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CHRISTIE

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The Secret Of Chimneys (1925)

By Agatha Christie

One

ANTHONY CADE SIGNS ON

“Gentleman Joe!”

“Why, if it isn’t old Jimmy McGrath.”

Castle’s Select Tour, represented by seven depressed-looking females and three perspiring males, looked on with considerable interest. Evidently their Mr. Cade had met an old friend. They all admired Mr. Cade so much, his tall lean figure, his suntanned face, the lighthearted manner with which he settled disputes and cajoled them all into good temper. This friend of his now—surely rather a peculiar-looking man. About the same height as Mr. Cade, but thickset and not nearly so good-looking. The sort of man one read about in books, who probably kept a saloon. Interesting though. After all, that was what one came abroad for—to see all these peculiar things one read about in books. Up to now they had been rather bored with Bulawayo. The sun was unbearably hot, the hotel was uncomfortable, there seemed to be nowhere particular to go until the moment should arrive to motor to the Matoppos. Very fortunately, Mr. Cade had suggested picture postcards. There was an excellent supply of picture postcards.

Anthony Cade and his friend had stepped a little apart.

“What the hell are you doing with this pack of females?” demanded McGrath. “Starting a harem?”

“Not with this little lot,” grinned Anthony. “Have you taken a good look at them?”

“I have that. Thought maybe you were losing your eyesight.”

“My eyesight’s as good as ever it was. No, this is a Castle’s Select Tour. I’m Castle—the local Castle, I mean.”

“What the hell made you take on a job like that?”

“A regrettable necessity for cash. I can assure you it doesn’t suit my temperament.”

Jimmy grinned.

“Never a hog for regular work, were you?”

Anthony ignored this aspersion.

“However, something will turn up soon, I expect,” he remarked hopefully. “It usually does.” Jimmy chuckled.

“If there’s any trouble brewing, Anthony Cade is sure to be in it sooner or later, I know that,” he said. “You’ve an absolute instinct for rows—and the nine lives of a cat. When can we have a yarn together?”

Anthony sighed.

“I’ve got to take these cackling hens to see Rhodes’ grave.”

“That’s the stuff,” said Jimmy approvingly. “They’ll come back bumped black and blue with the ruts in the road, and clamouring for bed to rest the bruises on. Then you and I will have a spot or two and exchange the news.”

“Right. So long, Jimmy.”

Anthony rejoined his flock of sheep. Miss Taylor, the youngest and most skittish of the party, instantly attacked him.

“Oh, Mr. Cade, was that an old friend of yours?”

“It was, Miss Taylor. One of the friends of my blameless youth.”

Miss Taylor giggled.

“I thought he was such an interesting-looking man.”

“I’ll tell him you said so.”

“Oh, Mr. Cade, how can you be so naughty! The very idea! What was that name he called you?”

“Gentleman Joe?”

“Yes. Is your name Joe?”

“I thought you knew it was Anthony, Miss Taylor.”

“Oh, go on with you!” cried Miss Taylor coquettishly.

Anthony had by now well mastered his duties. In addition to making the necessary arrangements of travel, they included soothing down irritable old gentlemen when their dignity was ruffled, seeing that elderly matrons had ample opportunities to buy picture postcards, and flirting with everything under a catholic forty years of age. The last task was rendered easier for him by the extreme readiness of the ladies in question to read a tender meaning into his most innocent remarks.

Miss Taylor returned to the attack.

“Why does he call you Joe, then?”

“Oh, just because it isn’t my name.”

“And why Gentleman Joe?”

“The same kind of reason.”

“Oh, Mr. Cade,” protested Miss Taylor, much distressed, “I’m sure you shouldn’t say that. Papa was only saying last night what gentlemanly manners you had.”

“Very kind of your father, I’m sure, Miss Taylor.”

“And we are all agreed that you are quite the gentleman.”

“I’m overwhelmed.”

“No, really, I mean it.”

“Kind hearts are more than coronets,” said Anthony vaguely, without a notion of what he meant by the remark, and wishing fervently it was lunchtime.

“That’s such a beautiful poem, I always think. Do you know much poetry, Mr. Cade?”

“I might recite ‘The boy stood on the burning deck’ at a pinch. ‘The boy stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled.’ That’s all I know, but I can do that bit with action if you like. ‘The boy stood on the burning deck’—whoosh—whoosh—whoosh—(the flames, you see) ‘Whence all but he had fled’—for that bit I run to and fro like a dog.”

Miss Taylor screamed with laughter.

“Oh, do look at Mr. Cade! Isn’t he funny?”

“Time for morning tea,” said Anthony briskly. “Come this way. There is an excellent café in the next street.”

“I presume,” said Mrs. Caldicott in her deep voice, “that the expense is included in the Tour?”

“Morning tea, Mrs. Caldicott,” said Anthony, assuming his professional manner, “is an extra.”

“Disgraceful.”

“Life is full of trials, isn’t it?” said Anthony cheerfully.

Mrs. Caldicott’s eyes gleamed, and she remarked with the air of one springing a mine:

“I suspected as much, and in anticipation I poured off some tea into a jug at breakfast this morning! I can heat that up on the spirit lamp. Come, Father.”

Mr. and Mrs. Caldicott sailed off triumphantly to the hotel, the lady's back complacent with successful forethought.

"Oh, Lord," muttered Anthony, "what a lot of funny people it does take to make a world."

He marshalled the rest of the party in the direction of the café. Miss Taylor kept by his side, and resumed her catechism.

"Is it a long time since you saw your friend?"

"Just over seven years."

"Was it in Africa you knew him?"

"Yes, not this part, though. The first time I ever saw Jimmy McGrath he was all trussed up ready for the cooking pot. Some of the tribes in the interior are cannibals, you know. We got there just in time."

"What happened?"

"Very nice little shindy. We potted some of the beggars, and the rest took to their heels."

"Oh, Mr. Cade, what an adventurous life you must have led."

"Very peaceful, I assure you."

But it was clear that the lady did not believe him.

It was about ten o'clock that night when Anthony Cade walked into the small room where Jimmy McGrath was busy manipulating various bottles.

"Make it strong, James," he implored. "I can tell you, I need it."

"I should think you did, my boy. I wouldn't take on that job of yours for anything."

"Show me another, and I'll jump out of it fast enough."

McGrath poured out his own drink, tossed it off with a practised hand and mixed a second one. Then he said slowly:

“Are you in earnest about that, old son?”

“About what?”

“Chucking this job of yours if you could get another?”

“Why? You don’t mean to say that you’ve got a job going begging? Why don’t you grab it yourself?”

“I have grabbed it—but I don’t much fancy it, that’s why I’m trying to pass it on to you.”

Anthony became suspicious.

“What’s wrong with it? They haven’t engaged you to teach in a Sunday school, have they?”

“Do you think anyone would choose me to teach in a Sunday school?”

“Not if they knew you well, certainly.”

“It’s a perfectly good job—nothing wrong with it whatsoever.”

“Not in South America by any lucky chance? I’ve rather got my eye on South America. There’s a very tidy little revolution coming off in one of those little republics soon.”

McGrath grinned.

“You always were keen on revolutions—anything to be mixed up in a really good row.”

“I feel my talents might be appreciated out there. I tell you, Jimmy, I can be jolly useful in a revolution—to one side or the other. It’s better than making an honest living any day.”

“I think I’ve heard that sentiment from you before, my son. No, the job isn’t in South America—it’s in England.”

“England? Return of hero to his native land after many long years. They can’t dun you for bills after seven years, can they, Jimmy?”

“I don’t think so. Well, are you on for hearing more about it?”

“I’m on all right. The thing that worries me is why you’re not taking it on yourself.”

“I’ll tell you. I’m after gold, Anthony—far up in the interior.”

Anthony whistled and looked at him.

“You’ve always been after gold, Jimmy, ever since I knew you. It’s your weak spot—your own particular little hobby. You’ve followed up more wildcat trails than anyone I know.”

“And in the end I’ll strike it. You’ll see.”

“Well, everyone his own hobby. Mine’s rows, yours is gold.”

“I’ll tell you the whole story. I suppose you know all about Herzoslovakia?”

Anthony looked up sharply.

“Herzoslovakia?” he said, with a curious ring in his voice.

“Yes. Know anything about it?”

There was quite an appreciable pause before Anthony answered. Then he said slowly:

“Only what everyone knows. It’s one of the Balkan States, isn’t it? Principal rivers, unknown. Principal mountains, also unknown, but fairly numerous. Capital, Ekarest. Population, chiefly brigands. Hobby, assassinating kings and having revolutions. Last king, Nicholas IV, assassinated about seven

years ago. Since then it's been a republic. Altogether a very likely spot. You might have mentioned before that Herzoslovakia came into it."

"It doesn't except indirectly."

Anthony gazed at him more in sorrow than in anger.

"You ought to do something about this, James," he said. "Take a correspondence course, or something. If you'd told a story like this in the good old Eastern days, you'd have been hung up by the heels and bastinadoed or something equally unpleasant."

Jimmy pursued this course quite unmoved by these strictures.

"Ever heard of Count Stylptitch?"

"Now you're talking," said Anthony. "Many people who have never heard of Herzoslovakia would brighten at the mention of Count Stylptitch. The Grand Old Man of the Balkans. The Greatest Statesman of Modern Times. The biggest villain unhung. The point of view all depends on which newspaper you take in. But be sure of this, Count Stylptitch will be remembered long after you and I are dust and ashes, James. Every move and countermove in the Near East for the last twenty years has had Count Stylptitch at the bottom of it. He's been a dictator and a patriot and a statesman—and nobody knows exactly what he has been, except that he's been a perfect king of intrigue. Well, what about him?"

"He was Prime Minister of Herzoslovakia—that's why I mentioned it first."

"You've no sense of proportion, Jimmy. Herzoslovakia is of no importance at all compared to Stylptitch. It just provided him with a birthplace and a post in public affairs. But I thought he was dead?"

"So he is. He died in Paris about two months ago. What I'm telling you about happened some years ago."

"The question is," said Anthony, "what are you telling me about?"

Jimmy accepted the rebuke and hastened on.

“It was like this. I was in Paris—just four years ago, to be exact. I was walking along one night in rather a lonely part, when I saw half a dozen French toughs beating up a respectable-looking old gentleman. I hate a one-sided show, so I promptly butted in and proceeded to beat up the toughs. I guess they’d never been hit really hard before. They melted like snow!”

“Good for you, James,” said Anthony softly. “I’d like to have seen that scrap.”

“Oh, it was nothing much,” said Jimmy modestly. “But the old boy was no end grateful. He’d had a couple, no doubt about that, but he was sober enough to get my name and address out of me, and he came along and thanked me next day. Did the thing in style, too. It was then that I found out it was Count Stylptitch I’d rescued. He’d got a house up by the Bois.”

Anthony nodded.

“Yes, Stylptitch went to live in Paris after the assassination of King Nicholas. They wanted him to come back and be president later, but he wasn’t taking any. He remained sound to his monarchical principles, though he was reported to have his finger in all the backstairs pies that went on in the Balkans. Very deep, the late Count Stylptitch.”

“Nicholas IV was the man who had a funny taste in wives, wasn’t he?” said Jimmy suddenly.

“Yes,” said Anthony. “And it did for him, too, poor beggar. She was some little guttersnipe of a music hall artiste in Paris—not even suitable for a morganatic alliance. But Nicholas had a frightful crush on her, and she was all out for being a queen. Sounds fantastic, but they managed it somehow. Called her the Countess Popoffsky, or something, and pretended she had Romanoff blood in her veins. Nicholas married her in the cathedral at Ekarest with a couple of unwilling archbishops to do the job, and she was crowned as Queen Varaga. Nicholas squared his ministers, and I suppose he thought that was all that mattered—but he forgot to reckon with the populace. They’re very aristocratic and reactionary in Herzoslovakia. They like their kings and queens to be the genuine article. There were mutterings and discontent, and the usual ruthless suppressions, and the final uprising

which stormed the palace, murdered the King and Queen, and proclaimed a republic. It's been a republic ever since—but things still manage to be pretty lively there, so I've heard. They've assassinated a president or two, just to keep their hand in. But *revenons à nos moutons*. You had got to where Count Stylptitch was hailing you as his preserver."

"Yes. Well, that was the end of that business. I came back to Africa and never thought of it again until about two weeks ago I got a queer-looking parcel which had been following me all over the place for the Lord knows how long. I'd seen in a paper that Count Stylptitch had recently died in Paris. Well, this parcel contained his memoirs—or reminiscences, or whatever you call the things. There was a note enclosed to the effect that if I delivered the manuscript at a certain firm of publishers in London on or before October 13th, they were instructed to hand me a thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds? Did you say a thousand pounds, Jimmy?"

"I did, my son. I hope to God it's not a hoax. Put not your trust in princes or politicians, as the saying goes. Well, there it is. Owing to the way the manuscript had been following me around, I had no time to lose. It was a pity, all the same. I'd just fixed up this trip to the interior, and I'd set my heart on going. I shan't get such a good chance again."

"You're incurable, Jimmy. A thousand pounds in the hand is worth a lot of mythical gold."

"And supposing it's all a hoax? Anyway, here I am, passage booked and everything, on the way to Cape Town—and then you blow along!"

Anthony got up and lit a cigarette.

"I begin to perceive your drift, James. You go gold hunting as planned, and I collect the thousand pounds for you. How much do I get out of it?"

"What do you say to a quarter?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds free of income tax, as the saying goes?"

“That’s it.”

“Done, and just to make you gnash your teeth I’ll tell you that I would have gone for a hundred! Let me tell you, James McGrath, you won’t die in your bed counting up your bank balance.”

“Anyway, it’s a deal?”

“It’s a deal all right. I’m on. And confusion to Castle’s Select Tours.”

They drank the toast solemnly.

Two

A LADY IN DISTRESS

“So that’s that,” said Anthony, finishing off his glass and replacing it on the table. “What boat were you going on?”

“Granarth Castle.”

“Passage booked in your name, I suppose, so I’d better travel as James McGrath. We’ve outgrown the passport business, haven’t we.

“No odds either way. You and I are totally unlike, but we’d probably have the same description on one of those blinking things. Height six feet, hair brown, eyes blue, nose ordinary, chin ordinary—”

“Not so much of this ‘ordinary’ stunt. Let me tell you that Castle’s selected me out of several applicants solely on account of my pleasing appearance and nice manners.”

Jimmy grinned.

“I noticed your manners this morning.”

“The devil you did.”

Anthony rose and paced up and down the room. His brow was slightly wrinkled, and it was some minutes before he spoke.

“Jimmy,” he said at last. “Stylptitch died in Paris. What’s the point of sending a manuscript from Paris to London via Africa?”

Jimmy shook his head helplessly.

“I don’t know.”

“Why not do it up in a nice little parcel and send it by post?”

“Sounds a damn sight more sensible, I agree.”

“Of course,” continued Anthony, “I know that kings and queens and government officials are prevented by etiquette from doing anything in a simple, straightforward fashion. Hence King’s Messengers and all that. In medieval days you gave a fellow a signet ring as a sort of open sesame. ‘The King’s Ring! Pass, my lord!’ And usually it was the other fellow who had stolen it. I always wonder why some bright lad never hit on the expedient of copying the ring—making a dozen or so, and selling them at a hundred ducats apiece. They seem to have had no initiative in the Middle Ages.”

Jimmy yawned.

“My remarks on the Middle Ages don’t seem to amuse you. Let us get back to Count Stylptitch. From France to England via Africa seems a bit thick even for a diplomatic personage. If he merely wanted to ensure that you should get a thousand pounds he could have left it you in his will. Thank God neither you nor I are too proud to accept a legacy! Stylptitch must have been barmy.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

Anthony frowned and continued his pacing.

“Have you read the thing at all?” he asked suddenly.

“Read what?”

“The manuscript.”

“Good Lord, no. What do you think I want to read a thing of that kind for?”

Anthony smiled.

“I just wondered, that’s all. You know a lot of trouble has been caused by memoirs. Indiscreet revelations, that sort of thing. People who have been

close as an oyster all their lives seem positively to relish causing trouble when they themselves shall be comfortably dead. It gives them a kind of malicious glee. Jimmy, what sort of a man was Count Stylptitch? You met him and talked to him, and you're a pretty good judge of raw human nature. Could you imagine him being a vindictive old devil?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"It's difficult to tell. You see, that first night he was distinctly canned, and the next day he was just a high-toned old boy with the most beautiful manners overwhelming me with compliments till I didn't know where to look."

"And he didn't say anything interesting when he was drunk?"

Jimmy cast his mind back, wrinkling his brows as he did so.

"He said he knew where the Koh-i-noor was," he volunteered doubtfully.

"Oh, well," said Anthony, "we all know that. They keep it in the Tower, don't they? Behind thick plate glass and iron bars, with a lot of gentlemen in fancy dress standing round to see you don't pinch anything."

"That's right," agreed Jimmy.

"Did Stylptitch say anything else of the same kind? That he knew which city the Wallace Collection was in, for instance?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Hm!" said Anthony.

He lit another cigarette, and once more began pacing up and down the room.

"You never read the papers, I suppose, you heathen?" he threw out presently.

“Not very often,” said McGrath simply. “They’re not about anything that interests me as a rule.”

“Thank heaven I’m more civilized. There have been several mentions of Herzoslovakia lately. Hints at a royalist restoration.”

“Nicholas IV didn’t leave a son,” said Jimmy. “But I don’t suppose for a minute that the Obolovitch dynasty is extinct. There are probably shoals of young ’uns knocking about, cousins and second cousins and third cousins once removed.”

“So that there wouldn’t be any difficulty in finding a king?”

“Not in the least, I should say,” replied Jimmy. “You know, I don’t wonder at their getting tired of republican institutions. A full-blooded, virile people like that must find it awfully tame to put at presidents after being used to kings. And talking of kings, that reminds me of something else old Stylptitch let out that night. He said he knew the gang that was after him. They were King Victor’s people, he said.”

“What?” Anthony wheeled round suddenly.

A short grin widened on McGrath’s face.

“Just a mite excited, aren’t you, Gentleman Joe?” he drawled.

“Don’t be an ass, Jimmy. You’ve just said something rather important.”

He went over to the window and stood there looking out.

“Who is this King Victor, anyway?” demanded Jimmy. “Another Balkan monarch?”

“No,” said Anthony slowly. “He isn’t that kind of a king.”

“What is he, then?”

There was a pause, and then Anthony spoke.

“He’s a crook, Jimmy. The most notorious jewel thief in the world. A fantastic, daring fellow, not to be daunted by anything. King Victor was the nickname he was known by in Paris. Paris was the headquarters of his gang. They caught him there and put him away for seven years on a minor charge. They couldn’t prove the more important things against him. He’ll be out soon—or he may be out already.”

“Do you think Count Stylptitch had anything to do with putting him away? Was that why the gang went for him? Out of revenge?”

“I don’t know,” said Anthony. “It doesn’t seem likely on the face of it. King Victor never stole the crown jewels of Herzoslovakia as far as I’ve heard. But the whole thing seems rather suggestive, doesn’t it? The death of Stylptitch, the memoirs, and the rumours in the papers—all vague but interesting. And there’s a further rumour to the effect that they’ve found oil in Herzoslovakia. I’ve a feeling in my bones, James, that people are getting ready to be interested in that unimportant little country.”

“What sort of people?”

“Hebraic people. Yellow-faced financiers in city offices.”

“What are you driving at with all this?”

“Trying to make an easy job difficult, that’s all.”

“You can’t pretend there’s going to be any difficulty in handing over a simple manuscript at a publisher’s office?”

“No,” said Anthony regretfully. “I don’t suppose there’ll be anything difficult about that. But shall I tell you, James, where I propose to go with my two hundred and fifty pounds?”

“South America?”

“No, my lad, Herzoslovakia. I shall stand in with the republic, I think. Very probably I shall end up as president.”

“Why not announce yourself as the principal Obolovitch and be a king whilst you’re about it?”

“No, Jimmy. Kings are for life. Presidents only take on the job for four years or so. It would quite amuse me to govern a kingdom like Herzoslovakia for four years.”

“The average for kings is even less, I should say,” interpolated Jimmy.

“It will probably be a serious temptation to me to embezzle your share of the thousand pounds. You won’t want it, you know, when you get back weighed down with nuggets. I’ll invest it for you in Herzoslovakian oil shares. You know, James, the more I think of it, the more pleased I am with this idea of yours. I should never have thought of Herzoslovakia if you hadn’t mentioned it. I shall spend one day in London, collecting the booty, and then away by the Balkan Express!”

“You won’t get off quite as fast as that. I didn’t mention it before, but I’ve got another little commission for you.”

Anthony sank into a chair and eyed him severely.

“I knew all along that you were keeping something dark. This is where the catch comes in.”

“Not a bit. It’s just something that’s got to be done to help a lady.”

“Once and for all, James, I refuse to be mixed up in your beastly love affairs.”

“It’s not a love affair. I’ve never seen the woman. I’ll tell you the whole story.”

“If I’ve got to listen to more of your long, rambling stories, I shall have to have another drink.”

His host complied hospitably with this demand, then began the tale.

“It was when I was up in Uganda. There was a dago there whose life I had saved—”

“If I were you, Jimmy, I should write a short book entitled ‘Lives I have Saved.’ This is the second I’ve heard of this evening.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t really do anything this time. Just pulled the dago out of the river. Like all dagos, he couldn’t swim.”

“Wait a minute, has this story anything to do with the other business?”

“Nothing whatever, though, oddly enough, now I remember it, the man was a Herzoslovakian. We always called him Dutch Pedro, though.”

Anthony nodded indifferently.

“Any name’s good enough for a dago,” he remarked. “Get on with the good work, James.”

“Well, the fellow was sort of grateful about it. Hung around like a dog. About six months later he died of fever. I was with him. Last thing, just as he was pegging out, he beckoned me and whispered some excited jargon about a secret—a gold mine, I thought he said. Shoved an oilskin packet into my hand which he’d always worn next his skin. Well, I didn’t think much of it at the time. It wasn’t until a week afterwards that I opened the packet. Then I was curious, I must confess. I shouldn’t have thought that Dutch Pedro would have had the sense to know a gold mine when he saw it—but there’s no accounting for luck—”

“And at the mere thought of gold, your heart beat pitterpat as always,” interrupted Anthony.

“I was never so disgusted in my life. Gold mine, indeed! I daresay it may have been a gold mine to him, the dirty dog. Do you know what it was? A woman’s letters—yes, a woman’s letters, and an Englishwoman at that. The skunk had been blackmailing her—and he had the impudence to pass on his dirty bag of tricks to me.”

“I like to see your righteous heat, James, but let me point out to you that dagos will be dagos. He meant well. You had saved his life, he bequeathed to you a profitable source of raising money—your high-minded British ideals did not enter his horizon.”

“Well, what the hell was I to do with the things? Burn ’em, that’s what I thought at first. And then it occurred to me that there would be that poor dame, not knowing they’d been destroyed, and always living in a quake and a dread lest that dago should turn up again one day.”

“You’ve more imagination than I gave you credit for, Jimmy,” observed Anthony, lighting a cigarette. “I admit that the case presented more difficulties than were at first apparent. What about just sending them to her by post?”

“Like all women, she’d put no date and no address on most of the letters. There was a kind of address on one—just one word. ‘Chimneys.’ ”

Anthony paused in the act of blowing out his match, and he dropped it with a quick jerk of the wrist as it burned his finger.

“Chimneys?” he said. “That’s rather extraordinary.”

“Why, do you know it?”

“It’s one of the stately homes of England, my dear James. A place where kings and queens go for weekends, and diplomatists forgather and diplome.”

“That’s one of the reasons why I’m so glad that you’re going to England instead of me. You know all these things,” said Jimmy simply. “A josser like myself from the backwoods of Canada would be making all sorts of bloomers. But someone like you who’s been to Eton and Harrow—”

“Only one of them,” said Anthony modestly.

“Will be able to carry it through. Why didn’t I send them to her, you say? Well, it seemed to me dangerous. From what I could make out, she seemed

to have a jealous husband. Suppose he opened the letter by mistake. Where would the poor dame be then? Or she might be dead—the letters looked as though they'd been written some time. As I figured it out, the only thing was for someone to take them to England and put them into her own hands.”

Anthony threw away his cigarette, and coming across to his friend, clapped him affectionately on the back.

“You’re a real knight-errant, Jimmy,” he said. “And the backwoods of Canada should be proud of you. I shan’t do the job half as prettily as you would.”

“You’ll take it on, then?”

“Of course.”

McGrath rose, and going across to a drawer, took out a bundle of letters and threw them on the table.

“Here you are. You’d better have a look at them.”

“Is it necessary? On the whole, I’d rather not.”

“Well, from what you say about this Chimneys place, she may have been staying there only. We’d better look through the letters and see if there’s any clue as to where she really hangs out.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

They went through the letters carefully, but without finding what they had hoped to find. Anthony gathered them up again thoughtfully.

“Poor little devil,” he remarked. “She was scared stiff.”

Jimmy nodded.

“Do you think you’ll be able to find her all right?” he asked anxiously.

“I won’t leave England till I have. You’re very concerned about this unknown lady, James?”

Jimmy ran his finger thoughtfully over the signature.

“It’s a pretty name,” he said apologetically. “Virginia Revel.”

Three

ANXIETY IN HIGH PLACES

“Quite so, my dear fellow, quite so,” said Lord Caterham.

He had used the same words three times already, each time in the hope that they would end the interview and permit him to escape. He disliked very much being forced to stand on the steps of the exclusive London club to which he belonged and listen to the interminable eloquence of the Hon. George Lomax.

Clement Edward Alistair Brent, ninth Marquis of Caterham, was a small gentleman, shabbily dressed, and entirely unlike the popular conception of a marquis. He had faded blue eyes, a thin melancholy nose, and a vague but courteous manner.

The principal misfortune of Lord Caterham’s life was to have succeeded his brother, the eighth marquis, four years ago. For the previous Lord Caterham had been a man of mark, a household word all over England. At one time Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he had always bulked largely in the counsels of the Empire, and his country seat, Chimneys, was famous for its hospitality. Ably seconded by his wife, a daughter of the Duke of Perth, history had been made and unmade at informal weekend parties at Chimneys, and there was hardly anyone of note in England—or indeed in Europe—who had not, at one time or another, stayed there.

That was all very well. The ninth Marquis of Caterham had the utmost respect and esteem for the memory of his brother. Henry had done that kind of thing magnificently. What Lord Caterham objected to was the assumption that Chimneys was a national possession rather than a private country house. There was nothing that bored Lord Caterham more than politics—unless it was politicians. Hence his impatience under the continued eloquence of George Lomax. A robust man, George Lomax,

inclined to embonpoint, with a red face and protuberant eyes, and an immense sense of his own importance.

“You see the point, Caterham? We can’t—we simply can’t afford a scandal of any kind just now. The position is one of the utmost delicacy.”

“It always is,” said Lord Caterham, with a flavour of irony.

“My dear fellow, I’m in a position to know!”

“Oh, quite so, quite so,” said Lord Caterham, falling back upon his previous line of defence.

“One slip over this Herzoslovakian business and we’re done. It is most important that the oil concessions should be granted to a British company. You must see that?”

“Of course, of course.”

“Prince Michael Obolovitch arrives the end of the week, and the whole thing can be carried through at Chimneys under the guise of a shooting party.”

“I was thinking of going abroad this week,” said Lord Caterham.

“Nonsense, my dear Caterham, no one goes abroad in early October.”

“My doctor seems to think I’m in rather a bad way,” said Lord Caterham, longingly eyeing a taxi that was crawling past.

He was quite unable to make a dash for liberty, however, since Lomax had the unpleasant habit of retaining a hold upon a person with whom he was engaged in serious conversation—doubtless the result of long experience. In this case, he had a firm grip of the lapel of Lord Caterham’s coat.

“My dear man, I put it to you imperially. In a moment of national crisis, such as is fast approaching—”

Lord Caterham wriggled uneasily. He felt suddenly that he would rather give any number of house parties than listen to George Lomax quoting from one of his own speeches. He knew by experience that Lomax was quite capable of going on for twenty minutes without a stop.

“All right,” he said hastily, “I’ll do it. You’ll arrange the whole thing, I suppose.”

“My dear fellow, there’s nothing to arrange. Chimneys, quite apart from its historic associations, is ideally situated. I shall be at the Abbey, less than seven miles away. It wouldn’t do, of course, for me to be actually a member of the house party.”

“Of course not,” agreed Lord Caterham, who had no idea why it would not do, and was not interested to learn.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t mind having Bill Eversleigh, though. He’d be useful to run messages.”

“Delighted,” said Lord Caterham, with a shade more animation. “Bill’s quite a decent shot, and Bundle likes him.”

“The shooting, of course, is not really important. It’s only the pretext, as it were.”

Lord Caterham looked depressed again.

“That will be all, then. The Prince, his suite, Bill Eversleigh, Herman Isaacstein—”

“Who?”

“Herman Isaacstein. The representative of the syndicate I spoke to you about.”

“The all-British syndicate?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing—nothing—I only wondered, that’s all. Curious names these people have.”

“Then, of course, there ought to be one or two outsiders—just to give the thing a bona fide appearance. Lady Eileen could see to that—young people, uncritical, and with no idea of politics.”

“Bundle would attend to that all right, I’m sure.”

“I wonder now.” Lomax seemed struck by an idea. “You remember the matter I was speaking about just now?”

“You’ve been speaking about so many things.”

“No, no, I mean this unfortunate contretemps”—he lowered his voice to a mysterious whisper—“the memoirs—Count Stylptitch’s memoirs.”

“I think you’re wrong about that,” said Lord Caterham, suppressing a yawn. “People like scandal. Damn it all, I read reminiscences myself—and enjoy ’em too.”

“The point is not whether people will read them or not—they’ll read them fast enough—but their publication at this juncture might ruin everything—everything. The people of Herzoslovakia wish to restore the monarchy, and are prepared to offer the crown to Prince Michael, who has the support and encouragement of His Majesty’s Government—”

“And who is prepared to grant concessions to Mr. Ikey Hermanstein and Co. in return for the loan of a million or so to set him on the throne—”

“Caterham, Caterham,” implored Lomax in an agonized whisper. “Discretion, I beg of you. Above all things, discretion.”

“And the point is,” continued Lord Caterham, with some relish, though he lowered his voice in obedience to the other’s appeal, “that some of Stylptitch’s reminiscences may upset the applecart. Tyranny and misbehaviour of the Obolovitch family generally, eh? Questions asked in the House. Why replace the present broad-minded and democratic form of

government by an obsolete tyranny? Policy dictated by the bloodsucking capitalists. Down with the Government. That kind of thing—eh?”

Lomax nodded.

“And there might be worse still,” he breathed. “Suppose—only suppose that some reference should be made to—to that unfortunate disappearance—you know what I mean.”

Lord Caterham stared at him.

“No, I don’t. What disappearance?”

“You must have heard of it? Why, it happened while they were at Chimneys. Henry was terribly upset about it. It almost ruined his career.”

“You interest me enormously,” said Lord Caterham. “Who or what disappeared?”

Lomax leant forward and put his mouth to Lord Caterham’s ear. The latter withdrew it hastily.

“For God’s sake, don’t hiss at me.”

“You heard what I said?”

“Yes, I did,” said Lord Caterham reluctantly. “I remember now hearing something about it at the time. Very curious affair. I wonder who did it. It was never recovered?”

“Never. Of course we had to go about the matter with the utmost discretion. No hint of the loss could be allowed to leak out. But Stylptitch was there at the time. He knew something. Not all, but something. We were at loggerheads with him once or twice over the Turkish question. Suppose that in sheer malice he has set the whole thing down for the world to read. Think of the scandal—of the far-reaching results. Everyone would say—why was it hushed up?”

“Of course they would,” said Lord Caterham, with evident enjoyment.

Lomax, whose voice had risen to a high pitch, took a grip on himself.

“I must keep calm,” he murmured. “I must keep calm. But I ask you this, my dear fellow. If he didn’t mean mischief, why did he send the manuscript to London in this roundabout way?”

“It’s odd, certainly. You are sure of your facts?”

“Absolutely. We—er—had our agents in Paris. The memoirs were conveyed away secretly some weeks before his death.”

“Yes, it looks as though there’s something in it,” said Lord Caterham, with the same relish he had displayed before.

“We have found out that they were sent to a man called Jimmy, or James, McGrath, a Canadian at present in Africa.”

“Quite an Imperial affair, isn’t it?” said Lord Caterham cheerily.

“James McGrath is due to arrive by the Granarth Castle tomorrow—Thursday.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“We shall, of course, approach him at once, point out the possibly serious consequences, and beg him to defer publication of the memoirs for at least a month, and in any case to permit them to be judiciously—er—edited.”

“Supposing that he says ‘No, sir,’ or ‘I’ll goddarned well see you in hell first,’ or something bright and breezy like that?” suggested Lord Caterham.

“That’s just what I’m afraid of,” said Lomax simply. “That’s why it suddenly occurred to me that it might be a good thing to ask him down to Chimneys as well. He’d be flattered, naturally, at being asked to meet Prince Michael, and it might be easier to handle him.”

“I’m not going to do it,” said Lord Caterham hastily. “I don’t get on with Canadians, never did—especially those that have lived much in Africa!”

“You’d probably find him a splendid fellow—a rough diamond, you know.”

“No, Lomax. I put my foot down there absolutely. Somebody else has got to tackle him.”

“It has occurred to me,” said Lomax, “that a woman might be very useful here. Told enough and not too much, you understand. A woman could handle the whole thing delicately and with tact—put the position before him, as it were, without getting his back up. Not that I approve of women in politics—St. Stephen’s is ruined, absolutely ruined, nowadays. But woman in her own sphere can do wonders. Look at Henry’s wife and what she did for him. Marcia was magnificent, unique, a perfect political hostess.”

“You don’t want to ask Marcia down for this party, do you?” asked Lord Caterham faintly, turning a little pale at the mention of his redoubtable sister-in-law.

“No, no, you misunderstand me. I was speaking of the influence of women in general. No, I suggest a young woman, a woman of charm, beauty, intelligence?”

“Not Bundle? Bundle would be no use at all. She’s a red-hot Socialist if she’s anything at all, and she’d simply scream with laughter at the suggestion.”

“I was not thinking of Lady Eileen. Your daughter, Caterham, is charming, simply charming, but quite a child. We need some one with savoir faire, poise, knowledge of the world—Ah, of course, the very person. My cousin Virginia.”

“Mrs. Revel?” Lord Caterham brightened up. He began to feel that he might possibly enjoy the party after all. “A very good suggestion of yours, Lomax. The most charming woman in London.”

“She is well up in Herzoslovakian affairs too. Her husband was at the Embassy there, you remember. And, as you say, a woman of great personal charm.”

“A delightful creature,” murmured Lord Caterham.

“That is settled, then.”

Mr. Lomax relaxed his hold on Lord Caterham’s lapel, and the latter was quick to avail himself of the chance.

“Bye-bye, Lomax, you’ll make all the arrangements, won’t you?”

He dived into a taxi. As far as it is possible for one upright Christian gentleman to dislike another upright Christian gentleman, Lord Caterham disliked the Hon. George Lomax. He disliked his puffy red face, his heavy breathing, and his prominent earnest blue eyes. He thought of the coming weekend and sighed. A nuisance, an abominable nuisance. Then he thought of Virginia Revel and cheered up a little.

“A delightful creature,” he murmured to himself. “A most delightful creature.”

Four

INTRODUCING A VERY CHARMING LADY

George Lomax returned straightway to Whitehall. As he entered the sumptuous apartment in which he transacted affairs of State, there was a scuffling sound.

Mr. Bill Eversleigh was assiduously filing letters, but a large armchair near the window was still warm from contact with a human form.

A very likeable young man, Bill Eversleigh. Age at a guess, twenty-five, big and rather ungainly in his movements, a pleasantly ugly face, a splendid set of white teeth and a pair of honest brown eyes.

“Richardson sent up that report yet?”

“No, sir. Shall I get on to him about it?”

“It doesn’t matter. Any telephone messages?”

“Miss Oscar is dealing with most of them. Mr. Isaacstein wants to know if you can lunch with him at the Savoy tomorrow.”

“Tell Miss Oscar to look in my engagement book. If I’m not engaged, she can ring up and accept.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By the way, Eversleigh, you might ring up a number for me now. Look it up in the book. Mrs. Revel, 487 Pont Street.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bill seized the telephone book, ran an unseeing eye down a column of M’s, shut the book with a bang and moved to the instrument on the desk. With

his hand upon it, he paused, as though in sudden recollection.

“Oh, I say, sir, I’ve just remembered. Her line’s out of order. Mrs. Revel’s, I mean. I was trying to ring her up just now.”

George Lomax frowned.

“Annoying,” he said, “distinctly annoying.” He tapped the table undecidedly.

“If it’s anything important, sir, perhaps I might go round there now in a taxi. She is sure to be in at this time in the morning.”

George Lomax hesitated, pondering the matter. Bill waited expectantly, poised for instant flight, should the reply be favourable.

“Perhaps that would be the best plan,” said Lomax at last. “Very well, then, take a taxi there, and ask Mrs. Revel if she will be at home this afternoon at four o’clock as I am very anxious to see her about an important matter.”

“Right, sir.”

Bill seized his hat and departed.

Ten minutes later, a taxi deposited him at 487 Pont Street. He rang the bell and executed a loud rat-tat on the knocker. The door was opened by a grave functionary to whom Bill nodded with the ease of long acquaintance.

“Morning, Chilvers, Mrs. Revel in?”

“I believe, sir, that she is just going out.”

“Is that you, Bill?” called a voice over the banisters. “I thought I recognized that muscular knock. Come up and talk to me.”

Bill looked up at the face that was laughing down on him, and which was always inclined to reduce him—and not him alone—to a state of babbling incoherency. He took the stairs two at a time and clasped Virginia Revel’s outstretched hands tightly in his.

“Hullo, Virginia!”

“Hullo, Bill!”

Charm is a very peculiar thing; hundreds of young women, some of them more beautiful than Virginia Revel, might have said “Hullo, Bill,” with exactly the same intonation, and yet have produced no effect whatever. But those two simple words, uttered by Virginia, had the most intoxicating effect upon Bill.

Virginia Revel was just twenty-seven. She was tall and of an exquisite slimness—indeed, a poem might have been written to her slimness, it was so exquisitely proportioned. Her hair was of real bronze, with the greenish tint in its gold; she had a determined little chin, a lovely nose, slanting blue eyes that showed a gleam of deepest cornflower between the half-closed lids, and a delicious and quite indescribable mouth that tilted ever so slightly at one corner in what is known as “the signature of Venus.” It was a wonderfully expressive face, and there was a sort of radiant vitality about her that always challenged attention. It would have been quite impossible ever to ignore Virginia Revel.

She drew Bill into the small drawing room which was all pale mauve and green and yellow, like crocuses surprised in a meadow.

“Bill, darling,” said Virginia, “isn’t the Foreign Office missing you? I thought they couldn’t get on without you.”

“I’ve brought a message for you from Codders.”

Thus irreverently did Bill allude to his chief.

“And by the way, Virginia, in case he asks, remember that your telephone was out of order this morning.”

“But it hasn’t been.”

“I know that. But I said it was.”

“Why? Enlighten me as to this Foreign Office touch.” Bill threw her a reproachful glance.

“So that I could get here and see you, of course.”

“Oh, darling Bill, how dense of me! And how perfectly sweet of you!”

“Chilvers said you were going out.”

“So I was—to Sloane Street. There’s a place there where they’ve got a perfectly wonderful new hip band.”

“A hip band?”

“Yes, Bill, H-I-P hip, B-A-N-D band. A band to confine the hips. You wear it next the skin.”

“I blush for you Virginia. You shouldn’t describe your underwear to a young man to whom you are not related. It isn’t delicate.”

“But, Bill dear, there’s nothing indelicate about hips. We’ve all got hips—although we poor women are trying awfully hard to pretend we haven’t. This hip band is made of red rubber and comes to just above the knees, and it’s simply impossible to walk in it.”

“How awful!” said Bill. “Why do you do it?”

“Oh, because it gives one such a noble feeling to suffer for one’s silhouette. But don’t let’s talk about my hip band. Give me George’s message.”

“He wants to know whether you’ll be in at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“I shan’t. I shall be at Ranelagh. Why this sort of formal call? Is he going to propose to me, do you think?”

“I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Because, if so, you can tell him that I much prefer men who propose on impulse.”

“Like me?”

“It’s not an impulse with you, Bill. It’s habit.”

“Virginia, won’t you ever—”

“No, no, no, Bill. I won’t have it in the morning before lunch. Do try and think of me as a nice motherly person approaching middle age who has your interests thoroughly at heart.”

“Virginia, I do love you so.”

“I know, Bill, I know. And I simply love being loved. Isn’t it wicked and dreadful of me? I should like every nice man in the world to be in love with me.”

“Most of them are, I expect,” said Bill gloomily.

“But I hope George isn’t in love with me. I don’t think he can be. He’s so wedded to his career. What else did he say?”

“Just that it was very important.”

“Bill, I’m getting intrigued. The things that George thinks important are so awfully limited. I think I must chuck Ranelagh. After all, I can go to Ranelagh any day. Tell George that I shall be awaiting him meekly at four o’clock.”

Bill looked at his wristwatch.

“It seems hardly worthwhile to go back before lunch. Come out and chew something, Virginia.”

“I’m going out to lunch somewhere or other.”

“That doesn’t matter. Make a day of it, and chuck everything all round.”

“It would be rather nice,” said Virginia, smiling at him.

“Virginia, you’re a darling. Tell me, you do like me rather, don’t you? Better than other people.”

“Bill, I adore you. If I had to marry someone—simply had to—I mean if it was in a book and a wicked mandarin said to me, ‘Marry someone or die by slow torture,’ I should choose you at once—I should indeed. I should say, ‘Give me little Bill.’ ”

“Well, then—”

“Yes, but I haven’t got to marry anyone. I love being a wicked widow.”

“You could do all the same things still. Go about, and all that. You’d hardly notice me about the house.”

“Bill, you don’t understand. I’m the kind of person who marries enthusiastically if they marry at all.”

Bill gave a hollow groan.

“I shall shoot myself one of these days, I expect,” he murmured gloomily.

“No, you won’t, Bill darling. You’ll take a pretty girl out to supper—like you did the night before last.”

Mr. Eversleigh was momentarily confused.

“If you mean Dorothy Kirkpatrick, the girl who’s in Hooks and Eyes, I—well, dash it all, she’s a thoroughly nice girl, straight as they make ’em. There was no harm in it.”

“Bill darling, of course there wasn’t. I love you to enjoy yourself. But don’t pretend to be dying of a broken heart, that’s all.”

Mr. Eversleigh recovered his dignity.

“You don’t understand at all, Virginia,” he said severely. “Men—”

“Are polygamous! I know they are. Sometimes I have a shrewd suspicion that I am polyandrous. If you really love me, Bill, take me out to lunch quickly.”

Five

FIRST NIGHT IN LONDON

There is often a flaw in the best-laid plans. George Lomax had made one mistake—there was a weak spot in his preparations. The weak spot was Bill.

Bill Eversleigh was an extremely nice lad. He was a good cricketer and a scratch golfer, he had pleasant manners, and an amiable disposition, but his position in the Foreign Office had been gained, not by brains, but by good connexions. For the work he had to do he was quite suitable. He was more or less George's dog. He did no responsible or brainy work. His part was to be constantly at George's elbow, to interview unimportant people whom George didn't want to see, to run errands, and generally to make himself useful. All this Bill carried out faithfully enough. When George was absent, Bill stretched himself out in the biggest chair and read the sporting news, and in so doing he was merely carrying out a time-honoured tradition.

Being accustomed to send Bill on errands, George had dispatched him to the Union Castle offices to find out when the Granarth Castle was due in. Now, in common with most well-educated young Englishmen, Bill had a pleasant but quite inaudible voice. Any elocution master would have found fault with his pronunciation of the word Granarth. It might have been anything. The clerk took it to be Carnfrae.

The Carnfrae Castle was due in on the following Thursday. He said so. Bill thanked him and went out. George Lomax accepted the information and laid his plans accordingly. He knew nothing about Union Castle liners, and took it for granted that James McGrath would duly arrive on Thursday.

Therefore, at the moment he was buttonholing Lord Caterham on the steps of the club on Wednesday morning, he would have been greatly surprised to learn that the Granarth Castle had docked at Southampton the preceding afternoon. At two o'clock that afternoon Anthony Cade, travelling under

the name of Jimmy McGrath, stepped out of the boat train at Waterloo, hailed a taxi, and after a moment's hesitation, ordered the driver to proceed to the Blitz Hotel.

"One might as well be comfortable," said Anthony to himself as he looked with some interest out of the taxi windows.

It was exactly fourteen years since he had been in London.

He arrived at the hotel, booked a room, and then went for a short stroll along the Embankment. It was rather pleasant to be back in London again. Everything was changed of course. There had been a little restaurant there—just past Blackfriars Bridge—where he had dined fairly often, in company with other earnest lads. He had been a Socialist then, and worn a flowing red tie. Young—very young.

He retraced his steps back to the Blitz. Just as he was crossing the road, a man jostled against him, nearly making him lose his balance. They both recovered themselves, and the man muttered an apology, his eyes scanning Anthony's face narrowly. He was a short, thickset man of the working classes, with something foreign in his appearance.

Anthony went on into the hotel, wondering, as he did so, what had inspired that searching glance. Nothing in it probably. The deep tan of his face was somewhat unusual looking amongst these pallid Londoners and it had attracted the fellow's attention. He went up to his room and, led by a sudden impulse, crossed to the looking glass and stood studying his face in it. Of the few friends of the old days—just a chosen few—was it likely that any of them would recognize him now if they were to meet him face to face? He shook his head slowly.

When he had left London he had been just eighteen—a fair, slightly chubby boy, with a misleadingly seraphic expression. Small chance that that boy would be recognized in the lean, brown-faced man with the quizzical expression.

The telephone beside the bed rang, and Anthony crossed to the receiver.

“Hullo!”

The voice of the desk clerk answered him.

“Mr. James McGrath?”

“Speaking.”

“A gentleman has called to see you.”

Anthony was rather astonished.

“To see me?”

“Yes, sir, a foreign gentleman.”

“What’s his name?”

There was a slight pause, and then the clerk said:

“I will send up a page boy with his card.”

Anthony replaced the receiver and waited. In a few minutes there was a knock on the door and a small page appeared bearing a card upon a salver.

Anthony took it. The following was the name engraved upon it.

Baron Lolopretjzyl

He now fully appreciated the desk clerk’s pause.

For a moment or two he stood studying the card, and then made up his mind.

“Show the gentleman up.”

“Very good, sir.”

In a few minutes the Baron Lolopretjzyl was ushered into the room, a big man with an immense fan-like black beard and a high, bald forehead.

He brought his heels together with a click, and bowed.

“Mr. McGrath,” he said.

Anthony imitated his movements as nearly as possible.

“Baron,” he said. Then, drawing forward a chair, “Pray sit down. I have not, I think had the pleasure of meeting you before?”

“That is so,” agreed the Baron, seating himself. “It is my misfortune,” he added politely.

“And mine also,” responded Anthony, on the same note.

“Let us now to business come,” said the Baron. “I represent in London the Loyalist party of Herzoslovakia.”

“And represent it admirably, I am sure,” murmured Anthony.

The Baron bowed in acknowledgement of the compliment.

“You are too kind,” he said stiffly. “Mr. McGrath, I will not from you conceal anything. The moment has come for the restoration of the monarchy, in abeyance since the martyrdom of His Most Gracious Majesty King Nicholas IV of blessed memory.”

“Amen,” murmured Anthony. “I mean hear, hear.”

“On the throne will be placed His Highness Prince Michael, who the support of the British Government has.”

“Splendid,” said Anthony. “It’s very kind of you to tell me all this.”

“Everything arranged is—when you come here to trouble make.”

The Baron fixed him with a stern eye.

“My dear Baron,” protested Anthony.

“Yes, yes, I know what I am talking about. You have with you the memoirs of the late Count Stylptitch.”

He fixed Anthony with an accusing eye.

“And if I have? What have the memoirs of Count Stylptitch to do with Prince Michael?”

“They will cause scandals.”

“Most memoirs do that,” said Anthony soothingly.

“Of many secrets he the knowledge had. Should he reveal but the quarter of them, Europe into war plunged may be.”

“Come, come,” said Anthony. “It can’t be as bad as all that.”

“An unfavourable opinion of the Obolovitch will abroad be spread. So democratic is the English spirit.”

“I can quite believe,” said Anthony, “that the Obolovitch may have been a trifle high-handed now and again. It runs in the blood. But people in England expect that sort of thing from the Balkans. I don’t know why they should, but they do.”

“You do not understand,” said the Baron. “You do not understand at all. And my lips sealed are.” He sighed.

“What exactly are you afraid of?” asked Anthony.

“Until I have read the memoirs I do not know,” explained the Baron simply. “But there is sure to be something. These great diplomats are always indiscreet. The appplecart upset will be, as the saying goes.”

“Look here,” said Anthony kindly. “I’m sure you’re taking altogether too pessimistic a view of the thing. I know all about publishers—they sit on

manuscripts and hatch 'em like eggs. It will be at least a year before the thing is published.”

“Either a very deceitful or a very simple young man you are. All is arranged for the memoirs in a Sunday newspaper to come out immediately.

“Oh!” Anthony was somewhat taken aback. “But you can always deny everything,” he said hopefully.

The Baron shook his head sadly.

“No, no, through the hat you talk. Let us to business come. One thousand pounds you are to have, is it not so? You see, I have the good information got.”

“I certainly congratulate the Intelligence Department of the Loyalists.”

“Then I to you offer fifteen hundred.”

“Anthony stared at him in amazement, then shook his head ruefully.

“I’m afraid it can’t be done,” he said, with regret.

“Good. I to you offer two thousand.”

“You tempt me, Baron, you tempt me. But I still say it can’t be done.”

“Your own price name, then.”

“I’m afraid you don’t understand the position. I’m perfectly willing to believe that you are on the side of the angels, and that these memoirs may damage your cause. Nevertheless, I’ve undertaken the job, and I’ve got to carry it through. See? I can’t allow myself to be bought off by the other side. That kind of thing isn’t done.”

The Baron listened very attentively. At the end of Anthony’s speech he nodded his head several times.

“I see. Your honour as an Englishman it is?”

“Well, we don’t put it that way ourselves,” said Anthony. “But I daresay, allowing for a difference in vocabulary, that we both mean much the same thing.”

The Baron rose to his feet.

“For the English honour I much respect have,” he announced. “We must another way try. I wish you good morning.”

He drew his heels together, clicked, bowed and marched out of the room, holding himself stiffly erect.

“Now I wonder what he meant by that,” mused Anthony. “Was it a threat? Not that I’m in the least afraid of old Lollipop. Rather a good name for him, that, by the way. I shall call him Baron Lollipop.”

He took a turn or two up and down the room, undecided on his next course of action. The date stipulated upon for delivering the manuscript was a little over a week ahead. Today was the 5th of October. Anthony had no intention of handing it over before the last moment. Truth to tell, he was by now feverishly anxious to read these memoirs. He had meant to do so on the boat coming over, but had been laid low with a touch of fever, and not at all in the mood for deciphering crabbed and illegible handwriting, for none of the manuscript was typed. He was now more than ever determined to see what all the fuss was about.

There was the other job too.

On an impulse, he picked up the telephone book and looked up the name of Revel. There were six Revels in the book: Edward Henry Revel, surgeon, of Harley Street; and James Revel and Co., saddlers; Lennox Revel of Abbotbury Mansions, Hampstead; Miss Mary Revel with an address in Ealing; Hon. Mrs. Timothy Revel of 487 Pont Street; and Mrs. Willis Revel of 42 Cadogan Square. Eliminating the saddlers and Miss Mary Revel, that gave him four names to investigate—and there was no reason to suppose that the lady lived in London at all! He shut up the book with a short shake of the head.

“For the moment I’ll leave it to chance,” he said. “Something usually turns up.”

The luck of the Anthony Cades of this world is perhaps in some measure due to their own belief in it. Anthony found what he was after not half an hour later, when he was turning over the pages of an illustrated paper. It was a representation of some tableaux organized by the Duchess of Perth. Below the central figure, a woman in Eastern dress, was the inscription:

The Hon. Mrs. Timothy Revel as Cleopatra. Before her marriage, Mrs. Revel was the Hon. Virginia Cawthron, a daughter of Lord Edgbaston.

Anthony looked at the picture some time, slowly pursing up his lips as though to whistle. Then he tore out the whole page, folded it up and put it in his pocket. He went upstairs again, unlocked his suitcase and took out the packet of letters. He took out the folded page from his pocket and slipped it under the string that held them together.

Then at a sudden sound behind him, he wheeled round sharply. A man was standing in the doorway, the kind of man whom Anthony had fondly imagined existed only in the chorus of a comic opera. A sinister-looking figure, with a squat brutal head and lips drawn back in an evil grin.

“What the devil are you doing here?” asked Anthony. “And who let you come up?”

“I pass where I please,” said the stranger. His voice was guttural and foreign, though his English was idiomatic enough.

“Another dago,” thought Anthony.

“Well, get out, do you hear?” he went on aloud.

The man’s eyes were fixed on the packet of letters which Anthony had caught up.

“I will get out when you have given me what I have come for.”

“And what’s that, may I ask?”

The man took a step nearer.

“The memoirs of Count Stylptitch,” he hissed.

“It’s impossible to take you seriously,” said Anthony. “You’re so completely the stage villain. I like your getup very much. Who sent you here? Baron Lollipop?”

“Baron?—” The man jerked out a string of harsh sounding consonants.

“So that’s how you pronounce it, is it? A cross between gargling and barking like a dog. I don’t think I could say it myself—my throat’s not made that way. I shall have to go on calling him Lollipop. So he sent you, did he?”

But he received a vehement negative. His visitor went so far as to spit upon the suggestion in a very realistic manner. Then he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper which he threw upon the table.

“Look,” he said. “Look and tremble, accursed Englishman.”

Anthony looked with some interest, not troubling to fulfil the latter part of the command. On the paper was traced the crude design of a human hand in red.

“It looks like a hand,” he remarked. “But, if you say so, I’m quite prepared to admit that it’s a Cubist picture of Sunset at the North Pole.”

“It is the sign of the Comrades of the Red Hand. I am a Comrade of the Red Hand.”

“You don’t say so,” said Anthony, looking at him with much interest. “Are the others all like you? I don’t know what the Eugenic Society would have to say about it.”

The man snarled angrily.

“Dog,” he said. “Worse than dog. Paid slave of an effete monarchy. Give me the memoirs, and you shall go unscathed. Such is the clemency of the Brotherhood.”

“It’s very kind of them, I’m sure,” said Anthony, “but I’m afraid that both they and you are labouring under a misapprehension. My instructions are to deliver the manuscript—not to your amiable society, but to a certain firm of publishers.”

“Pah!” laughed the other. “Do you think you will ever be permitted to reach that office alive? Enough of this fool’s talk. Hand over the papers, or I shoot.”

He drew a revolver from his pocket and brandished it in the air.

But there he misjudged his Anthony Cade. He was not used to men who could act as quickly—or quicker than they could think. Anthony did not wait to be covered by the revolver. Almost as soon as the other got it out of his pocket, Anthony had sprung forward and knocked it out of his hand. The force of the blow sent the man swinging round, so that he presented his back to his assailant.

The chance was too good to be missed. With one mighty, well-directed kick, Anthony sent the man flying through the doorway into the corridor, where he collapsed in a heap.

Anthony stepped out after him, but the doughty Comrade of the Red Hand had had enough. He got nimbly to his feet and fled down the passage. Anthony did not pursue him, but went back into his own room.

“So much for the Comrades of the Red Hand,” he remarked. “Picturesque appearance, but easily routed by direct action. How the hell did that fellow get in, I wonder? There’s one thing that stands out pretty clearly—this isn’t going to be quite such a soft job as I thought. I’ve already fallen foul of both the Loyalist and the Revolutionary parties. Soon, I suppose, the Nationalists and the Independent Liberals will be sending up a delegation. One thing’s fixed. I start on that manuscript tonight.”

Looking at his watch, Anthony discovered that it was nearly nine o'clock, and he decided to dine where he was. He did not anticipate any more surprise visits, but he felt that it was up to him to be on his guard. He had no intention of allowing his suitcase to be rifled whilst he was downstairs in the Grill Room. He rang the bell and asked for the menu, selected a couple of dishes and ordered a bottle of Chambertin. The waiter took the order and withdrew.

Whilst he was waiting for the meal to arrive, he got out the package of manuscript and put it on the table with the letters.

There was a knock at the door, and the waiter entered with a small table and the accessories of the meal. Anthony had strolled over to the mantelpiece. Standing there with his back to the room, he was directly facing the mirror, and idly glancing in it he noticed a curious thing.

The waiter's eyes were glued on the parcel of manuscript. Shooting little glances sideways at Anthony's immovable back, he moved softly round the table. His hands were twitching and he kept passing his tongue over his dry lips. Anthony observed him more closely. He was a tall man, supple like all waiters, with a clean-shaven, mobile face. An Italian, Anthony thought, not a Frenchman.

At the critical moment Anthony wheeled round abruptly. The waiter started slightly, but pretended to be doing something with the saltcellar.

"What's your name?" asked Anthony abruptly.

"Giuseppe, monsieur."

"Italian, eh?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Anthony spoke to him in that language, and the man answered fluently enough. Finally Anthony dismissed him with a nod, but all the while he was eating the excellent meal which Giuseppe served to him, he was thinking rapidly.

Had he been mistaken? Was Giuseppe's interest in the parcel just ordinary curiosity? It might be so, but remembering the feverish intensity of the man's excitement, Anthony decided against that theory. All the same, he was puzzled.

"Dash it all," said Anthony to himself, "everyone can't be after the blasted manuscript. Perhaps I'm fancying things."

Dinner concluded and cleared away, he applied himself to the perusal of the memoirs. Owing to the illegibility of the late Count's handwriting, the business was a slow one. Anthony's yawns succeeded one another with suspicious rapidity. At the end of the fourth chapter, he gave it up.

So far, he had found the memoirs insufferably dull, with no hint of scandal of any kind.

He gathered up the letters and the wrapping of the manuscript which were lying in a heap together on the table and locked them up in the suitcase. Then he locked the door, and as an additional precaution put a chair against it. On the chair he placed the water bottle from the bathroom.

Surveying these preparations with some pride, he undressed and got into bed. He had one more shot at the Count's memoirs, but felt his eyelids drooping, and stuffing the manuscript under his pillow, he switched out the light and fell asleep almost immediately.

It must have been some four hours later that he awoke with a start. What had awakened him he did not know—perhaps a sound, perhaps only the consciousness of danger which in men who have led an adventurous life is very fully developed.

For a moment he lay quite still, trying to focus his impressions. He could hear a very stealthy rustle, and then he became aware of a denser blackness somewhere between him and the window—on the floor by the suitcase.

With a sudden spring, Anthony jumped out of bed, switching the light on as he did so. A figure sprang up from where it had been kneeling by the suitcase.

It was the waiter, Giuseppe. In his right hand gleamed a long thin knife. He hurled himself straight upon Anthony, who was by now fully conscious of his own danger. He was unarmed and Giuseppe was evidently thoroughly at home with his own weapon.

Anthony sprang to one side, and Giuseppe missed him with the knife. The next minute the two men were rolling on the floor together, locked in a close embrace. The whole of Anthony's faculties were centred on keeping a close grip of Giuseppe's right arm so that he would be unable to use the knife. He bent it slowly back. At the same time he felt the Italian's other hand clutching at his windpipe, stifling him, choking. And still, desperately, he bent the right arm back.

There was a sharp tinkle as the knife fell on the floor. At the same time, the Italian extricated himself with a swift twist from Anthony's grasp. Anthony sprang up too, but made the mistake of moving towards the door to cut off the other's retreat. He saw, too late, that the chair and the water bottle were just as he had arranged them.

Giuseppe had entered by the window, and it was the window he made for now. In the instant's respite given him by Anthony's move towards the door, he had sprung out on the balcony, leaped over to the adjoining balcony and had disappeared through the adjoining window.

Anthony knew well enough that it was of no use to pursue him. His way of retreat was doubtless fully assured. Anthony would merely get himself into trouble.

He walked over to the bed, thrusting his hand beneath the pillow and drawing out the memoirs. Lucky that they had been there and not in the suitcase. He crossed over to the suitcase and looked inside, meaning to take out the letters.

Then he swore softly under his breath.

The letters were gone.

Six

THE GENTLE ART OF BLACKMAIL

It was exactly five minutes to four when Virginia Revel, rendered punctual by a healthy curiosity, returned to the house in Pont Street. She opened the door with her latchkey, and stepped into the hall to be immediately confronted by the impassive Chilvers.

“I beg pardon, ma’am, but a—a person has called to see you—”

For the moment, Virginia did not pay attention to the subtle phraseology whereby Chilvers cloaked his meaning.

“Mr. Lomax? Where is he? In the drawing room?”

“Oh, no, ma’am, not Mr. Lomax.” Chilvers’ tone was faintly reproachful. “A person—I was reluctant to let him in, but he said his business was most important—connected with the late Captain, I understood him to say. Thinking therefore that you might wish to see him, I put him—er—in the study.”

Virginia stood thinking for a minute. She had been a widow now for some years, and the fact that she rarely spoke of her husband was taken by some to indicate that below her careless demeanour was a still-aching wound. By others it was taken to mean the exact opposite, that Virginia had never really cared for Tim Revel, and that she found it insincere to profess a grief she did not feel.

“I should have mentioned, ma’am,” continued Chilvers, “that the man appears to be some kind of foreigner.”

Virginia’s interest heightened a little. Her husband had been in the Diplomatic Service, and they had been together in Herzoslovakia just before the sensational murder of the King and Queen. This man might

probably be a Herzoslovakian, some old servant who had fallen on evil days.

“You did quite right, Chilvers,” she said with a quick, approving nod.
“Where did you say you put him? In the study?”

She crossed the hall with her light buoyant step, and opened the door of the small room that flanked the dining room.

The visitor was sitting in a chair by the fireplace. He rose on her entrance and stood looking at her. Virginia had an excellent memory for faces, and she was at once quite sure that she had never seen the man before. He was tall and dark, supple in figure, and quite unmistakably a foreigner; but she did not think he was of Slavonic origin. She put him down as Italian or possibly Spanish.

“You wish to see me?” she asked. “I am Mrs. Revel.”

The man did not answer for a minute or two. He was looking her slowly over, as though appraising her narrowly. There was a veiled insolence in his manner which she was quick to feel.

“Will you please state your business?” she said, with a touch of impatience.

“You are Mrs. Revel? Mrs. Timothy Revel?”

“Yes. I told you so just now.”

“Quite so. It is a good thing that you consented to see me, Mrs. Revel. Otherwise, as I told your butler, I should have been compelled to do business with your husband.”

Virginia looked at him in astonishment, but some impulse quelled the retort that sprang to her lips. She contented herself by remarking dryly:

“You might have found some difficulty in doing that.”

“I think not. I am very persistent. But I will come to the point. Perhaps you recognize this?”

He flourished something in his hand. Virginia looked at it without much interest.

“Can you tell me what it is, madame?”

“It appears to be a letter,” replied Virginia, who was by now convinced that she had to do with a man who was mentally unhinged.

“And perhaps you note to whom it is addressed,” said the man significantly, holding it out to her.

“I can read,” Virginia informed him pleasantly. “It is addressed to a Captain O’Neill at Rue de Quenelles No. 15 Paris.”

The man seemed searching her face hungrily for something he did not find.

“Will you read it, please?”

Virginia took the envelope from him, drew out the enclosure and glanced at it, but almost immediately she stiffened and held it out to him again.

“This is a private letter—certainly not meant for my eyes.”

The man laughed sardonically.

“I congratulate you, Mrs. Revel, on your admirable acting. You play your part to perfection. Nevertheless, I think that you will hardly be able to deny the signature!”

“The signature?”

Virginia turned the letter over—and was struck dumb with astonishment. The signature, written in a delicate slanting hand, was Virginia Revel. Checking the exclamation of astonishment that rose to her lips, she turned again to the beginning of the letter and deliberately read the whole thing through. Then she stood a minute lost in thought. The nature of the letter made it clear enough what was in prospect.

“Well, madame?” said the man. “That is your name, is it not?”

“Oh, yes,” said Virginia. “It’s my name.”

“But not my handwriting,” she might have added.

Instead she turned a dazzling smile upon her visitor.

“Supposing,” she said sweetly, “we sit down and talk it over?”

He was puzzled. Not so had he expected her to behave. His instinct told him that she was not afraid of him.

“First of all, I should like to know how you found me out?”

“That was easy.”

He took from his pocket a page torn from an illustrated paper, and handed it to her. Anthony Cade would have recognized it.

She gave it back to him with a thoughtful little frown.

“I see,” she said. “It was very easy.”

“Of course you understand, Mrs. Revel, that that is not the only letter. There are others.”

“Dear me,” said Virginia, “I seem to have been frightfully indiscreet.”

Again she could see that her light tone puzzled him. She was by now thoroughly enjoying herself.

“At any rate,” she said, smiling sweetly at him, “it’s very kind of you to call and give them back to me.”

There was a pause as he cleared his throat.

“I am a poor man, Mrs. Revel,” he said at last, with a good deal of significance in his manner.

“As such you will doubtless find it easier to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, or so I have always heard.”

“I cannot afford to let you have these letters for nothing.”

“I think you are under a misapprehension. Those letters are the property of the person who wrote them.”

“That may be the law, madame, but in this country you have a saying ‘Possession is nine points of the law.’ And, in any case, are you prepared to invoke the aid of the law?”

“The law is a severe one for blackmailers,” Virginia reminded him.

“Come, Mrs. Revel, I am not quite a fool. I have read these letters—the letters of a woman to her lover, one and all breathing dread of discovery by her husband. Do you want me to take them to your husband?”

“You have overlooked one possibility. Those letters were written some years ago. Supposing that since then—I have become a widow.”

He shook his head with confidence.

“In that case—if you had nothing to fear—you would not be sitting here making terms with me.”

Virginia smiled.

“What is your price?” she asked in a businesslike manner.

“For one thousand pounds I will hand the whole packet over to you. It is very little that I am asking there; but, you see, I do not like the business.”

“I shouldn’t dream of paying you a thousand pounds,” said Virginia with decision.

“Madame, I never bargain. A thousand pounds, and I will place the letters in your hands.”

Virginia reflected.

“You must give me a little time to think it over. It will not be easy for me to get such a sum together.”

“A few pounds on account perhaps—say fifty—and I will call again.”

Virginia looked up at the clock. It was five minutes past four, and she fancied that she had heard the bell.

“Very well,” she said hurriedly. “Come back tomorrow, but later than this. About six.”

She crossed over to a desk that stood against the wall, unlocked one of the drawers, and took out an untidy handful of notes.

“There is about forty pounds here. That will have to do for you.”

He snatched at it eagerly.

“And now go at once, please,” said Virginia.

He left the room obediently enough. Through the open door, Virginia caught a glimpse of George Lomax in the hall, just being ushered upstairs by Chilvers. As the front door closed, Virginia called to him.

“Come in here, George. Chilvers, bring us tea in here, will you please?”

She flung open both windows, and George Lomax came into the room to find her standing erect with dancing eyes and windblown hair.

“I’ll shut them in a minute, George, but I felt the room ought to be aired. Did you fall over the blackmailer in the hall?”

“The what?”

“Blackmailer, George. B-L-A-C-K-M-A-I-L-E-R: blackmailer. One who blackmails.”

“My dear Virginia, you can’t be serious!”

“Oh, but I am, George.”

“But who did he come here to blackmail?”

“Me, George.”

“But, my dear Virginia, what have you been doing?”

“Well, just for once, as it happens, I hadn’t been doing anything. The good gentleman mistook me for someone else.”

“You rang up the police, I suppose?”

“No, I didn’t. I suppose you think I ought to have done so.”

“Well—” George considered weightily. “No, no, perhaps not—perhaps you acted wisely. You might be mixed up in some unpleasant publicity in connexion with the case. You might even have had to give evidence—”

“I should have liked that,” said Virginia. “I would love to be summoned, and I should like to see if judges really do make all the rotten jokes you read about. It would be most exciting. I was at Vine Street the other day to see about a diamond brooch I had lost, and there was the most perfectly lovely inspector—the nicest man I ever met.”

George, as was his custom, let all irrelevancies pass.

“But what did you do about this scoundrel?”

“Well, George, I’m afraid I let him do it.”

“Do what?”

“Blackmail me.”

George’s face of horror was so poignant that Virginia had to bite her underlip.

“You mean—do I understand you to mean—that you did not correct the misapprehension under which he was labouring?”

Virginia shook her head, shooting a sideways glance at him.

“Good heavens, Virginia, you must be mad.”

“I suppose it would seem that way to you.”

“But why? In God’s name, why?”

“Several reasons. To begin with, he was doing it so beautifully—blackmailing me, I mean—I hate to interrupt an artist when he’s doing his job really well. And then, you see, I’d never been blackmailed—”

“I should hope not, indeed.”

“And I wanted to see what it felt like.”

“I am quite at a loss to comprehend you, Virginia.”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“You did not give him money, I hope?”

“Just a trifle,” said Virginia apologetically.

“How much?”

“Forty pounds.”

“Virginia!”

“My dear George, it’s only what I pay for an evening dress. It’s just as exciting to buy a new experience as it is to buy a new dress—more so, in fact.”

George Lomax merely shook his head, and Chilvers appearing at that moment with the tea urn, he was saved from having to express his outraged

feelings. When tea had been brought in, and Virginia's deft fingers were manipulating the heavy silver teapot, she spoke again on the subject.

"I had another motive too, George—a brighter and better one. We women are usually supposed to be cats, but at any rate I'd done another woman a good turn this afternoon. This man isn't likely to go off looking for another Virginia Revel. He thinks he's found his bird all right. Poor little devil, she was in a blue funk when she wrote that letter. Mr. Blackmailer would have had the easiest job in his life there. Now, though he doesn't know it, he's up against a tough proposition. Starting with the great advantage of having led a blameless life, I shall toy with him to his undoing—as they say in books. Guile, George, lots of guile."

George still shook his head.

"I don't like it," he persisted. "I don't like it."

"Well, never mind, George dear. You didn't come here to talk about blackmailers. What did you come here for, by the way? Correct answer: 'To see you!' Accent on the you, and press her hand with significance unless you happen to have been eating heavily buttered muffin, in which case it must all be done with the eyes."

"I did come to see you," replied George seriously. "And I am glad to find you alone."

" 'Oh, George, this is so sudden.' Says she, swallowing a currant."

"I wanted to ask a favour of you. I have always considered you, Virginia, as a woman of considerable charm."

"Oh, George!"

"And also as a woman of intelligence!"

"Not really? How well the man knows me."

"My dear Virginia, there is a young fellow arriving in England tomorrow whom I should like you to meet."

“All right, George, but it’s your party—let that be clearly understood.”

“You could, I feel sure, if you chose, exercise your considerable charm.”

Virginia cocked her head a little on one side.

“George dear, I don’t ‘charm’ as a profession, you know. Often I like people—and then, well, they like me. But I don’t think I could set out in cold blood to fascinate a helpless stranger. That sort of thing isn’t done, George, it really isn’t. There are professional sirens who would do it much better than I should.”

“That is out of the question, Virginia. This young man, he is a Canadian, by the way, of the name of McGrath—”

“ ‘A Canadian of Scottish descent.’ Says she, deducing brilliantly.”

“Is probably quite unused to the higher walks of English society. I should like him to appreciate the charm and distinction of a real English gentlewoman.”

“Meaning me?”

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said why? You don’t boom the real English gentlewoman with every stray Canadian who sets foot upon our shores. What is the deep idea, George? To put it vulgarly, what do you get out of it?”

“I cannot see that that concerns you, Virginia.”

“I couldn’t possibly go out for an evening and fascinate unless I knew all the whys and wherefores.”

“You have a most extraordinary way of putting things, Virginia. Anyone would think—”

“Wouldn’t they? Come on, George, part with a little more information.”

“My dear Virginia, matters are likely to be a little strained shortly in a certain Central European nation. It is important, for reasons which are immaterial, that this—Mr.—er—McGrath should be brought to realize that the restoring of the monarchy in Herzoslovakia is imperative to the peace of Europe.”

“The part about the peace of Europe is all bosh,” said Virginia calmly, “but I’m all for monarchies every time, especially for a picturesque people like the Herzoslovaks. So you’re running a king in the Herzoslovakian Stakes, are you? Who is he?”

George was reluctant to answer, but did not see his way to avoid the question. The interview was not going at all as he had planned. He had foreseen Virginia as a willing, docile tool, receiving his hints gratefully, and asking no awkward questions. This was far from being the case. She seemed determined to know all about it and this George, ever doubtful of female discretion, was determined at all costs to avoid. He had made a mistake. Virginia was not the woman for the part. She might, indeed, cause serious trouble. Her account of her interview with the blackmailer had caused him grave apprehension. A most undependable creature, with no idea of treating serious matters seriously.

“Prince Michael Obolovitch,” he replied, as Virginia was obviously waiting for an answer to her question. “But please let that go no further.”

“Don’t be absurd, George. There are all sorts of hints in the papers already, and articles cracking up the Obolovitch dynasty and talking about the murdered Nicholas IV as though he were a cross between a saint and a hero instead of a stupid little man besotted by a third-rate actress.”

George winced. He was more than ever convinced that he had made a mistake in enlisting Virginia’s aid. He must stave her off quickly.

“You are right, my dear Virginia,” he said hastily, as he rose to his feet to bid her farewell. “I should not have made the suggestion I did to you. But we are anxious for the Dominions to see eye to eye with us on this Herzoslovakian crisis, and McGrath has, I believe, influence in journalistic circles. As an ardent monarchist, and with your knowledge of the country, I thought it a good plan for you to meet him.”

“So that’s the explanation, is it?”

“Yes, but I daresay you wouldn’t have cared for him.”

Virginia looked at him for a second and then she laughed.

“George,” she said, “you’re a rotten liar.”

“Virginia!”

“Rotten, absolutely rotten! If I had had your training, I could have managed a better one than that—one that had a chance of being believed. But I shall find out all about it, my poor George. Rest assured of that. The Mystery of Mr. McGrath. I shouldn’t wonder if I got a hint or two at Chimneys this weekend.”

“At Chimneys? You are going to Chimneys?”

George could not conceal his perturbation. He had hoped to reach Lord Caterham in time for the invitation to remain unissued.

“Bundle rang up and asked me this morning.”

George made a last effort.

“Rather a dull party, I believe,” he said. “Hardly in your line, Virginia.”

“My poor George, why didn’t you tell me the truth and trust me? It’s still not too late.”

George took her hand and dropped it again limply.

“I have told you the truth,” he said coldly, and he said it without a blush.

“That’s a better one,” said Virginia approvingly. “But it’s still not good enough. Cheer up, George, I shall be at Chimneys all right, exerting my considerable charm—as you put it. Life has become suddenly very much more amusing. First a blackmailer, and then George in diplomatic difficulties. Will he tell all to the beautiful woman who asks for his confidence so pathetically? No, he will reveal nothing until the last chapter. Good-bye, George. One last fond look before you go? No? Oh, George, dear, don’t be sulky about it!”

Virginia ran to the telephone as soon as George had departed with a heavy gait through the front door.

She obtained the number she required and asked to speak to Lady Eileen Brent.

“Is that you, Bundle? I’m coming to Chimneys all right tomorrow. What? Bore me? No, it won’t. Bundle, wild horses wouldn’t keep me away! So there!”

Seven

MR. MCGRATH REFUSES AN INVITATION

The letters were gone!

Having once made up his mind to the fact of their disappearance, there was nothing to do but accept it. Anthony realized very well that he could not pursue Giuseppe through the corridors of the Blitz Hotel. To do so was to court undesired publicity, and in all probability to fail in his object all the same.

He came to the conclusion that Giuseppe had mistaken the packets of letters, enclosed as they were in the other wrappings, for the memoirs themselves. It was likely therefore that when he discovered his mistake he would make another attempt to get hold of the memoirs. For this attempt Anthony intended to be fully prepared.

Another plan that occurred to him was to advertise discreetly for the return of the package of letters. Supposing Giuseppe to be an emissary of the Comrades of the Red Hand, or, which seemed to Anthony more probable, to be employed by the Loyalist party, the letters could have no possible interest for either employer and he would probably jump at the chance of obtaining a small sum of money for their return.

Having thought out all this, Anthony returned to bed and slept peacefully until morning. He did not fancy that Giuseppe would be anxious for a second encounter that night.

Anthony got up with his plan of campaign fully thought-out. He had a good breakfast, glanced at the papers which were full of the new discoveries of oil in Herzoslovakia, and then demanded an interview with the manager and being Anthony Cade, with a gift for getting his own way by means of quiet determination he obtained what he asked for.

The manager, a Frenchman with an exquisitely suave manner, received him in his private office.

“You wished to see me, I understand, Mr.—er—McGrath?”

“I did. I arrived at your hotel yesterday afternoon and I had dinner served to me in my own rooms by a waiter whose name was Giuseppe.”

He paused.

“I daresay we have a waiter of that name,” agreed the manager indifferently.

“I was struck by something unusual in the man’s manner, but thought nothing more of it at the time. Later, in the night, I was awakened by the sound of someone moving softly about the room. I switched on the light, and found this same Giuseppe in the act of rifling my leather suitcase.”

The manager’s indifference had completely disappeared now.

“But I have heard nothing of this,” he exclaimed. “Why was I not informed sooner?”

“The man and I had a brief struggle—he was armed with a knife, by the way. In the end he succeeded in making off by way of the window.”

“What did you do then, Mr. McGrath?”

“I examined the contents of my suitcase.”

“Had anything been taken?”

“Nothing of—importance,” said Anthony slowly.

The manager leaned back with a sigh.

“I am glad of that,” he remarked. “But you will allow me to say, Mr. McGrath, that I do not quite understand your attitude in the matter. You made no attempt to arouse the hotel? To pursue the thief?”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing of value had been taken, as I tell you. I am aware, of course, that strictly speaking it is a case for the police—”

He paused, and the manager murmured without any particular enthusiasm:

“For the police—of course—”

“In any case, I was fairly certain that the man would manage to make good his escape, and since nothing was taken, why bother with the police?”

The manager smiled a little.

“I see that you realize, Mr. McGrath, that I am not at all anxious to have the police called in. From my point of view it is always disastrous. If the newspapers can get hold of anything connected with a big fashionable hotel such as this, they always run it for all it is worth, no matter how insignificant the real subject may be.”

“Quite so,” agreed Anthony. “Now I told you that nothing of value had been taken, and that was perfectly true in a sense. Nothing of any value to the thief was taken, but he got hold of something which is of considerable value to me.”

“Ah?”

“Letters, you understand.”

An expression of superhuman discretion, only to be achieved by a Frenchman, settled down upon the manager’s face.

“I comprehend,” he murmured. “But perfectly. Naturally, it is not a matter for the police.”

“We are quite agreed upon that point. But you will understand that I have every intention of recovering these letters. In the part of the world where I come from, people are used to doing things for themselves. What I require

from you therefore is the fullest possible information you can give me about this waiter, Giuseppe.”

“I see no objection to that,” said the manager after a moment or two’s pause. “I cannot give you the information offhand, of course, but if you will return in half an hour’s time I will have everything ready to lay before you.”

“Thank you very much. That will suit me admirably.”

In half an hour’s time, Anthony returned to the office again to find that the manager had been as good as his word. Jotted down on a piece of paper were all the relevant facts known about Giuseppe Manelli.

“He came to us, you see, about three months ago. A skilled and experienced waiter. Has given complete satisfaction. He has been in England about five years.”

Together the two men ran over a list of the hotels and restaurants where the Italian had worked. One fact struck Anthony as being possibly of significance. At two of the hotels in question there had been serious robberies during the time that Giuseppe was employed there, though no suspicion of any kind had attached to him in either case. Still, the fact was significant.

Was Giuseppe merely a clever hotel thief? Had his search of Anthony’s suitcase been only part of his habitual professional tactics? He might just possibly have had the packet of letters in his hand at the moment when Anthony switched on the light, and have shoved it into his pocket mechanically so as to have his hands free. In that case, the thing was mere plain or garden robbery.

Against that, there was to be put the man’s excitement of the evening before when he had caught sight of the papers lying on the table. There had been no money or object of value there such as would excite the cupidity of an ordinary thief.

No, Anthony felt convinced that Giuseppe had been acting as a tool for some outside agency. With the information supplied to him by the manager,

it might be possible to learn something about Giuseppe's private life and so finally track him down. He gathered up the sheet of paper and rose.

"Thank you very much indeed. It's quite unnecessary to ask, I suppose, whether Giuseppe is still in the hotel?"

The manager smiled.

"His bed was not slept in, and all his things have been left behind. He must have rushed straight out after his attack upon you. I don't think there is much chance of our seeing him again."

"I imagine not. Well, thank you very much indeed. I shall be staying on here for the present."

"I hope you will be successful in your task, but I confess that I am rather doubtful."

"I always hope for the best."

One of Anthony's first proceedings was to question some of the other waiters who had been friendly with Giuseppe, but he obtained very little to go upon. He wrote out an advertisement on the lines he had planned, and had it sent to five of the most widely read newspapers. He was just about to go out and visit the restaurant at which Giuseppe had been previously employed when the telephone rang. Anthony took up the receiver.

"Hullo, what is it?"

A toneless voice replied.

"Am I speaking to Mr. McGrath?"

"You are. Who are you?"

"This is Messrs. Balderson and Hodgkins. Just a minute, please. I will put you through to Mr. Balderson."

“Our worthy publishers,” thought Anthony. “So they are getting worried too, are they? They needn’t. There’s a week to run still.”

A hearty voice struck suddenly upon his ear.

“Hullo! That Mr. McGrath?”

“Speaking.”

“I’m Mr. Balderson of Balderson and Hodgkins. What about that manuscript, Mr. McGrath?”

“Well,” said Anthony, “what about it?”

“Everything about it. I understand, Mr. McGrath, that you have just arrived in this country from South Africa. That being so, you can’t possibly understand the position. There’s going to be trouble about that manuscript, Mr. McGrath, big trouble. Sometimes I wish we’d never said we’d handle it.”

“Indeed?”

“I assure you it’s so. At present I’m anxious to get it into my possession as quickly as possible, so as to have a couple of copies made. Then, if the original is destroyed—well, no harm will be done.”

“Dear me,” said Anthony.

“Yes, I expect it sounds absurd to you, Mr. McGrath. But, I assure you, you don’t appreciate the situation. There’s a determined effort being made to prevent its ever reaching this office. I say to you quite frankly and without humbug that if you attempt to bring it yourself it’s ten to one that you’ll never get here.”

“I doubt that,” said Anthony. “When I want to get anywhere, I usually do.”

“You’re up against a very dangerous lot of people. I wouldn’t have believed it myself a month ago. I tell you, Mr. McGrath, we’ve been bribed and threatened and cajoled by one lot and another until we don’t know whether

we're on our heads or our heels. My suggestion is that you do not attempt to bring the manuscript here. One of our people will call upon you at the hotel and take possession of it."

"And supposing the gang does him in?" asked Anthony.

"The responsibility would then be ours—not yours. You would have delivered it to our representative and obtained a written discharge. The cheque for—er—a thousand pounds which we are instructed to hand to you will not be available until Wednesday next by the terms of our agreement with the executors of the late—er—author—you know whom I mean, but if you insist I will send my own cheque for that amount by the messenger."

Anthony reflected for a minute or two. He had intended to keep the memoirs until the last day of grace, because he was anxious to see for himself what all the fuss was about. Nevertheless, he realized the force of the publisher's arguments.

"All right," he said, with a little sigh. "Have it your own way. Send your man along. And if you don't mind sending that cheque as well I'd rather have it now, as I may be going out of England before next Wednesday."

"Certainly, Mr. McGrath. Our representative will call upon you first thing tomorrow morning. It will be wiser not to send anyone direct from the office. Our Mr. Holmes lives in South London. He will call in on his way to us, and will give you a receipt for the package. I suggest that tonight you should place a dummy packet in the manager's safe. Your enemies will get to hear of this, and it will prevent any attack being made upon your apartments tonight."

"Very well, I will do as you direct."

Anthony hung up the receiver with a thoughtful face.

Then he went on with his interrupted plan of seeking news of the slippery Giuseppe. He drew a complete blank, however. Giuseppe had worked at the restaurant in question, but nobody seemed to know anything of his private life or associates.

“But I’ll get you, my lad,” murmured Anthony, between his teeth. “I’ll get you yet. It’s only a matter of time.”

His second night in London was entirely peaceful.

At nine o’clock the following morning, the card of Mr. Holmes from Messrs. Balderson and Hodgkins was sent up, and Mr. Holmes followed it. A small, fair man with a quiet manner. Anthony handed over the manuscript, and received in exchange a cheque for a thousand pounds. Mr. Holmes packed up the manuscript in the small brown bag he carried, wished Anthony good morning, and departed. The whole thing seemed very tame.

“But perhaps he’ll be murdered on the way there,” Anthony murmured aloud, as he stared idly out of the window. “I wonder now—I very much wonder.”

He put the cheque in an envelope, enclosed a few lines of writing with it, and sealed it up carefully. Jimmy, who had been more or less in funds at the time of his encounter with Anthony at Bulawayo, had advanced him a substantial sum of money which was, as yet, practically untouched.

“If one job’s done with, the other isn’t,” said Anthony to himself. “Up to now, I’ve bungled it. But never say die. I think that, suitably disguised, I shall go and have a look at 487 Pont Street.”

He packed his belongings, went down and paid his bill, and ordered his luggage to be put on a taxi. Suitably rewarding those who stood in his path, most of whom had done nothing whatever materially to add to his comfort, he was on the point of being driven off, when a small boy rushed down the steps with a letter.

“Just come for you, this very minute, sir.”

With a sigh, Anthony produced yet another shilling. The taxi groaned heavily and jumped forward with a hideous crashing of gears, and Anthony opened the letter.

It was rather a curious document. He had to read it four times before he could be sure of what it was all about. Put in plain English (the letter was not in plain English, but in the peculiar involved style common to missives issued by government officials) it presumed that Mr. McGrath was arriving in England from South Africa today—Thursday, it referred obliquely to the memoirs of Count Stylptitch, and begged Mr. McGrath to do nothing in the matter until he had had a confidential conversation with Mr. George Lomax, and certain other parties whose magnificence was vaguely hinted at. It also contained a definite invitation to go down to Chimneys as the guest of Lord Caterham, on the following day, Friday.

A mysterious and thoroughly obscure communication. Anthony enjoyed it very much.

“Dear old England,” he murmured affectionately. “Two days behind the times, as usual. Rather a pity. Still, I can’t go down to Chimneys under false pretences. I wonder, though, if there’s an inn handy? Mr. Anthony Cade might stay at the inn without anyone being the wiser.”

He leaned out of the window, and gave new directions to the taxi driver, who acknowledged them with a snort of contempt.

The taxi drew up before one of London’s more obscure hostelries. The fare, however, was paid on a scale befitting its point of departure.

Having booked a room in the name of Anthony Cade, Anthony passed into a dingy writing room, took out a sheet of notepaper stamped with the legend Hotel Blitz, and wrote rapidly.

He explained that he had arrived on the preceding Tuesday, that he had handed over the manuscript in question to Messrs. Balderson and Hodgkins, and he regretfully declined the kind invitation of Lord Caterham as he was leaving England almost immediately. He signed the letter “Yours faithfully, James McGrath.”

And now,” said Anthony, as he affixed the stamp to the envelope. “To business. Exit James McGrath, and Enter Anthony Cade.”

Eight

A DEAD MAN

On that same Thursday afternoon Virginia Revel had been playing tennis at Ranelagh. All the way back to Pont Street, as she lay back in the long, luxurious limousine, a little smile played upon her lips as she rehearsed her part in the forthcoming interview. Of course it was within the bounds of possibility that the blackmailer might not reappear, but she felt pretty certain that he would. She had shown herself an easy prey. Well, perhaps this time there would be a little surprise for him!

When the car drew up at the house, she turned to speak to the chauffeur before going up the steps.

“How’s your wife, Walton? I forgot to ask.”

“Better I think, ma’am. The doctor said he’d look in and see her about half past six. Will you be wanting the car again?”

Virginia reflected for a minute.

“I shall be away for the weekend. I’m going by the 6:40 from Paddington, but I shan’t need you again—a taxi will do for that. I’d rather you saw the doctor. If he thinks it would do your wife good to go away for the weekend, take her somewhere, Walton. I’ll stand the expense.”

Cutting short the man’s thanks with an impatient nod of the head, Virginia ran up the steps, delved into her bag in search of her latchkey, remembered she hadn’t got it with her, and hastily rang the bell.

It was not answered at once, but as she waited there a young man came up the steps. He was shabbily dressed, and carried in his hand a sheaf of leaflets. He held one out to Virginia with the legend on it plainly visible: “Why Did I Serve My Country?” In his left hand he held a collecting box.

“I can’t buy two of those awful poems in one day,” said Virginia pleadingly. “I bought one this morning. I did, indeed, honour bright.”

The young man threw back his head and laughed. Virginia laughed with him. Running her eyes carelessly over him, she thought him a more pleasing specimen than usual of London’s unemployed. She liked his brown face, and the lean hardness of him. She went so far as to wish she had a job for him.

But at that moment the door opened, and immediately Virginia forgot all about the problem of the unemployed, for to her astonishment the door was opened by her own maid, Elise.

“Where’s Chilvers?” she demanded sharply, as she stepped into the hall.

“But he is gone, madame, with the others.”

“What others? Gone where?”

“But to Datchet, madame—to the cottage, as your telegram said.”

“My telegram?” said Virginia, utterly at sea.

“Did not madame send a telegram? Surely there can be no mistake. It came but an hour ago.”

“I never sent any telegram. What did it say?”

“I believe it is still on the table là-bas.”

Elise retired, pouncing upon it, and brought it to her mistress in triumph.

“Voilà, madame!”

The telegram was addressed to Chilvers and ran as follows:

“Please take household down to cottage at once, and make preparations for weekend party there. Catch 5:49 train.”

There was nothing unusual about it, it was just the sort of message she herself had frequently sent before, when she had arranged a party at her riverside bungalow on the spur of the moment. She always took the whole household down, leaving an old woman as caretaker. Chilvers would not have seen anything wrong with the message, and like a good servant had carried out his orders faithfully enough.

“Me, I remained,” explained Elise, “knowing that madame would wish me to pack for her.”

“It’s a silly hoax,” cried Virginia, flinging down the telegram angrily. “You know perfectly well, Elise, that I am going to Chimneys. I told you so this morning.”

“I thought madame had changed her mind. Sometimes that does happen, does it not, madame?”

Virginia admitted the truth of the accusation with a half-smile. She was busy trying to find a reason for this extraordinary practical joke. Elise put forward a suggestion.

“Mon Dieu!” she cried, clasping her hands. “If it should be the malefactors, the thieves! They send the bogus telegram and get the domestiques all out of the house, and then they rob it.”

“I suppose that might be it,” said Virginia doubtfully.

“Yes, yes madame, that is without a doubt. Every day you read in the papers of such things. Madame will ring up the police at once—at once—before they arrive and cut our throats.”

“Don’t get so excited, Elise. They won’t come and cut our throats at six o’clock in the afternoon.”

“Madame, I implore you, let me run out and fetch a policeman now, at once.”

“What on earth for? Don’t be silly, Elise. Go up and pack my things for Chimneys, if you haven’t already done it. The new Cailleaux evening dress, and the white crêpe marocain, and—yes, the black velvet—black velvet is so political, is it not?”

“Madame looks ravishing in the eau de nil satin,” suggested Elise, her professional instincts reasserting themselves.

“No, I won’t take that. Hurry up, Elise, there’s a good girl. We’ve got very little time. I’ll send a wire to Chilvers at Datchet, and I’ll speak to the policeman on the beat as we go out and tell him to keep an eye on the place. Don’t start rolling your eyes again, Elise—if you get so frightened before anything has happened, what would you do if a man jumped out from some dark corner and stuck a knife into you?”

Elise gave vent to a shrill squeak, and beat a speedy retreat up the stairs, darting nervous glances over her shoulder as she went.

Virginia made a face at her retreating back, and crossed the hall to the little study where the telephone was. Elise’s suggestion of ringing up the police station seemed to her a good one, and she intended to act upon it without any further delay.

She opened the study door and crossed to the telephone. Then, with her hand on the receiver, she stopped. A man was sitting in the big armchair, sitting in a curious huddled position. In the stress of the moment, she had forgotten all about her expected visitor. Apparently he had fallen asleep whilst waiting for her.

She came right up to the chair, a slightly mischievous smile upon her face. And then suddenly the smile faded.

The man was not asleep. He was dead.

She knew it at once, knew it instinctively even before her eyes had seen and noted the small shining pistol lying on the floor, the little singed hole just above the heart with the dark stain round it, and the horrible dropped jaw.

She stood quite still, her hands pressed to her sides. In the silence she heard Elise running down the stairs.

“Madame! Madame!”

“Well, what is it?”

She moved quickly to the door. Her whole instinct was to conceal what had happened—for the moment anyway—from Elise. Elise would promptly go into hysterics, she knew that well enough, and she felt a great need for calm and quiet in which to think things out.

“Madame, would it not be better if I should draw the chain across the door? These malefactors, at any minute they may arrive.”

“Yes, if you like. Anything you like.”

She heard the rattle of the chain, and then Elise running upstairs again, and drew a long breath of relief.

She looked at the man in the chair and then at the telephone. Her course was quite clear, she must ring up the police at once.

But still she did not do so. She stood quite still, paralysed with horror and with a host of conflicting ideas rushing through her brain. The bogus telegram! Had it something to do with this? Supposing Elise had not stayed behind? She would have let herself in—that is, presuming she had had her latchkey with her as usual to find herself alone in the house with a murdered man—a man whom she had permitted to blackmail her on a former occasion. Of course she had an explanation of that; but thinking of that explanation she was not quite easy in her mind. She remembered how frankly incredible George had found it. Would other people think the same? Those letters now—of course, she hadn’t written them, but would it be so easy to prove that?

She put her hands on her forehead, squeezing them tight together.

“I must think,” said Virginia. “I simply must think.”

Who had let the man in? Surely not Elise. If she had done so, she would have been sure to have mentioned the fact at once. The whole thing seemed more and more mysterious as she thought about it. There was really only one thing to be done—ring up the police.

She stretched out her hand to the telephone, and suddenly she thought of George. A man—that was what she wanted—an ordinary levelheaded, unemotional man who would see things in their proper proportion and point out to her the best course to take.

Then she shook her head. Not George. The first thing George would think of would be his own position. He would hate being mixed up in this kind of business. George wouldn't do at all.

Then her face softened. Bill, of course! Without more ado, she rang up Bill.

She was informed that he had left half an hour ago for Chimneys.

“Oh, damn!” cried Virginia, jamming down the receiver. It was horrible to be shut up with a dead body and to have no one to speak to.

And at that minute the front doorbell rang.

Virginia jumped. In a few minutes it rang again. Elise, she knew, was upstairs packing and wouldn't hear it.

Virginia went out in the hall, drew back the chain, and undid all the bolts that Elise had fastened in her zeal. Then, with a long breath, she threw open the door. On the steps was the unemployed young man.

Virginia plunged headlong with a relief born of overstrung nerves.

Come in,” she said. “I think perhaps I've got a job for you.”

She took him into the dining room, pulled forward a chair for him, sat herself facing him, and stared at him very attentively.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but are you—I mean—”

“Eton and Oxford,” said the young man. “That’s what you wanted to ask me, wasn’t it?”

“Something of the kind,” admitted Virginia.

“Come down in the world entirely through my own incapacity to stick to regular work. This isn’t regular work you’re offering me, I hope?”

A smile hovered for a moment on her lips.

“It’s very irregular.”

“Good,” said the young man in a tone of satisfaction.

Virginia noted his bronzed face and long lean body with approval.

“You see,” she explained. “I’m in rather a hole, and most of my friends are—well, rather high up. They’ve all got something to lose.”

“I’ve nothing whatever to lose. So go ahead. What’s the trouble?”

“There’s a dead man in the next room,” said Virginia. “He’s been murdered, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

She blurted out the words as simply as a child might have done. The young man went up enormously in her estimation by the way he accepted her statement. He might have been used to hearing a similar announcement made every day of his life.

“Excellent,” he said, with a trace of enthusiasm. “I’ve always wanted to do a bit of amateur detective work. Shall we go and view the body, or will you give me the facts first?”

“I think I’d better give you the facts.” She paused for a moment to consider how best to condense her story, and then began speaking quietly and concisely:

“This man came to the house for the first time yesterday and asked to see me. He had certain letters with him—love letters, signed with my name—”

“But which weren’t written by you,” put in the young man quietly.

Virginia looked at him in some astonishment.

“How did you know that?”

“Oh, I deduced it. But go on.”

“He wanted to blackmail me—and I—well, I don’t know if you’ll understand, but I—let him.”

She looked at him appealingly, and he nodded his head reassuringly.

“Of course I understand. You wanted to see what it felt like.”

“How frightfully clever of you! That’s just what I did feel.”

“I am clever,” said the young man modestly. “But, mind you, very few people would understand that point of view. Most people, you see, haven’t got any imagination.”

“I suppose that’s so. I told this man to come back today—at six o’clock. I arrived home from Ranelagh to find that a bogus telegram had got all the servants except my maid out of the house. Then I walked into the study and found the man shot.”

“Who let him in?”

“I don’t know. I think if my maid had done so she would have told me.”

“Does she know what has happened?”

“I have told her nothing.”

The young man nodded, and rose to his feet.

“And now to view the body,” he said briskly. “But I’ll tell you this—on the whole it’s always best to tell the truth. One lie involves you in such a lot of lies—and continuous lying is so monotonous.”

“Then you advise me to ring up the police?”

“Probably. But we’ll just have a look at the fellow first.”

Virginia led the way out of the room. On the threshold she paused, looking back at him.

“By the way,” she said, “you haven’t told me your name yet?”

“My name? My name’s Anthony Cade.”

Nine

ANTHONY DISPOSES OF A BODY

Anthony followed Virginia out of the room, smiling a little to himself. Events had taken quite an unexpected turn. But as he bent over the figure in the chair he grew grave again.

“He’s still warm,” he said sharply. “He was killed less than half an hour ago.”

“Just before I came in?”

“Exactly.”

He stood upright, drawing his brows together in a frown. Then he asked a question of which Virginia did not at once see the drift:

“Your maid’s not been in this room, of course?”

“No.”

“Does she know that you’ve been into it?”

“Why—yes. I came to the door to speak to her.”

“After you’d found the body?”

“Yes.”

“And you said nothing?”

“Would it have been better if I had? I thought she would go into hysterics—she’s French, you know, and easily upset—I wanted to think over the best thing to do.”

Anthony nodded, but did not speak.

“You think it a pity, I can see?”

“Well, it was rather unfortunate, Mrs. Revel. If you and the maid had discovered the body together, immediately on your return, it would have simplified matters very much. The man would then definitely have been shot before your return to the house.”

“Whilst now they might say he was shot after—I see—”

He watched her taking in the idea, and was confirmed in his first impression of her, formed when she had spoken to him on the steps outside. Besides beauty, she possessed courage and brains.

Virginia was so engrossed in the puzzle presented to her that it did not occur to her to wonder at this strange man’s ready use of her name.

“Why didn’t Elise hear the shot, I wonder?” she murmured.

Anthony pointed to the open window, as a loud backfire came from a passing car.

“There you are. London’s not the place to notice a pistol shot.”

Virginia turned with a little shudder to the body in the chair.

“He looks like an Italian,” she remarked curiously.

“He is an Italian,” said Anthony. “I should say that his regular profession was that of a waiter. He only did blackmailing in his spare time. His name might very possibly be Giuseppe.”

“Good heavens!” cried Virginia. “Is this Sherlock Holmes?”

“No,” said Anthony regretfully. “I’m afraid it’s just plain or garden cheating. I’ll tell you all about it presently. Now you say this man showed you some letters and asked you for money. Did you give him any?”

“Yes, I did.”

“How much?”

“Forty pounds.”

“That’s bad,” said Anthony, but without manifesting any undue surprise. “Now let’s have a look at the telegram.”

Virginia picked it up from the table and gave it to him. She saw his face grow grave as he looked at it.

“What’s the matter?”

He held it out, pointing silently to the place of origin.

“Barnes,” he said. “And you were at Ranelagh this afternoon. What’s to prevent you having sent it off yourself?”

Virginia felt fascinated by his words. It was as though a net was closing tighter and tighter round her. He was forcing her to see all the things which she had felt dimly at the back of her mind.

Anthony took out his handkerchief and wound it round his hand, then he picked up the pistol.

“We criminals have to be so careful,” he said apologetically. “Fingerprints, you know.”

Suddenly she saw his whole figure stiffen. His voice, when he spoke, had altered. It was terse and curt.

“Mrs. Revel,” he said, “have you ever seen this pistol before?”

“No,” said Virginia wonderingly.

“Are you sure of that?”

“Quite sure.”

“Have you a pistol of your own?”

“No.”

“Have you ever had one?”

“No, never.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Quite sure.”

He stared at her steadily for a minute, and Virginia stared back in complete surprise at his tone.

Then, with a sigh, he relaxed.

“That’s odd,” he said. “How do you account for this?”

He held out the pistol. It was a small, dainty article, almost a toy—though capable of doing deadly work. Engraved on it was the name Virginia.

“Oh, it’s impossible!” cried Virginia.

Her astonishment was so genuine that Anthony could but believe in it.

“Sit down,” he said quietly. “There’s more in this than there seemed to be first go off. To begin with, what’s our hypothesis? There are only two possible ones. There is, of course, the real Virginia of the letters. She may have somehow or other tracked him down, shot him, dropped the pistol, stolen the letters, and taken herself off. That’s quite possible, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” said Virginia unwillingly.

“The other hypothesis is a good deal more interesting. Whoever wished to kill Giuseppe, wished also to incriminate you—in fact, that may have been their main object. They could get him easily enough anywhere, but they took extraordinary pains and trouble to get him here, and whoever they were they knew all about you, your cottage at Datchet, your usual

household arrangements, and the fact that you were at Ranelagh this afternoon. It seems an absurd question, but have you any enemies, Mrs. Revel?"

"Of course I haven't—not that kind, anyway."

"The question is," said Anthony, "what are we going to do now? There are two courses open to us. A: ring up the police, tell the whole story, and trust to your unassailable position in the world and your hitherto blameless life. B: an attempt on my part to dispose successfully of the body. Naturally my private inclinations urge me to B. I've always wanted to see if I couldn't conceal a crime with the necessary cunning, but have had a squeamish objection to shedding blood. On the whole, I expect A's the soundest. Then here's a sort of bowdlerized A. Ring up the police, etc, but suppress the pistol and the blackmailing letters—that is, if they are on him still."

Anthony ran rapidly through the dead man's pockets.

"He's been stripped clean," he announced. "There's not a thing on him. There'll be dirty work at the crossroads over those letters yet. Hullo, what's this? Hole in the lining—something got caught there, torn roughly out, and a scrap of paper left behind."

He drew out the scrap of paper as he spoke, and brought it over to the light. Virginia joined him.

"Pity we haven't got the rest of it," he muttered. "Chimneys 11:45 Thursday—Sounds like an appointment."

"Chimneys?" cried Virginia. "How extraordinary!"

"Why extraordinary? Rather high-toned for such a low fellow?"

"I'm going to Chimneys this evening. At least I was."

Anthony wheeled round on her.

"What's that? Say that again."

“I was going to Chimneys this evening,” repeated Virginia.

Anthony stared at her.

“I begin to see. At least, I may be wrong—but it’s an idea. Suppose someone wanted badly to prevent your going to Chimneys?”

“My cousin George Lomax does,” said Virginia with a smile. “But I can’t seriously suspect George of murder.”

Anthony did not smile. He was lost in thought.

“If you ring up the police, its good-bye to any idea of getting to Chimneys today—or even tomorrow. And I should like you to go to Chimneys. I fancy it will disconcert our unknown friends. Mrs. Revel, will you put yourself in my hands?”

“It’s to be Plan B, then?”

“It’s to be Plan B. The first thing is to get that maid of yours out of the house. Can you manage that?”

“Easily.”

Virginia went out in the hall and called up the stairs.

“Elise. Elise.”

“Madame?”

Anthony heard a rapid colloquy, and then the front door opened and shut. Virginia came back into the room.

“She’s gone. I sent her for some special scent—told her the shop in question was open until eight. It won’t be, of course. She’s to follow after me by the next train without coming back here.”

“Good,” said Anthony approvingly. “We can now proceed to the disposal of the body. It’s a timeworn method, but I’m afraid I shall have to ask you if

there's such a thing in the house as a trunk?"

"Of course there is. Come down to the basement and take your choice."

There was a variety of trunks in the basement. Anthony selected a solid affair of suitable size.

"I'll attend to this part of it," he said tactfully. "You go upstairs and get ready to start."

Virginia obeyed. She slipped out of her tennis kit, put on a soft brown travelling dress and a delightful little orange hat, and came down to find Anthony waiting in the hall with a neatly strapped trunk beside him.

"I should like to tell you the story of my life," he remarked, "but it's going to be rather a busy evening. Now this is what you've got to do. Call a taxi, have your luggage put on it, including the trunk. Drive to Paddington. There have the trunk put in the Left Luggage Office. I shall be on the platform. As you pass me, drop the cloakroom ticket. I will pick it up and return it to you, but in reality I shall keep it. Go on to Chimneys, and leave the rest to me."

"It's awfully good of you," said Virginia. "It's really dreadful of me saddling a perfect stranger with a dead body like this."

"I like it," returned Anthony nonchalantly. "If one of my friends, Jimmy McGrath, were here, he'd tell you that anything of this kind suits me down to the ground."

Virginia was staring at him.

"What name did you say? Jimmy McGrath?"

Anthony returned her glance keenly.

"Yes. Why? Have you heard of him?"

"Yes—and quite lately." She paused irresolutely, and then went on. "Mr. Cade, I must talk to you. Can't you come down to Chimneys?"

“You’ll see me before very long, Mrs. Revel—I’ll tell you that. Now, exit Conspirator A by back door slinkingly. Exit Conspirator B in blaze of glory by front door to taxi.”

The plan went through without a hitch. Anthony, having picked up a second taxi, was on the platform and duly retrieved the fallen ticket. He then departed in search of a somewhat battered secondhand Morris Cowley which he had acquired earlier in the day in case it should be necessary to his plans.

Returning to Paddington in this, he handed the ticket to the porter, who got the trunk out of the cloakroom and wedged it securely at the back of the car. Anthony drove off.

His objective now was out of London. Through Notting Hill, Shepherd’s Bush, down Goldhawk Road, through Brentford and Hounslow till he came to the long stretch of road midway between Hounslow and Staines. It was a well-frequented road, with motors passing continuously. No footmarks or tyre marks were likely to show. Anthony stopped the car at a certain spot. Getting down, he first obscured the number plate with mud. Then, waiting until he heard no car coming in either direction, he opened the trunk, heaved out Giuseppe’s body, and laid it neatly down by the side of the road, on the inside of a curve, so that the headlights of passing motors would not strike on it.

Then he entered the car again and drove away. The whole business had occupied exactly one minute and a half. He made a detour to the right, returning to London by way of Burnham Beeches. There again he halted the car, and choosing a giant of the forest he deliberately climbed the huge tree. It was something of a feat, even for Anthony. To one of the topmost branches he affixed a small brown-paper parcel, concealing it in a little niche close to the bole.

“A very clever way of disposing of the pistol,” said Anthony to himself with some approval. “Everybody hunts about on the ground, and drags ponds. But there are very few people in England who could climb that tree.”

Next, back to London and Paddington Station. Here he left the trunk—at the other cloakroom this time, the one on the Arrival side. He thought longingly of such things as good rump steaks, juicy chops, and large masses of fried potatoes. But he shook his head ruefully, glancing at his wristwatch. He fed the Morris with a fresh supply of petrol, and then took the road once more. North this time.

It was just after half past eleven that he brought the car to rest in the road adjoining the park of Chimneys. Jumping out he scaled the wall easily enough, and set out towards the house. It took him longer than he thought, and presently he broke into a run. A great grey mass loomed up out of the darkness—the venerable pile of Chimneys. In the distance a stable clock chimed the three-quarters.

11:45—the time mentioned on the scrap of paper. Anthony was on the terrace now, looking up at the house. Everything seemed dark and quiet.

“They go to bed early, these politicians,” he murmured to himself.

And suddenly a sound smote upon his ears—the sound of a shot. Anthony spun round quickly. The sound had come from within the house—he was sure of that. He waited a minute, but everything was still as death. Finally he went up to one of the long French windows from where he judged the sound that had startled him had come. He tried the handle. It was locked. He tried some of the other windows, listening intently all the while. But the silence remained unbroken.

In the end he told himself that he must have imagined the sound, or perhaps mistaken a stray shot coming from a poacher in the woods. He turned and retraced his steps across the park, vaguely dissatisfied and uneasy.

He looked back at the house, and whilst he looked a light sprang up in one of the windows on the first floor. In another minute it went out again, and the whole place was in darkness once more.

Ten

CHIMNEYS

Inspector Badgworthy in his office. Time, 8:30 a.m. A tall portly man, Inspector Badgworthy, with a heavy regulation tread. Inclined to breathe hard in moments of professional strain. In attendance Constable Johnson, very new to the Force, with a downy unfledged look about him, like a human chicken.

The telephone on the table rang sharply, and the inspector took it up with his usual portentous gravity of action.

“Yes. Police station Market Basing. Inspector Badgworthy speaking. What?”

Slight alteration in the inspector’s manner. As he is greater than Johnson, so others are greater than Inspector Badgworthy.

“Speaking, my lord. I beg your pardon, my lord? I didn’t quite hear what you said?”

Long pause, during which the inspector listens, quite a variety of expressions passing over his usually impassive countenance. Finally he lays down the receiver, after a brief “At once, my lord.”

He turned to Johnson, seeming visibly swelled with importance.

“From his lordship—at Chimneys—murder.”

“Murder,” echoed Johnson, suitably impressed.

“Murder it is,” said the inspector, with great satisfaction.

“Why, there’s never been a murder here—not that I’ve ever heard of—except the time that Tom Pearse shot his sweetheart.”

“And that, in a manner of speaking, wasn’t murder at all, but drink,” said the inspector, deprecatingly.

“He weren’t hanged for it,” agreed Johnson gloomily. “But this is the real thing, is it, sir?”

“It is, Johnson. One of his lordship’s guests, a foreign gentleman, discovered shot. Open window, and footprints outside.”

“I’m sorry it were a foreigner,” said Johnson, with some regret.

It made the murder seem less real. Foreigners, Johnson felt, were liable to be shot.

“His lordship’s in a rare taking,” continued the inspector. “We’ll get hold of Dr. Cartwright and take him up with us right away. I hope to goodness no one will get messing with those footprints.”

Badgworthy was in a seventh heaven. A murder! At Chimneys! Inspector Badgworthy in charge of the case. The police have a clue. Sensational arrest. Promotion and kudos for the aforementioned inspector.

“That is,” said Inspector Badgworthy to himself, “if Scotland Yard doesn’t come butting in.”

The thought damped him momentarily. It seemed so extremely likely to happen under the circumstances.

They stopped at Dr. Cartwright’s, and the doctor, who was a comparatively young man, displayed a keen interest. His attitude was almost exactly that of Johnson.

“Why, bless my soul,” he exclaimed. “We haven’t had a murder here since the time of Tom Pearse.”

All three of them got into the doctor’s little car, and started off briskly for Chimneys. As they passed the local inn, the Jolly Cricketers, the doctor noticed a man standing in the doorway.

“Stranger,” he remarked. “Rather a nice-looking fellow. Wonder how long he’s been here, and what he’s doing staying at the Cricketers? I haven’t seen him about at all. He must have arrived last night.”

“He didn’t come by train,” said Johnson.

Johnson’s brother was the local railway porter, and Johnson was therefore always well up in arrivals and departures.

“Who was here for Chimneys yesterday?” asked the inspector.

“Lady Eileen, she come down by the 3:40, and two gentlemen with her, an American gent and a young Army chap—neither of them with valets. His lordship come down with a foreign gentleman, the one that’s been shot as likely as not, by the 5:40, and the foreign gentleman’s valet. Mr. Eversleigh come by the same train. Mrs. Revel came by the 7:25, and another foreign-looking gentleman came by it too, one with a bald head and a hook nose. Mrs. Revel’s maid came by the 8:56.”

Johnson paused, out of breath.

“And there was no one for the Cricketers?”

Johnson shook his head.

“He must have come by car then,” said the inspector. “Johnson, make a note to institute inquiries at the Cricketers on your way back. We want to know all about any strangers. He was very sunburnt, that gentleman. Likely as not, he’s come from foreign parts too.”

The inspector nodded his head with great sagacity, as though to imply that that was the sort of wide-awake man he was—not to be caught napping under any consideration.

The car passed in through the park gates of Chimneys. Descriptions of that historic place can be found in any guidebook. It is also No. 3 in *Historic Homes of England*, price 21s. On Thursday, coaches come over from

Middlingham and view those portions of it which are open to the public. In view of all these facilities, to describe Chimneys would be superfluous.

They were received at the door by a white-headed butler whose demeanour was perfect.

“We are not accustomed,” it seemed to say, “to having murder committed within these walls. But these are evil days. Let us meet disaster with perfect calm, and pretend with our dying breath that nothing out of the usual has occurred.”

“His lordship,” said the butler, “is expecting you. This way, if you please.”

He led them to a small cosy room which was Lord Caterham’s refuge from the magnificence elsewhere, and announced them.

“The police, my lord, and Dr. Cartwright.”

Lord Caterham was pacing up and down in a visibly agitated state.

“Ha! Inspector, you’ve turned up at last. I’m thankful for that. How are you, Cartwright? This is the very devil of a business, you know. The very devil of a business.”

And Lord Caterham, running his hands through his hair in a frenzied fashion until it stood upright in little tufts, looked even less like a peer of the realm than usual.

“Where’s the body?” asked the doctor, in curt businesslike fashion.

Lord Caterham turned to him as though relieved at being asked a direct question.

“In the Council Chamber—just where it was found—I wouldn’t have it touched. I believed—er—that that was the correct thing to do.”

“Quite right, my lord,” said the inspector approvingly.

He produced a notebook and pencil.

“And who discovered the body? Did you?”

“Good Lord, no,” said Lord Caterham. “You don’t think I usually get up at this unearthly hour in the morning, do you? No, a housemaid found it. She screamed a good deal, I believe. I didn’t hear her myself. Then they came to me about it, and of course I got up and came down—and there it was, you know.”

“You recognized the body as that of one of your guests?”

“That’s right, Inspector.”

“By name?”

This perfectly simple question seemed to upset Lord Caterham. He opened his mouth once or twice, and then shut it again. Finally he asked feebly:

“Do you mean—do you mean—what was his name?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Well,” said Lord Caterham, looking slowly round the room, as though hoping to gain inspiration. “His name was—I should say it was—yes, decidedly so—Count Stanislaus.”

There was something so odd about Lord Caterham’s manner, that the inspector ceased using his pencil and stared at him instead. But at that moment a diversion occurred which seemed highly welcome to the embarrassed peer.

The door opened and a girl came into the room. She was tall, slim and dark, with an attractive boyish face, and a very determined manner. This was Lady Eileen Brent, commonly known as Bundle, Lord Caterham’s eldest daughter. She nodded to the others, and addressed her father directly.

“I’ve got him,” she announced.

For a moment the inspector was on the point of starting forward under the impression that the young lady had captured the murderer red-handed, but

almost immediately he realized that her meaning was quite different.

Lord Caterham uttered a sigh of relief.

“That’s a good job. What did he say?”

“He’s coming over at once. We are to ‘use the utmost discretion.’ ”

Her father made a sound of annoyance.

“That’s just the sort of idiotic thing George Lomax would say. However, once he comes, I shall wash my hands of the whole affair.”

He appeared to cheer up a little at the prospect.

“And the name of the murdered man was Count Stanislaus?” queried the doctor.

A lightning glance passed between father and daughter, and then the former said with some dignity:

“Certainly. I said so just now.”

“I asked because you didn’t seem quite sure about it before,” explained Cartwright.

There was a faint twinkle in his eye, and Lord Caterham looked at him reproachfully.

“I’ll take you to the Council Chamber,” he said more briskly.

They followed him, the inspector bringing up the rear, and darting sharp glances all around him as he went, much as though he expected to find a clue in a picture frame, or behind a door.

Lord Caterham took a key from his pocket and unlocked a door, flinging it open. They all passed into a big room panelled in oak, with three French windows giving on the terrace. There was a long refectory table and a good

many oak chests, and some beautiful old chairs. On the walls were various paintings of dead and gone Caterhams and others.

Near the left-hand wall, about halfway between the door and the window, a man was lying on his back, his arms flung wide.

Dr. Cartwright went over and knelt down by the body. The inspector strode across to the windows, and examined them in turn. The centre one was closed, but not fastened. On the steps outside were footprints leading up to the window, and a second set going away again.

“Clear enough,” said the inspector, with a nod. “But there ought to be footprints on the inside as well. They’d show up plain on this parquet floor.”

“I think I can explain that,” interposed Bundle. “The housemaid had polished half the floor this morning before she saw the body. You see, it was dark when she came in here. She went straight across to the windows, drew the curtains, and began on the floor, and naturally didn’t see the body which is hidden from that side of the room by the table. She didn’t see it until she came right on top of it.”

The inspector nodded.

“Well,” said Lord Caterham, eager to escape. “I’ll leave you here, Inspector. You’ll be able to find me if you—er—want me. But Mr. George Lomax is coming over from Wyvern Abbey shortly, and he’ll be able to tell you far more than I could. It’s his business really. I can’t explain, but he will when he comes.”

Lord Caterham beat a precipitate retreat without waiting for a reply.

“Too bad of Lomax,” he complained. “Letting me in for this. What’s the matter, Tredwell?”

The white-haired butler was hovering deferentially at his elbow.

“I have taken the liberty, my lord, of advancing the breakfast hour as far as you are concerned. Everything is ready in the dining room.”

“I don’t suppose for a minute I can eat anything,” said Lord Caterham gloomily, turning his footsteps in that direction. “Not for a moment.”

Bundle slipped her hand through his arm, and they entered the dining room together. On the sideboard were half a score of heavy silver dishes, ingeniously kept hot by patent arrangements.

“Omelet,” said Lord Caterham, lifting each lid in turn. “Eggs and bacon, kidneys, devilled bird, haddock, cold ham, cold pheasant. I don’t like any of these things, Tredwell. Ask the cook to poach me an egg, will you?”

“Very good, my lord.”

Tredwell withdrew. Lord Caterham, in an absentminded fashion, helped himself plentifully to kidneys and bacon, poured himself out a cup of coffee, and sat down at the long table. Bundle was already busy with a plateful of eggs and bacon.

“I’m damned hungry,” said Bundle with her mouth full. “It must be the excitement.”

“It’s all very well for you,” complained her father. “You young people like excitement. But I’m in a very delicate state of health. Avoid all worry, that’s what Sir Abner Willis said—avoid all worry. So easy for a man sitting in his consulting room in Harley Street to say that. How can I avoid worry when that ass Lomax lands me with a thing like this? I ought to have been firm at the time. I ought to have put my foot down.”

With a sad shake of the head, Lord Caterham rose and carved himself a plate of ham.

“Codders has certainly done it this time,” observed Bundle cheerfully. “He was almost incoherent over the telephone. He’ll be here in a minute or two, spluttering nineteen to the dozen about discretion and hushing it up.”

Lord Caterham groaned at the prospect.

“Was he up?” he asked.

“He told me,” replied Bundle, “that he had been up and dictating letters and memoranda ever since seven o’clock.”

“Proud of it, too,” remarked her father. “Extraordinarily selfish, these public men. They make their wretched secretaries get up at the most unearthly hours in order to dictate rubbish to them. If a law was passed compelling them to stop in bed until eleven, what a benefit it would be to the nation! I wouldn’t mind so much if they didn’t talk such balderdash. Lomax is always talking to me of my ‘position.’ As if I had any. Who wants to be a peer nowadays?”

“Nobody,” said Bundle. “They’d much rather keep a prosperous public house.”

Tredwell reappeared silently with two poached eggs in a little silver dish which he placed on the table in front of Lord Caterham.

“What’s that, Tredwell?” said the latter, looking at them with faint distaste.

“Poached eggs, my lord.”

“I hate poached eggs,” said Lord Caterham peevishly. “They’re so insipid. I don’t like to look at them even. Take them away, will you, Tredwell?”

“Very good, my lord.”

Tredwell and the poached eggs withdrew as silently as they came.

“Thank God no one gets up early in this house,” remarked Lord Caterham devoutly. “We shall have to break this to them when they do, I suppose.”

He sighed.

“I wonder who murdered him,” said Bundle. “And why?”

“That’s not our business, thank goodness,” said Lord Caterham. “That’s for the police to find out. Not that Badgworthy will ever find anything. On the whole I rather hope it was Nosystein.”

“Meaning—”

“The all-British syndicate.”

“Why should Mr. Isaacstein murder him when he’d come down here on purpose to meet him?”

“High finance,” said Lord Caterham vaguely. “And that reminds me, I shouldn’t be at all surprised if Isaacstein wasn’t an early riser. He may blow in upon us at any minute. It’s a habit in the city. I believe that, however rich you are, you always catch the 9:17.”

The sound of a motor being driven at great speed was heard through the open window.

“Codders,” cried Bundle.

Father and daughter leaned out of the window and hailed the occupant of the car as it drew up before the entrance.

“In here, my dear fellow, in here,” cried Lord Caterham, hastily swallowing his mouthful of ham.

George had no intention of climbing in through the window. He disappeared through the front door, and reappeared ushered in by Tredwell, who withdrew at once.

“Have some breakfast,” said Lord Caterham, shaking him by the hand.

“What about a kidney?”

George waved the kidney aside impatiently.

“This is a terrible calamity, terrible, terrible.”

“It is indeed. Some haddock?”

“No, no. It must be hushed up—at all costs it must be hushed up.”

As Bundle had prophesied, George began to splutter.

“I understand your feelings,” said Lord Caterham sympathetically. “Try an egg and bacon, or some haddock.”

“A totally unforeseen contingency—national calamity—concessions jeopardized—”

“Take time,” said Lord Caterham. “And take some food. What you need is some food, to pull you together. Poached eggs now? There were some poached eggs here a minute or two ago.”

“I don’t want any food,” said George. “I’ve had breakfast, and even if I hadn’t had any I shouldn’t want it. We must think what is to be done. You have told no one as yet?”

“Well, there’s Bundle and myself. And the local police. And Cartwright. And all the servants of course.”

George groaned.

“Pull yourself together, my dear fellow,” said Lord Caterham kindly. “(I wish you’d have some breakfast.) You don’t seem to realize that you can’t hush up a dead body. It’s got to be buried and all that sort of thing. Very unfortunate, but there it is.”

George became suddenly calm.

“You are right, Caterham. You have called in the local police, you say? That will not do. We must have Battle.”

“Battle, murder and sudden death,” inquired Lord Caterham, with a puzzled face.

“No, no, you misunderstand me. I referred to Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard. A man of the utmost discretion. He worked with us in that deplorable business of the Party funds.”

“What was that?” asked Lord Caterham, with some interest.

But George’s eye had fallen upon Bundle, as she sat half in and half out of the window, and he remembered discretion just in time. He rose.

“We must waste no time. I must send off some wires at once.”

“If you write them out, Bundle will send them through the telephone.”

George pulled out a fountain pen and began to write with incredible rapidity. He handed the first one to Bundle, who read it with a great deal of interest.

“God! what a name,” she remarked. “Baron How Much?”

“Baron Lolopretjzyl.”

Bundle blinked.

“I’ve got it, but it will take some conveying to the post office.”

George continued to write. Then he handed his labours to Bundle and addressed the master of the house:

“The best thing that you can do, Caterham—”

“Yes,” said Lord Caterham apprehensively.

“Is to leave everything in my hands.”

“Certainly,” said Lord Caterham, with alacrity. “Just what I was thinking myself. You’ll find the police and Dr. Cartwright in the Council Chamber. With the—er—with the body, you know. My dear Lomax, I place Chimneys unreservedly at your disposal. Do anything you like.”

“Thank you,” said George. “If I should want to consult you—”

But Lord Caterham had faded unobtrusively through the farther door. Bundle had observed his retreat with a grim smile.

“I’ll send off those telegrams at once,” she said. “You know your way to the Council Chamber?”

“Thank you, Lady Eileen.”

George hurried from the room.

Eleven

SUPERINTENDENT BATTLE ARRIVES

So apprehensive was Lord Caterham of being consulted by George that he spent the whole morning making a tour of his estate. Only the pangs of hunger drew him homeward. He also reflected that by now the worst would surely be over.

He sneaked into the house quietly by a small side door. From there he slipped neatly into his sanctum. He flattered himself that his entrance had not been observed, but there he was mistaken. The watchful Tredwell let nothing escape him. He presented himself at the door.

“You’ll excuse me, my lord—”

“What is it, Tredwell?”

“Mr. Lomax, my lord, is anxious to see you in the library as soon as you return.”

By this delicate method Tredwell conveyed that Lord Caterham had not yet returned unless he chose to say so.

Lord Caterham sighed, and then rose.

“I suppose it will have to be done sooner or later. In the library, you say?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Sighing again, Lord Caterham crossed the wide spaces of his ancestral home, and reached the library door. The door was locked. As he rattled the handle, it was unlocked from inside, opened a little way, and the face of George Lomax appeared, peering out suspiciously.

His face changed when he saw who it was.

“Ah, Caterham, come in. We were just wondering what had become of you.”

Murmuring something vague about duties on the estate, repairs for tenants, Lord Caterham sidled in apologetically. There were two other men in the room. One was Colonel Melrose, the chief constable. The other was a squarely built middle-aged man with a face so singularly devoid of expression as to be quite remarkable.

“Superintendent Battle arrived half an hour ago,” explained George. “He has been round with Inspector Badgworthy, and seen Dr. Cartwright. He now wants a few facts from us.”

They all sat down, after Lord Caterham had greeted Melrose and acknowledged his introduction to Superintendent Battle.

“I need hardly tell you, Battle,” said George, “that this is a case in which we must use the utmost discretion.”

The superintendent nodded in an offhand manner that rather took Lord Caterham’s fancy.

“That will be all right, Mr. Lomax. But no concealments from us. I understand that the dead gentleman was called Count Stanislaus—at least, that that is the name by which the household knew him. Now was that his real name?”

“It was not.”

“What was his real name?”

“Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia.”

Battle’s eyes opened just a trifle, otherwise he gave no sign.

“And what, if I may ask the question, was the purpose of his visit here? Just pleasure?”

“There was a further object, Battle. All this in the strictest confidence, of course.”

“Yes, yes, Mr. Lomax.”

“Colonel Melrose?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then, Prince Michael was here for the express purpose of meeting Mr. Herman Isaacstein. A loan was to be arranged on certain terms.”

“Which were?”

“I do not know the exact details. Indeed, they had not yet been arranged. But in the event of coming to the throne, Prince Michael pledged himself to grant certain oil concessions to those companies in which Mr. Isaacstein is interested. The British Government was prepared to support the claim of Prince Michael to the throne in view of his pronounced British sympathies.”

“Well,” said Superintendent Battle, “I don’t suppose I need go further into it than that. Prince Michael wanted the money, Mr. Isaacstein wanted oil, and the British Government was ready to do the heavy lifting. Just one question. Was anyone else after those concessions?”

“I believe an American group of financiers had made overtures to His Highness.”

“And been turned down, eh?”

But George refused to be drawn.

“Prince Michael’s sympathies were entirely pro-British,” he repeated.

Superintendent Battle did not press the point.

“Lord Caterham, I understand that this is what occurred yesterday. You met Prince Michael in town and journeyed down here in company with him. The Prince was accompanied by his valet, a Czechoslovakian named Boris

Anchoukoff, but his equerry, Captain Andrassy, remained in town. The Prince, on arriving, declared himself greatly fatigued, and retired to the apartments set aside for him. Dinner was served to him there, and he did not meet the other members of the house party. Is that correct?”

“Quite correct.”

“This morning a housemaid discovered the body at approximately 7:45 a.m. Dr. Cartwright examined the dead man and found that death was the result of a bullet fired from a revolver. No revolver was found, and no one in the house seems to have heard the shot. On the other hand the dead man’s wristwatch was smashed by the fall, and marks the crime as having been committed at exactly a quarter to twelve. Now what time did you retire to bed last night?”

“We went early. Somehow or other the party didn’t seem to ‘go,’ if you know what I mean, Superintendent. We went up about half past ten, I should say.”

“Thank you. Now I will ask you, Lord Caterham, to give me a description of all the people staying in the house.”

“But, excuse me, I thought the fellow who did it came from outside?”

Superintendent Battle smiled.

“I daresay he did. I daresay he did. But all the same I’ve got to know who was in the house. Matter of routine, you know.”

“Well, there was Prince Michael and his valet and Mr. Herman Isaacstein. You know all about them. Then there was Mr. Eversleigh—”

“Who works in my department,” put in George condescendingly.

“And who was acquainted with the real reason of Prince Michael’s being here?”

“No, I should not say that,” replied George weightily. “Doubtless he realized that something was in the wind, but I did not think it necessary to

take him fully into my confidence.”

“I see. Will you go on, Lord Caterham?”

“Let me see, there was Mr. Hiram Fish.”

“Who is Mr. Hiram Fish?”

“Mr. Fish is an American. He brought over a letter of introduction from Mr. Lucius Gott—you’ve heard of Lucius Gott?”

Superintendent Battle smiled acknowledgement. Who had not heard of Lucius C. Gott, the multimillionaire?

“He was specially anxious to see my first editions. Mr. Gott’s collection is, of course, unequalled, but I’ve got several treasures myself. This Mr. Fish was an enthusiast. Mr. Lomax had suggested that I ask one or two extra people down here this weekend to make things seem more natural, so I took the opportunity of asking Mr. Fish. That finishes the men. As for the ladies, there is only Mrs. Revel—and I expect she brought a maid or something like that. Then there was my daughter, and of course the children and their nurses and governesses and all the servants.”

Lord Caterham paused and took a breath.

“Thank you,” said the detective. “A mere matter of routine, but necessary as such.”

“There is no doubt, I suppose,” asked George ponderously, “that the murderer entered by the window?”

Battle paused for a minute before replying slowly.

“There were footsteps leading up to the window, and footsteps leading away from it. A car stopped outside the park at 11:40 last night. At twelve o’clock a young man arrived at the Jolly Cricketers in a car, and engaged a room. He put his boots outside to be cleaned—they were very wet and muddy, as though he had been walking through the long grass in the park.”

George leant forward eagerly.

“Could not the boots be compared with the footprints?”

“They were.”

“Well?”

“They exactly correspond.”

“That settles it,” cried George. “We have the murderer. This young man—what is his name, by the way?”

“At the inn he gave the name of Anthony Cade.”

“This Anthony Cade must be pursued at once, and arrested.”

“You won’t need to pursue him,” said Superintendent Battle.

“Why?”

“Because he’s still there.”

“What?”

“Curious, isn’t it?”

Colonel Melrose eyed him keenly.

“What’s in your mind, Battle? Out with it.”

“I just say it’s curious, that’s all. Here’s a young man who ought to cut and run, but he doesn’t cut and run. He stays here, and gives us every facility for comparing footmarks.”

“What do you think, then?”

“I don’t know what to think. And that’s a very disturbing state of mind.”

“Do you imagine—” began Colonel Melrose, but broke off as a discreet knock came at the door.

George rose and went to it. Tredwell, inwardly suffering from having to knock at doors in this low fashion, stood dignified upon the threshold, and addressed his master.

“Excuse me, my lord, but a gentleman wishes to see you on urgent and important business, connected, I understand, with this morning’s tragedy.”

“What’s his name?” asked Battle suddenly.

“His name, sir, is Mr. Anthony Cade, but he said it wouldn’t convey anything to anybody.”

It seemed to convey something to the four men present. They all sat up in varying degrees of astonishment.

Lord Caterham began to chuckle.

“I’m really beginning to enjoy myself. Show him in, Tredwell. Show him in at once.”

Twelve

ANTHONY TELLS HIS STORY

“Mr. Anthony Cade,” announced Tredwell. “Enter suspicious stranger from village inn,” said Anthony.

He made his way towards Lord Caterham with a kind of instinct rare in strangers. At the same time he summed up the other three men in his own mind thus: “1, Scotland Yard. 2, local dignitary—probably chief constable. 3, harassed gentleman on the verge of apoplexy—possibly connected with the Government.”

“I must apologize,” continued Anthony, still addressing Lord Caterham. “For forcing my way in like this, I mean. But it was rumoured round the Jolly Dog, or whatever the name of your local pub may be, that you had had a murder up here, and as I thought I might be able to throw some light upon it I came along.”

For a moment or two, no one spoke. Superintendent Battle because he was a man of ripe experience who knew how infinitely better it was to let everyone else speak if they could be persuaded upon to do so, Colonel Melrose because he was habitually taciturn, George because he was in the habit of having notice given to him of the question, Lord Caterham because he had not the least idea of what to say. The silence of the other three, however, and the fact that he had been directly addressed, finally forced speech upon the last named.

“Er—quite so—quite so,” he said nervously. “Won’t—you—er—sit down?”

“Thank you,” said Anthony.

George cleared his throat portentously.

“Er—when you say you can throw light upon this matter, you mean?—”

“I mean,” said Anthony, “that I was trespassing upon Lord Caterham’s property (for which I hope he will forgive me) last night at about 11:45, and that I actually heard the shot fired. I can at any rate fix the time of the crime for you.”

He looked round at the three in turn, his eyes resting longest on Superintendent Battle, the impassivity of whose face he seemed to appreciate.

“But I hardly think that that’s news to you,” he added gently.

“Meaning by that, Mr. Cade?” asked Battle.

“Just this. I put on shoes when I got up this morning. Later, when I asked for my boots, I couldn’t have them. Some nice young constable had called round for them. So I naturally put two and two together, and hurried up here to clear my character if possible.”

“A very sensible move,” said Battle noncommittally.

Anthony’s eyes twinkled a little.

“I appreciate your reticence, Inspector. It is Inspector, isn’t it?”

Lord Caterham interposed. He was beginning to take a fancy to Anthony.

“Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard. This is Colonel Melrose, our chief constable, and Mr. Lomax.”

Anthony looked sharply at George.

“Mr. George Lomax?”

“Yes.”

“I think, Mr. Lomax,” said Anthony, “that I had the pleasure of receiving a letter from you yesterday.”

George stared at him.

“I think not,” he said coldly.

But he wished that Miss Oscar were here. Miss Oscar wrote all his letters for him, and remembered who they were to and what they were about. A great man like George could not possibly remember all these annoying details.

“I think, Mr. Cade,” he hinted, “that you were about to give us some—er—explanation of what you were doing in the grounds last night at 11:45?”

His tone said plainly: “And whatever it may be, we are not likely to believe it.”

“Yes, Mr. Cade, what were you doing?” said Lord Caterham with lively interest.

“Well,” said Anthony regretfully, “I’m afraid it’s rather a long story.”

He drew out his cigarette case.

“May I?”

Lord Caterham nodded, and Anthony lit a cigarette, and braced himself for the ordeal.

He was aware, none better, of the peril in which he stood. In the short space of twenty-four hours, he had become embroiled in two separate crimes. His actions in connexion with the first would not bear looking into for a second. After deliberately disposing of one body and so defeating the aims of justice, he had arrived upon the scene of the second crime at the exact moment when it was being committed. For a young man looking for trouble, he could hardly have done better.

“South America,” thought Anthony to himself, “simply isn’t in it with this!”

He had already decided upon his course of action. He was going to tell the truth—with one trifling alteration, and one grave suppression.

“The story begins,” said Anthony, “about three weeks ago—in Bulawayo. Mr. Lomax, of course, knows where that is—outpost of the Empire—‘What do we know of England who only England know?’ all that sort of thing. I was conversing with a friend of mine, a Mr. James McGrath—”

He brought out the name slowly, with a thoughtful eye on George. George bounded in his seat and repressed an exclamation with difficulty.

“The upshot of our conversation was that I came to England to carry out a little commission for Mr. McGrath, who was unable to go himself. Since the passage was booked in his name, I travelled as James McGrath. I don’t know what particular kind of offence that was—the superintendent can tell me, I daresay, and run me in for so many months’ hard if necessary.”

“We’ll get on with the story, if you please, sir,” said Battle, but his eyes twinkled a little.

“On arrival in London I went to the Blitz Hotel, still as James McGrath. My business in London was to deliver a certain manuscript to a firm of publishers, but almost immediately I received deputations from the representatives of two political parties of a foreign kingdom. The methods of one were strictly constitutional, the methods of the other were not. I dealt with them both accordingly. But my troubles were not over. That night my room was broken into, and an attempt at burglary was made by one of the waiters at the hotel.”

“That was not reported to the police, I think?” said Superintendent Battle.

“You are right. It was not. Nothing was taken, you see. But I did report the occurrence to the manager of the hotel, and he will confirm my story, and tell you that the waiter in question decamped rather abruptly in the middle of the night. The next day, the publishers rang me up, and suggested that one of their representatives would call upon me and receive the manuscript. I agreed to this, and the arrangement was duly carried out on the following morning. Since I have heard nothing further, I presume the manuscript reached them safely. Yesterday, still as James McGrath, I received a letter from Mr. Lomax—”

Anthony paused. He was by now beginning to enjoy himself. George shifted uneasily.

“I remember,” he murmured. “Such a large correspondence. The name, of course, being different, I could not be expected to know. And I may say,” George’s voice rose a little, firm in assurance of moral stability, “that I consider this—this—masquerading as another man in the highest degree improper. I have no doubt, no doubt whatever that you have incurred a severe legal penalty.”

“In this letter,” continued Anthony, unmoved, “Mr. Lomax made various suggestions concerning the manuscript in my charge. He also extended an invitation to me from Lord Caterham to join the house party here.”

“Delighted to see you, my dear fellow,” said the nobleman. “Better late than never—eh?”

George frowned at him.

Superintendent Battle bent an unmoved eye upon Anthony.

“And is that your explanation of your presence here last night, sir?” he asked.

“Certainly not,” said Anthony warmly. “When I am asked to stay at a country house, I don’t scale the wall late at night, tramp across the park, and try the downstairs windows. I drive up to the front door, ring the bell and wipe my feet on the mat. I will proceed. I replied to Mr. Lomax’s letter, explaining that the manuscript had passed out of my keeping, and therefore regretfully declining Lord Caterham’s kind invitation. But after I had done so, I remembered something which had up till then escaped my memory.” He paused. The moment had come for skating over thin ice. “I must tell you that in my struggle with the waiter Giuseppe, I had wrested from him a small bit of paper with some words scribbled on it. They had conveyed nothing to me at the time, but I still had them, and the mention of Chimneys recalled them to me. I got the torn scrap out and looked at it. It was as I had thought. Here is the piece of paper, gentlemen, you can see for yourselves. The words on it are ‘Chimneys 11:45 Thursday.’ ”

Battle examined the paper attentively.

“Of course,” continued Anthony, “the word Chimneys might have nothing whatever to do with this house. On the other hand, it might. And undoubtedly this Giuseppe was a thieving rascal. I made up my mind to motor down here last night, satisfy myself that all was as it should be, put up at the inn, and call upon Lord Caterham in the morning and put him on his guard in case some mischief should be intended during the weekend.”

“Quite so,” said Lord Caterham encouragingly. “Quite so.”

“I was late getting here—had not allowed enough time. Consequently I stopped the car climbed over the wall and ran across the park. When I arrived on the terrace, the whole house was dark and silent. I was just turning away when I heard a shot. I fancied that it came from inside the house, and I ran back, crossed the terrace, and tried the windows. But they were fastened, and there was no sound of any kind from inside the house. I waited a while, but the whole place was as still as the grave, so I made up my mind that I had made a mistake, and that what I had heard was a stray poacher—quite natural conclusion to come to under the circumstances, I think.”

“Quite natural,” said Superintendent Battle expressionlessly.

“I went on to the inn, put up as I said—and heard the news this morning. I realized, of course, that I was a suspicious character—bound to be under the circumstances, and came up here to tell my story, hoping it wasn’t going to be handcuffs for one.”

There was a pause. Colonel Melrose looked sideways at Superintendent Battle.

“I think the story seems clear enough,” he remarked.

“Yes,” said Battle. “I don’t think we’ll be handing out any handcuffs this morning.”

“Any questions, Battle?”

“There’s one thing I’d like to know. What was this manuscript?”

He looked across at George, and the latter replied with a trace of unwillingness:

“The memoirs of the late Count Stylptitch. You see—”

“You needn’t say anything more,” said Battle. “I see perfectly.”

He turned to Anthony.

“Do you know who it was that was shot, Mr. Cade?”

“At the Jolly Dog it was understood to be a Count Stanislaus or some such name.”

“Tell him,” said Battle laconically to George Lomax.

George was clearly reluctant, but he was forced to speak:

“The gentleman who was staying here incognito as Count Stanislaus was His Highness Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia.”

Anthony whistled.

“That must be deuced awkward,” he remarked.

Superintendent Battle, who had been watching Anthony closely, gave a short grunt as though satisfied of something, and rose abruptly to his feet.

“There are one or two questions I’d like to ask Mr. Cade,” he announced. “I’ll take him into the Council Chamber with me if I may.”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Lord Caterham. “Take him anywhere you like.”

Anthony and the detective went out together.

The body had been moved from the scene of the tragedy. There was a dark stain on the floor where it had lain, but otherwise there was nothing to

suggest that a tragedy had ever occurred. The sun poured in through the three windows, flooding the room with light, and bringing out the mellow tone of the old panelling. Anthony looked around him with approval.

“Very nice,” he commented. “Nothing much to beat old England, is there?”

“Did it seem to you at first that it was in this room the shot was fired?” asked the superintendent, not replying to Anthony’s eulogium.

“Let me see.”

“Anthony opened the window and went out on the terrace, looking up at the house.

“Yes, that’s the room all right,” he said. “It’s built out, and occupies all the corner. If the shot had been fired anywhere else, it would have sounded from the left, but this was from behind me or to the right if anything. That’s why I thought of poachers. It’s at the extremity of the wing, you see.”

He stepped back across the threshold, and asked suddenly, as though the idea had just struck him:

“But why do you ask? You know he was shot here, don’t you?”

“Ah!” said the superintendent. “We never know as much as we’d like to know. But, yes, he was shot here all right. Now you said something about trying the windows, didn’t you?”

“Yes. They were fastened from the inside.”

“How many of them did you try?”

“All three of them.”

“Sure of that, sir?”

“I’m in the habit of being sure. Why do you ask?”

“That’s a funny thing,” said the superintendent.

“What’s a funny thing?”

“When the crime was discovered this morning, the middle one was open—not latched, that is to say.”

“Whew!” said Anthony, sinking down on the window seat, and taking out his cigarette case. “That’s rather a blow. That opens up quite a different aspect of the case. It leaves us two alternatives. Either he was killed by someone in the house, and that someone unlatched the window after I had gone to make it look like an outside job—incidentally with me as Little Willie—or else, not to mince matters, I’m lying. I daresay you incline to the second possibility, but, upon my honour, you’re wrong.”

“Nobody’s going to leave this house until I’m through with them, I can tell you that,” said Superintendent Battle grimly.

Anthony looked at him keenly.

“How long have you had the idea that it might be an inside job?” he asked.

Battle smiled.

“I’ve had a notion that way all along. Your trail was a bit too—flaring, if I may put it that way. As soon as your boots fitted the footmarks, I began to have my doubts.”

“I congratulate Scotland Yard,” said Anthony lightly.

But at that moment, the moment when Battle apparently admitted Anthony’s complete absence of complicity in the crime, Anthony felt more than ever the need of being upon his guard. Superintendent Battle was a very astute officer. It would not do to make any slip with Superintendent Battle about.

“That’s where it happened, I suppose?” said Anthony, nodding towards the dark patch upon the floor.

“Yes.”

“What was he shot with—a revolver?”

“Yes, but we shan’t know what make until they get the bullet out at the autopsy.”

“It wasn’t found then?”

“No, it wasn’t found.”

“No clues of any kind?”

“Well, we’ve got this.”

Rather after the manner of a conjurer, Superintendent Battle produced a half sheet of notepaper. And, as he did so, he again watched Anthony closely without seeming to do so.

But Anthony recognized the design upon it without any sign of consternation.

“Aha! Comrades of the Red Hand again. If they’re going to scatter this sort of thing about, they ought to have it lithographed. It must be a frightful nuisance doing everyone separately. Where was this found?”

“Underneath the body. You’ve seen it before, sir?”

Anthony recounted to him in detail his short encounter with that public-spirited association.

“The idea is, I suppose, that the Comrades did him in.”

“Do you think it likely, sir?”

“Well, it would be in keeping with their propaganda. But I’ve always found that those who talk most about blood have never actually seen it run. I shouldn’t have said the Comrades had the guts myself. And they’re such picturesque people too. I don’t see one of them disguising himself as a suitable guest for a country house. Still, one never knows.”

“Quite right, Mr. Cade. One never knows.”

Anthony looked suddenly amused.

“I see the big idea now. Open window, trail of footprints, suspicious stranger at the village inn. But I can assure you, my dear Superintendent, that whatever I am, I am not the local agent of the Red Hand.”

Superintendent Battle smiled a little. Then he played his last card.

“Would you have any objection to seeing the body?” he shot out suddenly.

“None whatever,” rejoined Anthony.

Battle took a key from his pocket, and preceding Anthony down the corridor, paused at a door and unlocked it. It was one of the smaller drawing rooms. The body lay on a table covered with a sheet.

Superintendent Battle waited until Anthony was beside him, and then whisked away the sheet suddenly.

An eager light sprang into his eyes at the half-uttered exclamation and the start of surprise which the other gave.

“So you do recognize him, Mr. Cade?” he said, in a voice that he strove to render devoid of triumph.

“I’ve seen him before, yes,” said Anthony, recovering himself. “But not as Prince Michael Obolovitch. He purported to come from Messrs. Balderson and Hodgkins, and he called himself Mr. Holmes.”

Thirteen

THE AMERICAN VISITOR

Superintendent Battle replaced the sheet with the slightly crestfallen air of a man whose best point has fallen flat. Anthony stood with his hands in his pockets lost in thought.

“So that’s what old Lollipop meant when he talked about ‘other means,’ ” he murmured at last.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Cade?”

“Nothing, Superintendent. Forgive my abstraction. You see I—or rather my friend, Jimmy McGrath, has been very neatly done out of a thousand pounds.”

“A thousand pounds is a nice sum of money,” said Battle.

“It isn’t the thousand pounds so much,” said Anthony, “though I agree with you that it’s a nice sum of money. It’s being done that maddens me. I handed over that manuscript like a little woolly lamb. It hurts, Superintendent, indeed it hurts.”

The detective said nothing.

“Well, well,” said Anthony. “Regrets are vain, and all may not yet be lost. I’ve only got to get hold of dear old Stylptitch’s reminiscences between now and next Wednesday and all will be gas and gaiters.”

“Would you mind coming back to the Council Chamber, Mr. Cade? There’s one little thing I want to point out to you.”

Back in the Council Chamber, the detective strode at once to the middle window.

“I’ve been thinking, Mr. Cade. This particular window is very stiff; very stiff indeed. You might have been mistaken in thinking that it was fastened. It might just have stuck. I’m sure—yes, I’m almost sure, that you were mistaken.”

Anthony eyed him keenly.

“And supposing I say that I’m quite sure I was not?”

“Don’t you think you could have been?” said Battle, looking at him very steadily.

“Well, to oblige you, Superintendent, yes.”

Battle smiled in a satisfied fashion.

“You’re quick in the uptake, sir. And you’ll have no objection to saying so, careless like, at a suitable moment?”

“None whatever. I—”

He paused, as Battle gripped his arm. The superintendent was bent forward, listening.

Enjoining silence on Anthony with a gesture, he tiptoed noiselessly to the door, and flung it suddenly open.

On the threshold stood a tall man with black hair neatly parted in the middle, china-blue eyes with a particularly innocent expression, and a large placid face.

“Your pardon, gentlemen,” he said in a slow drawling voice with a pronounced transatlantic accent. “But is it permitted to inspect the scene of the crime? I take it that you are both gentlemen from Scotland Yard?”

“I have not that honour,” said Anthony. “But this gentleman is Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard.”

“Is that so?” said the American gentleman, with a great appearance of interest. “Pleased to meet you, sir. My name is Hiram P. Fish, of New York City.”

“What was it you wanted to see, Mr. Fish?” asked the detective.

The American walked gently into the room, and looked with much interest at the dark patch on the floor.

“I am interested in crime, Mr. Battle. It is one of my hobbies. I have contributed a monograph to one of our weekly periodicals on the subject ‘Degeneracy and the Criminal.’ ”

As he spoke, his eyes went gently round the room, seeming to note everything in it. They rested just a shade longer on the window.

“The body,” said Superintendent Battle, stating a self-evident fact, “has been removed.”

“Surely,” said Mr. Fish. His eyes went on to the panelled walls. “Some remarkable pictures in this room, gentlemen. A Holbein, two Van Dycks, and, if I am not mistaken, a Velazquez. I am interested in pictures—and likewise in first editions. It was to see his first editions that Lord Caterham was so kind as to invite me down here.”

He sighed gently.

“I guess that’s all off now. It would show a proper feeling, I suppose, for the guests to return to town immediately?”

“I’m afraid that can’t be done, sir,” said Superintendent Battle. “Nobody must leave the house until after the inquest.”

“Is that so? And when is the inquest?”

“May be tomorrow, may not be until Monday. We’ve got to arrange for the autopsy and see the coroner.

“I get you,” said Mr. Fish. “Under the circumstances, though it will be a melancholy party.”

Battle led the way to the door.

“We’d best get out of here,” he said. “We’re keeping it locked still.”

He waited for the other two to pass through, and then turned the key and removed it.

“I opine,” said Mr. Fish, “that you are seeking for fingerprints?”

“Maybe,” said the superintendent laconically.

“I should say too, that, on a night such as last night, an intruder would have left footprints on the hardwood floor.”

“None inside, plenty outside.”

“Mine,” explained Anthony cheerfully.

The innocent eyes of Mr. Fish swept over him.

“Young man,” he said, “you surprise me.”

They turned a corner, and came out into the big wide hall, panelled like the Council Chamber in old oak, and with a wide gallery above it. Two other figures came into sight at the far end.

“Aha!” said Mr. Fish. “Our genial host.”

This was such a ludicrous description of Lord Caterham that Anthony had to turn his head away to conceal a smile.

“And with him,” continued the American, “is a lady whose name I did not catch last night. But she is bright—she is very bright.”

With Lord Caterham was Virginia Revel.

Anthony had been anticipating this meeting all along. He had no idea how to act. He must leave it to Virginia. Although he had full confidence in her presence of mind, he had not the slightest idea what line she would take. He was not long left in doubt.

“Why, it’s Mr. Cade,” said Virginia. She held out both hands to him. “So you found you could come down after all?”

“My dear Mrs. Revel, I had no idea Mr. Cade was a friend of yours,” said Lord Caterham.

“He’s a very old friend,” said Virginia, smiling at Anthony, with a mischievous glint in her eye. “I ran across him in London unexpectedly yesterday, and told him I was coming down here.”

Anthony was quick to give her her pointer.

“I explained to Mrs. Revel,” he said, “that I had been forced to refuse your kind invitation—since it had really been extended to quite a different man. And I couldn’t very well foist a perfect stranger on you under false pretences.”

“Well, well, my dear fellow,” said Lord Caterham, “that’s all over and done with now. I’ll send down to the Cricketers for your bag.”

“It’s very kind of you, Lord Caterham, but—”

“Nonsense, of course you must come to Chimneys. Horrible place, the Cricketers—to stay in, I mean.”

“Of course, you must come, Mr. Cade,” said Virginia softly.

Anthony realized the altered tone of his surroundings. Already Virginia had done much for him. He was no longer an ambiguous stranger. Her position was so assured and unassailable that anyone for whom she vouched was accepted as a matter of course. He thought of the pistol in the tree at Burnham Beeches, and smiled inwardly.

“I’ll send for your traps,” said Lord Caterham to Anthony. “I suppose, in the circumstances, we can’t have any shooting. A pity. But there it is. And I don’t know what the devil to do with Isaacstein. It’s all very unfortunate.”

The depressed peer sighed heavily.

“That’s settled, then,” said Virginia. “You can begin to be useful right away, Mr. Cade, and take me out on the lake. It’s very peaceful there and far from crime and all that sort of thing. Isn’t it awful for poor Lord Caterham having a murder done in his house? But it’s George’s fault really. This is George’s party, you know.”

“Ah!” said Lord Caterham. “But I should never have listened to him!”

He assumed the air of a strong man betrayed by a single weakness.

“One can’t help listening to George,” said Virginia. “He always holds you so that you can’t get away. I’m thinking of patenting a detachable lapel.”

“I wish you would,” chuckled her host. “I’m glad you’re coming to us, Cade. I need support.”

“I appreciate your kindness very much, Lord Caterham,” said Anthony. “Especially,” he added, “when I’m such a suspicious character. But my staying here makes it easier for Battle.”

“In what way, sir?” asked the superintendent.

“It won’t be so difficult to keep an eye on me,” explained Anthony gently.

And by the momentary flicker of the superintendent’s eyelids he knew that his shot had gone home.

Fourteen

MAINLY POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL

Except for that involuntary twitch of the eyelids, Superintendent Battle's impassivity was unimpaired. If he had been surprised at Virginia's recognition of Anthony, he did not show it. He and Lord Caterham stood together and watched those two go out through the garden door. Mr. Fish also watched them.

"Nice young fellow, that," said Lord Caterham.

"Vurry nice for Mrs. Revel to meet an old friend," murmured the American. "They have been acquainted some time, presoomably?"

"Seems so," said Lord Caterham. "But I've never heard her mention him before. Oh, by the way, Battle, Mr. Lomax has been asking for you. He's in the Blue Morning room."

"Very good, Lord Caterham. I'll go there at once."

Battle found his way to the Blue Morning room without difficulty. He was already familiar with the geography of the house.

"Ah, there you are, Battle," said Lomax.

He was striding impatiently up and down the carpet. There was one other person in the room, a big man sitting in a chair by the fireplace. He was dressed in very correct English shooting clothes which nevertheless sat strangely upon him. He had a fat yellow face, and black eyes, as impenetrable as those of a cobra. There was a generous curve to the big nose and power in the square lines of the vast jaw.

"Come in, Battle," said Lomax irritably. "And shut the door behind you. This is Mr. Herman Isaacstein."

Battle inclined his head respectfully.

He knew all about Mr. Herman Isaacstein, and though the great financier sat there silent, whilst Lomax strode up and down and talked, he knew who was the real power in the room.

“We can speak more freely now,” said Lomax. “Before Lord Caterham and Colonel Melrose, I was anxious not to say too much. You understand, Battle? These things mustn’t get about.”

“Ah!” said Battle. “But they always do, more’s the pity.”

Just for a second he saw a trace of a smile on the fat yellow face. It disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

“Now, what do you really think of this young fellow—this Anthony Cade?” continued George. “Do you still assume him to be innocent?”

Battle shrugged his shoulders very slightly.

“He tells a straight story. Part of it we shall be able to verify. On the face of it, it accounts for his presence here last night. I shall cable to South Africa, of course, for information about his antecedents.”

“Then you regard him as cleared of all complicity?”

Battle raised a large square hand.

“Not so fast, sir. I never said that.”

“What is your idea about the crime, Superintendent Battle?” asked Isaacstein, speaking for the first time.

His voice was deep and rich, and had a certain compelling quality about it. It had stood him in good stead at board meetings in his younger days.

“It’s rather too soon to have ideas, Mr. Isaacstein. I’ve not got beyond asking myself the first question.”

“What is that?”

“Oh, it’s always the same. Motive. Who benefits by the death of Prince Michael? We’ve got to answer that before we can get anywhere.”

“The Revolutionary party of Herzoslovakia—” began George.

Superintendent Battle waved him aside with something less than his usual respect.

“It wasn’t the Comrades of the Red Hand, sir, if you’re thinking of them.”

“But the paper—with the scarlet hand on it?”

“Put there to suggest the obvious solution.”

George’s dignity was a little ruffled.

“Really, Battle, I don’t see how you can be so sure of that.”

“Bless you, Mr. Lomax, we know all about the Comrades of the Red Hand. We’ve had our eye on them ever since Prince Michael landed in England. That sort of thing is the elementary work of the department. They’d never be allowed to get within a mile of him.”

“I agree with Superintendent Battle,” said Isaacstein. “We must look elsewhere.”

“You see, sir,” said Battle, encouraged by this support, “we do know a little about the case. If we don’t know who gains by his death, we do know who loses by it.”

“Meaning?” said Isaacstein.

His black eyes were bent upon the detective. More than ever, he reminded Battle of a hooded cobra.

“You and Mr. Lomax, not to mention the Loyalist party of Herzoslovakia. If you’ll pardon the expression, sir, you’re in the soup.”

“Really, Battle,” interposed George, shocked to the core.

“Go on, Battle,” said Isaacstein. “In the soup describes the situation very accurately. You’re an intelligent man.”

“You’ve got to have a king. You’ve lost your king—like that!” He snapped his large fingers. “You’ve got to find another in a hurry, and that’s not an easy job. No, I don’t want to know the details of your scheme, the bare outline is enough for me, but, I take it, it’s a big deal?”

Isaacstein bent his head slowly.

“It’s a very big deal.”

“That brings me to my second question. Who is the next heir to the throne of Herzoslovakia?”

Isaacstein looked across at Lomax. The latter answered the question, with a certain reluctance, and a good deal of hesitation:

“That would be—I should say—yes, in all probability Prince Nicholas would be the next heir.”

“Ah!” said Battle. “And who is Prince Nicholas?”

“A first cousin of Prince Michael’s.”

“Ah!” said Battle. “I should like to hear all about Prince Nicholas, especially where he is at present.”

“Nothing much is known of him,” said Lomax. “As a young man, he was most peculiar in his ideas, consorted with Socialists and Republicans, and acted in a way highly unbecoming to his position. He was sent down from Oxford, I believe, for some wild escapade. There was a rumour of his death two years later in the Congo, but it was only a rumour. He turned up a few months ago when news of the royalist reaction got about.”

“Indeed?” said Battle. “Where did he turn up?”

“In America.”

“America!”

Battle turned to Isaacstein with one laconic word:

“Oil?”

The financier nodded.

“He represented that if the Herzoslovakians chose a king, they would prefer him to Prince Michael as being more in sympathy with modern enlightened ideas, and he drew attention to his early democratic views and his sympathy with Republican ideals. In return for financial support, he was prepared to grant concessions to a certain group of American financiers.”

Superintendent Battle so far forgot his habitual impassivity as to give vent to a prolonged whistle.

“So that is it,” he muttered. “In the meantime, the Loyalist party supported Prince Michael, and you felt sure you’d come out on top. And then this happens!”

“You surely don’t think—” began George.

“It was a big deal,” said Battle. “Mr. Isaacstein says so. And I should say that what he calls a big deal is a big deal.”

“There are always unscrupulous tools to be got hold of,” said Isaacstein quietly. “For the moment, Wall Street wins. But they’ve not done with me yet. Find out who killed Prince Michael, Superintendent Battle, if you want to do your country a service.”

“One thing strikes me as highly suspicious,” put in George. “Why did the equerry, Captain Andrassy, not come down with the Prince yesterday?”

“I’ve inquired into that,” said Battle. “It’s perfectly simple. He stayed in town to make arrangements with a certain lady, on behalf of Prince Michael, for next weekend. The Baron rather frowned on such things,

thinking them injudicious at the present stage of affairs, so His Highness had to go about them in a hole-and-corner manner. He was, if I may say so, inclined to be a rather—er—dissipated young man.”

“I’m afraid so,” said George ponderously. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“There’s one other point we ought to take into account, I think,” said Battle, speaking with a certain amount of hesitation. “King Victor’s supposed to be in England.”

“King Victor?”

Lomax frowned in an effort at recollection.

“Notorious French crook, sir. We’ve had a warning from the Sûreté in Paris.”

“Of course,” said George. “I remember now. Jewel thief, isn’t he? Why, that’s the man—”

He broke off abruptly. Isaacstein, who had been frowning abstractedly at the fireplace, looked up just too late to catch the warning glance telegraphed from Superintendent Battle to the other. But being a man sensitive to vibrations in the atmosphere, he was conscious of a sense of strain.

“You don’t want me any longer, do you, Lomax?” he inquired.

“No, thank you, my dear fellow.”

“Would it upset your plans if I returned to London, Superintendent Battle?”

“I’m afraid so, sir,” said the superintendent civilly. “You see, if you go, there will be others who’ll want to go also. And that would never do.”

“Quite so.”

The great financier left the room, closing the door behind him.

“Splendid fellow, Isaacstein,” murmured George Lomax perfunctorily.

“Very powerful personality,” agreed Superintendent Battle.

George began to pace up and down again.

“What you say disturbs me greatly,” he began. “King Victor! I thought he was in prison?”

“Came out a few months ago. French police meant to keep on his heels, but he managed to give them the slip straightaway. He would too. One of the coolest customers that ever lived. For some reason or other, they believe he’s in England, and have notified us to that effect.”

“But what should he be doing in England?”

“That’s for you to say, sir,” said Battle significantly.

“You mean?—You think?—You know the story, of course—ah, yes, I can see you do. I was not in office, of course, at the time, but I heard the whole story from the late Lord Caterham. An unparalleled catastrophe.”

“The Koh-i-noor,” said Battle reflectively.

“Hush, Battle!” George glanced suspiciously round him. “I beg of you, mention no names. Much better not. If you must speak of it, call it the K.”

The superintendent looked wooden again.

“You don’t connect King Victor with this crime, do you, Battle?”

“It’s just a possibility, that’s all. If you cast your mind back, sir, you’ll remember that there were four places where a—er—certain royal visitor might have concealed the jewel. Chimneys was one of them. King Victor was arrested in Paris three days after the—disappearance, if I may call it that, of the K. It was always hoped that he would some day lead us to the jewel.”

“But Chimneys has been ransacked and overhauled a dozen times.”

“Yes,” said Battle sapiently. “But it’s never much good looking when you don’t know where to look. Only suppose now, that this King Victor came here to look for the thing, was surprised by Prince Michael, and shot him.”

“It’s possible,” said George. “A most likely solution of the crime.”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that. It’s possible, but not much more.”

“Why is that?”

“Because King Victor has never been known to take a life,” said Battle seriously.

“Oh, but a man like that—a dangerous criminal—”

But Battle shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“Criminals always act true to type, Mr. Lomax. It’s surprising. All the same —”

“Yes?”

“I’d rather like to question the Prince’s servant. I’ve left him purposely to the last. We’ll have him in here, sir, if you don’t mind.”

George signified his assent. The superintendent rang the bell. Tredwell answered it, and departed with his instructions.

He returned shortly accompanied by a tall fair man with high cheekbones, and very deep-set blue eyes, and an impassivity of countenance, which almost rivalled Battle’s.

“Boris Anchoukoff?”

“Yes.”

“You were valet to Prince Michael?”

“I was His Highness’ valet, yes.”

The man spoke good English, though with a markedly harsh foreign accent.

“You know that your master was murdered last night?”

A deep snarl, like the snarl of a wild beast, was the man’s only answer. It alarmed George, who withdrew prudently towards the window.

“When did you see your master last?”

“His Highness retired to bed at half past ten. I slept, as always, in the anteroom next to him. He must have gone down to the room downstairs by the other door, the door that gave on the corridor. I did not hear him go. It may be that I was drugged. I have been an unfaithful servant, I slept while my master woke. I am accursed.”

George gazed at him, fascinated.

“You loved your master, eh?” said Battle, watching the man closely.

Boris’ features contracted painfully. He swallowed twice. Then his voice came, harsh with emotion.

“I say this to you, English policeman, I would have died for him! And since he is dead, and I still live, my eyes shall not know sleep, or my heart rest, until I have avenged him. Like a dog will I nose out his murderer and when I have discovered him—Ah!” His eyes lit up. Suddenly he drew an immense knife from beneath his coat and brandished it aloft. “Not all at once will I kill him—oh no!—first I will slit his nose, and cut off his ears and put out his eyes, and then—then, into his black heart, I will thrust this knife.”

Swiftly he replaced the knife, and turning, left the room. George Lomax, his eyes always protuberant, but now goggling almost out of his head, stared at the closed door.

“Purebred Herzoslovakian, of course,” he muttered. “Most uncivilized people. A race of brigands.”

Superintendent Battle rose alertly to his feet.

“Either that man’s sincere,” he remarked, “or he’s the best bluffer I’ve ever seen. And if it’s the former, God help Prince Michael’s murderer when that human bloodhound gets hold of him.”

Fifteen

THE FRENCH STRANGER

Virginia and Anthony walked side by side down the path which led to the lake. For some minutes after leaving the house they were silent. It was Virginia who broke the silence at last with a little laugh.

“Oh, dear,” she said, “isn’t it dreadful? Here I am so bursting with the things I want to tell you, and the things I want to know, that I simply don’t know where to begin. First of all”—she lowered her voice—“What have you done with the body? How awful it sounds, doesn’t it! I never dreamt that I should be so steeped in crime.”

“I suppose it’s quite a novel sensation for you,” agreed Anthony.

“But not for you?”

“Well, I’ve never disposed of a corpse before, certainly.”

“Tell me about it.”

Briefly and succinctly, Anthony ran over the steps he had taken on the previous night. Virginia listened attentively.

“I think you were very clever,” she said approvingly when he had finished. “I can pick up the trunk again when I go back to Paddington. The only difficulty that might arise is if you had to give an account of where you were yesterday evening.”

“I can’t see that can arise. The body can’t have been found until late last night—or possibly this morning. Otherwise there would have been something about it in this morning’s papers. And whatever you may imagine from reading detective stories, doctors aren’t such magicians that they can tell you exactly how many hours a man has been dead. The exact

time of his death will be pretty vague. An alibi for last night would be far more to the point.”

“I know. Lord Caterham was telling me all about it. But the Scotland Yard man is quite convinced of your innocence now, isn’t he?”

Anthony did not reply at once.

“He doesn’t look particularly astute,” continued Virginia.

“I don’t know about that,” said Anthony slowly. “I’ve an impression that there are no flies on Superintendent Battle. He appears to be convinced of my innocence—but I’m not sure. He’s stumped at present by my apparent lack of motive.”

“Apparent?” cried Virginia. “But what possible reason could you have for murdering an unknown foreign count?”

Anthony darted a sharp glance at her.

“You were at one time or other in Herzoslovakia, weren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes. I was there with my husband, for two years, at the Embassy.”

“That was just before the assassination of the King and Queen. Did you ever run across Prince Michael Obolovitch?”

“Michael? Of course I did. Horrid little wretch! He suggested, I remember, that I should marry him morganatically.”

“Did he really? And what did he suggest you should do about your existing husband?”

“Oh, he had a sort of David and Uriah scheme all made out.”

“And how did you respond to this amiable offer?”

“Well,” said Virginia, “unfortunately one had to be diplomatic. So poor little Michael didn’t get it as straight from the shoulder as he might have

done. But he retired hurt all the same. Why all this interest about Michael?”

“Something I’m getting at in my own blundering fashion. I take it that you didn’t meet the murdered man?”

“No. To put it like a book he ‘retired to his own apartments immediately on arrival.’ ”

“And of course you haven’t seen the body?”

Virginia, eyeing him with a good deal of interest, shook her head.

“Could you get to see it, do you think?”

“By means of influence in high places—meaning Lord Caterham—I daresay I could. Why? Is it an order?”

“Good Lord, no,” said Anthony, horrified. “Have I been as dictatorial as all that? No, it’s simply this. Count Stanislaus was the incognito of Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia.”

Virginia’s eyes opened very wide.

“I see.” Suddenly her face broke into its fascinating one-sided smile. “I hope you don’t suggest that Michael went to his rooms simply to avoid seeing me?”

“Something of the kind,” admitted Anthony. “You see, if I’m right in my mind that someone wanted to prevent your coming to Chimneys, the reason seems to lie in your knowing Herzoslovakia. Do you realize that you’re the only person here who knew Prince Michael by sight?”

“Do you mean that this man who was murdered was an imposter?” asked Virginia abruptly.

“That is the possibility that crossed my mind. If you can get Lord Caterham to show you the body, we can clear up that point at once.”

“He was shot at 11:45,” said Virginia thoughtfully. “The time mentioned on that scrap of paper. The whole thing’s horribly mysterious.”

“That reminds me. Is that your window up there? The second from the end over the Council Chamber?”

“No, my room is in the Elizabethan wing, the other side. Why?”

“Simply because as I walked away last night, after thinking I heard a shot, the light went up in that room.”

“How curious! I don’t know who has that room, but I can find out by asking Bundle. Perhaps they heard the shot?”

“If so, they haven’t come forward to say so. I understood from Battle that nobody in the house heard the shot fired. It’s the only clue of any kind that I’ve got, and I daresay it’s a pretty rotten one, but I mean to follow it up for what it’s worth.”

“It’s curious, certainly,” said Virginia thoughtfully.

They had arrived at the boathouse by the lake, and had been leaning against it as they talked.

“And now for the whole story,” said Anthony. “We’ll paddle gently about on the lake, secure from the prying ears of Scotland Yard, American visitors, and curious housemaids.”

“I’ve heard something from Lord Caterham,” said Virginia. “But not nearly enough. To begin with, which are you really, Anthony Cade or Jimmy McGrath?”

For the second time that morning, Anthony unfolded the history of the last six weeks of his life—with this difference that the account given to Virginia needed no editing. He finished up with his own astonished recognition of “Mr. Holmes.”

“By the way, Mrs. Revel,” he ended, “I’ve never thanked you for imperilling your mortal soul by saying that I was an old friend of yours.”

“Of course you’re an old friend,” cried Virginia. “You don’t suppose I’d lumber you with a corpse, and then pretend you were a mere acquaintance next time I met you? No, indeed!”

She paused.

“Do you know one thing that strikes me about all this?” she went on. “That there’s some extra mystery about those memoirs that we haven’t fathomed yet.”

“I think you’re right,” agreed Anthony. “There’s one thing I’d like you to tell me,” he continued.

“What’s that?”

“Why did you seem so surprised when I mentioned the name of Jimmy McGrath to you yesterday at Pont Street? Had you heard it before?”

“I had, Sherlock Holmes. George—my cousin, George Lomax, you know—came to see me the other day, and suggested a lot of frightfully silly things. His idea was that I should come down here and make myself agreeable to this man, McGrath, and Delilah the memoirs out of him somehow. He didn’t put it like that, of course. He talked a lot of nonsense about English gentlewomen, and things like that, but his real meaning was never obscure for a moment. It was just the sort of rotten thing poor old George would think of. And then I wanted to know too much, and he tried to put me off with lies that wouldn’t have deceived a child of two.”

“Well, his plan seems to have succeeded, anyhow,” observed Anthony. “Here am I, the James McGrath he had in mind, and here are you being agreeable to me.”

“But alas, for poor old George, no memoirs! Now I’ve got a question for you. When I said I hadn’t written those letters, you said you knew I hadn’t—you couldn’t know any such thing?”

“Oh, yes, I could,” said Anthony, smiling. “I’ve got a good working knowledge of psychology.”

“You mean your belief in the sterling worth of my moral character was such that—”

But Anthony was shaking his head vigorously.

“Not at all. I don’t know anything about your moral character. You might have a lover, and you might write to him. But you’d never lie down to be blackmailed. The Virginia Revel of those letters was scared stiff. You’d have fought.”

“I wonder who the real Virginia Revel is—where she is, I mean. It makes me feel as though I had a double somewhere.”

Anthony lit a cigarette.

“You know that one of the letters was written from Chimneys?” he asked at last.

“What?” Virginia was clearly startled. “When was it written?”

“It wasn’t dated. But it’s odd, isn’t it?”

“I’m perfectly certain no other Virginia Revel has ever stayed at Chimneys. Bundle or Lord Caterham would have said something about the coincidence of the name if she had.”

“Yes. It’s rather queer. Do you know, Mrs. Revel, I am beginning to disbelieve profoundly in this other Virginia Revel.”

“She’s very elusive,” agreed Virginia.

“Extraordinarily elusive. I am beginning to think that the person who wrote those letters deliberately used your name.”

“But why?” cried Virginia. “Why should they do such a thing?”

“Ah, that’s just the question. There’s the devil of a lot to find out about everything.”

“Who do you really think killed Michael?” asked Virginia suddenly. “The Comrades of the Red Hand?”

“I suppose they might have done so,” said Anthony in a dissatisfied voice. “Pointless killing would be rather characteristic of them.”

“Let’s get to work,” said Virginia. “I see Lord Caterham and Bundle strolling together. The first thing to do is to find out definitely whether the dead man is Michael or not.”

Anthony paddled to shore and a few moments later they had joined Lord Caterham and his daughter.

“Lunch is late,” said his lordship in a depressed voice.

“Battle has insulted the cook, I expect.”

“This is a friend of mine, Bundle,” said Virginia. “Be nice to him.”

Bundle looked earnestly at Anthony for some minutes, and then addressed a remark to Virginia as though he had not been there.

“Where do you pick up these nice-looking men, Virginia? ‘How do you do it?’ says she enviously.”

“You can have him,” said Virginia generously. “I want Lord Caterham.”

She smiled upon the flattered peer, slipped her hand through his arm and they moved off together.

“Do you talk?” asked Bundle. “Or are you just strong and silent?”

“Talk?” said Anthony. “I babble. I murmur. I burble—like the running brook, you know. Sometimes I even ask questions.”

“As, for instance?”

“Who occupies the second room on the left from the end?”

He pointed to it as he spoke.

“What an extraordinary question!” said Bundle. “You intrigue me greatly. Let me see—yes—that’s Mademoiselle Brun’s room. The French governess. She endeavours to keep my young sisters in order. Dulcie and Daisy—like the song, you know. I daresay they’d have called the next one Dorothy May. But mother got tired of having nothing but girls and died. Thought someone else could take on the job of providing an heir.”

“Mademoiselle Brun,” said Anthony thoughtfully. “How long has she been with you?”

“Two months. She came to us when we were in Scotland.”

“Ha!” said Anthony. “I smell a rat.”

“I wish I could smell some lunch,” said Bundle. “Do I ask the Scotland Yard man to have lunch with us, Mr. Cade? You’re a man of the world, you know about the etiquette of such things. We’ve never had a murder in the house before. Exciting, isn’t it. I’m sorry your character was so completely cleared this morning. I’ve always wanted to meet a murderer and see for myself if they’re as genial and charming as the Sunday papers always say they are. God! what’s that?”

“That” seemed to be a taxi approaching the house. It’s two occupants were a tall man with a bald head and a black beard, and a smaller and younger man with a black moustache. Anthony recognized the former, and guessed that it was he—rather than the vehicle which contained him—that had rung the exclamation of astonishment from his companion’s lips.

“Unless I much mistake,” he remarked, “that is my old friend, Baron Lollipop.”

“Baron what?”

“I call him Lollipop for convenience. The pronouncing of his own name tends to harden the arteries.”

“It nearly wrecked the telephone this morning,” remarked Bundle. “So that’s the Baron, is it? I foresee he’ll be turned on to me this afternoon—and I’ve had Isaacstein all the morning. Let George do his own dirty work, say I, and to hell with politics. Excuse me leaving you, Mr. Cade, but I must stand by poor old Father.”

Bundle retreated rapidly to the house.

Anthony stood looking after her for a minute or two and thoughtfully lighted a cigarette. As he did so, his ear was caught by a stealthy sound quite near him. He was standing by the boathouse, and the sound seemed to come from just round the corner. The mental picture conveyed to him was that of a man vainly trying to stifle a sudden sneeze.

“Now I wonder—I very much wonder who’s behind the boathouse,” said Anthony to himself. “We’d better see, I think.”

Suiting the action to the word, he threw away the match he had just blown out, and ran lightly and noiselessly round the corner of the boathouse.

He came upon a man who had evidently been kneeling on the ground and was just struggling to rise to his feet. He was tall, wore a light-coloured overcoat and glasses, and for the rest, had a short pointed black beard and slightly foppish manner. He was between thirty and forty years of age, and altogether of a most respectable appearance.

“What are you doing here?” asked Anthony.

He was pretty certain that the man was not one of Lord Caterham’s guests.

“I ask your pardon,” said the stranger, with a marked foreign accent and what was meant to be an engaging smile. “It is that I wish to return to the Jolly Cricketers and I have lost my way. Would Monsieur be so good as to direct me?”

“Certainly,” said Anthony. “But you don’t go there by water, you know.”

“Eh?” said the stranger, with the air of one at a loss.

“I said,” repeated Anthony, with a meaning glance at the boathouse, “that you won’t get there by water. There’s a right of way across the park—some distance away, but all this is the private part. You’re trespassing.”

“I am most sorry,” said the stranger. “I lost my direction entirely. I thought I would come up here and inquire.”

Anthony refrained from pointing out that kneeling behind a boathouse was a somewhat peculiar manner of prosecuting inquiries. He took the stranger kindly by the arm.

“You go this way, he said. “Right round the lake and straight on—you can’t miss the path. When you get on it, turn to the left, and it will lead you to the village. You’re staying at the Cricketers, I suppose?”

“I am, monsieur. Since this morning. Many thanks for your kindness in directing me.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Anthony. “I hope you haven’t caught cold.”

“Eh?” said the stranger.

“From kneeling on the damp ground, I mean,” explained Anthony. “I fancied I heard you sneezing.”

“I may have sneezed,” admitted the other.

“Quite so,” said Anthony. “But you shouldn’t suppress a sneeze, you know. One of the most eminent doctors said so only the other day. It’s frightfully dangerous. I don’t remember exactly what it does to you—whether it’s an inhibition or whether it hardens your arteries, but you must never do it. Good morning.”

“Good morning, and thank you, monsieur, for setting me on the right road.”

“Second suspicious stranger from village inn,” murmured Anthony to himself, as he watched the other’s retreating form. “And one that I can’t place, either. Appearance that of a French commercial traveller. I don’t quite see him as a Comrade of the Red Hand. Does he represent yet a third

party in the harassed state of Herzoslovakia? The French governess has the second window from the end. A mysterious Frenchman is found slinking round the grounds, listening to conversations that are not meant for his ears. I'll bet my hat there's something in it."

Musing thus, Anthony retraced his steps to the house. On the terrace, he encountered Lord Caterham, looking suitably depressed, and two new arrivals. He brightened a little at the sight of Anthony.

"Ah, there you are," he remarked. "Let me introduce you to Baron—er—er—and Captain Andrassy. Mr. Anthony Cade."

The Baron stared at Anthony with growing suspicion.

"Mr. Cade?" he said stiffly. "I think not."

"A word alone with you, Baron," said Anthony. "I can explain everything."

The Baron bowed, and the two men walked down the terrace together.

"Baron," said Anthony. "I must throw myself upon your mercy. I have so far strained the honour of an English gentleman as to travel to this country under an assumed name. I represented myself to you as Mr. James McGrath—but you must see for yourself that the deception involved was infinitesimal. You are doubtless acquainted with the works of Shakespeare, and his remarks about the unimportance of the nomenclature of roses? This case is the same. The man you wanted to see was the man in possession of the memoirs. I was that man. As you know only too well, I am no longer in possession of them. A neat trick, Baron, a very neat trick. Who thought of it, you or your principal?"

"His Highness' own idea it was. And for anyone but him to carry it out he would not permit."

"He did it jolly well," said Anthony, with approval. "I never took him for anything but an Englishman."

“The education of an English gentleman did the Prince receive,” explained the Baron. “The custom of Herzoslovakia it is.”

“No professional could have pinched those papers better,” said Anthony. “May I ask, without indiscretion, what has become of them?”

“Between gentlemen,” began the Baron.

“You are too kind, Baron,” murmured Anthony. “I’ve never been called a gentleman so often as I have in the last forty-eight hours.”

“I to you say this—I believe them to be burnt.”

“You believe, but you don’t know, eh? Is that it?”

“His Highness in his own keeping retained them. His purpose it was to read them and then by the fire destroy them.”

“I see,” said Anthony. “All the same, they are not the kind of light literature you’d skim through in half an hour.”

“Among the effects of my martyred master they have not discovered been. It is clear, therefore, that burnt they are.”

“Hm!” said Anthony. “I wonder?”

He was silent for a minute or two and then went on.

“I have asked you these questions, Baron, because, as you may have heard, I myself have been implicated in the crime. I must clear myself absolutely, so that no suspicion attaches to me.”

“Undoubtedly,” said the Baron. “Your honour demands it.”

“Exactly,” said Anthony. “You put these things so well. I haven’t got the knack of it. To continue, I can only clear myself by discovering the real murderer, and to do that I must have all the facts. This question of the memoirs is very important. It seems to me possible that to gain possession

of them might be the motive of the crime. Tell me, Baron, is that a very far-fetched idea?"

The Baron hesitated for a moment or two.

"You yourself the memoirs have read?" he asked cautiously at length.

"I think I am answered," said Anthony, smiling. "Now, Baron, there's just one thing more. I should like to give you fair warning that it is still my intention to deliver that manuscript to the publishers on Wednesday next, the 13th of October."

The Baron stared at him.

"But you have no longer got it?"

"On Wednesday next, I said. Today is Friday. That gives me five days to get hold of it again."

"But if it is burnt?"

"I don't think it is burnt. I have good reasons for not believing so."

As he spoke they turned the corner of the terrace. A massive figure was advancing towards them. Anthony, who had not yet seen the great Mr. Herman Isaacstein, looked at him with considerable interest.

"Ah, Baron," said Isaacstein, waving a big black cigar he was smoking, "this is a bad business—a very bad business."

"My good friend, Mr. Isaacstein, it is indeed," cried the Baron. "All our noble edifice in ruins is."

Anthony tactfully left the two gentlemen to their lamentations, and retraced his steps along the terrace.

Suddenly he came to a halt. A thin spiral of smoke was rising into the air apparently from the very centre of the yew hedge.

“It must be hollow in the middle,” reflected Anthony “I’ve heard of such things before.”

He looked swiftly to right and left of him. Lord Caterham was at the farther end of the terrace with Captain Andrassy. Their backs were towards him. Anthony bent down and wriggled his way through the massive yew.

He had been quite right in his supposition. The yew hedge was really not one, but two, a narrow passage divided them. The entrance to this was about halfway up, on the side of the house. There was no mystery about it, but no one seeing the yew hedge from the front would have guessed at the probability.

Anthony looked down the narrow vista. About halfway down, a man was reclining in a basket chair. A half-smoked cigar rested on the arm of the chair, and the gentleman himself appeared to be asleep.

“Hm!” said Anthony to himself. “Evidently Mr. Hiram Fish prefers sitting in the shade.”

Sixteen

TEA IN THE SCHOOLROOM

Anthony regained the terrace with the feeling uppermost in his mind that the only safe place for private conversations was the middle of the lake.

The resonant boom of a gong sounded from the house, and Tredwell appeared in a stately fashion from a side door "Luncheon is served, my lord."

"Ah!" said Lord Caterham, brisking up a little. "Lunch!"

At that moment two children burst out of the house. They were high-spirited young women of twelve and ten, and though their names might be Dulcie and Daisy, as Bundle had affirmed, they appeared to be more generally known as Guggle and Winkle. They executed a kind of war dance, interspersed with shrill whoops till Bundle emerged and quelled them.

"Where's Mademoiselle?" she demanded.

"She's got the migraine, the migraine, the migraine!" chanted Winkle.

"Hurrah!" said Guggle, joining in.

Lord Caterham had succeeded in shepherding most of his guests into the house. Now he laid a restraining hand on Anthony's arm.

"Come to my study," he breathed. "I've got something rather special there."

Slinking down the hall, far more like a thief than like the master of the house, Lord Caterham gained the shelter of his sanctum. Here he unlocked a cupboard and produced various bottles.

“Talking to foreigners always makes me so thirsty,” he explained apologetically. “I don’t know why it is.”

There was a knock on the door, and Virginia popped her head round the corner of it.

“Got a special cocktail for me?” she demanded.

“Of course,” said Lord Caterham hospitably. “Come in.”

The next few minutes were taken up with serious rites.

“I needed that,” said Lord Caterham with a sigh, as he replaced his glass on the table. “As I said just now, I find talking to foreigners particularly fatiguing. I think it’s because they’re so polite. Come along. Let’s have some lunch.”

He led the way to the dining room. Virginia put her hand on Anthony’s arm, and drew him back a little.

“I’ve done my good deed for the day,” she whispered. “I got Lord Caterham to take me to see the body.”

“Well?” demanded Anthony eagerly.

One theory of his was to be proved or disproved.

Virginia was shaking her head.

“You were wrong,” she whispered. “It’s Prince Michael right.”

“Oh!” Anthony was deeply chagrined.

“And Mademoiselle had the migraine,” he added aloud, in a dissatisfied tone.

“What has that got to do with it?”

“Probably nothing, but I wanted to see her. You see, I’ve found out that Mademoiselle has the second room from the end—the one where I saw the light go up last night.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Probably there’s nothing in it. All the same, I mean to see Mademoiselle before the day is out.”

Lunch was somewhat of an ordeal. Even the cheerful impartiality of Bundle failed to reconcile the heterogeneous assembly. The Baron and Andrassy were correct, formal, full of etiquette, and had the air of attending a meal in a mausoleum. Lord Catherham was lethargic and depressed. Bill Eversleigh stared longingly at Virginia. George, very mindful of the trying position in which he found himself, conversed weightily with the Baron and Mr. Isaacstein. Guggle and Winkle, completely beside themselves with joy at having a murder in the house, had to be continually checked and kept under, whilst Mr. Hiram Fish slowly masticated his food, and drawled out dry remarks in his own peculiar idiom. Superintendent Battle had considerably vanished, and nobody knew what had become of him.

“Thank God that’s over,” murmured Bundle to Anthony, as they left the table. “And George is taking the foreign contingent over to the Abbey this afternoon to discuss State secrets.”

“That will possibly relieve the atmosphere,” agreed Anthony.

“I don’t mind the American so much,” continued Bundle. “He and Father can talk first editions together quite happily in some secluded spot. Mr. Fish”—as the object of their conversation drew near—“I’m planning a peaceful afternoon for you.”

The American bowed.

“That’s too kind of you, Lady Eileen.”

“Mr. Fish,” said Anthony, “had quite a peaceful morning.”

Mr. Fish shot a quick glance at him.

“Ah, you observed me, then, in my secluded retreat? There are moments, sir, when far from the madding crowd is the only motto for a man of quiet tastes.”

Bundle had drifted on, and the American and Anthony were left together. The former dropped his voice a little.

“I opine,” he said, “that there is considerable mystery about this little dustup?”

“Any amount of it,” said Anthony.

“That guy with the bald head was perhaps a family connexion?”

“Something of the kind.”

“These Central European nations beat the band,” declared Mr. Fish. “It’s kind of being rumoured around that the deceased gentleman was a Royal Highness. Is that so, do you know?”

“He was staying here as Count Stanislaus,” replied Anthony evasively.

To this Mr. Fish offered no further rejoinder than the somewhat cryptic:

“Oh, boy!”

After which he relapsed into silence for some moments.

“This police captain of yours,” he observed at last. “Battle, or whatever his name is, is he the goods all right?”

“Scotland Yard think so,” replied Anthony dryly.

“He seems kind of hidebound to me,” remarked Mr. Fish. “No hustle to him. This big idea of his, letting no one leave the house, what is there to it?”

He darted a very sharp look at Anthony as he spoke.

“Everyone’s got to attend the inquest tomorrow morning, you see.”

“That’s the idea is it? No more to it than that? No question of Lord Caterham’s guests being suspected?”

“My dear Mr. Fish!”

“I was getting a mite uneasy—being a stranger in this country. But of course it was an outside job—I remember now. Window found unfastened, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” said Anthony, looking straight in front of him.

Mr. Fish sighed. After a minute or two he said in a plaintive tone:

“Young man, do you know how they get the water out of a mine?”

“How?”

“By pumping—but it’s almighty hard work! I observe the figure of my genial host detaching itself from the group over yonder. I must join him.”

Mr. Fish walked gently away, and Bundle drifted back again.

“Funny Fish, isn’t he?” she remarked.

“He is.”

“It’s no good looking for Virginia,” said Bundle sharply.

“I wasn’t.”

“You were. I don’t know how she does it. It isn’t what she says, I don’t even believe it’s what she looks. But, oh, boy! she gets there everytime. Anyway, she’s on duty elsewhere for the time. She told me to be nice to you, and I’m going to be nice to you—by force if necessary.”

“No force required,” Anthony assured her. “But, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather you were nice to me on the water, in a boat.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” said Bundle meditatively.

They strolled down to the lake together.

“There’s just one question I’d like to ask you,” said Anthony as he paddled gently out from the shore, “before we turn to really interesting topics. Business before pleasure.”

“Whose bedroom do you want to know about now?” asked Bundle with weary patience.

“Nobody’s bedroom for the moment. But I would like to know where you got your French governess from.”

“The man’s bewitched,” said Bundle. “I got her from an agency, and I pay her a hundred pounds a year, and her Christian name is Geneviève. Anything more you want to know?”

“We’ll assume the agency,” said Anthony. “What about her references?”

“Oh, glowing! She lived for ten years with the Countess of What Not.”

“What Not being?—”

“The Comtesse de Breteuil, Château de Breteuil, Dinard.”

“You didn’t actually see the Comtesse yourself? It was all done by letter?”

“Exactly.”

“Hm!” said Anthony.

“You intrigue me,” said Bundle. “You intrigue me enormously. Is it love or crime?”

“Probably sheer idiocy on my part. Let’s forget it.”

“ ‘Let’s forget it,’ says he negligently, having extracted all the information he wants. Mr. Cade, who do you suspect? I rather suspect Virginia as being

the most unlikely person. Or possibly Bill.”

“What about you?”

“Member of the aristocracy joins in secret the Comrades of the Red Hand. It would create a sensation all right.”

Anthony laughed. He liked Bundle, though he was a little afraid of the shrewd penetration of her sharp grey eyes.

“You must be proud of all this,” he said suddenly, waving his hand towards the great house in the distance.

Bundle screwed up her eyes and tilted her head on one side.

“Yes—it means something, I suppose. But one’s too used to it. Anyway, we’re not here very much—too deadly dull. We’ve been at Cowes and Deauville all the summer after town, and then up to Scotland. Chimneys has been swathed in dust sheets for about five months. Once a week they take the dust sheets off and coaches full of tourists come and gape and listen to Tredwell. ‘On your right is the portrait of the fourth Marchioness of Caterham, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds,’ etc, and Ed or Bert, the humorist of the party, nudges his girl and says, ‘Eh! Gladys, they’ve got two pennyworth of pictures here, right enough.’ And then they go and look at more pictures and yawn and shuffle their feet and wish it was time to go home.”

“Yet history has been made here once or twice, by all accounts.”

“You’ve been listening to George,” said Bundle sharply. “That’s the kind of thing he’s always saying.”

But Anthony had raised himself on his elbow, and was staring at the shore.

“Is that a third suspicious stranger I see standing disconsolately by the boathouse? Or is it one of the house party?”

Bundle lifted her head from the scarlet cushion.

“It’s Bill,” she said.

“He seems to be looking for something.”

“He’s probably looking for me,” said Bundle, without enthusiasm.

“Shall we row quickly in the opposite direction?”

“That’s quite the right answer, but it should be delivered with more enthusiasm.”

“I shall row with double vigour after that rebuke.”

“Not at all,” said Bundle. “I have my pride. Row me to where that young ass is waiting. Somebody’s got to look after him, I suppose. Virginia must have given him the slip. One of these days, inconceivable as it seems, I might want to marry George, so I might as well practise being ‘one of our well-known political hostesses.’ ”

Anthony pulled obediently towards the shore.

“And what’s to become of me, I should like to know?” he complained. “I refuse to be the unwanted third. Is that the children I see in the distance?”

“Yes. Be careful, or they’ll rope you in.”

“I’m rather fond of children,” said Anthony. “I might teach them some nice quiet intellectual game.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Having relinquished Bundle to the care of the disconsolate Bill, Anthony strolled off to where various shrill cries disturbed the peace of the afternoon. He was received with acclamation.”

“Are you any good at playing Red Indians?” asked Guggle sternly.

“Rather,” said Anthony. “You should hear the noise I make when I’m being scalped. Like this.” He illustrated.

“Not so bad,” said Winkle grudgingly. “Now do the scalper’s yell.”

Anthony obliged with a bloodcurdling noise. In another minute the game of Red Indians was in full swing.

About an hour later, Anthony wiped his forehead, and ventured to inquire after Mademoiselle’s migraine. He was pleased to hear that that lady had entirely recovered. So popular had he become that he was urgently invited to come and have tea in the schoolroom.

“And then you can tell us about the man you saw hung,” urged Guggle.

“Did you say you’d got a bit of the rope with you?” asked Winkle.

“It’s in my suitcase,” said Anthony solemnly. “You shall each have a piece of it.”

Winkle immediately let out a wild Indian yell of satisfaction.

“We’ll have to go and get washed, I suppose,” said Guggle gloomily. “You will come to tea, won’t you? You won’t forget?”

Anthony swore solemnly that nothing should prevent him keeping the engagement. Satisfied, the youthful pair beat a retreat towards the house. Anthony stood for a minute looking after them, and, as he did so, he became aware of a man leaving the other side of a little copse of trees and hurrying away across the park. He felt almost sure that it was the same black-bearded stranger he had encountered that morning. Whilst he was hesitating whether to go after him or not the trees just ahead of him were parted and Mr. Hiram Fish stepped out into the open. He started slightly when he saw Anthony.

“A peaceful afternoon, Mr. Fish?” inquired the latter.

“I thank you, yes.”

Mr. Fish did not look as peaceful as usual however. His face was flushed, and he was breathing hard as though he had been running. He drew out his watch and consulted it.

“I guess,” he said softly, “it’s just about time for your British institution of afternoon tea.”

Closing his watch with a snap, Mr. Fish ambled gently away in the direction of the house.

Anthony stood in a brown study and awoke with a start to the fact that Superintendent Battle was standing beside him. Not the faintest sound had heralded his approach, and he seemed literally to have materialized from space.

“Where did you spring from?” asked Anthony irritably.

With a slight jerk of his head, Battle indicated the little copse of trees behind them.

“It seems a popular spot this afternoon,” remarked Anthony.

“You were very lost in thought, Mr. Cade.”

“I was indeed. Do you know what I was doing, Battle? I was trying to put two and one and five and three together so as to make four. And it can’t be done, Battle, it simply can’t be done.”

“There’s difficulties that way,” agreed the detective.

“But you’re just the man I wanted to see. Battle, I want to go away. Can it be done?”

True to his creed, Superintendent Battle showed neither emotion nor surprise. His reply was easy and matter of fact.

“That depends, sir, as to where you want to go.”

“I’ll tell you exactly, Battle. I’ll lay my cards upon the table. I want to go Dinard, to the château of Madame la Comtesse de Breteuil. Can it be done?”

“When do you want to go, Mr. Cade?”

“Say tomorrow after the inquest. I could be back here by Sunday evening.”

“I see,” said the superintendent, with peculiar solidity.

“Well, what about it?”

“I’ve no objection, provided you go where you say you’re going, and come straight back here.”

“You’re a man in a thousand, Battle. Either you have taken an extraordinary fancy to me or else you’re extraordinarily deep. Which is it?”

Superintendent Battle smiled a little, but did not answer.

“Well, well,” said Anthony, “I expect you’ll take your precautions. Discreet minions of the law will follow my suspicious footsteps. So be it. But I do wish I knew what it was all about.”

“I don’t get you, Mr. Cade.”

“The memoirs—what all the fuss is about. Were they only memoirs? Or have you got something up your sleeve?”

Battle smiled again.

“Take it like this. I’m doing you a favour because you’ve made a favourable impression on me, Mr. Cade. I’d like you to work in with me over this case. The amateur and the professional, they go well together. The one has the intimacy, so to speak, and the other the experience.”

“Well,” said Anthony slowly, “I don’t mind admitting that I’ve always wanted to try my hand at unravelling a murder mystery.”

“Any ideas about the case at all, Mr. Cade?”

“Plenty of them,” said Anthony. “But they’re mostly questions.”

“As, for instance?”

“Who steps into the murdered Michael’s shoes? It seems to me that that is important?”

A rather wry smile came over Superintendent Battle’s face.

“I wondered if you’d think of that, sir. Prince Nicholas Obolovitch is the next heir—first cousin of this gentleman.”

“And where is he at the present moment?” asked Anthony, turning away to light a cigarette. “Don’t tell me you don’t know, Battle, because I shan’t believe you.”

We’ve reason to believe that he’s in the United States. He was until quite lately, at all events. Raising money on his expectations.”

Anthony gave vent to a surprised whistle.

“I get you,” said Anthony. “Michael was backed by England, Nicholas by America. In both countries a group of financiers are anxious to obtain the oil concessions. The Loyalist party adopted Michael as their candidate—now they’ll have to look elsewhere. Gnashing of teeth on the part of Isaacstein and Co. and Mr. George Lomax. Rejoicings in Wall Street. Am I right?”

“You’re not far off,” said Superintendent Battle.

“Hm!” said Anthony. “I almost dare swear that I know what you were doing in that copse.”

The detective smiled, but made no reply.

“International politics are very fascinating,” said Anthony, “but I fear I must leave you. I have an appointment in the schoolroom.”

He strode briskly away towards the house. Inquiries of the dignified Tredwell showed him the way to the schoolroom. He tapped on the door and entered, to be greeted by squeals of joy.

Guggle and Winkle immediately rushed at him and bore him in triumph to be introduced to Mademoiselle.

For the first time, Anthony felt a qualm. Mademoiselle Brun was a small, middle-aged woman with a sallow face, pepper-and-salt hair, and a budding moustache!

As the notorious foreign adventuress she did not fit into the picture at all.

“I believe,” said Anthony to himself, “I’m making the most utter fool of myself. Never mind, I must go through with it now.”

He was extremely pleasant to Mademoiselle, and she, on her part, was evidently delighted to have a good-looking young man invade her schoolroom. The meal was a great success.

But that evening, alone in the charming bedchamber that had been allotted to him, Anthony shook his head several times.

“I’m wrong,” he said to himself. “For the second time, I’m wrong. Somehow or other, I can’t get the hang of this thing.”

He stopped in his pacing of the floor.

“What the devil—” began Anthony.

The door was being softly opened. In another minute a man had slipped into the room, and stood deferentially by the door.

He was a big fair man, squarely built, with high Slavonic cheekbones, and dreamy fanatic eyes.

“Who the devil are you?” asked Anthony, staring at him.

The man replied in perfect English.

“I am Boris Anchoukoff.”

“Prince Michael’s servant, eh?”

“That is so. I served my master. He is dead. Now I serve you.”

“It’s very kind of you,” said Anthony. “But I don’t happen to want a valet.”

“You are my master now. I will serve you faithfully.”

“Yes—but—look—here—I don’t need a valet. I can’t afford one.”

Boris Anchoukoff looked at him with a touch of scorn.

“I do not ask for money. I served my master. So will I serve you—to the death!”

Stepping quickly forward, he dropped on one knee, caught Anthony’s hand and placed it on his forehead. Then he rose swiftly and left the room as suddenly as he had come.

Anthony stared after him, his face a picture of astonishment.

“That’s damned odd,” he said to himself. “A faithful sort of dog. Curious the instincts these fellows have.”

He rose and paced up and down.

“All the same,” he muttered, “it’s awkward—damned awkward—just at present.”

Seventeen

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

The inquest took place on the following morning. It was extraordinarily unlike the inquests as pictured in sensational fiction. It satisfied even George Lomax in its rigid suppression of all interesting details. Superintendent Battle and the coroner, working together with the support of the chief constable, had reduced the proceedings to the lowest level of boredom.

Immediately after the inquest, Anthony took an unostentatious departure.

His departure was the one bright spot in the day for Bill Eversleigh. George Lomax, obsessed with the fear that something damaging to his department might leak out, had been exceedingly trying. Miss Oscar and Bill had been in constant attendance. Everything useful and interesting had been done by Miss Oscar. Bill's part had been to run to and fro with countless messages, to decode telegrams, and to listen by the hour to George's repeating himself.

It was a completely exhausted young man who retired to bed on Saturday night. He had had practically no chance to talk to Virginia all day, owing to George's exactions, and he felt injured and ill-used. Thank goodness, that Colonial fellow had taken himself off. He had monopolized far too much of Virginia's society, anyway. And of course if George Lomax went on making an ass of himself like this—His mind seething with resentment, Bill fell asleep. And, in dreams, came consolation. For he dreamt of Virginia.

It was an heroic dream, a dream of burning timbers in which he played the part of the gallant rescuer. He brought down Virginia from the topmost storey in his arms. She was unconscious. He laid her on the grass. Then he went off to find a packet of sandwiches. It was most important that he should find that packet of sandwiches. George had it but instead of giving it up to Bill, he began to dictate telegrams. They were now in the vestry of a church, and any minute Virginia might arrive to be married to him. Horror!

He was wearing pyjamas. He must get home at once and find his proper clothes. He rushed out to the car. The car would not start. No petrol in the tank! He was getting desperate. And then a big General bus drew up and Virginia got out of it on the arm of the baldheaded Baron. She was deliciously cool, and exquisitely dressed in grey. She came over to him and shook him by the shoulders playfully. "Bill," she said. "Oh, Bill." She shook him harder. "Bill," she said. "Wake up. Oh, do wake up!"

Very dazed, Bill woke up. He was in his bedroom at Chimneys. But part of the dream was with him still. Virginia was leaning over him, and was repeating the same words with variations.

"Wake up, Bill. Oh, do wake up! Bill."

"Hullo!" said Bill, sitting up in bed. "What's the matter?"

Virginia gave a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness. I thought you'd never wake up. I've been shaking you and shaking you. Are you properly awake now?"

"I think so," said Bill doubtfully.

"You great lump," said Virginia. "The trouble I've had! My arms are aching."

"These insults are uncalled for," said Bill, with dignity. "Let me say, Virginia, that I consider your conduct most unbecoming. Not at all that of a pure young widow."

"Don't be an idiot, Bill. Things are happening."

"What kind of things?"

"Queer things. In the Council Chamber. I thought I heard a door bang somewhere, and I came down to see. And then I saw a light in the Council Chamber. I crept along the passage, and peeped through the crack of the door. I couldn't see much, but what I could see was so extraordinary that I felt I must see more. And then, all of a sudden, I felt that I should like a

nice, big strong man with me. And you were the nicest and biggest and strongest man I could think of, so I came in and tried to wake you up quietly. But I've been ages doing it."

"I see," said Bill. "And what do you want me to do now? Get up and tackle the burglars?"

Virginia wrinkled her brows.

"I'm not sure that they are burglars. Bill, it's very queer—But don't let's waste time talking. Get up."

Bill slipped obediently out of bed.

"Wait while I don a pair of boots—the big ones with nails in them. However big and strong I am. I'm not going to tackle hardened criminals with bare feet."

"I like your pyjamas, Bill," said Virginia dreamily. "Brightness without vulgarity."

"While we're on the subject," remarked Bill, reaching for his second boot, "I like that thingummybob of yours. It's a pretty shade of green. What do you call it? It's not just a dressing gown, is it?"

"It's a negligé," said Virginia. "I'm glad you've led such a pure life, Bill."

"I haven't, said Bill indignantly.

"You've just betrayed the fact. You're very nice, Bill, and I like you. I daresay that tomorrow morning—say about ten o'clock, a good safe hour for not unduly exciting the emotions—I might even kiss you."

"I always think these things are best carried out on the spur of the moment," suggested Bill.

"We've other fish to fry," said Virginia. "If you don't want to put on a gas mask and a shirt of chain mail, shall we start?"

“I’m ready,” said Bill.

He wriggled into a lurid silk dressing gown, and picked up a poker.

“The orthodox weapon,” he observed.

“Come on,” said Virginia, “and don’t make a noise.”

They crept out of the room and along the corridor, and then down the wide double staircase. Virginia frowned as they reached the bottom of it.

“Those boots of yours aren’t exactly domes of silence, are they, Bill?”

“Nails will be nails,” said Bill. “I’m doing my best.”

“You’ll have to take them off,” said Virginia firmly.

Bill groaned.

“You can carry them in your hand. I want to see if you can make out what’s going on in the Council Chamber. Bill, it’s awfully mysterious. Why should burglars take a man in armour to pieces?”

“Well, I suppose they can’t take him away whole very well. They disarticulate him, and pack him neatly.”

Virginia shook her head, dissatisfied.

“What should they want to steal a mouldy old suit of armour for? Why, Chimneys is full of treasures that are much easier to take away.”

Bill shook his head.

“How many of them are there?” he asked, taking a firmer grip of his poker.

“I couldn’t see properly. You know what a keyhole is. And they only had a flashlight.”

“I expect they’ve gone by now,” said Bill hopefully.

He sat on the bottom stair and drew off his boots. Then, holding them in his hand, he crept along the passage that led to the Council Chamber, Virginia close behind him. They halted outside the massive oak door. All was silent within, but suddenly Virginia pressed his arm, and he nodded. A bright light had shown for a minute through the keyhole.

Bill went down on his knees, and applied his eye to the orifice. What he saw was confusing in the extreme. The scene of the drama that was being enacted inside was evidently just to the left, out of his line of vision. A subdued chink every now and then seemed to point to the fact that the invaders were still dealing with the figure in armour. There were two of these, Bill remembered. They stood together by the wall just under the Holbein portrait. The light of the electric torch was evidently being directed upon the operations in progress. It left the rest of the room nearly in darkness. Once a figure flitted across Bill's line of vision, but there was not sufficient light to distinguish anything about it. It might have been that of a man or a woman. In a minute or two it flitted back again and then the subdued chinking sounded again. Presently there came a new sound, a faint tap-tap as of knuckles on wood.

Bill sat back on his heels suddenly.

"What is it?" whispered Virginia.

"Nothing. It's no good going on like this. We can't see anything, and we can't guess what they're up to. I must go in and tackle them."

He drew on his boots and stood up.

"Now, Virginia, listen to me. We'll open the door as softly as possible. You know where the switch of the electric light is?"

"Yes, just by the door."

"I don't think there are more than two of them. There may be only one. I want to get well into the room. Then, when I say 'Go' I want you to switch on the lights. Do you understand?"

“Perfectly.”

“And don’t scream or faint or anything. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“My hero!” murmured Virginia.

Bill peered at her suspiciously through the darkness. He heard a faint sound which might have been either a sob or a laugh. Then he grasped the poker firmly and rose to his feet. He felt that he was fully alive to the situation.

Very softly, he turned the handle of the door. It yielded and swung gently inwards. Bill felt Virginia close beside him. Together they moved noiselessly into the room.

At the farther end of the room, the torch was playing upon the Holbein picture. Silhouetted against it was the figure of a man, standing on a chair and gently tapping on the panelling. His back, of course, was to them, and he merely loomed up as a monstrous shadow.

What more they might have seen cannot be told, for at that moment Bill’s nails squeaked upon the parquet floor. The man swung round, directing the powerful torch full upon them and almost dazzling them with the sudden glare.

Bill did not hesitate.

“Go,” he roared to Virginia, and sprang for his man, as she obediently pressed down the switch of the electric lights.

The big chandelier should have been flooded with light; but instead, all that happened was the click of the switch. The room remained in darkness.

Virginia heard Bill curse freely. The next minute the air was filled with panting, scuffling sounds. The torch had fallen to the ground and extinguished itself in the fall. There was the sound of a desperate struggle going on in the darkness, but as to who was getting the better of it, and indeed as to who was taking part in it, Virginia had no idea. Had there been

anyone else in the room besides the man who was tapping the panelling? There might have been. Their glimpse had been only a momentary one.

Virginia felt paralysed. She hardly knew what to do. She dared not try to join in the struggle. To do so might hamper and not aid Bill. Her one idea was to stay in the doorway, so that anyone trying to escape should not leave the room that way. At the same time, she disobeyed Bill's express instructions and screamed loudly and repeatedly for help.

She heard doors opening upstairs, and a sudden gleam of light from the hall and the big staircase. If only Bill could hold his man until help came.

But at that minute there was a final terrific upheaval. They must have crashed into one of the figures in armour, for it fell to the ground with a deafening noise. Virginia saw dimly a figure springing for the window, and at the same time heard Bill cursing and disengaging himself from fragments of armour.

For the first time, she left her post, and rushed wildly for the figure at the window. But the window was already unlatched. The intruder had no need to stop and fumble for it. He sprang out and raced away down the terrace and round the corner of the house. Virginia raced after him. She was young and athletic, and she turned the corner of the terrace not many seconds after her quarry.

But there she ran headlong into the arms of a man who was emerging from a small side door. It was Mr. Hiram P. Fish.

"Gee! It's a lady," he exclaimed. "Why, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Revel. I took you for one of the thugs fleeing from justice."

"He's just passed this way," cried Virginia breathlessly. "Can't we catch him?"

But even as she spoke, she knew it was too late. The man must have gained the park by now, and it was a dark night with no moon. She retraced her steps to the Council Chamber, Mr. Fish by her side, discoursing in a

soothing monotone upon the habits of burglars in general, of which he seemed to have a wide experience.

Lord Caterham, Bundle and various frightened servants were standing in the doorway of the Council Chamber.

“What the devil’s the matter?” asked Bundle. “Is it burglars? What are you and Mr. Fish doing, Virginia? Taking a midnight stroll?”

Virginia explained the events of the evening.

“How frightfully exciting,” commented Bundle. “You don’t usually get a murder and a burglary crowded into one weekend. What’s the matter with the lights in here? They’re all right everywhere else.”

That mystery was soon explained. The bulbs had simply been removed and laid in a row against the wall. Mounted on a pair of steps, the dignified Tredwell, dignified even in undress, restored illumination to the stricken apartment.

“If I am not mistaken,” said Lord Caterham in his sad voice as he looked around him, “this room has recently been the centre of somewhat violent activity.”

There was some justice in the remark. Everything that could have been knocked over had been knocked over. The floor was littered with splintered chairs, broken china, and fragments of armour.

“How many of them were there?” asked Bundle. “It seems to have been a desperate fight.”

“Only one, I think,” said Virginia. But, even as she spoke she hesitated a little. Certainly only one person—a man—had passed out through the window. But as she had rushed after him, she had a vague impression of a rustle somewhere close at hand. If so, the second occupant of the room could have escaped through the door. Perhaps, though, the rustle had been an effect of her own imagination.

Bill appeared suddenly at the window. He was out of breath and panting hard.

“Damn the fellow!” he exclaimed wrathfully. “He’s escaped. I’ve been hunting all over the place. Not a sign of him.”

“Cheer up, Bill,” said Virginia, “better luck next time.”

“Well,” said Lord Caterham, “what do you think we’d better do now? Go back to bed? I can’t get hold of Badgworthy at this time of night. Tredwell, you know the sort of thing that’s necessary. Just see to it, will you?”

“Very good, my lord.”

With a sigh of relief, Lord Caterham prepared to retreat.

“That beggar, Isaacstein, sleeps soundly,” he remarked, with a touch of envy. “You’d have thought all this row would have brought him down.” He looked across at Mr. Fish. “You found time to dress, I see,” he added.

“I flung on a few articles of clothing, yes,” admitted the American.

“Very sensible of you,” said Lord Caterham. “Damned chilly things, pyjamas.”

He yawned. In a rather depressed mood, the house party retired to bed.

Eighteen

SECOND MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

The first person that Anthony saw as he alighted from his train on the following afternoon was Superintendent Battle. His face broke into a smile.

“I’ve returned according to contract,” he remarked. “Did you come down here to assure yourself of the fact?”

Battle shook his head.

“I wasn’t worrying about that, Mr. Cade. I happen to be going to London, that’s all.”

“You have such a trustful nature, Battle.”

“Do you think so, sir?”

“No. I think you’re deep—very deep. Still waters, you know, and all that sort of thing. So you’re going to London?”

“I am, Mr. Cade.”

“I wonder why.”

The detective did not reply.

“You’re so chatty,” remarked Anthony. “That’s what I like about you.”

A far-off twinkle showed in Battle’s eyes.

“What about your own little job, Mr. Cade?” he inquired. “How did that go off?”

“I’ve drawn blank, Battle. For the second time I’ve been proved hopelessly wrong. Galling, isn’t it?”

“What was the idea, sir, if I may ask?”

“I suspected the French governess, Battle. A: upon the grounds of her being the most unlikely person, according to the canons of the best fiction. B: because there was a light in her room on the night of the tragedy.”

“That wasn’t much to go upon.”

“You are quite right. It was not. But I discovered that she had only been here a short time, and I also found a suspicious Frenchman spying round the place. You know all about him, I suppose?”

“You mean the man who calls himself, M. Chelles? Staying at the Cricketers? A traveller in silk.”

“That’s it, is it? What about him? What does Scotland Yard think?”

“His actions have been suspicious,” said Superintendent Battle expressionlessly.

“Very suspicious, I should say. Well, I put two and two together. French governess in the house, French stranger outside. I decided that they were in league together, and I hurried off to interview the lady with whom Mademoiselle Brun had lived for the last ten years. I was fully prepared to find that she had never heard of any such person as Mademoiselle Brun, but I was wrong, Battle. Mademoiselle is the genuine article.”

Battle nodded.

“I must admit,” said Anthony, “that as soon as I spoke to her I had an uneasy conviction that I was barking up the wrong tree. She seemed so absolutely the governess.”

Again Battle nodded.

“All the same, Mr. Cade, you can’t always go by that. Women especially can do a lot with makeup. I’ve seen quite a pretty girl with the colour of her hair altered, a sallow complexion stain, slightly reddened eyelids and, most efficacious of all, dowdy clothes, who would fail to be identified by nine people out of ten who had seen her in her former character. Men haven’t got quite the same pull. You can do something with the eyebrows, and of course different sets of false teeth alter the whole expression. But there are always the ears—there’s an extraordinary lot of character in ears, Mr. Cade.”

“Don’t look so hard at mine, Battle,” complained Anthony. “You make me quite nervous.”

“I’m not talking of false beards and greasepaint,” continued the superintendent. “That’s only for books. No, there are very few men who can escape identification and put it over on you. In fact there’s only one man I know who has a positive genius for impersonation. King Victor. Ever heard of King Victor, Mr. Cade?”

There was something so sharp and sudden about the way the detective put the question that Anthony checked the words that were rising to his lips.

“King Victor?” he said reflectively instead. “Somehow, I seem to have heard the name.”

“One of the most celebrated jewel thieves in the world. Irish father, French mother. Can speak five languages at least. He’s been serving a sentence, but his time was up a few months ago.”

“Really? And where is he supposed to be now?”

“Well, Mr. Cade, that’s what we’d rather like to know.”

“The plot thickens,” said Anthony lightly. “No chance of his turning up here, is there? But I suppose he wouldn’t be interested in political memoirs—only in jewels.”

“There’s no saying,” said Superintendent Battle. “For all we know, he may be here already.”

“Disguised as the second footman? Splendid. You’ll recognize him by his ears and cover yourself with glory.”

“Quite fond of your little joke, aren’t you, Mr. Cade? By the way, what do you think of that curious business at Staines?”

“Staines?” said Anthony. “What’s been happening at Staines?”

“It was in Saturday’s papers. I thought you might have seen about it. Man found by the roadside shot. A foreigner. It was in the papers again today, of course.”

“I did see something about it,” said Anthony carelessly. “Not suicide, apparently.”

“No. There was no weapon. As yet the man hasn’t been identified.”

“You seem very interested,” said Anthony, smiling. “No connexion with Prince Michael’s death, is there?”

His hand was quite steady. So were his eyes. Was it his fancy that Superintendent Battle was looking at him with peculiar intentness?

“Seems to be quite an epidemic of that sort of thing,” said Battle. “But, well, I daresay there’s nothing in it.”

He turned away, beckoning to a porter as the London train came thundering in. Anthony drew a faint sigh of relief.

He strolled across the park in an unusually thoughtful mood. He purposely chose to approach the house from the same direction as that from which he had come on the fateful Thursday night, and as he drew near to it he looked up at the windows cudgelling his brains to make sure of the one where he had seen the light. Was he quite sure that it was the second from the end?

And, doing so, he made a discovery. There was an angle at the corner of the house in which was a window set farther back. Standing on one spot, you counted this window as the first, and the first one built out over the Council Chamber as the second, but move a few yards to the right and the part built

out over the Council Chamber appeared to be the end of the house. The first window was invisible, and the two windows of the rooms over the Council Chamber would have appeared the first and second from the end. Where exactly had he been standing when he had seen the light flash up?

Anthony found the question very hard to determine. A matter of a yard or so made all the difference. But one point was made abundantly clear. It was quite possible that he had been mistaken in describing the light as occurring in the second room from the end. It might equally well have been the third.

Now who occupied the third room? Anthony was determined to find that out as soon as possible. Fortune favoured him. In the hall Tredwell had just set the massive silver urn in its place on the tea tray. Nobody else was there.

“Hullo, Tredwell,” said Anthony. “I wanted to ask you something. Who has the third room from the end on the west side? Over the Council Chamber, I mean.”

Tredwell reflected for a minute or two.

“That would be the American gentleman’s room, sir. Mr. Fish.”

“Oh, is it? Thank you.”

“Not at all, sir.”

Tredwell prepared to depart, then paused. The desire to be the first to impart news makes even pontifical butlers human.

“Perhaps you have heard, sir, of what occurred last night?”

“Not a word,” said Anthony. “What did occur last night?”

“An attempt at robbery, sir!”

“Not really? Was anything taken?”

“No sir. The thieves were dismantling the suits of armour in the Council Chamber when they were surprised and forced to flee. Unfortunately they

got clear away.”

“That’s very extraordinary,” said Anthony. “The Council Chamber again. Did they break in that way?”

“It is supposed, sir, that they forced the window.”

Satisfied with the interest his information had aroused, Tredwell resumed his retreat, but brought up short with a dignified apology.

“I beg your pardon, sir. I didn’t hear you come in, and didn’t know you were standing just behind me.”

Mr. Isaacstein, who had been the victim of the impact, waved his hand in a friendly fashion.

“No harm done, my good fellow. I assure you no harm done.”

Tredwell retired looking contemptuous, and Isaacstein came forward and dropped into an easy chair.

“Hullo, Cade, so you’re back again. Been hearing all about last night’s little show?”

“Yes,” said Anthony. “Rather an exciting weekend, isn’t it?”

“I should imagine that last night was the work of local men,” said Isaacstein. “It seems a clumsy, amateurish affair.”

“Is there anyone about here who collects armour?” asked Anthony. “It seems a curious thing to select.”

“Very curious,” agreed Mr. Isaacstein. He paused a minute, and then said slowly: “The whole position here is very unfortunate.”

There was something almost menacing in his tone.

“I don’t quite understand,” said Anthony.

“Why are we all being kept here in this way? The inquest was over yesterday. The Prince’s body will be removed to London, where it is being given out that he died of heart failure. And still nobody is allowed to leave the house. Mr. Lomax knows no more than I do. He refers me to Superintendent Battle.”

“Superintendent Battle has something up his sleeve,” said Anthony thoughtfully. “And it seems the essence of his plan that nobody should leave.”

“But, excuse me, Mr. Cade, you have been away.”

“With a string tied to my leg. I’ve no doubt that I was shadowed the whole time. I shouldn’t have been given a chance of disposing of the revolver or anything of that kind.”

“Ah, the revolver,” said Isaacstein thoughtfully. “That has not yet been found, I think?”

“Not yet.”

“Possibly thrown into the lake in passing.”

“Very possibly.”

“Where is Superintendent Battle? I have not seen him this afternoon.”

“He’s gone to London. I met him at the station.”

“Gone to London? Really? Did he say when he would be back?”

“Early tomorrow, so I understand.”

Virginia came in with Lord Caterham and Mr. Fish. She smiled a welcome at Anthony.

“So you’re back, Mr. Cade. Have you heard all about our adventures last night?”

“Why, trooly, Mr. Cade,” said Hiram Fish. “It was a night of strenuous excitement. Did you hear that I mistook Mrs. Revel for one of the thugs?”

“And in the meantime,” said Anthony, “the thug?—”

“Got clear away,” said Mr. Fish mournfully.

“Do pour out,” said Lord Caterham to Virginia. “I don’t know where Bundle is.”

Virginia officiated. Then she came and sat down near Anthony.

“Come to the boathouse after tea,” she said in a low voice. “Bill and I have got a lot to tell you.”

Then she joined lightly in the general conversation.

The meeting at the boathouse was duly held.

Virginia and Bill were bubbling over with their news. They agreed that a boat in the middle of the lake was the only safe place for confidential conversation. Having paddled out a sufficient distance, the full story of last night’s adventure was related to Anthony. Bill looked a little sulky. He wished Virginia would not insist on bringing this Colonial fellow into it.

“It’s very odd,” said Anthony, when the story was finished. “What do you make of it?” he asked Virginia.

“I think they were looking for something,” she returned promptly. “The burglar idea is absurd.”

“They thought the something, whatever it was, might be concealed in the suits of armour, that’s clear enough. But why tap the panelling? That looks more as though they were looking for a secret staircase, or something of that kind.”

“There’s a priest’s hole at Chimneys, I know,” said Virginia. “And I believe there’s a secret staircase as well. Lord Caterham would tell us all about it. What I want to know is, what can they have been looking for?”

“It can’t be the memoirs,” said Anthony. “They’re a great bulky package. It must have been something small.”

“George knows, I expect,” said Virginia. “I wonder whether I could get it out of him. All along I’ve felt there was something behind all this.”

“You say there was only one man,” pursued Anthony, “but that there might possibly be another, as you thought you heard someone going towards the door as you sprang to the window.”

“The sound was very slight,” said Virginia. “It might have been just my imagination.”

“That’s quite possible, but in case it wasn’t your imagination the second person must have been an inmate of the house. I wonder now—”

“What are you wondering at?” asked Virginia.

“The thoroughness of Mr. Hiram Fish, who dresses himself completely when he hears screams for help downstairs.”

“There’s something in that,” agreed Virginia. “And then there’s Isaacstein, who sleeps through it all. That’s suspicious too. Surely he couldn’t?”

“There’s that fellow Boris,” suggested Bill. “He looks an unmitigated ruffian. Michael’s servant, I mean.”

“Chimneys is full of suspicious characters,” said Virginia. “I daresay the others are just as suspicious of us. I wish Superintendent Battle hadn’t gone to London. I think it’s rather stupid of him. By the way, Mr. Cade, I’ve seen that peculiar-looking Frenchman about once or twice, spying round the park.”

“It’s a mix-up,” confessed Anthony. “I’ve been away on a wild-goose chase. Made a thorough ass of myself. Look here, to me the whole question seems to resolve itself into this: did the men find what they were looking for last night?”

“Supposing they didn’t?” said Virginia. “I’m pretty sure they didn’t, as a matter of fact.”

“Just this, I believe they’ll come again. They know, or they soon will know, that Battle’s in London. They’ll take the risk and come again tonight.”

“Do you really think so?”

“It’s a chance. Now we three will form a little syndicate. Eversleigh and I will conceal ourselves with due precautions in the Council Chamber—”

“What about me?” interrupted Virginia. “Don’t think you’re going to leave me out of it.”

“Listen to me, Virginia,” said Bill. “This is men’s work—”

“Don’t be an idiot, Bill. I’m in on this. Don’t you make any mistake about it. The syndicate will keep watch tonight.”

It was settled thus, and the details of the plan were laid. After the party had retired to bed, first one and then another of the syndicate crept down. They were all armed with powerful electric torches, and in the pocket of Anthony’s coat lay a revolver.

Anthony had said that he believed another attempt to resume the search would be made. Nevertheless, he did not expect that the attempt would be made from outside. He believed that Virginia had been correct in her guess that someone had passed her in the dark the night before, and as he stood in the shadow of an old oak dresser it was towards the door and not the window that his eyes were directed. Virginia was crouching behind a figure in armour on the opposite wall, and Bill was by the window.

The minutes passed, at interminable length. One o’clock chimed, then the half hour, then two, then half hour. Anthony felt stiff and cramped. He was coming slowly to the conclusion that he had been wrong. No attempt would be made tonight.

And then he stiffened suddenly, all his senses on the alert. He had heard a footstep on the terrace outside. Silence again, and then a low scratching noise at the window. Suddenly it ceased, and the window swung open. A man stepped across the sill into the room. He stood quite still for a moment, peering round as though listening. After a minute or two, seemingly satisfied, he switched on a torch he carried, and turned it rapidly round the room. Apparently he saw nothing unusual. The three watchers held their breath.

He went over to the same bit of panelled wall he had been examining the night before.

And then a terrible knowledge smote Bill. He was going to sneeze! The wild race through the dew-laden park the night before had given him a chill. All day he had sneezed intermittently. A sneeze was due now, and nothing on earth would stop it.

He adopted all the remedies he could think of. He pressed his upper lip, swallowed hard, threw back his head and looked at the ceiling. As a last resort he held his nose and pinched it violently. It was of no avail. He sneezed.

A stifled, checked, emasculated sneeze, but a startling sound in the deadly quiet of the room.

The stranger sprang round, and in the same minute, Anthony acted. He flashed on his torch, and jumped full for the stranger. In another minute they were down on the floor together.

“Lights,” shouted Anthony.

Virginia was ready at the switch. The lights came on true and full tonight. Anthony was on top of his man. Bill leant down to give him a hand.

“And now,” said Anthony, “let’s see who you are, my fine fellow.”

He rolled his victim over. It was the neat, dark-bearded stranger from the Cricketers.

“Very nice indeed,” said an approving voice.

They all looked up startled. The bulky form of Superintendent Battle was standing in the open doorway.

“I thought you were in London, Superintendent Battle,” said Anthony.

Battle’s eyes twinkled.

“Did you sir?” he said. “Well, I thought it would be a good thing if I was thought to be going.”

“And it has been,” agreed Anthony, looking down at his prostrate foe.

To his surprise there was a slight smile on the stranger’s face.

“May I get up, gentlemen?” he inquired. “You are three to one.”

Anthony kindly hauled him on to his legs. The stranger settled his coat, pulled up his collar, and directed a keen look at Battle.

“I demand pardon,” he said, “but do I understand that you are a representative from Scotland Yard?”

“That’s right,” said Battle.

“Then I will present to you my credentials.” He smiled rather ruefully. “I would have been wise to do so before.”

He took some papers from his pocket and handed them to the Scotland Yard detective. At the same time, he turned back the lapel of his coat and showed something pinned there.

Battle gave an exclamation of astonishment. He looked through the papers and handed them back with a little bow.

“I’m sorry you’ve been manhandled, monsieur,” he said, “but you brought it on yourself, you know.”

He smiled, noting the astonished expression on the faces of the others.

“This is a colleague we have been expecting for some time,” he said. “M. Lemoine, of the Sûreté in Paris.”

Nineteen

SECRET HISTORY

They all stared at the French detective, who smiled back at them.

“But yes,” he said, “it is true.”

There was a pause for a general readjusting of ideas. Then Virginia turned to Battle.

“Do you know what I think, Superintendent Battle?”

“What do you think, Mrs. Revel?”

“I think the time has come to enlighten us a little.”

“To enlighten you? I don’t quite understand, Mrs. Revel.”

“Superintendent Battle, you understand perfectly. I daresay Mr. Lomax has hedged you about with recommendations of secrecy—George would, but surely it’s better to tell us than have us stumbling on the secret all by ourselves, and perhaps doing untold harm. M. Lemoine, don’t you agree with me?”

“Madame, I agree with you entirely.”

“You can’t go on keeping things dark forever,” said Battle, “I’ve told Mr. Lomax so. Mr. Eversleigh is Mr. Lomax’s secretary, there’s no objection to his knowing what there is to know. As for Mr. Cade, he’s been brought into the thing willy-nilly, and I consider he’s a right to know where he stands. But—”

Battle paused.

“I know,” said Virginia. “Women are so indiscreet! I’ve often heard George say so.”

Lemoine had been studying Virginia attentively. Now he turned to the Scotland Yard man.

“Did I hear you just now address Madame by the name of Revel?”

“That is my name,” said Virginia.

“Your husband was in the Diplomatic Service, was he not? And you were with him in Herzoslovakia just before the assassination of the late King and Queen.”

“Yes.”

Lemoine turned again.

“I think Madame has a right to hear the story. She is indirectly concerned. Moreover”—his eyes twinkled a little—“Madame’s reputation for discretion stands very high in diplomatic circles.”

“I’m glad they give me a good character,” said Virginia, laughing. “And I’m glad I’m not going to be left out of it.”

“What about refreshments?” said Anthony. “Where does the conference take place? Here?”

“If you please, sir,” said Battle, “I’ve a fancy for not leaving this room until morning. You’ll see why when you’ve heard the story.”

“Then I’ll go and forage,” said Anthony.

Bill went with him and they returned with a tray of glasses, siphons and other necessities of life.

The augmented syndicate established itself comfortably in the corner by the window, being grouped round a long oak table.

“It’s understood, of course,” said Battle, “that anything that’s said here is said in strict confidence. There must be no leakage. I’ve always felt it would come out one of these days. Gentlemen like Mr. Lomax who want everything hushed up take bigger risks than they think. The start of this business was just over seven years ago. There was a lot of what they call reconstruction going on—especially in the Near East. There was a good deal going on in England, strictly on the QT with that old gentleman, Count Stylptitch, pulling the strings. All the Balkan States were interested parties, and there were a lot of royal personages in England just then. I’m not going into details but Something disappeared—disappeared in a way that seemed incredible unless you admitted two things—that the thief was a royal personage and that at the same time it was the work of a high-class professional. M. Lemoine here will tell you how that well might be.”

The Frenchman bowed courteously and took up the tale.

“It is possible that you in England may not even have heard of our famous and fantastic King Victor. What his real name is, no one knows, but he is a man of singular courage and daring, one who speaks five languages and is unequalled in the art of disguise. Though his father is known to have been either English or Irish, he himself has worked chiefly in Paris. It was there, nearly eight years ago, that he was carrying out a daring series of robberies and living under the name of Captain O’Neill.”

A faint exclamation escaped Virginia. M. Lemoine darted a keen glance at her.

“I think I understand what agitates Madame. You will see in a minute. Now we of the Sûreté had our suspicions that this Captain O’Neill was none other than ‘King Victor,’ but we could not obtain the necessary proof. There was also in Paris at the time a clever young actress, Angèle Mory, of the Folies Bergères. For some time we had suspected that she was associated with the operations of King Victor. But again no proof was forthcoming.

“About that time, Paris was preparing for the visit of the young King Nicholas IV of Herzoslovakia. At the Sûreté we were given special instructions as to the course to be adopted to ensure the safety of His Majesty. In particular we were warned to superintend the activities of a

certain Revolutionary organization which called itself the Comrades of the Red Hand. It is fairly certain now that the Comrades approached Angèle Mory and offered her a huge sum if she would aid them in their plans. Her part was to infatuate the young King, and decoy him to some spot agreed upon with them. Angèle Mory accepted the bribe and promised to perform her part.

“But the young lady was cleverer and more ambitious than her employers suspected. She succeeded in captivating the King who fell desperately in love with her and loaded her with jewels. It was then that she conceived the idea of being—not a king’s mistress, but a queen! As everyone knows, she realized her ambition. She was introduced into Herzoslovakia as the Countess Varaga Popoleffsky, an offshoot of the Romanoffs, and became eventually Queen Varaga of Herzoslovakia. Not bad for a little Parisian actress! I have always heard that she played the part extremely well. But her triumph was not to be long-lived. The Comrades of the Red Hand, furious at her betrayal, twice attempted her life. Finally they worked up the country to such a pitch that a revolution broke out in which both the King and Queen perished. Their bodies, horribly mutilated and hardly recognizable, were recovered, attesting to the fury of the populace against the lowborn foreign Queen.

“Now, in all this, it seems certain that Queen Varaga still kept in with her confederate, King Victor. It is possible that the bold plan was his all along. What is known is that she continued to correspond with him, in a secret code, from the Court of Herzoslovakia. For safety the letters were written in English, and signed with the name of an English lady then at the Embassy. If any inquiry had been made, and the lady in question had denied her signature, it is possible that she would not have been believed, for the letters were those of a guilty woman to her lover. It was your name she used, Mrs. Revel.”

“I know,” said Virginia. Her colour was coming and going unevenly. “So that is the truth of the letters! I have wondered and wondered.”

“What a blackguardly trick,” cried Bill indignantly.

“The letters were addressed to Captain O’Neill at his rooms in Paris, and their principal purpose may have light shed upon it by a curious fact which came to light later. After the assassination of the King and Queen, many of the crown jewels which had fallen, of course, into the hands of the mob, found their way to Paris, and it was discovered that in nine cases out of ten the principal stones had been replaced by paste—and mind you, there were some very famous stones among the jewels of Herzoslovakia. So as a queen, Angèle Mory still practised her former activities.

“You see now where we have arrived. Nicholas IV and Queen Varaga came to England and were the guests of the late Marquis of Caterham, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Herzoslovakia is a small country, but it could not be left out. Queen Varaga was necessarily received. And there we have a royal personage and at the same time an expert thief. There is also no doubt that the—er—substitute which was so wonderful as to deceive anyone but an expert could only have been fashioned by King Victor, and indeed the whole plan, in its daring and audacity, pointed to him as the author.”

“What happened?” asked Virginia.

“Hushed up,” said Superintendent Battle laconically. “Not a mention of it’s ever been made public to this day. We did all that could be done on the quiet—and that was a good deal more than you’d ever imagine, by the way. We’ve got methods of our own that would surprise. That jewel didn’t leave England with the Queen of Herzoslovakia—I can tell you that much. No, Her Majesty hid it somewhere—but where we’ve never been able to discover. But I shouldn’t wonder”—Superintendent Battle let his eyes wander gently round—“if it wasn’t somewhere in this room.”

Anthony leapt to his feet.

“What? After all these years?” he cried incredulously. “Impossible.”

“You do not know the peculiar circumstances, monsieur,” said the Frenchman quickly. “Only a fortnight later, the revolution in Herzoslovakia broke out, and the King and Queen were murdered. Also, Captain O’Neill was arrested in Paris and sentenced on a minor charge. We hoped to find the

packet of code letters in his house, but it appears that this had been stolen by some Herzoslovakian go-between. The man turned up in Herzoslovakia just before the revolution, and then disappeared completely.”

“He probably went abroad,” said Anthony thoughtfully. “To Africa as likely as not. And you bet he hung on to that packet. It was as good as a gold mine to him. It’s odd how things come about. They probably called him Dutch Pedro or something like that out there.”

He caught Superintendent Battle’s expressionless glance bent upon him, and smiled.

“It’s not really clairvoyance, Battle,” he said, “though it sounds like it. I’ll tell you presently.”

“There is one thing that you have not explained,” said Virginia. “Where does this link up with the memoirs?” There must be a link, surely?”

“Madame is very quick,” said Lemoine approvingly. “Yes, there is a link. Count Stylptitch was also staying at Chimneys at the time.”

“So that he might have known about it?”

“Parfaitement.”

“And, of course,” said Battle, “if he’s blurted it out in his precious memoirs, the fat will be in the fire. Especially after the way the whole thing was hushed up.”

Anthony lit a cigarette.

“There’s no possibility of there being a clue in the memoirs as to where the stone was hidden?” he asked.

“Very unlikely,” said Battle decisively. “He was never in with the Queen—opposed the marriage tooth and nail. She’s not likely to have taken him into her confidence.”

“I wasn’t suggesting such a thing for a minute,” said Anthony. “But by all accounts he was a cunning old boy. Unknown to her, he may have discovered where she hid the jewel. In that case, what would he have done, do you think?”

“Sat tight,” said Battle, after a moment’s reflection.

“I agree,” said the Frenchman. “It was a ticklish moment, you see. To return the stone anonymously would have presented great difficulties. Also, the knowledge of its whereabouts would give him great power—and he liked power, that strange old man. Not only did he hold the Queen in the hollow of his hand, but he had a powerful weapon to negotiate with at any time. It was not the only secret he possessed—oh, no!—he collected secrets like some men collect rare pieces of china. It is said that, once or twice before his death, he boasted to people of the things he could make public if the fancy took him. And once at least he declared that he intended to make some startling revelations in his memoirs. Hence”—the Frenchman smiled rather dryly—“the general anxiety to get hold of them. Our own secret police intended to seize them, but the Count took the precaution to have them conveyed away before his death.”

“Still, there’s no real reason to believe that he knew this particular secret,” said Battle.

“I beg your pardon,” said Anthony quietly. “There are his own words.”

“What?”

Both detectives stared at him as though unable to believe their ears.

“When Mr. McGrath gave me that manuscript to bring to England, he told me the circumstances of his one meeting with Count Stylptitch. It was in Paris. At some considerable risk to himself. Mr. McGrath rescued the Count from a band of Apaches. He was, I understand—shall we say a trifle—exhilarated? Being in that condition, he made two rather interesting remarks. One of them was to the effect that he knew where the Koh-i-noor was—a statement to which my friend paid very little attention. He also said

that the gang in question were King Victor's men. Taken together, those two remarks are very significant."

"Good lord," ejaculated Superintendent Battle. "I should say they were. Even the murder of Prince Michael wears a different aspect."

"King Victor has never taken a life," the Frenchman reminded him.

"Supposing he were surprised when he was searching for the jewel?"

"Is he in England, then?" asked Anthony sharply. "You say that he was released a few months ago. Didn't you keep track of him?"

A rather rueful smile overspread the French detective's face.

"We tried to, monsieur. But he is a devil, that man. He gave us the slip at once—at once. We thought, of course, that he would make straight for England. But no. He went—where do you think?"

"Where?" said Anthony.

He was staring intently at the Frenchman, and absentmindedly fingers played with a box of matches.

"To America. To the United States."

"What?"

There was sheer amazement in Anthony's tone.

"Yes, and what do you think he called himself? What part do you think he played over there? The part of Prince Nicholas of Herzoslovakia."

The matchbox fell from Anthony's hand, but his amazement was fully equalled by that of Battle.

"Impossible."

“Not so, my friend. You, too, will get the news in the morning. It has been the most colossal bluff. As you know, Prince Nicholas was rumoured to have died in the Congo years ago. Our friend, King Victor, seizes on that—difficult to prove a death of that kind. He resurrects Prince Nicholas, and plays him to such purpose that he gets away with a tremendous haul of American dollars—all on account of the supposed oil concessions. But by a mere accident, he was unmasked, and had to leave the country hurriedly. This time he did come to England. And that is why I am here. Sooner or later he will come to Chimneys. That is, if he is not already here!”

“You think—that?”

“I think he was here the night Prince Michael died, and again last night.”

“It was another attempt, eh?” said Battle.

“It was another attempt.”

“What has bothered me,” continued Battle, “was wondering what had become of M. Lemoine here. I’d had word from Paris that he was on his way over to work with me, and couldn’t make out why he hadn’t turned up.”

“I must indeed apologize,” said Lemoine. “You see, I arrived on the morning after the murder. It occurred to me at once that it would be as well for me to study things from an unofficial standpoint without appearing officially as your colleague. I thought that great possibilities lay that way. I was, of course, aware that I was bound to be an object of suspicion, but that in a way furthered my plan since it would not put the people I was after on their guard. I can assure you that I have seen a good deal that is interesting on the last two days.”

“But look here,” said Bill, “what really did happen last night?”

“I am afraid,” said M. Lemoine, “that I gave you rather violent exercise.”

“It was you I chased, then?”

“Yes. I will recount things to you. I came up here to watch, convinced that the secret had to do with this room since the Prince had been killed here. I stood outside on the terrace. Presently I became aware that someone was moving about in this room. I could see the flash of a torch now and again. I tried the middle window and found it unlatched. Whether the man had entered that way earlier, or whether he had left it so as a blind in case he was disturbed, I do not know. Very gently, I pushed it back and slipped inside the room. Step by step I felt my way until I was in a spot where I could watch operations without likelihood of being discovered myself. The man himself I could not see clearly. His back was to me, of course, and he was silhouetted against the light of the torch so that his outline only could be seen. But his actions filled me with surprise. He took to pieces first one and then the other of those two suits of armour, examining each one piece by piece. When he had convinced himself that what he sought was not there, he began tapping the panelling of the wall under that picture. What he would have done next, I do not know. The interruption came. You burst in —” He looked at Bill.

“Our well-meant interference was really rather a pity,” said Virginia thoughtfully.

“In a sense, madame, it was. The man switched out his torch, and I, who had no wish as yet to be forced to reveal my identity, sprang for the window. I collided with the other two in the dark, and fell headlong. I sprang up and out through the window. Mr. Eversleigh, taking me for his assailant, followed.”

“I followed you first,” said Virginia. “Bill was only second in the race.”

“And the other fellow had the sense to stay still and sneak out through the door. I wonder he didn’t meet the rescuing crowd.”

“That would present no difficulties,” said Lemoine. “He would be a rescuer in advance of the rest, that was all.”

“Do you really think this Arsène Lupin fellow is actually among the household now?” asked Bill, his eyes sparkling.

“Why not?” said Lemoine. “He could pass perfectly as a servant. For all we may know, he may be Boris Anchoukoff, the trusted servant of the late Prince Michael.”

“He is an odd-looking bloke,” agreed Bill.

But Anthony was smiling.

“That’s hardly worthy of you, M. Lemoine,” he said gently.

The Frenchman smiled too.

“You’ve taken him on as your valet now, haven’t you, Mr. Cade?” asked Superintendent Battle.

“Battle, I take off my hat to you. You know everything. But just as a matter of detail, he’s taken me on, not I him.”

“Why was that, I wonder, Mr. Cade?”

“I don’t know,” said Anthony lightly. “It’s a curious taste, but perhaps he may have liked my face. Or he may think I murdered his master and wish to establish himself in a handy position for executing revenge upon me.”

He rose and went over to the windows, pulling the curtains.

“Daylight,” he said, with a slight yawn. “There won’t be any more excitements now.”

Lemoine rose also.

“I will leave you,” he said. “We shall perhaps meet again later in the day.”

With a graceful bow to Virginia, he stepped out of the window.

“Bed,” said Virginia, yawning. “It’s all been very exciting. Come on, Bill, go to bed like a good little boy. The breakfast table will see us not, I fear.”

Anthony stayed at the window looking after the retreating form of M. Lemoine.

“You wouldn’t think it,” said Battle behind him, “but that’s supposed to be the cleverest detective in France.”

“I don’t know that I wouldn’t,” said Anthony thoughtfully. “I rather think I would.”

“Well,” said Battle, “he was right about the excitements of this night being over. By the way, do you remember my telling you about that man they’d found shot near Staines?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing. They’ve identified him, that’s all. It seems he was called Giuseppe Manuelli. He was a waiter at the Blitz in London. Curious, isn’t it?”

Twenty

BATTLE AND ANTHONY CONFER

Anthony said nothing. He continued to stare out of the window. Superintendent Battle looked for some time at his motionless back.

“Well, goodnight, sir,” he said at last, and moved to the door.

Anthony stirred.

“Wait a minute, Battle.”

The superintendent halted obediently. Anthony left the window. He drew out a cigarette from his case and lighted it. Then, between two puffs of smoke, he said:

“You seem very interested in this business at Staines?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that, sir. It’s unusual, that’s all.”

“Do you think the man was shot where he was found, or do you think he was killed elsewhere and the body brought to that particular spot afterwards?”

“I think he was shot somewhere else, and the body brought there in a car.”

“I think so too,” said Anthony.

Something in the emphasis of his tone made the detective look up sharply.

“Any ideas of your own, sir? Do you know who brought him there?”

“Yes,” said Anthony. “I did.”

He was a little annoyed at the absolutely unruffled calm preserved by the other.

“I must say you take these shocks very well, Battle,” he remarked.

“ ‘Never display emotion.’ That was a rule that was given to me once, and I’ve found it very useful.”

“You live up to it, certainly,” said Anthony. “I can’t say I’ve ever seen you ruffled. Well, do you want to hear the whole story?”

“If you please, Mr. Cade.”

Anthony pulled up two of the chairs, both men sat down, and Anthony recounted the events of the preceding Thursday night.

Battle listened immovably. There was a far-off twinkle in his eyes as Anthony finished.

“You know, sir,” he said, “you’ll get into trouble one of these days.”

“Then, for the second time, I’m not to be taken into custody?”

“We always like to give a man plenty of rope,” said Superintendent Battle.

“Very delicately put,” said Anthony. “Without unduly stressing the end of the proverb.”

“What I can’t make out, sir,” said Battle, “is why you decided to come across with this now?”

“It’s rather difficult to explain,” said Anthony. “You see, Battle, I’ve come to have really a very high opinion of your abilities. When the moment comes, you’re always there. Look at tonight. And it occurred to me that, in withholding this knowledge of mine, I was seriously cramping your style. You deserve to have access to all the facts. I’ve done what I could, and up to now I’ve made a mess of things. Until tonight, I couldn’t speak for Mrs. Revel’s sake. But now that those letters have been definitely proved to have nothing whatever to do with her, any idea of her complicity becomes

absurd. Perhaps I advised her badly in the first place, but it struck me that her statement of having paid this man money to suppress the letters, simply as a whim, might take a bit of believing.”

“It might, by a jury,” agreed Battle. “Juries never have any imagination.”

“But you accept it quite easily?” said Anthony, looking curiously at him.

“Well, you see, Mr. Cade, most of my work has lain amongst these people. What they call the upper classes, I mean. You see, the majority of people are always wondering what the neighbours will think. But tramps and aristocrats don’t—they just do the first thing that comes into their heads, and they don’t bother to think what anyone thinks of them. I’m not meaning just the idle rich, the people who give big parties, and so on. I mean those that have had it born and bred in them for generations that nobody else’s opinion counts but their own. I’ve always found the upper classes the same—fearless, truthful, and sometimes extraordinarily foolish.”

“This is a very interesting lecture, Battle. I suppose you’ll be writing your reminiscences one of these days. They ought to be worth reading too.”

The detective acknowledged the suggestion with a smile, but said nothing.

“I’d like rather to ask you one question,” continued Anthony. “Did you connect me at all with the Staines affair? I fancied, from your manner, that you did.”

“Quite right. I had a hunch that way. But nothing definite to go upon. Your manner was very good, if I may say so, Mr. Cade. You never overdid the carelessness.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Anthony. “I’ve a feeling that ever since I met you you’ve been laying little traps for me. On the whole I’ve managed to avoid falling into them, but the strain has been acute.”

Battle smiled grimly.

“That’s how you get a crook in the end, sir. Keep him on the run, to and fro, turning and twisting. Sooner or later, his nerve goes, and you’ve got him.”

“You’re a cheerful fellow, Battle. When will you get me, I wonder?”

“Plenty of rope, sir,” quoted the superintendent, “plenty of rope.”

“In the meantime,” said Anthony. “I am still the amateur assistant?”

“That’s it, Mr. Cade.”

“Watson to your Sherlock, in fact?”

“Detective stories are mostly bunkum,” said Battle unemotionally. “But they amuse people,” he added, as an afterthought. “And they’re useful sometimes.”

“In what way?” asked Anthony curiously.

“They encourage the universal idea that the police are stupid. When we get an amateur crime, such as a murder, that’s very useful indeed.”

Anthony looked at him for some minutes in silence. Battle sat quite still, blinking now and then, with no expression whatsoever on his square placid face. Presently he rose.

“Not much good going to bed now,” he observed. “As soon as he’s up, I want to have a few words with his lordship. Anyone who wants to leave the house can do so now. At the same time I should be much obliged to his lordship if he’ll extend an informal invitation to his guests to stay on. You’ll accept it, sir, if you please, and Mrs. Revel also.”

“Have you ever found the revolver?” asked Anthony suddenly.

“You mean the one Prince Michael was shot with? No, I haven’t. Yet it must be in the house or grounds. I’ll take a hint from you, Mr. Cade, and send some boys up bird’s-nesting. If I could get hold of the revolver, we might get forward a bit. That, and the bundle of letters. You say that a letter with the heading ‘Chimneys’ was amongst them? Depend upon it that was

the last one written. The instructions for finding the diamond are written in code in that letter.”

“What’s your theory of the killing of Giuseppe?” asked Anthony.

“I should say he was a regular thief, and that he was got hold of, either by King Victor or by the Comrades of the Red Hand, and employed by them. I shouldn’t wonder at all if the Comrades and King Victor aren’t working together. The organization has plenty of money and power, but it isn’t very strong in brain. Giuseppe’s task was to steal the memoirs—they couldn’t have known that you had the letters—it’s a very odd coincidence that you should have, by the way.”

“I know,” said Anthony. “It’s amazing when you come to think of it.”

“Giuseppe gets hold of the letters instead. Is at first vastly chagrined. Then sees the cutting from the paper and has the brilliant idea of turning them to account on his own by blackmailing the lady. He has, of course, no idea of their real significance. The Comrades find out what he is doing, believe that he is deliberately double-crossing them, and decree his death. They’re very fond of executing traitors. It has a picturesque element which seems to appeal to them. What I can’t quite make out is the revolver with ‘Virginia’ engraved upon it. There’s too much finesse about that for the Comrades. As a rule, they enjoy plastering their Red Hand sign about—in order to strike terror into other would-be traitors. No, it looks to me as though King Victor had stepped in there. But what his motive was, I don’t know. It looks like a very deliberate attempt to saddle Mrs. Revel with the murder, and, on the surface, there doesn’t seem any particular point in that.”

“I had a theory,” said Anthony. “But it didn’t work out according to plan.”

He told Battle of Virginia’s recognition of Michael. Battle nodded his head.

“Oh, yes, no doubt as to his identity. By the way, that old Baron has a very high opinion of you. He speaks of you in most enthusiastic terms.”

“That’s very kind of him,” said Anthony. “Especially as I’ve given him full warning that I mean to do my utmost to get hold of the missing memoirs

before Wednesday next.”

“You’ll have a job to do that,” said Battle.

“Y-es. You think so? I suppose King Victor and Co. have got the letters.”

Battle nodded.

“Pinched them off Giuseppe that day in Pont Street. Prettily planned piece of work, that. Yes, they’ve got ’em all right, and they’ve decoded them, and they know where to look.”

Both men were on the point of passing out of the room.

“In here?” said Anthony, jerking his head back.

“Exactly, in here. But they haven’t found the prize yet, and they’re going to run a pretty risk trying to get it.”

“I suppose,” said Anthony. “That you’ve got a plan in that subtle head of yours?”

Battle returned no answer. He looked particularly stolid and unintelligent. Then, very slowly, he winked.

“Want my help?” asked Anthony.

“I do. And I shall want someone else’s.”

“Who is that?”

“Mrs. Revel’s. You may have noticed it, Mr. Cade, but she’s a lady who has a particularly beguiling way with her.”

“I’ve noticed it all right,” said Anthony.

He glanced at his watch.

“I’m inclined to agree with you about bed, Battle. A dip in the lake and a hearty breakfast will be far more to the point.”

He ran lightly upstairs to his bedroom. Whistling to himself, he discarded, his evening clothes, and picked up a dressing gown and a bath towel.

Then suddenly he stopped dead in front of the dressing table, staring at the object that reposed demurely in front of the looking glass.

For a moment he could not believe his eyes. He took it up, examined it closely. Yes, there was no mistake.

It was the bundle of letters signed Virginia Revel. They were intact. Not one missing.

Anthony dropped into a chair, the letters in his hand.

“My brain must be cracking,” he murmured. “I can’t understand a quarter of what is going on in this house. Why should the letters reappear like a damned conjuring trick? Who put them on my dressing table? Why?”

And to all these very pertinent questions he could find no satisfactory reply.

Twenty-one

MR. ISAACSTEIN'S SUITCASE

At ten o'clock that morning, Lord Caterham and his daughter were breakfasting. Bundle was looking very thoughtful.

"Father," she said at last.

Lord Caterham, absorbed in The Times, did not reply.

"Father," said Bundle again, more sharply.

Lord Caterham, torn from his interested perusal of forthcoming sales of rare books, looked up absentmindedly.

"Eh?" he said. "Did you speak?"

"Yes. Who is it who's had breakfast?"

She nodded towards a place that had evidently been occupied. The rest were all expectant.

"Oh, what's-his-name."

"Fat Iky?"

Bundle and her father had enough sympathy between them to comprehend each other's somewhat misleading observations.

"That's it."

"Did I see you talking to the detective this morning before breakfast?"

Lord Caterham sighed.

“Yes, he buttonholed me in the hall. I do think the hours before breakfast should be sacred. I shall have to go abroad. The strain on my nerves—”

Bundle interrupted unceremoniously.

“What did he say?”

“Said everyone who wanted to could clear out.”

“Well,” said Bundle, “that’s all right. That’s what you’ve been wanting.”

“I know. But he didn’t leave it at that. He went on to say that nevertheless he wanted me to ask everyone to stay on.”

“I don’t understand,” said Bundle, wrinkling her nose.

“So confusing and contradictory,” complained Lord Caterham. “And before breakfast too.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, I agreed, of course. It’s never any good arguing with these people. Especially before breakfast,” continued Lord Caterham, reverting to his principal grievance.

“Who have you asked so far?”

“Cade. He was up very early this morning. He’s going to stop on. I don’t mind that. I can’t quite make the fellow out; but I like him—I like him very much.”

“So does Virginia,” said Bundle, drawing a pattern on the table with her fork.

“Eh?”

“And so do I. But that doesn’t seem to matter.”

“And I asked Isaacstein,” continued Lord Caterham.

“Well?”

“But fortunately he’s got to go back to town. Don’t forget to order the car for the 10:50, by the way.”

“All right.”

“Now if I can only get rid of Fish too,” continued Lord Caterham, his spirits rising.

“I thought you liked talking to him about your mouldy old books.”

“So I do, so I do. So I did, rather. But it gets monotonous when one finds that one is always doing all the talking. Fish is very interested, but he never volunteers any statements of his own.”

“It’s better than doing all the listening,” said Bundle. “Like one does with George Lomax.”

Lord Caterham shuddered at the remembrance.

“George is all very well on platforms,” said Bundle. “I’ve clapped him myself, though of course I know all the time that he’s talking balderdash. And anyway, I’m a Socialist—”

“I know, my dear, I know,” said Lord Caterham hastily.

“It’s all right,” said Bundle. “I’m not going to bring politics into the home. That’s what George does—public speaking in private life. It ought to be abolished by Act of Parliament.”

“Quite so,” said Lord Caterham.

“What about Virginia?” asked Bundle. “Is she to be asked to stop on?”

“Battle said everybody.”

“Says he firmly! Have you asked her to be my stepma yet?”

“I don’t think it would be any good,” said Lord Caterham mournfully. “Although she did call me a darling last night. But that’s the worst of these attractive young women with affectionate dispositions. They’ll say anything, and they mean absolutely nothing by it.”

“No,” agreed Bundle. “It would have been much more hopeful if she’d thrown a boot at you or tried to bite you.”

“You modern young people seem to have such unpleasant ideas about lovemaking,” said Lord Caterham plaintively.

“It comes from reading *The Sheik*,” said Bundle. “Desert love. Throw her about, etc.”

“What is *The Sheik*?” asked Lord Caterham simply. “Is it a poem?”

Bundle looked at him with commiserating pity. Then she rose and kissed the top of his head.

“Dear old Daddy,” she remarked, and sprang lightly out of the window.

Lord Caterham went back to the salerooms.

He jumped when addressed suddenly by Mr. Hiram Fish, who had made his usual noiseless entry.

“Good morning, Lord Caterham.”

“Oh, good morning,” said Lord Caterham. “Good morning. Nice day.”

“The weather is delightful,” said Mr. Fish.

He helped himself to coffee. By way of food, he took a piece of dry toast.

“Do I hear correctly that the embargo is removed?” he asked after a minute or two. “That we are all free to depart?”

“Yes—er—yes,” said Lord Caterham “As a matter of fact, I hoped, I mean, that I shall be delighted”—his conscience drove him on—“only too

delighted if you will stay on for a little.”

“Why, Lord Caterham—”

“It’s been a beastly visit, I know,” Lord Caterham hurried on. “Too bad. Shan’t blame you for wanting to run away.”

“You misjudge me, Lord Caterham. The associations have been painful, no one could deny that point. But the English country life, as lived in the mansions of the great, has a powerful attraction for me. I am interested in the study of those conditions. It is a thing we lack completely in Amercia. I shall be only too delighted to accept your vurry kind invitation and stay on.”

“Oh, well,” said Lord Caterham, “that’s that. Absolutely delighted, my dear fellow, absolutely delighted.”

Spurring himself on to a false geniality of manner, Lord Caterham murmured something about having to see his bailiff and escaped from the room.

In the hall, he saw Virginia just descending the staircase.

“Shall I take you in to breakfast?” asked Lord Caterham tenderly.

“I’ve had it in bed, thank you, I was frightfully sleepy this morning.”

She yawned.

“Had a bad night, perhaps?”

“Not exactly a bad night. From one point of view decidedly a good night. Oh, Lord Caterham”—she slipped her hand inside his arm and gave it a squeeze—“I am enjoying myself. You were a darling to ask me down.”

“You’ll stop on for a bit then, won’t you? Battle is lifting the—the embargo, but I want you to stay particularly. So does Bundle.”

“Of course I’ll stay. It’s sweet of you to ask me.”

“Ah!” said Lord Caterham.

He sighed.

“What is your secret sorrow?” asked Virginia. “Has anyone bitten you?”

“That’s just it,” said Lord Caterham mournfully.

Virginia looked puzzled.

“You don’t feel, by any chance, that you want to throw a boot at me? No, I can see you don’t. Oh, well, it’s of no consequence.”

Lord Caterham drifted sadly away, and Virginia passed out through a side door into the garden.

She stood there for a moment, breathing in the crisp October air which was infinitely refreshing to one in her slightly jaded state.

She started a little to find Superintendent Battle at her elbow. The man seemed to have an extraordinary knack of appearing out of space without the least warning.

“Good morning, Mrs. Revel. Not too tired, I hope?”

Virginia shook her head.

“It was a most exciting night,” she said. “Well worth the loss of a little sleep. The only thing is, today seems a trifle dull after it.”

“There’s a nice shady place down under that cedar tree,” remarked the superintendent. “Shall I take a chair down to it for you?”

“If you think it’s the best thing for me to do,” said Virginia solemnly.

“You’re very quick, Mrs. Revel. Yes, it’s quite true, I do want a word with you.”

He picked up a long wicker chair and carried it down the lawn. Virginia followed him with a cushion under her arm.

“Very dangerous place, that terrace,” remarked the detective. “That is, if you want to have a private conversation.”

“I’m getting excited again, Superintendent Battle.”

“Oh, it’s nothing important.” He took out a big watch and glanced at it. “Half past ten. I’m starting for Wyvern Abbey in ten minutes to report to Mr. Lomax. Plenty of time. I only wanted to know if you could tell me a little more about Mr. Cade.”

“About Mr. Cade?”

Virginia was startled.

“Yes, where you first met him, and how long you’ve known him and so forth.”

Battle’s manner was easy and pleasant enough. He even refrained from looking at her and the fact that he did so made her vaguely uneasy.

“It’s more difficult than you think,” she said at last. “He did me a great service once—”

Battle interrupted her.

“Before you go any further, Mrs. Ravel, I’d just like to say something. Last night, after you and Mr. Eversleigh had gone to bed, Mr. Cade told me all about the letters and the man who was killed in your house.”

“He did?” gasped Virginia.

“Yes, and very wisely too. It clears up a lot of misunderstanding. There’s only one thing he didn’t tell me—how long he had known you. Now I’ve a little idea of my own about that. You shall tell me if I’m right or wrong. I think that the day he came to your house in Pont Street was the first time you had ever seen him. Ah! I see I’m right. It was so.”

Virginia said nothing. For the first time she felt afraid of this stolid man with the expressionless face. She understood what Anthony had meant when he said there were no flies on Superintendent Battle.

“Has he ever told you anything about his life.” the detective continued. “Before he was in South Africa, I mean. Canada? Or before that, the Sudan? Or about his boyhood?”

Virginia merely shook her head.

“And yet I’d bet he’s got something worth telling. You can’t mistake the face of a man who’s led a life of daring and adventure. He could tell you some interesting tales if he cared to.”

“If you want to know about his past life, why don’t you cable to that friend of his, Mr. McGrath?” Virginia asked.

“Oh, we have. But it seems he’s up-country somewhere. Still, there’s no doubt Mr. Cade was in Bulawayo when he said he was. But I wondered what he’d been doing before he came to South Africa. He’d only had that job with Castle’s about a month.” He took out his watch again. “I must be off. The car will be waiting.”

Virginia watched him retreat to the house. But she did not move from her chair. She hoped that Anthony might appear and join her. Instead came Bill Eversleigh, with a prodigious yawn.

“Thank God, I’ve got a chance to speak to you at last, Virginia,” he complained.

“Well, speak to me very gently, Bill darling, or I shall burst into tears.”

“Has someone been bullying you?”

“Not exactly bullying me. Getting inside my mind and turning it inside out. I feel as though I’d been jumped on by an elephant.”

“Not Battle?”

“Yes, Battle. He’s a terrible man really.”

“Well, never mind Battle. I say, Virginia, I do love you so awfully—”

“Not this morning, Bill. I’m not strong enough. Anyway, I’ve always told you the best people don’t propose before lunch.”

“Good Lord,” said Bill. “I could propose to you before breakfast.”

Virginia shuddered.

“Bill, be sensible and intelligent for a minute. I want to ask your advice.”

“If you’d once make up your mind to it, and say you’d marry me, you’d feel miles better, I’m sure. Happier, you know, and more settled down.”

“Listen to me, Bill. Proposing to me is your *idée fixe*. All men propose when they’re bored and can’t think of anything to say. Remember my age and my widowed state, and go and make love to a pure young girl.”

“My darling Virginia—Oh, Blast! here’s that French idiot bearing down on us.”

It was indeed M. Lemoine, black-bearded and correct of demeanour as ever.

“Good morning, madame. You are not fatigued, I trust?”

“Not in the least.”

“That is excellent. Good morning, Mr. Eversleigh.”

“How would it be if we promenaded ourselves a little, the three of us?” suggested the Frenchman.

“How about it, Bill?” said Virginia.

“Oh, all right,” said the unwilling young gentleman by her side.

He heaved himself up from the grass, and the three of them walked slowly along. Virginia between the two men. She was sensible at once of a strange undercurrent of excitement in the Frenchman, though she had no clue as to what caused it.

Soon, with her usual skill, she was putting him at his ease, asking him questions, listening to his answers, and gradually drawing him out. Presently he was telling them anecdotes of the famous King Victor. He talked well, albeit with a certain bitterness as he described the various ways in which the detective bureau had been outwitted.

But all the time, despite the real absorption of Lemoine in his own narrative, Virginia had a feeling that he had some other object in view. Moreover, she judged that Lemoine, under cover of his story, was deliberately striking out his own course across the park. They were not just strolling idly. He was deliberately guiding them in a certain direction.

Suddenly, he broke off his story and looked round. They were standing just where the drive intersected the park before turning an abrupt corner by a clump of trees. Lemoine was staring at a vehicle approaching them from the direction of the house.

Virginia's eyes followed his.

"It's the luggage cart," she said, "taking Isaacstein's luggage and his valet to the station."

"Is that so?" said Lemoine. He glanced down at his own watch and started. "A thousand pardons. I have been longer here than I meant—such charming company. Is it possible, do you think, that I might have a lift to the village?"

He stepped out on to the drive and signalled with his arm. The luggage cart stopped, and after a word or two of explanation Lemoine climbed in behind. He raised his hat politely to Virginia, and drove off.

The other two stood and watched the cart disappearing with puzzled expressions. Just as the cart swung round the bend, a suitcase fell off into the drive. The cart went on.

“Come on,” said Virginia to Bill. “We’re going to see something interesting. That suitcase was thrown out.”

“Nobody’s noticed it,” said Bill.

They ran down the drive towards the fallen piece of luggage. Just as they reached it, Lemoine came round the corner of the bend on foot. He was hot from walking fast.

“I was obliged to descend,” he said pleasantly. “I found that I had left something behind.”

“This?” said Bill, indicating the suitcase.

It was a handsome case of heavy pigskin, with the initials H. I. on it.

“What a pity!” said Lemoine gently. “It must have fallen out. Shall we lift it from the road?”

Without waiting for a reply, he picked up the suitcase, and carried it over to the belt of trees. He stooped over it, something flashed in his hand, and the lock slipped back.

He spoke, and his voice was totally different, quick and commanding.

“The car will be here in a minute,” he said. “Is it in sight?”

Virginia looked back towards the house.

“No.”

“Good.”

With deft fingers he tossed the things out of the suitcase. Gold-topped bottle, silk pyjamas, a variety of socks. Suddenly his whole figure stiffened. He caught up what appeared to be a bundle of silk underwear, and unrolled it rapidly.

A slight exclamation broke from Bill. In the centre of the bundle was a heavy revolver.

“I hear the horn,” said Virginia.

Like lightning, Lemoine repacked the suitcase. The revolver he wrapped in a silk handkerchief of his own, and slipped into his pocket. He snapped the locks of the suitcase, and turned quickly to Bill.

“Take it. Madame will be with you. Stop the car, and explain that it fell off the luggage cart. Do not mention me.”

Bill stepped quickly down to the drive just as the big Lanchester limousine with Isaacstein inside it came round the corner. The chauffeur slowed down, and Bill swung the suitcase up to him.

“Fell off the luggage cart,” he explained. “We happened to see it.”

He caught a momentary glimpse of a startled yellow face as the financier stared at him, and then the car swept on again.

They went back to Lemoine. He was standing with the revolver in his hand, and a look of gloating satisfaction in his face.

“A long shot,” he said. “A very long shot. But it came off.”

Twenty-two

THE RED SIGNAL

Superintendent Battle was standing in the library at Wyvern Abbey.

George Lomax, seated before a desk overflowing with papers, was frowning portentously.

Superintendent Battle had opened proceedings by making a brief and businesslike report. Since then, the conversation had lain almost entirely with George, and Battle had contented himself with making brief and usually monosyllabic replies to the other's questions.

On the desk, in front of George, was the packet of letters Anthony had found on his dressing table.

"I can't understand it at all," said George irritably, as he picked up the packet. "They're in code, you say?"

"Just so, Mr. Lomax."

"And where does he say he found them—on his dressing table?"

Battle repeated, word for word, Anthony Cade's account of how he had come to regain possession of the letters.

"And he brought them at once to you? That was quite proper—quite proper. But who could have placed them in his room?"

Battle shook his head.

"That's the sort of thing you ought to know," complained George. "It sounds to me very fishy—very fishy indeed. What do we know about this man Cade, anyway? He appears in a most mysterious manner—under highly suspicious circumstances—and we know nothing whatever about

him. I may say that I, personally, don't care for his manner at all. You've made inquiries about him, I suppose?"

Superintendent Battle permitted himself a patient smile.

"We wired at once to South Africa, and his story has been confirmed on all points. He was in Bulawayo with Mr. McGrath at the time he stated. Previous to their meeting, he was employed by Messrs. Castle, the tourist agents."

"Just what I should have expected," said George. "He has the kind of cheap assurance that succeeds in a certain type of employment. But about these letters—steps must be taken at once—at once—"

The great man puffed himself out and swelled importantly.

Superintendent Battle opened his mouth, but George forestalled him.

"There must be no delay. These letters must be decoded without any loss of time. Let me see, who is the man? There is a man—connected with the British Museum. Knows all there is to know about ciphers. Ran the department for us during the war. Where is Miss Oscar? She will know. Name something like Win—Win—"

"Professor Wynwood," said Battle.

"Exactly. I remember perfectly now. He must be wired to immediately."

"I have done so, Mr. Lomax, an hour ago. He will arrive by the 12:10."

"Oh, very good, very good. Thank heaven, something is off my mind. I shall have to be in town today. You can get along without me, I suppose?"

"I think so, sir."

"Well, do your best, Battle, do your best. I am terribly rushed just at present."

"Just so, sir."

“By the way, why did not Mr. Eversleigh come over with you?”

“He was still asleep, sir. We’ve been up all night, as I told you.”

“Oh, quite so. I am frequently up nearly the whole night myself. To do the work of thirty-six hours in twenty-four, that is my constant task! Send Mr. Eversleigh over at once when you get back, will you, Battle?”

“I will give him your message, sir.”

“Thank you, Battle. I realize perfectly that you had to repose a certain amount of confidence in him. But do you think it was strictly necessary to take my cousin, Mrs. Revel, into your confidence also?”

“In view of the name signed to those letters, I do, Mr. Lomax.”

“An amazing piece of effrontery,” murmured George, his brow darkened as he looked at the bundle of letters. “I remember the late King of Herzoslovakia. A charming fellow, but weak—deplorably weak. A tool in the hands of an unscrupulous woman. Have you any theory as to how these letters came to be restored to Mr. Cade?”

“It’s my opinion,” said Battle, “that if people can’t get a thing one way—they try another.”

“I don’t quite follow you,” said George.

“This crook, this King Victor, he’s well aware by now that the Council Chamber is watched. So he’ll let us have the letters, and let us do the decoding, and let us find the hiding place. And then—trouble! But Lemoine and I between us will attend to that.”

“You’ve got a plan, eh?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’ve got a plan. But I’ve got an idea. It’s a very useful thing sometimes, an idea.”

Thereupon Superintendent Battle took his departure.

He had no intention of taking George any further into his confidence.

On the way back, he passed Anthony on the road and stopped. "Going to give me a lift back to the house?" asked Anthony. "That's good."

"Where have you been, Mr. Cade?"

"Down to the station to inquire about trains."

Battle raised his eyebrows.

"Thinking of leaving us again?" he inquired.

"Not just at present," laughed Anthony. "By the way, what's upset Isaacstein? He arrived in the car just as I left, and he looked as though something had given him a nasty jolt."

"Mr. Isaacstein?"

"Yes."

"I can't say, I'm sure. I fancy it would take a good deal to jolt him."

"So do I," agreed Anthony. "He's quite one of the strong silent yellow men of finance."

Suddenly Battle leant forward and touched the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"Stop, will you? And wait for me here."

He jumped out of the car, much to Anthony's surprise. But in a minute or two, the latter perceived M. Lemoine advancing to meet the English detective, and gathered that it was a signal from him which had attracted Battle's attention.

There was a rapid colloquy between them, and then the superintendent returned to the car and jumped in again, bidding the chauffeur drive on.

His expression had completely changed.

“They’ve found the revolver,” he said suddenly and curtly.

“What?”

Anthony gazed at him in great surprise.

“Where?”

“In Isaacstein’s suitcase.”

“Oh, impossible!”

“Nothing’s impossible,” said Battle. “I ought to have remembered that.”

He sat perfectly still, tapping his knee with his hand.

“Who found it?”

Battle jerked his head over his shoulder.

“Lemoine. Clever chap. They think no end of him at the Sûreté.”

“But doesn’t this upset all your ideas?”

“No,” said Superintendent Battle very slowly. “I can’t say it does. It was a bit of a surprise, I admit, at first. But it fits in very well with one idea of mine.”

“Which is?”

But the superintendent branched off on to a totally different subject.

“I wonder if you’d mind finding Mr. Eversleigh for me, sir? There’s a message for him from Mr. Lomax. He’s to go over to the Abbey at once.”

“All right,” said Anthony. The car had just drawn up at the great door. “He’s probably in bed still.”

“I think not,” said the detective. “If you’ll look, you’ll see him walking under the trees there with Mrs. Revel.”

“Wonderful eyes you have, haven’t you, Battle?” said Anthony as he departed on his errand.

He delivered the message to Bill, who was duly disgusted.

“Damn it all,” grumbled Bill to himself, as he strode off to the house, “why can’t Coddors sometimes leave me alone? And why can’t these blasted Colonials stay in their Colonies? What do they want to come over here for, and pick out all the best girls? I’m fed up to the teeth with everything.”

“Have you heard about the revolver?” asked Virginia breathlessly, as Bill left them.

“Battle told me. Rather staggering, isn’t it? Isaacstein was in a frightful state yesterday to get away, but I thought it was just nerves. He’s about the one person I’d have pitched upon as being above suspicion. Can you see any motive for his wanting Prince Michael out of the way?”

“It certainly doesn’t fit in,” agreed Virginia thoughtfully.

“Nothing fits in anywhere,” said Anthony discontentedly. “I rather fancied myself as an amateur detective to begin with, and so far all I’ve done is to clear the character of the French governess at vast trouble and some little expense.”

“Is that what you went to France for?” inquired Virginia.

“Yes, I went to Dinard and had an interview with the Comtesse de Breteuil, awfully pleased with my own cleverness, and fully expecting to be told that no such person as Mademoiselle Brun had ever been heard of.

Instead of which I was given to understand that the lady in question had been the mainstay of the household for the past seven years. So, unless the Comtesse is also a crook, that ingenious theory of mine falls to the ground.”

Virginia shook her head.

“Madame de Breteuil is quite above suspicion. I know her quite well, and I fancy I must have come across Mademoiselle at the château. I certainly knew her face quite well—in that vague way one does know governesses and companions and people one sits opposite to in trains. It’s awful, but I never really look at them properly. Do you?”

“Only if they’re exceptionally beautiful,” admitted Anthony.

“Well, in this case—” she broke off. “What’s the matter?”

Anthony was staring at a figure which detached itself from the clump of trees and stood there rigidly at attention. It was the Herzoslovakian, Boris.

“Excuse me,” said Anthony to Virginia, “I must just speak to my dog a minute.”

He went across to where Boris was standing.

“What’s the matter? What do you want?”

“Master,” said Boris, bowing.

“Yes, that’s all very well, but you mustn’t keep following me about like this. It looks odd.”

Without a word, Boris produced a soiled scrap of paper, evidently torn from a letter, and handed it to Anthony.

“What’s this?” said Anthony.

There was an address scrawled on the paper, nothing else.

“He dropped it,” said Boris. “I bring it to the master.”

“Who dropped it?”

“The foreign gentleman.”

“But why bring it to me?”

Boris looked at him reproachfully.

“Well, anyway, go away now,” said Anthony. “I’m busy.”

Boris saluted, turning sharply on his heel, and marched away. Anthony rejoined Virginia, thrusting the piece of paper into his pocket.

“What did he want?” she asked curiously. “And why do you call him your dog?”

“Because he acts like one,” said Anthony, answering the last question first. “He must have been a retriever in his last incarnation, I think. He’s just brought me a piece of a letter which he says the foreign gentleman dropped. I suppose he means Lemoine.”

“I suppose so,” acquiesced Virginia.

“He’s always following me round,” continued Anthony. “Just like a dog. Says next to nothing. Just looks at me with his big round eyes. I can’t make him out.”

“Perhaps he meant Isaacstein,” suggested Virginia. “Isaacstein looks foreign enough, heaven knows.”

“Isaacstein,” muttered Anthony impatiently. “Where the devil does he come in?”

“Are you ever sorry that you’ve mixed yourself up in all this?” asked Virginia suddenly.

“Sorry? Good Lord, no. I love it. I’ve spent most of my life looking for trouble, you know. Perhaps, this time, I’ve got a little more than I bargained for.”

“But you’re well out of the wood now,” said Virginia, a little surprised by the unusual gravity of his tone.

“Not quite.”

They strolled on for a minute or two in silence.

“There are some people,” said Anthony, breaking the silence, “who don’t conform to the signals. An ordinary well-regulated locomotive slows down or pulls up when it sees the red light hoisted against it. Perhaps I was born colour-blind. When I see the red signal—I can’t help forging ahead. And in the end, you know, that spells disaster. Bound to. And quite right really. That sort of thing is bad for traffic generally.”

He still spoke very seriously.

“I suppose,” said Virginia, “that you have taken a good many risks in your life?”

“Pretty nearly everyone there is—except marriage.”

“That’s rather cynical.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. Marriage, the kind of marriage I mean, would be the biggest adventure of the lot.”

“I like that,” said Virginia, flushing eagerly.

“There’s only one kind of woman I’d want to marry—the kind who is worlds removed from my type of life. What would we do about it? Is she to lead my life, or am I to lead hers?”

“If she loved you—”

“Sentimentality, Mrs. Revel. You know it is. Love isn’t a drug that you take to blind you to your surroundings—you can make it that, yes, but it’s a pity—love can be a lot more than that. What do you think the King and his beggarmaid thought of married life after they’d been married a year or two? Didn’t she regret her rags and her bare feet and her carefree life? You bet she did. Would it have been any good his renouncing his crown for her sake? Not a bit of good, either. He’d have made a damned bad beggar, I’m sure. And no woman respects a man when he’s doing a thing thoroughly badly.”

“Have you fallen in love with a beggarmaid, Mr. Cade?” inquired Virginia softly.

“It’s the other way about with me, but the principle’s the same.”

“And there’s no way out?” asked Virginia.

“There’s always a way out,” said Anthony gloomily. “I’ve got a theory that one can always get anything one wants if one will pay the price. And do you know what the price is, nine times out of ten? Compromise. A beastly thing, compromise, but it steals upon you as you near middle age. It’s stealing upon me now. To get the woman I want I’d—I’d even take up regular work.”

Virginia laughed.

“I was brought up to a trade, you know,” continued Anthony.

“And you abandoned it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“A matter of principle.”

“Oh!”

“You’re a very unusual woman,” said Anthony suddenly, turning and looking at her.

“Why?”

“You can refrain from asking questions.”

“You mean that I haven’t asked you what your trade was?”

“Just that.”

Again they walked on in silence. They were nearing the house now, passing close by the scented sweetness of the rose garden.

“You understand well enough, I daresay,” said Anthony, breaking the silence. “You know when a man’s in love with you. I don’t suppose you care a hang for me—or for anyone else—but, by God, I’d like to make you care.”

“Do you think you could?” asked Virginia, in a low voice.

“Probably not, but I’d have a damned good try.”

“Are you sorry you ever met me?” she said suddenly.

“Lord, no. It’s the red signal again. When I first saw you—that day in Pont Street, I knew I was up against something that was going to hurt like fun. Your face did that to me—just your face. There’s magic in you from head to foot—some women are like that, but I’ve never known a woman who had so much of it as you have. You’ll marry someone respectable and prosperous, I suppose, and I shall return to my disreputable life, but I’ll kiss you once before I go—I swear I will.”

“You can’t do it now,” said Virginia softly. “Superintendent Battle is watching us out of the library window.”

Anthony looked at her.

“You’re rather a devil, Virginia,” he said dispassionately. “But rather a dear too.”

Then he waved his hand airily to Superintendent Battle.

“Caught any criminals this morning, Battle?”

“Not as yet, Mr. Cade.”

“That sounds hopeful.”

Battle with an agility surprising in so stolid a man, vaulted out of the library window and joined them on the terrace.

“I’ve got Professor Wynwood down here,” he announced in a whisper. “Just this minute arrived. He’s decoding the letters now. Would you like to see him at work?”

His tone suggested that of the showman speaking of some pet exhibit. Receiving a reply in the affirmative, he led them up to the window and invited them to peep inside.

Seated at a table, the letters spread out in front of him and writing busily on a big sheet of paper, was a small red-haired man of middle age. He grunted irritably to himself as he wrote and every now and then rubbed his nose violently until its hue almost rivalled that of his hair.

Presently he looked up.

“That you, Battle? What do you want me down here to unravel this tomfoolery for? A child in arms could do it. A baby of two could do it on his head. Call this thing a cipher? It leaps to the eye, man.”

“I’m glad of that, Professor,” said Battle mildly. “But we’re not all so clever as you are, you know.”

“It doesn’t need cleverness,” snapped the professor. “It’s routine work. Do you want the whole bundle done? It’s a long business, you know—requires diligent application and close attention and absolutely no intelligence. I’ve done the one dated ‘Chimneys’ which you said was important. I might as well take the rest back to London and hand ’em over to one of my assistants. I really can’t afford the time myself. I’ve come away now from a real teaser, and I want to get back to it.”

His eyes glistened a little.

“Very well, Professor,” assented Battle. “I’m sorry we’re such small-fry. I’ll explain to Mr. Lomax. It’s just this one letter that all the hurry is about. Lord Caterham is expecting you to stay for lunch, I believe.”

“Never have lunch,” said the professor. “Bad habit, lunch. A banana and a water biscuit is all any sane and healthy man should need in the middle of the day.”

He seized his overcoat, which lay across the back of a chair. Battle went round to the front of the house, and a few minutes later Anthony and Virginia heard the sound of a car driving away.

Battle rejoined them, carrying in his hand the half sheet of paper which the Professor had given him.

“He’s always like that,” said Battle, referring to the departed professor. “In the very deuce of a hurry. Clever man, though. Well, here’s the kernel of Her Majesty’s letter. Care to have a look at it?”

Virginia stretched out a hand, and Anthony read it over her shoulder. It had been, he remembered, a long epistle, breathing mingled passion and despair. The genius of Professor Wynwood had transformed it into an essentially businesslike communication.

Operations carried out successfully, but S double-crossed us. Has removed stone from hiding place. Not in his room. I have searched. Found following memorandum which I think refers to it: RICHMOND SEVEN STRAIGHT EIGHT LEFT THREE RIGHT.

“S?” said Anthony. “Stylptitch, of course. Cunning old dog. He changed the hiding place.”

“Richmond,” said Virginia thoughtfully. “Is the diamond concealed somewhere at Richmond, I wonder?”

“It’s a favourite spot for royalties,” agreed Anthony.

Battle shook his head.

“I still think it’s a reference to something in this house.”

“I know,” cried Virginia suddenly.

Both men turned to look at her.

“The Holbein portrait in the Council Chamber. They were tapping on the wall just below it. And it’s a portrait of the Earl of Richmond!”

“You’ve got it,” said Battle, and slapped his leg.

He spoke with an animation quite unwonted.

“That’s the starting point, the picture, and the crooks know no more than we do what the figures refer to. Those two men in armour stand directly underneath the picture, and their first idea was that the diamond was hidden in one of them. The measurements might have been inches. That failed, and their next idea was a secret passage or stairway, or a sliding panel. Do you know of any such thing, Mrs. Revel?”

Virginia shook her head.

“There’s a priest’s hole, and at least one secret passage, I know,” she said. “I believe I’ve been shown them once, but I can’t remember much about them now. Here’s Bundle, she’ll know.”

Bundle was coming quickly along the terrace towards them.

“I’m taking the Panhard up to town after lunch,” she remarked. “Anyone want a lift? Wouldn’t you like to come, Mr. Cade? We’ll be back by dinnertime.”

“No, thanks,” said Anthony. “I’m quite happy and busy down here.”

“The man fears me,” said Bundle. “Either my driving or my fatal fascination! Which is it?”

“The latter,” said Anthony. “Every time.”

“Bundle, dear,” said Virginia, “is there any secret passage leading out of the Council Chamber?”

“Rather. But it’s only a mouldy one. Supposed to lead from Chimneys to Wyvern Abbey. So it did in the old, old days, but it’s all blocked up now. You can only get along it for about a hundred yards from this end. The one upstairs in the White Gallery is ever so much more amusing, and the priest’s hole isn’t half bad.”

“We’re not regarding them from an artistic standpoint,” explained Virginia. “It’s business. How do you get into the Council Chamber one?”

“Hinged panel. I’ll show it you after lunch if you like.”

“Thank you,” said Superintendent Battle. “Shall we say at 2:30?”

Bundle looked at him with lifted eyebrows.

“Crook stuff?” she inquired.

Tredwell appeared on the terrace.

Luncheon is served, my lady,” he announced.

Twenty-three

ENCOUNTER IN THE ROSE GARDEN

At 2:30 a little party met together in the Council Chamber: Bundle, Virginia, Superintendent Battle, M. Lemoine and Anthony Cade.

“No good waiting until we can get hold of Mr. Lomax,” said Battle. “This is the kind of business one wants to get on with quickly.”

“If you’ve got any idea that Prince Michael was murdered by someone who got in this way, you’re wrong,” said Bundle. “It can’t be done. The other end’s blocked completely.”

“There is no question of that, milady,” said Lemoine quickly. “It is quite a different search that we make.”

“Looking for something, are you?” asked Bundle quickly. “Not the historic whatnot, by any chance?”

Lemoine looked puzzled.

“Explain yourself, Bundle,” said Virginia encouragingly. “You can when you try.”

“The thingummybob,” said Bundle. “The historic diamond of purple princes that was pinched in the dark ages before I grew to years of discretion.”

“Who told you this, Lady Eileen?” asked Battle.

“I’ve always known. One of the footmen told me when I was twelve years old.”

“A footman,” said Battle. “Lord! I’d like Mr. Lomax to have heard that!”

“Is it one of George’s closely guarded secrets?” asked Bundle. “How perfectly screaming! I never really thought it was true. George always was an ass—he must know that servants know everything.”

She went across to the Holbein portrait, touched a spring concealed somewhere at the side of it, and immediately, with a creaking noise, a section of the panelling swung inwards, revealing a dark opening.

“Entrez, messieurs et mesdames,” said Bundle dramatically. “Walk up, walk up, walk up, dearies. Best show of the season, and only a tanner.”

Both Lemoine and Battle were provided with torches. They entered the dark aperture first, the others close on their heels.

“Air’s nice and fresh,” remarked Battle. “Must be ventilated somehow.”

He walked on ahead. The floor was rough uneven stone, but the walls were bricked. As Bundle had said, the passage extended for a bare hundred yards. Then it came to an abrupt end with a fallen heap of masonry. Battle satisfied himself that there was no way of egress beyond, and then spoke over his shoulder.

“We’ll go back, if you please. I wanted just to spy out the land, so to speak.”

In a few minutes they were back again at the panelled entrance.

“We’ll start from here,” said Battle. “Seven straight, eight left, three right. Take the first as paces.”

He paced seven steps carefully, and bending down examined the ground.

“About right, I should fancy. At one time or another, there’s been a chalk mark made here. Now then, eight left. That’s not paces, the passage is only wide enough to go Indian file, anyway.”

“Say it in bricks,” suggested Anthony.

“Quite right, Mr. Cade. Eight bricks from the bottom or the top on the left-hand side. Try from the bottom first—it’s easier.”

He counted up eight bricks.

“Now three to the right of that. One, two, three—Hullo—Hullo, what’s this?”

“I shall scream in a minute,” said Bundle, “I know I shall. What is it?”

Superintendent Battle was working at the brick with the point of his knife. His practised eye had quickly seen that this particular brick was different from the rest. A minute or two’s work, and he was able to pull it right out. Behind was a small dark cavity. Battle thrust in his hand.

Everyone waited in breathless expectancy.

Battle drew out his hand again.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise and anger.

The others crowded round and stared uncomprehendingly at the three articles he held. For a moment it seemed as though their eyes must have deceived them.

A card of small pearl buttons, a square of coarse knitting, and a piece of paper on which were inscribed a row of capital E’s!

“Well,” said Battle. “I’m—I’m danged. What’s the meaning of this?”

“Mon Dieu,” muttered the Frenchman. “Ça, c’est un peu trop fort!”

“But what does it mean?” cried Virginia, bewildered.

“Mean?” said Anthony. “There’s only one thing it can mean. The late Count Stylptitch must have had a sense of humour! This is an example of that humour. I may say that I don’t consider it particularly funny myself.”

“Do you mind explaining your meaning a little more clearly, sir?” said the Superintendent Battle.

“Certainly. This was the Count’s little joke. He must have suspected that his memorandum had been read. When the crooks came to recover the jewel, they were to find instead this extremely clever conundrum. It’s the sort of thing you pin on to yourself at Book Teas, when people have to guess what you are.”

“It has a meaning, then?”

“I should say, undoubtedly. If the Count had meant to be merely offensive, he would have put a placard with ‘Sold’ on it, or a picture of a donkey or something crude like that.”

“A bit of knitting, some capital E’s, and a lot of buttons,” muttered Battle discontentedly.

“C’est inouï,” said Lemoine angrily.

“Cipher No. 2,” said Anthony. “I wonder whether Professor Wynwood would be any good at this one?”

“When was this passage last used, milady?” asked the Frenchman of Bundle.

Bundle reflected.

“I don’t believe anyone’s been into it for over two years. The priest’s hole is the show exhibit for Americans and tourists generally.”

“Curious,” murmured the Frenchman.

“Why curious?”

Lemoine stooped and picked up a small object from the floor.

“Because of this,” he said. “This match has not lain here for two years—not even two days.”

“Any of you ladies or gentlemen drop this, by any chance?” he asked.

He received a negative all round.

“Well, then,” said Superintendent Battle, “we’ve seen all there is to see. We might as well get out of here.”

The proposal was assented to by all. The panel had swung to, but Bundle showed them how it was fastened from the inside. She unlatched it, swung it noiselessly open, and sprang through the opening, alighting in the Council Chamber with a resounding thud.

“Damn!” said Lord Caterham, springing up from an armchair in which he appeared to have been taking forty winks.

“Poor old Father,” said Bundle. “Did I startle you?”

“I can’t think,” said Lord Caterham, “why nobody nowadays ever sits still after a meal. It’s a lost art. God knows Chimneys is big enough but even here there doesn’t seem to be a single room where I can be sure of a little peace. Good Lord, how many of you are there? Reminds me of the pantomimes I used to go to as a boy when hordes of demons used to pop up out of trapdoors.”

“Demon No. 7,” said Virginia, approaching him, and patting him on the head. “Don’t be cross. We’re just exploring secret passages, that’s all.”

“There seems to be a positive boom in secret passages today,” grumbled Lord Caterham, not yet completely mollified. “I’ve had to show that fellow Fish round them all this morning.”

“When was that?” asked Battle quickly.

“Just before lunch. It seems he’d heard of the one in here. I showed him that, and then took him up to the White Gallery, and we finished up with the priest’s hole. But his enthusiasm was waning by that time. He looked bored to death. But I made him go through with it.” Lord Caterham chuckled at the remembrance.

Anthony put a hand on Lemoine's arm.

"Come outside," he said softly. "I want to speak to you."

The two men went out together through the window. When they had gone a sufficient distance from the house, Anthony drew from his pocket the scrap of paper that Boris had given him that morning.

"Look here," he said. "Did you drop this?"

Lemoine took it and examined it with some interest.

"No," he said. "I have never seen it before. Why?"

"Quite sure?"

"Absolutely sure, monsieur."

"That's very odd."

He repeated to Lemoine what Boris had said. The other listened with close attention.

"No, I did not drop it. You say he found it in that clump of trees?"

"Well, I assumed so, but he did not actually say so."

"It is just possible that it might have fluttered out of M. Isaacstein's suitcase. Question Boris again." He handed the paper back to Anthony. After a minute or two he said: "What exactly do you know of this man Boris?"

Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

"I understood he was the late Prince Michael's trusted servant."

"It may be so, but make it your business to find out. Ask someone who knows, such as the Baron Lolopretjzyl. Perhaps this man was engaged but a few weeks ago. For myself, I have believed him honest. But who knows?"

King Victor is quite capable of making himself into a trusted servant at a moment's notice."

"Do you really think—"

Lemoine interrupted him.

"I will be quite frank. With me, King Victor is an obsession. I see him everywhere. At this moment even I ask myself—this man who is talking to me, this M. Cade, is he, perhaps, King Victor?"

"Good Lord," said Anthony, "you have got it badly."

"What do I care for the diamond? For the discovery of the murderer of Prince Michael? I leave those affairs to my colleague of Scotland Yard whose business it is. Me, I am in England for one purpose, and one purpose only, to capture King Victor and capture him red-handed. Nothing else matters."

"Think you'll do it?" asked Anthony, lighting a cigarette.

"How should I know?" said Lemoine, with sudden despondency.

"Hm!" said Anthony.

They had regained the terrace. Superintendent Battle was standing near the French window in a wooden attitude.

"Look at poor old Battle," said Anthony. "Let's go and cheer him up." He paused a minute, and said, "You know, you're an odd fish in some ways, M. Lemoine."

"In what ways, M. Cade?"

"Well," said Anthony, "in your place, I should have been inclined to note down that address that I showed you. It may be of no importance—quite conceivably. On the other hand, it might be very important indeed."

Lemoine looked at him for a minute or two steadily. Then, with a slight smile, he drew back the cuff of his left coat sleeve. Pencilled on the white shirt cuff beneath were the words "Hurstmere, Langly Road, Dover."

"I apologize," said Anthony. "And I retire worsted."

He joined Superintendent Battle.

"You look very pensive, Battle," he remarked.

"I've got a lot to think about, Mr. Cade."

"Yes, I expect you have."

"Things aren't dovetailing. They're not dovetailing at all."

"Very trying," sympathized Anthony. "Never mind, Battle, if the worst comes to the worst, you can always arrest me. You've got my guilty footprints to fall back upon, remember."

But the superintendent did not smile.

"Got any enemies here that you know of, Mr. Cade?" he asked.

"I've an idea that the third footman doesn't like me," replied Anthony lightly. "He does his best to forget to hand me the choicest vegetables. Why?"

"I've been getting anonymous letters," said Superintendent Battle. "Or rather an anonymous letter, I should say."

"About me?"

Without answer Battle took a folded sheet of cheap notepaper from his pocket, and handed it to Anthony. Scrawled on it in an illiterate handwriting were the words:

Look out for Mr. Cade. He isn't wot he seems.

Anthony handed it back with a light laugh.

“That all? Cheer up, Battle. I’m really a king in disguise, you know.”

He went into the house, whistling lightly as he walked along. But as he entered his bedroom and shut the door behind him, his face changed. It grew set and stern. He sat down on the edge of the bed and stared moodily at the floor.

“Things are getting serious,” said Anthony to himself. “Something must be done about it. It’s all damned awkward. . . .”

He sat there for a minute or two, then strolled to the window. For a moment or two he stood looking out aimlessly and then his eyes became suddenly focused on a certain spot, and his face lightened.

“Of course,” he said. “The rose garden! That’s it! The rose garden.”

He hurried downstairs again and out into the garden by a side door. He approached the rose garden by a circuitous route. It had a little gate at either end. He entered by the far one, and walked up to the sundial which was on a raised hillock in the exact centre of the garden.

Just as Anthony reached it, he stopped dead and stared at another occupant of the rose garden who seemed equally surprised to see him.

“I didn’t know that you were interested in roses, Mr. Fish,” said Anthony gently.

“Sir,” said Mr. Fish, “I am considerably interested in roses.”

They looked at each other warily, as antagonists seek to measure their opponents’ strength.

“So am I,” said Anthony.

“Is that so?”

“In fact, I dote upon roses,” said Anthony airily.

A very slight smile hovered upon Mr. Fish's lips, and at the same time Anthony also smiled. The tension seemed to relax.

"Look at this beauty now," said Mr. Fish, stooping to point out a particularly fine bloom. "Madame Abel Chatenay, I pressoon it to be. Yes, I am right. This white rose, before the war, was known as Frau Carl Drusky. They have, I believe, renamed it. Oversensitive, perhaps, but truly patriotic. The La France is always popular. Do you care for red roses at all, Mr. Cade? A bright scarlet rose now—"

Mr. Fish's slow, drawling voice, was interrupted. Bundle was leaning out of a first-floor window.

"Care for a spin to town, Mr. Fish? I'm just off."

"Thank you, Lady Eileen, but I am vurry happy here."

"Sure you won't change your mind, Mr. Cade?"

Anthony laughed and shook his head. Bundle disappeared.

"Sleep is more in my line," said Anthony, with a wide yawn. "A good after-luncheon nap!" He took out a cigarette. "You haven't got a match, have you?"

Mr. Fish handed him a matchbox. Anthony helped himself, and handed back the box with a word of thanks.

"Roses," said Anthony, "are all very well. But I don't feel particularly horticultural this afternoon."

With a disarming smile, he nodded cheerfully.

A thundering noise sounded from just outside the house.

"Pretty powerful engine she's got in that car of hers," remarked Anthony. "There, off she goes."

They had a view of the car speeding down the long drive.

Anthony yawned again, and strolled towards the house.

He passed in through the door. Once inside, he seemed as though changed to quicksilver. He raced across the hall, out through one of the windows on the farther side, and across the park. Bundle, he knew, had to make a big detour by the lodge gates, and through the village.

He ran desperately. It was a race against time. He reached the park wall just as he heard the car outside. He swung himself up and dropped into the road.

“Hi!” cried Anthony.

In her astonishment, Bundle swerved half across the road. She managed to pull up without accident. Anthony ran after the car, opened the door, and jumped in beside Bundle.

“I’m coming to London with you,” he said. “I meant to all along.”

“Extraordinary person,” said Bundle. “What’s that you’ve got in your hand?”

“Only a match,” said Anthony.

He regarded it thoughtfully. It was pink, with a yellow head. He threw away his unlighted cigarette, and put the match carefully into his pocket.

Twenty-four

THE HOUSE AT DOVER

“You don’t mind, I suppose,” said Bundle after a minute or two, “if I drive rather fast? I started later than I meant to do.”

It had seemed to Anthony that they were proceeding at a terrific speed already, but he soon saw that that was nothing compared to what Bundle could get out of the Panhard if she tried.

“Some people,” said Bundle, as she slowed down momentarily to pass through a village, “are terrified of my driving. Poor old Father, for instance. Nothing would induce him to come up with me in this old bus.”

Privately, Anthony thought Lord Caterham was entirely justified. Driving with Bundle was not a sport to be indulged in by nervous, middle-aged gentlemen.

“But you don’t seem nervous a bit,” continued Bundle approvingly, as she swept round a corner on two wheels.

“I’m in pretty good training, you see,” explained Anthony gravely. “Also,” he added, as an afterthought, “I’m rather in a hurry myself.”

“Shall I speed her up a bit more?” asked Bundle kindly.

“Good Lord, no,” said Anthony hastily. “We’re averaging about fifty as it is.”

“I’m burning with curiosity to know the reason for this sudden departure,” said Bundle, after executing a fanfare upon the klaxon which must temporarily have deafened the neighbourhood. “But I suppose I mustn’t ask? You’re not escaping from justice, are you?”

“I’m not quite sure,” said Anthony. “I shall know soon.”

“That Scotland Yard man isn’t as much of a rabbit as I thought,” said Bundle thoughtfully.

“Battle’s a good man,” agreed Anthony.

“You ought to have been in diplomacy,” remarked Bundle. “You don’t part with much information, do you?”

“I was under the impression that I babbled.”

“Oh! Boy! You’re not eloping with Mademoiselle Brun, by any chance?”

“Not guilty!” said Anthony with fervour.

There was a pause of some minutes during which Bundle caught up and passed three other cars. Then she asked suddenly:

“How long have you known Virginia?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer,” said Anthony, with perfect truth. “I haven’t actually met her very often, and yet I seem to have known her a long time.”

Bundle nodded.

“Virginia’s got brains,” she remarked abruptly. “She’s always talking nonsense, but she’s got brains all right. She was frightfully good out in Herzoslovakia, I believe. If Tim Revel had lived he’d have had a fine career—and mostly owing to Virginia. She worked for him tooth and nail. She did everything in the world she could for him—and I know why, too.”

“Because she cared for him?” Anthony sat looking very straight ahead of him.

“No, because she didn’t. Don’t you see? She didn’t love him—she never loved him, and so she did everything on earth she could to make up. That’s Virginia all over. But don’t you make any mistake about it. Virginia was never in love with Tim Revel.”

“You seem very positive,” said Anthony, turning to look at her.

Bundle’s little hands were clenched on the steering wheel, and her chin was stuck out in a determined manner.

“I know a thing or two. I was only a kid at the time of her marriage, but I heard one or two things, and knowing Virginia I can put them together easily enough. Tim Revel was bowled over by Virginia—he was Irish, you know, and most attractive, with a genius for expressing himself well. Virginia was quite young—eighteen. She couldn’t go anywhere without seeing Tim in a state of picturesque misery, vowing he’d shoot himself or take to drink if she didn’t marry him. Girls believe these things—or used to—we’ve advanced a lot in the last eight years. Virginia was carried away by the feeling she thought she’d inspired. She married him—and she was an angel to him always. She wouldn’t have been half as much of an angel if she’d loved him. There’s a lot of the devil in Virginia. But I can tell you one thing—she enjoys her freedom. And anyone will have a hard time persuading her to give it up.”

“I wonder why you tell me all this?” said Anthony slowly.

“It’s interesting to know about people, isn’t it? Some people, that is.”

“I’ve wanted to know,” he acknowledged.

“And you’d never have heard from Virginia. But you can trust me for an inside tip from the stables. Virginia’s a darling. Even women like her because she isn’t a bit of a cat. And anyway,” Bundle ended, somewhat obscurely, “one must be a sport, mustn’t one?”

“Oh, certainly,” Anthony agreed. But he was still puzzled. He had no idea what had prompted Bundle to give him so much information unasked. That he was glad of it, he did not deny.

“Here are the trams,” said Bundle, with a sigh. “Now, I suppose, I shall have to drive carefully.”

“It might be as well,” agreed Anthony.

His ideas and Bundle's on the subject of careful driving hardly coincided. Leaving indignant suburbs behind them they finally emerged into Oxford Street.

"Not bad going, eh?" said Bundle, glancing at her wristwatch.

Anthony assented fervently.

"Where do you want to be dropped?"

"Anywhere. Which way are you going?"

"Knightsbridge way."

"All right, drop me at Hyde Park Corner."

"Good-bye," said Bundle, as she drew up at the place indicated. "What about the return journey?"

"I'll find my own way back, thanks very much."

"I have scared him," remarked Bundle.

"I shouldn't recommend driving with you as a tonic for nervous old ladies, but personally I've enjoyed it. The last time I was in equal danger was when I was charged by a herd of wild elephants."

"I think you're extremely rude," remarked Bundle. "We're not even had one bump today."

"I'm sorry if you've been holding yourself in on my account," retorted Anthony.

"I don't think men are really very brave," said Bundle.

"That's a nasty one," said Anthony. "I retire, humiliated." Bundle nodded and drove on. Anthony hailed a passing taxi. "Victoria Station," he said to the driver as he got in.

When he got to Victoria he paid off the taxi and inquired for the next train to Dover. Unfortunately he had just missed one.

Resigning himself to a wait of something over an hour, Anthony paced up and down, his brows knit. Once or twice he shook his head impatiently.

The journey to Dover was uneventful. Arrived there, Anthony passed quickly out of the station and then, as though suddenly remembering, he turned back again. There was a slight smile on his lips as he asked to be directed to Hurstmere, Langly Road.

The road in question was a long one, leading right out of the town. According to the porter's instructions, Hurstmere was the last house. Anthony trudged along steadily. The little pucker had reappeared between his eyes. Nevertheless there was a new elation in his manner, as always when danger was near at hand.

Hurstmere was, as the porter had said, the last house in Langly Road. It stood well back, enclosed in its own grounds, which were ragged and overgrown. The place, Anthony judged, must have been empty for many years. A large iron gate swung rustily on its hinges, and the name on the gatepost was half obliterated.

"A lonely spot," muttered Anthony to himself, "and a good one to choose."

He hesitated a minute or two, glanced quickly up and down the road—which was quite deserted—and then slipped quietly past the creaking gate into the overgrown drive. He walked up it a little way, and then stood listening. He was still some distance from the house. Not a sound could be heard anywhere. Some fast-yellowing leaves detached themselves from one of the trees overhead and fell with a soft rustling sound that was almost sinister in the stillness. Anthony started; then smiled.

"Nerves," he murmured to himself. "Never knew I had such things before."

He went on up the drive. Presently, as the drive curved, he slipped into the shrubbery and so continued his way unseen from the house. Suddenly he stood still, peering out through the leaves. Some distance away a dog was

barking, but it was a sound nearer at hand that had attracted Anthony's attention.

His keen hearing had not been mistaken. A man came rapidly round the corner of the house, a short square, thickset man, foreign in appearance. He did not pause but walked steadily on, circling the house and disappearing again.

Anthony nodded to himself.

"Sentry," he murmured. "They do the thing quite well."

As soon as he had passed, Anthony went on, diverging to the left, and so following in the footsteps of the sentry.

His own footsteps were quite noiseless.

The wall of the house was on his right, and presently he came to where a broad blur of light fell on the gravelled walk. The sound of several men talking together was clearly audible.

"My God! what double-dyed idiots," murmured Anthony to himself. "It would serve them right to be given a fright."

He stole up to the window, stooping a little so that he should not be seen. Presently he lifted his head very carefully to the level of the sill and looked in.

Half a dozen men were sprawling round a table. Four of them were big thickset men, with high cheekbones, and eyes set in Magyar slanting fashion. The other two were rat-like little men with quick gestures. The language that was being spoken was French, but the four big men spoke it with uncertainty and a hoarse guttural intonation.

"The boss?" growled one of these. "When will he be here?"

One of the smaller men shrugged his shoulders.

"Any time now."

“About time, too,” growled the first man. “I have never seen him, this boss of yours, but, oh, what great and glorious work might we not have accomplished in these days of idle waiting!”

“Fool,” said the other little man biting. “Getting nabbed by the police is all the great and glorious work you and your precious lot would have been likely to accomplish. A lot of blundering gorillas!”

“Aha!” roared another big thickset fellow. “You insult the Comrades? I will soon set the sign of the Red Hand round your throat.”

He half rose, glaring ferociously at the Frenchman, but one of his companions pulled him back again.

“No quarrelling,” he grunted. “We’re to work together. From all I heard, this King Victor doesn’t stand for being disobeyed.”

In the darkness, Anthony heard the footsteps of the sentry coming his round again, and he drew back behind a bush.

“Who’s that?” said one of the men inside.

“Carlo—going his rounds.”

“Oh! What about the prisoner?”

“He’s all right—coming round pretty fast now. He’s recovered well from the crack on the head we gave him.”

Anthony moved gently away.

“God! What a lot,” he muttered. “They discuss their affairs with an open window, and that fool Carlo goes his round with the tread of an elephant—and the eyes of a bat. And to crown all, the Herzoslovakians and the French are on the point of coming to blows. King Victor’s headquarters seem to be in a parlous condition. It would amuse me, it would amuse me very much, to teach them a lesson.”

He stood irresolute for a minute, smiling to himself.

From somewhere above his head came a stifled groan.

Anthony looked up. The groan came again.

Anthony glanced quickly from left to right. Carlo was not due round again just yet. He grasped the heavy Virginia creeper and climbed nimbly till he reached the sill of a window. The window was shut, but with a tool from his pocket he soon succeeded in forcing up the catch.

He paused a minute to listen, then sprang lightly inside the room. There was a bed in the far corner and on that bed a man was lying, his figure barely discernible in the gloom.

Anthony went over to the bed, and flashed his pocket torch on the man's face. It was a foreign face, pale and emaciated, and the head was swathed in heavy bandages.

The man was bound hand and foot. He stared up at Anthony like one dazed.

Anthony bent over him, and as he did so he heard a sound behind him and swung round, his hand travelling to his coat pocket.

But a sharp command arrested him.

"Hands up, sonny. You didn't expect to see me here, but I happened to catch the same train as you at Victoria."

It was Mr. Hiram Fish who was standing in the doorway. He was smiling and in his hand was a big blue automatic.

Twenty-five

TUESDAY NIGHT AT CHIMNEYS

Lord Caterham, Virginia and Bundle were sitting in the library after dinner. It was Tuesday evening. Some thirty hours had elapsed since Anthony's rather dramatic departure.

For at least the seventh time Bundle repeated Anthony's parting words, as spoken at Hyde Park Corner.

"I'll find my own way back," echoed Virginia thoughtfully. "That doesn't look as though he expected to be away as long as this. And he's left all his things here."

"He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"No," said Virginia, looking straight in front of her. "He told me nothing."

After this, there was a silence for a minute or two. Lord Caterham was the first to break it.

"On the whole," he said, "keeping an hotel has some advantages over keeping a country house."

"Meaning—"

"That little notice they always hang up in your room. Visitors intending departure must give notice before twelve o'clock."

Virginia smiled.

"I daresay," he continued, "that I am old-fashioned and unreasonable. It's the fashion, I know, to pop in and out of a house. Same idea as an hotel—perfect freedom of action, and no bill at the end!"

“You are an old grouser,” said Bundle. “You’ve had Virginia and me. What more do you want?”

“Nothing more, nothing more,” Lord Caterham assured them hastily.

“That’s not it at all. It’s the principle of the thing. It gives one such a restless feeling. I’m quite willing to admit that it’s been an almost ideal twenty-four hours. Peace—perfect peace. No burglaries or other crimes of violence, no detectives, no Americans. What I complain of is that I should have enjoyed it all so much more if I’d felt really secure. As it is, all the time, I’ve been saying to myself, ‘One or the other of them is bound to turn up in a minute.’ And that spoilt the whole thing.”

“Well, nobody has turned up,” said Bundle. “We’ve been left severely alone—neglected, in fact. It’s odd the way Fish disappeared. Didn’t he say anything?”

“Not a word. Last time I saw him he was pacing up and down the rose garden yesterday afternoon, smoking one of those unpleasant cigars of his. After that he seems to have just melted into the landscape.”

“Somebody must have kidnapped him,” said Bundle hopefully.

“In another day or two, I expect we shall have Scotland Yard dragging the lake to find his dead body,” said her father gloomily. “It serves me right. At my time of life, I ought to have gone quietly abroad and taken care of my health, and not allowed myself to be drawn into George Lomax’s wildcat schemes. I—”

He was interrupted by Tredwell.

“Well,” said Lord Caterham, irritably, “what is it?”

“The French detective is here, my lord, and would be glad if you could spare him a few minutes.”

“What did I tell you?” said Lord Caterham. “I knew it was too good to last. Depend up on it, they’ve found Fish’s dead body doubled up in the goldfish pond.”

Tredwell, in a strictly respectful manner, steered him back to the point at issue.

“Am I to say that you will see him, my lord?”

“Yes, yes. Bring him in here.”

Tredwell departed. He returned a minute or two later announcing in a lugubrious voice:

“Monsieur Lemoine.”

The Frenchman came in with a quick, light step. His walk, more than his face, betrayed the fact that he was excited about something.

“Good evening, Lemoine,” said Lord Caterham. “Have a drink, won’t you?”

“I thank you, no.” He bowed punctiliously to the ladies. “At last I make progress. As things are, I felt that you should be acquainted with the discoveries—the very grave discoveries that I have made in the course of the last twenty-four hours.”

“I thought there must be something important going on somewhere,” said Lord Caterham.

“My lord, yesterday afternoon one of your guests left this house in a curious manner. From the beginning, I must tell you, I have had my suspicions. Here is a man who comes from the wilds. Two months ago he was in South Africa. Before that—where?”

Virginia drew a sharp breath. For a moment the Frenchman’s eyes rested on her doubtfully. Then he went on:

“Before that—where? None can say. And he is just such a one as the man I am looking for—gay, audacious, reckless, one who would dare anything. I send cable after cable, but I can get no word as to his past life. Ten years ago he was in Canada, yes, but since then—silence. My suspicions grow stronger. Then I pick up one day a scrap of paper where he has lately passed

along. It bears an address—the address of a house in Dover. Later, as though by chance, I drop that same piece of paper. Out of the tail of my eye, I see this Boris, the Herzoslovakian, pick it up and take it to his master. All along I have been sure that this Boris is an emissary of the Comrades of the Red Hand. We know that the Comrades are working in with King Victor over this affair. If Boris recognized his chief in Mr. Anthony Cade, would he not do just what he has done—transferred his allegiance? Why should he attach himself otherwise to an insignificant stranger? It was suspicious, I tell you, very suspicious.

“But almost I am disarmed, for Anthony Cade brings this same paper to me at once and asks me if I have dropped it. As I say, almost I am disarmed—but not quite! For it may mean that he is innocent, or it may mean that he is very, very clever. I deny, of course, that it is mine or that I dropped it. But in the meantime I have set inquiries on foot. Only today I have news. The house at Dover has been precipitately abandoned, but up till yesterday afternoon it was occupied by a body of foreigners. Not a doubt but that it was King Victor’s headquarters. Now see the significance of these points. Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Cade clears out from here precipitately. Ever since he dropped that paper, he must know that the game is up. He reaches Dover and immediately the gang is disbanded. What the next move will be, I do not know. What is quite certain is that Mr. Anthony Cade will not return here. But knowing King Victor as I do, I am certain that he will not abandon the game without having one more try for the jewel. And that is when I shall get him!”

Virginia stood up suddenly. She walked across to the mantelpiece and spoke in a voice that rang cold like steel.

“You are leaving one thing out of account, I think, M. Lemoine,” she said. “Mr. Cade is not the only guest who disappeared yesterday in a suspicious manner.”

“You mean, madame?—”

“That all you have said applies equally well to another person. What about Mr. Hiram Fish?”

“Oh Mr. Fish!”

“Yes, Mr. Fish. Did you not tell us that first night that King Victor had lately come to England from America? So has Mr. Fish come to England from America. It is true that he brought a letter of introduction from a very well-known man, but surely that would be a simple thing for a man like King Victor to manage. He is certainly not what he pretends to be. Lord Caterham has commented on the fact that when it is a question of the first editions he is supposed to have come here to see he is always the listener, never the talker. And there are several suspicious facts against him. There was a light in his window the night of the murder. Then take that evening in the Council Chamber. When I met him on the terrace he was fully dressed. He could have dropped the paper. You didn’t actually see Mr. Cade do so. Mr. Cade may have gone to Dover. If he did it was simply to investigate. He may have been kidnapped there. I say that there is far more suspicion attaching to Mr. Fish’s actions than to Mr. Cade’s.”

The Frenchman’s voice rang out sharply:

“From your point of view, that well may be, madame. I do not dispute it. And I agree that Mr. Fish is not what he seems.”

“Well, then?”

“But that makes no difference. You see, madame, Mr. Fish is a Pinkerton’s man.”

“What?” cried Lord Caterham.

“Yes, Lord Caterham. He came over here to trail King Victor. Superintendent Battle and I have known this for some time.”

Virginia said nothing. Very slowly she sat down again. With those few words the structure that she had built up so carefully was scattered in ruins about her feet.

“You see,” Lemoine was continuing, “we have all known that eventually King Victor would come to Chimneys. It was the one place we were sure of

catching him.”

Virginia looked up with an odd light in her eyes, and suddenly she laughed.

“You’ve not caught him yet,” she said.

Lemoine looked at her curiously.

“No, madame. But I shall.”

“He’s supposed to be rather famous for outwitting people, isn’t he?”

The Frenchman’s face darkened with anger.

“This time, it will be different,” he said between his teeth.

“He’s a very attractive fellow,” said Lord Caterham. “Very attractive. But surely—why, you said he was an old friend of yours, Virginia?”

“That is why,” said Virginia composedly, “I think M. Lemoine must be making a mistake.”

And her eyes met the detective’s steadily, but he appeared in no wise discomfited.

“Time will show, madame,” he said.

“Do you pretend that it was he who shot Prince Michael?” she asked presently.

“Certainly.”

But Virginia shook her head.

“Oh no!” she said, “Oh, no! That is one thing I am quite sure of. Anthony Cade never killed Prince Michael.”

Lemoine was watching her intently.

“There is a possibility that you are right, madame,” he said slowly. “A possibility, that is all. It may have been the Herzoslovakian, Boris, who exceeded his orders and fired that shot. Who knows, Prince Michael may have done him some great wrong, and the man sought revenge.”

“He looks a murderous sort of fellow,” agreed Lord Caterham. “The housemaids, I believe, scream when he passes them in the passages.”

“Well,” said Lemoine. “I must be going now. I felt it was due to you, my lord, to know exactly how things stand.”

“Very kind of you, I’m sure,” said Lord Caterham. “Quite certain you won’t have a drink? All right, then. Goodnight.”

“I hate that man with his prim little black beard and his eyeglasses,” said Bundle, as soon as the door had shut behind him. “I hope Anthony does snoo him. I’d love to see him dancing with rage. What do you think about it all, Virginia?”

“I don’t know,” said Virginia. “I’m tired. I shall go up to bed.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Lord Caterham. “It’s half past eleven.”

As Virginia was crossing the wide hall, she caught sight of a broad back that seemed familiar to her discreetly vanishing through a side door.

“Superintendent Battle,” she called imperiously.

The superintendent, for it was indeed he, retraced his steps with a shade of unwillingness.

“Yes, Mrs. Revel?”

“M. Lemoine has been here. He says—Tell me, is it true, really true, that Mr. Fish is an American detective?”

Superintendent Battle nodded.

“That’s right.”

“You have known it all along?”

Again Superintendent Battle nodded.

Virginia turned away towards the staircase.

“I see,” she said. “Thank you.”

Until that minute she had refused to believe.

And now?—

Sitting down before her dressing table in her own room, she faced the question squarely. Every word that Anthony had said came back to her fraught with a new significance.

Was this the “trade” that he had spoken of?

The trade that he had given up. But then—

An unusual sound disturbed the even tenor of her meditations. She lifted her head with a start. Her little gold clock showed the hour to be after one. Nearly two hours she had sat here thinking.

Again the sound was repeated. A sharp tap on the windowpane. Virginia went to the window and opened it. Below on the pathway was a tall figure which even as she looked stooped for another handful of gravel.

For a moment Virginia’s heart beat faster—then she recognized the massive strength and square-cut outline of the Herzoslovakian, Boris.

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “What is it?”

At the moment it did not strike her as strange that Boris should be throwing gravel at her window at this hour of the night.

“What is it?” she repeated impatiently.

“I come from the master,” said Boris in a low tone which nevertheless carried perfectly. “He has sent for you.”

He made the statement in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone.

“Sent for me?”

“Yes, I am to bring you to him. There is a note. I will throw it up to you.”

Virginia stood back a little, and a slip of paper, weighted with a stone, fell accurately at her feet. She unfolded it and read:

My dear (Anthony had written)—I’m in a tight place, but I mean to win through. Will you trust me and come to me?

For quite two minutes Virginia stood there, immovable, reading those few words over and over again.

She raised her head, looking round the well-appointed luxury of the bedroom as though she saw it with new eyes.

Then she leaned out of the window again.

“What am I to do?” she asked.

“The detectives are the other side of the house, outside the Council Chamber. Come down and out through the side door. I will be there. I have a car waiting outside in the road.”

Virginia nodded. Quickly she changed her dress for one of fawn tricot, and pulled on a little fawn leather hat.

Then, smiling a little, she wrote a short note, addressed it to Bundle and pinned it to the pincushion.

She stole quietly downstairs and undid the bolts of the side door. Just a moment she paused, then, with a little gallant toss of the head, the same toss of the head with which her ancestors had gone into action in the Crusades, she passed through.

Twenty-six

THE 13TH OF OCTOBER

At ten o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, the 13th of October, Anthony Cade walked into Harridge's Hotel and asked for Baron Lolopretjzyl who was occupying a suite there.

After suitable and imposing delay, Anthony was taken to the suite in question. The Baron was standing on the hearthrug in a correct and stiff fashion. Little Captain Andrassy, equally correct as to demeanour, but with a slightly hostile attitude, was also present.

The usual bows, clicking of heels, and other formal greetings of etiquette took place. Anthony was, by now, thoroughly conversant with the routine.

"You will forgive this early call I trust, Baron," he said cheerfully, laying down his hat and stick on the table. "As a matter of fact, I have a little business proposition to make to you."

"Ha! Is that so?" said the Baron.

Captain Andrassy, who had never overcome his initial distrust of Anthony, looked suspicious.

"Business," said Anthony, "is based on the well-known principle of supply and demand. You want something, the other man has it. The only thing left to settle is the price."

The Baron looked at him attentively, but said nothing.

"Between a Herzoslovakian nobleman and an English gentleman the terms should be easily arranged," said Anthony rapidly.

He blushed a little as he said it. Such words do not rise easily to an Englishman's lips, but he had observed on previous occasions the enormous

effect of such phraseology upon the Baron's mentality. True enough, the charm worked.

"That is so," said the Baron approvingly, nodding his head. "That is entirely so."

Even Captain Andrassy appeared to unbend a little, and nodded his head also.

"Very good," said Anthony. "I won't beat about the bush any more—"

"What is that, you say?" interrupted the Baron. "To beat about the bush? I do not comprehend?"

"A mere figure of speech, Baron. To speak in plain English, you want the goods, we have them! The ship is all very well, but it lacks a figurehead. By the ship, I mean the Loyalist party of Herzoslovakia. At the present minute you lack the principal plank of your political programme. You are minus a prince! Now supposing—only supposing, that I could supply you with a prince?"

The baron stared.

"I do not comprehend you in the least," he declared.

"Sir," said Captain Andrassy, twirling his moustache fiercely, "you are insulting!"

"Not at all," said Anthony. "I'm trying to be helpful. Supply and demand, you understand. It's all perfectly fair and square. No princes supplied unless genuine—see trademark. If we come to terms, you'll find it's quite all right. I'm offering you the real genuine article—out of the bottom drawer."

"Not in the least," the Baron declared again, "do I comprehend you."

"It doesn't really matter," said Anthony kindly. "I just want you to get used to the idea. To put it vulgarly, I've got something up my sleeve. Just get hold of this. You want a prince. Under certain conditions, I will undertake to supply you with one."

The Baron and Andrassy stared at him. Anthony took up his hat and stick again and prepared to depart.

“Just think it over. Now, Baron, there is one thing further. You must come down to Chimneys this evening—Captain Andrassy also. Several very curious things are likely to happen there. Shall we make an appointment? Say in the Council Chamber at nine o’clock? Thank you, gentlemen, I may rely upon you to be there?”

The Baron took a step forward and looked searchingly in Anthony’s face.

“Mr. Cade,” he said, not without dignity, “it is not, I hope, that you wish to make fun of me?”

Anthony returned his gaze steadily.

“Baron,” he said, and there was a curious note in his voice, “when this evening is over, I think you will be the first to admit that there is more earnest than jest about this business.”

Bowing to both men, he left the room.

His next call was in the City where he sent in his card to Mr. Herman Isaacstein.

After some delay, Anthony was received by a pale and exquisitely dressed underling with an engaging manner, and a military title.

“You wanted to see Mr. Isaacstein, didn’t you?” said the young man. “I’m afraid he’s most awfully busy this morning—board meetings and all that sort of thing, you know. Is it anything that I can do?”

“I must see him personally,” said Anthony, and added carelessly, “I’ve just come up from Chimneys.”

The young man was slightly staggered by the mention of Chimneys.

“Oh!” he said doubtfully. “Well, I’ll see.”

“Tell him it’s important,” said Anthony.

“Message from Lord Caterham?” suggested the young man.

“Something of the kind,” said Anthony, “but it’s imperative that I should see Mr. Isaacstein at once.”

Two minutes later Anthony was conducted into a sumptuous inner sanctum where he was principally impressed by the immense size and roomy depths of the leather-covered armchairs.

Mr. Isaacstein rose to greet him.

“You must forgive my looking you up like this,” said Anthony. “I know that you’re a busy man, and I’m not going to waste more of your time than I can help. It’s just a little matter of business that I want to put before you.”

Isaacstein looked at him attentively for a minute or two out of his beady black eyes.

“Have a cigar,” he said unexpectedly, holding out an open box.

“Thank you,” said Anthony. “I don’t mind if I do.”

He helped himself.

“It’s about this Herzoslovakian business,” continued Anthony as he accepted a match. He noted the momentary flickering of the other’s steady gaze. “The murder of Prince Michael must have rather upset the applecart.”

Mr. Isaacstein raised one eyebrow, murmured. “Ah?” interrogatively and transferred his gaze to the ceiling.

“Oil,” said Anthony, thoughtfully surveying the polished surface of the desk. “Wonderful thing, oil.”

He felt the slight start the financier gave.

“Do you mind coming to the point, Mr. Cade?”

“Not at all. I imagine, Mr. Isaacstein, that if those oil concessions are granted to another company you won’t be exactly pleased about it?”

“What’s the proposition?” asked the other, looking straight at him.

“A suitable claimant to the throne, full of pro-British sympathies.”

“Where have you got him?”

“That’s my business.”

Isaacstein acknowledged the retort by a slight smile, his glance had grown hard and keen.

“The genuine article? I can’t stand for any funny business?”

“The absolute genuine article.”

“Straight?”

“Straight.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You don’t seem to take much convincing?” said Anthony, looking curiously at him.

Herman Isaacstein smiled.

“I shouldn’t be where I am now if I hadn’t learnt to know whether a man is speaking the truth or not,” he replied simply. “What terms do you want?”

“The same loan, on the same conditions, that you offered to Prince Michael.”

“What about yourself?”

“For the moment, nothing, except that I want you to come down to Chimneys tonight.”

“No,” said Isaacstein, with some decision. “I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Dining out—rather an important dinner.”

“All the same, I’m afraid you’ll have to cut it out—for your own sake.”

“What do you mean?”

Anthony looked at him for a full minute before he said slowly:

“Do you know that they’ve found the revolver, the one Michael was shot with? Do you know where they found it? In your suitcase.”

“What?”

Isaacstein almost leapt from his chair. His face was frenzied.

“What are you saying? What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you.”

Very obligingly, Anthony narrated the occurrences in connexion with the finding of the revolver. As he spoke the other’s face assumed a greyish tinge of absolute terror.

“But it’s false,” he screamed out as Anthony finished.

“I never put it there. I know nothing about it. It is a plot.”

“Don’t excite yourself,” said Anthony soothingly. “If that’s the case you’ll easily be able to prove it.”

“Prove it? How can I prove it?”

“If I were you,” said Anthony gently, “I’d come to Chimneys tonight.”

Isaacstein looked at him doubtfully.

“You advise it?”

Anthony leant forward and whispered to him. The financier fell back in amazement, staring at him.

“You actually mean—”

“Come and see,” said Anthony.

Twenty-seven

THE 13TH OF OCTOBER (CONTD)

The clock in the Council Chamber struck nine.

“Well,” said Lord Caterham, with a deep sigh. “Here they all are, just like little Bo-Peep’s flock, back again and wagging their tails behind them.”

He looked sadly round the room.

“Organ grinder complete with monkey,” he murmured, fixing the Baron with his eye. “Nosy Parker of Throgmorton Street—”

“I think you’re rather unkind to the Baron,” protested Bundle, to whom these confidences were being poured out. “He told me that he considered you the perfect example of English hospitality among the haute noblesse.”

“I daresay,” said Lord Caterham. “He’s always saying things like that. It makes him most fatiguing to talk to. But I can tell you I’m not nearly as much of the hospitable English gentleman as I was. As soon as I can I shall let Chimneys to an enterprising American, and go and live in an hotel. There, if anyone worries you, you can just ask for your bill and go.”

“Cheer up,” said Bundle. “We seem to have lost Mr. Fish for good.”

“I always found him rather amusing,” said Lord Caterham, who was in a contradictory temper. “It’s that precious young man of yours who has let me in for this. Why should I have this board meeting called in my house? Why doesn’t he rent The Larches or Elmhurst, or some nice villa residence like that at Streatham, and hold his company meetings there?”

“Wrong atmosphere,” said Bundle.

“No one is going to play any tricks on us, I hope?” said her father nervously. “I don’t trust that French fellow, Lemoine. The French police are

up to all sorts of dodges. Put india rubber bands round your arm, and then reconstruct the crime and make you jump, and it's registered on a thermometer. I know that when they call out 'Who killed Prince Michael?' I shall register a hundred and twenty-two or something perfectly frightful, and they'll haul me off to jail at once."

The door opened and Tredwell announced:

"Mr. George Lomax. Mr. Eversleigh."

"Enter Codders, followed by faithful dog," murmured Bundle.

Bill made a beeline for her, whilst George greeted Lord Caterham in the genial manner he assumed for public occasions.

"My dear Caterham," said George, shaking him by the hand, "I got your message and came over, of course."

"Very good of you, my dear fellow, very good of you. Delighted to see you." Lord Caterham's conscience always drove him on to an excess of geniality when he was conscious of feeling none. "Not that it was my message, but that doesn't matter at all."

In the meantime Bill was attacking Bundle in an undertone.

"I say. What's it all about? What's this I hear about Virginia bolting off in the middle of the night? She's not been kidnapped has she?"

"Oh, no," said Bundle. "She left a note pinned to the pincushion in the orthodox fashion."

"She's not gone off with anyone, has she? Not with that Colonial Johnny? I never liked the fellow, and, from all I hear, there seems to be an idea floating around that he himself is the super-crook. But I don't quite see how that can be?"

"Why not?"

"Well, this King Victor was a French fellow, and Cade's English enough."

“You don’t happen to have heard that King Victor was an accomplished linguist, and, moreover, was half Irish?”

“Oh, Lord! Then that’s why he’s made himself scarce, is it?”

“I don’t know about his making himself scarce. He disappeared the day before yesterday, as you know. But this morning we got a wire from him saying he would be down here at 9 p.m. tonight, and suggesting that Codders should be asked over. All these other people have turned up as well—asked by Mr. Cade.”

“It is a gathering,” said Bill, looking round. “One French detective by window, one English ditto by fireplace. Strong foreign element. The Stars and Stripes don’t seem to be represented?”

Bundle shook her head.

“Mr. Fish has disappeared into the blue. Virginia’s not here either. But everyone else is assembled, and I have a feeling in my bones, Bill, that we are drawing very near to the moment when somebody says ‘James, the footman,’ and everything is revealed. We’re only waiting now for Anthony Cade to arrive.”

“He’ll never show up,” said Bill.

“Then why call this company meeting, as Father calls it?”

“Ah, there’s some deep idea behind that. Depend upon it. Wants us all here while he’s somewhere else—you know the sort of thing.”

“You don’t think he’ll come, then?”

“No fear. Run his head into the lion’s mouth? Why, the room’s bristling with detectives and high officials.”

“You don’t know much about King Victor, if you think that would deter him. By all accounts, it’s the kind of situation he loves above all, and he always manages to come out on top.”

Mr. Eversleigh shook his head doubtfully.

“That would take some doing—with the dice loaded against him. He’ll never—”

The door opened again and Tredwell announced:

“Mr. Cade.”

Anthony came straight across to his host.

“Lord Caterham,” he said, “I’m giving you a frightful lot of trouble, and I’m awfully sorry about it. But I really do think that tonight will see the clearing up of the mystery.”

Lord Caterham looked mollified. He had always had a secret liking for Anthony.

“No trouble at all,” he said heartily.

“It’s very kind of you,” said Anthony. “We’re all here, I see. Then I can get on with the good work.”

“I don’t understand,” said George Lomax weightily. “I don’t understand in the least. This is all very irregular. Mr. Cade has no standing—no standing whatever. The position is a very difficult and delicate one. I am strongly of the opinion—”

George’s flood of eloquence was arrested. Moving unobtrusively to the great man’s side, Superintendent Battle whispered a few words in his ear. George looked perplexed and baffled.

“Very well, if you say so,” he remarked grudgingly. Then added in a louder tone, “I’m sure we are all willing to listen to what Mr. Cade has to say.”

Anthony ignored the palpable condescension of the other’s tone.

“It’s just a little idea of mine, that’s all,” he said cheerfully. “Probably all of you know that we got hold of a certain message in cipher the other day.

There was a reference to Richmond, and some numbers.” He paused. “Well, we had a shot at solving it—and we failed. Now in the late Count Stylptitch’s memoirs (which I happen to have read) there is a reference to a certain dinner—a ‘flower’ dinner which everyone attended wearing a badge representing a flower. The Count himself wore the exact duplicate of that curious device we found in the cavity in the secret passage. It represented a rose. If you remember, it was all rows of things—buttons, letter Es, and finally rows of knitting. Now, gentlemen, what is there in this house that is arranged in rows? Books, isn’t that so? Add to that, that in the catalogue of Lord Caterham’s library there is a book called The Life of the Earl of Richmond, and I think you will get a very fair idea of the hiding place. Starting at the volume in question, and using the numbers to denote shelves and books, I think you will find that the—er—object of our search is concealed in a dummy book, or in a cavity behind a particular book.”

Anthony looked round modestly, obviously waiting for applause.

“Upon my word, that’s very ingenious,” said Lord Caterham.

“Quite ingenious,” admitted George condescendingly. “But it remains to be seen—”

Anthony laughed.

“The proof of the pudding’s in the eating—eh? Well, I’ll soon settle that for you.” He sprang to his feet. “I’ll go to the library—”

He got no farther. M. Lemoine moved forward from the window.

“Just one moment, Mr. Cade. You permit, Lord Caterham?”

He went to the writing table, and hurriedly scribbled a few lines. He sealed them up in an envelope, and then rang the bell. Tredwell appeared in answer to it. Lemoine handed him the note.

“See that that is delivered at once, if you please.”

“Very good, sir,” said Tredwell.

With his usual dignified tread he withdrew.

Anthony, who had been standing, irresolute, sat down again.

“What’s the big idea, Lemoine?” he asked gently.

There was a sudden sense of strain in the atmosphere.

“If the jewel is where you say it is—well, it has been there for over seven years—a quarter of an hour more does not matter.”

“Go on,” said Anthony. “That wasn’t all you wanted to say?”

“No, it was not. At this juncture it is—unwise to permit any one person to leave the room. Especially if that person has rather questionable antecedents.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows and lighted a cigarette.

“I suppose a vagabond life is not very respectable,” he mused.

“Two months ago, Mr. Cade, you were in South Africa. That is admitted. Where were you before that?”

Anthony leaned back in his chair, idly blowing smoke rings.

“Canada. Wild Northwest.”

“Are you sure you were not in prison? A French prison?”

Automatically, Superintendent Battle moved a step nearer the door, as if to cut off a retreat that way, but Anthony showed no signs of doing anything dramatic.

Instead, he stared at the French detective, and then burst out laughing.

“My poor Lemoine. It is a monomania with you! You do indeed see King Victor everywhere. So you fancy that I am that interesting gentleman?”

“Do you deny it?”

Anthony brushed a fleck of ash from his coat sleeve.

“I never deny anything that amuses me,” he said lightly. “But the accusation is really too ridiculous.”

“Ah! you think so?” The Frenchman leant forward. His face was twitching painfully, and yet he seemed perplexed and baffled—as though something in Anthony’s manner puzzled him. “What if I tell you, monsieur, that this time—this time—I am out to get King Victor, and nothing shall stop me!”

“Very laudable,” was Anthony’s comment. “You’ve been out to get him before, though, haven’t you, Lemoine? And he’s got the better of you. Aren’t you afraid that that may happen again? He’s a slippery fellow, by all accounts.”

The conversation had developed into a duel between the detective and Anthony. Everyone else in the room was conscious of the tension. It was a fight to a finish between the Frenchman, painfully in earnest, and the man who smoked so calmly and whose words seemed to show that he had not a care in the world.

“If I were you, Lemoine,” continued Anthony, “I should be very, very careful. Watch your step, and all that sort of thing.”

“This time,” said Lemoine grimly, “there will be no mistake.”

“You seem very sure about it all,” said Anthony. “But there’s such a thing as evidence, you know.”

Lemoine smiled, and something in his smile seemed to attract Anthony’s attention. He sat up and stubbed out his cigarette.

“You saw that note I wrote just now?” said the French detective. “It was to my people at the inn. Yesterday I received from France the fingerprints and the Bertillon measurements of King Victor—the so-called Captain O’Neill.

I have asked for them to be sent up to me here. In a few minutes we shall know whether you are the man!”

Anthony stared steadily at him. Then a little smile crept over his face.

“You’re really rather clever, Lemoine. I never thought of that. The documents will arrive, you will induce me to dip my fingers in the ink, or something equally unpleasant, and you will measure my ears and look for my distinguishing marks. And if they agree—”

“Well,” said Lemoine, “if they agree—eh?”

Anthony leaned forward in his chair.

“Well, if they do agree,” he said very gently, “what then?”

“What then?” The detective seemed taken aback. “But—I shall have proved then that you are King Victor!”

But for the first time, a shade of uncertainty crept into his manner.

“That will doubtless be a great satisfaction to you,” said Anthony. “But I don’t quite see where it’s going to hurt me. I’m not admitting anything, but supposing, just for the sake of argument, that I was King Victor—I might be trying to repent, you know.”

“Repent?”

“That’s the idea. Put yourself in King Victor’s place, Lemoine. Use your imagination. You’ve just come out of prison. You’re getting on in life. You’ve lost the first fine rapture of the adventurous life. Say, even that you meet a beautiful girl. You think of marrying and settling down somewhere in the country where you can grow vegetable marrows. You decide from henceforth to lead a blameless life. Put yourself in King Victor’s place. Can’t you imagine feeling like that?”

“I do not think that I should feel like that,” said Lemoine with a sardonic smile.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t,” admitted Anthony. “But then you’re not King Victor, are you? You can’t possibly know what he feels like.”

“But it is nonsense, what you are saying there,” spluttered the Frenchman.

“Oh, no, it isn’t. Come now, Lemoine, if I’m King Victor, what have you against me after all? You could never get the necessary evidence in the old, old days, remember. I’ve served my sentence, and that’s all there is to it. I suppose you could arrest me for the French equivalent of ‘Loitering with intent to commit a felony,’ but that would be poor satisfaction, wouldn’t it?”

“You forget,” said Lemoine. “America! How about this business of obtaining money under false pretences, and passing yourself off as Prince Nicholas Obolovitch?”

“No good, Lemoine,” said Anthony, “I was nowhere near America at the time. And I can prove that easily enough. If King Victor impersonated Prince Nicholas in America, then I’m not King Victor. You’re sure he was impersonated? That it wasn’t the man himself?”

Superintendent Battle suddenly interposed.

“The man was an imposter all right, Mr. Cade.”

“I wouldn’t contradict you, Battle,” said Anthony. “You have such a habit of being always right. Are you equally sure that Prince Nicholas died in the Congo?”

Battle looked at him curiously.

“I wouldn’t swear to that, sir. But it’s generally believed.”

“Careful man. What’s your motto? Plenty of rope, eh? I’ve taken a leaf out of your book. I’ve given M. Lemoine plenty of rope. I’ve not denied his accusations. But, all the same, I’m afraid he’s going to be disappointed. You see I always believe in having something up one’s sleeve. Anticipating that some little unpleasantness might arise here, I took the precaution to bring a trump card along with me. It—or rather he—is upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” said Lord Caterham, very interested.

“Yes, he’s been having rather a trying time of it lately, poor fellow. Got a nasty bump on the head from someone. I’ve been looking after him.”

Suddenly the deep voice of Mr. Isaacstein broke in: “Can we guess who he is?”

“If you like,” said Anthony, “but—”

Lemoine interrupted with sudden ferocity:

“All this is foolery. You think to outwit me yet again. It may be true what you say—that you were not in America. You are too clever to say it if it were not true. But there is something else. Murder! Yes, murder. The murder of Prince Michael. He interfered with you that night as you were looking for the jewel.”

“Lemoine, have you ever known King Victor do murder?” Anthony’s voice rang out sharply. “You know as well—better than I do, that he has never shed blood.”

“Who else but you could have murdered him?” cried Lemoine. “Tell me that!”

The last word died on his lips, as a shrill whistle sounded from the terrace outside. Anthony sprang up, all his assumed nonchalance laid aside.

“You ask me who murdered Prince Michael?” he cried. “I won’t tell you—I’ll show you. That whistle was the signal I’ve been waiting for. The murderer of Prince Michael is in the library now.”

He sprang out through the window, and the others followed him as he led the way round the terrace, until they came to the library window. He pushed the window, and it yielded to his touch.

Very softly he held aside the thick curtain, so that they could look into the room.

Standing by the bookcase was a dark figure, hurriedly pulling out and replacing volumes, so absorbed in the task that no outside sound was heeded.

And then, as they stood watching, trying to recognize the figure that was vaguely silhouetted against the light of the electric torch it carried, someone sprang past them with a sound like the roar of a wild beast.

The torch fell to the ground, was extinguished, and the sounds of a terrific struggle filled the room. Lord Caterham groped his way to the lights and switched them on.

Two figures were swaying together. And as they looked the end came. The short sharp crack of a pistol shot, and the small figure crumbled up and fell. The other figure turned and faced them—it was Boris, his eyes alight with rage.

“She killed my master,” he growled. “Now she tries to shoot me. I would have taken the pistol from her and shot her, but it went off in the struggle. St. Michael directed it. The evil woman is dead.”

“A woman?” cried George Lomax.

They drew nearer. On the floor, the pistol still clasped in her hand, and an expression of deadly malignity on her face, lay—Mademoiselle Brun.

Twenty-eight

KING VICTOR

“I suspected her from the first,” explained Anthony. “There was a light in her room on the night of the murder. Afterwards, I wavered. I made inquiries about her in Brittany, and came back satisfied that she was what she represented herself to be. I was a fool. Because the Comtesse de Breteuil had employed a Mademoiselle Brun and spoke highly of her, it never occurred to me that the real Mademoiselle Brun might have been kidnapped on her way to her new post, and that it might be a substitute taking her place. Instead I shifted my suspicions to Mr. Fish. It was not until he had followed me to Dover, and we had had a mutual explanation, that I began to see clearly. Once I knew that he was a Pinkerton’s man, trailing King Victor, my suspicions swung back again to their original object.

“The thing that worried me most was that Mrs. Revel had definitely recognized the woman. Then I remembered that it was only after I had mentioned her being Madame de Breteuil’s governess. And all she had said was that that accounted for the fact that the woman’s face was familiar to her. Superintendent Battle will tell you that a deliberate plot was formed to keep Mrs. Revel from coming to Chimneys. Nothing more nor less than a dead body, in fact. And though the murder was the work of the Comrades of the Red Hand, punishing supposed treachery on the part of the victim, the staging of it, and the absence of the Comrade’s sign manual, pointed to some abler intelligence directing operations. From the first, I suspected some connexion with Herzoslovakia. Mrs. Revel was the only member of the house party who had been to the country. I suspected at first that someone was impersonating Prince Michael, but that proved to be a totally erroneous idea. When I realized the possibility of Mademoiselle Brun’s being an imposter, and added to that the fact that her face was familiar to Mrs. Revel, I began to see daylight. It was evidently very important that she should not be recognized, and Mrs. Revel was the only person likely to do so.”

“But who was she?” said Lord Caterham. “Someone Mrs. Revel had known in Herzoslovakia?”

“I think the Baron might be able to tell us,” said Anthony.

“I?” The Baron stared at him, then down at the motionless figure.

“Look well,” said Anthony. “Don’t be put off by the makeup. She was an actress once, remember.”

The Baron stared again. Suddenly he started.

“God in heaven,” he breathed, “it is not possible.”

“What is not possible?” asked George. “Who is the lady? You recognize her, Baron?”

“No, no, it is not possible.” The Baron continued to mutter. “She was killed. They were both killed. On the steps of the palace. Her body was recovered.”

“Mutilated and unrecognizable,” Anthony reminded him. “She managed to put up a bluff. I think she escaped to America, and has spent a good many years lying low in deadly terror of the Comrades of the Red Hand. They promoted the revolution, remember, and, to use an expressive phrase, they always had it in for her. Then King Victor was released, and they planned to recover the diamond together. She was searching for it that night when she came suddenly upon Prince Michael, and he recognized her. There was never much fear of her meeting him in the ordinary way of things. Royal guests don’t come in contact with governesses, and she could always retire with a convenient migraine, as she did the day the Baron was here.

“However, she met Prince Michael face to face when she least expected it. Exposure and disgrace stared her in the face. She shot him. It was she who placed the revolver in Isaacstein’s suitcase, so as to confuse the trail, and she who returned the letters.”

Lemoine moved forward.

“She was coming down to search for the jewel that night, you say,” he said. “Might she not have been going to meet her accomplice, King Victor, who was coming from outside? Eh? What do you say to that?”

Anthony sighed.

“Still at it, my dear Lemoine? How persistent you are! You won’t take my hint that I’ve got a trump card up my sleeve?”

But George, whose mind worked slowly, now broke in.

“I am still completely at sea. Who was this lady, Baron? You recognize her, it seems?”

But the Baron drew himself up and stood very straight and stiff.

“You are in error, Mr. Lomax. To my knowledge I have not this lady seen before. A complete stranger she is to me.”

“But—”

George stared at him—bewildered.

The Baron took him into a corner of the room, and murmured something into his ear. Anthony watched with a good deal of enjoyment, George’s face turning slowly purple, his eyes bulging, and all the incipient symptoms of apoplexy. A murmur of George’s throaty voice came to him.

“Certainly . . . certainly . . . by all means . . . no need at all . . . complicate situation . . . utmost discretion.”

“Ah!” Lemoine hit the table sharply with his hand. “I do not care about all this! The murder of Prince Michael—that was not my affair. I want King Victor.”

Anthony shook his head gently.

“I’m sorry for you, Lemoine. You’re really a very able fellow. But, all the same, you’re going to lose the trick. I’m about to play my trump card.”

He stepped across the room and rang the bell. Tredwell answered it.

“A gentlemen arrived with me this evening, Tredwell.”

“Yes, sir, a foreign gentleman.”

“Quite so. Will you kindly ask him to join us here as soon as possible?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tredwell withdrew.

“Entry of the trump card, the mysterious Monsieur X,” remarked Anthony.

“Who is he? Can anyone guess?”

“Putting two and two together,” said Herman Isaacstein, “what with your mysterious hints this morning, and your attitude this afternoon, I should say there was no doubt about it. Somehow or other you’ve managed to get hold of Prince Nicholas of Herzoslovakia.”

“You think the same, Baron?”

“I do. Unless yet another impostor you have put forward. But that I will not believe. With me, your dealings most honourable have been.”

“Thank you, Baron. I shan’t forget those words. So you are all agreed?”

His eyes swept round the circle of waiting faces. Only Lemoine did not respond, but kept his eyes fixed sullenly on the table.

Anthony’s quick ears had caught the sound of footsteps outside in the hall.

“And yet, you know,” he said with a queer smile, “you’re all wrong!”

He crossed swiftly to the door and flung it open.

A man stood on the threshold—a man with a neat black beard, eyeglasses, and a foppish appearance slightly marred by a bandage round the head.

“Allow me to present to you the real Monsieur Lemoine of the Sûreté.”

There was a rush and a scuffle, and then the nasal tones of Mr. Hiram Fish rose bland and reassuring from the window:

“No, you don’t, sonny—not this way. I have been stationed here this whole evening for the particular purpose of preventing your escape. You will observe that I have you covered well and good with this gun of mine. I came over to get you, and I’ve got you—but you sure are some lad!”

Twenty-nine

FURTHER EXPLANATIONS

“You owe us an explanation, I think, Mr. Cade,” said Herman Isaacstein, somewhat later in the evening.

“There’s nothing much to explain,” said Anthony modestly. “I went to Dover and Fish followed me under the impression that I was King Victor. We found a mysterious stranger imprisoned there, and as soon as we heard his story we knew where we were. The same idea again, you see. The real man kidnapped, and the false one—in this case King Victor himself—takes his place. But it seems that Battle here always thought there was something fishy about his French colleague, and wired to Paris for his fingerprints and other means of identification.”

“Ah!” cried the Baron. “The fingerprints. The Bertillon measurements that that scoundrel talked about?”

“It was a clever idea,” said Anthony. “I admired it so much that I felt forced to play it up. Besides, my doing so puzzled the false Lemoine enormously. You see, as soon as I had given the tip about the ‘rows’ and where the jewel really was, he was keen to pass on the news to his accomplice, and at the same time to keep us all in that room. The note was really to Mademoiselle Brun. He told Tredwell to deliver it at once, and Tredwell did so by taking it upstairs to the schoolroom. Lemoine accused me of being King Victor, by that means creating a diversion and preventing anyone from leaving the room. By the time all that had been cleared up and we adjourned to the library to look for the stone, he flattered himself that the stone would be no longer there to find!”

George cleared his throat.

“I must say, Mr. Cade,” he said pompously, “that I consider your action in that matter highly reprehensible. If the slightest hitch had occurred in your

plans, one of our national possessions might have disappeared beyond the hope of recovery. It was foolhardy, Mr. Cade, reprehensibly foolhardy.”

“I guess you haven’t tumbled to the little idea, Mr. Lomax,” said the drawling voice of Mr. Fish. “That historic diamond was never behind the books in the library.”

“Never?”

“Not on your life.”

“You see,” explained Anthony, “that little device of Count Stylptitch’s stood for what it had originally stood for—a rose. When that dawned upon me on Monday afternoon, I went straight to the rose garden. Mr. Fish had already tumbled to the same idea. If, standing with your back to the sundial, you take seven paces straight forward, then eight to the left and three to the right, you come to some bushes of a bright red rose called Richmond. The house has been ransacked to find the hiding place, but nobody has thought of digging in the garden. I suggest a little digging party tomorrow morning.”

“Then the story about the books in the library—”

“An invention of mine to trap the lady. Mr. Fish kept watch on the terrace, and whistled when the psychological moment had arrived. I may say that Mr. Fish and I established martial law at the Dover house, and prevented the Comrades from communicating with the false Lemoine. He sent them an order to clear out, and word was conveyed to him that this had been done. So he went happily ahead with his plans for denouncing me.”

“Well, well,” said Lord Caterham cheerfully, “everything seems to have been cleared up most satisfactorily.”

“Everything but one thing,” said Mr. Isaacstein.

“What is that?”

The great financier looked steadily at Anthony.

“What did you get me down here for? Just to assist at a dramatic scene as an interested onlooker?”

Anthony shook his head.

“No, Mr. Isaacstein. You are a busy man whose time is money. Why did you come down here originally?”

“To negotiate a loan.”

“With whom?”

“Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia.”

“Exactly. Prince Michael is dead. Are you prepared to offer the same loan on the same terms to his cousin Nicholas?”

“Can you produce him? I thought he was killed in the Congo?”

“He was killed all right. I killed him. Oh, no, I’m not a murderer. When I say I killed him, I mean that I spread the report of his death. I promise you a prince, Mr. Isaacstein. Will I do?”

“You?”

“Yes, I’m the man. Nicholas Sergius Alexander Ferdinand Obolovitch. Rather long for the kind of life I proposed to live, so I emerged from the Congo as plain Anthony Cade.”

Little Captain Andrassy sprang up.

“But this is incredible—incredible,” he spluttered. “Have a care, sir, what you say.”

“I can give you plenty of proofs,” said Anthony quietly. “I think I shall be able to convince the Baron here.”

The Baron lifted his hand.

“Your proofs I will examine, yes. But of them for me there is no need. Your word alone sufficient for me is. Besides, your English mother you much resemble. All along have I said: ‘This young man on one side or the other most highly born is.’ ”

“You have always trusted my word, Baron,” said Anthony. “I can assure you that in the days to come I shall not forget.”

Then he looked over at Superintendent Battle, whose face had remained perfectly expressionless.

“You can understand,” said Anthony with a smile, “that my position has been extremely precarious. Of all of those in the house I might be supposed to have the best reason for wishing Michael Obolovitch out of the way, since I was the next heir to the throne. I’ve been extraordinarily afraid of Battle all along. I always felt that he suspected me, but that he was held up by lack of motive.”

“I never believed for a minute that you’d shot him, sir,” said Superintendent Battle. “We’ve got a feeling in such matters. But I knew that you were afraid of something, and you puzzled me. If I’d known sooner who you really were I daresay I’d have yielded to the evidence, and arrested you.”

“I’m glad I managed to keep one guilty secret from you. You wormed everything else out of me all right. You’re a damned good man at your job Battle. I shall always think of Scotland Yard with respect.”

“Most amazing,” muttered George. “Most amazing story I ever heard. I—I can really hardly believe it. You are quite sure, Baron, that—”

“My dear Mr. Lomax,” said Anthony, with a slight hardness in his tone, “I have no intention of asking the British Foreign Office to support my claim without bringing forward the most convincing documentary evidence. I suggest that we adjourn now, and that you, the Baron, Mr. Isaacstein and myself discuss the terms of the proposed loan.”

The Baron rose to his feet, and clicked his heels together.

“It will be the proudest moment of my life, sir,” he said solemnly, “when I see you King of Herzoslovakia.”

“Oh, by the way, Baron,” said Anthony carelessly, slipping his hand through the other’s arm, “I forgot to tell you. There’s a string tied to this. I’m married, you know.”

The Baron retreated a step or two. Dismay overspread his countenance.

“Something wrong I knew there would be,” he boomed. “Merciful God in heaven! He has married a black woman in Africa!”

“Come, come, it’s not so bad as all that,” said Anthony laughing. “She’s white enough—white all through, bless her.”

“Good. A respectable morganatic affair it can be, then.”

“Not a bit of it. She’s to play Queen to my King. It’s no use shaking your head. She’s fully qualified for the post. She’s the daughter of an English peer who dates back to the time of the Conqueror. It’s very fashionable just now for royalties to marry into the aristocracy—and she knows something of Herzoslovakia.”

“My God!” cried George Lomax, startled out of his usual careful speech. “Not—not—Virginia Revel?”

“Yes,” said Anthony. “Virginia Revel.”

“My dear fellow,” cried Lord Caterham, “I mean—sir, I congratulate you. I do indeed. A delightful creature.”

“Thank you, Lord Caterham,” said Anthony. “She’s all you say and more.”

But Mr. Isaacstein was regarding him curiously.

“You’ll excuse my asking your Highness, but when did this marriage take place?”

Anthony smiled back at him.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “I married her this morning.”

Thirty

ANTHONY SIGNS ON FOR A NEW JOB

“If you will go on, gentlemen, I will follow you in a minute,” said Anthony.

He waited while the others filed out, and then turned to where Superintendent Battle was standing apparently absorbed in examining the panelling.

“Well, Battle? Want to ask me something, don’t you?”

“Well, I do, sir, though I don’t know how you knew I did. But I always marked you out as being specially quick in the uptake. I take it that the lady who is dead was the late Queen Varaga?”

“Quite right, Battle. It’ll be hushed up, I hope. You can understand what I feel about family skeletons.”

“Trust Mr. Lomax for that, sir. No one will ever know. That is, a lot of people will know, but it won’t get about.”

“Was that what you wanted to ask me about?”

“No, sir—that was only in passing. I was curious to know just what made you drop your own name—if I’m not taking too much of a liberty?”

“Not a bit of it. I’ll tell you. I killed myself for the purest motives, Battle. My mother was English, I’d been educated in England, and I was far more interested in England than in Herzoslovakia. And I felt an absolute fool knocking about the world with a comic-opera title tacked on to me. You see, when I was very young, I had democratic ideas. Believed in the purity of ideals, and the equality of all men. I especially disbelieved in kings and princes.”

“And since then?” asked Battle shrewdly.

“Oh, since then, I’ve travelled and seen the world. There’s damned little equality going about. Mind you, I still believe in democracy. But you’ve got to force it on people with a strong hand—ram it down their throats. Men don’t want to be brothers—they may some day, but they don’t now. My belief in the brotherhood of man died the day I arrived in London last week, when I observed people standing in a Tube train resolutely refuse to move up and make room for those who entered. You won’t turn people into angels by appealing to their better natures just yet awhile—but by judicious force you can coerce them into behaving more or less decently to one another to go on with. I still believe in the brotherhood of man, but it’s not coming yet awhile. Say another ten thousand years or so. It’s no good being impatient. Evolution is a slow process.”

“I’m very interested in these views of yours, sir,” said Battle with a twinkle. “And if you’ll allow me to say so, I’m sure you’ll make a very fine king out there.”

“Thank you, Battle,” said Anthony with a sigh.

“You don’t seem very happy about it, sir?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I daresay it will be rather fun. But it’s tying oneself down to regular work. I’ve always avoided that before.”

“But you consider it your duty, I suppose, sir?”

“Good Lord, no! What an idea. It’s a woman—it’s always a woman, Battle. I’d do more than be a king for her sake.”

“Quite so, sir.”

“I’ve arranged it so that the Baron and Isaacstein can’t kick. The one wants a king, and the other wants oil. They’ll both get what they want, and I’ve got—oh, Lord, Battle, have you ever been in love?”

“I am much attached to Mrs. Battle, sir.”

“Much attached to Mrs.—oh, you don’t know what I’m talking about! It’s entirely different!”

“Excuse me, sir, that man of yours is waiting outside the window.”

“Boris? So he is. He’s a wonderful fellow. It’s a mercy that pistol went off in the struggle and killed the lady. Otherwise Boris would have wrung her neck as sure as Fate, and then you would have wanted to hang him. His attachment to the Obolovitch dynasty is remarkable. The queer thing was that as soon as Michael was dead he attached himself to me—and yet he couldn’t possibly have known who I really was.”

“Instinct,” said Battle. “Like a dog.”

“Very awkward instinct I thought it at the time. I was afraid it might give the show away to you. I suppose I’d better see what he wants.”

He went out through the window. Superintendent Battle, left alone, looked after him for a minute, then apparently addressed the panelling.

“He’ll do,” said Superintendent Battle.

Outside Boris explained himself.

“Master,” he said, and led the way along the terrace.

Anthony followed him, wondering what was forward.

Presently Boris stopped and pointed with his forefinger. It was moonlight, and in front of them was a stone seat on which sat two figures.

“He is a dog,” said Anthony to himself. “And what’s more a pointer!”

He strode forward. Boris melted into the shadows.

The two figures rose to meet him. One of them was Virginia—the other—

“Hullo, Joe,” said a well-remembered voice. “This is a great girl of yours.”

“Jimmy McGrath, by all that’s wonderful,” cried Anthony. “How in the name of fortune did you get here?”

“That trip of mine into the interior went phut. Then some dagos came monkeying around. Wanted to buy that manuscript off me. Next thing I as near as nothing got a knife in the back one night. That made me think that I’d handed you out a bigger job than I knew. I thought you might need help, and I came along after you by the very next boat.”

“Wasn’t it splendid of him?” said Virginia. She squeezed Jimmy’s arm. “Why didn’t you ever tell me how frightfully nice he was? You are, Jimmy, you’re a perfect dear.”

“You two seem to be getting along all right,” said Anthony.

“Sure thing,” said Jimmy. “I was snooping round for news of you, when I connected with this dame. She wasn’t at all what I thought she’d be—some swell haughty society lady that’d scare the life out of me.”

“He told me all about the letters,” said Virginia. “And I feel almost ashamed not to have been in real trouble over them when he was such a knight-errant.”

“If I’d known what you were like,” said Jimmy gallantly, “I’d not have given him the letters. I’d have brought them to you myself. Say, young man, is the fun really over? Is there nothing for me to do?”

“By Jove,” said Anthony, “there is! Wait a minute.”

He disappeared into the house. In a minute or two he returned with a paper package which he cast into Jimmy’s arms.

“Go round to the garage and help yourself to a likely looking car. Beat it to London and deliver that parcel at 17 Everdean Square. That’s Mr. Balderson’s private address. In exchange he’ll hand you a thousand pounds.”

“What? It’s not the memoirs? I understood that they’d been burnt.”

“What do you take me for?” demanded Anthony.

“You don’t think I’d fall for a story like that, do you? I rang up the publishers at once, found out that the other was a fake call, and arranged accordingly. I made up a dummy package as I’d been directed to do. But I put the real package in the manager’s safe and handed over the dummy. The memoirs have never been out of my possession.”

“Bully for you, my son,” said Jimmy.

“Oh, Anthony,” cried Virginia. “You’re not going to let them be published?”

“I can’t help myself. I can’t let a pal like Jimmy down. But you needn’t worry. I’ve had time to wade through them, and I see now why people always hint that bigwigs don’t write their own reminiscences but hire someone to do it for them. As a writer, Stylptitch is an insufferable bore. He prosed on about statecraft, and doesn’t go in for any racy and indiscreet anecdotes. His ruling passion of secrecy held strong to the end. There’s not a word in the memoirs from beginning to end to flutter the susceptibilities of the most difficult politician. I rang up Balderson today, and arranged with him that I’d deliver the manuscript tonight before midnight. But Jimmy can do his own dirty work now that he’s here.”

“I’m off,” said Jimmy. “I like the idea of that thousand pounds—especially when I’d made up my mind it was down and out.”

“Half a second,” said Anthony. “I’ve got a confession to make to you, Virginia. Something that everyone else knows, but that I haven’t yet told you.”

“I don’t mind how many strange women you’ve loved so long as you don’t tell me about them.”

“Women!” said Anthony, with a virtuous air. “Women indeed? You ask James here what kind of women I was going about with the last time he saw me.”

“Frumps,” said Jimmy solemnly. “Utter frumps. Not one a day under forty-five.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” said Anthony, “you’re a true friend. No, it’s much worse than that. I’ve deceived you as to my real name.”

“Is it very dreadful?” said Virginia, with interest. “It isn’t something silly like Pobbles, is it? Fancy being called Mrs. Pobbles.”

“You are always thinking the worst of me.”

“I admit that I did once think you were King Victor, but only for about a minute and a half.”

“By the way, Jimmy, I’ve got a job for you—gold prospecting in the rocky fastnesses of Herzoslovakia?”

“Is there gold there?” asked Jimmy eagerly.

“Sure to be,” said Anthony. “It’s a wonderful country.”

“So you’re taking my advice and going there?”

“Yes,” said Anthony. “Your advice was worth more than you knew. Now for the confession. I wasn’t changed at nurse, or anything romantic like that, but nevertheless I am really Prince Nicholas Obolovitch of Herzoslovakia.”

“Oh, Anthony,” cried Virginia. “How perfectly screaming! And I have married you! What are we going to do about it?”

“We’ll go to Herzoslovakia and pretend to be kings and queens. Jimmy McGrath once said that the average life of a king or queen out there is under four years. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Mind?” cried Virginia. “I shall love it!”

“Isn’t she great?” murmured Jimmy.

Then, discreetly, he faded into the night. A few minutes later the sound of a car was heard.

“Nothing like letting a man do his own dirty work,” said Anthony with satisfaction. “Besides, I didn’t know how else to get rid of him. Since we were married I’ve not had one minute alone with you.”

“We’ll have a lot of fun,” said Virginia. “Teaching the brigands not to be brigands, and the assassins not to assassinate, and generally improving the moral tone of the country.”

“I like to hear these pure ideals,” said Anthony. “It makes me feel my sacrifice has not been in vain.”

“Rot,” said Virginia calmly, “you’ll enjoy being a king. It’s in your blood, you know. You were brought up to the trade of royalty, and you’ve got a natural aptitude for it, just like plumbers have a natural bent for plumbing.”

“I never think they have,” said Anthony. “But, damn it all, don’t let’s waste time talking about plumbers. Do you know that at this very minute I’m supposed to be deep in conference with Isaacstein and old Lollipop? They want to talk about oil. Oil, my God! They can just await my kingly pleasure. Virginia, do you remember my telling you once that I’d have a damned good try to make you care for me?”

“I remember,” said Virginia softly. “But Superintendent Battle was looking out of the window.”

“Well, he isn’t now,” said Anthony.

He caught her suddenly to him, kissing her eyelids, her lips, the green gold of her hair. . . .

“I do love you so, Virginia,” he whispered. “I do love you so. Do you love me?”

He looked down at her—sure of the answer.

Her head rested against his shoulder, and very low, in a sweet shaken voice, she answered:

“Not a bit!”

“You little devil,” cried Anthony, kissing her again. “Now I know for certain that I shall love you until I die. . . .”

Thirty-one

SUNDRY DETAILS

Scene—Chimneys, 11 a.m. Thursday morning.

Johnson, the police constable, with his coat off, digging.

Something in the nature of a funeral feeling seems to be in the air. The friends and relations stand round the grave that Johnson is digging.

George Lomax has the air of the principal beneficiary under the will of the deceased. Superintendent Battle, with his immovable face, seems pleased that the funeral arrangements have gone so nicely. As the undertaker, it reflects credit upon him. Lord Caterham has that solemn and shocked look which Englishmen assume when a religious ceremony is in progress.

Mr. Fish does not fit into the picture so well. He is not sufficiently grave.

Johnson bends to his task. Suddenly he straightens up. A little stir of excitement passes round.

“That’ll do, sonny,” said Mr. Fish. “We shall do nicely now.”

One perceives at once that he is really the family physician.

Johnson retires. Mr. Fish, with due solemnity, stoops over the excavation. The surgeon is about to operate.

He brings out a small canvas package. With much ceremony he hands it to Superintendent Battle. The latter, in his turn, hands it to George Lomax. The etiquette of the situation has now been carefully complied with.

George Lomax unwraps the package, slits up the oilsilk inside it, burrows into further wrapping. For a moment he holds something on the palm of his hand—then quickly shrouds it once more in cottonwool.

He clears his throat.

“At this auspicious moment,” he begins, with the clear delivery of the practised speaker.

Lord Caterham beats a precipitate retreat. On the terrace he finds his daughter.

“Bundle, is that car of yours in order?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Then take me up to town in it immediately. I’m going abroad at once—today.”

“But, Father—”

“Don’t argue with me, Bundle. George Lomax told me when he arrived this morning that he was anxious to have a few words with me privately on a matter of the utmost delicacy. He added that the King of Timbuctoo was arriving in London shortly. I won’t go through it again, Bundle, do you hear? Not for fifty George Lomaxes! If Chimneys is so valuable to the nation, let the nation buy it. Otherwise I shall sell it to a syndicate and they can turn it into an hotel.”

“Where is Codders now?”

Bundle is rising to the situation.

“At the present minute,” replied Lord Caterham, looking at his watch, “he is good for at least fifteen minutes about the Empire.”

Another picture.

Mr. Bill Eversleigh, not invited to be present at the graveside ceremony, at the telephone.

“No, really, I mean it . . . I say, don’t be huffy . . . Well, you will have supper tonight, anyway? . . . No, I haven’t. I’ve been kept to it with my nose

at the grindstone. You've no idea what Codders is like . . . I say, Dolly, you know jolly well what I think about you . . . You know I've never cared for anyone but you . . . Yes, I'll come to the show first. How does the old wheeze go? 'And the little girl tries, Hooks and Eyes' . . ."

Unearthly sounds. Mr. Eversleigh trying to hum the refrain in question.

And now George's peroration draws to a close.

". . . the lasting peace and prosperity of the British Empire!"

"I guess," said Mr. Hiram Fish sotto voce to himself and the world at large, "that this has been a great little old week."

The Seven Dials Mystery (1929)

By Agatha Christie

Introduction

by Val McDermid

Things that everybody knows about Agatha Christie: she produced a lot of books that still outsell the competition; she was the greatest plotter of the classic detective story; she did a vanishing act and turned up amnesiac in Harrogate, identified by the banjo player in the hotel band; she wrote the longest-running play in theatrical history, *The Mousetrap*; and she couldn't write thrillers.

So why am I suggesting that anyone would want to read *The Seven Dials Mystery*? After all, it has all the ingredients of the classic 1920s thriller, as exemplified by; A. E. W. Mason, Sapper and John Buchan. Secret plans, evil foreigners, marvellous cars with running boards and powerful engines, the joint threats of Germany and Communist Russia, house parties, young men wandering round with loaded revolvers and plucky young women—they're all there by the bucketload.

Oh, and let's not forget the secret society that meets behind closed doors, whose members are masked so not even they know who the other members are. Bulldog Drummond and Richard Hannay territory, surely? Which we know that Christie can't do. Right?

Wrong. Because *The Seven Dials Mystery* isn't a thriller. It's a pastiche of a thriller, an antidote to the gung-ho chest-beating of the boys. It's wry, it's got its tongue planted firmly in its cheek and it subverts the whole genre it appears to be part of, not least because as well as all of this, it also delivers cleverly dovetailed plotting with a typical Christie flourish at the end. "Ah yes," we sigh. "Fooled again." If one of our Young Turks did something similar with the thriller now, we'd all nod sagely and go, "how very postmodern, how very self-referential and knowing, how very metafictional."

But that was then and this is now. So Christie gets no credit for poking her tongue out at the big boys who set the agenda for what a thriller should be. I mean, how can a nice middle-class wife and mother be considered a subversive? How embarrassing would that be for the leather-jacketed iconoclasts?

But the fact remains that *The Seven Dials Mystery* really doesn't perform as expected.

As well as showing that when it came to sleight of hand, Agatha Christie just couldn't help herself, what *The Seven Dials Mystery* reveals is the side of its author that everybody seems to forget. (Not surprisingly, when you look at those stern jacket photographs . . .) She had a sense of humour. It was sly and shrewd, and never far from the surface.

It's there in the very first Jane Marple mystery in the character of Griselda, the hopelessly inappropriate wife of the very conservative vicar. And it continues in the Marple novels with, for example, a series of sly digs at Miss Marple's nephew, the literary novelist Raymond West, whose pretensions are a constant source of bubble-bursting on Christie's part.

And it's there in the Poirot mysteries too. Perhaps Christie's funniest as well as her most self-referential character appears regularly there—the crime writer Ariadne Oliver. Mrs. Oliver, with her perpetually bursting bags of apples and her disregard for convention, is clearly a thinly disguised version of Christie herself.

Where Christie has her Belgian detective whom she came to dislike intensely, Mrs. Oliver has a Finn. She is constantly to be heard complaining bitterly about her folly in creating a depressive detective from a country about which she knew nothing and has had to learn far too much. She moans that her publisher and her readers won't let her kill him off because they like him too much. All of this is delivered in such a way that it's impossible to avoid a wry smile at the character's expense and at Christie's too.

From the very first paragraph of *The Seven Dials Mystery*, we should be in no doubt that we're in a world of Wodehousian insouciance. No one could

have written such an opening, not even in 1929, without being conscious of its parodic quality.

That amiable youth, Jimmy Thesiger, came racing down the big staircase at Chimneys two steps at a time. So precipitate was his descent that he collided with Tredwell, the stately butler, just as the latter was crossing the hall bearing a fresh supply of hot coffee. Owing to the marvellous presence of mind and masterly agility of Tredwell, no casualty occurred. "Sorry," apologized Jimmy. "I say, Tredwell, am I the last down?"

Substitute Bertie Wooster for Jimmy Thesiger and Jeeves for Tredwell, and it wouldn't feel at all out of place. I think it's safe to say that Christie wasn't setting up in competition with Buchan and Sapper when she wrote this novel.

When critics consider Christie now, they often point to the apparent intolerance and lack of political correctness revealed by her attitudes to class and to other races. It's true that she patronises the lower classes and is extraordinarily offensive about Jews, Germans and Russians, among others. But in this she reflected the attitudes of a woman of her class and generation. It would have been remarkable if she had displayed different attitudes. Even a feminist icon like Virginia Woolf, writing at around the same time, displays an unnerving lack of insight into the lives and dreams of the "servant classes."

But that hasn't stopped people leaping on Christie as an example of all that is worst about the English. She's accused of snobbery, of insensitivity, of racial and class stereotyping.

But how valid are these criticisms? For myself, I've always thought that the true test of people's beliefs lies in their sense of humour. What they find funny will tell you far more about someone than their serious professions of belief. It's often seemed to me that those we make the butts of our jokes are those for whom we nurse our deepest and most secret contempt.

So what does Christie make fun of in this novel?

Well, first there is the aristocracy. The egotistical, indolent and almost indigent Lord Caterham (a title absurd in itself, Caterham being the epitome of stifling Home Counties suburbia) is drawn with affection, but where Buchan or Sapper would have shown him as a figure of status, worthy of respect and trust, Christie shows him as a figure of fun who is indulged by his feisty daughter. He's a not-too-distant relative of Wodehouse's Lord Emsworth.

Christie teases the nouveau riche just as wickedly. Sir Oswald and Lady Coote are perceptively lampooned, the one for his over-reaching ambition, the other for her failure to escape her lower middle-class sensibilities. We see her treated with disdain by the servants, while her husband fails to see how little acceptance his wealth, his title and his material success have brought him.

But the upper middle classes are given no more leeway than the arrivistes. The Seven Dials Mystery is peppered with ineffectual Oxbridge Foreign Office young men being rescued by their women. The men are silly asses, who avoid disaster more by luck and having the right people behind them than by finely honed judgement.

But most importantly, prejudice comes under the cosh. There are several characters in The Seven Dials Mystery about whom we are invited to make knee-jerk judgements, from the mysterious East European countess to the apparently reliable but unimaginative Scotland Yard detective. All of these snap decisions would fall into line with the received bigotry of the time.

Yet by the end of the novel, Christie has forced a reversal of almost all of these positions.

I'm not suggesting that she was actually a secret radical who was aiming to subvert the narrow-minded intolerance of her time and class. That would be patently absurd, for Agatha Christie was no revolutionary.

But she was far less of a hidebound conservative than is generally assumed. There is clearly more to The Seven Dials Mystery than a facile attempt to turn everything on its head in order to make the "least likely person" hypothesis work. There is, I believe, clear evidence that Christie saw her

world with a far clearer and colder eye than those who disparage her understand.

The Seven Dials Mystery is the perfect antidote to anyone who has overdosed on the classic English thriller from between the wars. But it's also worth reading for the sheer skill with which Christie plays with her readers' expectations and uses them to play the cleverest of narrative tricks with us.

It's all sleight of hand. And the quickness of Christie's hand still continues to deceive our eyes, all those years later.

One

ON EARLY RISING

That amiable youth, Jimmy Thesiger, came racing down the big staircase at Chimneys two steps at a time. So precipitate was his descent that he collided with Tredwell, the stately butler, just as the latter was crossing the hall bearing a fresh supply of hot coffee. Owing to the marvellous presence of mind and masterly agility of Tredwell, no casualty occurred.

“Sorry,” apologized Jimmy. “I say, Tredwell, am I the last down?”

“No, sir. Mr. Wade has not come down yet.”

“Good,” said Jimmy, and entered the breakfast room.

The room was empty save for his hostess, and her reproachful gaze gave Jimmy the same feeling of discomfort he always experienced on catching the eye of a defunct codfish exposed on a fisherman’s slab. Yet, hang it all, why should the woman look at him like that? To come down at a punctual nine thirty when staying in a country house simply wasn’t done. To be sure, it was now a quarter past eleven which was, perhaps, the outside limit, but even then—

“Afraid I’m a bit late, Lady Coote. What?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” said Lady Coote in a melancholy voice.

As a matter of fact, people being late for breakfast worried her very much. For the first ten years of her married life, Sir Oswald Coote (then plain Mr.) had, to put it badly, raised hell if his morning meal were even a half minute later than eight o’clock. Lady Coote had been disciplined to regard unpunctuality as a deadly sin of the most unpardonable nature. And habit dies hard. Also, she was an earnest woman, and she could not help asking herself what possible good these young people would ever do in the world

without early rising. As Sir Oswald so often said, to reporters and others: “I attribute my success entirely to my habits of early rising, frugal living, and methodical habits.”

Lady Coote was a big, handsome woman in a tragic sort of fashion. She had large, mournful eyes and a deep voice. An artist looking for a model for “Rachel mourning for her children” would have hailed Lady Coote with delight. She would have done well, too, in melodrama, staggering through the falling snow as the deeply wronged wife of the villain.

She looked as though she had some terrible secret sorrow in her life, and yet if the truth be told, Lady Coote had had no trouble in her life whatever, except the meteoric rise to prosperity of Sir Oswald. As a young girl she had been a jolly flamboyant creature, very much in love with Oswald Coote, the aspiring young man in the bicycle shop next to her father’s hardware store. They had lived very happily, first in a couple of rooms, and then in a tiny house, and then in a larger house, and then in successive houses of increasing magnitude, but always within a reasonable distance of “the Works,” until now Sir Oswald had reached such an eminence that he and “the Works” were no longer interdependent, and it was his pleasure to rent the very largest and most magnificent mansions available all over England. Chimneys was a historic place, and in renting it from the Marquis of Caterham for two years, Sir Oswald felt that he had attained the top notch of his ambition.

Lady Coote was not nearly so happy about it. She was a lonely woman. The principal relaxation of her early married life had been talking to “the girl”—and even when “the girl” had been multiplied by three, conversation with her domestic staff had still been the principal distraction of Lady Coote’s day. Now, with a pack of housemaids, a butler like an archbishop, several footmen of imposing proportions, a bevy of scuttling kitchen and scullery maids, a terrifying foreign chef with a “temperament,” and a housekeeper of immense proportions who alternately creaked and rustled when she moved, Lady Coote was as one marooned on a desert island.

She sighed now, heavily, and drifted out through the open window, much to the relief of Jimmy Thesiger, who at once helped himself to more kidneys and bacon on the strength of it.

Lady Coote stood for a few moments tragically on the terrace and then nerved herself to speak to MacDonald, the head gardener, who was surveying the domain over which he ruled with an autocratic eye. MacDonald was a very chief and prince among head gardeners. He knew his place—which was to rule. And he ruled—despotically.

Lady Coote approached him nervously.

“Good morning, MacDonald.”

“Good morning, m’lady.”

He spoke as head gardeners should speak—mournfully, but with dignity—like an emperor at a funeral.

“I was wondering—could we have some of those late grapes for dessert tonight?”

“They’re no fit for picking yet,” said MacDonald.

He spoke kindly but firmly.

“Oh!” said Lady Coote.

She plucked up courage.

“Oh! but I was in the end house yesterday, and I tasted one and they seemed very good.”

MacDonald looked at her, and she blushed. She was made to feel that she had taken an unpardonable liberty. Evidently the late Marchioness of Caterham had never committed such a solecism as to enter one of her own hothouses and help herself to grapes.

“If you had given orders, m’lady, a bunch should have been cut and sent in to you,” said MacDonald severely.

“Oh, thank you,” said Lady Coote. “Yes, I will do that another time.”

“But they’re no properly fit for picking yet.”

“No,” murmured Lady Coote, “no, I suppose not. We’d better leave it then.”

MacDonald maintained a masterly silence. Lady Coote nerved herself once more.

“I was going to speak to you about the piece of lawn at the back of the rose garden. I wondered if it could be used as a bowling green. Sir Oswald is very fond of a game of bowls.”

“And why not?” thought Lady Coote to herself. She had been instructed in her history of England. Had not Sir Francis Drake and his knightly companions been playing a game of bowls when the Armada was sighted? Surely a gentlemanly pursuit and one to which MacDonald could not reasonably object. But she had reckoned without the predominant trait of a good head gardener, which is to oppose any and every suggestion made to him.

“Nae doot it could be used for that purpose,” said MacDonald noncommittally.

He threw a discouraging flavour into the remark, but its real object was to lure Lady Coote on to her destruction.

“If it was cleared up and—er—cut—and—er—all that sort of thing,” she went on hopefully.

“Aye,” said MacDonald slowly. “It could be done. But it would mean taking William from the lower border.”

“Oh!” said Lady Coote doubtfully. The words “lower border” conveyed absolutely nothing to her mind—except a vague suggestion of a Scottish song—but it was clear that to MacDonald they constituted an insuperable objection.

“And that would be a pity,” said MacDonald.

“Oh, of course,” said Lady Coote. “It would.” And wondered why she agreed so fervently.

MacDonald looked at her very hard.

“Of course,” he said, “if it’s your orders, m’lady—”

He left it like that. But his menacing tone was too much for Lady Coote. She capitulated at once.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I see what you mean, MacDonald. N—no—William had better get on with the lower border.”

“That’s what I thocht meself, m’lady.”

“Yes,” said Lady Coote. “Yes, certainly.”

“I thocht you’d agree, m’lady,” said MacDonald.

“Oh, certainly,” said Lady Coote again.

MacDonald touched his hat and moved away.

Lady Coote sighed unhappily and looked after him. Jimmy Thesiger, replete with kidneys and bacon, stepped out on to the terrace beside her, and sighed in quite a different manner.

“Topping morning, eh?” he remarked.

“Is it?” said Lady Coote absently. “Oh, yes, I suppose it is. I hadn’t noticed.”

“Where are the others? Punting on the lake?”

“I expect so. I mean, I shouldn’t wonder if they were.”

Lady Coote turned and plunged abruptly into the house again. Tredwell was just examining the coffee pot.

“Oh, dear,” said Lady Coote. “Isn’t Mr.—Mr.—”

“Wade, m’lady?”

“Yes, Mr. Wade. Isn’t he down yet?”

“No, m’lady.”

“It’s very late.”

“Yes, m’lady.”

“Oh, dear. I suppose he will come down sometime, Tredwell?”

“Oh, undoubtedly, m’lady. It was eleven thirty yesterday morning when Mr. Wade came down, m’lady.”

Lady Coote glanced at the clock. It was now twenty minutes to twelve. A wave of human sympathy rushed over her.

“It’s very hard luck on you, Tredwell. Having to clear and then get lunch on the table by one o’clock.”

“I am accustomed to the ways of young gentlemen, m’lady.”

The reproof was dignified, but unmistakable. So might a prince of the Church reprove a Turk or an infidel who had unwittingly committed a solecism in all good faith.

Lady Coote blushed for the second time that morning. But a welcome interruption occurred. The door opened and a serious, spectacled young man put his head in.

“Oh, there you are, Lady Coote. Sir Oswald was asking for you.”

“Oh, I’ll go to him at once, Mr. Bateman.”

Lady Coote hurried out.

Rupert Bateman, who was Sir Oswald's private secretary, went out the other way, through the window where Jimmy Thesiger was still lounging amiably.

" 'Morning, Pongo," said Jimmy. "I suppose I shall have to go and make myself agreeable to those blasted girls. You coming?"

Bateman shook his head and hurried along the terrace and in at the library window. Jimmy grinned pleasantly at his retreating back. He and Bateman had been at school together, when Bateman had been a serious, spectacled boy, and had been nicknamed Pongo for no earthly reason whatever.

Pongo, Jimmy reflected, was very much the same sort of ass now that he had been then. The words "Life is real, life is earnest" might have been written specially for him.

Jimmy yawned and strolled slowly down to the lake. The girls were there, three of them—just the usual sort of girls, two with dark, shingled heads and one with a fair, shingled head. The one that giggled most was (he thought) called Helen—and there was another called Nancy—and the third one was, for some reason, addressed as Socks. With them were his two friends, Bill Eversleigh and Ronny Devereux, who were employed in a purely ornamental capacity at the Foreign Office.

"Hallo," said Nancy (or possibly Helen). "It's Jimmy. Where's what's his name?"

"You don't mean to say," said Bill Eversleigh, "that Gerry Wade's not up yet? Something ought to be done about it."

"If he's not careful," said Ronny Devereux, "he'll miss his breakfast altogether one day—find it's lunch or tea instead when he rolls down."

"It's a shame," said the girl called Socks. "Because it worries Lady Coote so. She gets more and more like a hen that wants to lay an egg and can't. It's too bad."

"Let's pull him out of bed," suggested Bill. "Come on, Jimmy."

“Oh! let’s be more subtle than that,” said the girl called Socks. Subtle was a word of which she was rather fond. She used it a great deal.

“I’m not subtle,” said Jimmy. “I don’t know how.”

“Let’s get together and do something about it tomorrow morning,” suggested Ronny vaguely. “You know, get him up at seven. Stagger the household. Tredwell loses his false whiskers and drops the tea urn. Lady Coote has hysterics and faints in Bill’s arms—Bill being the weight carrier. Sir Oswald says ‘Ha!’ and steel goes up a point and five eighths. Pongo registers emotion by throwing down his spectacles and stamping on them.”

“You don’t know Gerry,” said Jimmy. “I daresay enough cold water might wake him—judiciously applied, that is. But he’d only turn over and go to sleep again.”

“Oh! we must think of something more subtle than cold water,” said Socks.

“Well, what?” asked Ronny bluntly. And nobody had any answer ready.

“We ought to be able to think of something,” said Bill. “Who’s got any brains?”

“Pongo,” said Jimmy. “And here he is, rushing along in a harried manner as usual. Pongo was always the one for brains. It’s been his misfortune from his youth upwards. Let’s turn Pongo on to it.”

Mr. Bateman listened patiently to a somewhat incoherent statement. His attitude was that of one poised for flight. He delivered his solution without loss of time.

“I should suggest an alarum clock,” he said briskly. “I always use one myself for fear of oversleeping. I find that early tea brought in in a noiseless manner is sometimes powerless to awaken one.”

He hurried away.

“An alarum clock.” Ronny shook his head. “One alarum clock. It would take about a dozen to disturb Gerry Wade.”

“Well, why not?” Bill was flushed and earnest. “I’ve got it. Let’s all go into Market Basing and buy an alarum clock each.”

There was laughter and discussion. Bill and Ronny went off to get hold of cars. Jimmy was deputed to spy upon the dining room. He returned rapidly.

“He’s here right enough. Making up for lost time and wolfing down toast and marmalade. How are we going to prevent him coming along with us?”

It was decided that Lady Coote must be approached and instructed to hold him in play. Jimmy and Nancy and Helen fulfilled this duty. Lady Coote was bewildered and apprehensive.

“A rag? You will be careful, won’t you, my dears? I mean, you won’t smash the furniture and wreck things or use too much water. We’ve got to hand this house over next week, you know. I shouldn’t like Lord Caterham to think—”

Bill, who had returned from the garage, broke in reassuringly.

“That’s all right, Lady Coote. Bundle Brent—Lord Caterham’s daughter—is a great friend of mine. And there’s nothing she’d stick at—absolutely nothing! You can take it from me. And anyway there’s not going to be any damage done. This is quite a quiet affair.”

“Subtle,” said the girl called Socks.

Lady Coote went sadly along the terrace just as Gerald Wade emerged from the breakfast room. Jimmy Thesiger was a fair, cherubic young man, and all that could be said of Gerald Wade was that he was fairer and more cherubic, and that his vacuous expression made Jimmy’s face quite intelligent by contrast.

“ ‘Morning, Lady Coote,” said Gerald Wade. “Where are all the others?”

“They’ve all gone to Market Basing,” said Lady Coote.

“What for?”

“Some joke,” said Lady Coote in her deep, melancholy voice.

“Rather early in the morning for jokes,” said Mr. Wade.

“It’s not so very early in the morning,” said Lady Coote pointedly.

“I’m afraid I was a bit late coming down,” said Mr. Wade with engaging frankness. “It’s an extraordinary thing, but wherever I happen to be staying, I’m always last to be down.”

“Very extraordinary,” said Lady Coote.

“I don’t know why it is,” said Mr. Wade, meditating. “I can’t think, I’m sure.”

“Why don’t you just get up?” suggested Lady Coote.

“Oh!” said Mr. Wade. The simplicity of the solution rather took him aback.

Lady Coote went on earnestly.

“I’ve heard Sir Oswald say so many times that there’s nothing for getting a young man on in the world like punctual habits.”

“Oh, I know,” said Mr. Wade. “And I have to when I’m in town. I mean, I have to be round at the jolly old Foreign Office by eleven o’clock. You mustn’t think I’m always a slacker, Lady Coote. I say, what awfully jolly flowers you’ve got down in that lower border. I can’t remember the names of them, but we’ve got some at home—those mauve thingummybobs. My sister’s tremendously keen on gardening.”

Lady Coote was immediately diverted. Her wrongs rankled within her.

“What kind of gardeners do you have?”

“Oh just one. Rather an old fool, I believe. Doesn’t know much, but he does what he’s told. And that’s a great thing, isn’t it?”

Lady Coote agreed that it was with a depth of feeling in her voice that would have been invaluable to her as an emotional actress. They began to discourse on the iniquities of gardeners.

Meanwhile the expedition was doing well. The principal emporium of Market Basing had been invaded and the sudden demand for alarm clocks was considerably puzzling the proprietor.

“I wish we’d got Bundle here,” murmured Bill. “You know her, don’t you, Jimmy? Oh, you’d like her. She’s a splendid girl—a real good sport—and mark you, she’s got brains too. You know her, Ronny?”

Ronny shook his head.

“Don’t know Bundle? Where have you been vegetating? She’s simply it.”

“Be a bit more subtle, Bill,” said Socks. “Stop blethering about your lady friends and get on with the business.”

Mr. Murgatroyd, owner of Murgatroyd’s Stores, burst into eloquence.

“If you’ll allow me to advise you, Miss, I should say—not the 7/11 one. It’s a good clock—I’m not running it down, mark you, but I should strongly advise this kind at 10/6. Well worth the extra money. Reliability, you understand. I shouldn’t like you to say afterwards—”

It was evident to everybody that Mr. Murgatroyd must be turned off like a tap.

“We don’t want a reliable clock, said Nancy.

“It’s got to go for one day, that’s all,” said Helen.

“We don’t want a subtle one,” said Socks. “We want one with a good loud ring.”

“We want—” began Bill, but was unable to finish, because Jimmy, who was of a mechanical turn of mind, had at last grasped the mechanism. For the

next five minutes the shop was hideous with the loud raucous ringing of many alarum clocks.

In the end six excellent starters were selected.

“And I’ll tell you what,” said Ronny handsomely, “I’ll get one for Pongo. It was his idea, and it’s a shame that he should be out of it. He shall be represented among those present.”

“That’s right,” said Bill. “And I’ll take an extra one for Lady Coote. The more the merrier. And she’s doing some of the spade work. Probably gassing away to old Gerry now.”

Indeed at this precise moment Lady Coote was detailing a long story about MacDonald and a prize peach and enjoying herself very much.

The clocks were wrapped up and paid for. Mr. Murgatroyd watched the cars drive away with a puzzled air. Very spirited the young people of the upper classes nowadays, very spirited indeed, but not at all easy to understand. He turned with relief to attend to the vicar’s wife, who wanted a new kind of dripless teapot.

Two

CONCERNING ALARUM CLOCKS

“Now where shall we put them?”

Dinner was over. Lady Coote had been once more detailed for duty. Sir Oswald had unexpectedly come to the rescue by suggesting bridge—not that suggesting is the right word. Sir Oswald, as became one of “Our Captains of Industry” (No 7 of Series I), merely expressed a preference and those around him hastened to accommodate themselves to the great man’s wishes.

Rupert Bateman and Sir Oswald were partners against Lady Coote and Gerald Wade, which was a very happy arrangement. Sir Oswald played bridge, like he did everything else, extremely well, and liked a partner to correspond. Bateman was as efficient a bridge player as he was a secretary. Both of them confined themselves strictly to the matter in hand, merely uttering in curt, short barks, “Two no trumps,” “Double,” “Three spades.” Lady Coote and Gerald Wade were amiable and discursive, and the young man never failed to say at the conclusion of each hand, “I say, partner, you played that simply splendidly,” in tones of simple admiration which Lady Coote found both novel and extremely soothing. They also held very good cards.

The others were supposed to be dancing to the wireless in the big ballroom. In reality they were grouped around the door of Gerald Wade’s bedroom, and the air was full of subdued giggles and the loud ticking of clocks.

“Under the bed in a row,” suggested Jimmy in answer to Bill’s question.

“And what shall we set them at? What time, I mean? All together so that there’s one glorious whatnot, or at intervals?”

The point was hotly disputed. One party argued that for a champion sleeper like Gerry Wade the combined ringing of eight alarm clocks was necessary. The other party argued in favour of steady and sustained effort.

In the end the latter won the day. The clocks were set to go off one after the other, starting at 6:30 am.

“And I hope,” said Bill virtuously, “that this will be a lesson to him.”

“Hear, hear,” said Socks.

The business of hiding the clocks was just being begun when there was a sudden alarm.

“Hist,” cried Jimmy. “Somebody’s coming up the stairs.”

There was a panic.

“It’s all right,” said Jimmy. “It’s only Pongo.”

Taking advantage of being dummy, Mr. Bateman was going to his room for a handkerchief. He paused on his way and took in the situation at a glance. He then made a comment, a simple and practical one.

“He will hear them ticking when he goes to bed.”

The conspirators looked at each other.

“What did I tell you?” said Jimmy in a reverent voice. “Pongo always did have brains!”

The brainy one passed on.

“It’s true,” admitted Ronny Devereux, his head on one side. “Eight clocks all ticking at once do make a devil of a row. Even old Gerry, ass as he is, couldn’t miss it. He’ll guess something’s up.”

“I wonder if he is,” said Jimmy Thesiger.

“Is what?”

“Such an ass as we all think.”

Ronny stared at him.

“We all know old Gerald.”

“Do we?” said Jimmy. “I’ve sometimes thought that—well, that it isn’t possible for anyone to be quite the ass old Gerry makes himself out to be.”

They all stared at him. There was a serious look on Ronny’s face.

“Jimmy,” he said, “you’ve got brains.”

“A second Pongo,” said Bill encouragingly.

“Well, it just occurred to me, that’s all,” said Jimmy, defending himself.

“Oh! don’t let’s all be subtle,” cried Socks. “What are we to do about these clocks?”

“Here’s Pongo coming back again. Let’s ask him,” suggested Jimmy.

Pongo, urged to bring his great brain to bear upon the matter, gave his decision.

“Wait till he’s gone to bed and got to sleep. Then enter the room very quietly and put the clocks down on the floor.”

“Little Pongo’s right again,” said Jimmy. “On the word one all park clocks, and then we’ll go downstairs and disarm suspicion.”

Bridge was still proceeding—with a slight difference. Sir Oswald was now playing with his wife and was conscientiously pointing out to her the mistakes she had made during the play of each hand. Lady Coote accepted reproof good-humouredly, and with a complete lack of any real interest. She reiterated, not once, but many times:

“I see, dear. It’s so kind of you to tell me.”

And she continued to make exactly the same errors.

At intervals, Gerald Wade said to Pongo:

“Well-played, partner, jolly well-played.”

Bill Eversleigh was making calculations with Ronny Devereux.

“Say he goes to bed about twelve—what do you think we ought to give him—about an hour?”

He yawned.

“Curious thing—three in the morning is my usual time for bye-bye, but tonight, just because I know we’ve got to sit up a bit, I’d give anything to be a mother’s boy and turn in right away.”

Everyone agreed that they felt the same.

“My dear Maria,” rose the voice of Sir Oswald in mild irritation. “I have told you over and over again not to hesitate when you are wondering whether to finesse or not. You give the whole table information.”

Lady Coote had a very good answer to this—namely that as Sir Oswald was dummy, he had no right to comment on the play of the hand. But she did not make it. Instead she smiled kindly, leaned her ample chest well forward over the table, and gazed firmly into Gerald Wade’s hand where he sat on her right.

Her anxieties lulled to rest by perceiving the queen, she played the knave and took the trick and proceeded to lay down her cards.

“Four tricks and the rubber,” she announced. “I think I was very lucky to get four tricks there.”

“Lucky,” murmured Gerald Wade, as he pushed back his chair and came over to the fireside to join the others. “Lucky, she calls it. That woman

wants watching.”

Lady Coote was gathering up notes and silver.

“I know I’m not a good player,” she announced in a mournful tone which nevertheless held an undercurrent of pleasure in it. “But I’m really very lucky at the game.”

“You’ll never be a bridge player, Maria,” said Sir Oswald.

“No, dear,” said Lady Coote. “I know I shan’t. You’re always telling me so. And I do try so hard.”

“She does,” said Gerald Wade sotto voce. “There’s no subterfuge about it. She’d put her head right down on your shoulder if she couldn’t see into your hand any other way.”

“I know you try,” said Sir Oswald. “It’s just that you haven’t any card sense.”

“I know, dear,” said Lady Coote. “That’s what you’re always telling me. And you owe me another ten shillings, Oswald.”

“Do I?” Sir Oswald looked surprised.

“Yes. Seventeen hundred—eight pounds ten. You’ve only given me eight pounds.”

“Dear me,” said Sir Oswald. “My mistake.”

Lady Coote smiled at him sadly and took up the extra ten shilling note. She was very fond of her husband, but she had no intention of allowing him to cheat her out of ten shillings.

Sir Oswald moved over to a side table and became hospitable with whisky and soda. It was half past twelve when general good nights were said.

Ronny Devereux, who had the room next door to Gerald Wade’s, was told off to report progress. At a quarter to two he crept round tapping at doors.

The party, pyjamaed and dressing gowned, assembled with various scuffles and giggles and low whispers.

“His light went out twenty minutes ago,” reported Ronny in a hoarse whisper. “I thought he’d never put it out. I opened the door just now and peeped in, and he seems sound off. What about it?”

Once more the clocks were solemnly assembled. Then another difficulty arose.

“We can’t all go barging in. Make no end of a row. One person’s got to do it and the others can hand him the whatnots from the door.”

Hot discussion then arose as to the proper person to be selected.

The three girls were rejected on the grounds that they would giggle. Bill Eversleigh was rejected on the grounds of his height, weight and heavy tread, also for his general clumsiness, which latter clause he fiercely denied. Jimmy Thesiger and Ronny Devereux were considered possibles, but in the end an overwhelming majority decided in favour of Rupert Bateman.

“Pongo’s the lad,” agreed Jimmy. “Anyway, he walks like a cat—always did. And then, if Gerry should waken up, Pongo will be able to think of some rotten silly thing to say to him. You know, something plausible that’ll calm him down and not rouse his suspicions.”

“Something subtle,” suggested the girl Socks thoughtfully.

“Exactly,” said Jimmy.

Pongo performed his job neatly and efficiently. Cautiously opening the bedroom door, he disappeared into the darkness inside bearing the two largest clocks. In a minute or two he reappeared on the threshold and two more were handed to him and then again twice more. Finally he emerged. Everyone held their breath and listened. The rhythmical breathing of Gerald Wade could still be heard, but drowned, smothered and buried beneath the triumphant, impassioned ticking of Mr. Murgatroyd’s eight alarum clocks.

Three

THE JOKE THAT FAILED

“Twelve o’clock,” said Socks despairingly.

The joke—as a joke—had not gone off any too well. The alarm clocks, on the other hand, had performed their part. They had gone off—with a vigour and élan that could hardly have been surpassed and which had sent Ronny Devereux leaping out of bed with a confused idea that the day of judgment had come. If such had been the effect in the room next door, what must it have been at close quarters? Ronny hurried out in the passage and applied his ear to the crack of the door.

He expected profanity—expected it confidently and with intelligent anticipation. But he heard nothing at all. That is to say, he heard nothing of what he expected. The clocks were ticking all right—ticking in a loud, arrogant, exasperating manner. And presently another went off, ringing with a crude, deafening note that would have aroused acute irritation in a deaf man.

There was no doubt about it; the clocks had performed their part faithfully. They did all and more than Mr. Murgatroyd had claimed for them. But apparently they had met their match in Gerald Wade.

The syndicate was inclined to be despondent about it.

“The lad isn’t human,” grumbled Jimmy Thesiger.

“Probably thought he heard the telephone in the distance and rolled over and went to sleep again,” suggested Helen (or possibly Nancy).

“It seems to me very remarkable,” said Rupert Bateman seriously. “I think he ought to see a doctor about it.”

“Some disease of the eardrums,” suggested Bill hopefully.

“Well, if you ask me,” said Socks, “I think he’s just spoofing us. Of course they woke him up. But he’s just going to do us down by pretending that he didn’t hear anything.”

Everyone looked at Socks with respect and admiration.

“It’s an idea,” said Bill.

“He’s subtle, that’s what it is,” said Socks. “You’ll see, he’ll be extra late for breakfast this morning—just to show us.”

And since the clock now pointed to some minutes past twelve the general opinion was that Sock’s theory was a correct one. Only Ronny Devereux demurred.

“You forget, I was outside the door when the first one went off. Whatever old Gerry decided to do later, the first one must have surprised him. He’d have let out something about it. Where did you put it, Pongo?”

“On a little table close by his ear,” said Mr. Bateman.

“That was thoughtful of you, Pongo,” said Ronny. “Now, tell me.” He turned to Bill. “If a whacking great bell started ringing within a few inches of your ear at half past six in the morning, what would you say about it?”

“Oh, Lord,” said Bill. “I should say—” He came to a stop.

“Of course you would,” said Ronny. “So would I. So would anyone. What they call the natural man would emerge. Well, it didn’t. So I say that Pongo is right—as usual—and that Gerry has got an obscure disease of the eardrums.”

“It’s now twenty past twelve,” said one of the other girls sadly.

“I say,” said Jimmy slowly, “that’s a bit beyond anything, isn’t it? I mean a joke’s a joke. But this is carrying it a bit far. It’s a shade hard on the Cootes.”

Bill stared at him.

“What are you getting at?”

“Well,” said Jimmy. “Somehow or other—it’s not like old Gerry.”

He found it hard to put into words just what he meant to say. He didn’t want to say too much, and yet—He saw Ronny looking at him. Ronny was suddenly alert.

It was at that moment Tredwell came into the room and looked around him hesitatingly.

“I thought Mr. Bateman was here,” he explained apologetically.

“Just gone out this minute through the window,” said Ronny. “Can I do anything?”

Tredwell’s eyes wandered from him to Jimmy Thesiger and then back again. As though singled out, the two young men left the room with him. Tredwell closed the dining room door carefully behind him.

“Well,” said Ronny. “What’s up?”

“Mr. Wade not having yet come down, sir, I took the liberty of sending Williams up to his room.”

“Yes?”

“Williams has just come running down in a great state of agitation, sir.” Tredwell paused—a pause of preparation. “I am afraid, sir, the poor young gentleman must have died in his sleep.”

Jimmy and Ronny stared at him.

“Nonsense,” cried Ronny at last. “It’s—it’s impossible. Gerry—” His face worked suddenly. “I’ll—I’ll run up and see. That fool Williams may have made a mistake.”

Tredwell stretched out a detaining hand. With a queer, unnatural feeling of detachment, Jimmy realized that the butler had the whole situation in hand.

“No, sir, Williams has made no mistake. I have already sent for Dr. Cartwright, and in the meantime I have taken the liberty of locking the door, preparatory to informing Sir Oswald of what has occurred. I must now find Mr. Bateman.”

Tredwell hurried away. Ronny stood like a man dazed.

“Gerry,” he muttered to himself.

Jimmy took his friend by the arm and steered him out through a side door on to a secluded portion of the terrace. He pushed him down on to a seat.

“Take it easy, old son,” he said kindly. “You’ll get your wind in a minute.”

But he looked at him rather curiously. He had no idea that Ronny was such a friend of Gerry Wade’s.

“Poor old Gerry,” he said thoughtfully. “If ever a man looked fit, he did.”

Ronny nodded.

“All that clock business seems so rotten now,” went on Jimmy. “It’s odd, isn’t it, why farce so often seems to get mixed up with tragedy?”

He was talking more or less at random, to give Ronny time to recover himself. The other moved restlessly.

“I wish that doctor would come. I want to know—”

“Know what?”

“What he—died of.”

Jimmy pursed up his lips.

“Heart?” he hazarded.

Ronny gave a short, scornful laugh.

“I say, Ronny,” said Jimmy.

“Well?”

Jimmy found a difficulty in going on.

“You don’t mean—you aren’t thinking—I mean, you haven’t got it into your head—that, well I mean he wasn’t biffed on the head or anything? Tredwell’s locking the door and all that.”

It seemed to Jimmy that his words deserved an answer, but Ronny continued to stare straight out in front of him.

Jimmy shook his head and relapsed into silence. He didn’t see that there was anything to do except just wait. So he waited.

It was Tredwell who disturbed them.

“The doctor would like to see you two gentlemen in the library, if you please, sir.”

Ronny sprang up. Jimmy followed him.

Dr. Cartwright was a thin, energetic young man with a clever face. He greeted them with a brief nod. Pongo, looking more serious and spectacled than ever, performed introductions.

“I understand you were a great friend of Mr. Wade’s,” the doctor said to Ronny.

“His greatest friend.”

“H’m. Well, this business seems straightforward enough. Sad, though. He looked a healthy young chap. Do you know if he was in the habit of smoking stuff to make him sleep?”

“Make him sleep.” Ronny stared. “He always slept like a top.”

“You never heard him complain of sleeplessness?”

“Never.”

“Well, the facts are simple enough. There’ll have to be an inquest, I’m afraid, nevertheless.”

“How did he die?”

“There’s not much doubt; I should say an overdose of chloral. The stuff was by his bed. And a bottle and glass. Very sad, these things are.”

It was Jimmy who asked the question which he felt was trembling on his friend’s lips, and yet which the other could somehow or other not get out.

“There’s no question of—foul play?”

The doctor looked at him sharply.

“Why do you say that? Any cause to suspect it, eh?”

Jimmy looked at Ronny. If Ronny knew anything now was the time to speak. But to his astonishment Ronny shook his head.

“No cause whatever,” he said clearly.

“And suicide—eh?”

“Certainly not.”

Ronny was emphatic. The doctor was not so clearly convinced.

“No troubles that you know of? Money troubles? A woman?”

Again Ronny shook his head.

“Now about his relations. They must be notified.”

“He’s got a sister—a half sister rather. Lives at Deane Priory. About twenty miles from here. When he wasn’t in town Gerry lived with her.”

“H’m,” said the Doctor. “Well, she must be told.”

“I’ll go,” said Ronny. “It’s a rotten job, but somebody’s got to do it.” He looked at Jimmy. “You know her, don’t you?”

“Slightly. I’ve danced with her once or twice.”

“Then we’ll go in your car. You don’t mind, do you? I can’t face it alone.”

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy reassuringly. “I was going to suggest it myself. I’ll go and get the old bus cranked up.”

He was glad to have something to do. Ronny’s manner puzzled him. What did he know or suspect? And why had he not voiced his suspicions, if he had them, to the doctor.

Presently the two friends were skimming along in Jimmy’s car with a cheerful disregard for such things as speed limits.

“Jimmy,” said Ronny at last, “I suppose you’re about the best pal I have—now.”

“Well” said Jimmy, “what about it?”

He spoke gruffly.

“There’s something I’d like to tell you. Something you ought to know.”

“About Gerry Wade?”

“Yes, about Gerry Wade.”

Jimmy waited.

“Well?” he inquired at last.

“I don’t know that I ought to,” said Ronny.

“Why?”

“I’m bound by a kind of promise.”

“Oh! Well then, perhaps you’d better not.”

There was a silence.

“And yet, I’d like—You see, Jimmy, your brains are better than mine.”

“They could easily be that,” said Jimmy unkindly.

“No, I can’t,” said Ronny suddenly.

“All right,” said Jimmy. “Just as you like.”

After a long silence, Ronny said:

“What’s she like?”

“Who?”

“This girl. Gerry’s sister.”

Jimmy was silent for some minutes, then he said in a voice that had somehow or other altered:

“She’s all right. In fact—well, she’s a corker.”

“Gerry was very devoted to her, I knew. He often spoke of her.”

“She was very devoted to Gerry. It—it’s going to hit her hard.”

“Yes, a nasty job.”

They were silent till they reached Deane Priory.

Miss Loraine, the maid told them, was in the garden. Unless they wanted to see Mrs. Coker.

Jimmy was eloquent that they did not want to see Mrs. Coker.

“Who’s Mrs. Coker?” asked Ronny as they went round into the somewhat neglected garden.

“The old trout who lives with Loraine.”

They had stepped out into a paved walk. At the end of it was a girl with two black spaniels. A small girl, very fair, dressed in shabby old tweeds. Not at all the girl that Ronny had expected to see. Not, in fact, Jimmy’s usual type.

Holding one dog by the collar, she came down the pathway to meet them.

“How do you do,” she said. “You mustn’t mind Elizabeth. She’s just had some puppies and she’s very suspicious.”

She had a supremely natural manner and, as she looked up smiling, the faint wild-rose flush deepened in her cheeks. Her eyes were a very dark blue—like cornflowers.

Suddenly they widened—was it with alarm? As though, already, she guessed.

Jimmy hastened to speak.

“This is Ronny Devereux, Miss Wade. You must often have heard Gerry speak of him.”

“Oh, yes.” She turned a lovely, warm, welcoming smile on him. “You’ve both been staying at Chimneys, haven’t you? Why didn’t you bring Gerry over with you?”

“We-er-couldn’t,” said Ronny, and then stopped.

Again Jimmy saw the look of fear flash into her eyes.

“Miss Wade,” he said, “I’m afraid—I mean, we’ve got bad news for you.”

She was on the alert in a moment.

“Gerry?”

“Yes—Gerry. He’s—”

She stamped her foot with sudden passion.

“Oh! tell me—tell me—” She turned suddenly on Ronny. “You’ll tell me.”

Jimmy felt a pang of jealousy, and in that moment he knew what up to now he had hesitated to admit to himself. He knew why Helen and Nancy and Socks were just “girls” to him and nothing more.

He only half-heard Ronny’s voice saying bravely:

“Yes, Miss Wade, I’ll tell you. Gerry is dead.”

She had plenty of pluck. She gasped and drew back, but in a minute or two she was asking eager, searching questions. How? When?

Ronny answered her as gently as he could.

“Sleeping draught? Gerry?”

The incredulity in her voice was plain. Jimmy gave her a glance. It was almost a glance of warning. He had a sudden feeling that Loraine in her innocence might say too much.

In his turn he explained as gently as possible the need for an inquest. She shuddered. She declined their offer of taking her back to Chimneys with them, but explained she would come over later. She had a two-seater of her own.

“But I want to be—be alone a little first,” she said piteously.

“I know,” said Ronny.

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy.

They looked at her, feeling awkward and helpless.

“Thank you both ever so much for coming.”

They drove back in silence and there was something like constraint between them.

“My God! that girl’s plucky,” said Ronny once.

Jimmy agreed.

“Gerry was my friend,” said Ronny. “It’s up to me to keep an eye on her.”

“Oh! rather. Of course.”

On returning to Chimneys Jimmy was waylaid by a tearful Lady Coote.

“That poor boy,” she kept repeating. “That poor boy.”

Jimmy made all the suitable remarks he could think of.

Lady Coote told him at great length various details about the decease of various dear friends of hers. Jimmy listened with a show of sympathy and at last managed to detach himself without actual rudeness.

He ran lightly up the stairs. Ronny was just emerging from Gerald Wade’s room. He seemed taken aback at the sight of Jimmy.

“I’ve been in to see him,” he said. “Are you going in?”

“I don’t think so,” said Jimmy, who was a healthy young man with a natural dislike of being reminded of death.

“I think all his friends ought to.”

“Oh! do you?” said Jimmy, and registered to himself an impression that Ronny Devereux was damned odd about it all.

“Yes. It’s a sign of respect.”

Jimmy sighed, but gave in.”

“Oh! very well,” he said, and passed in, setting his teeth a little.

There were white flowers arranged on the coverlet, and the room had been tidied and set to rights.

Jimmy gave one quick, nervous glance at the still, white face. Could that be cherubic, pink Gerry Wade? That still peaceful figure. He shivered.

As he turned to leave the room, his glance swept the mantelshelf and he stopped in astonishment. The alarm clocks had been ranged along it neatly in a row.

He went out sharply. Ronny was waiting for him.

“Looks very peaceful and all that. Rotten luck on him,” mumbled Jimmy.

Then he said:

“I say, Ronny, who arranged all those clocks like that in a row?”

“How should I know? One of the servants, I suppose.”

“The funny thing is,” said Jimmy, “that there are seven of them, not eight. One of them’s missing. Did you notice that?”

Ronny made an inaudible sound.

“Seven instead of eight,” said Jimmy, frowning. “I wonder why.”

Four

A LETTER

“Inconsiderate, that’s what I call it,” said Lord Caterham.

He spoke in a gentle, plaintive voice and seemed pleased with the adjective he had found.

“Yes, distinctly inconsiderate. I often find these self-made men are inconsiderate. Very possibly that is why they amass such large fortunes.”

He looked mournfully out over his ancestral acres, of which he had today regained possession.

His daughter, Lady Eileen Brent, known to her friends and society in general as “Bundle,” laughed.

“You’ll certainly never amass a large fortune,” she observed dryly, “though you didn’t do so badly out of old Coote, sticking him for this place. What was he like? Presentable?”

“One of those large men,” said Lord Caterham, shuddering slightly, “with a red square face and iron-grey hair. Powerful, you know. What they call a forceful personality. The kind of man you’d get if a steamroller were turned into a human being.”

“Rather tiring?” suggested Bundle sympathetically.

“Frightfully tiring, full of all the most depressing virtues like sobriety and punctuality. I don’t know which are the worst, powerful personalities or earnest politicians. I do so prefer the cheerful inefficient.”

“A cheerful inefficient wouldn’t have been able to pay you the price you asked for this old mausoleum,” Bundle reminded him.

Lord Caterham winced.

“I wish you wouldn’t use that word, Bundle. We were just getting away from the subject.”

“I don’t see why you’re so frightfully sensitive about it,” said Bundle. “After all, people must die somewhere.”

“They needn’t die in my house,” said Lord Caterham.

“I don’t see why not. Lots of people have. Masses of stuffy old great-grandfathers and grandmothers.”

“That’s different,” said Lord Caterham. “Naturally I expect Brents to die here—they don’t count. But I do object to strangers. And I especially object to inquests. The thing will become a habit soon. This is the second. You remember all that fuss we had four years ago? For which, by the way, I hold George Lomax entirely to blame.”

“And now you’re blaming poor old steamroller Coote. I’m sure he was quite as annoyed about it as anyone.”

“Very inconsiderate,” said Lord Caterham obstinately. “People who are likely to do that sort of thing oughtn’t to be asked to stay. And you may say what you like, Bundle, I don’t like inquests. I never have and I never shall.”

“Well, this wasn’t the same sort of thing as the last one,” said Bundle soothingly. “I mean, it wasn’t a murder.”

“It might have been—from the fuss that thickhead of an inspector made. He’s never got over that business four years ago. He thinks every death that takes place here must necessarily be a case of foul play fraught with grave political significance. You’ve no idea the fuss he made. I’ve been hearing about it from Tredwell. Tested everything imaginable for fingerprints. And of course they only found the dead man’s own. The clearest case imaginable—though whether it was suicide or accident is another matter.”

“I met Gerry Wade once,” said Bundle. “He was a friend of Bill’s. You’d have liked him, Father. I never saw anyone more cheerfully inefficient than he was.”

“I don’t like anyone who comes and dies in my house on purpose to annoy me,” said Lord Caterham obstinately.

“But I certainly can’t imagine anyone murdering him,” continued Bundle. “The idea’s absurd.”

“Of course it is,” said Lord Caterham. “Or would be to anyone but an ass like Inspector Raglan.”

“I daresay looking for fingerprints made him feel important,” said Bundle soothingly. “Anyway, they brought it in ‘Death by misadventure,’ didn’t they?”

Lord Caterham acquiesced.

“They had to show some consideration for the sister’s feelings?”

“Was there a sister. I didn’t know.”

“Half sister, I believe. She was much younger. Old Wade ran away with her mother—he was always doing that sort of thing. No woman appealed to him unless she belonged to another man.”

“I’m glad there’s one bad habit you haven’t got,” said Bundle.

“I’ve always led a very respectable God-fearing life,” said Lord Caterham. “It seems extraordinary, considering how little harm I do to anybody, that I can’t be let alone. If only—”

He stopped as Bundle made a sudden excursion through the window.

“MacDonald,” called Bundle in a clear, autocratic voice.

The emperor approached. Something that might possibly have been taken for a smile of welcome tried to express itself on his countenance, but the

natural gloom of gardeners dispelled it.

“Your ladyship?” said MacDonald.

“How are you?” said Bundle.

“I’m no verra grand,” said MacDonald.

“I wanted to speak to you about the bowling green. It’s shockingly overgrown. Put someone on to it, will you?”

MacDonald shook his head dubiously.

“It would mean taking William from the lower border, m’lady.”

“Damn the lower border,” said Bundle. “Let him start at once. And MacDonald—”

“Yes, m’lady?”

“Let’s have some of those grapes in from the far house. I know it’s the wrong time to cut them because it always is, but I want them all the same. See?”

Bundle reentered the library.

“Sorry, Father,” she said. “I wanted to catch MacDonald. Were you speaking?”

“As a matter of fact I was,” said Lord Caterham. “But it doesn’t matter. What were you saying to MacDonald?”

“Trying to cure him of thinking he’s God Almighty. But that’s an impossible task. I expect the Cootes have been bad for him. MacDonald wouldn’t care one hoot, or even two hoots, for the largest steamroller that ever was. What’s Lady Coote like?”

Lord Caterham considered the question.

“Very like my idea of Mrs. Siddons,” he said at last. “I should think she went in a lot for amateur theatricals. I gather she was very upset about the clock business.”

“What clock business?”

“Tredwell has just been telling me. It seems the house party had some joke on. They bought a lot of alarm clocks and hid them about this young Wade’s room. And then, of course, the poor chap was dead. Which made the whole thing rather beastly.

Bundle nodded.

“Tredwell told me something else rather odd about the clocks,” continued Lord Caterham, who was now quite enjoying himself. “It seems that somebody collected them all and put them in a row on the mantelpiece after the poor fellow was dead.”

“Well, why not?” said Bundle.

“I don’t see why not myself,” said Lord Caterham. “But apparently there was some fuss about it. No one would own up to having done it, you see. All the servants were questioned and swore they hadn’t touched the beastly things. In fact, it was rather a mystery. And then the coroner asked questions at the inquest, and you know how difficult it is to explain things to people of that class.”

“Perfectly foul,” agreed Bundle.

“Of course,” said Lord Caterham, “it’s very difficult to get the hang of things afterwards. I didn’t quite see the point of half the things Tredwell told me. By the way, Bundle, the fellow died in your room.”

Bundle made a grimace.

“Why need people die in my room?” she asked with some indignation.

“That’s just what I’ve been saying,” said Lord Caterham, in triumph. “Inconsiderate. Everybody’s damned inconsiderate nowadays.”

“Not that I mind,” said Bundle valiantly. “Why should I?”

“I should,” said her father. “I should mind very much. I should dream things, you know—spectral hands and clanking chains.”

“Well,” said Bundle. “Great Aunt Louisa died in your bed. I wonder you don’t see her spook hovering over you.”

“I do sometimes,” said Lord Caterham, shuddering. “Especially after lobster.”

“Well, thank heaven I’m not superstitious,” declared Bundle.

Yet that evening, as she sat in front of her bedroom fire, a slim, pyjamaed figure, she found her thoughts reverting to that cheery, vacuous young man, Gerry Wade. Impossible to believe that anyone so full of the joy of living could deliberately have committed suicide. No, the other solution must be the right one. He had taken a sleeping draught and by a pure mistake had swallowed an overdose. That was possible. She did not fancy that Gerry Wade had been overburdened in an intellectual capacity.

Her gaze shifted to the mantelpiece and she began thinking about the story of the clocks. Her maid had been full of that, having just been primed by the second housemaid. She had added a detail which apparently Tredwell had not thought worthwhile retailing to Lord Caterham, but which had piqued Bundle’s curiosity.

Seven clocks had been neatly ranged on the mantelpiece; the last and remaining one had been found on the lawn outside, where it had obviously been thrown from the window.

Bundle puzzled over that point now. It seemed such an extraordinary purposeless thing to do. She could imagine that one of the maids might have tidied the clocks and then, frightened by the inquisition into the matter, have denied doing so. But surely no maid would have thrown a clock into the garden.

Had Gerry Wade done so when its first sharp summons woke him? But no; that again was impossible. Bundle remembered hearing that his death must have taken place in the early hours of the morning, and he would have been in a comatose condition for some time before that.

Bundle frowned. This business of the clocks was curious. She must get hold of Bill Eversleigh. He had been there, she knew.

To think was to act with Bundle. She got up and went over to the writing desk. It was an inlaid affair with a lid that rolled back. Bundle sat down at it, pulled a sheet of notepaper towards her and wrote.

Dear Bill,—

She paused to pull out the lower part of the desk. It had stuck halfway, as she remembered it often did. Bundle tugged at it impatiently but it did not move. She recalled that on a former occasion an envelope had been pushed back with it and had jammed it for the time being. She took a thin paper knife and slipped it into the narrow crack. She was so far successful that a corner of white paper showed. Bundle caught hold of it and drew it out. It was the first sheet of a letter, somewhat crumpled.

It was the date that first caught Bundle's eye. A big flourishing date that leaped out from the paper. Sept. 21st.

"September 21st," said Bundle slowly. "Why, surely that was—"

She broke off. Yes, she was sure of it. The 22nd was the day Gerry Wade was found dead. This, then, was a letter he must have been writing on the very evening of the tragedy.

Bundle smoothed it out and read it. It was unfinished.

"My Darling Lorraine,—I will be down on Wednesday. Am feeling awfully fit and rather pleased with myself all round. It will be heavenly to see you. Look here, do forget what I said about that Seven Dials business. I thought it was going to be more or less a joke—but it isn't—anything but. I'm sorry

I ever said anything about it—it's not the kind of business kids like you ought to be mixed up in. So forget about it, see?

“Something else I wanted to tell you—but I'm so sleepy I can't keep my eyes open.

“Oh, about Lurcher; I think—”

Here the letter broke off.

Bundle sat frowning. Seven Dials. Where was that? Some rather slummy district of London, she fancied. The words Seven Dials reminded her of something else, but for the moment she couldn't think of what. Instead her attention fastened on two phrases. “Am feeling awfully fit . . .” and “I'm so sleepy I can't keep my eyes open.”

That didn't fit in. That didn't fit in at all. For it was that very night that Gerry Wade had taken such a heavy dose of chloral that he never woke again. And if what he had written in that letter were true, why should he have taken it?

Bundle shook her head. She looked round the room and gave a slight shiver. Supposing Gerry Wade were watching her now. In this room he had died . . .

She sat very still. The silence was unbroken save for the ticking of her little gold clock. That sounded unnaturally loud and important.

Bundle glanced towards the mantelpiece. A vivid picture rose before her mind's eyes. The dead man lying on the bed, and seven clocks ticking on the mantelpiece—ticking loudly, ominously . . . ticking . . . ticking . . .

Five

THE MAN IN THE ROAD

“Father,” said Bundle, opening the door of Lord Caterham’s special sanctum and putting her head in, “I’m going up to town in the Hispano. I can’t stand the monotony down here any longer.”

“We only got home yesterday,” complained Lord Caterham.

“I know. It seems like a hundred years. I’d forgotten how dull the country could be.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Lord Caterham. “It’s peaceful, that’s what it is—peaceful. And extremely comfortable. I appreciate getting back to Tredwell more than I can tell you. That man studies my comfort in the most marvellous manner. Somebody came round only this morning to know if they could hold a tally for girl guides here—”

“A rally,” interrupted Bundle.

“Rally or tally—it’s all the same. Some silly word meaning nothing whatever. But it would have put me in a very awkward position—having to refuse—in fact, I probably shouldn’t have refused. But Tredwell got me out of it. I’ve forgotten what he said—something damned ingenious which couldn’t hurt anybody’s feelings and which knocked the idea on the head absolutely.”

“Being comfortable isn’t enough for me,” said Bundle. “I want excitement.”

Lord Caterham shuddered.

“Didn’t we have enough excitement four years ago?” he demanded plaintively.

“I’m about ready for some more,” said Bundle. “Not that I expect I shall find any in town. But at any rate I shan’t dislocate my jaw with yawning.”

“In my experience,” said Lord Caterham, “people who go about looking for trouble usually find it.” He yawned. “All the same,” he added, “I wouldn’t mind running up to town myself.”

“Well, come on,” said Bundle. “But be quick, because I’m in a hurry.”

Lord Caterham, who had begun to rise from his chair, paused.

“Did you say you were in a hurry?” he asked suspiciously.

“In the devil of a hurry,” said Bundle.

“That settles it,” said Lord Caterham. “I’m not coming. To be driven by you in the Hispano when you’re in a hurry—no, it’s not fair on any elderly man. I shall stay here.”

“Please yourself,” said Bundle, and withdrew.

Tredwell took her place.

“The vicar, my lord, is most anxious to see you, some unfortunate controversy having arisen about the status of the Boys’ Brigade.”

Lord Caterham groaned.

“I rather fancied, my lord, that I had heard you mention at breakfast that you were strolling down to the village this morning to converse with the vicar on the subject.”

“Did you tell him so?” asked Lord Caterham eagerly.

“I did, my lord. He departed, if I may say so, hot foot. I hope I did right, my lord?”

“Of course you did, Tredwell. You are always right. You couldn’t go wrong if you tried.”

Tredwell smiled benignly and withdrew.

Bundle meanwhile was sounding the Klaxon impatiently before the lodge gates, while a small child came hastening out with all speed from the lodge, admonishment from her mother following her.

“Make haste, Katie. That be her ladyship in a mortal hurry as always.”

It was indeed characteristic of Bundle to be in a hurry, especially when driving a car. She had skill and nerve and was a good driver; had it been otherwise her reckless pace would have ended in disaster more than once.

It was a crisp October day, with a blue sky and a dazzling sun. The sharp tang of the air brought the blood to Bundle’s cheeks and filled her with the zest of living.

She had that morning sent Gerald Wade’s unfinished letter to Loraine Wade at Deane Priory, enclosing a few explanatory lines. The curious impression it had made upon her was somewhat dimmed in the daylight, yet it still struck her as needing explanation. She intended to get hold of Bill Eversleigh sometime and extract from him fuller details of the house party which had ended so tragically. In the meantime, it was a lovely morning and she felt particularly well and the Hispano was running like a dream.

Bundle pressed her foot down on the accelerator and the Hispano responded at once. Mile after mile vanished, traffic was few and far between and Bundle had a clear stretch of road in front of her.

And then, without any warning whatever, a man reeled out of the hedge and on to the road right in front of the car. To stop in time was out of the question. With all her might Bundle wrenched at the steering wheel and swerved out to the right. The car was nearly in the ditch—nearly, but not quite. It was a dangerous manoeuvre; but it succeeded. Bundle was almost certain that she had missed the man.

She looked back and felt a sickening sensation in the middle of her anatomy. The car had not passed over the man, but nevertheless it must

have struck him in passing. He was lying face downwards on the road, and he lay ominously still.

Bundle jumped out and ran back. She had never yet run over anything more important than a stray hen. The fact that the accident was hardly her fault did not weigh with her at the minute. The man had seemed drunk, but drunk or not, she had killed him. She was quite sure she had killed him. Her heart beat sickeningly in great pounding thumps, sounding right up in her ears.

She knelt down by the prone figure and turned him very gingerly over. He neither groaned nor moaned. He was young, she saw, rather a pleasant-faced young man, well-dressed and wearing a small toothbrush moustache.

There was no external mark of injury that she could see, but she was quite positive that he was either dead or dying. His eyelids flickered and the eyes half-opened. Piteous eyes, brown and suffering, like a dog's. He seemed to be struggling to speak. Bundle bent right over.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes?”

There was something he wanted to say, she could see that. Wanted to say badly. And she couldn't help him, couldn't do anything.

At last the words came, a mere sighing breath:

“Seven Dials . . . tell . . .”

“Yes,” said Bundle again. It was a name he was trying to get out—trying with all his failing strength. “Yes. Who am I to tell?”

“Tell . . . Jimmy Thesiger . . .” He got it out at last, and then, suddenly, his head fell back and his body went limp.

Bundle sat back on her heels, shivering from head to foot. She could never have imagined that anything so awful could have happened to her. He was dead—and she had killed him.

She tried to pull herself together. What must she do now? A doctor—that was her first thought. It was possible—just possible—that the man might

only be unconscious, not dead. Her instinct cried out against the possibility, but she forced herself to act upon it. Somehow or other she must get him into the car and take him to the nearest doctor's. It was a deserted stretch of country road and there was no one to help her.

Bundle, for all her slimness, was strong. She had muscles of whipcord. She brought the Hispano as close as possible, and then exerting all her strength, she dragged and pulled the inanimate figure into it. It was a horrid business, and one that made her set her teeth, but at last she managed it.

Then she jumped into the driver's seat and set off. A couple of miles brought her into a small town and on inquiring she was quickly directed to the doctor's house.

Dr. Cassell, a kindly, middle-aged man, was startled to come into his surgery and find a girl there who was evidently on the verge of collapse.

Bundle spoke abruptly.

"I—I think I've killed a man. I ran over him. I brought him along in the car. He's outside now. I—I was driving too fast, I suppose. I've always driven too fast."

The doctor cast a practised glance over her. He stepped over to a shelf and poured something into a glass. He brought it over to her.

"Drink this down," he said, "and you'll feel better. You've had a shock."

Bundle drank obediently and a tinge of colour came into her pallid face. The doctor nodded approvingly.

"That's right. Now I want you to sit quietly here. I'll go out and attend to things. After I've made sure there's nothing to be done for the poor fellow, I'll come back and we'll talk about it."

He was away some time. Bundle watched the clock on the mantelpiece. Five minutes, ten minutes, a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes—would he ever come?

Then the door opened and Dr. Cassell reappeared. He looked different—Bundle noticed that at once—grimmer and at the same time more alert. There was something else in his manner that she did not quite understand, a suggestion of repressed excitement.

“Now then, young lady,” he said. “Let’s have this out. You ran over this man, you say. Tell me just how the accident happened?”

Bundle explained to the best of her ability. The doctor followed her narrative with keen attention.

“Just so; the car didn’t pass over his body?”

“No. In fact, I thought I’d missed him altogether.”

“He was reeling, you say?”

“Yes, I thought he was drunk.”

“And he came from the hedge?”

“There was a gate just there, I think. He must have come through the gate.”

The doctor nodded, then he leaned back in his chair and removed his pince-nez.

“I’ve no doubt at all,” he said, “that you’re a very reckless driver, and that you’ll probably run over some poor fellow and do for him one of these days—but you haven’t done it this time.”

“But—”

“The car never touched him. This man was shot.”

Six

SEVEN DIALS AGAIN

Bundle stared at him. And very slowly the world, which for the last three quarters of an hour had been upside down, shifted till it stood once more the right way up. It was quite two minutes before Bundle spoke, but when she did it was no longer the panic-stricken girl but the real Bundle, cool, efficient and logical.

“How could he be shot?” she said.

“I don’t know how he could,” said the doctor dryly. “But he was. He’s got a rifle bullet in him all right. He bled internally, that’s why you didn’t notice anything.”

Bundle nodded.

“The question is,” the doctor continued, “who shot him? You saw nobody about?”

Bundle shook her head.

“It’s odd,” said the doctor. “If it was an accident, you’d expect the fellow who did it would come running to the rescue—unless just possibly he didn’t know what he’d done.”

“There was no one about,” said Bundle. “On the road, that is.”

“It seems to me,” said the doctor, “that the poor lad must have been running—the bullet got him just as he passed through the gate and he came reeling on to the road in consequence. You didn’t hear a shot?”

Bundle shook her head.

“But I probably shouldn’t anyway,” she said, “with the noise of the car.”

“Just so. He didn’t say anything before he died?”

“He muttered a few words.”

“Nothing to throw light on the tragedy?”

“No. He wanted something—I don’t know what—told to a friend of his. Oh! Yes, and he mentioned Seven Dials.”

“H’m,” said Doctor Cassell. “Not a likely neighbourhood for one of his class. Perhaps his assailant came from there. Well, we needn’t worry about that now. You can leave it in my hands. I’ll notify the police. You must, of course, leave your name and address, as the police are sure to want to question you. In fact, perhaps you’d better come round to the police station with me now. They might say I ought to have detained you.”

They went together in Bundle’s car. The police inspector was a slow-speaking man. He was somewhat overawed by Bundle’s name and address when she gave it to him, and he took down her statement with great care.

“Lads!” he said. “That’s what it is. Lads practising! Cruel stupid, them young varmint are. Always loosing off at birds with no consideration for anyone as may be the other side of a hedge.”

The doctor thought it a most unlikely solution, but he realized that the case would soon be in abler hands and it did not seem worthwhile to make objections.

“Name of deceased?” asked the sergeant, moistening his pencil.

“He had a card case on him. He appeared to have been a Mr. Ronald Devereux, with an address in the Albany.”

Bundle frowned. The name Ronald Devereux awoke some chord of remembrance. She was sure she had heard it before.

It was not until she was halfway back to Chimneys in the car that it came to her. Of course! Ronny Devereux. Bill’s friend in the Foreign Office. He and Bill and—yes—Gerald Wade.

As this last realization came to her, Bundle nearly went into the hedge. First Gerald Wade—then Ronny Devereux. Gerry Wade's death might have been natural—the result of carelessness—but Ronny Devereux's surely bore a more sinister interpretation.

And then Bundle remembered something else. Seven Dials! When the dying man had said it, it had seemed vaguely familiar. Now she knew why. Gerald Wade had mentioned Seven Dials in that last letter of his written to his sister on the night before his death. And that again connected up with something else that escaped her.

Thinking all these things over, Bundle had slowed down to such a sober pace that nobody would have recognized her. She drove the car round to the garage and went in search of her father.

Lord Caterham was happily reading a catalogue of a forthcoming sale of rare editions and was immeasurably astonished to see Bundle.

“Even you,” he said, “can't have been to London and back in this time.”

“I haven't been to London,” said Bundle. “I ran over a man.”

“What?”

“Only I didn't really. He was shot.”

“How could he have been?”

“I don't know how he could have been, but he was.”

“But why did you shoot him?”

“I didn't shoot him.”

“You shouldn't shoot people,” said Lord Caterham in a tone of mild remonstrance. “You shouldn't really. I daresay some of them richly deserve it—but all the same it will lead to trouble.”

“I tell you I didn't shoot him.”

“Well, who did?”

“Nobody knows,” said Bundle.

“Nonsense,” said Lord Caterham. “A man can’t be shot and run over without anyone having done it.”

“He wasn’t run over,” said Bundle.

“I thought you said he was.”

“I said I thought I had.”

“A tyre burst, I suppose,” said Lord Caterham. “That does sound like a shot. It says so in detective stories.”

“You really are perfectly impossible, Father. You don’t seem to have the brains of a rabbit.”

“Not at all,” said Lord Caterham. “You come in with a wildly impossible tale about men being run over and shot and I don’t know what, and then you expect me to know all about it by magic.”

Bundle sighed wearily.

“Just attend,” she said. “I’ll tell you all about it in words of one syllable.”

“There,” she said when she had concluded. “Now have you got it?”

“Of course. I understand perfectly now. I can make allowances for your being a little upset, my dear. I was not far wrong when I remarked to you before starting out that people looking for trouble usually found it. I am thankful,” finished Lord Caterham with a slight shiver, “that I stayed quietly here.”

He picked up the catalogue again.

“Father, where is Seven Dials?”

“In the East End somewhere, I fancy. I have frequently observed buses going there—or do I mean Seven Sisters? I have never been there myself, I’m thankful to say. Just as well, because I don’t fancy it is the sort of spot I should like. And yet, curiously enough, I seem to have heard of it in some connection just lately.”

“You don’t know a Jimmy Thesiger, do you?”

Lord Caterham was now engrossed in his catalogue once more. He had made an effort to be intelligent on the subject of Seven Dials. This time he made hardly any effort at all.

“Thesiger,” he murmured vaguely. “Thesiger. One of the Yorkshire Thesigers?”

“That’s what I’m asking you. Do attend, Father. This is important.”

Lord Caterham made a desperate effort to look intelligent without really having to give his mind to the matter.

“There are some Yorkshire Thesigers,” he said earnestly. “And unless I am mistaken some Devonshire Thesigers also. Your Great Aunt Selina married a Thesiger.”

“What good is that to me?” cried Bundle.

Lord Caterham chuckled.

“It was very little good to her, if I remember rightly.”

“You’re impossible,” said Bundle, rising. “I shall have to get hold of Bill.”

“Do, dear,” said her father absently as he turned a page. “Certainly. By all means. Quite so.”

Bundle rose to her feet with an impatient sigh.

“I wish I could remember what that letter said,” she murmured, more to herself than aloud. “I didn’t read it very carefully. Something about a joke,

that the Seven Dials business wasn't a joke."

Lord Caterham emerged suddenly from his catalogue.

"Seven Dials?" he said. "Of course. I've got it now."

"Got what?"

"I know why it sounded so familiar. George Lomax has been over. Tredwell failed for once and let him in. He was on his way up to town. It seems he's having some political party at the Abbey next week and he got a warning letter."

"What do you mean by a warning letter?"

"Well, I don't really know. He didn't go into details. I gather it said 'Beware' and 'Trouble is at hand,' and all those sort of things. But anyway it was written from Seven Dials, I distinctly remember his saying so. He was going up to town to consult Scotland Yard about it. You know George?"

Bundle nodded. She was well-acquainted with that public-spirited Cabinet Minister, George Lomax, His Majesty's permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who was shunned by many because of his inveterate habit of quoting from his public speeches in private. In allusion to his bulging eyeballs, he was known to many—Bill Eversleigh among others—as Codders.

"Tell me," she said, "was Codders interested at all in Gerald Wade's death?"

"Not that I heard of. He may have been, of course."

Bundle said nothing for some minutes. She was busily engaged in trying to remember the exact wording of the letter she had sent on to Loraine Wade, and at the same time she was trying to picture the girl to whom it had been written. What sort of a girl was this to whom, apparently, Gerald Wade was so devoted? The more she thought over it, the more it seemed to her that it was an unusual letter for a brother to write.

“Did you say the Wade girl was Gerry’s half sister?” she asked suddenly.

“Well, of course, strictly speaking, I suppose she isn’t—wasn’t, I mean—his sister at all.”

“But her name’s Wade?”

“Not really. She wasn’t old Wade’s child. As I was saying, he ran away with his second wife, who was married to a perfect blackguard. I suppose the Courts gave the rascally husband the custody of the child, but he certainly didn’t avail himself of the privilege. Old Wade got very fond of the child and insisted that she should be called by his name.”

“I see,” said Bundle. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Something that puzzled me about that letter.”

“She’s rather a pretty girl, I believe,” said Lord Caterham. “Or so I’ve heard.”

Bundle went upstairs thoughtfully. She had several objects in view. First she must find this Jimmy Thesiger. Bill, perhaps, would be helpful there. Ronny Devereux had been a friend of Bill’s. If Jimmy Thesiger was a friend of Ronny’s, the chances were that Bill would know him too. Then there was the girl, Lorraine Wade. It was possible that she could throw some light on the problem of Seven Dials. Evidently Gerry Wade had said something to her about it. His anxiety that she should forget the fact had a sinister suggestion.

Seven

BUNDLE PAYS A CALL

Getting hold of Bill presented few difficulties. Bundle motored up to town on the following morning—this time without adventures on the way—and rang him up. Bill responded with alacrity and made various suggestions as to lunch, tea, dinner and dancing. All of which suggestions Bundle turned down as made.

“In a day or two, I’ll come and frivel with you, Bill. But for the moment I’m up on business.”

“Oh,” said Bill. “What a beastly bore.”

“It’s not that kind,” said Bundle. “It’s anything but boring. Bill, do you know anyone called Jimmy Thesiger?”

“Of course. So do you.”

“No, I don’t,” said Bundle.

“Yes, you do. You must. Everyone knows old Jimmy.”

“Sorry,” said Bundle. “Just for once I don’t seem to be everyone.”

“Oh! but you must know Jimmy—pink-faced chap. Looks a bit of an ass. But really he’s got as many brains as I have.”

“You don’t say so,” said Bundle. “He must feel a bit top heavy when he walks about.”

“Was that meant for sarcasm?”

“It was a feeble effort at it. What does Jimmy Thesiger do?”

“How do you mean, what does he do?”

“Does being at the Foreign Office prevent you from understanding your native language?”

“Oh! I see, you mean, has he got a job? No, he just fools around. Why should he do anything?”

“In fact, more money than brains?”

“Oh! I wouldn’t say that. I told you just now that he had more brains than you’d think.”

Bundle was silent. She was feeling more and more doubtful. This gilded youth did not sound a very promising ally. And yet it was his name that had come first to the dying man’s lips. Bill’s voice chimed in suddenly with singular appropriateness.

“Ronny always thought a lot of his brains. You know, Ronny Devereux. Thesiger was his greatest pal.”

“Ronny—”

Bundle stopped, undecided. Clearly Bill knew nothing of the other’s death. It occurred to Bundle for the first time that it was odd the morning papers had contained nothing of the tragedy. Surely it was the kind of spicy item of news that would never be passed over. There could be one explanation, and one explanation only. The police, for reasons of their own, were keeping the matter quiet.

Bill’s voice was continuing.

“I haven’t seen Ronny for an age—not since that weekend down at your place. You know, when poor old Gerry Wade passed out.”

He paused and then went on.

“Rather a foul business that altogether. I expect you’ve heard about it. I say, Bundle—are you there still?”

“Of course I’m here.”

“Well, you haven’t said anything for an age. I began to think that you had gone away.”

“No, I was just thinking over something.”

Should she tell Bill of Ronny’s death? She decided against it—it was not the sort of thing to be said over the telephone. But soon, very soon, she must have a meeting with Bill. In the meantime—

“Bill?”

“Hullo.”

“I might dine with you tomorrow night.”

“Good, and we’ll dance afterwards. I’ve got a lot to talk to you about. As a matter of fact I’ve been rather hard hit—the foulest luck—

“Well, tell me about it tomorrow,” said Bundle, cutting him short rather unkindly. “In the meantime, what is Jimmy Thesiger’s address?”

“Jimmy Thesiger?”

“That’s what I said.”

“He’s got rooms in Jermyn Street—do I mean Jermyn Street or the other one?”

“Bring that class A brain to bear upon it.”

“Yes, Jermyn Street. Wait a bit and I’ll give you the number.”

There was a pause.

“Are you still there?”

“I’m always here.”

“Well, one never knows with these dashed telephones. The number is 103. Got it?”

“103. Thank you, Bill.”

“Yes, but, I say—what do you want it for? You said you didn’t know him.”

“I don’t, but I shall in half an hour.”

“You’re going round to his rooms?”

“Quite right, Sherlock.”

“Yes, but, I say—well, for one thing he won’t be up.”

“Won’t be up?”

“I shouldn’t think so. I mean, who would be if they hadn’t got to? Look at it that way. You’ve no idea what an effort it is for me to get here at eleven every morning, and the fuss Codders makes if I’m behind time is simply appalling. You haven’t the least idea, Bundle, what a dog’s life this is—”

“You shall tell me all about it tomorrow night,” said Bundle hastily.

She slammed down the receiver and took stock of the situation. First she glanced at the clock. It was five and twenty minutes to twelve. Despite Bill’s knowledge of his friend’s habits, she inclined to her belief that Mr. Thesiger would by now be in a fit state to receive visitors. She took a taxi to 103 Jermyn Street.

The door was opened by a perfect example of the retired gentleman’s gentleman. His face, expressionless and polite, was such a face as may be found by the score in that particular district of London.

“Will you come this way, madam?”

He ushered her upstairs into an extremely comfortable sitting room containing leather-covered armchairs of immense dimensions. Sunk in one

of those monstrosities was another girl, rather younger than Bundle. A small, fair girl, dressed in black.

“What name shall I say, madam?”

“I won’t give any name,” said Bundle. “I just want to see Mr. Thesiger on important business.”

The grave gentleman bowed and withdrew, shutting the door noiselessly behind him.

There was a pause.

“It’s a nice morning,” said the fair girl timidly.

“It’s an awfully nice morning,” agreed Bundle.

There was another pause.

“I motored up from the country this morning,” said Bundle, plunging once more into speech. “And I thought it was going to be one of those foul fogs. But it wasn’t.”

“No,” said the other girl. “It wasn’t.” And she added: “I’ve come up from the country too.”

Bundle eyed her more attentively. She had been slightly annoyed at finding the other there. Bundle belonged to the energetic order of people who liked “to get on with it,” and she foresaw that the second visitor would have to be disposed of and got rid of before she could broach her own business. It was not a topic she could introduce before a stranger.

Now, as she looked more closely, an extraordinary idea rose to her brain. Could it be? Yes, the girl was in deep mourning; her black-clad ankles showed that. It was a long shot, but Bundle was convinced that her idea was right. She drew a long breath.

“Look here,” she said, “are you by any chance Lorraine Wade?”

Lorraine's eyes opened wide.

"Yes, I am. How clever of you to know. We've never met, have we?"

"I wrote to you yesterday, though. I'm Bundle Brent."

"It was so very kind of you to send me Gerry's letter," said Lorraine. "I've written to thank you. I never expected to see you here."

"I'll tell you why I'm here," said Bundle. "Did you know Ronny Devereux?"

Lorraine nodded.

"He came over the day that Gerry—you know. And he's been to see me two or three times since. He was one of Gerry's greatest friends."

"I know. Well—he's dead."

Lorraine's lips parted in surprise.

"Dead! But he always seemed so fit."

Bundle narrated the events of the preceding day as briefly as possible. A look of fear and horror came into Lorraine's face.

"Then it is true. It is true."

"What's true?"

"What I've thought—what I've been thinking all these weeks. Gerry didn't die a natural death. He was killed."

"You've thought that, have you?"

"Yes. Gerry would never have taken things to make him sleep." She gave the little ghost of a laugh. "He slept much too well to need them. I always thought it queer. And he thought so too—I know he did."

“Who?”

“Ronny. And now this happens. Now he’s killed too.” She paused and then went on: “That’s what I came for today. That letter of Gerry’s you sent me—as soon as I read it, I tried to get hold of Ronny, but they said he was away. So I thought I’d come and see Jimmy—he was Ronny’s other great friend. I thought perhaps he’d tell me what I ought to do.”

“You mean—” Bundle paused. “About—Seven Dials.” Loraine nodded.

“You see—” she began.

But at that moment Jimmy Thesiger entered the room.

Eight

VISITORS FOR JIMMY

We must at this point go back to some twenty minutes earlier, to a moment when Jimmy Thesiger, emerging from the mists of sleep, was conscious of a familiar voice speaking unfamiliar words.

His sleep-ridden brain tried for a moment to cope with the situation, but failed. He yawned and rolled over again.

“A young lady, sir, has called to see you.”

The voice was implacable. So prepared was it to go on repeating the statement indefinitely that Jimmy resigned himself to the inevitable. He opened his eyes and blinked.

“Eh, Stevens?” he said. “Say that again.”

“A young lady, sir, has called to see you.”

“Oh!” Jimmy strove to grasp the situation. “Why?”

“I couldn’t say, sir.”

“No, I suppose not. No,” he thought it over. “I suppose you couldn’t.”

Stevens swooped down upon a tray by the bedside.

“I will bring you some fresh tea, sir. This is cold.”

“You think that I ought to get up and—er—see the lady?”

Stevens made no reply, but he held his back very stiff and Jimmy read the signs correctly.

“Oh! very well,” he said. “I suppose I’d better. She didn’t give her name?”

“No, sir.”

“M’m. She couldn’t be by any possible chance my Aunt Jemima, could she? Because if so, I’m damned if I’m going to get up.”

“The lady, sir, could not possibly be anyone’s aunt, I should say, unless the youngest of a large family.”

“Aha,” said Jimmy. “Young and lovely. Is she—what kind is she?”

“The young lady, sir, is most undoubtedly strictly *comme il faut*, if I may use the expression.”

“You may use it,” said Jimmy graciously. “Your French pronunciation, Stevens, if I may say so, is very good. Much better than mine.”

“I am gratified to hear it, sir. I have lately been taking a correspondence course in French.”

“Have you really? You’re a wonderful chap, Stevens.”

Stevens smiled in a superior fashion and left the room. Jimmy lay trying to recall the names of any young and lovely girls strictly *comme il faut* who might be likely to come and call upon him.

Stevens reentered with fresh tea, and as Jimmy sipped it he felt a pleasurable curiosity.

“You’ve given her the paper and all that, I hope, Stevens,” he said.

“I supplied her with the Morning Post and Punch, sir.”

A ring at the bell took him away. In a few minutes he returned.

“Another young lady, sir.”

“What?”

Jimmy clutched his head.

“Another young lady; she declines to give her name, sir, but says her business is important.”

Jimmy stared at him.

“This is damned odd, Stevens. Damned odd. Look here, what time did I come home last night?”

“Just upon five o’clock, sir.”

“And was I—er—how was I?”

“Just a little cheerful, sir—nothing more. Inclined to sing ‘Rule Britannia.’”

“What an extraordinary thing,” said Jimmy. “ ‘Rule Britannia,’ eh? I cannot imagine myself in a sober state ever singing ‘Rule Britannia.’ Some latent patriotism must have emerged under the stimulus of—er—just a couple too many. I was celebrating at the ‘Mustard and Cress,’ I remember. Not nearly such an innocent spot as it sounds, Stevens.” He paused. “I was wondering —”

“Yes, sir?”

“I was wondering whether under the aforementioned stimulus I had put an advertisement in a newspaper asking for a nursery governess or something of that sort.”

Stevens coughed.

“Two girls turning up. It looks odd. I shall eschew the ‘Mustard and Cress’ in future. That’s a good word, Stevens—eschew—I met it in a crossword the other day and took a fancy to it.”

Whilst he was talking Jimmy was rapidly apparelling himself. At the end of ten minutes he was ready to face his unknown guests. As he opened the door of his sitting room the first person he saw was a dark, slim girl who

was totally unknown to him. She was standing by the mantelpiece, leaning against it. Then his glance went on to the big leather-covered armchair, and his heart missed a beat. Loraine!

It was she who rose and spoke first a little nervously.

“You must be very surprised to see me. But I had to come. I’ll explain in a minute. This is Lady Eileen Brent.”

“Bundle—that’s what I’m usually known as. You’ve probably heard of me from Bill Eversleigh.”

“Oh, rather, of course I have,” said Jimmy, endeavouring to cope with the situation. “I say, do sit down and let’s have a cocktail or something.”

Both girls declined.

“As a matter of fact,” continued Jimmy, “I’m only just out of bed.”

“That’s what Bill said,” remarked Bundle. “I told him I was coming round to see you, and he said you wouldn’t be up.”

“Well, I’m up now” said Jimmy encouragingly.

“It’s about Gerry,” said Loraine. “And now about Ronny—”

“What do you mean by ‘and now about Ronny?’ ”

“He was shot yesterday.”

“What?” cried Jimmy.

Bundle told her story for the second time. Jimmy listened like a man in a dream.

“Old Ronny—shot,” he murmured. “What is this damned business?”

He sat down on the edge of a chair, thinking for a minute or two, and then spoke in a quiet, level voice.

“There’s something I think I ought to tell you.”

“Yes,” said Bundle encouragingly.

“It was on the day Gerry Wade died. On the way over to break the news to you”—he nodded at Loraine—“in the car Ronny said something to me. That is to say, he started to tell me something. There was something he wanted to tell me, and he began about it, and then he said he was bound by a promise and couldn’t go on.”

“Bound by a promise,” said Loraine thoughtfully.

“That’s what he said. Naturally I didn’t press him after that. But he was odd—damned odd—all through. I got the impression then that he suspected—well, foul play. I thought he’d tell the doctor so. But no, not even a hint. So I thought I’d been mistaken. And afterwards, with the evidence and all—well, it seemed such a very clear case. I thought my suspicions had been all bosh.”

“But you think Ronny still suspected?” asked Bundle.

Jimmy nodded.

“That’s what I think now. Why, none of us have seen anything of him since. I believe he was playing a lone hand—trying to find out the truth about Gerry’s death, and what’s more, I believe he did find out. That’s why the devils shot him. And then he tried to send word to me, but could only get out those two words.”

“Seven Dials,” said Bundle, and shivered a little.

“Seven Dials,” said Jimmy gravely. “At any rate we’ve got that to go on with.”

Bundle turned to Loraine.

“You were just going to tell me—”

“Oh! yes. First, about the letter.” She spoke to Jimmy. “Gerry left a letter. Lady Eileen—”

“Bundle.”

“Bundle found it.” She explained the circumstances in a few words.

Jimmy listened, keenly interested. This was the first he had heard of the letter. Lorraine took it from her bag and handed it to him. He read it, then looked across at her.

“This is where you can help us. What was it Gerry wanted you to forget?”

Lorraine’s brows wrinkled a little in perplexity.

“It’s so hard to remember exactly now. I opened a letter of Gerry’s by mistake. It was written on cheap sort of paper, I remember, and very illiterate handwriting. It had some address in Seven Dials at the head of it. I realized it wasn’t for me, so I put it back in the envelope without reading it.”

“Sure?” asked Jimmy very gently.

Lorraine laughed for the first time.

“I know what you think, and I admit that women are curious. But, you see, this didn’t even look interesting. It was a kind of list of names and dates.”

“Names and dates,” said Jimmy thoughtfully.

“Gerry didn’t seem to mind much,” continued Lorraine. “He laughed. He asked me if I had ever heard of the Mafia, and then said it would be queer if a society like the Mafia started in England—but that that kind of secret society didn’t take on much with English people. ‘Our criminals,’ he said, ‘haven’t got a picturesque imagination.’ ”

Jimmy pursed up his lips into a whistle.

“I’m beginning to see,” he said. “Seven Dials must be the headquarters for some secret society. As he says in his letter to you. He thought it rather a joke to start with. But evidently it wasn’t a joke—he says as much. And there’s something else: his anxiety that you should forget what he’s told you. There can be only one reason for that—if that society suspected that you had any knowledge of its activity, you too would be in danger. Gerald realized the peril, and he was terribly anxious—for you.”

He stopped, then he went on quietly:

“I rather fancy that we’re all going to be in danger—if we go on with this.”

“If—?” cried Bundle indignantly.

“I’m talking of you two. It’s different for me. I was poor old Ronny’s pal.” He looked at Bundle. “You’ve done your bit. You’ve delivered the message he sent me. No; for God’s sake keep out of it, you and Lorraine.”

Bundle looked questioningly at the other girl. Her own mind was definitely made up, but she gave no indication of it just then. She had no wish to push Lorraine Wade into a dangerous undertaking.

But Lorraine’s small face was alight at once with indignation.

“You say that! Do you think for one minute I’d be contented to keep out of it—when they killed Gerry—my own dear Gerry, the best and dearest and kindest brother any girl ever had. The only person belonging to me I had in the whole world!”

Jimmy cleared his throat uncomfortably. Lorraine, he thought, was wonderful; simply wonderful.

“Look here,” he said awkwardly. “You mustn’t say that. About being alone in the world—all that rot. You’ve got lots of friends—only too glad to do what they can. See what I mean?”

It is possible that Lorraine did, for she suddenly blushed, and to cover her confusion began to talk nervously.

“That’s settled,” she said. “I’m going to help. Nobody’s going to stop me.”

“And so am I, of course,” said Bundle.

They both looked at Jimmy.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, quite so.”

They looked at him inquiringly.

“I was just wondering,” said Jimmy, “how we were going to begin.”

Nine

PLANS

Jimmy's words lifted the discussion at once into a more practical sphere.

"All things considered," he said, "we haven't got much to go on. In fact, just the words Seven Dials. As a matter of fact I don't even know exactly where Seven Dials is. But, anyway, we can't very well comb out the whole of that district, house by house."

"We could," said Bundle.

"Well, perhaps we could eventually—though I'm not so sure. I imagine it's a well-populated area. But it wouldn't be very subtle."

The word reminded him of the girl Socks and he smiled.

"Then, of course, there's the part of the country where Ronny was shot. We could nose around there. But the police are probably doing everything we could do, and doing it much better."

"What I like about you," said Bundle sarcastically, "is your cheerful and optimistic disposition."

"Never mind her, Jimmy," said Lorraine softly. "Go on."

"Don't be so impatient," said Jimmy to Bundle. "All the best sleuths approach a case this way, by eliminating unnecessary and unprofitable investigation. I'm coming now to the third alternative—Gerald's death. Now that we know it was murder—by the way, you do both believe that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Lorraine.

"Yes," said Bundle.

“Good. So do I. Well, it seems to me that there we do stand some faint chance. After all, if Gerry didn’t take the chloral himself, someone must have got into his room and put it there—dissolved it in the glass of water, so that when he woke up he drank it off. And of course left the empty box or bottle or whatever it was. You agree with that?”

“Ye—es,” said Bundle slowly. “But—”

“Wait. And that someone must have been in the house at the time. It couldn’t very well have been someone from outside.”

“No,” agreed Bundle, more readily this time.

“Very well. Now, that narrows down things considerably. To begin with, I suppose a good many of the servants are family ones—they’re your lot, I mean.”

“Yes,” said Bundle. “Practically all the staff stayed when we let it. All the principal ones are there still—of course there have been changes among the under servants.”

“Exactly—that’s what I am getting at. You”—he addressed Bundle—“must go into all that. Find out when new servants were engaged—what about footmen, for instance?”

“One of the footmen is new. John, his name is.”

“Well, make inquiries about John. And about the others who have only come recently.”

“I suppose,” said Bundle slowly, “it must have been a servant. It couldn’t have been one of the guests?”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Who were there exactly?”

“Well, there were three girls—Nancy and Helen and Socks—”

“Socks Daventry? I know her.”

“May have been. Girl who was always saying things were subtle.”

“That’s Socks all right. Subtle is one of her words.”

“And then there was Gerry Wade and me and Bill Eversleigh and Ronny. And, of course, Sir Oswald and Lady Coote. Oh! and Pongo.”

“Who’s Pongo?”

“Chap called Bateman—secretary to old Coote. Solemn sort of cove but very conscientious. I was at school with him.”

“There doesn’t seem anything very suspicious there,” remarked Loraine.

“No, there doesn’t,” said Bundle. “As you say, we’ll have to look amongst the servants. By the way, you don’t suppose that clock being thrown out of the window had anything to do with it?”

“A clock thrown out of the window,” said Jimmy, staring. It was the first he had heard of it.

“I can’t see how it can have anything to do with it,” said Bundle. “But it’s odd somehow. There seems no sense in it.”

“I remember,” said Jimmy slowly. “I went in to—to see poor old Gerry, and, there were the clocks ranged along the mantelpiece. I remember noticing there were only seven—not eight.”

He gave a sudden shiver and explained himself apologetically.

“Sorry, but somehow those clocks have always given me the shivers. I dream of them sometimes. I’d hate to go into that room in the dark and see them there in a row.”

“You wouldn’t be able to see them if it was dark,” said Bundle practically. “Not unless they had luminous dials—Oh!” She gave a sudden gasp and the colour rushed into her cheeks. “Don’t you see! Seven Dials!”

The others looked at her doubtfully, but she insisted with increasing vehemence.

“It must be. It can’t be a coincidence.”

There was a pause.

“You may be right,” said Jimmy Thesiger at last. “It’s—it’s dashed odd.”

Bundle started questioning him eagerly.

“Who bought the clocks?”

“All of us.”

“Who thought of them?”

“All of us.”

“Nonsense, somebody must have thought of them first.”

“It didn’t happen that way. We were discussing what we could do to get Gerry up, and Pongo said an alarum clock, and somebody said one would be no good, and somebody else—Bill Eversleigh, I think—said why not get a dozen. And we all said good egg and hoofed off to get them. We got one each and an extra one for Pongo and one for Lady Coote—just out of the generosity of our hearts. There was nothing premeditated about it—it just happened.”

Bundle was silenced, but not convinced.

Jimmy proceeded to sum up methodically.

“I think we can say we’re sure of certain facts. There’s a secret society, with points of resemblance to the Mafia, in existence. Gerry Wade came to know about it. At first he treated it as rather a joke—as an absurdity, shall we say. He couldn’t believe in its being really dangerous. But later something happened to convince him, and then he got the wind up in earnest. I rather fancy he must have said something to Ronny Devereux about it. Anyway,

when he was put out of the way, Ronny suspected, and he must have known enough to get on the same track himself. The unfortunate thing is that we've got to start quite from the outer darkness. We haven't got the knowledge the other two had."

"Perhaps that's an advantage," said Lorraine coolly. "They won't suspect us and therefore they won't be trying to put us out of the way."

"I wish I felt sure about that," said Jimmy in a worried voice. "You know, Lorraine, old Gerry himself wanted you to keep out of it. Don't you think you could—"

"No, I couldn't," said Lorraine. "Don't let's start discussing that again. It's only a waste of time."

At the mention of the word time, Jimmy's eyes rose to the clock and he uttered an exclamation of astonishment. He rose and opened the door.

"Stevens."

"Yes, sir?"

"What about a spot of lunch, Stevens? Could it be managed?"

"I anticipated that it would be required, sir. Mrs. Stevens has made preparations accordingly."

"That's a wonderful man," said Jimmy, as he returned, heaving a sigh of relief. "Brain, you know. Sheer brain. He takes correspondence courses. I sometimes wonder if they'd be any good to me."

"Don't be silly," said Lorraine.

Stevens opened the door and proceeded to bring in a most recherché meal. An omelette was followed by quails and the very lightest thing in soufflés.

"Why are men so happy when they're single," said Lorraine tragically.

"Why are they so much better looked after by other people than by us?"

“Oh! but that’s rot, you know,” said Jimmy. “I mean, they’re not. How could they be? I often think—”

He stammered and stopped. Lorraine blushed again.

Suddenly Bundle let out a whoop and both the others started violently.

“Idiot,” said Bundle. “Imbecile. Me, I mean. I knew there was something I’d forgotten.”

“What?”

“You know Codders—George Lomax, I mean?”

“I’ve heard of him a good deal,” said Jimmy. “From Bill and Ronny, you know.”

“Well, Codders is giving some sort of a dry party next week—and he’s had a warning letter from Seven Dials.”

“What?” cried Jimmy excitedly, leaning forward. “You can’t mean it?”

“Yes, I do. He told Father about it. Now what do you think that points to?”

Jimmy leant back in his chair. He thought rapidly and carefully. At last he spoke. His speech was brief and to the point.

“Something’s going to happen at that party,” he said.

“That’s what I think,” said Bundle.

“It all fits in, said Jimmy almost dreamily.

He turned to Lorraine.

“How old were you when the war was on?” he asked unexpectedly.

“Nine—no, eight.”

“And Gerry, I suppose, was about twenty. Most lads of twenty fought in the war. Gerry didn’t.”

“No,” said Loraine, after thinking a minute or two. “No, Gerry wasn’t a soldier. I don’t know why.”

“I can tell you why,” said Jimmy. “Or at least I can make a very shrewd guess. He was out of England from 1915 to 1918. I’ve taken the trouble to find that out. And nobody seems to know exactly where he was. I think he was in Germany.”

The colour rose in Loraine’s cheeks. She looked at Jimmy with admiration.

“How clever of you.”

“He spoke German well, didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, like a native.”

“I’m sure I’m right. Listen you two. Gerry Wade was at the Foreign Office. He appeared to be the same sort of amiable idiot—excuse the term, but you know what I mean—as Bill Eversleigh and Ronny Devereux. A purely ornamental excrescence. But in reality he was something quite different. I think Gerry Wade was the real thing. Our secret service is supposed to be the best in the world. I think Gerry Wade was pretty high up in that service. And that explains everything! I remember saying idly that last evening at Chimneys that Gerry couldn’t be quite such an ass as he made himself out to be.”

“And if you’re right?” said Bundle, practical as ever.

“Then the thing’s bigger than we thought. This Seven Dials business isn’t merely criminal—it’s international. One thing’s certain, somebody has got to be at this house party of Lomax’s.”

Bundle made a slight grimace.

“I know George well—but he doesn’t like me. He’d never think of asking me to a serious gathering. All the same, I might—”

She remained a moment lost in thought.

“Do you think I could work it through Bill?” asked Jimmy. “He’s bound to be there as Codder’s right hand man. He might bring me along somehow or other.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Bundle. “You’ll have to prime Bill and make him say the right things. He’s incapable of thinking of them for himself.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Jimmy humbly.

“Oh! It’s quite easy. Bill describes you as a rich young man—interested in politics, anxious to stand for Parliament. George will fall at once. You know what these political parties are: always looking for new rich young men. The richer Bill says you are, the easier it will be to manage.”

“Short of being described as Rothschild, I don’t mind,” said Jimmy.

“Then I think that’s practically settled. I’m dining with Bill tomorrow night, and I’ll get a list of who is to be there. That will be useful.”

“I’m sorry you can’t be there,” said Jimmy. “But on the whole I think it’s all for the best.”

“I’m not sure I shan’t be there,” said Bundle. “Codders hates me like poison—but there are other ways.”

She became meditative.

“And what about me?” asked Lorraine in a small, meek voice.

“You’re not on in this act,” said Jimmy instantly. “See? After all, we’ve got to have someone outside to—er—”

“To what?” said Lorraine.

Jimmy decided not to pursue this tack. He appealed to Bundle.

“Look here,” he said, “Lorraine must keep out of this, mustn’t she?”

“I certainly think she’d better.”

“Next time,” said Jimmy kindly.

“And suppose there isn’t a next time?” said Lorraine.

“Oh, there probably will be. Not a doubt of it.”

“I see. I’m just to go home and—wait.”

“That’s it,” said Jimmy, with every appearance of relief. “I thought you’d understand.”

“You see,” explained Bundle, “three of us forcing our way in might look rather suspicious. And you would be particularly difficult. You do see that, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lorraine.

“Then it’s settled—you do nothing,” said Jimmy.

“I do nothing,” said Lorraine meekly.

Bundle looked at her in sudden suspicion. The tameness with which Lorraine was taking it seemed hardly natural. Lorraine looked at her. Her eyes were blue and guileless. They met Bundle’s without a quiver even of the lashes. Bundle was only partly satisfied. She found the meekness of Lorraine Wade highly suspicious.

Ten

BUNDLE VISITS SCOTLAND YARD

Now it may be said at once that in the foregoing conversation each one of the three participants had, as it were, held something in reserve. That “Nobody tells everything” is a very true motto.

It may be questioned, for instance, if Loraine Wade was perfectly sincere in her account of the motives which had led her to seek out Jimmy Thesiger.

In the same way, Jimmy Thesiger himself had various ideas and plans connected with the forthcoming party at George Lomax’s which he had no intention of revealing to—say, Bundle.

And Bundle herself had a fully-fledged plan which she proposed to put into immediate execution and which she had said nothing whatever about.

On leaving Jimmy Thesiger’s rooms, she drove to Scotland Yard, where she asked for Superintendent Battle.

Superintendent Battle was rather a big man. He worked almost entirely on cases of a delicate political nature. On such a case he had come to Chimneys four years ago, and Bundle was frankly trading on his remembering this fact.

After a short delay, she was taken along several corridors and into the Superintendent’s private room. Battle was a stolid-looking man with a wooden face. He looked supremely unintelligent and more like a commissioner than a detective.

He was standing by the window when she entered, gazing in an expressionless manner at some sparrows.

“Good afternoon, Lady Eileen,” he said. “Sit down, won’t you?”

“Thank you,” said Bundle. “I was afraid you mightn’t remember me.”

“Always remember people,” said Battle. He added: “Got to in my job.”

“Oh!” said Bundle, rather damped.

“And what can I do for you?” inquired the Superintendent.

Bundle came straight to the point.

“I’ve always heard that you people at Scotland Yard have lists of all secret societies and things like that that are formed in London.”

“We try to keep up to date,” said Superintendent Battle cautiously.

“I suppose a great many of them aren’t really dangerous.”

“We’ve got a very good rule to go by,” said Battle. “The more they talk, the less they’ll do. You’d be surprised how well that works out.”

“And I’ve heard that very often you let them go on?”

Battle nodded.

“That’s so. Why shouldn’t a man call himself a Brother of Liberty and meet twice a week in a cellar and talk about rivers of blood—it won’t hurt either him or us. And if there is trouble any time, we know where to lay our hands on him.”

“But sometimes, I suppose,” said Bundle slowly, “a society may be more dangerous than anyone imagines?”

“Very unlikely,” said Battle.

“But it might happen,” persisted Bundle.

“Oh, it might,” admitted the Superintendent.

There was a moment or two’s silence. Then Bundle said quietly:

“Superintendent Battle, could you give me a list of secret societies that have their headquarters in Seven Dials?”

It was Superintendent Battle’s boast that he had never been seen to display emotion. But Bundle could have sworn that just for a moment his eyelids flickered and he looked taken back. Only for a moment, however. He was his usual wooden self as he said:

“Strictly speaking, Lady Eileen, there’s no such place as Seven Dials nowadays.”

“No?”

“No. Most of it is pulled down and rebuilt. It was rather a low quarter once, but it’s very respectable and high class nowadays. Not at all a romantic spot to poke about in for mysterious secret societies.”

“Oh!” said Bundle, rather nonplussed.

“But all the same I should very much like to know what put that neighbourhood into your head, Lady Eileen.”

“Have I got to tell you?”

“Well, it saves trouble, doesn’t it? We know where we are, so to speak.”

Bundle hesitated for a minute.

“There was a man shot yesterday,” she said slowly. “I thought I had run over him—”

“Mr. Ronald Devereux?”

“You know about it, of course. Why has there been nothing in the papers?”

“Do you really want to know that, Lady Eileen?”

“Yes, please.”

“Well, we just thought we should like to have a clear twenty-four hours—see? It will be in the papers tomorrow.”

“Oh!” Bundle studied him, puzzled.

What was hidden behind that immovable face? Did he regard the shooting of Ronald Devereux as an ordinary crime or as an extraordinary one?

“He mentioned Seven Dials when he was dying,” said Bundle slowly.

“Thank you,” said Battle. “I’ll make a note of that.”

He wrote a few words on the blotting pad in front of him.

Bundle started on another tack.

“Mr. Lomax, I understand, came to see you yesterday about a threatening letter he had had.”

“He did.”

“And that was written from Seven Dials.”

“It had Seven Dials written at the top if it, I believe.”

Bundle felt as though she was battering hopelessly on a locked door.

“If you’ll let me advise you, Lady Eileen—”

“I know what you’re going to say.”

“I should go home and—well, think no more about these matters.”

“Leave it to you, in fact?”

“Well,” said Superintendent Battle, “after all, we are the professionals.”

“And I’m only an amateur? Yes, but you forget one thing—I mayn’t have your knowledge and skill—but I have one advantage over you. I can work

in the dark.”

She thought that the Superintendent seemed a little taken aback, as though the force of her words struck home.

“Of course,” said Bundle, “if you won’t give me a list of secret societies—”

“Oh! I never said that. You shall have a list of the whole lot.”

He went to the door, put his head through and called out something, then came back to his chair. Bundle, rather unreasonably, felt baffled. The ease with which he acceded to her request seemed to her suspicious. He was looking at her now in a placid fashion.

“Do you remember the death of Mr. Gerald Wade?” she asked abruptly.

“Down at your place, wasn’t it? Took an overdraft of sleeping mixture.”

“His sister says he never took things to make him sleep.”

“Ah!” said the Superintendent. “You’d be surprised what a lot of things there are that sisters don’t know.”

Bundle again felt baffled. She sat in silence till a man came in with a typewritten sheet of paper, which he handed to the Superintendent.

“Here you are,” said the latter when the other had left the room. “The Blood Brothers of St. Sebastian. The Wolf Hounds. The Comrades of Peace. The Comrades Club. The Friends of Oppression. The Children of Moscow. The Red Standard Bearers. The Herrings. The Comrades of the Fallen—and half a dozen more.”

He handed it to her with a distinct twinkle in his eye.

“You give it to me,” said Bundle, “because you know it’s not going to be the slightest use to me. Do you want me to leave the whole thing alone?”

“I should prefer it,” said Battle. “You see—if you go messing around all these places—well, it’s going to give us a lot of trouble.”

“Looking after me, you mean?”

“Looking after you, Lady Eileen.”

Bundle had risen to her feet. Now she stood undecided. So far the honours lay with Superintendent Battle. Then she remembered one slight incident, and she based her last appeal upon it.

“I said just now that an amateur could do some things which a professional couldn’t. You didn’t contradict me. That’s because you’re an honest man, Superintendent Battle. You knew I was right.”

“Go on,” said Battle quickly.

“At Chimneys you let me help. Won’t you let me help now?”

Battle seemed to be turning the thing over in his mind. Emboldened by his silence, Bundle continued.

“You know pretty well what I’m like, Superintendent Battle. I butt into things. I’m a Nosy Parker. I don’t want to get in your way or to try and do things that you’re doing and can do a great deal better. But if there’s a chance for an amateur, let me have it.”

Again there was a pause, and then Superintendent Battle said quietly:

“You couldn’t have spoken fairer than you have done, Lady Eileen. But I’m just going to say this to you. What you propose is dangerous. And when I say dangerous, I mean dangerous.”

“I’ve grasped that,” said Bundle. “I’m not a fool.”

“No,” said Superintendent Battle. “Never knew a young lady who was less so. What I’ll do for you, Lady Eileen, is this. I’ll just give you one little hint. And I’m doing it because I never have thought much of the motto ‘Safety First.’ In my opinion all the people who spend their lives avoiding being run over by buses had much better be run over and put safely out of the way. They’re no good.”

This remarkable utterance issuing from the conventional lips of Superintendent Battle quite took Bundle's breath away.

"What was that hint you were going to give me?" she asked at last.

"You know Mr. Eversleigh, don't you?"

"Know Bill? Why, of course, But what—?"

"I think Mr. Bill Eversleigh will be able to tell you all you want to know about Seven Dials."

"Bill knows about it? Bill?"

"I didn't say that. Not at all. But I think, being a quick-witted young lady, you'll get what you want from him.

"And now," said Superintendent Battle firmly, "I'm not going to say another word."

Eleven

DINNER WITH BILL

Bundle set out to keep her appointment with Bill on the following evening full of expectation.

Bill greeted her with every sign of elation.

“Bill really is rather nice,” thought Bundle to herself. “Just like a large, clumsy dog that wags its tail when it’s pleased to see you.”

The large dog was uttering short staccato yelps of comment and information.

“You look tremendously fit, Bundle. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to see you. I’ve ordered oysters—you do like oysters, don’t you? And how’s everything? What did you want to go mouldering about abroad so long? Were you having a very gay time?”

“No, deadly,” said Bundle. “Perfectly foul. Old diseased colonels creeping about in the sun, and active, wizened spinsters running libraries and churches.”

“Give me England,” said Bill. “I bar this foreign business—except Switzerland. Switzerland’s all right. I’m thinking of going this Christmas. Why don’t you come along?”

“I’ll think about it,” said Bundle. “What have you been doing with yourself lately, Bill?”

It was an incautious query. Bundle had merely made it out of politeness and as a preliminary to introducing her own topics of conversation. It was, however, the opening for which Bill had been waiting.

“That’s just what I’ve been wanting to tell you about. You’re brainy, Bundle, and I want your advice. You know that musical show, ‘Damn Your Eyes?’ ”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you about one of the dirtiest pieces of work imaginable. My God! the theatrical crowd. There’s a girl—a Yankee girl—a perfect stunner—”

Bundle’s heart sank. The grievances of Bill’s lady friends were always interminable—they went on and on and there was no stemming them.

“This girl, Babe St. Maur her name is—”

“I wonder how she got her name?” said Bundle sarcastically.

Bill replied literally.

“She got it out of Who’s Who. Opened it and jabbed her finger down on a page without looking. Pretty nifty, eh? Her real name’s Goldschmidt or Abrameier—something quite impossible.”

“Oh, quite,” agreed Bundle.

“Well, Babe St. Maur is pretty smart. And she’s got muscles. She was one of the eight girls who made the living bridge—”

“Bill,” said Bundle desperately. “I went to see Jimmy Thesiger yesterday morning.”

“Good old Jimmy,” said Bill. “Well, as I was telling you, Babe’s pretty smart. You’ve got to be nowadays. She can put it over on most theatrical people. If you want to live, be high-handed, that’s what Babe says. And mind you, she’s the goods all right. She can act—it’s marvellous how that girl can act. She’d not much chance in ‘Damn Your Eyes’—just swamped in a pack of good-looking girls. I said why not try the legitimate stage—you know, Mrs. Tanqueray—that sort of stuff—but Babe just laughed—”

“Have you seen Jimmy at all?”

“Saw him this morning. Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, I hadn’t got to the rumpus yet. And mind you it was jealousy—sheer, spiteful jealousy. The other girl wasn’t a patch on Babe for looks and she knew it. So she went behind her back—”

Bundle resigned herself to the inevitable and heard the whole story of the unfortunate circumstances which had led up to Babe St. Maur’s summary disappearance from the cast of “Damn Your Eyes.” It took a long time. When Bill finally paused for breath and sympathy, Bundle said:

“You’re quite right, Bill, it’s a rotten shame. There must be a lot of jealousy about—”

“The whole theatrical world’s rotten with it.”

“It must be. Did Jimmy say anything to you about coming down to the Abbey next week?”

For the first time, Bill gave his attention to what Bundle was saying.

“He was full of a long rigmarole he wanted me to stuff Coddors with. About wanting to stand in the Conservative interest. But you know, Bundle, it’s too damned risky.”

“Stuff,” said Bundle. “If George does find him out, he won’t blame you. You’ll just have been taken in, that’s all.”

“That’s not it at all,” said Bill. “I mean it’s too damned risky for Jimmy. Before he knows where he is, he’ll be parked down somewhere like Tooting East, pledged to kiss babies and make speeches. You don’t know how thorough Coddors is and how frightfully energetic.”

“Well, we’ll have to risk that,” said Bundle. “Jimmy can take care of himself all right.”

“You don’t know Coddors,” repeated Bill.

“Who’s coming to this party, Bill? Is it anything very special?”

“Only the usual sort of muck. Mrs. Macatta for one.”

“The M.P.?”

“Yes, you know, always going off the deep end about Welfare and Pure Milk and Save the Children. Think of poor Jimmy being talked to by her.”

“Never mind Jimmy. Go on telling me.”

“Then there’s the Hungarian, what they call a Young Hungarian. Countess something unpronounceable. She’s all right.”

He swallowed as though embarrassed, and Bundle observed that he was crumbling his bread nervously.

“Young and beautiful?” she inquired delicately.

“Oh, rather.”

“I didn’t know George went in for female beauty much.”

“Oh, he doesn’t. She runs baby feeding in Buda Pesth —something like that. Naturally she and Mrs. Macatta want to get together.”

“Who else?”

“Sir Stanley Digby—”

“The Air Minister?”

“Yes. And his secretary, Terence O’Rourke. He’s rather a lad, by the way—or used to be in his flying days. Then there’s a perfectly poisonous German chap called Herr Eberhard. I don’t know who he is, but we’re all making the hell of a fuss about him. I’ve been twice told off to take him out to lunch, and I can tell you, Bundle, it was no joke. He’s not like the Embassy chaps, who are all very decent. This man sucks in soup and eats peas with a knife.

Not only that, but the brute is always biting his fingernails—positively gnaws at them.”

“Pretty foul.”

“Isn’t it? I believe he invents things—something of the kind. Well, that’s all. Oh, yes, Sir Oswald Coote.”

“And Lady Coote?”

“Yes, I believe she’s coming too.”

Bundle sat lost in thought for some minutes. Bill’s list was suggestive, but she hadn’t time to think out various possibilities just now. She must get on to the next point.

“Bill,” she said, “what’s all this about Seven Dials?”

Bill at once looked horribly embarrassed. He blinked and avoided her glance.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said Bundle. “I was told you know all about it.”

“About what?”

This was rather a poser. Bundle shifted her ground.

“I don’t see what you want to be so secretive for,” she complained.

“Nothing to be secretive about. Nobody goes there much now. It was only a craze.”

This sounded puzzling.

“One gets so out of things when one is away,” said Bundle in a sad voice.

“Oh, you haven’t missed much,” said Bill. “Everyone went there just to say they had been. It was boring really, and, my God, you can get tired of fried fish.”

“Where did everyone go?”

“To the Seven Dials Club, of course,” said Bill, staring. “Wasn’t that what you were asking about?”

“I didn’t know it by that name,” said Bundle.

“Used to be a slummy sort of district round about Tottenham Court Road way. It’s all pulled down and cleaned up now. But the Seven Dials Club keeps to the old atmosphere. Fried fish and chips. General squalor. Kind of East End stunt, but awfully handy to get at after a show.”

“It’s a nightclub, I suppose,” said Bundle. “Dancing and all that?”

“That’s it. Awfully mixed crowd. Not a posh affair. Artists, you know, and all sorts of odd women and a sprinkling of our lot. They say quite a lot of things, but I think that that’s all bunkum myself, just said to make the place go.”

“Good,” said Bundle. “We’ll go there tonight.”

“Oh! I shouldn’t do that,” said Bill. His embarrassment had returned. “I tell you it’s played out. Nobody goes there now.”

“Well, we’re going.”

“You wouldn’t care for it, Bundle. You wouldn’t really.”

“You’re going to take me to the Seven Dials Club and nowhere else, Bill. And I should like to know why you are so unwilling?”

“I? Unwilling?”

“Painfully so. What’s the guilty secret?”

“Guilty secret?”

“Don’t keep repeating what I say. You do it to give yourself time.”

“I don’t,” said Bill indignantly. “It’s only—”

“Well? I know there’s something. You never can conceal anything.”

“I’ve got nothing to conceal. It’s only—”

“Well?”

“It’s a long story—You see, I took Babe St. Maur there one night—”

“Oh! Babe St. Maur again.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t know it was about her—” said Bundle, stifling a yawn.

“As I say, I took Babe there. She rather fancied a lobster. I had a lobster under my arm—”

The story went on—When the lobster had been finally dismembered in a struggle between Bill and a fellow who was a rank outsider, Bundle brought her attention back to him.

“I see,” she said. “And there was a row?”

“Yes, but it was my lobster. I’d bought it and paid for it. I had a perfect right —”

“Oh, you had, you had,” said Bundle hastily. “But I’m sure that’s all forgotten now. And I don’t care for lobsters anyway. So let’s go.”

“We may be raided by the police. There’s a room upstairs where they play baccarat.”

“Father will have to come and bail me out, that’s all. Come on, Bill.”

Bill still seemed rather reluctant, but Bundle was adamant and they were soon speeding to their destination in a taxi.

The place, when they got to it, was much as she imagined it would be. It was a tall house in a narrow street, 14 Hunstanton Street; she noted the number.

A man whose face was strangely familiar opened the door. She thought he started slightly when he saw her, but he greeted Bill with respectful recognition. He was a tall man, with fair hair, a rather weak, anaemic face and slightly shifty eyes. Bundle puzzled to herself where she could have seen him before.

Bill had recovered his equilibrium now and quite enjoyed doing showman. They danced in the cellar, which was very full of smoke—so much so that you saw everyone through a blue haze. The smell of fried fish was almost overpowering.

On the wall were rough charcoal sketches, some of them executed with real talent. The company was extremely mixed. There were portly foreigners, opulent Jewesses, a sprinkling of the really smart, and several ladies belonging to the oldest profession in the world.

Soon Bill led Bundle upstairs. There the weak-faced man was on guard, watching all those admitted to the gambling room with a lynx eye. Suddenly recognition came to Bundle.

“Of course,” she said. “How stupid of me. It’s Alfred who used to be second footman at Chimneys. How are you, Alfred?”

“Nicely, thank you, your Ladyship.”

“When did you leave Chimneys, Alfred? Was it long before we got back?”

“It was about a month ago, m’lady. I got a chance of bettering myself, and it seemed a pity not to take it.”

“I suppose they pay you very well here,” remarked Bundle.

“Very fair, m’lady.”

Bundle passed in. It seemed to her that in this room the real life of the club was exposed. The stakes were high, she saw that at once, and the people gathered round the two tables were of the true type. Hawkeyed, haggard, with the gambling fever in their blood.

She and Bill stayed here for about half an hour. Then Bill grew restive.

“Let’s get out of this place, Bundle, and go on dancing.”

Bundle agreed. There was nothing to be seen here. They went down again. They danced for another half hour, had fish and chips, and then Bundle declared herself ready to go home.

“But it’s so early,” Bill protested.

“No, it isn’t. Not really. And, anyway, I’ve got a long day in front of me tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do?”

“That depends,” said Bundle mysteriously. “But I can tell you this, Bill, the grass is not going to grow under my feet.”

“It never does,” said Mr. Eversleigh.

Twelve

INQUIRIES AT CHIMNEYS

Bundle's temperament was certainly not inherited from her father, whose prevailing characteristic was a wholly amiable inertia. As Bill Eversleigh had very justly remarked, the grass never did grow under Bundle's feet.

On the morning following her dinner with Bill, Bundle woke full of energy. She had three distinct plans which she meant to put into operation that day, and she realized that she was going to be slightly hampered by the limits of time and space.

Fortunately she did not suffer from the affliction of Gerry Wade, Ronny Devereux and Jimmy Thesiger—that of not being able to get up in the morning. Sir Oswald Coote himself would have had no fault to find with her on the score of early rising. At half past eight Bundle had breakfasted and was on her way to Chimneys in the Hispano.

Her father seemed mildly pleased to see her.

“I never know when you're going to turn up,” he said. “But this will save me ringing up, which I hate. Colonel Melrose was here yesterday about the inquest.”

Colonel Melrose was Chief Constable of the county, and an old friend of Lord Caterham.

“You mean the inquest of Ronny Devereux? When is it to be?”

“Tomorrow. Twelve o'clock. Melrose will call for you. Having found the body, you'll have to give evidence, but he said you needn't be at all alarmed.”

“Why on earth should I be alarmed?”

“Well, you know,” said Lord Caterham apologetically, “Melrose is a bit old-fashioned.”

“Twelve o’clock,” said Bundle. “Good. I shall be here, if I’m still alive.”

“Have you any reason to anticipate not being alive?”

“One never knows,” said Bundle. “The strain of modern life—as the newspapers say.”

“Which reminds me that George Lomax asked me to come over to the Abbey next week. I refused, of course.”

“Quite right,” said Bundle. “We don’t want you mixed up in any funny business.”

“Is there going to be any funny business?” asked Lord Caterham with a sudden awakening of interest.

“Well—warning letters and all that, you know,” said Bundle.

“Perhaps George is going to be assassinated,” said Lord Caterham hopefully. “What do you think, Bundle—perhaps I’d better go after all.”

“You curb your bloodthirsty instincts and stay quietly at home,” said Bundle. “I’m going to talk to Mrs. Howell.”

Mrs. Howell was the housekeeper, that dignified, creaking lady who struck terror to the heart of Lady Coote. She had no terror for Bundle, whom, indeed, she always called Miss Bundle, a relic of the days when Bundle had stayed at Chimneys, a long-legged, impish child, before her father had succeeded to the title.

“Now, Howelly,” said Bundle, “let’s have a cup of rich cocoa together, and let me hear all the household news.”

She gleaned what she wanted without much difficulty, making mental notes as follows:

“Two new scullery maids—village girls—doesn’t seem much there. New third housemaid—head housemaid’s niece. That sounds all right. Howelly seems to have bullied poor Lady Coote a good deal. She would.”

“I never thought the day would come when I should see Chimneys inhabited by strangers, Miss Bundle.”

“Oh! one must go with the times,” said Bundle. “You’ll be lucky, Howelly, if you never see it converted into desirable flats with use of superb pleasure grounds.”

Mrs. Howells shivered all down her reactionary aristocratic spine.

“I’ve never seen Sir Oswald Coote,” remarked Bundle.

“Sir Oswald is no doubt a very clever gentleman,” said Mrs. Howells distantly.

Bundle gathered that Sir Oswald had not been liked by his staff.

“Of course, it was Mr. Bateman who saw to everything,” continued the housekeeper. “A very efficient gentleman. A very efficient gentleman indeed, and one who knew the way things ought to be done.”

Bundle led the talk on to the topic of Gerald Wade’s death. Mrs. Howell was only too willing to talk about it, and was full of pitying ejaculations about the poor young gentleman, but Bundle gleaned nothing new. Presently she took leave of Mrs. Howell and came downstairs again, where she promptly rang for Tredwell.

“Tredwell, when did Arthur leave?”

“It would be about a month ago now, my lady.”

“Why did he leave?”

“It was by his own wish, my lady. I believe he has gone to London. I was not dissatisfied with him in any way. I think you will find the new footman,

John, very satisfactory. He seems to know his work and to be most anxious to give satisfaction.”

“Where did he come from?”

“He had excellent references, my lady. He had lived last with Lord Mount Vernon.”

“I see,” said Bundle thoughtfully.

She was remembering that Lord Mount Vernon was at present on a shooting trip in East Africa.

“What’s his last name, Tredwell?”

“Bower, my lady.”

Tredwell paused for a minute or two and then, seeing that Bundle had finished, he quietly left the room. Bundle remained lost in thought.

John had opened the door to her on her arrival that day, and she had taken particular notice of him without seeming to do so. Apparently he was the perfect servant, well-trained, with an expressionless face. He had, perhaps, a more soldierly bearing than most footmen and there was something a little odd about the shape of the back of his head.

But these details, as Bundle realized, were hardly relevant to the situation. She sat frowning down at the blotting paper in front of her. She had a pencil in her hand and was idly tracing the name Bower over and over again.

Suddenly an idea struck her and she stopped dead, staring at the word. Then she summoned Tredwell once more.

“Tredwell, how is the name Bower spelt?”

“B-A-U-E-R, my lady.”

“That’s not an English name.”

“I believe he is of Swiss extraction, my lady.”

“Oh! That’s all, Tredwell, thank you.”

Swiss extraction? No. German! That martial carriage, that flat back to the head. And he had come to Chimneys a fortnight before Gerry Wade’s death.

Bundle rose to her feet. She had done all she could here. Now to get on with things! She went in search of her father.

“I’m off again,” she said. “I’ve got to go and see Aunt Marcia.”

“Got to see Marcia?” Lord Caterham’s voice was full of astonishment. “Poor child, how did you get let in for that?”

“Just for once,” said Bundle, “I happen to be going of my own free will.”

Lord Caterham looked at her in amazement. That anyone could have a genuine desire to face his redoubtable sister-in-law was quite incomprehensible to him. Marcia, Marchioness of Caterham, the widow of his late brother Henry, was a very prominent personality. Lord Caterham admitted that she had made Henry an admirable wife and that but for her in all probability he would never have held the office of Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. On the other hand, he had always looked upon Henry’s early death as a merciful release.

It seemed to him that Bundle was foolishly putting her head into the lion’s mouth.

“Oh! I say,” he said. “You know, I shouldn’t do that. You don’t know what it may lead to.”

“I know what I hope it’s going to lead to,” said Bundle. “I’m all right, Father, don’t you worry about me.”

Lord Caterham sighed and settled himself more comfortably in his chair. He went back to his perusal of the Field. But in a minute or two Bundle suddenly put her head in again.

“Sorry,” she said. “But there’s one other thing I wanted to ask you. What is Sir Oswald Coote?”

“I told you—a steamroller.”

“I don’t mean your personal impression of him. How did he make his money—trouser buttons or brass beds or what?”

“Oh, I see. He’s steel. Steel and iron. He’s got the biggest steel works, or whatever you call it, in England. He doesn’t, of course, run the show personally now. It’s a company or companies. He got me in as a director of something or other. Very good business for me—nothing to do except go down to the city once or twice a year to one of those hotel places—Cannon Street or Liverpool Street—and sit around a table where they have very nice new blotting paper. Then Coote or some clever Johnny makes a speech simply bristling with figures, but fortunately you needn’t listen to it—and I can tell you, you often get a jolly good lunch out of it.”

Uninterested in Lord Caterham’s lunches, Bundle had departed again before he had finished speaking. On the way back to London, she tried to piece together things to her satisfaction.

As far as she could see, steel and infant welfare did not go together. One of the two, then, was just padding—presumably the latter. Mrs. Macatta and the Hungarian countess could be ruled out of court. They were camouflage. No, the pivot of the whole thing seemed to be the unattractive Herr Eberhard. He did not seem to be the type of man whom George Lomax would normally invite. Bill had said vaguely that he invented. Then there was the Air Minister, and Sir Oswald Coote, who was steel. Somehow that seemed to hang together.

Since it was useless speculating further, Bundle abandoned the attempt and concentrated on her forthcoming interview with Lady Caterham.

The lady lived in a large gloomy house in one of London’s higher-class squares. Inside it smelt of sealing wax, bird seed and slightly decayed flowers. Lady Caterham was a large woman—large in every way. Her proportions were majestic, rather than ample. She had a large beaked nose,

wore goldrimmed pince-nez and her upper lip bore just the faintest suspicion of a moustache.

She was somewhat surprised to see her niece, but accorded her a frigid cheek, which Bundle duly kissed.

“This is quite an unexpected pleasure, Eileen,” she observed coldly.

“We’ve only just got back, Aunt Marcia.”

“I know. How is your father? Much as usual?”

Her tone conveyed disparagement. She had a poor opinion of Alastair Edward Brent, ninth Marquis of Caterham. She would have called him, had she known the term, a “poor fish.”

“Father is very well. He’s down at Chimneys.”

“Indeed. You know, Eileen, I never approved of the letting of Chimneys. The place is in many ways a historical monument. It should not be cheapened.”

“It must have been wonderful in Uncle Henry’s days,” said Bundle with a slight sigh.

“Henry realized his responsibilities,” said Henry’s widow.

“Think of the people who stayed there,” went on Bundle ecstatically. “All the principal statesmen of Europe.”

Lady Caterham sighed.

“I can truly say that history has been made there more than once,” she observed. “If only your father—”

She shook her head sadly.

“Politics bore father,” said Bundle, “and yet they are about the most fascinating study there is, I should say. Especially if one knew about them

from the inside.”

She made this extravagantly untruthful statement of her feelings without even a blush. Her aunt looked at her with some surprise.

“I am pleased to hear you say so,” she said. “I always imagined, Eileen, that you cared for nothing but this modern pursuit of pleasure.”

“I used to,” said Bundle.

“It is true that you are still very young,” said Lady Caterham thoughtfully. “But with your advantages, and if you were to marry suitably, you might be one of the leading political hostesses of the day.”

Bundle felt slightly alarmed. For a moment she feared that her aunt might produce a suitable husband straightaway.

“But I feel such a fool,” said Bundle. “I mean, I know so little.”

“That can easily be remedied,” said Lady Caterham briskly. “I have any amount of literature I can lend you.”

“Thank you, Aunt Marcia,” said Bundle, and proceeded hastily to her second line of attack.

“I wondered if you knew Mrs. Macatta, Aunt Marcia?”

“Certainly I know her. A most estimable woman with a brilliant brain. I may say that as a general rule I do not hold with women standing for Parliament. They can make their influence felt in a more womanly fashion.” She paused, doubtless to recall the womanly way in which she had forced a reluctant husband into the political arena and the marvellous success which had crowned his and her efforts. “But still, times change. And the work Mrs. Macatta is doing is of truly national importance, and of the utmost value to all women. It is, I think I may say, true womanly work. You must certainly meet Mrs. Macatta.”

Bundle gave a rather dismal sigh.

“She’s going to be at a house party at George Lomax’s next week. He asked father, who, of course, won’t go, but he never thought of asking me. Thinks I’m too much of an idiot, I suppose.”

It occurred to Lady Caterham that her niece was really wonderfully improved. Had she, perhaps, had an unfortunate love affair? An unfortunate love affair, in Lady Caterham’s opinion, was so often highly beneficial to young girls. It made them take life seriously.

“I don’t suppose George Lomax realizes for a moment that you have—shall we say, grown up? Eileen dear” she said, “I must have a few words with him.”

“He doesn’t like me,” said Bundle. “I know he won’t ask me.”

“Nonsense,” said Lady Caterham. “I shall make a point of it. I knew George Lomax when he was so high.” She indicated a quite impossible height. “He will be only too pleased to do me a favour. And he will be sure to see for himself that it is vitally important that the present-day young girls of our own class should take an intelligent interest in the welfare of their country.”

Bundle nearly said: “Hear, hear,” but checked herself.

“I will find you some literature now,” said Lady Caterham, rising.

She called in a piercing voice: “Miss Connor.”

A very neat secretary with a frightened expression came running. Lady Caterham gave her various directions. Presently Bundle was driving back to Brook Street with an armful of the driest-looking literature imaginable.

Her next proceeding was to ring up Jimmy Thesiger. His first words were full of triumph.

“I’ve managed it,” he said. “Had a lot of trouble with Bill, though. He’d got it into his thick head that I should be a lamb among wolves. But I made him see sense at last. I’ve got a lot of thingummybobs now and I’m studying them. You know, blue books and white papers. Deadly dull—but one must

do the thing properly. Have you ever heard of the Santa Fé boundary dispute?”

“Never,” said Bundle.

“Well, I’m taking special pains with that. It went on for years and was very complicated. I’m making it my subject. Nowadays one has to specialize.”

“I’ve got a lot of the same sort of things,” said Bundle. “Aunt Marcia gave them to me.”

“Aunt who?”

“Aunt Marica—Father’s sister-in-law. She’s very political. In fact, she’s going to get me invited to George’s party.”

“No? Oh, I say, that will be splendid.” There was a pause and then Jimmy said:

“I say, I don’t think we’d better tell Lorraine that—eh?”

“Perhaps not.”

“You see, she mayn’t like being out of it. And she really must be kept out of it.”

“Yes.”

“I mean you can’t let a girl like that run into danger!”

Bundle reflected that Mr. Thesiger was slightly deficient in tact. The prospect of her running into danger did not seem to give him any qualms whatever.

“Have you gone away?” asked Jimmy.

“No, I was only thinking.”

“I see. I say, are you going to the inquest tomorrow?”

“Yes, are you?”

“Yes. By the way, it’s in the evening papers. But tucked away in a corner. Funny—I should have thought they’d have made rather a splash about it.”

“Yes—so should I.”

“Well,” said Jimmy, “I must be getting on with my task. I’ve just got to where Bolivia sent us a Note.”

“I suppose I must get on with my little lot,” said Bundle. “Are you going to swot at it all the evening?”

“I think so. Are you?”

“Oh, probably. Good night.”

They were both liars of the most unblushing order. Jimmy Thesiger knew perfectly well that he was taking Loraine Wade out to dinner.

As for Bundle, no sooner had she rung off than she attired herself in various nondescript garments belonging, as a matter of fact, to her maid. And having donned them she sallied out on foot deliberating whether bus or tube would be the best route by which to reach the Seven Dials Club.

Thirteen

THE SEVEN DIALS CLUB

Bundle reached 14 Hunstanton Street about six p.m. At that hour, as she rightly judged, the Seven Dials Club was a dead spot. Bundle's aim was a simple one. She intended to get hold of the ex-footman Alfred. She was convinced that once she had got hold of him the rest would be easy. Bundle had a simple autocratic method of dealing with retainers. It seldom failed, and she saw no reason why it should fail now.

The only thing of which she was not certain was how many people inhabited the club premises. Naturally she wished to disclose her presence to as few people as possible.

Whilst she was hesitating as to the best line of attack, the problem was solved for her in a singularly easy fashion. The door of No 14 opened and Alfred himself came out.

"Good afternoon, Alfred," said Bundle pleasantly.

Alfred jumped.

"Oh! good afternoon, your ladyship. I—I didn't recognize your ladyship just for a moment."

Paying a tribute in her own mind to her maid's clothing, Bundle proceeded to business.

"I want a few words with you, Alfred. Where shall we go?"

"Well—really, my lady—I don't know—it's not what you might call a nice part round here—I don't know, I'm sure—"

Bundle cut him short.

“Who’s in the club?”

“No one at present, my lady.”

“Then we’ll go in there.”

Alfred produced a key and opened the door. Bundle passed in. Alfred, troubled and sheepish, followed her. Bundle sat down and looked straight at the uncomfortable Alfred.

“I suppose you know,” she said crisply, “that what you’re doing here is dead against the law?”

Alfred shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“It’s true as we’ve been raided twice,” he admitted. “But nothing compromising was found, owing to the neatness of Mr. Mosgorovsky’s arrangements.”

“I’m not talking of the gambling only,” said Bundle. There’s more than that—probably a great deal more than you know. I’m going to ask you a direct question, Alfred, and I should like the truth, please. How much were you paid for leaving Chimneys?”

Alfred looked twice round the cornice as though seeking for inspiration, swallowed three or four times, and then took the inevitable course of a weak will opposed to a strong one.

“It was this way, your ladyship. Mr. Mosgorovsky, he come with a party to visit Chimneys on one of the show days. Mr. Tredwell, he was indisposed like—an ingrowing toenail as a matter of fact—so it fell to me to show the parties over. At the end of the tour Mr. Mosgorovsky, he stays behind the rest, and after giving me something handsome, he falls into conversation.”

“Yes,” said Bundle encouragingly.

“And the long and the short of it was,” said Alfred, with a sudden acceleration of his narrative, “that he offers me a hundred pound down to leave that instant and to look after this here club. He wanted someone as

was used to the best families—to give the place a tone, as he put it. And, well, it seemed flying in the face of providence to refuse—let alone that the wages I get here are just three times what they were as second footman.”

“A hundred pounds,” said Bundle. “That’s a very large sum, Alfred. Did they say anything about who was to fill your place at Chimneys?”

“I demurred a bit, my lady, about leaving at once. As I pointed out, it wasn’t usual and might cause inconvenience. But Mr. Mosgorovsky he knew of a young chap—been in good service and ready to come any minute. So I mentioned his name to Mr. Tredwell and everything was settled pleasant-like.”

Bundle nodded. Her own suspicions had been correct and the *modus operandi* was much as she had thought it to be. She essayed a further inquiry.

“Who is Mr. Mosgorovsky?”

“Gentleman as runs this club. Russian gentleman. A very clever gentleman too.”

Bundle abandoned the getting of information for the moment and proceeded to other matters.

“A hundred pounds is a very large sum of money, Alfred.”

“Larger than I ever handled, my lady,” said Alfred with simple candour.

“Did you ever suspect that there was something wrong?”

“Wrong, my lady?”

“Yes. I’m not talking about the gambling. I mean something far more serious. You don’t want to be sent to penal servitude, do you, Alfred?”

“Oh, Lord! my lady, you don’t mean it?”

“I was at Scotland Yard the day before yesterday,” said Bundle impressively. “I heard some very curious things. I want you to help me, Alfred, and if you do, well—if things go wrong, I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Anything I can do, I shall be only too pleased, my lady. I mean I would anyway.”

“Well, first,” said Bundle, “I want to go all over this place—from top to bottom.”

Accompanied by a mystified and scared Alfred, she made a very thorough tour of inspection. Nothing struck her eye till she came to the gaming room. There she noticed an inconspicuous door in the corner, and the door was locked.

Alfred explained readily.

“That’s used as a getaway, your ladyship. There’s a room and a door on to a staircase what comes out in the next street. That’s the way the gentry goes when there’s a raid.”

“But don’t the police know about it?”

“It’s a cunning door, you see, my lady. Looks like a cupboard, that’s all.”

Bundle felt a rising excitement.

“I must get in there,” she said.

Alfred shook his head.

“You can’t, my lady; Mr. Mosgorovsky, he has the key.”

“Well,” said Bundle, “there are other keys.”

She perceived that the lock was a perfectly ordinary one which probably could be easily unlocked by the key of one of the other doors. Alfred, rather

troubled, was sent to collect likely specimens. The fourth that Bundle tried fitted. She turned it, opened the door and passed through.

She found herself in a small, dingy apartment. A long table occupied the centre of the room with chairs ranged round it. There was no other furniture in the room. Two built-in cupboards stood on either side of the fireplace. Alfred indicated the nearer one with a nod.

“That’s it,” he explained.

Bundle tried the cupboard door, but it was locked, and she saw at once that this lock was a very different affair. It was of the patent kind that would only yield to its own key.

“ ‘Ighly ingenious, it is,” explained Alfred. “It looks all right when opened. Shelves, you know, with a few ledgers and that on ’em. Nobody’d ever suspect, but you touch the right spot and the whole things swings open.”

Bundle had turned round and was surveying the room thoughtfully. The first thing she noticed was that the door by which they had entered was carefully fitted round with baize. It must be completely soundproof. Then her eyes wandered to the chairs. There were seven of them, three each side and one rather more imposing in design at the head of the table.

Bundle’s eyes brightened. She had found what she was looking for. This, she felt sure, was the meeting place of the secret organization. The place was almost perfectly planned. It looked so innocent—you could reach it just by stepping through from the gaming room, or you could arrive there by the secret entrance—and any secrecy, any precautions were easily explained by the gaming going on in the next room.

Idly, as these thoughts passed through her mind, she drew a finger across the marble of the mantelpiece. Alfred saw and misinterpreted the action.

“You won’t find no dirt, not to speak of,” he said. “Mr. Mosgorovsky, he ordered the place to be swept out this morning, and I did it while he waited.”

“Oh!” said Bundle, thinking very hard. “This morning, eh?”

“Has to be done sometimes,” said Alfred. “Though the room’s never what you might call used.”

Next minute he received a shock.

“Alfred,” said Bundle, “you’ve got to find me a place in this room where I can hide.”

Alfred looked at her in dismay.

“But it’s impossible, my lady. You’ll get me into trouble and I’ll lose my job.”

“You’ll lose it anyway when you go to prison,” said Bundle unkindly. “But as a matter of fact, you needn’t worry, nobody will know anything about it.”

“And there ain’t no place,” wailed Alfred. “Look round for yourself, your ladyship, if you don’t believe me.”

Bundle was forced to admit that there was something in this argument. But she had the true spirit of one undertaking adventures.

“Nonsense,” she said with determination. “There has got to be a place.”

“But there ain’t one,” wailed Alfred.

Never had a room shown itself more unpropitious for concealment. Dingy blinds were drawn down over the dirty window panes, and there were no curtains. The window sill outside, which Bundle examined, was about four inches wide! Inside the room there were the table, the chairs and the cupboards.

The second cupboard had a key in the lock. Bundle went across and pulled it open. Inside were shelves covered with an odd assortment of glasses and crockery.

“Surplus stuff as we don’t use,” explained Alfred. “You can see for yourself, my lady, there’s no place here as a cat could hide.”

But Bundle was examining the shelves.

“Flimsy work,” she said. “Now then, Alfred, have you got a cupboard downstairs where you could shove all this glass? You have? Good. Then get a tray and start to carry it down at once. Hurry—there’s no time to lose.”

“You can’t, my lady. And it’s getting late, too. The cooks will be here any minute now.”

“Mr. Mosgo—whatnot doesn’t come till later, I suppose?”

“He’s never here much before midnight. But oh, my lady—”

“Don’t talk so much, Alfred,” said Bundle. “Get that tray. If you stay here arguing, you will get into trouble.”

Doing what is familiarly known as “wringing his hands,” Alfred departed. Presently he returned with a tray, and having by now realized that his protests were useless, he worked with a nervous energy quite surprising.

As Bundle had seen, the shelves were easily detachable. She took them down, ranged them upright against the wall, and then stepped in.

“H’m,” she remarked. “Pretty narrow. It’s going to be a tight fit. Shut the door on me carefully, Alfred—that’s right. Yes, it can be done. Now I want a gimlet.”

“A gimlet, my lady?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I don’t know—”

“Nonsense, you must have a gimlet—perhaps you’ve got an auger as well. If you haven’t got what I want, you’ll have to go out and buy it, so you’d better try hard to find the right thing.”

Alfred departed and returned presently with quite a creditable assortment of tools. Bundle seized what she wanted and proceeded swiftly and efficiently to bore a small hole at the level of her right eye. She did this from the outside so that it should be less noticeable, and she dared not make it too large lest it should attract attention.

“There, that’ll do,” she remarked at last.

“Oh, but, my lady, my lady—”

“Yes?”

“But they’ll find you—if they should open the door.”

“They won’t open the door,” said Bundle. “Because you are going to lock it and take the key away.”

“And if by chance Mr. Mosgorovsky should ask for the key?”

“Tell him it’s lost,” said Bundle briskly. “But nobody’s going to worry about this cupboard—it’s only here to attract attention from the other one and make it a pair. Go on, Alfred, someone might come at any time. Lock me in and take the key and come and let me out when everyone’s gone.”

“You’ll be taken bad, my lady. You’ll faint—”

“I never faint,” said Bundle. “But you might as well get me a cocktail. I shall certainly need it. Then lock the door of the room again—don’t forget—and take the door keys back to their proper doors. And Alfred—don’t be too much of a rabbit. Remember, if anything goes wrong, I’ll see you through.”

“And that’s that,” said Bundle to herself, when having served the cocktail, Alfred had finally departed.

She was not nervous lest Alfred’s nerve should fail and he should give her away. She knew that his sense of self-preservation was far too strong for that. His training alone helped him to conceal private emotions beneath the mask of a well-trained servant.

Only one thing worried Bundle. The interpretation she had chosen to put upon the cleaning of the room that morning might be all wrong. And if so— Bundle sighed in the narrow confines of the cupboard. The prospect of spending long hours in it for nothing was not attractive.

THE MEETING OF THE SEVEN DIALS

It would be as well to pass over the sufferings of the next four hours as quickly as possible. Bundle found her position extremely cramped. She had judged that the meeting, if meeting there was to be, would take place at a time when the club was in full swing—somewhere probably between the hours of midnight and two a.m.

She was just deciding that it must be at least six o'clock in the morning when a welcome sound came to her ears, the sound of the unlocking of a door.

In another minute the electric light was switched on. The hum of voices, which had come to her for a minute or two, rather like the far-off roar of sea waves, ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and Bundle heard the sound of a bolt being shot. Clearly someone had come in from the gaming room next door, and she paid tribute to the thoroughness with which the communicating door had been rendered soundproof.

In another minute the intruder came into her line of vision—a line of vision that was necessarily somewhat incomplete but which yet answered its purpose. A tall man, broad-shouldered and powerful looking, with a long black beard, Bundle remembered having seen him sitting at one of the baccarat tables on the preceding night.

This, then, was Alfred's mysterious Russian gentleman, the proprietor of the club, the sinister Mr. Mosgorovsky. Bundle's heart beat faster with excitement. So little did she resemble her father that at this minute she fairly gloried in the extreme discomfort of her position.

The Russian remained for some minutes standing by the table, stroking his beard. Then he drew a watch from his pocket and glanced at the time. Nodding his head as though satisfied, he again thrust his hand into his

pocket and, pulling out something that Bundle could not see, he moved out of the line of vision.

When he reappeared she could hardly help giving a gasp of surprise.

His face was now covered by a mask—but hardly a mask in the conventional sense. It was not shaped to the face. It was a mere piece of material hanging in front of the features like a curtain in which two slits were pierced for the eyes. In shape it was round and on it was the representation of a clock face, with the hands pointing to six o'clock.

“The Seven Dials!” said Bundle to herself.

And at that minute there came a new sound—seven muffled taps.

Mosgorovsky strode across to where Bundle knew was the other cupboard door. She heard a sharp click, and then the sound of greetings in a foreign tongue.

Presently she had a view of the newcomers.

They also wore clock masks, but in their case the hands were in a different position—four o'clock and five o'clock respectively. Both men were in evening dress—but with a difference. One was an elegant, slender young man wearing evening clothes of exquisite cut. The grace with which he moved was foreign rather than English. The other man could be better described as wiry and lean. His clothes fitted him sufficiently well, but no more, and Bundle guessed at his nationality even before she heard his voice.

“I reckon we're the first to arrive at this little meeting.”

A full pleasant voice with a slight American drawl, and an inflection of Irish behind it.

The elegant young man said in good, but slightly stilted English:

“I had much difficulty in getting away tonight. These things do not always arrange themselves fortunately. I am not, like No 4 here, my own master.”

Bundle tried to guess at his nationality. Until he spoke, she had thought he might be French, but the accent was not a French one. He might possibly, she thought, be an Austrian, or a Hungarian, or even a Russian.

The American moved to the other side of the table, and Bundle heard a chair being pulled out.

“One o’clock’s being a great success,” he said. “I congratulate you on taking the risk.”

Five o’clock shrugged his shoulders.

“Unless one takes risks—” He left the sentence unfinished.

Again seven taps sounded and Mosgorovsky moved across to the secret door.

She failed to catch anything definite for some moments since the whole company were out of sight, but presently she heard the bearded Russian’s voice upraised.

“Shall we begin proceedings?”

He himself came round the table and took the seat next to the armchair at the top. Sitting thus, he was directly facing Bundle’s cupboard. The elegant five o’clock took the place next to him. The third chair that side was out of Bundle’s sight, but the American, No 4, moved into her line of vision for a moment or two before he sat down.

On the near side of the table also, only two chairs were visible, and as she watched a hand turned the second—really the middle chair—down. And then with a swift movement, one of the newcomers brushed past the cupboard and took the chair opposite Mosgorovsky. Whoever sat there had, of course, their back directly turned to Bundle—and it was at that back that Bundle was staring with a good deal of interest, for it was the back of a singularly beautiful woman very much décolleté.

It was she who spoke first. Her voice was musical, foreign—with a deep seductive note in it. She was glancing towards the empty chair at the head of the table.

“So we are not to see No 7 tonight?” she said. “Tell me, my friends, shall we ever see him?”

“That’s darned good,” said the American. “Darned good! As for seven o’clock—I’m beginning to believe there is no such person.”

“I should not advise you to think that, my friend,” said the Russian pleasantly.

There was a silence—rather an uncomfortable silence, Bundle felt.

She was still staring as though fascinated at the beautiful back in front of her. There was a tiny black mole just below the right shoulder blade that enhanced the whiteness of the skin. Bundle felt that at last the term “beautiful adventuress,” so often read, had a real meaning for her. She was quite certain that this woman had a beautiful face—a dark Slavonic face with passionate eyes.

She was recalled from her imagining by the voice of the Russian, who seemed to act as master of ceremonies.

“Shall we get on with our business? First to our absent comrade! No 2!”

He made a curious gesture with his hand towards the turned down chair next to the woman, which everyone present imitated, turning to the chair as they did so.

“I wish No 2 were with us tonight,” he continued. “There are many things to be done. Unsuspected difficulties have arisen.”

“Have you had his report?” It was the American who spoke.

“As yet—I have nothing from him.” There was a pause. “I cannot understand it.”

“You think it may have—gone astray?”

“That is—a possibility.”

“In other words,” said five o’clock softly, “there is—danger.”

He spoke the word delicately—and yet with relish.

The Russian nodded emphatically.

“Yes—there’s danger. Too much is getting known about us—about this place. I know of several people who suspect.” He added coldly: “They must be silenced.”

Bundle felt a little cold shiver pass down her spine. If she were to be found, would she be silenced? She was recalled suddenly to attention by a word.

“So nothing has come to light about Chimneys?”

Mosgorovsky shook his head.

“Nothing.”

Suddenly No 5 leant forward.

“I agree with Anna; where is our president—No 7? He who called us into being. Why do we never see him?”

“No 7,” said the Russian, “has his own ways of working.”

“So you always say.”

“I will say no more,” said Mosgorovsky. “I pity the man—or woman—who comes up against him.”

There was an awkward silence.

“We must get on with our business,” said Mosgorovsky quietly. “No 3, you have the plans of Wyvern Abbey?”

Bundle strained her ears. So far she had neither caught a glimpse of No 3, nor had she heard his voice. She heard it now and recognized it as unmistakable. Low, pleasant, indistinct—the voice of a well-bred Englishman.

“I’ve got them here, sir.”

Some papers were shoved across the table. Everyone bent forward. Presently Mosgorovsky raised his head again.

“And the list of guests?”

“Here.”

The Russian read them.

“Sir Stanley Digby. Mr. Terence O’Rourke. Sir Oswald and Lady Coote. Mr. Bateman. Countess Anna Radzky. Mrs. Macatta. Mr. James Thesiger —” He paused and then asked sharply:

“Who is Mr. James Thesiger?”

The American laughed.

“I guess you needn’t worry any about him. The usual complete young ass.”

The Russian continued reading.

“Herr Eberhard and Mr. Eversleigh. That completes the list.”

“Does it?” said Bundle silently. “What about that sweet girl, Lady Eileen Brent?”

“Yes, there seems nothing to worry about there,” said Mosgorovsky. He looked across the table. “I suppose there’s no doubt whatever about the value of Eberhard’s invention?”

Three o’clock made a laconic British reply.

“None whatever.”

“Commercially it should be worth millions,” said the Russian. “And internationally—well, one knows only too well the greed of nations.”

Bundle had an idea that behind his mask he was smiling unpleasantly.

“Yes,” he went on. “A gold mine.”

“Well worth a few lives,” said No 5, cynically, and laughed.

“But you know what inventors are,” said the American. “Sometimes these darned things won’t work.”

“A man like Sir Oswald Coote will have made no mistake,” said Mosgorovsky.

“Speaking as an aviator myself,” said No 5, “the thing is perfectly feasible. It has been discussed for years—but it needed the genius of Eberhard to bring it to fruition.”

“Well,” said Mosgorovsky, “I don’t think we need discuss matters any further. You have all seen the plans. I do not think our original scheme can be bettered. By the way, I hear something about a letter of Gerald Wade’s that has been found—a letter that mentions this organization. Who found it?”

“Lord Caterham’s daughter—Lady Eileen Brent.”

“Bauer should have been on to that,” said Mosgorovsky. “It was careless of him. Who was the letter written to?”

“His sister, I believe,” said No 3.

“Unfortunate,” said Mosgorovsky. “But it cannot be helped. The inquest on Ronald Devereux is tomorrow. I suppose that has been arranged for?”

“Reports as to local lads having been practising with rifles have been spread everywhere,” said the American.

“That should be all right then. I think there is nothing further to be said. I think we must all congratulate our dear one o’clock and wish her luck in the part she has to play.”

“Hurrah!” cried No 5. “To Anna!”

All hands flew out in the same gesture which Bundle had noticed before.

“To Anna!”

One o’clock acknowledged the salutation with a typically foreign gesture. Then she rose to her feet and the others followed suit. For the first time, Bundle caught a glimpse of No 3 as he came to put Anna’s cloak round her—a tall, heavily built man.

Then the party filed out through the secret door. Mosgorovsky secured it after them. He waited a few moments and then Bundle heard him unbolt the other door and pass through after extinguishing the electric light.

It was not until two hours later that a white and anxious Alfred came to release Bundle. She almost fell into his arms and he had to hold her up.

“Nothing,” said Bundle. “Just stiff, that’s all. Here, let me sit down.”

“Oh, Gord, my lady, it’s been awful.”

“Nonsense,” said Bundle. “It all went off splendidly. Don’t get the wind up now it’s all over. It might have gone wrong, but thank goodness it didn’t.”

“Thank goodness, as you say, my lady. I’ve been in a twitter all the evening. They’re a funny crowd, you know.”

“A damned funny crowd,” said Bundle, vigorously massaging her arms and legs. “As a matter of fact, they’re the sort of crowd I always imagined until tonight only existed in books. In this life, Alfred, one never stops learning.”

Fifteen

THE INQUEST

Bundle reached home about six a.m. She was up and dressed by half past nine, and rang up Jimmy Thesiger on the telephone.

The promptitude of his reply somewhat surprised her, till he explained that he was going down to attend the inquest.

“So am I,” said Bundle. “And I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

“Well, suppose you let me drive you down and we can talk on the way. How about that?”

“All right. But allow a bit extra because you’ll have to take me to Chimneys. The Chief Constable’s picking me up there.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a kind man,” said Bundle.

“So am I,” said Jimmy. “Very kind.”

“Oh! you—you’re an ass,” said Bundle. “I heard somebody say so last night.”

“Who?”

“To be strictly accurate—a Russian Jew. No, it wasn’t. It was—”

But an indignant protest drowned her words.

“I may be an ass,” said Jimmy. “I daresay I am—but I won’t have Russian Jews saying so. What were you doing last night, Bundle?”

“That’s what I’m going to talk about,” said Bundle. “Good-bye for the moment.”

She rang off in a tantalizing manner which left Jimmy pleasantly puzzled. He had the highest respect for Bundle’s capabilities, though there was not the slightest trace of sentiment in his feeling towards her.

“She’s been up to something,” he opined, as he took a last hasty drink of coffee. “Depend upon it, she’s been up to something.”

Twenty minutes later, his little two-seater drew up before the Brook Street house and Bundle, who had been waiting, came tripping down the steps. Jimmy was not ordinarily an observant young man, but he noticed that there were black rings round Bundle’s eyes and that she had all the appearance of having had a late night the night before.

“Now then,” he said, as the car began to nose her way through the suburbs, “what dark deeds have you been up to?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Bundle. “But don’t interrupt until I’ve finished.”

It was a somewhat long story, and Jimmy had all he could do to keep sufficient attention on the car to prevent an accident. When Bundle had finished he sighed—then looked at her searchingly.

“Bundle?”

“Yes?”

“Look here, you’re not pulling my leg?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry,” apologized Jimmy, “but it seems to me as though I’d heard it all before—in a dream, you know.”

“I know,” said Bundle sympathetically.

“It’s impossible,” said Jimmy, following out his own train of thought. “The beautiful foreign adventuress, the international gang, the mysterious No 7, whose identity nobody knows—I’ve read it all a hundred times in books.”

“Of course you have. So have I. But it’s no reason why it shouldn’t really happen.”

“I suppose not,” admitted Jimmy.

“After all—I suppose fiction is founded on the truth. I mean unless things did happen, people couldn’t think of them.”

“There is something in what you say,” agreed Jimmy. “But all the same I can’t help pinching myself to see if I’m awake.”

“That’s how I felt.”

Jimmy gave a deep sigh.

“Well, I suppose we are awake. Let me see, a Russian, an American, an Englishman—a possible Austrian or Hungarian—and the lady who may be any nationality—for choice Russian or Polish—that’s a pretty representative gathering.”

“And a German,” said Bundle. “You’ve forgotten the German.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy slowly. “You think—?”

“The absent No 2. No 2 is Bauer—our footman. That seems to me quite clear from what they said about expecting a report which hadn’t come in—though what there can be to report about Chimneys, I can’t think.”

“It must be something to do with Gerry Wade’s death,” said Jimmy.

“There’s something there we haven’t fathomed yet. You say they actually mentioned Bauer by name?”

Bundle nodded.

“They blamed him for not having found that letter.”

“Well, I don’t see what you could have clearer than that. There’s no going against it. You’ll have to forgive my first incredulity, Bundle—but you know, it was rather a tall story. You say they knew about my going down to Wyvern Abbey next week?”

“Yes, that’s when the American—it was him, not the Russian—said they needn’t worry—you were only the usual kind of ass.”

“Ah!” said Jimmy. He pressed his foot down on the accelerator viciously and the car shot forward. “I’m very glad you told me that. It gives me what you might call a personal interest in the case.”

He was silent for a minute or two and then he said:

“Did you say that German inventor’s name was Eberhard?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Wait a minute. Something’s coming back to me. Eberhard, Eberhard—yes, I’m sure that was the name.”

“Tell me.”

“Eberhard was a Johnny who’d got some patent process he applied to sell. I can’t put the thing properly because I haven’t got the scientific knowledge—but I know the result was that it became so toughened that a wire was as strong as a steel bar had previously been. Eberhard had to do with aeroplanes and his idea was that the weight would be so enormously reduced that flying would be practically revolutionized—the cost of it, I mean. I believe he offered his invention to the German Government, and they turned it down, pointed out some undeniable flaw in it—but they did it rather nastily. He set to work and circumvented the difficulty, whatever it was, but he’d been offended by their attitude and swore they shouldn’t have his ewe lamb. I always thought the whole thing was probably bunkum, but now—it looks differently.”

“That’s it,” said Bundle eagerly. “You must be right, Jimmy. Eberhard must have offered his invention to our Government. They’ve been taking, or are

going to take, Sir Oswald Coote's expert opinion on it. There's going to be an unofficial conference at the Abbey. Sir Oswald, George, the Air Minister and Eberhard. Eberhard will have the plans or the process or whatever you call it—"

"Formula," suggested Jimmy. "I think 'formula' is a good word myself."

"He'll have the formula with him, and the Seven Dials are out to steal the formula. I remember the Russian saying it was worth millions."

"I suppose it would be," said Jimmy.

"And well worth a few lives—that's what the other man said."

"Well, it seems to have been," said Jimmy, his face clouding over. "Look at this damned inquest today. Bundle, are you sure Ronny said nothing else?"

"No," said Bundle. "Just that. Seven Dials. Tell Jimmy Thesiger. That's all he could get out, poor lad."

"I wish we knew what he knew," said Jimmy. "But we've found out one thing. I take it that the footman, Bauer, must almost certainly have been responsible for Gerry's death. You know, Bundle—"

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm a bit worried sometimes. Who's going to be the next one! It really isn't the sort of business for a girl to be mixed up in."

Bundle smiled in spite of herself. It occurred to her that it had taken Jimmy a long time to put her in the same category as Loraine Wade.

"It's far more likely to be you than me," she remarked cheerfully.

"Hear, hear," said Jimmy. "But what about a few casualties on the other side for a change? I'm feeling rather bloodthirsty this morning. Tell me, Bundle, would you recognize any of these people if you saw them?"

Bundle hesitated.

“I think I should recognize No 5,” she said at last. “He’s got a queer way of speaking—a kind of venomous, lisping way—that I think I’d know again.”

“What about the Englishman?”

Bundle shook her head.

“I saw him least—only a glimpse—and he’s got a very ordinary voice. Except that he’s a big man, there’s nothing much to go by.”

“There’s the woman, of course,” continued Jimmy. “She ought to be easier. But then, you’re not likely to run across her. She’s probably putting in the dirty work, being taken out to dinner by amorous Cabinet Ministers and getting State secrets out of them when they’ve had a couple. At least, that’s how it’s done in books. As a matter of fact, the only Cabinet Minister I know drinks hot water with a dash of lemon in it.”

“Take George Lomax, for instance, can you imagine him being amorous with beautiful foreign women?” said Bundle with a laugh.

Jimmy agreed with her criticism.

“And now about the man of mystery—No 7,” went on Jimmy. “You’ve no idea who he could be?”

“None whatever.”

“Again—by book standards, that is—he ought to be someone we all know. What about George Lomax himself?”

Bundle reluctantly shook her head.

“In a book it would be perfect,” she agreed. “But knowing Codders—” And she gave herself up to sudden uncontrollable mirth. “Codders, the great criminal organizer,” she gasped. “Wouldn’t it be marvellous?”

Jimmy agreed that it would. Their discussion had taken some time and his driving had slowed down involuntarily once or twice. They arrived at

Chimneys, to find Colonel Melrose already there waiting. Jimmy was introduced to him and they all three proceeded to the inquest together.

As Colonel Melrose had predicted, the whole affair was very simple. Bundle gave her evidence. The doctor gave his. Evidence was given of rifle practice in the neighbourhood. A verdict of death by misadventure was brought in.

After the proceedings were over, Colonel Melrose volunteered to drive Bundle back to Chimneys, and Jimmy Thesiger returned to London.

For all his lighthearted manner, Bundle's story had impressed him profoundly. He set his lips closely together.

"Ronny, old boy," he murmured, "I'm going to be up against it. And you're not here to join in the game."

Another thought flashed into his mind. Loraine! Was she in danger?

After a minute or two's hesitation, he went over to the telephone and rang her up.

"It's me—Jimmy. I thought you'd like to know the result of the inquest. Death by misadventure."

"Oh, but—"

"Yes, but I think there's something behind that. The coroner had had a hint. Someone's at work to hush it up. I say, Loraine—"

"Yes?"

"Look here. There's—there's some funny business going about. You'll be very careful, won't you? For my sake."

He heard the quick note of alarm that sprang into her voice.

"Jimmy—but then it's dangerous—for you."

He laughed.

“Oh, that’s all right. I’m the cat that had nine lives. Bye-bye, old thing.”

He rang off and remained a minute or two lost in thought. Then he summoned Stevens.

“Do you think you could go out and buy me a pistol, Stevens?”

“A pistol, sir?”

True to his training, Stevens betrayed no hint of surprise.

“What kind of a pistol would you be requiring?”

“The kind where you put your finger on the trigger and the thing goes on shooting until you take it off again.”

“An automatic, sir.”

“That’s it,” said Jimmy. “An automatic. And I should like it to be a bluenosed one—if you and the shopman know what that is. In American stories, the hero always takes his bluenosed automatic from his hip pocket.”

Stevens permitted himself a faint, discreet smile.

“Most American gentlemen that I have known, sir, carry something very different in their hip pockets,” he observed.

Jimmy Thesiger laughed.

Sixteen

THE HOUSE PARTY AT THE ABBEY

Bundle drove over to Wyvern Abbey just in time for tea on Friday afternoon. George Lomax came forward to welcome her with considerable empressement.

“My dear Eileen,” he said, “I can’t tell you how pleased I am to see you here. You must forgive my not having invited you when I asked your father, but to tell the truth I never dreamed that a party of this kind would appeal to you. I was both—er—surprised and—er—delighted when Lady Caterham told me of your—er—interest in—er—politics.”

“I wanted to come so much,” said Bundle in a simple, ingenuous manner.

“Mrs. Macatta will not arrive till the later train,” explained George. “She was speaking at a meeting in Manchester last night. Do you know Thesiger? Quite a young fellow, but a remarkable grasp of foreign politics. One would hardly suspect it from his appearance.”

“I know Mr. Thesiger,” said Bundle, and she shook hands solemnly with Jimmy, who she observed had parted his hair in the middle in the endeavour to add earnestness to his expression.

“Look here,” said Jimmy in a low hurried voice, as George temporarily withdrew. “You mustn’t be angry, but I’ve told Bill about our little stunt.”

“Bill?” said Bundle, annoyed.

“Well, after all,” said Jimmy, “Bill is one of the lads, you know. Ronny was a pal of his and so was Gerry.”

“Oh! I know,” said Bundle.

“But you think it’s a pity? Sorry.”

“Bill’s all right, of course. It isn’t that,” said Bundle. “But he’s—well, Bill’s a born blunderer.”

“Not mentally very agile?” suggested Jimmy. “But you forget one thing—Bill’s got a very hefty fist. And I’ve an idea that a hefty fist is going to come in handy.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right. How did he take it?” “Well, he clutched his head a good bit, but—I mean the facts took some driving home. But by repeating the thing patiently in words of one syllable I at last got it into his thick head. And, naturally, he’s with us to the death, as you might say.”

George reappeared suddenly.

“I must make some introductions, Eileen. This is Sir Stanley Digby—Lady Eileen Brent. Mr. O’Rourke.” The Air Minister was a little round man with a cheerful smile. Mr. O’Rourke, a tall young man with laughing blue eyes and a typical Irish face, greeted Bundle with enthusiasm.

“And I thinking it was going to be a dull political party entirely,” he murmured in an adroit whisper.

“Hush,” said Bundle. “I’m political—very political.”

“Sir Oswald and Lady Coote you know,” continued George.

“We’ve never actually met,” said Bundle, smiling.

She was mentally applauding her father’s descriptive powers.

Sir Oswald took her hand in an iron grip and she winced slightly.

Lady Coote, after a somewhat mournful greeting, had turned to Jimmy Thesiger, and appeared to be registering something closely akin to pleasure. Despite his reprehensible habit of being late for breakfast, Lady Coote had a fondness for this amiable, pink-faced young man. His air of irrepressible good nature fascinated her. She had a motherly wish to cure him of his bad habits and form him into one of the world’s workers. Whether, once formed, he would be as attractive was a question she had never asked herself. She

began now to tell him of a very painful motor accident which had happened to one of her friends.

“Mr. Bateman,” said George briefly, as one who would pass on to better things.

A serious, palefaced young man bowed.

“And now,” continued George, “I must introduce you to Countess Radzky.”

Countess Radzky had been conversing with Mr. Bateman. Leaning very far back on a sofa, with her legs crossed in a daring manner, she was smoking a cigarette in an incredibly long turquoise-studded holder.

Bundle thought she was one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Her eyes were very large and blue, her hair was coal black, she had a matte skin, the slightly flattened nose of the Slav, and a sinuous, slender body. Her lips were reddened to a degree with which Bundle was sure Wyvern Abbey was totally unacquainted.

She said eagerly: “This is Mrs. Macatta—yes?”

On George’s replying in the negative and introducing Bundle, the countess gave her a careless nod, and at once resumed her conversation with the serious Mr. Bateman.

Bundle heard Jimmy’s voice in her ear:

“Pongo is absolutely fascinated by the lovely Slav,” he said. “Pathetic, isn’t it? Come and have some tea.”

They drifted once more into the neighbourhood of Sir Oswald Coote.

“That’s a fine place of yours, Chimneys,” remarked the great man.

“I’m glad you liked it,” said Bundle meekly.

“Wants new plumbing,” said Sir Oswald. “Bring it up to date, you know.”

He ruminated for a minute or two.

“I’m taking the Duke of Alton’s place. Three years. Just while I’m looking round for a place of my own. Your father couldn’t sell if he wanted to, I suppose?”

Bundle felt her breath taken away. She had a nightmare vision of England with innumerable Cootes in innumerable counterparts of Chimneys—all, be it understood, with an entirely new system of plumbing installed.

She felt a sudden violent resentment which, she told herself, was absurd. After all, contrasting Lord Caterham with Sir Oswald Coote, there was no doubt as to who would go to the wall. Sir Oswald had one of those powerful personalities which make all those with whom they come in contact appear faded. He was, as Lord Caterham had said, a human steamroller. And yet, undoubtedly, in many ways, Sir Oswald was a stupid man. Apart from his special line of knowledge and his terrific driving force, he was probably intensely ignorant. A hundred delicate appreciations of life which Lord Caterham could and did enjoy were a sealed book to Sir Oswald.

Whilst indulging in these reflections Bundle continued to chat pleasantly. Herr Eberhard, she heard, had arrived, but was lying down with a nervous headache. This was told her by Mr. O’Rourke, who managed to find a place by her side and keep it.

Altogether, Bundle went up to dress in a pleasant mood of expectation, with a slight nervous dread hovering in the background whenever she thought of the imminent arrival of Mrs. Macatta. Bundle felt that dalliance with Mrs. Macatta was going to prove no primrose path.

Her first shock was when she came down, demurely attired in a black lace frock, and passed along the hall. A footman was standing there—at least a man dressed as a footman. But that square, burly figure lent itself badly to the deception. Bundle stopped and stared.

“Superintendent Battle,” she breathed.

“That’s right, Lady Eileen.”

“Oh!” said Bundle uncertainly. “Are you here to—to—?”

“Keep an eye on things.”

“I see.”

“That warning letter, you know,” said the Superintendent, “fairly put the wind up Mr. Lomax. Nothing would do for him but that I should come down myself.”

“But don’t you think—” began Bundle, and stopped. She hardly liked to suggest to the Superintendent that his disguise was not a particularly efficient one. He seemed to have “police officer” written all over him, and Bundle could hardly imagine the most unsuspecting criminal failing to be put on his guard.

“You think,” said the Superintendent stolidly, “that I might be recognized?”

He gave the final word a distinct capital letter.

“I did think so—yes—” admitted Bundle.

Something that might conceivably have been intended for a smile crossed the woodenness of Superintendent Battle’s features.

“Put them on their guard, eh? Well, Lady Eileen, why not?”

“Why not?” echoed Bundle—rather stupidly, she felt.

Superintendent Battle was nodding his head slowly.

“We don’t want any unpleasantness, do we?” he said. “Don’t want to be too clever—just show any light-fingered gentry that may be about—well, just show them that there’s somebody on the spot, so to speak.”

Bundle gazed at him in some admiration. She could imagine that the sudden appearance of so renowned a personage as Superintendent Battle might have a depressing effect on any scheme and the hatches of it.

“It’s a great mistake to be too clever,” Superintendent Battle was repeating. “The great thing is not to have any unpleasantness this weekend.”

Bundle passed on, wondering how many of her fellow guests had recognized or would recognize the Scotland Yard detective. In the drawing room George was standing with a puckered brow and an orange envelope in his hand.

“Most vexatious,” he said. “A telegram from Mrs. Macatta to say she will be unable to be with us. Her children are suffering from mumps.”

Bundle’s heart gave a throb of relief.

“I especially feel this on your account, Eileen,” said George kindly. “I know how anxious you were to meet her. The Countess too will be sadly disappointed.”

“Oh, never mind,” said Bundle. “I should hate it if she’d come and given me mumps.”

“A very distressing complaint,” agreed George. “But I do not think that infection could be carried that way. Indeed, I am sure that Mrs. Macatta would have run no risk of that kind. She is a most highly principled woman, with a very real sense of her responsibilities to the community. In these days of national stress, we must all take into account—”

On the brink of embarking on a speech, George pulled himself up short.

“But it must be for another time,” he said. “Fortunately there is no hurry in your case. But the Countess, alas, is only a visitor to our shores.”

“She’s a Hungarian, isn’t she?” said Bundle, who was curious about the Countess.

“Yes. You have heard, no doubt, of the Young Hungarian party. The Countess is a leader of that party. A woman of great wealth, left a widow at an early age, she has devoted her money and her talents to the public service. She has especially devoted herself to the problem of infant

mortality—a terrible one under present conditions in Hungary. I—Ah! here is Herr Eberhard.”

The German inventor was younger than Bundle had imagined him. He was probably not more than thirty-three or four. He was boorish and ill at ease. And yet his personality was not an unpleasing one. His blue eyes were more shy than furtive, and his more unpleasant mannerisms, such as the one that Bill had described of gnawing his fingernails, arose, she thought, more from nervousness than from any other cause. He was thin and weedy in appearance and looked anaemic and delicate.

He conversed rather awkwardly with Bundle in stilted English and they both welcomed the interruption of the joyous Mr. O’Rourke. Presently Bill bustled in—there is no other word for it: in the same such way does a favoured Newfoundland make his entrance—and at once came over to Bundle. He was looking perplexed and harassed.

“Hullo, Bundle. Heard you’d got here. Been kept with my nose to the grindstone all the blessed afternoon or I’d have seen you before.”

“Cares of State heavy tonight?” suggested O’Rourke sympathetically.

Bill groaned.

“I don’t know what your fellow’s like,” he complained. “Looks a good-natured, tubby little chap. But Coddors is absolutely impossible. Drive, drive, drive, from morning to night. Everything you do is wrong, and everything you haven’t done you ought to have done.”

“Quite like a quotation from the prayer book,” remarked Jimmy, who had just strolled up.

Bill glanced at him reproachfully.

“Nobody knows,” he said pathetically, “what I have to put up with.”

“Entertaining the Countess, eh?” suggested Jimmy. “Poor Bill, that must have been a sad strain to a woman hater like yourself.”

“What’s this?” asked Bundle.

“After tea,” said Jimmy with a grin, “the Countess asked Bill to show her round the interesting old place.”

“Well, I couldn’t refuse, could I?” said Bill, his countenance assuming a brick-red tint.

Bundle felt faintly uneasy. She knew, only too well, the susceptibility of Mr. William Eversleigh to female charms. In the hand of a woman like the Countess, Bill would be as wax. She wondered once more whether Jimmy Thesiger had been wise to take Bill into their confidence.

“The Countess,” said Bill, “is a very charming woman. And no end intelligent. You should have seen her going round the house. All sorts of questions she asked.”

“What kind of questions?” asked Bundle suddenly.

Bill was vague.

“Oh! I don’t know. About the history of it. And old furniture. And—oh! all sorts of things.”

At that moment the Countess swept into the room. She seemed a shade breathless. She was looking magnificent in a close-fitting black velvet gown. Bundle noticed how Bill gravitated at once to her immediate neighbourhood. The serious spectacled young man joined him.

“Bill and Pongo have both got it badly,” observed Jimmy Thesiger with a laugh.

Bundle was by no means so sure that it was a laughing matter.

Seventeen

AFTER DINNER

George was not a believer in modern innovations. The Abbey was innocent of anything so up to date as central heating. Consequently, when the ladies entered the drawing room after dinner, the temperature of the room was woefully inadequate to the needs of modern evening clothes. The fire that burnt in the well-furnished steel grate became as a magnet. The three women huddled round it.

“Brrrrrrrrrr!” said the Countess, a fine, exotic foreign sound.

“The days are drawing in,” said Lady Coote, and drew a flowered atrocity of a scarf closer about her ample shoulders.

“Why on earth doesn’t George have the house properly heated?” said Bundle.

“You English, you never heat your houses,” said the Countess.

She took out her long cigarette holder and began to smoke.

“That grate is old-fashioned,” said Lady Coote. “The heat goes up the chimney instead of into the room.”

“Oh!” said the Countess.

There was a pause. The Countess was so plainly bored by her company that conversation became difficult.

“It’s funny,” said Lady Coote, breaking the silence, “that Mrs. Macatta’s children should have mumps. At least, I don’t mean exactly funny—”

“What,” said the Countess, “are mumps?”

Bundle and Lady Coote started simultaneously to explain. Finally, between them, they managed it.

“I suppose Hungarian children have it?” asked Lady Coote.

“Eh?” said the Countess.

“Hungarian children. They suffer from it?”

“I do not know,” said the Countess. “How should I?”

Lady Coote looked at her in some surprise.

“But I understood that you worked—”

“Oh, that!” The Countess uncrossed her legs, took her cigarette holder from her mouth and began to talk rapidly.

“I will tell you some horrors,” she said. “Horrors that I have seen. Incredible! You would not believe!”

And she was as good as her word. She talked fluently and with a graphic power of description. Incredible scenes of starvation and misery were painted by her for the benefit of her audience. She spoke of Buda Pesth shortly after the war and traced its vicissitudes to the present day. She was dramatic, but she was also, to Bundle’s mind, a little like a gramophone record. You turned her on, and there you were. Presently, just as suddenly, she would stop.

Lady Coote was thrilled to the marrow—that much was clear. She sat with her mouth slightly open and her large, sad, dark eyes fixed on the Countess. Occasionally, she interpolated a comment of her own.

“One of my cousins had three children burned to death. Awful, wasn’t it?”

The Countess paid no attention. She went on and on. And she finally stopped as suddenly as she had begun.

“There!” she said. “I have told you. We have money—but no organization. It is organization we need.”

Lady Coote sighed.

“I’ve heard my husband say that nothing can be done without regular methods. He attributes his own success entirely to that. He declares he would never have got on without them.”

She sighed again. A sudden fleeting vision passed before her eyes of a Sir Oswald who had not got on in the world. A Sir Oswald who retained, in all essentials, the attributes of that cheery young man in the bicycle shop. Just for a second it occurred to her how much pleasanter life might have been for her if Sir Oswald had not had regular methods.

By a quite understandable association of ideas she turned to Bundle.

“Tell me, Lady Eileen,” she said; “do you like that head gardener of yours?”

“MacDonald? Well—” Bundle hesitated. “One couldn’t exactly like MacDonald,” she explained apologetically. “But he’s a first-class gardener.”

“Oh! I know he is,” said Lady Coote.

“He’s all right if he’s kept in his place,” said Bundle.

“I suppose so,” said Lady Coote.

She looked enviously at Bundle, who appeared to approach the task of keeping MacDonald in his place so lightheartedly.

“I’d just adore a high-toned garden,” said the Countess dreamily.

Bundle stared, but at that moment a diversion occurred. Jimmy Thesiger entered the room and spoke directly to her in a strange, hurried voice.

“I say, will you come and see those etchings now? They’re waiting for you.”

Bundle left the room hurriedly, Jimmy close behind her.

“What etchings?” she asked, as the drawing room door closed behind her.

“No etchings,” said Jimmy. “I’d got to say something to get hold of you. Come on, Bill is waiting for us in the library. There’s nobody there.”

Bill was striding up and down the library, clearly in a very perturbed state of mind.

“Look here,” he burst out, “I don’t like this.”

“Don’t like what?”

“You being mixed up in this. Ten to one there’s going to be a rough house and then—”

He looked at her with a kind of pathetic dismay that gave Bundle a warm and comfortable feeling.

“She ought to be kept out of it, oughtn’t she, Jimmy?”

He appealed to the other.

“I’ve told her so,” said Jimmy.

“Dash it all, Bundle, I mean—someone might get hurt.”

Bundle turned round to Jimmy.

“How much have you told him?”

“Oh! everything.”

“I haven’t got the hang of it all yet,” confessed Bill. “You in that place in Seven Dials and all that.” He looked at her unhappily. “I say, Bundle, I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t what?”

“Get mixed up in these sort of things.”

“Why not?” said Bundle. “They’re exciting.”

“Oh, yes—exciting. But they may be damnably dangerous. Look at poor old Ronny.”

“Yes,” said Bundle. “If it hadn’t been for your friend Ronny, I don’t suppose I should ever have got what you call ‘mixed up’ in this thing. But I am. And it’s no earthly use your bleating about it.”

“I know you’re the most frightful sport, Bundle, but—”

“Cut out the compliments. Let’s make plans.”

To her relief, Bill reacted favourably to the suggestion.

“You’re right about the formula,” he said. “Eberhard’s got some sort of formula with him, or rather Sir Oswald has. The stuff has been tested out at his works—very secretly and all that. Eberhard has been down there with him. They’re all in the study now—what you might call coming down to brass tacks.”

“How long is Sir Stanley Digby staying?” asked Jimmy.

“Going back to town tomorrow.”

“H’m,” said Jimmy. “Then one thing’s quite clear. If, as I suppose, Sir Stanley will be taking the formula with him, any funny business there’s going to be will be tonight.”

“I suppose it will.”

“Not a doubt of it. That narrows the thing down very comfortably. But the bright lads will have to be their very brightest. We must come down to details. First of all, where will the sacred formula be tonight? Will Eberhard have it, or Sir Oswald Coote?”

“Neither. I understand it’s to be handed over to the Air Minister this evening, for him to take to town tomorrow. In that case O’Rourke will have it. Sure to.”

“Well, there’s only one thing for it. If we believe someone’s going to have a shot at pinching that paper, we’ve got to keep watch tonight, Bill, my boy.”

Bundle opened her mouth as though to protest, but shut it again without speaking.

“By the way,” continued Jimmy, “did I recognize the commissionaire from Harrods in the hall this evening, or was it our old friend Lestrade from Scotland Yard?”

“Scintillating, Watson,” said Bill.

“I suppose,” said Jimmy, “that we are rather butting in on his preserves.”

“Can’t be helped,” said Bill. “Not if we mean to see this thing through.”

“Then it’s agreed,” said Jimmy. “We divide the night into two watches?”

Again Bundle opened her mouth, and again shut it without speaking.

“Right you are,” agreed Bill. “Who’ll take first duty?”

“Shall we spin for it?”

“Might as well.”

“All right. Here goes. Heads you first and I second. Tails, vice versa.”

Bill nodded. The coin spun in the air. Jimmy bent to look at it.

“Tails,” he said.

“Damn,” said Bill. “You get first half and probably any fun that’s going.”

“Oh, you never know,” said Jimmy. “Criminals are very uncertain. What time shall I wake you? Three?”

“That’s about fair, I think.”

And now, at last, Bundle spoke:

“What about me?” she asked.

“Nothing doing. You go to bed and sleep.”

“Oh!” said Bundle. “That’s not very exciting.”

“You never know,” said Jimmy kindly. “You may be murdered in your sleep while Bill and I escape scot-free.”

“Well, there’s always that possibility. Do you know, Jimmy, I don’t half like the look of that countess. I suspect her.”

“Nonsense,” cried Billy hotly. “She’s absolutely above suspicion.”

“How do you know?” retorted Bundle.

“Because I do. Why, one of the fellows at the Hungarian Embassy vouched for her.”

“Oh!” said Bundle, momentarily taken aback by his fervour.

“You girls are all the same,” grumbled Bill. “Just because she’s a jolly good-looking woman—”

Bundle was only too well-acquainted with this unfair masculine line of argument.

“Well, don’t you go and pour confidences into her shell-pink ear,” she remarked. “I’m going to bed. I was bored stiff with that drawing room and I’m not going back.”

She left the room. Bill looked at Jimmy.

“Good old Bundle,” he said. “I was afraid we might have trouble with her. You know how keen she is to be in everything. I think the way she took it was just wonderful.”

“So did I,” said Jimmy. “It staggered me.”

“She’s got some sense, Bundle has. She knows when a thing’s plumb impossible. I say, oughtn’t we to have some lethal weapons? Chaps usually do when they’re going on this sort of stunt.”

“I have a bluenosed automatic,” said Jimmy with gentle pride. “It weighs several pounds and looks most dangerous. I’ll lend it to you when the time comes.”

Bill looked at him with respect and envy.

“What made you think of getting that?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Jimmy carelessly. “It just came to me.”

“I hope we shan’t go and shoot the wrong person,” said Bill with some anxiety.

“That would be unfortunate,” said Mr. Thesiger gravely.

Eighteen

JIMMY'S ADVENTURES

Our chronicle must here split into three separate and distinct portions. The night was to prove an eventful one and each of the three persons involved saw it from his or her own individual angle.

We will begin with that pleasant and engaging youth, Mr. Jimmy Thesiger, at a moment when he has at last exchanged final good nights with his fellow conspirator, Bill Eversleigh.

“Don’t forget,” said Bill, “three a.m. If you’re still alive, that is,” he added kindly.

“I may be an ass,” said Jimmy, with rancorous remembrance of the remark Bundle had repeated to him, “but I’m not nearly so much of an ass as I look.”

“That’s what you said about Gerry Wade,” said Bill slowly. “Do you remember? And that very night he—”

“Shut up, you damned fool,” said Jimmy. “Haven’t you got any tact?”

“Of course I’ve got tact,” said Bill. “I’m a budding diplomatist. All diplomatists have tact.”

“Ah!” said Jimmy. “You must be still in what they call the larval stage.”

“I can’t get over Bundle,” said Bill, reverting abruptly to a former topic. “I should certainly have said that she’d be—well, difficult. Bundle’s improved. She’s improved very much.”

“That’s what your Chief was saying,” said Jimmy. “He said he was agreeably surprised.”

“I thought Bundle was laying it on a bit thick myself,” said Bill. “But Coddors is such an ass he’d swallow anything. Well, night-night. I expect you’ll have a bit of a job waking me when the times comes—but stick to it.”

“It won’t be much good if you’ve taken a leaf out of Gerry Wade’s book,” said Jimmy maliciously.

Bill looked at him reproachfully.

“What the hell do you want to go and make a chap uncomfortable for?” he demanded.

“I’m only getting my own back,” said Jimmy. “Toddle along.”

But Bill lingered. He stood uncomfortably, first on one foot and then on the other.

“Look here,” he said.

“Yes?”

“What I mean to say is—well, I mean you’ll be all right and all that, won’t you? It’s all very well ragging but when I think of poor Gerry—and then poor old Ronny—”

Jimmy gazed at him in exasperation. Bill was one of those who undoubtedly meant well, but the result of his efforts would not be described as heartening.

“I see,” he remarked, “that I shall have to show you Leopold.”

He slipped his hand into the pocket of the dark-blue suit into which he had just changed and held out something for Bill’s inspection.

“A real, genuine, bluenosed automatic,” he said with modest pride.

“No. I say,” said Bill, “is it really?”

He was undoubtedly impressed.

“Stevens, my man, got him for me. Warranted clean and methodical in his habits. You press the button and Leopold does the rest.”

“Oh!” said Bill. “I say, Jimmy?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful, won’t you? I mean, don’t go loosing that thing off at anybody. Pretty awkward if you shot old Digby walking in his sleep.”

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy. “Naturally, I want to get value out of old Leopold now I’ve bought him, but I’ll curb my bloodthirsty instincts as far as possible.”

“Well, night-night,” said Bill for the fourteenth time, and this time really did depart.

Jimmy was left alone to take up his vigil.

Sir Stanley Digby occupied a room at the extremity of the west wing. A bathroom adjoined it on one side, and on the other a communicating door led into a smaller room, which was tenanted by Mr. Terence O’Rourke. The doors of these three rooms gave on to a short corridor. The watcher had a simple task. A chair placed inconspicuously in the shadow of an oak press just where the corridor ran into the main gallery formed a perfect vantage ground. There was no other way into the west wing, and anyone going to or from it could not fail to be seen. One electric light was still on.

Jimmy ensconced himself comfortably, crossed his legs and waited. Leopold lay in readiness across his knee.

He glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes to one—just an hour since the household had retired to rest. Not a sound broke the stillness, except for the far-off ticking of a clock somewhere.

Somehow or other, Jimmy did not much care for that sound. It recalled things. Gerald Wade—and those seven ticking clocks on the mantelpiece . .

. Whose hand had placed them there, and why? He shivered.

It was a creepy business, this waiting. He didn't wonder that things happened at spiritualistic séances. Sitting in the gloom, one got all worked up—ready to start at the least sound. And unpleasant thoughts came in on a fellow.

Ronny Devereux! Ronny Devereux and Gerry Wade! Both young, both full of life and energy; ordinary, jolly, healthy young men. And now, where were they? Dank earth . . . worms getting them . . . Ugh! why couldn't he put these horrible thoughts out of his mind?

He looked again at his watch. Twenty minutes past one only. How the time crawled.

Extraordinary girl, Bundle! Fancy having the nerve and daring actually to get into the midst of that Seven Dials place. Why hadn't he had the nerve and initiative to think of that? He supposed because the thing was so fantastic.

No 7. Who the hell could No 7 be? Was he, perhaps, in the house at this minute? Disguised as a servant. He couldn't, surely, be one of the guests. No, that was impossible. But then, the whole thing was impossible. If he hadn't believed Bundle to be essentially truthful—well, he would have thought she had invented the whole thing.

He yawned. Queer, to feel sleepy, and yet at the same time strung up. He looked again at his watch. Ten minutes to two. Time was getting on.

And then, suddenly, he held his breath and leaned forward, listening. He had heard something.

The minutes went past . . . There it was again. The creak of a board . . . But it came from downstairs somewhere. There it was again! A slight, ominous creak. Somebody was moving stealthily about the house.

Jimmy sprang noiselessly to his feet. He crept silently to the head of the staircase. Everything seemed perfectly quiet. Yet he was quite certain he

had really heard that stealthy sound. It was not imagination.

Very quietly and cautiously he crept down the staircase, Leopold clasped tightly in his right hand. Not a sound in the big hall. If he had been correct in assuming that the muffled sound came from directly beneath him, then it must have come from the library.

Jimmy stole to the door of it, listened, but heard nothing; then, suddenly flinging open the door, he switched on the lights.

Nothing! The big room was flooded with light. But it was empty.

Jimmy frowned.

“I could have sworn—” he murmured to himself.

The library was a large room with three windows which opened on to the terrace. Jimmy strode across the room. The middle window was unlatched.

He opened it and stepped out on to the terrace, looking from end to end of it. Nothing!

“Looks all right,” he murmured to himself. “And yet—”

He remained for a minute lost in thought. Then he stepped back into the library. Crossing to the door, he locked it and put the key in his pocket. Then he switched off the light. He stood for a minute listening, then crossed softly to the open window and stood there, Leopold ready in his hand.

Was there, or was there not, a soft patter of feet along the terrace? No—his imagination. He grasped Leopold tightly and stood listening. . . .

In the distance a stable clock chimed two.

BUNDLE'S ADVENTURES

Bundle Brent was a resourceful girl—she was also a girl of imagination. She had foreseen that Bill, if not Jimmy, would make objections to her participation in the possible dangers of the night. It was not Bundle's idea to waste time in argument. She had laid her own plans and made her own arrangements. A glance from her bedroom window shortly before dinner had been highly satisfactory. She had known that the grey walls of the Abbey were plentifully adorned with ivy, but the ivy outside her window was particularly solid looking and would present no difficulties to one of her athletic propensities.

She had no fault to find with Bill's and Jimmy's arrangements as far as they went. But in her opinion they did not go far enough. She offered no criticism, because she intended to see to that side of things herself. Briefly, while Jimmy and Bill were devoting themselves to the inside of the Abbey, Bundle intended to devote her attentions to the outside.

Her own meek acquiescence in the tame rôle assigned to her gave her an infinity of pleasure, though she wondered scornfully how either of the two men could be so easily deceived. Bill, of course, had never been famous for scintillating brain power. On the other hand, he knew, or should know, his Bundle. And she considered that Jimmy Thesiger, though only slightly acquainted with her, ought to have known better than to imagine that she could be so easily and summarily disposed of.

Once in the privacy of her own room, Bundle set rapidly to work. First she discarded her evening dress and the negligible trifle which she wore beneath it, and started again, so to speak, from the foundations. Bundle had not brought her maid with her, and she had packed herself. Otherwise, the puzzled Frenchwoman might have wondered why her lady took a pair of riding breeches and no further equine equipment.

Arrayed in riding breeches, rubber-soled shoes, and a dark-coloured pullover, Bundle was ready for the fray. She glanced at the time. As yet, it was only half past twelve. Too early by far. Whatever was going to happen would not happen for some time yet. The occupants of the house must all be given time to get off to sleep. Half past one was the time fixed by Bundle for the start of operations.

She switched off her light and sat down by the window to wait. Punctually at the appointed moment, she rose, pushed up the sash and swung her leg over the sill. The night was a fine one, cold and still. There was starlight but no moon.

She found the descent very easy. Bundle and her two sisters had run wild in the park at Chimneys as small children, and they could all climb like cats. Bundle arrived on a flower bed, rather breathless, but quite unscathed.

She paused a minute to take stock of her plans. She knew that the rooms occupied by the Air Minister and his secretary were in the west wing; that was the opposite side of the house from where Bundle was now standing. A terrace ran along the south and west side of the house, ending abruptly against a walled fruit garden.

Bundle stepped out of her flower bed and turned the corner of the house to where the terrace began on the south side. She crept very quietly along it, keeping close to the shadow of the house. But, as she reached the second corner, she got a shock, for a man was standing there, with the clear intention of barring her way.

The next instant she had recognized him.

“Superintendent Battle! You did give me a fright!”

“That’s what I’m here for,” said the Superintendent pleasantly.

Bundle looked at him. It struck her now, as so often before, how remarkably little camouflage there was about him. He was large and solid and noticeable. He was, somehow, very English. But of one thing Bundle was quite sure. Superintendent Battle was no fool.

“What are you really doing here?” she asked, still in a whisper.

“Just seeing,” said Battle, “that nobody’s about who shouldn’t be.”

“Oh!” said Bundle, rather taken aback.

“You, for instance, Lady Eileen. I don’t suppose you usually take a walk at this time of night.”

“Do you mean,” said Bundle slowly, “that you want me to go back?”

Superintendent Battle nodded approvingly.

“You’re very quick, Lady Eileen. That’s just what I do mean. Did you—er—come out of a door, or the window?”

“The window. It’s easy as anything climbing down this ivy.”

Supertintendent Battle looked up at it thoughtfully.

“Yes,” he said. “I should say it would be.”

“And you want me to go back?” said Bundle. “I’m rather sick about that. I wanted to go round on to the west terrace.”

“Perhaps you won’t be the only one who’ll want to do that,” said Battle.

“Nobody could miss seeing you,” said Bundle rather spitefully.

The Superintendent seemed rather pleased than otherwise.

“I hope they won’t,” he said. “No unpleasantness. That’s my motto. And if you’ll excuse me, Lady Eileen, I think it’s time you were going back to bed.”

The firmness of his tone admitted no parley. Rather crestfallen, Bundle retraced her steps. She was halfway up the ivy when a sudden idea occurred to her, and she nearly relaxed her grip and fell.

Supposing Superintendent Battle suspected her.

There had been something—yes, surely there had been something in his manner that vaguely suggested the idea. She couldn't help laughing as she crawled over the sill into her bedroom. Fancy the solid Superintendent suspecting her!

Though she had so far obeyed Battle's orders as to returning to her room, Bundle had no intention of going to bed and sleeping. Nor did she think that Battle had really intended her to do so. He was not a man to expect impossibilities. And to remain quiescent when something daring and exciting might be going on was a sheer impossibility to Bundle.

She glanced at her watch. It was ten minutes to two. After a moment or two of irresolution, she cautiously opened her door. Not a sound. Everything was still and peaceful. She stole cautiously along the passage.

Once she halted, thinking she heard a board creak somewhere, but then convinced that she was mistaken, she went on again. She was now in the main corridor, making her way to the west wing. She reached the angle of intersection and peered cautiously round—then she stared in blank surprise.

The watcher's post was empty. Jimmy Thesiger was not there.

Bundle stared in complete amazement. What had happened? Why had Jimmy left his post? What did it mean?

At that moment she heard a clock strike two.

She was still standing there, debating what to do next, when suddenly her heart gave a leap and then seemed to stand still. The door handle of Terence O'Rourke's room was slowly turning.

Bundle watched, fascinated. But the door did not open. Instead the knob turned slowly to its original position. What did it mean?

Suddenly Bundle came to a resolution. Jimmy, for some unknown reason, had deserted his post. She must get hold of Bill.

Quickly and noiselessly, Bundle fled along the way she had come. She burst unceremoniously into Bill's room.

"Bill, wake up! Oh, do wake up!"

It was an urgent whisper she sent forth, but there came no response to it.

"Bill," breathed Bundle.

Impatiently she switched on the lights, and then stood dumbfounded.

The room was empty, and the bed had not even been slept in.

Where then was Bill?

Suddenly she caught her breath. This was not Bill's room. The dainty negligée thrown over a chair, the feminine knickknacks on the dressing table, the black velvet evening dress thrown carelessly over a chair—Of course, in her haste she had mistaken the doors. This was the Countess Radzky's room.

But where, oh where, was the countess?

And just as Bundle was asking herself this question, the silence of the night was suddenly broken, and in no uncertain manner.

The clamour came from below. In an instant Bundle had sped out of the Countess's room and downstairs. The sounds came from the library—a violent crashing of chairs being overturned.

Bundle rattled vainly at the library door. It was locked. But she could clearly hear the struggle that was going on within—the panting and scuffling, curses in many tones, the occasional crash as some light piece of furniture came into the line of battle.

And then, sinister and distinct, breaking the peace of the night for good and all, two shots in rapid succession.

Twenty

LORAINÉ'S ADVENTURES

Loraine Wade sat up in bed and switched on the light. It was exactly ten minutes to one. She had gone to bed early—at half past nine. She possessed the useful art of being able to wake herself up at the required time, so she had been able to enjoy some hours of refreshing sleep.

Two dogs slept in the room with her, and one of these now raised his head and looked at her inquiringly.

“Quiet, Lurcher,” said Loraine, and the big animal put his head down again obediently, watching her from between his shaggy eyelashes.

It is true that Bundle had once doubted the meekness of Loraine Wade, but that brief moment of suspicion had passed. Loraine had seemed so entirely reasonable, so willing to be kept out of everything.

And yet, if you studied the girl's face, you saw that there was strength of purpose in the small, resolute jaw and the lips that closed together so firmly.

Loraine rose and dressed herself in a tweed coat and skirt. Into one pocket of the coat she dropped an electric torch. Then she opened the drawer of her dressing table and took out a small ivory-handled pistol—almost a toy in appearance. She had bought it the day before at Harrods and she was very pleased with it.

She gave a final glance round the room to see if she had forgotten anything, and at that moment the big dog rose and came over to her, looking up at her with pleading eyes and wagging its tail.

“No, Lurcher. Can't go. Missus can't take you. Got to stay here and be a good boy.”

She dropped a kiss on the dog's head, made him lie down on his rug again, and then slipped noiselessly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

She let herself out of the house by a side door and made her way round to the garage, where her little two-seater car was in readiness. There was a gentle slope, and she let the car run silently down it, not starting the engine till she was some way from the house. Then she glanced at the watch on her arm and pressed her foot down on the accelerator.

She left the car at a spot she had previously marked down. There was a gap there in the fencing that she could easily get through. A few minutes later, slightly muddy, Loraine stood inside the grounds of Wyvern Abbey.

As noiselessly as possible, she made her way towards the venerable ivy-coloured building. In the distance a stable clock chimed two.

Loraine's heart beat faster as she drew near to the terrace. There was no one about—no sign of life anywhere. Everything seemed peaceful and undisturbed. She reached the terrace and stood there, looking about her.

Suddenly, without the least warning, something from above fell with a flop almost at her feet. Loraine stooped to pick it up. It was a brown paper packet, loosely wrapped. Holding it, Loraine looked up.

There was an open window just above her head, and even as she looked a leg swung over it and a man began to climb down the ivy.

Loraine waited no more. She took to her heels and ran, still clasping the brown paper packet.

Behind her, the noise of a struggle suddenly broke out. A hoarse voice: "Lemme go"; another that she knew well: "Not if I know it—ah, you would, would you?"

Still Loraine ran—blindly, as though panic-stricken—right round the corner of the terrace—and slap into the arms of a large, solidly built man.

"There, there," said Superintendent Battle kindly.

Loraine was struggling to speak.

“Oh, quick!—oh, quick! They’re killing each other. Oh, do be quick!”

There was a sharp crack of a revolver shot—and then another.

Superintendent Battle started to run. Loraine followed. Back round the corner of the terrace and along to the library window. The window was open.

Battle stooped and switched on an electric torch. Loraine was close behind him, peering over his shoulder. She gave a little sobbing gasp.

On the threshold of the window lay Jimmy Thesiger in what looked like a pool of blood. His right arm lay dangling in a curious position.

Loraine gave a sharp cry.

“He’s dead,” she wailed. “Oh, Jimmy—Jimmy—he’s dead!”

“Now, now,” said Superintendent Battle soothingly. “Don’t you take on so. The young gentleman isn’t dead, I’ll be bound. See if you can find the lights and turn them on.”

Loraine obeyed. She stumbled across the room, found the switch by the door and pressed it down. The room was flooded with light. Superintendent Battle uttered a sigh of relief.

“It’s all right—he’s only shot in the right arm. He’s fainted through loss of blood. Come and give me a hand with him.”

There was a pounding on the library door. Voices were heard, asking, expostulating, demanding.

Loraine looked doubtfully at it.

“Shall I—?”

“No hurry,” said Battle. “We’ll let them in presently. You come and give me a hand.”

Loraine came obediently. The Superintendent had produced a large, clean pocket handkerchief and was neatly bandaging the wounded man’s arm. Loraine helped him.

“He’ll be all right,” said the Superintendent. “Don’t you worry. As many lives as cats, these young fellows. It wasn’t the loss of blood knocked him out either. He must have caught his head a crack on the floor as he fell.”

Outside, the knocking on the door had become tremendous. The voice of George Lomax, furiously upraised, came loud and distinct:

“Who is in there? Open the door at once.”

Superintendent Battle sighed.

“I suppose we shall have to,” he said. “A pity.”

His eyes darted round, taking in the scene. An automatic lay by Jimmy’s side. The Superintendent picked it up gingerly, holding it very delicately, and examined it. He grunted and laid it on the table. Then he stepped across and unlocked the door.

Several people fell into the room. Nearly everybody said something at the same minute. George Lomax, spluttering with obdurate words which refused to come with sufficient fluency, exclaimed:

“The—the—the meaning of this? Ah! It’s you, Superintendent; what’s happened? I say—what has—happened?”

Bill Eversleigh said; “My God! Old Jimmy!” and stared at the limp figure on the ground.

Lady Coote, clad in a resplendent purple dressing gown, cried out: “The poor boy!” and swept past Superintendent Battle to bend over the prostrate Jimmy in a motherly fashion.

Bundle said: "Lorraine!"

Herr Eberhard said: "Gott im Himmel!" and other words of that nature.

Sir Stanley Digby said: "My God, what's all this?"

A housemaid said: "Look at the blood," and screamed with pleasurable excitement.

A footman said: "Lor!"

The butler said, with a good deal more bravery in his manner than had been noticeable a few minutes earlier: "Now then, this won't do!" and waved away under servants.

The efficient Mr. Rupert Bateman said to George: "Shall we get rid of some of these people, sir?"

Then they all took fresh breath.

"Incredible!" said George Lomax. "Battle, what has happened?"

Battle gave him a look, and George's discreet habits assumed their usual way.

"Now then," he said, moving to the door, "everyone go back to bed, please. There's been a—er—"

"A little accident," said Superintendent Battle easily.

"A—er—an accident. I shall be much obliged if everyone will go back to bed."

Everyone was clearly reluctant to do so.

"Lady Coote—please—"

"The poor boy," said Lady Coote in a motherly fashion.

She rose from a kneeling position with great reluctance. And as she did so, Jimmy stirred and sat up.

“Hallo!” he said thickly. “What’s the matter?”

He looked round him vacantly for a minute or two and then intelligence returned to his eye.

“Have you got him? he demanded eagerly.

“Got who?”

“The man. Climbed down the ivy. I was by the window there. Grabbed him and we had no end of a set-to—”

“One of those nasty, murderous cat burglars,” said Lady Coote. “Poor boy.”

Jimmy was looking round him.

“I say—I’m afraid we—er—have made rather a mess of things. Fellow was as strong as an ox and we went fairly waltzing round.”

The condition of the room was clear proof of this statement. Everything light and breakable within a range of twelve feet that could be broken had been broken.

“And what happened then?”

But Jimmy was looking round for something.

“Where’s Leopold? The pride of the bluenosed automatics?”

Battle indicated the pistol on the table.

“Is this yours, Mr. Thesiger?”

“That’s right. That’s little Leopold. How many shots have been fired?”

“One shot.”

Jimmy looked chagrined.

“I’m disappointed in Leopold,” he murmured. “I can’t have pressed the button properly, or he’d have gone on shooting.”

“Who shot first?”

“I did, I’m afraid,” said Jimmy. “You see, the man twisted himself out of my grasp suddenly. I saw him making for the window and I closed my finger down on Leopold and let him have it. He turned in the window and fired at me and—well, I suppose after that I took the count.”

He rubbed his head rather ruefully.

But Sir Stanley Digby was suddenly alert.

“Climbing down the ivy, you said? My God, Lomax, you don’t think they’ve got away with it?”

He rushed from the room. For some curious reason nobody spoke during his absence. In a few minutes Sir Stanley returned. His round, chubby face was white as death.

“My God, Battle,” he said, “they’ve got it. O’Rourke’s fast asleep—drugged, I think. I can’t wake him. And the papers have vanished.”

Twenty-one

THE RECOVERY OF THE FORMULA

“Der liebe Gott!” said Herr Eberhard in a whisper.

His face had gone chalky white.

George turned a face of dignified reproach on Battle.

“Is this true, Battle? I left all arrangements in your hands.”

The rock-like quality of the Superintendent showed out well. Not a muscle of his face moved.

“The best of us are defeated sometimes, sir,” he said quietly.

“Then you mean—you really mean—that the document is gone?”

But to everyone’s surprise Superintendent Battle shook his head.

“No, no, Mr. Lomax, it’s not so bad as you think. Everything’s all right. But you can’t lay the credit for it at my door. You’ve got to thank this young lady.”

He indicated Loraine, who stared at him in surprise. Battle stepped across to her and gently took the brown paper parcel which she was still clutching mechanically.

“I think, Mr. Lomax,” he said, “that you will find what you want here.”

Sir Stanley Digby, quicker in action than George, snatched at the package and tore it open, investigating its contents eagerly. A sigh of relief escaped him and he mopped his brow. Herr Eberhard fell upon the child of his brain and clasped it to his heart, whilst a torrent of German burst from him.

Sir Stanley turned to Loraine, shaking her warmly by the hand.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “we are infinitely obliged to you, I am sure.”

“Yes, indeed,” said George. “Though I—er—”

He paused in some perplexity, staring at a young lady who was a total stranger to him. Loraine looked appealingly at Jimmy, who came to the rescue.

“We—this is Miss Wade.” said Jimmy. “Gerald Wade’s sister.”

“Indeed,” said George, shaking her warmly by the hand. “My dear Miss Wade, I must express my deep gratitude to you for what you have done. I must confess that I do not quite see—”

He paused delicately and four of the persons present felt that explanations were going to be fraught with much difficulty. Superintendent Battle came to the rescue.

“Perhaps we’d better not go into that just now, sir,” he suggested tactfully.

The efficient Mr. Bateman created a further diversion.

“Wouldn’t it be wise for someone to see to O’Rourke? Don’t you think, sir, that a doctor had better be sent for?”

“Of course,” said George. “Of course. Most remiss of us not to have thought of it before.” He looked towards Bill. “Get Dr. Cartwright on the telephone. Ask him to come. Just hint, if you can, that—er—discretion should be observed.”

Bill went off on his errand.

“I will come up with you, Digby,” said George. “Something, possibly, could be done—measures should, perhaps, be taken—whilst awaiting the arrival of the doctor.”

He looked rather helplessly at Rupert Bateman. Efficiency always makes itself felt. It was Pongo who was really in charge of the situation.

“Shall I come up with you, sir?”

George accepted the offer with relief. Here, he felt, was someone on whom he could lean. He experienced that sense of complete trust in Mr. Bateman’s efficiency which came to all those who encountered that excellent young man.

The three men left the room together. Lady Coote, murmuring in deep rich tones: “The poor young fellow. Perhaps I could do something—” hurried after them.

“That’s a very motherly woman,” observed the Superintendent thoughtfully. “A very motherly woman. I wonder—”

Three pairs of eyes looked at him inquiringly.

“I was wondering,” said Superintendent Battle slowly, “where Sir Oswald Coote may be.”

“Oh!” gasped Loraine. “Do you think he’s been murdered?”

Battle shook his head at her reproachfully.

“No need for anything so melodramatic,” he said. “No—I rather think—”

He paused, his head on one side, listening—one large hand raised to enjoin silence.

In another minute they all heard what his sharper ears had been the first to notice. Footsteps coming along the terrace outside. They rang out clearly with no kind of subterfuge about them. In another minute the window was blocked by a bulky figure which stood there regarding them and who conveyed, in an odd way, a sense of dominating the situation.

Sir Oswald, for it was he, looked slowly from one face to another. His keen eyes took in the details of the situation. Jimmy, with his roughly bandaged

arm; Bundle, in her somewhat anomalous attire; Loraine, a perfect stranger to him. His eyes came last to Superintendent Battle. He spoke sharply and crisply.

“What’s been happening here, officer?”

“Attempted robbery, sir.”

“Attempted—eh?”

“Thanks to this young lady, Miss Wade, the thieves failed to get away with it.”

“Ah!” he said again, his scrutiny ended. “And now, officer, what about this?”

He held out a small Mauser pistol which he carried delicately by the butt.

“Where did you find that, Sir Oswald?”

“On the lawn outside. I presume it must have been thrown down by one of the thieves as he took to his heels. I’ve held it carefully, as I thought you might wish to examine it for fingerprints.”

“You think of everything, Sir Oswald,” said Battle.

He took the pistol from the other, handling it with equal care, and laid it down on the table beside Jimmy’s Colt.

“And now, if you please,” said Sir Oswald, “I should like to hear exactly what occurred.”

Superintendent Battle gave a brief résumé of the events of the night. Sir Oswald frowned thoughtfully.

“I understand,” he said sharply. “After wounding and disabling Mr. Thesiger, the man took to his heels and ran, throwing away the pistol as he did so. What I cannot understand is why no one pursued him.”

“It wasn’t till we heard Mr. Thesiger’s story that we knew there was anyone to pursue,” remarked Superintendent Battle dryly.

“You didn’t—er—catch sight of him making off as you turned the corner of the terrace?”

“No, I missed him by just about forty seconds, I should say. There’s no moon and he’d be invisible as soon as he’d left the terrace. He must have leapt for it as soon as he’d fired the shot.”

“H’m,” said Sir Oswald. “I still think that a search should have been organized. Someone else should have been posted—”

“There are three of my men in the grounds,” said the Superintendent quietly.

“Oh!” Sir Oswald seemed rather taken aback.

“They were told to hold and detain anyone attempting to leave the grounds.”

“And yet—they haven’t done so?”

“And yet they haven’t done so,” agreed Battle gravely.

Sir Oswald looked at him as though something in the words puzzled him. He said sharply:

“Are you telling me all that you know, Superintendent Battle?”

“All that I know—yes, Sir Oswald. What I think is a different matter. Maybe I think some rather curious things—but until thinking’s got you somewhere it’s no use talking about it.”

“And yet,” said Sir Oswald slowly, “I should like to know what you think, Superintendent Battle.”

“For one thing, sir, I think there’s a lot too much ivy about this place—excuse me, sir, you’ve got a bit on your coat—yes, a great deal too much

ivy. It complicates things.”

Sir Oswald stared at him, but any reply he might have contemplated making was arrested by the entrance of Rupert Bateman.

“Oh, there you are, Sir Oswald. I’m so glad. Lady Coote has just discovered that you were missing—and she has been insisting upon it that you had been murdered by the thieves. I really, think, Sir Oswald, that you had better come to her at once. She is terribly upset.”

“Maria is an incredibly foolish woman,” said Sir Oswald. “Why should I be murdered? I’ll come with you, Bateman.”

He left the room with his secretary.

“That’s a very efficient young man,” said Battle, looking after them. “What’s his name—Bateman?”

Jimmy nodded.

“Bateman—Rupert,” he said. “Commonly known as Pongo. I was at school with him.”

“Were you? Now, that’s interesting, Mr. Thesiger. What was your opinion of him in those days?”

“Oh, he was always the same sort of ass.”

“I shouldn’t have thought,” said Battle mildly, “that he was an ass.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Of course he wasn’t really an ass. Tons of brains and always swotting at things. But deadly serious. No sense of humour.”

“Ah!” said Superintendent Battle. “That’s a pity. Gentlemen who have no sense of humour get to taking themselves too seriously—and that leads to mischief.”

“I can’t imagine Pongo getting into mischief,” said Jimmy. “He’s done extremely well for himself so far—dug himself in with old Coote and looks like being a permanency in the job.”

“Superintendent Battle,” said Bundle.

“Yes, Lady Eileen?”

“Don’t you think it very odd that Sir Oswald didn’t say what he was doing wandering about in the garden in the middle of the night?”

“Ah!” said Battle. “Sir Oswald’s a great man—and a great man always knows better than to explain unless an explanation is demanded. To rush into explanations and excuses is always a sign of weakness. Sir Oswald knows that as well as I do. He’s not going to come in explaining and apologizing—not he. He just stalks in and hauls me over the coals. He’s a big man, Sir Oswald.”

Such a warm admiration sounded in the Superintendent’s tones that Bundle pursued the subject no further.

“And now,” said Superintendent Battle, looking round with a slight twinkle in his eye, “now that we’re together and friendly like—I should like to hear just how Miss Wade happened to arrive on the scene so pat.”

“She ought to be ashamed of herself,” said Jimmy. “Hood-winking us all as she did.”

“Why should I be kept out of it all?” cried Loraine passionately. “I never meant to be—no, not the very first day in your rooms when you both explained how the best thing for me to do was to stay quietly at home and keep out of danger. I didn’t say anything, but I made up my mind then.”

“I half expected it,” said Bundle. “You were so surprisingly meek about it. I might have known you were up to something.”

“I thought you were remarkably sensible,” said Jimmy Thesiger.

“You would, Jimmy dear,” said Loraine. “It was easy enough to deceive you.”

“Thank you for these kind words,” said Jimmy. “Go on, and don’t mind me.”

“When you rang up and said there might be danger, I was more determined than ever,” went on Loraine. “I went to Harrods and bought a pistol. Here it is.”

She produced the dainty weapon and Superintendent Battle took it from her and examined it.

“Quite a deadly little toy, Miss Wade,” he said. “Have you had much—er—practice with it?”

“None at all,” said Loraine. “But I thought if I took it with me—well, that it would give me a comforting feeling.”

“Quite so,” said Battle gravely.

“My idea was to come over here and see what was going on. I left my car in the road and climbed through the hedge and came up to the terrace. I was just looking about me when—plop—something fell right at my feet. I picked it up and then looked to see where it could have come from. And then I saw the man climbing down the ivy and I ran.”

“Just so,” said Battle. “Now, Miss Wade, can you describe the man at all?”

The girl shook her head.

“It was too dark to see much. I think he was a big man—but that’s about all.”

“And now you, Mr. Thesiger.” Battle turned to him. “You struggled with the man—can you tell me anything about him?”

“He was a pretty hefty individual—that’s all I can say. He gave a few hoarse whispers—that’s when I had him by the throat. He said ‘Lemme go,

guvnor,' something like that."

"An uneducated man, then?"

"Yes, I suppose he was. He spoke like one."

"I still don't quite understand about the packet," said Lorraine. "Why should he throw it down as he did? Was it because it hampered him climbing?"

"No," said Battle. "I've got an entirely different theory about that. That packet, Miss Wade, was deliberately thrown down to you—or so I believe."

"To me?"

"Shall we say—to the person the thief thought you were."

"This is getting very involved," said Jimmy.

"Mr. Thesiger, when you came into this room, did you switch on the light at all?"

"Yes."

"And there was no one in the room?"

"No one at all."

"But previously you thought you heard someone moving about down here?"

"Yes."

"And then, after trying the window, you switched off the light again and locked the door?"

Jimmy nodded.

Superintendent Battle looked slowly around him. His glance was arrested by a big screen of Spanish leather which stood near one of the bookcases.

Brusquely he strode across the room and looked behind it.

He uttered a sharp ejaculation, which brought the three young people quickly to his side.

Huddled on the floor, in a dead faint, lay the Countess Radzky.

Twenty-two

THE COUNTESS RADZKY'S STORY

The Countess's return to consciousness was very different from that of Jimmy Thesiger. It was more prolonged and infinitely more artistic.

Artistic was Bundle's word. She had been zealous in her ministrations—largely consisting of the application of cold water—and the Countess had instantly responded, passing a white, bewildered hand across her brow and murmuring faintly.

It was at this point that Bill, at last relieved from his duties with telephone and doctors, had come bustling into the room and had instantly proceeded to make (in Bundle's opinion) a most regrettable idiot of himself.

He had hung over the Countess with a concerned and anxious face and had addressed a series of singularly idiotic remarks to her:

"I say, Countess. It's all right. It's really all right. Don't try to talk. It's bad for you. Just lie still. You'll be all right in a minute. It'll all come back to you. Don't say anything till you're quite all right. Take your time. Just lie still and close your eyes. You'll remember everything in a minute. Have another sip of water. Have some brandy. That's the stuff. Don't you think, Bundle, that some brandy . . . ?"

"For God's sake, Bill, leave her alone," said Bundle crossly. "She'll be all right."

And with an expert hand she flipped a good deal of cold water on to the exquisite makeup of the Countess's face.

The Countess flinched and sat up. She looked considerably more wide awake.

"Ah!" she murmured. "I am here. Yes, I am here."

“Take you time,” said Bill. “Don’t talk till you feel quite all right again.”

The Countess drew the folds of a very transparent negligée closer around her.

“It is coming back to me,” she murmured. “Yes, it is coming back.”

She looked at the little crowd grouped around her. Perhaps something in the attentive faces struck her as unsympathetic. In any case she smiled deliberately up at the one face which clearly displayed a very opposite emotion.

“Ah, my big Englishman,” she said very softly, “do not distress yourself. All is well with me.”

“Oh! I say, but are you sure?” demanded Bill anxiously.

“Quite sure.” She smiled at him reassuringly. “We Hungarians, we have nerves of steel.”

A look of intense relief passed over Bill’s face. A fatuous look settled down there instead—a look which made Bundle earnestly long to kick him.

“Have some water,” she said coldly.

The Countess refused water. Jimmy, kindlier to beauty in distress, suggested a cocktail. The Countess reacted favourably to this suggestion. When she had swallowed it, she looked round once more, this time with a livelier eye.

“Tell me, what has happened?” she demanded briskly.

“We were hoping you might be able to tell us that,” said Superintendent Battle.

The Countess looked at him sharply. She seemed to become aware of the big, quiet man for the first time.

“I went to your room,” said Bundle. “The bed hadn’t been slept in and you weren’t there.”

She paused—looking accusingly at the Countess. The latter closed her eyes and nodded her head slowly.

“Yes, yes, I remember it all now. Oh, it was horrible!” She shuddered. “Do you want me to tell you?”

Superintendent Battle said, “If you please” at the same moment that Bill said, “Not if you don’t feel up to it.”

The Countess looked from one to the other, but the quiet, masterful eye of Superintendent Battle won the game.

“I could not sleep,” began the Countess. “The house—it oppressed me. I was all, as you say, on wires, the cat on the hot bricks. I knew that in the state I was in it was useless to think of going to bed. I walked about my room. I read. But the books placed there did not interest me greatly. I thought I would come down and find something more absorbing.”

“Very natural,” said Bill.

“Very often done, I believe,” said Battle.

“So as soon as the idea occurred to me, I left my room and came down. The house was very still—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted the Superintendent, “but can you give me an idea of the time when this occurred?”

“I never know the time,” said the Countess superbly, and swept on with her story.

“The house was very quiet. One could even hear the little mouse run, if there had been one. I come down the stairs—very quietly—”

“Very quietly?”

“Naturally I do not want to disturb the household,” said the Countess reproachfully. “I come in here. I go into this corner and I search the shelves for a suitable book.”

“Having of course switched on the light?”

“No, I did not switch on the light. I had, you see, my little electric torch with me. With that, I scanned the shelves.”

“Ah!” said the Superintendent.

“Suddenly,” continued the Countess dramatically, “I hear something. A stealthy sound. A muffled footstep. I switch out my torch and listen. The footsteps draw nearer—stealthy, horrible footsteps. I shrink behind the screen. In another minute the door opens and the light is switched on. The man—the burglar is in the room.”

“Yes, but I say—” began Mr. Thesiger.

A large-sized foot pressed his, and realizing that Superintendent Battle was giving him a hint, Jimmy shut up.

“I nearly died of fear,” continued the Countess. “I tried not to breathe. The man waited for a minute, listening. Then, still with that horrible, stealthy tread—”

Again Jimmy opened his mouth in protest, and again shut it.

“—he crossed to the window and peered out. He remained there for a minute or two, then he recrossed the room and turned out the lights again, locking the door. I am terrified. He is in the room, moving stealthily about in the dark. Ah, it is horrible. Suppose he should come upon me in the dark! In another minute I hear him again by the window. Then silence. I hope that perhaps he may have gone out that way. As the minutes pass and I hear no further sound, I am almost sure that he has done so. Indeed I am in the very act of switching on my torch and investigating when—prestissimo!—it all begins.”

“Yes?”

“Ah! But it was terrible—never—never shall I forget it! Two men trying to murder each other. Oh, it was horrible! They reeled about the room, and

furniture crashed in every direction. I thought, too, that I heard a woman scream—but that was not in the room. It was outside somewhere. The criminal had a hoarse voice. He croaked rather than spoke. He kept saying ‘Lemme go—lemme go.’ The other man was a gentleman. He had a cultured English voice.”

Jimmy looked gratified.

“He swore—mostly,” continued the Countess.

“Clearly a gentleman,” said Superintendent Battle.

“And then,” continued the Countess, “a flash and a shot. The bullet hit the bookcase beside me. I—I suppose I must have fainted.”

She looked up at Bill. He took her hand and patted it.

“You poor dear,” he said. “How rotten for you.”

“Silly idiot,” thought Bundle.

Superintendent Battle had moved on swift, noiseless feet over to the bookcase a little to the right of the screen. He bent down, searching. Presently he stooped and picked something up.

“It wasn’t a bullet, Countess,” he said. “It’s the shell of the cartridge. Where were you standing when you fired, Mr. Thesiger.”

Jimmy took up a position by the window.

“As nearly as I can see, about here.”

Superintendent Battle placed himself in the same spot.

“That’s right,” he agreed. “The empty shell would throw right rear. It’s a .455. I don’t wonder the Countess thought it was a bullet in the dark. It hit the bookcase about a foot from her. The bullet itself grazed the window frame and we’ll find it outside tomorrow—unless your assailant happens to be carrying it about in him.”

Jimmy shook his head regretfully.

“Leopold, I fear, did not cover himself with glory,” he remarked sadly.

The Countess was looking at him with most flattering attention.

“Your arm!” she exclaimed. “It is all tied up! Was it you then—?”

Jimmy made her a mock bow.

“I’m so glad I’ve got a cultured, English voice,” he said. “And I can assure you that I wouldn’t have dreamed of using the language I did if I had had any suspicion that a lady was present.”

“I did not understand all of it,” the Countess hastened to explain. “Although I had an English governess when I was young—”

“It isn’t the sort of thing she’d be likely to teach you,” agreed Jimmy. “Kept you busy with your uncle’s pen, and the umbrella of the gardener’s niece. I know the sort of stuff.”

“But what has happened?” asked the Countess. “That is what I want to know. I demand to know what has happened.”

There was a moment’s silence whilst everybody looked at Superintendent Battle.

“It’s very simple,” said Battle mildly. “Attempted robbery. Some political papers stolen from Sir Stanley Digby. The thieves nearly got away with them, but thanks to this young lady”—he indicated Loraine—“they didn’t.”

The Countess flashed a glance at the girl—rather an odd glance.

“Indeed,” she said coldly.

“A very fortunate coincidence that she happened to be there,” said Superintendent Battle, smiling.

The Countess gave a little sigh and half closed her eyes again.

“It is absurd, but I still feel extremely faint,” she murmured.

“Of course you do,” cried Bill. “Let me help you up to your room. Bundle will come with you.”

“It is very kind of Lady Eileen,” said the Countess, “but I should prefer to be alone. I am really quite all right. Perhaps you will just help me up the stairs.”

She rose to her feet, accepted Bill’s arm and, leaning heavily on it, went out of the room. Bundle followed as far as the hall, but, the Countess reiterating her assurance—with some tartness—that she was quite all right, she did not accompany them upstairs.

But as she stood watching the Countess’s graceful form, supported by Bill, slowly mounting the stairway, she stiffened suddenly to acute attention. The Countess’s negligée, as previously mentioned, was thin—a mere veil of orange chiffon. Through it Bundle saw distinctly below the right shoulder blade a small black mole.

With a gasp, Bundle swung impetuously round to where Superintendent Battle was just emerging from the library. Jimmy and Loraine had preceded him.

“There,” said Battle. “I’ve fastened the window and there will be a man on duty outside. And I’ll lock the door and take the key. In the morning we’ll do what the French call reconstruct the crime—Yes, Lady Eileen, what is it?”

“Superintendent Battle, I must speak with you,—at once.”

“Why, certainly, I—”

George Lomax suddenly appeared, Dr. Cartwright by his side.

“Ah, there you are, Battle. You’ll be relieved to hear that there’s nothing seriously wrong with O’Rourke.”

“I never thought there would be much wrong with Mr. O’Rourke,” said Battle.

“He’s had a strong hypodermic administered to him,” said the doctor. “He’ll wake perfectly all right in the morning, perhaps a bit of a head, perhaps not. Now then, young man, let’s look at this bullet wound of yours.”

“Come on, nurse,” said Jimmy to Loraine. “Come and hold the basin or my hand. Witness a strong man’s agony. You know the stunt.”

Jimmy, Loraine and the doctor went off together. Bundle continued to throw agonized glances in the direction of Superintendent Battle, who had been buttonholed by George.

The Superintendent waited patiently till a pause occurred in George’s loquacity. He then swiftly took advantage of it.

“I wonder, sir, if I might have a word privately with Sir Stanley? In the little study at the end there.”

“Certainly,” said George. “Certainly. I’ll go and fetch him at once.”

He hurried off upstairs again. Battle drew Bundle swiftly into the drawing room and shut the door.

“Now, Lady Eileen, what is it?”

“I’ll tell you as quickly as I can—but it’s rather long and complicated.”

As concisely as she could, Bundle related her introduction to the Seven Dials Club and her subsequent adventures there. When she had finished, Superintendent Battle drew a long breath. For once, his facial woodenness was laid aside.

“Remarkable,” he said. “Remarkable. I wouldn’t have believed it possible—even for you, Lady Eileen. I ought to have known better.”

“But you did give me a hint, Superintendent Battle. You told me to ask Bill Eversleigh.”

“It’s dangerous to give people like you a hint, Lady Eileen. I never dreamt of your going to the lengths you have.”

“Well, it’s all right, Superintendent Battle. My death doesn’t lie at your door.”

“Not yet, it doesn’t,” said Battle grimly.

He stood as though in thought, turning things over in his mind. “What Mr. Thesiger was about, letting you run into danger like that, I can’t think,” he said presently.

“He didn’t know till afterwards,” said Bundle. “I’m not a complete mug, Superintendent Battle. And, anyway, he’s got his hands full looking after Miss Wade.”

“Is that so?” said the Superintendent. “Ah!”

He twinkled a little.

“I shall have to detail Mr. Eversleigh to look after you, Lady Eileen.”

“Bill!” said Bundle contemptuously. “But, Superintendent Battle, you haven’t heard the end of my story. The woman I saw there—Anna—No 1. Yes, No 1 is the Countess Radzky.”

And rapidly she went on to describe her recognition of the mole.

To her surprise the Superintendent hemmed and hawed.

“A mole isn’t much to go upon, Lady Eileen. Two women might have an identical mole very easily. You must remember that the Countess Radzky is a very well-known figure in Hungary.”

“Then this isn’t the real Countess Radzky. I tell you I’m sure this is the same woman I saw there. And look at her tonight—the way we found her. I don’t believe she ever fainted at all.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t say that, Lady Eileen. That empty shell striking the bookcase beside her might have frightened any woman half out of her wits.”

“But what was she doing there anyway? One doesn’t come down to look for a book with an electric torch.”

Battle scratched his cheek. He seemed unwilling to speak. He began to pace up and down the room, as though making up his mind. At last he turned to the girl.

“See here, Lady Eileen, I’m going to trust you. The Countess’s conduct is suspicious. I know that as well as you do. It’s very suspicious—but we’ve got to go carefully. There mustn’t be any unpleasantness with the Embassies. One has got to be sure.”

“I see. If you were sure . . .”

“There’s something else. During the war, Lady Eileen, there was a great outcry about German spies being left at large. Busybodies wrote letters to the papers about it. We paid no attention. Hard words didn’t hurt us. The small fry were left alone. Why? Because through them, sooner or later, we got the big fellow—the man at the top.”

“You mean?”

“Don’t bother about what I mean, Lady Eileen. But remember this. I know all about the Countess. And I want her let alone.”

“And now,” added Superintendent Battle ruefully, “I’ve got to think of something to say to Sir Stanley Digby!”

Twenty-three

SUPERINTENDENT BATTLE IN CHARGE

It was ten o'clock on the following morning. The sun poured in through the windows of the library, where Superintendent Battle had been at work since six. On a summons from him, George Lomax, Sir Oswald Coote and Jimmy Thesiger had just joined him, having repaired the fatigues of the night with a substantial breakfast. Jimmy's arm was in a sling, but he bore little trace of the night's affray.

The Superintendent eyed all three of them benevolently, somewhat with the air of a kindly curator explaining a museum to little boys. On the table beside him were various objects, neatly labelled. Amongst them Jimmy recognized Leopold.

"Ah, Superintendent," said George, "I have been anxious to know how you have progressed. Have you caught the man?"

"He'll take a lot of catching, he will," said the Superintendent.

His failure in that respect did not appear to rankle with him.

George Lomax did not look particularly well-pleased. He detested levity of any kind.

"I've got everything taped out pretty clearly," went on the detective.

He took up two objects from the table.

"Here we've got the two bullets. The largest is a .455, fired from Mr. Thesiger's Colt automatic. Grazed the window sash and I found it embedded in the trunk of that cedar tree. This little fellow was fired from the Mauser .25. After passing through Mr. Thesiger's arm, it embedded itself in this armchair here. As for the pistol itself—"

“Well?” said Sir Oswald eagerly. “Any fingerprints?”

Battle shook his head.

“The man who handled it wore gloves,” he said slowly.

“A pity,” said Sir Oswald.

“A man who knew his business would wear gloves. Am I right in thinking, Sir Oswald, that you found this pistol just about twenty yards from the bottom of the steps leading up to the terrace?”

Sir Oswald stepped to the window.

“Yes, almost exactly, I should say.”

“I don’t want to find fault, but it would have been wiser on your part, sir, to leave it exactly as you found it.”

“I am sorry,” said Sir Oswald stiffly.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I’ve been able to reconstruct things. There were your footprints, you see, leading up from the bottom of the garden, and a place where you had obviously stopped and stooped down, and a kind of dent in the grass which was highly suggestive. By the way, what was your theory of the pistol being there?”

“I presumed that it had been dropped by the man in his flight.”

Battle shook his head.

“Not dropped. Sir Oswald. There are two points against that. To begin with, there are only one set of footprints crossing the lawn just there—your own.”

“I see,” said Sir Oswald thoughtfully.

“Can you be sure of that, Battle?” put in George.

“Quite sure, sir. There is one other set of tracks crossing the lawn, Miss Wade’s, but they are a good deal further to the left.”

He paused, and then went on: “And there’s the dent in the ground. The pistol must have struck the ground with some force. It all points to its having been thrown.”

“Well, why not?” said Sir Oswald. “Say the man fled down the path to the left. He’d leave no footprints on the path and he’d hurl the pistol away from him into the middle of the lawn, eh, Lomax?”

George agreed by a nod of the head.

“It’s true that he’d leave no footprints on the path,” said Battle, “but from the shape of the dent and the way the turf was cut, I don’t think the pistol was thrown from that direction. I think it was thrown from the terrace here.”

“Very likely,” said Sir Oswald. “Does it matter, Superintendent?”

“Ah, yes, Battle,” broke in George. “Is it—er—strictly relevant?”

“Perhaps not, Mr. Lomax. But we like to get things just so, you know. I wonder now if one of you gentlemen would take this pistol and throw it. Will you, Sir Oswald? That’s very kind. Stand just there in the window. Now fling it into the middle of the lawn.”

Sir Oswald complied, sending the pistol flying through the air with a powerful sweep of his arm. Jimmy Thesiger drew near with breathless interest. The Superintendent lumbered off after it like a well-trained retriever. He reappeared with a beaming face.

“That’s it, sir. Just the same kind of mark. Although, by the way, you sent it a good ten yards farther. But then, you’re a very powerfully built man, aren’t you, Sir Oswald? Excuse me, I thought I heard someone at the door.”

The Superintendent’s ears must have been very much sharper than anyone else’s. Nobody else had heard a sound, but Battle was proved right, for Lady Coote stood outside, a medicine glass in her hand.

“Your medicine, Oswald,” she said, advancing into the room. “You forgot it after breakfast.”

“I’m very busy, Maria,” said Sir Oswald. “I don’t want my medicine.”

“You would never take it if it wasn’t for me,” said his wife serenely, advancing upon him. “You’re just like a naughty little boy. Drink it up now.”

And meekly, obediently, the great steel magnate drank it up!

Lady Coote smiled sadly and sweetly at everyone.

“Am I interrupting you? Are you very busy? Oh, look at those revolvers. Nasty, noisy, murdering things. To think, Oswald, that you might have been shot by the burglar last night.”

“You must have been alarmed when you found he was missing, Lady Coote,” said Battle.

“I didn’t think of it at first,” confessed Lady Coote. “This poor boy here”—she indicated Jimmy—“being shot—and everything so dreadful, but so exciting. It wasn’t till Mr. Bateman asked me where Sir Oswald was that I remembered he’d gone out half an hour before for a stroll.”

“Sleepless, eh, Sir Oswald?” asked Battle.

“I am usually an excellent sleeper,” said Sir Oswald. “But I must confess that last night I felt unusually restless. I thought the night air would do me good.”

“You came out through this window, I suppose?”

Was it his fancy, or did Sir Oswald hesitate for a moment before replying?

“Yes.”

“In your pumps too,” said Lady Coote, “instead of putting thick shoes on. What would you do without me to look after you?”

She shook her head sadly.

“I think, Maria, if you don’t mind leaving us—we have still a lot to discuss.”

“I know, dear, I’m just going.”

Lady Coote withdrew, carrying the empty medicine glass as though it were a goblet out of which she had just administered a death potion.

“Well, Battle,” said George Lomax, “it all seems clear enough. Yes, perfectly clear. The man fires a shot, disabling Mr. Thesiger, flings away the weapon, runs along the terrace and down the gravel path.”

“Where he ought to have been caught by my men,” put in Battle.

“Your men, if I may say so, Battle, seem to have been singularly remiss. They didn’t see Miss Wade come in. If they could miss her coming in, they could easily miss the thief going out.”

Superintendent Battle opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to think better of it. Jimmy Thesiger looked at him curiously. He would have given a lot to know just what was in Superintendent Battle’s mind.

“Must have been a champion runner,” was all the Scotland Yard man contented himself with saying.

“How do you mean, Battle?”

“Just what I say, Mr. Lomax. I was round the corner of the terrace myself not fifty seconds after the shot was fired. And for a man to run all that distance towards me and get round the corner of the path before I appeared round the side of the house—well, as I say, he must have been a champion runner.”

“I am at a loss to understand you, Battle. You have some idea of your own which I have not yet—er—grasped. You say the man did not go across the lawn, and now you hint—What exactly do you hint? That the man did not go down the path? Then in your opinion—er—where did he go?”

For answer, Superintendent Battle jerked an eloquent thumb upwards.

“Eh?” said George.

The Superintendent jerked harder than ever. George raised his head and looked at the ceiling.

“Up there,” said Battle. “Up the ivy again.”

“Nonsense, Superintendent. What you are suggesting is impossible.”

“Not at all impossible, sir. He’d done it once. He could do it twice.”

“I don’t mean impossible in that sense. But if the man wanted to escape, he’d never bolt back into the house.”

“Safest place for him, Mr. Lomax.”

“But Mr. O’Rourke’s door was still locked on the inside when we came to him.”

“And how did you get to him? Through Sir Stanley’s room. That’s the way our man went. Lady Eileen tells me she saw the door knob of Mr. O’Rourke’s room move. That was when our friend was up there the first time. I suspect the key was under Mr. O’Rourke’s pillow. But his exit is clear enough the second time—through the communicating door and through Sir Stanley’s room, which, of course, was empty. Like everyone else, Sir Stanley is rushing downstairs to the library. Our man’s got a clear course.”

“And where did he go then?”

Superintendent Battle shrugged his burly shoulders and became evasive.

“Plenty of ways open. Into an empty room on the other side of the house and down the ivy again—out through a side door—or, just possibly, if it was an inside job, he—well, stayed in the house.”

George looked at him in shocked surprise.

“Really, Battle, I should—I should feel it very deeply if one of my servants—er—I have the most perfect reliance on them—it would distress me very much to have to suspect—”

“Nobody’s asking you to suspect anyone, Mr. Lomax. I’m just putting all the possibilities before you. The servants may be all right—probably are.”

“You have disturbed me,” said George. “You have disturbed me greatly.”

His eyes appeared more protuberant than ever.

To distract him, Jimmy poked delicately at a curious blackened object on the table.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“That’s exhibit Z,” said Battle. “The last of our little lot. It is, or rather it has been, a glove.”

He picked it up, the charred relic, and manipulated it with pride.

“Where did you find it?” asked Sir Oswald.

Battle jerked his head over his shoulder.

“In the grate—nearly burnt, but not quite. Queer looks as though it had been chewed by a dog.”

“It might possibly be Miss Wade’s,” suggested Jimmy. “She has several dogs.”

The Superintendent shook his head.

“This isn’t a lady’s glove—no, not even the large kind of loose glove ladies wear nowadays. Put it on, sir, a moment.”

He adjusted the blackened object over Jimmy’s hand.

“You see—it’s large even for you.”

“Do you attach importance to this discovery?” inquired Sir Oswald coldly.

“You never know, Sir Oswald, what’s going to be important or what isn’t.”

There was a sharp tap at the door and Bundle entered.

“I’m so sorry,” she said apologetically. “But Father has just rung up. He says I must come home because everybody is worrying him.”

She paused.

“Yes, my dear Eileen?” said George encouragingly, perceiving that there was more to come.

“I wouldn’t have interrupted you—only that I thought it might perhaps have something to do with all this. You see, what has upset Father is that one of our footmen is missing. He went out last night and hasn’t come back.”

“What is the man’s name?” It was Sir Oswald who took up the cross-examination.

“John Bauer.”

“An Englishman?”

“I believe he calls himself a Swiss—but I think he’s a German. He speaks English perfectly, though.”

“Ah!” Sir Oswald drew in his breath with a long, satisfied hiss. “And he has been at Chimneys—how long?”

“Just under a month.”

Sir Oswald turned to the other two.

“Here is our missing man. You know, Lomax, as well as I do, that several foreign Governments are after the thing. I remember the man now perfectly—tall, well-drilled fellow. Came about a fortnight before we left. A clever

move. Any new servants here would be closely scrutinized, but at Chimneys, five miles away—” He did not finish the sentence.

“You think the plan was laid so long beforehand?”

“Why not? There are millions in that formula, Lomax. Doubtless Bauer hoped to get access to my private papers at Chimneys, and to learn something of forthcoming arrangements from them. It seems likely that he may have had an accomplice in this house—someone who put him wise to the lie of the land and who saw to the doping of O’Rourke. But Bauer was the man Miss Wade saw climbing down the ivy—the big, powerful man.”

He turned to Superintendent Battle.

“Bauer was your man, Superintendent. And, somehow or other, you let him slip through your fingers.”

Twenty-four

BUNDLE WONDERS

There was no doubt that Superintendent Battle was taken aback. He fingered his chin thoughtfully.

“Sir Oswald is right, Battle,” said George. “This is the man. Any hope of catching him?”

“There may be, sir. It certainly looks—well, suspicious. Of course the man may turn up again—at Chimneys, I mean.”

“Do you think it likely?”

“No, it isn’t,” confessed Battle. “Yes, it certainly looks as though Bauer were the man. But I can’t quite see how he got in and out of these grounds unobserved.”

“I have already told you my opinion of the men you posted,” said George. “Hopelessly inefficient—I don’t mean to blame you, Superintendent, but —” His pause was eloquent.

“Ah, well,” said Battle lightly, “my shoulders are broad.”

He shook his head and sighed.

“I must get to the telephone at once. Excuse me, gentlemen. I’m sorry, Mr. Lomax—I feel I’ve rather bungled this business, But it’s been puzzling, more puzzling than you know.”

He strode hurriedly from the room.

“Come into the garden,” said Bundle to Jimmy. “I want to talk to you.”

They went out together through the window. Jimmy stared down at the lawn, frowning.

“What’s the matter?” asked Bundle.

Jimmy explained the circumstances of the pistol throwing.

“I’m wondering,” he ended, “what was in old Battle’s mind when he got Coote to throw the pistol. Something, I’ll swear. Anyhow, it landed up about ten yards farther than it should have done. You know, Bundle, Battle’s a deep one.”

“He’s an extraordinary man,” said Bundle. “I want to tell you about last night.”

She retailed her conversation with the Superintendent. Jimmy listened attentively.

“So the Countess is No 1,” he said thoughtfully. “It all hangs together very well. No 2—Bauer—comes over from Chimneys. He climbs up into O’Rourke’s room, knowing that O’Rourke has had a sleeping draught administered to him—by the Countess somehow or other. The arrangement is that he is to throw the papers to the Countess, who will be waiting below. Then she’ll nip back through the library and up to her room. If Bauer’s caught leaving the grounds, they’ll find nothing on him. Yes, it was a good plan—but it went wrong. No sooner is the Countess in the library than she hears me coming and has to jump behind the screen. Jolly awkward for her, because she can’t warn her accomplice. No 2 pinches the papers, looks out of the window, sees, as he thinks, the Countess waiting, pitches the papers down to her and proceeds to climb down the ivy, where he finds a nasty surprise in the shape of me waiting for him. Pretty nervy work for the Countess waiting behind her screen. All things considered, she told a pretty good story. Yes, it all hangs together very well.”

“Too well,” said Bundle decidedly.

“Eh?” said Jimmy surprised.

“What about No 7—No 7, who never appears, but lives in the background. The Countess and Bauer? No, it’s not so simple as that. Bauer was here last night, yes. But he was only here in case things went wrong—as they have done. His part is the part of scapegoat; to draw all attention from No 7—the boss.”

“I say, Bundle,” said Jimmy anxiously, “you haven’t been reading too much sensational literature, have you?”

Bundle threw him a glance of dignified reproach.

“Well,” said Jimmy, “I’m not yet like the Red Queen. I can’t believe six impossible things before breakfast.”

“It’s after breakfast,” said Bundle.

“Or even after breakfast. We’ve got a perfectly good hypothesis which fits the facts—and you won’t have it at any price, simply because, like the old riddle, you want to make things more difficult.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bundle, “but I cling passionately to a mysterious No 7 being a member of the house party.”

“What does Bill think?”

“Bill,” said Bundle coldly, “is impossible.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy. “I suppose you’ve told him about the Countess? He ought to be warned. Heaven knows what he’ll go blabbing about otherwise.”

“He won’t hear a word against her,” said Bundle. “He’s—oh, simply idiotic. I wish you’d drive it home to him about that mole.”

“You forget I wasn’t in the cupboard,” said Jimmy. “And anyway I’d rather not argue with Bill about his lady friend’s mole. But surely he can’t be such an ass as not to see that everything fits in?”

“He’s every kind of ass,” said Bundle bitterly. “You made the greatest mistake, Jimmy, in ever telling him at all.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jimmy. “I didn’t see it at the time—but I do now. I was a fool, but dash it all, old Bill—”

“You know what foreign adventuresses are,” said Bundle. “How they get hold of one.”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t,” said Jimmy. “One has never tried to get hold of me.” And he sighed.

For a moment or two there was silence. Jimmy was turning things over in his mind. The more he thought about them the more unsatisfactory they seemed.

“You say that Battle wants the Countess left alone,” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“The idea being that through her he will get at someone else?”

Bundle nodded.

Jimmy frowned deeply as he tried to see where this led. Clearly Battle had some very definite idea in his mind.

“Sir Stanley Digby went up to town early this morning, didn’t he,” he said.

“Yes.”

“O’Rourke with him?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You don’t think—no, that’s impossible.”

“What?”

“That O’Rourke can be mixed up in this in any way.”

“It’s possible,” said Bundle thoughtfully. “He’s got what one calls a very vivid personality. No, it wouldn’t surprise me if—oh, to tell the truth, nothing would surprise me! In fact, there’s only one person I’m really sure isn’t No 7.”

“Who’s that?”

“Superintendent Battle.”

“Oh! I thought you were going to say George Lomax.”

“Ssh, here he comes.”

George was, indeed, bearing down upon them in an unmistakable manner. Jimmy made an excuse and slipped away. George sat down by Bundle.

“My dear Eileen, must you really leave us?”

“Well, Father seems to have got the wind up rather badly. I think I’d better go home and hold his hand.”

“This little hand will indeed be comforting,” said George, taking it and pressing it playfully. “My dear Eileen, I understand your reasons and I honour you for them. In these days of changed and unsettled conditions—”

“He’s off,” thought Bundle desperately.

“—when family life is at a premium—all the old standards falling!—It becomes our class to set an example to show that we, at least, are unaffected by modern conditions. They call us the Die Hards—I am proud of the term—I repeat I am proud of the term! There are things that should die hard—dignity, beauty, modesty, the sanctity of family life, filial respect—who dies if these shall live? As I was saying, my dear Eileen, I envy you the privileges of your youth. Youth! What a wonderful thing! What a wonderful word! And we do not appreciate it until we grow to—er—maturer years. I confess, my dear child, that I have in the past been disappointed by your levity. I see now that it was but the careless and charming levity of a child. I

perceive now the serious and earnest beauty of your mind. You will allow me, I hope, to help you with your reading?”

“Oh, thank you,” said Bundle faintly.

“And you must never be afraid of me again. I was shocked when Lady Caterham told me that you stood in awe of me. I can assure you that I am a very humdrum sort of person.”

The spectacle of George being modest struck Bundle spellbound. George continued:

“Never be shy with me, dear child. And do not be afraid of boring me. It will be a great delight to me to—if I may say so—form your budding mind. I will be your political mentor. We have never needed young women of talent and charm in the Party more than we need them today. You may well be destined to follow in the footsteps of your aunt, Lady Caterham.”

This awful prospect knocked Bundle out completely. She could only stare helplessly at George. This did not discourage him—on the contrary. His main objection to women was that they talked too much. It was seldom that he found what he considered a really good listener. He smiled benignly at Bundle.

“The butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. A wonderful picture. I have a very interesting work on political economy. I will look it out now, and you can take it to Chimneys with you. When you have finished it, I will discuss it with you. Do not hesitate to write to me if any point puzzles you. I have many public duties but by unsparing work I can always make time for the affairs of my friends. I will look for the book.”

He strode away. Bundle gazed after him with a dazed expression. She was roused by the unexpected advent of Bill.

“Look here,” said Bill. “What the hell was Codders holding your hand for?”

“It wasn’t my hand,” said Bundle wildly. “It was my budding mind.”

“Don’t be an ass, Bundle.”

“Sorry, Bill, but I’m a little worried. Do you remember saying that Jimmy ran a grave risk down here?”

“So he does,” said Bill. “It’s frightfully hard to escape from Codders once he’s got interested in you. Jimmy will be caught in the toils before he knows where he is.”

“It’s not Jimmy who’s caught—it’s me,” said Bundle wildly. “I shall have to meet endless Mrs. Macattas, and read political economy and discuss it with George, and heaven knows where it will end!”

Bill whistled.

“Poor old Bundle. Been laying it on a bit thick, haven’t you?”

“I must have done. Bill, I feel horribly entangled.”

“Never mind,” said Bill consolingly. “George doesn’t really believe in women standing for Parliament, so you won’t have to stand up on platforms and talk a lot of junk, or kiss dirty babies in Bermondsey. Come and have a cocktail. It’s nearly lunch time.”

Bundle got up and walked by his side obediently.

“And I do so hate politics,” she murmured piteously.

“Of course you do. So do all sensible people. It’s only people like Codders and Pongo who take them seriously and revel in them. But all the same,” said Bill, reverting suddenly to a former point, “you oughtn’t to let Codders hold your hand.”

“Why on earth not?” said Bundle. “He’s known me all my life.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

“Virtuous William—Oh, I say, look at Superintendent Battle.”

They were just passing in through a side door. A cupboard-like room opened out of the little hallway. In it were kept golf clubs, tennis racquets, bowls and other features of country house life. Superintendent Battle was conducting a minute examination of various golf clubs. He looked up a little sheepishly at Bundle's exclamation.

"Going to take up golf, Superintendent Battle?"

"I might do worse, Lady Eileen. They say it's never too late to start. And I've got one good quality that will tell at any game."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"I don't know when I'm beaten. If everything goes wrong, I turn to and start again!"

And with a determined look on his face, Superintendent Battle came out and joined them, shutting the door behind him.

Twenty-five

JIMMY LAYS HIS PLANS

Jimmy Thesiger was feeling depressed. Avoiding George, whom he suspected of being ready to tackle him on serious subjects, he stole quietly away after lunch. Proficient as he was in details of the Santa Fé boundary dispute, he had no wish to stand an examination on it this minute.

Presently what he hoped would happen came to pass. Lorraine Wade, also unaccompanied, strolled down one of the shady garden paths. In a moment Jimmy was by her side. They walked for some minutes in silence and then Jimmy said tentatively:

“Lorraine?”

“Yes?”

“Look here, I’m a bad chap at putting things—but what about it? What’s wrong with getting a special licence and being married and living together happily ever afterwards?”

Lorraine displayed no embarrassment at this surprising proposal. Instead she threw back her head and laughed frankly.

“Don’t laugh at a chap,” said Jimmy reproachfully.

“I can’t help it. You were so funny.”

“Lorraine—you are a little devil.”

“I’m not. I’m what’s called a thoroughly nice girl.”

“Only to those who don’t know you—who are taken in by your delusive appearance of meekness and decorum.”

“I like your long words.”

“All out of crossword puzzles.”

“So educative.”

“Lorraine, dear, don’t beat about the bush. Will you or won’t you?”

Lorraine’s face sobered. It took on its characteristic appearance of determination. Her small mouth hardened and her little chin shot out aggressively.

“No, Jimmy. Not while things are as they are at present—all unfinished.”

“I know we haven’t done what we set out to do,” agreed Jimmy. “But all the same—well, it’s the end of a chapter. The papers are safe at the Air Ministry. Virtue triumphant. And—for the moment—nothing doing.”

“So—let’s get married?” said Lorraine with a slight smile.

“You’ve said it. Precisely the idea.”

But again Lorraine shook her head.

“No, Jimmy. Until this thing’s wound up—until we’re safe—”

“You think we’re in danger?”

“Don’t you?”

Jimmy’s cherubic pink face clouded over.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “If that extraordinary rigmarole of Bundle’s is true—and I suppose, incredible as it sounds, it must be true—then we’re not safe till we’ve settled with No 7!”

“And the others?”

“No—the others don’t count. It’s No 7 with his own ways of working that frightens me. Because I don’t know who he is or where to look for him.”

Lorraine shivered.

“I’ve been frightened,” she said in a low voice. “Ever since Gerry’s death. . .”

“You needn’t be frightened. There’s nothing for you to be frightened about. You leave everything to me. I tell you, Lorraine—I’ll get No 7 yet. Once we get him—well, I don’t think there’ll be much trouble with the rest of the gang, whoever they are.”

“If you get him—and suppose he gets you?”

“Impossible,” said Jimmy cheerfully. “I’m much too clever. Always have a good opinion of yourself—that’s my motto.”

“When I think of the things that might have happened last night—” Lorraine shivered.

“Well, they didn’t,” said Jimmy. “We’re both here, safe and sound—though I must admit my arm is confoundedly painful.”

“Poor boy.”

“Oh, one must expect to suffer in a good cause. And what with my wounds and my cheerful conversation, I’ve made a complete conquest of Lady Coote.”

“Oh! Do you think that important?”

“I’ve an idea it may come in useful.”

“You’ve got some plan in your mind, Jimmy. What is it?”

“The young hero never tells his plans,” said Jimmy firmly. “They mature in the dark.”

“You are an idiot, Jimmy.”

“I know. I know. That’s what everyone says. But I can assure you, Loraine, there’s a lot of brain work going on underneath. Now what about your plans? Got any?”

“Bundle has suggested that I should go to Chimneys with her for a bit.”

“Excellent,” said Jimmy approvingly. “Nothing could be better. I’d like an eye kept on Bundle anyway. You never know what mad thing she won’t get up to next. She’s so frightfully unexpected. And the worst of it is, she’s so astonishingly successful. I tell you, keeping Bundle out of mischief is a whole-time job.”

“Bill ought to look after her,” suggested Loraine.

“Bill’s pretty busy elsewhere.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Loraine.

“What? Not the Countess? But the lad’s potty about her.” Loraine continued to shake her head.

“There’s something there I don’t quite understand. But it’s not the Countess with Bill—it’s Bundle. Why, this morning, Bill was talking to me when Mr. Lomax came out and sat down by Bundle. He took her hand or something, and Bill was off like—like a rocket.”

“What a curious taste some people have,” observed Mr. Thesiger. “Fancy anyone who was talking to you wanting to do anything else. But you surprise me very much, Loraine. I thought our simple Bill was enmeshed in the toils of the beautiful foreign adventuress. Bundle thinks so, I know.”

“Bundle may,” said Loraine. “But I tell you, Jimmy, it isn’t so.”

“Then what’s the big idea?”

“Don’t you think it possible that Bill is doing a bit of sleuthing on his own?”

“Bill? He hasn’t got the brains.”

“I’m not so sure. When a simple, muscular person like Bill does set out to be subtle, no one ever gives him credit for it.”

“And in consequence he can put in some good work. Yes, there’s something in that. But all the same I’d never have thought it of Bill. He’s doing the Countess’s little woolly lamb to perfection. I think you’re wrong, you know, Loraine. The Countess is an extraordinarily beautiful woman—not my type of course,” put in Mr. Thesiger hastily—“and old Bill has always had a heart like an hotel.”

Loraine shook her head, unconvinced.

“Well,” said Jimmy, “have it your own way. We seem to have more or less settled things. You go back with Bundle to Chimneys, and for heaven’s sake keep her from poking about in that Seven Dials place again. Heaven knows what will happen if she does.”

Loraine nodded.

“And now,” said Jimmy, “I think a few words with Lady Coote would be advisable.”

Lady Coote was sitting on a garden seat doing woolwork. The subject was a disconsolate and somewhat misshapen young woman weeping over an urn.

Lady Coote made room for Jimmy by her side, and he promptly, being a tactful young man, admired her work.

“Do you like it?” said Lady Coote, pleased. “It was begun by my Aunt Selina the week before she died. Cancer of the liver, poor thing.”

“How beastly,” said Jimmy.

“And how is the arm?”

“Oh, it’s feeling quite all right. Bit of a nuisance and all that, you know.”

“You’ll have to be careful,” said Lady Coote in a warning voice. “I’ve known blood poisoning set in—and in that case you might lose your arm altogether.”

“Oh! I say, I hope not.”

“I’m only warning you,” said Lady Coote.

“Where are you hanging out now?” inquired Mr. Thesiger. “Town—or where?”

Considering that he knew the answer to his query perfectly well, he put the question with a praiseworthy amount of ingenuousness.

Lady Coote sighed heavily.

“Sir Oswald has taken the Duke of Alton’s place. Letherbury. You know it, perhaps?”

“Oh, rather. Topping place, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Lady Coote. “It’s a very large place, and gloomy, you know. Rows of picture galleries with such forbidding-looking people. What they call Old Masters are very depressing, I think. You should have seen a little house we had in Yorkshire, Mr. Thesiger. When Sir Oswald was plain Mr. Coote. Such a nice lounge hall and a cheerful drawing room with an ingle-nook—a white striped paper with a frieze of wisteria I chose for it, I remember. Satin stripe, you know, not moiré. Much better taste, I always think. The dining room faced northeast, so we didn’t get much sun in it, but with a good bright scarlet paper and a set of those comic hunting prints—why, it was as cheerful as Christmas.”

In the excitement of these reminiscences, Lady Coote dropped several little balls of wool, which Jimmy dutifully retrieved.

“Thank you, my dear,” said Lady Coote. “Now, what was I saying? Oh—about houses—yes, I do like a cheerful house. And choosing things for it gives you an interest.”

“I suppose Sir Oswald will be buying a place of his own one of these days,” suggested Jimmy. “And then you can have it just as you like.”

Lady Coote shook her head sadly.

“Sir Oswald talks of a firm doing it—and you know what that means.”

“Oh! But they’d consult you!”

“It would be one of those grand places—all for the antique. They’d look down on the things I call comfortable and homey. Not but that Sir Oswald wasn’t very comfortable and satisfied in his home always, and I daresay his tastes are just the same underneath. But nothing will suit him now but the best! He’s got on wonderfully, and naturally he wants something to show for it, but many’s the time I wonder where it will end.”

Jimmy looked sympathetic.

“It’s like a runaway horse,” said Lady Coote. “Got the bit between its teeth and away it goes. It’s the same with Sir Oswald. He’s got on, and he’s got on, till he can’t stop getting on. He’s one of the richest men in England—but does that satisfy him? No, he wants still more. He wants to be—I don’t know what he wants to be! I can tell you, it frightens me sometimes!”

“Like the Persian Johnny,” said Jimmy, “who went about wailing for fresh worlds to conquer.”

Lady Coote nodded acquiescence without much knowing what Jimmy was talking about.

“What I wonder is—will his stomach stand it?” she went on tearfully. “To have him an invalid—with his ideas—oh, it won’t bear thinking of.”

“He looks very hearty,” said Jimmy consolingly.

“He’s got something on his mind,” said Lady Coote. “Worried that’s what he is. I know.”

“What’s he worried about?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps something at the works. It’s a great comfort for him having Mr. Bateman. Such an earnest young man—and so conscientious.”

“Marvellously conscientious,” agreed Jimmy.

“Oswald thinks a lot of Mr. Bateman’s judgement. He says that Mr. Bateman is always right.”

“That was one of his worst characteristics years ago,” said Jimmy feelingly.

Lady Coote looked slightly puzzled.

“That was an awfully jolly weekend I had with you at Chimneys,” said Jimmy. “I mean it would have been awfully jolly if it hadn’t been for poor old Gerry kicking the bucket. Jolly nice girls.”

“I find girls very perplexing,” said Lady Coote. “Not romantic, you know. Why, I embroidered some handkerchiefs for Sir Oswald with my own hair when we were engaged.”

“Did you?” said Jimmy. “How marvellous. But I suppose girls haven’t got long hair to do that nowadays.”

“That’s true,” admitted Lady Coote. “But, oh, it shows in lots of other ways. I remember when I was a girl, one of my—well, my young men—picked up a handful of gravel, and a girl who was with me said at once that he was treasuring it because my feet had trodden on it. Such a pretty idea, I thought. Though it turned out afterwards that he was taking a course in mineralogy—or do I mean geology?—at a technical school. But I liked the idea—and stealing a girl’s handkerchief and treasuring it—all those sort of things.”

“Awkward if the girl wanted to blow her nose,” said the practical Mr. Thesiger.

Lady Coote laid down her woolwork and looked searchingly but kindly at him.

“Come now,” she said. “Isn’t there some nice girl that you fancy? That you’d like to work and make a little home for?”

Jimmy blushed and mumbled.

“I thought you got on very well with one of those girls at Chimneys that time—Vera Daventry.”

“Socks?”

“They do call her that,” admitted Lady Coote. “I can’t think why. It isn’t pretty.”

“Oh, she’s a topper,” said Jimmy. “I’d like to meet her again.”

“She’s coming down to stay with us next weekend.”

“Is she?” said Jimmy, trying to infuse a large amount of wistful longing into the two words.

“Yes. Would—would you like to come?”

“I would,” said Jimmy heartily. “Thanks ever so much, Lady Coote.”

And reiterating fervent thanks, he left her.

Sir Oswald presently joined his wife.

“What has that young jackanapes been boring you about?” he demanded. “I can’t stand that young fellow.”

“He’s a dear boy,” said Lady Coote. “And so brave. Look how he got wounded last night.”

“Yes, messing around where he’d no business to be.”

“I think you’re very unfair, Oswald.”

“Never done an honest day’s work in his life. A real waster if there ever was one. He’d never get on if he had his way to make in the world.”

“You must have got your feet damp last night,” said Lady Coote. “I hope you won’t get pneumonia. Freddie Richards died of it the other day. Dear me, Oswald, it makes my blood run cold to think of you wandering about with a dangerous burglar loose in the grounds. He might have shot you. I’ve asked Mr. Thesiger down for next weekend, by the way.”

“Nonsense,” said Sir Oswald. “I won’t have that young man in my house, do you hear, Maria?”

“Why not?”

“That’s my business.”

“I’m so sorry, dear,” said Lady Coote placidly. “I’ve asked him now, so it can’t be helped. Pick up that ball of pink wool, will you, Oswald?”

Sir Oswald complied, his face black as thunder. He looked at his wife and hesitated. Lady Coote was placidly threading her wool needle.

“I particularly don’t want Thesiger down next weekend,” he said at last. “I’ve heard a good deal about him from Bateman. He was at school with him.”

“What did Mr. Bateman say?”

“He’d no good to say of him. In fact, he warned me very seriously against him.”

“He did, did he?” said Lady Coote thoughtfully.

“And I have the highest respect for Bateman’s judgement. I’ve never known him wrong.”

“Dear me,” said Lady Coote. “What a mess I seem to have made of things. Of course, I should never have asked him if I had known. You should have told me all this before, Oswald. It’s too late now.”

She began to roll up her work very carefully. Sir Oswald looked at her, made as if to speak, then shrugged his shoulders. He followed her into the house. Lady Coote, walking ahead, wore a very faint smile on her face. She was fond of her husband, but she was also fond—in a quiet, unobtrusive, wholly womanly manner—of getting her own way.

Twenty-six

MAINLY ABOUT GOLF

“That friend of yours is a nice girl, Bundle,” said Lord Caterham.

Loraine had been at Chimneys for nearly a week, and had earned the high opinion of her host—mainly because of the charming readiness she had shown to be instructed in the science of the mashie shot.

Bored by his winter abroad, Lord Caterham had taken up golf. He was an execrable player and in consequence was profoundly enthusiastic over the game. He spent most of his mornings lifting mashie shots over various shrubs and bushes—or, rather, essaying to loft them, hacking large bits out of the velvety turf and generally reducing MacDonald to despair.

“We must lay out a little course,” said Lord Caterham, addressing a daisy. “A sporting little course. Now then, just watch this one, Bundle. Off the right knee, slow back, keep the head still and use the wrists.”

The ball, heavily topped, scudded across the lawn and disappeared into the unfathomed depths of a great bank of rhododendrons.

“Curious,” said Lord Caterham. “What did I do then, I wonder? As I was saying, Bundle, that friend of yours is a very nice girl. I really think I am inducing her to take quite an interest in the game. She hit some excellent shots this morning—really quite as good as I could do myself.”

Lord Caterham took another careless swing and removed an immense chunk of turf. MacDonald, who was passing retrieved it and stamped it firmly back. The look he gave Lord Caterham would have caused anyone but an ardent golfer to sink through the earth.

“If MacDonald has been guilty of cruelty to Cootes, which I strongly suspect,” said Bundle, “he’s being punished now.”

“Why shouldn’t I do as I like in my own garden?” demanded her father. “MacDonald ought to be interested in the way my game is coming on—the Scotch are a great golfing nation.”

“You poor old man,” said Bundle. “You’ll never be a golfer—but at any rate it keeps you out of mischief.”

“Not at all,” said Lord Caterham. “I did the long sixth in five the other day. The pro was very surprised when I told him about it.”

“He would be,” said Bundle.

“Talking of Cootes, Sir Oswald plays a fair game—a very fair game. Not a pretty style—too stiff. But straight down the middle every time. But curious how the cloven hoof shows—won’t give you a six inch putt! Makes you put it in every time. Now I don’t like that.”

“I suppose he’s a man who likes to be sure,” said Bundle.

“It’s contrary to the spirit of the game,” said her father. “And he’s not interested in the theory of the thing either. Now, that secretary chap, Bateman, is quite different. It’s the theory interests him. I was slicing badly with my spoon; and he said it all came from too much right arm; and he evolved a very interesting theory. It’s all left arm in golf—the left arm is the arm that counts. He says he plays tennis left-handed but golf with ordinary clubs because there his superiority with the left arm tells.”

“And did he play very marvellously?” inquired Bundle.

“No, he didn’t,” confessed Lord Caterham. “But then he may have been off his game. I see the theory all right and I think there’s a lot in it. Ah! Did you see that one, Bundle? Right over the rhododendrons. A perfect shot. Ah! If one could be sure of doing that every time—Yes, Tredwell, what is it?”

Tredwell addressed Bundle.

“Mr. Thesiger would like to speak to you on the telephone, my lady.”

Bundle set off at full speed for the house, yelling “Lorraine, Lorraine,” as she did so. Lorraine joined her just as she was lifting the receiver.

“Hallo, is that you, Jimmy?”

“Hallo. How are you?”

“Very fit, but a bit bored.”

“How’s Lorraine?”

“She’s all right. She’s here. Do you want to speak to her?”

“In a minute. I’ve got a lot to say. To begin with, I’m going down to the Cootes for the weekend,” he said significantly. “Now, look here, Bundle, you don’t know how one gets hold of skeleton keys, do you?”

“Haven’t the foggiest. Is it really necessary to take skeleton keys to the Cootes?”

“Well, I had a sort of idea they’d come in handy. You don’t know the sort of shop one gets them at?”

“What you want is a kindly burglar friend to show you the ropes.”

“I do, Bundle, I do. And unfortunately I haven’t got one. I thought perhaps your bright brain might grapple successfully with the problem. But I suppose I shall have to fall back upon Stevens as usual. He’ll be getting some funny ideas in his head soon about me—first a bluenosed automatic—and now skeleton keys. He’ll think I’ve joined the criminal classes.”

“Jimmy?” said Bundle.

“Yes?”

“Look here—be careful, won’t you? I mean if Sir Oswald finds you nosing around with skeleton keys—well, I should think he could be very unpleasant when he likes.”

“Young man of pleasing appearance in the dock! All right, I’ll be careful. Pongo’s the fellow I’m really frightened of. He sneaks around so on those flat feet of his. You never hear him coming. And he always did have a genius for poking his nose in where he wasn’t wanted. But trust to the boy hero.”

“Well, I wish Loraine and I were going to be there to look after you.”

“Thank you, nurse. As a matter of fact, though, I have a scheme.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you and Loraine might have a convenient car breakdown near Letherbury tomorrow morning? It’s not so very far from you, is it?”

“Forty miles. That’s nothing.”

“I thought it wouldn’t be—to you! Don’t kill Loraine though. I’m rather fond of Loraine. All right, then—somewhere round about quarter to half past twelve.”

“So that they invite us to lunch?”

“That’s the idea. I say, Bundle, I ran into that girl Socks yesterday, and what do you think—Terence O’Rourke is going to be down there this weekend!”

“Jimmy, do you think he—?”

“Well—suspect everyone, you know. That’s what they say. He’s a wild lad, and daring as they make them. I wouldn’t put it past him to run a secret society. He and the Countess might be in this together. He was out in Hungary last year.”

“But he could pinch the formula any time.”

“That’s just what he couldn’t. He’d have to do it under circumstances where he couldn’t be suspected. But the retreat up the ivy and into his own bed—well, that would be rather neat. Now for instructions. After a few polite nothings to Lady Coote, you and Loraine are to get hold of Pongo and

O'Rourke by hook or by crook and keep them occupied till lunch time. See? It oughtn't to be difficult for a couple of beautiful girls like you."

"You're using the best butter, I see."

"A plain statement of fact."

"Well, at any rate, your instructions are duly noted. Do you want to talk to Lorraine now?"

Bundle passed over the receiver and tactfully left the room.

Twenty-seven

NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

Jimmy Thesiger arrived at Letherbury on a sunny autumn afternoon and was greeted affectionately by Lady Coote and with cold dislike by Sir Oswald. Aware of the keen matchmaking eye of Lady Coote upon him, Jimmy took pains to make himself extremely agreeable to Socks Daventry.

O'Rourke was there in excellent spirits. He was inclined to be official and secretive about the mysterious events at the Abbey, about which Socks catechized him freely, but his official reticence took a novel form . . . namely that of embroidering the tale of events in such a fantastic manner that nobody could possibly guess what the truth might have been.

“Four masked men with revolvers? Is that really so?” demanded Socks severely.

“Ah! I'm remembering now that there was the round half-dozen of them to hold me down and force the stuff down my throat. Sure, and I thought it was poison, and I done for entirely.”

“And what was stolen, or what did they try and steal?”

“What else but the crown jewels of Russia that were brought to Mr. Lomax secretly to deposit in the Bank of England.”

“What a bloody liar you are,” said Socks without emotion.

“A liar, I? And the jewels brought over by aeroplane with my best friend as pilot. This is secret history I'm telling you, Socks. Will you ask Jimmy Thesiger there if you don't believe me. Not that I'd be putting any trust in what he'd say.”

“Is it true,” said Socks, “that George Lomax came down without his false teeth? That's what I want to know.”

“There were two revolvers,” said Lady Coote. “Nasty things. I saw them myself. It’s a wonder this poor boy wasn’t killed.”

“Oh, I was born to be hanged,” said Jimmy.

“I hear that there was a Russian countess there of subtle beauty,” said Socks. “And that she vamped Bill.”

“Some of the things she said about Buda Pesth were too dreadful,” said Lady Coote. “I shall never forget them. Oswald, we must send a subscription.”

Sir Oswald grunted.

“I’ll make a note of it, Lady Coote,” said Rupert Bateman.

“Thank you, Mr. Bateman. I feel one ought to do something as a thank offering. I can’t imagine how Sir Oswald escaped being shot—letting alone die of pneumonia.”

“Don’t be foolish, Maria,” said Sir Oswald.

“I’ve always had a horror of cat burglars,” said Lady Coote.

“Think of having the luck to meet one face to face. How thrilling!” murmured Socks.

“Don’t you believe it,” said Jimmy. “It’s damned painful.” And he patted his right arm gingerly.

“How is the poor arm?” inquired Lady Coote.

“Oh, pretty well all right now. But it’s been the most confounded nuisance having to do everything with the left hand. I’m no good whatever with it.”

“Every child should be brought up to be ambidexterous,” said Sir Oswald.

“Oh!” said Socks, somewhat out of her depth. “Is that like seals?”

“Not amphibious,” said Mr. Bateman. “Ambidexterous means using either hand equally well.”

“Oh!” said Socks, looking at Sir Oswald with respect. “Can you?”

“Certainly; I can write with either hand.”

“But not with both at once?”

“That would not be practical,” said Sir Oswald shortly.

“No,” said Socks thoughtfully. “I suppose that would be a bit too subtle.”

“It would be a grand thing now in a Government department,” observed Mr. O’Rourke, “if one could keep the right hand from knowing what the left hand was doing.”

“Can you use both hands?”

“No, indeed. I’m the most right-handed person that ever was.”

“But you deal cards with your left hand,” said the observant Bateman. “I noticed the other night.”

“Oh, but that’s different entirely,” said Mr. O’Rourke easily.

A gong with a sombre note pealed out and everyone went upstairs to dress for dinner.

After dinner Sir Oswald and Lady Coote, Mr. Bateman and Mr. O’Rourke played bridge and Jimmy passed a flirtatious evening with Socks. The last words Jimmy heard as he retreated up the staircase that night were Sir Oswald saying to his wife:

“You’ll never make a bridge player, Maria.”

And her reply:

“I know, dear. So you always say. You owe Mr. O’Rourke another pound, Oswald. That’s right.”

It was some two hours later that Jimmy crept noiselessly (or so he hoped) down the stairs. He made one brief visit to the dining room and then found his way to Sir Oswald’s study. There, after listening intently for a minute or two, he set to work. Most of the drawers of the desk were locked, but a curiously shaped bit of wire in Jimmy’s hand soon saw to that. One by one the drawers yielded to his manipulations.

Drawer by drawer he sorted through methodically, being careful to replace everything in the same order. Once or twice he stopped to listen, fancying he heard some distant sound. But he remained undisturbed.

The last drawer was looked through. Jimmy now knew—or could have known had he been paying attention—many interesting details relating to steel; but he had found nothing of what he wanted—a reference to Herr Eberhard’s invention or anything that could give him a clue to the identity of the mysterious No 7. He had, perhaps, hardly hoped that he would. It was an off chance and he had taken it—but he had not expected much result—except by sheer luck.

He tested the drawers to make sure that he had relocked them securely. He knew Rupert Bateman’s powers of minute observation and glanced round the room to make sure that he had left no incriminating trace of his presence.

“That’s that,” he muttered to himself softly. “Nothing there. Well, perhaps I’ll have better luck tomorrow morning—if the girls only play up.”

He came out of the study, closing the door behind him and locking it. For a moment he thought he heard a sound quite near him, but decided he had been mistaken. He felt his way noiselessly along the great hall. Just enough light came from the high-vaulted windows to enable him to pick his way without stumbling into anything.

Again he heard a soft sound—he heard it quite certainly this time and without the possibility of making a mistake. He was not alone in the hall.

Somebody else was there, moving as stealthily as he was. His heart beat suddenly very fast.

With a sudden spring he jumped to the electric switch and turned on the lights. The sudden glare made him blink—but he saw plainly enough. Not four feet away stood Rupert Bateman.

“My goodness, Pongo,” cried Jimmy, “you did give me a start. Slinking about like that in the dark.”

“I heard a noise,” explained Mr. Bateman severely. “I thought burglars had got in and I came down to see.”

Jimmy looked thoughtfully at Mr. Bateman’s rubbersoled feet.

“You think of everything, Pongo,” he said genially. “Even a lethal weapon.”

His eye rested on the bulge in the other’s pocket.

“It’s as well to be armed. One never knows whom one may meet.”

“I am glad you didn’t shoot,” said Jimmy. “I’m a bit tired of being shot at.”

“I might easily have done so,” said Mr. Bateman.

“It would be dead against the law if you did,” said Jimmy. “You’ve got to make quite sure the beggar’s housebreaking, you know, before you pot at him. You mustn’t jump to conclusions. Otherwise you’d have to explain why you shot a guest on a perfectly innocent errand like mine.”

“By the way what did you come down for?”

“I was hungry,” said Jimmy. “I rather fancied a dry biscuit.”

“There are some biscuits in a tin by your bed,” said Rupert Bateman.

He was staring at Jimmy very intently through his horn-rimmed spectacles.

“Ah! That’s where the staff work has gone wrong, old boy. There’s a tin there with “Biscuits for Starving Visitors” on it. But when the starving visitor opened it—nothing inside. So I just toddled down to the dining room.”

And with a sweet, ingenuous smile, Jimmy produced from his dressing gown pocket a handful of biscuits.

There was a moment’s pause.

“And now I think I’ll toddle back to bed,” said Jimmy. “Night-night, Pongo.”

With an affectation of nonchalance, he mounted the staircase. Rupert Bateman followed him. At the doorway of his room, Jimmy paused as if to say good night once more.

“It’s an extraordinary thing about these biscuits,” said Mr. Bateman. “Do you mind if I just—?”

“Certainly, laddie, look for yourself.”

Mr. Bateman strode across the room, opened the biscuit box and stared at its emptiness.

“Very remiss,” he murmured. “Well, good night.”

He withdrew. Jimmy sat on the edge of his bed listening for a minute.

“That was a narrow shave,” he murmured to himself. “Suspicious sort of chap, Pongo. Never seems to sleep. Nasty habit of his, prowling around with a revolver.”

He got up and opened one of the drawers of the dressing table. Beneath an assortment of ties lay a pile of biscuits.

“There’s nothing for it,” said Jimmy. “I shall have to eat the damned things. Ten to one, Pongo will come prowling round in the morning.”

With a sigh, he settled down to a meal of biscuits for which he had no inclination whatever.

Twenty-eight

SUSPICIONS

It was just on the appointed hour of twelve o'clock that Bundle and Loraine entered the park gates, having left the Hispano at an adjacent garage.

Lady Coote greeted the two girls with surprise, but distinct pleasure, and immediately pressed them to stay to lunch.

O'Rourke, who had been reclining in an immense armchair, began at once to talk with great animation to Loraine, who was listening with half an ear to Bundle's highly technical explanation of the mechanical trouble which had affected the Hispano.

"And we said," ended Bundle, "how marvellous that the brute should have broken down just here! Last time it happened was on a Sunday at a place called Little Speddlington under the Hill. And it lived up to its name, I can tell you."

"That would be a grand name on the films," remarked O'Rourke.

"Birthplace of the simple country maiden," suggested Socks.

"I wonder now," said Lady Coote, "where Mr. Thesiger is?"

"He's in the billiard room, I think," said Socks. "I'll fetch him."

She went off, but had hardly gone a minute when Rupert Bateman appeared upon the scene, with the harassed and serious air usual to him.

"Yes, Lady Coote? Thesiger said you were asking for me. How do you do, Lady Eileen—"

He broke off to greet the two girls, and Loraine immediately took the field.

“Oh, Mr. Bateman! I’ve been wanting to see you. Wasn’t it you who was telling me what to do for a dog when he is continually getting sore paws?”

The secretary shook his head.

“It must have been someone else, Miss Wade. Though, as a matter of fact, I do happen to know—”

“What a wonderful man you are,” interrupted Loraine. “You know about everything.”

“One should keep abreast of modern knowledge,” said Mr. Bateman seriously. “Now about your dog’s paws—”

Terence O’Rourke murmured sotto voce to Bundle:

“ ‘Tis a man like that writes all those little paragraphs in the weekly papers. ‘It is not generally known that to keep a brass fender uniformly bright, etc;’ ‘The dorper beetle is one of the most interesting characters in the insect world;’ ‘The marriage customs of the Fingalese Indian;’ and so on.”

“General information, in fact.”

“And what more horrible two words could you have?” said Mr. O’Rourke, and added piously: “Thank the heavens above I’m an educated man and know nothing whatever upon any subject at all.”

“I see you’ve got clock golf here,” said Bundle to Lady Coote.

“I’ll take you on it, Lady Eileen,” said O’Rourke.

“Let’s challenge those two,” said Bundle. “Loraine, Mr. O’Rourke and I want to take you and Mr. Bateman on at clock golf.”

“Do play, Mr. Bateman,” said Lady Coote, as the secretary showed a momentary hesitation. “I’m sure Sir Oswald doesn’t want you.”

The four went out on the lawn.

“Very cleverly managed, what?” whispered Bundle to Loraine.
“Congratulations on our girlish tact.”

The round ended just before one o’clock, victory going to Bateman and Loraine.

“But I think you’ll agree with me, partner,” said Mr. O’Rourke, “that we played a more sporting game.”

He lagged a little behind with Bundle.

“Old Pongo’s a cautious player—and takes no risks. Now, with me it’s neck or nothing. And a fine motto through life, don’t you agree, Lady Eileen?”

“Hasn’t it ever landed you in trouble?” asked Bundle laughing.

“To be sure it has. Millions of times. But I’m still going strong. Sure, it’ll take the hangman’s noose to defeat Terence O’Rourke.”

Just then Jimmy Thesiger strolled round the corner of the house.

“Bundle, by all that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed.

“You’ve missed competing in the Autumn Meeting,” said O’Rourke.

“I’d gone for a stroll,” said Jimmy. “Where did these girls drop from?”

“We came on our flat feet,” said Bundle. “The Hispano let us down.”

And she narrated the circumstances of the breakdown.

Jimmy listened with sympathetic attention.

“Hard luck,” he vouchsafed. “If it’s going to take some time, I’ll run you back in my car after lunch.”

A gong sounded at that moment and they all went in. Bundle observed Jimmy covertly. She thought she had noticed an unusual note of exultance in his voice. She had the feeling that things had gone well.

After lunch they took a polite leave of Lady Coote, and Jimmy volunteered to run them down to the garage in his car. As soon as they had started the same words burst simultaneously from both girls' lips:

"Well?"

Jimmy chose to be provoking.

"Well?"

"Oh, pretty hearty, thanks. Slight indigestion owing to overindulgence in dry biscuits."

"But what has happened?"

"I tell you. Devotion to the cause made me eat too many dry biscuits. But did our hero flinch? No, he did not."

"Oh, Jimmy," said Loraine reproachfully, and he softened.

"What do you really want to know?"

"Oh, everything. Didn't we do it well? I mean, the way we kept Pongo and Terence O'Rourke in play."

"I congratulate you on the handling of Pongo. O'Rourke was probably a sitter—but Pongo is made of other stuff. There's only one word for that lad—it was in the Sunday Newsbag crossword last week. Word of ten letters meaning everywhere at once. Ubiquitous. That described Pongo down to the ground. You can't go anywhere without running into him—and the worst of it is you never hear him coming."

"You think he's dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Of course he's not dangerous. Fancy Pongo being dangerous. He's an ass. But, as I said just now, he's an ubiquitous ass. He doesn't even seem to need sleep like ordinary mortals. In fact, to put it bluntly, the fellow's a damned nuisance."

And, in a somewhat aggrieved manner, Jimmy described the events of the previous evening.

Bundle was not very sympathetic.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing anyway, mooching around here.”

“No 7,” said Jimmy crisply. “That’s what I’m after. No 7.”

“And you think you’ll find him in this house?”

“I thought I might find a clue.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Not last night—no.”

“But this morning,” said Loraine, breaking in suddenly. “Jimmy, you did find something this morning. I can see it by your face.”

“Well, I don’t know if it is anything. But during the course of my stroll—”

“Which stroll didn’t take you far from the house, I imagine.”

“Strangely enough, it didn’t. Round trip of the interior, we might call it. Well, as I say, I don’t know whether there’s anything in it or not. But I found this.”

With the celerity of a conjurer he produced a small bottle and tossed it over to the girls. It was half full of a white powder.

“What do you think it is?” asked Bundle.

“A white crystalline powder, that’s what it is,” said Jimmy. “And to any reader of detective fiction those words are both familiar and suggestive. Of course, if it turns out to be a new kind of patent tooth powder, I shall be chagrined and annoyed.”

“Where did you find it?” asked Bundle sharply.

“Ah!” said Jimmy, “that’s my secret.”

And from that point he would not budge in spite of cajolery and insult.

“Here we are at the garage,” he said. “Let’s hope the high-mettled Hispano has not been subjected to any indignities.”

The gentleman at the garage presented a bill for five shillings and made a few vague remarks about loose nuts. Bundle paid him with a sweet smile.

“It’s nice to know we all get money for nothing sometimes,” she murmured to Jimmy.

The three stood together in the road, silent for the moment as they each pondered the situation.

“I know,” said Bundle suddenly.

“Know what?”

“Something I meant to ask you—and nearly forgot. Do you remember that glove Superintendent Battle found—the half-burnt one?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you say that he tried it on your hand?”

“Yes—it was a shade big. That fits in with the idea of its being a big, hefty man who wore it.”

“That’s not at all what I’m bothering about. Never mind the size of it. George and Sir Oswald were both there too, weren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“He could have given it to either of them to fit on?”

“Yes, of course—”

“But he didn’t. He chose you. Jimmy, don’t you see what that means?”

Mr. Thesiger stared at her.

“I’m sorry, Bundle. Possibly the jolly old brain isn’t functioning as well as usual, but I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you see, Loraine?”

Loraine looked at her curiously, but shook her head.

“Does it mean anything in particular?”

“Of course it does. Don’t you see—Jimmy had his right hand in a sling.”

“By Jove, Bundle,” said Jimmy slowly. “It was rather odd now I come to think of it; it’s being a left-hand glove, I mean. Battle never said anything.”

“He wasn’t going to draw attention to it. By trying it on you it might pass without notice being drawn to it, and he talked about the size just to put everybody off. But surely it must mean that the man who shot at you held the pistol in his left hand.”

“So we’ve got to look for a left-handed man,” said Loraine thoughtfully.

“Yes, and I’ll tell you another thing. That was what Battle was doing looking through the golf clubs. He was looking for a left-handed man’s.”

“By Jove,” said Jimmy suddenly.

“What is it?”

“Well, I don’t suppose there’s anything in it, but it’s rather curious.”

He retailed the conversation at tea the day before.

“So Sir Oswald Coote is ambidexterous?” said Bundle.

“Yes. And I remember now on that night at Chimneys—you know, the night Gerry Wade died—I was watching the bridge and thinking idly how awkwardly someone was dealing—and then realizing that it was because they were dealing with the left hand. Of course, it must have been Sir Oswald.”

They all three looked at each other. Loraine shook her head.

“A man like Sir Oswald Coote! It’s impossible. What could he have to gain by it?”

“It seems absurd,” said Jimmy. “And yet—”

“No 7 has his own ways of working,” quoted Bundle softly. “Supposing this is the way Sir Oswald has really made his fortune?”

“But why stage all that comedy at the Abbey when he’d had the formula at his own works?”

“There might be ways of explaining that,” said Loraine. “The same line of argument you used about Mr. O’Rourke. Suspicion had to be diverted from him and placed in another quarter.”

Bundle nodded eagerly.

“It all fits in. Suspicion is to fall on Bauer and the Countess. Who on earth would ever dream of suspecting Sir Oswald Coote?”

“I wonder if Battle does,” said Jimmy slowly.

Some chord of memory vibrated in Bundle’s mind. Superintendent Battle plucking an ivy leaf off the millionaire’s coat.

Had Battle suspected all the time?

Twenty-nine

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF GEORGE LOMAX

“Mr. Lomax is here, my lord.”

Lord Caterham started violently, for, absorbed in the intricacies of what not to do with the left wrist, he had not heard the butler approach over the soft turf. He looked at Tredwell more in sorrow than in anger.

“I told you at breakfast, Tredwell, that I should be particularly engaged this morning.”

“Yes, my lord, but—”

“Go and tell Mr. Lomax that you have made a mistake, that I am out in the village, that I am laid up with the gout, or, if all else fails, that I am dead.”

“Mr. Lomax, my lord, has already caught sight of your lordship when driving up the drive.”

Lord Caterham sighed deeply.

“He would. Very well, Tredwell, I am coming.”

In a manner highly characteristic, Lord Caterham was always most genial when his feelings were in reality the reverse. He greeted George now with a heartiness quite unparalleled.

“My dear fellow, my dear fellow. Delighted to see you. Absolutely delighted. Sit down. Have a drink. Well, well, this is splendid!”

And having pushed George into a large armchair, he sat down opposite him and blinked nervously.

“I wanted to see you very particularly,” said George.

“Oh!” said Lord Caterham faintly, and his heart sank, whilst his mind raced actively over all the dread possibilities that might lie behind that simple phrase.

“Very particularly,” said George with heavy emphasis.

Lord Caterham’s heart sank lower than ever. He felt that something was coming worse than anything he had yet thought of.

“Yes?” he said, with a courageous attempt at nonchalance.

“Is Eileen at home?”

Lord Caterham felt reprieved, but slightly surprised.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Bundle’s here. Got that friend of hers with her—the little Wade girl. Very nice girl—very nice girl. Going to be quite a good golfer one day. Nice easy swing—”

He was chatting garrulously on when George interrupted with ruthlessness:

“I am glad that Eileen is at home. Perhaps I might have an interview with her presently?”

“Certainly, my dear fellow, certainly.” Lord Caterham still felt very surprised, but was still enjoying the sensation of reprieve. “If it doesn’t bore you.”

“Nothing could bore me less,” said George. “I think, Caterham, if I may say so, that you hardly appreciate the fact that Eileen is grown up. She is no longer a child. She is a woman, and, if I may say so, a very charming and talented woman. The man who succeeds in winning her love will be extremely lucky. I repeat it—extremely lucky.”

“Oh, I daresay,” said Lord Caterham. “But she’s very restless, you know. Never content to be in one place for more than two minutes together. However, I daresay young fellows don’t mind that nowadays.”

“You mean that she is not content to stagnate. Eileen has brains, Caterham; she is ambitious. She interests herself in the questions of the day, and brings her fresh and vivid young intellect to bear upon them.”

Lord Caterham stared at him. It occurred to him that what was so often referred to as “the strain of modern life” had begun to tell upon George. Certainly his description of Bundle seemed to Lord Caterham ludicrously unlike.

“Are you sure you are feeling quite well?” he asked anxiously.

George waved the inquiry aside impatiently.

“Perhaps, Caterham, you begin to have some inkling of my purpose in visiting you this morning. I am not a man to undertake fresh responsibilities lightly. I have a proper sense, I hope, of what is due to the position I hold. I have given this matter my deep and earnest consideration. Marriage, especially at my age, is not to be undertaken without full—er—consideration. Equality of birth, similarity of tastes, general suitability, and the same religious creed—all these things are necessary and the pros and cons have to be weighed and considered. I can, I think, offer my wife a position in society that is not to be despised. Eileen will grace that position admirably. By birth and breeding she is fitted for it, and her brains and her acute political sense cannot but further my career to our mutual advantage. I am aware, Caterham, that there is—er—some disparity in years. But I can assure you that I feel full of vigour—in my prime. The balance of years should be on the husband’s side. And Eileen has serious tastes—an older man will suit her better than some young jackanapes without either experience or savoir faire. I can assure you, my dear Caterham, that I will cherish her—er—exquisite youth; I will cherish it—er—it will be appreciated. To watch the exquisite flower of her mind unfolding—what a privilege! And to think that I never realized—”

He shook his head deprecatingly and Lord Caterham, finding his voice with difficulty, said blankly:

“Do I understand you to mean—ah, my dear fellow, you can’t want to marry Bundle?”

“You are surprised. I suppose to you it seems sudden. I have your permission, then, to speak to her?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lord Caterham. “If it’s permission you want—of course you can. But you know, Lomax, I really shouldn’t if I were you. Just go home and think it over like a good fellow. Count twenty. All that sort of thing. Always a pity to propose and make a fool of yourself.”

“I daresay you mean your advice kindly, Caterham, though I must confess that you put it somewhat strangely. But I have made up my mind to put my fortune to the test. I may see Eileen?”

“Oh, it’s nothing to do with me,” said Lord Caterham hastily; “Eileen settles her own affairs. If she came to me tomorrow and said she was going to marry the chauffeur, I shouldn’t make any objections. It’s the only way nowadays. Your children can make life damned unpleasant if you don’t give in to them in every way. I say to Bundle, ‘Do as you like, but don’t worry me,’ and really, on the whole, she is amazingly good about it.”

George stood up intent upon his purpose.

“Where shall I find her?”

“Well, really, I don’t know,” said Lord Caterham vaguely. “She might be anywhere. As I told you just now, she’s never in the same place for two minutes together. No repose.”

“And I suppose Miss Wade will be with her? It seems to me, Caterham, that the best plan would be for you to ring the bell and ask your butler to find her, saying that I wish to speak to her for a few minutes.”

Lord Caterham pressed the bell obediently.

“Oh, Tredwell,” he said, when the bell was answered. “Just find her ladyship, will you. Tell her Mr. Lomax is anxious to speak to her in the drawing room.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tredwell withdrew. George seized Lord Caterham's hand and wrung it warmly, much to the latter's discomfort.

"A thousand thanks," he said. "I hope soon to bring you good news."

He hastened from the room.

"Well," said Lord Caterham. "Well!"

And after a long pause:

"What has Bundle been up to?"

The door opened again.

"Mr. Eversleigh, my lord."

As Bill hastened in, Lord Caterham caught his hand and spoke earnestly.

"Hullo, Bill. You're looking for Lomax, I suppose? Look here, if you want to do a good turn, hurry to the drawing room and tell him the Cabinet have called an immediate meeting, or get him away somehow. It's really not fair to let the poor devil make an ass of himself all for some silly girl's prank."

"I've not come for Codders," said Bill. "Didn't know he was here. It's Bundle I want to see. Is she anywhere about?"

"You can't see her," said Lord Caterham. "Not just now, at any rate. George is with her."

"Well—what does it matter?"

"I think it does rather," said Lord Caterham. "He's probably spluttering horribly at this minute, and we mustn't do anything to make it worse for him."

"But what is he saying?"

“Heaven knows,” said Lord Caterham. “A lot of damned nonsense, anyway. Never say too much, that was always my motto. Grab the girl’s hand and let events take their course.”

Bill stared at him.

“But look here, sir, I’m in a hurry. I must talk to Bundle—”

“Well, I don’t suppose you’ll have to wait long. I must confess I’m rather glad to have you here with me—I suppose Lomax will insist on coming back and talking to me when it’s all over.”

“When what’s all over? What is Lomax supposed to be doing?”

“Hush,” said Lord Caterham. “He’s proposing.”

“Proposing? Proposing what?”

“Marriage. To Bundle. Don’t ask me why. I suppose he’s come to what they call the dangerous age. I can’t explain it any other way.”

“Proposing to Bundle? The dirty swine. At his age.”

Bill’s face grew crimson.

“He says he’s in the prime of life,” said Lord Caterham cautiously.

“He? Why, he’s decrepit—senile! I—” Bill positively choked.

“Not at all,” said Lord Caterham coldly. “He’s five years younger than I am.”

“Of all the damned cheek! Codders and Bundle! A girl like Bundle! You oughtn’t to have allowed it.”

“I never interfere,” said Lord Caterham.

“You ought to have told him what you thought of him.”

“Unfortunately modern civilization rules that out,” said Lord Caterham regretfully. “In the Stone Age now—but, dear me, I suppose even then I shouldn’t be able to do it—being a small man.”

“Bundle! Bundle! Why, I’ve never dared to ask Bundle to marry me because I knew she’d only laugh. And George—a disgusting windbag, an unscrupulous hypocritical old hot air merchant—a foul, poisonous self-advertiser—”

“Go on,” said Lord Caterham. “I am enjoying this.”

“My God!” said Bill simply and with feeling. “Look here, I must be off.”

“No, no, don’t go. I’d much rather you stayed. Besides, you want to see Bundle.”

“Not now. This has driven everything else out of my head. You don’t know where Jimmy Thesiger is by any chance? I believe he was staying with the Cootes. Is he there still?”

“I think he went back to town yesterday. Bundle and Loraine were over there on Saturday. If you’ll only wait—”

But Bill shook his head energetically and rushed from the room. Lord Caterham tiptoed out into the hall, seized a hat and made a hurried exit by the side door. In the distance he observed Bill streaking down the drive in his car.

“That young man will have an accident,” he thought.

Bill, however, reached London without any mischance, and proceeded to park his car in St. James’s Square. Then he sought out Jimmy Thesiger’s rooms. Jimmy was at home.

“Hullo, Bill. I say, what’s the matter? You don’t look your usual bright little self.”

“I’m worried,” said Bill. “I was worried anyway, and then something else turned up and gave me a jolt.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy. “How lucid! What’s it all about? Can I do anything?”

Bill did not reply. He sat staring at the carpet and looking so puzzled and uncomfortable that Jimmy felt his curiosity aroused.

“Has anything very extraordinary occurred, William?” he asked gently.

“Something damned odd. I can’t make head or tail of it.”

“The Seven Dials business?”

“Yes—the Seven Dials business. I got a letter this morning.”

“A letter? What sort of letter?”

“A letter from Ronny Devereux’s executors.”

“Good lord! After all this time!”

“It seems he left instructions. If he was to die suddenly, a certain sealed envelope was to be sent to me exactly a fortnight after his death.”

“And they’ve sent it to you?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve opened it?”

“Yes.”

“Well—what did it say?”

Bill turned a glance upon him, such a strange and uncertain one that Jimmy was startled.

“Look here,” he said. “Pull yourself together, old man. It seems to have knocked the wind out of you, whatever it is. Have a drink.”

He poured out a stiff whisky and soda and brought it over to Bill, who took it obediently. His face still bore the same dazed expression.

“It’s what’s in the letter,” he said. “I simply can’t believe it, that’s all.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Jimmy. “You must get into the habit of believing six impossible things before breakfast. I do it regularly. Now then, let’s hear all about it. Wait a minute.”

He went outside.

“Stevens!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Just go out and get me some cigarettes, will you? I’ve run out.”

“Very good, sir.”

Jimmy waited till he heard the front door close. Then he came back into the sitting room. Bill was just in the act of setting down his empty glass. He looked better, more purposeful and more master of himself.

“Now then,” said Jimmy. “I’ve sent Stevens out so that we can’t be overheard. Are you going to tell me all about it?”

“It’s so incredible.”

“Then it’s sure to be true. Come on, out with it.”

Bill drew a deep breath.

“I will. I’ll tell you everything.”

Thirty

AN URGENT SUMMONS

Loraine, playing with a small and delectable puppy, was somewhat surprised when Bundle rejoined her after an absence of twenty minutes, in a breathless state and with an indescribable expression on her face.

“Whoof,” said Bundle, sinking on to a garden seat. “Whoof.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Loraine, looking at her curiously.

“George is the matter—George Lomax.”

“What’s he been doing?”

“Proposing to me. It was awful. He spluttered and he stuttered, but he would go through with it—he must have learnt it out of a book, I think. There was no stopping him. Oh, how I hate men who splutter! And, unfortunately, I didn’t know the reply.”

“You must have known what you wanted to do.”

“Naturally I’m not going to marry an apologetic idiot like George. What I mean is, I didn’t know the correct reply from the book of etiquette. I could only just say flatly: ‘No, I won’t.’ What I ought to have said was something about being very sensible of the honour he had done me and so on and so on. But I got so rattled that in the end I jumped out of the window and bolted.”

“Really, Bundle, that’s not like you.”

“Well, I never dreamt of such a thing happening. George—who I always thought hated me—and he did too. What a fatal thing it is to pretend to take an interest in a man’s pet subject. You should have heard the drivel George talked about my girlish mind and the pleasure it would be to form it. My

mind! If George knew one quarter of what was going on in my mind, he'd faint with horror!"

Loraine laughed. She couldn't help it.

"Oh, I know it's my own fault. I let myself in for this. There's Father dodging round that rhododendron. Hallo, Father."

Lord Caterham approached with a hangdog expression.

"Lomax gone, eh?" he remarked with somewhat forced geniality.

"A nice business you let me in for," said Bundle. "George told me he had your full approval and sanction."

"Well," said Lord Caterham, "what did you expect me to say? As a matter of fact, I didn't say that at all, or anything like it."

"I didn't really think so," said Bundle. "I assumed that George had talked you into a corner and reduced you to such a state that you could only nod your head feebly."

"That's very much what happened. How did he take it? Badly?"

"I didn't wait to see," said Bundle. "I'm afraid I was rather abrupt."

"Oh well," said Lord Caterham. "Perhaps that was the best way. Thank goodness in the future Lomax won't always be running over as he has been in the habit of doing, worrying me about things. Everything is for the best they say. Have you seen my jigger anywhere?"

"A mashie shot or two would steady my nerves, I think," said Bundle. "I'll take you on for sixpence, Loraine."

An hour passed very peacefully. The three returned to the house in a harmonious spirit. A note lay on the hall table.

"Mr. Lomax left that for you, my lord," explained Tredwell. "He was much disappointed to find that you had gone out."

Lord Caterham tore it open. He uttered a pained ejaculation and turned upon his daughter. Tredwell had retired.

“Really, Bundle, you might have made yourself clear, I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, read this.”

Bundle took it and read:

“My dear Caterham,—I am sorry not to have had a word with you. I thought I made it clear that I wanted to see you again after my interview with Eileen. She, dear child, was evidently quite unaware of the feelings I entertained towards her. She was, I am afraid, much startled. I have no wish to hurry her in any way. Her girlish confusion was very charming, and I entertain an even higher regard for her, as I much appreciate her maidenly reserve. I must give her time to become accustomed to the idea. Her very confusion shows that she is not wholly indifferent to me and I have no doubts of my ultimate success.

Believe me, dear Caterham,

Your sincere friend,

George Lomax.”

“Well,” said Bundle. “Well, I’m damned!”

Words failed her.

“The man must be mad,” said Lord Caterham. “No one could write those things about you, Bundle, unless they were slightly touched in the head. Poor chap, poor chap. But what persistence! I don’t wonder he got into the Cabinet. It would serve him right if you did marry him, Bundle.”

The telephone rang and Bundle moved forward to answer it. In another minute George and his proposal were forgotten, and she was beckoning eagerly to Loraine. Lord Caterham went off to his own sanctum.

“It’s Jimmy,” said Bundle. “And he’s tremendously excited about something.”

“Thank goodness I’ve caught you,” said Jimmy’s voice. “There’s no time to be lost. Lorraine’s there, too?”

“Yes, she’s here.”

“Well, look here, I haven’t got time to explain everything—in fact, I can’t through the telephone. But Bill has been round to see me with the most amazing story you ever heard. If it’s true—well, if it’s true, it’s the biggest scoop of the century. Now, look here, this is what you’ve got to do. Come up to town at once, both of you. Garage the car somewhere and go straight to the Seven Dials Club. Do you think that when you get there you can get rid of that footman fellow?”

“Alfred? Rather. You leave that to me.”

“Good. Get rid of him and watch out for me and Bill. Don’t show yourselves at the windows, but when we drive up, let us in at once. See?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all right then. Oh, Bundle, don’t let on that you’re going up to town. Make some other excuse. Say your taking Lorraine home. How would that do?”

“Splendidly. I say, Jimmy, I’m thrilled to the core.”

“And you might as well make your will before starting.”

“Better and better. But I wish I knew what it was all about.”

“You will as soon as we meet. I’ll tell you this much. We’re going to get ready the hell of a surprise for No 7!”

Bundle hung up the receiver and turned to Lorraine, giving her a rapid résumé of the conversation. Lorraine rushed upstairs and hurriedly packed her suitcase, and Bundle put her head round her father’s door.

“I’m taking Loraine home, Father.”

“Why? I had no idea she was going today.”

“They want her back,” said Bundle vaguely. “Just telephoned. Bye-bye.”

“Here, Bundle, wait a minute. When will you be home?”

“Don’t know. Expect me when you see me.”

With this unceremonious exit Bundle rushed upstairs, put a hat on, slipped into her fur coat and was ready to start. She had already ordered the Hispano to be brought round.

The journey to London was without adventure, except such as was habitually provided by Bundle’s driving. They left the car at a garage and proceeded direct to the Seven Dials Club.

The door was opened to them by Alfred. Bundle pushed her way past him without ceremony and Loraine followed.

“Shut the door, Alfred,” said Bundle. “Now, I’ve come here especially to do you a good turn. The police are after you.”

“Oh, my lady!”

Alfred turned chalk white.

“I’ve come to warn you because you did me a good turn the other night,” went on Bundle rapidly. “There’s a warrant out for Mr. Mosgorovsky, and the best thing you can do is to clear out of here as quick as you can. If you’re not found here, they won’t bother about you. Here’s ten pounds to help you get away somewhere.”

In three minutes’ time an incoherent and badly scared Alfred had left 14 Hunstanton Street with only one idea in his head—never to return.

“Well, I’ve managed that all right,” said Bundle with satisfaction.

“Was it necessary to be so—well, drastic?” Loraine demurred.

“It’s safer,” said Bundle. “I don’t know what Jimmy and Bill are up to, but we don’t want Alfred coming back in the middle of it and wrecking everything. Hallo, here they are. Well, they haven’t wasted much time. Probably watching round the corner to see Alfred leave. Go down and open the door to them, Loraine.”

Loraine obeyed. Jimmy Thesiger alighted from the driving seat.

“You stop here for a moment, Bill,” he said. “Blow the horn if you think anyone’s watching the place.”

He ran up the steps and banged the door behind him. He looked pink and elated.

“Hallo, Bundle, there you are. Now then, we’ve got to get down to it. Where’s the key of the room you got into last time?”

“It was one of the downstairs keys. We’d better bring the lot up.”

“Right you are, but be quick. Time’s short.”

The key was easily found, the baize-lined door swung back and the three entered. The room was exactly as Bundle had seen it before, with the seven chairs grouped round the table. Jimmy surveyed it for a minute or two in silence. Then his eyes went to the two cupboards.

“Which is the cupboard you hid in, Bundle?”

“This one.”

Jimmy went to it and flung the door open. The same collection of miscellaneous glassware covered the shelves.

“We shall have to shift all this stuff,” he murmured. “Run down and get Bill, Loraine. There’s no need for him to keep watch outside any longer.”

Loraine ran off.

“What are you going to do?” inquired Bundle impatiently.

Jimmy was down on his knees, trying to peer through the crack of the other cupboard door.

“Wait till Bill comes and you shall hear the whole story. This is his staff work—and a jolly creditable bit of work it is. Hallo—what’s Loraine flying up the stairs for as though she’s got a mad bull after her?”

Loraine was indeed racing up the stairs as fast as she could. She burst in upon them with an ashen face and terror in her eyes.

“Bill—Bill—Oh, Bundle—Bill!”

“What about Bill?”

Jimmy caught her by the shoulder.

“For God’s sake, Loraine, what’s happened?”

Loraine was still gasping.

“Bill—I think he’s dead—he’s in the car still—but he doesn’t move or speak. I’m sure he’s dead.”

Jimmy muttered an oath and sprang for the stairs, Bundle behind him, her heart pounding unevenly and an awful feeling of desolation spreading over her.

Bill—dead? Oh, no! Oh, no! Not that. Please God—not that.

Together she and Jimmy reached the car, Loraine behind them.

Jimmy peered under the hood. Bill was sitting as he had left him, leaning back. But his eyes were closed and Jimmy’s pull at his arm brought no response.

“I can’t understand it,” muttered Jimmy. “But he’s not dead. Cheer up, Bundle. Look here, we’ve got to get him into the house. Let’s pray to

goodness no policeman comes along. If anybody says anything, he's our sick friend we're helping into the house."

Between the three of them they got Bill into the house without much difficulty, and without attracting much attention, save for an unshaven gentleman, who said sympathetically:

"Genneman's 'ad a couple, I shee," and nodded his head sapiently.

"Into the little back room downstairs," said Jimmy. "There's a sofa there."

They got him safely on to the sofa and Bundle knelt down beside him and took his limp wrist in her hand.

"His pulse is beating," she said. "What is the matter with him?"

"He was all right when I left him just now," said Jimmy. "I wonder if someone's managed to inject some stuff into him. It would be easily done—just a prick. The man might have been asking him the time. There's only one thing for it. I must get him a doctor at once. You stay here and look after him."

He hurried to the door, then paused.

"Look here—don't be scared, either of you. But I'd better leave you my revolver. I mean—just in case. I'll be back just as soon as I possibly can."

He laid the revolver down on the little table by the sofa, then hurried off. They heard the front door bang behind him.

The house seemed very still now. The two girls stayed motionless by Bill. Bundle still kept her finger on his pulse. It seemed to be beating very fast and irregularly.

"I wish we could do something," she whispered to Loraine. "This is awful."

Loraine nodded.

“I know. It seems ages since Jimmy went and yet it’s only a minute and a half.”

“I keep hearing things,” said Bundle. “Footsteps and boards creaking upstairs—and yet I know it’s only imagination.”

“I wonder why Jimmy left us the revolver,” said Loraine. “There can’t really be danger.”

“If they could get Bill—” said Bundle and stopped.

Loraine shivered.

“I know—but we’re in the house. Nobody can get in without our hearing them. And anyway we’ve got the revolver.”

Bundle turned her attention back again to Bill.

“I wish I knew what to do. Hot coffee. You give them that sometimes.”

“I’ve got some smelling salts in my bag,” said Loraine. “And some brandy. Where is it? Oh, I must have left it in the room upstairs.”

“I’ll get it,” said Bundle. “They might do some good.”

She sped quickly up the stairs, across the gaming room and through the open door into the meeting place. Loraine’s bag was lying on the table.

As Bundle stretched out her hand to take it, she heard a noise from behind her. Hidden behind the door a man stood ready with a sandbag in his hand. Before Bundle could turn her head, he had struck.

With a faint moan, Bundle slipped down, an unconscious heap upon the floor.

Thirty-one

THE SEVEN DIALS

Very slowly Bundle returned to consciousness. She was aware of a dark, spinning blackness, the centre of which was a violent, throbbing ache. Punctuating this were sounds. A voice that she knew very well saying the same thing over and over again.

The blackness span less violently. The ache was now definitely located as being in Bundle's own head. And she was sufficiently herself to take an interest in what the voice was saying.

"Darling, darling Bundle. Oh, darling Bundle. She's dead; I know she's dead. Oh, my darling. Bundle, darling, darling Bundle. I do love you so. Bundle—darling—darling—"

Bundle lay quite still with her eyes shut. But she was now fully conscious. Bill's arms held her closely.

"Bundle darling—Oh, dearest, darling Bundle. Oh, my dear love. Oh, Bundle—Bundle. What shall I do? Oh, darling one—my Bundle—my own dearest, sweetest Bundle. Oh, God, what shall I do? I've killed her. I've killed her."

Reluctantly—very reluctantly—Bundle spoke.

"No, you haven't, you silly idiot," she said.

Bill gave a gasp of utter amazement.

"Bundle—you're alive."

"Of course I'm alive."

"How long have you been—I mean when did you come to?"

“About five minutes ago.”

“Why didn’t you open your eyes—or say something?”

“Didn’t want to. I was enjoying myself.”

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Yes. Listening to all the things you were saying. You’ll never say them so well again. You’ll be too beastly self-conscious.”

Bill had turned a dark brick-red.

“Bundle—you really didn’t mind? You know, I do love you so. I have for ages. But I never have dared to tell you so.”

“You silly juggins,” said Bundle. “Why?”

“I thought you’d only laugh at me. I mean—you’ve got brains and all that—you’ll marry some bigwig.”

“Like George Lomax?” suggested Bundle.

“I don’t mean a fatuous ass like Codders. But some really fine chap who’ll be worthy of you—though I don’t think anyone could be that,” ended Bill.

“You’re rather a dear, Bill.”

“But, Bundle, seriously, could you ever? I mean, could you ever bring yourself to?”

“Could I ever bring myself to do what?”

“Marry me. I know I’m awfully thickheaded—but I do love you, Bundle. I’d be your dog or your slave or your anything.”

“You’re very like a dog,” said Bundle. “I like dogs. They’re so friendly and faithful and warmhearted. I think that perhaps I could just bring myself to marry you, Bill—with a great effort, you know.”

Bill's response to this was to relinquish his grasp of her and recoil violently. He looked at her with amazement in his eyes.

"Bundle—you don't mean it?"

"There's nothing for it," said Bundle. "I see I shall have to relapse into unconsciousness again."

"Bundle—darling—" Bill caught her to him. He was trembling violently. "Bundle—do you really mean it—do you?—you don't know how much I love you."

"Oh, Bill," said Bundle.

There is no need to describe in detail the conversation of the next ten minutes. It consisted mostly of repetitions.

"And do you really love me?" said Bill, incredulously, for the twentieth time as he at last released her.

"Yes—yes—yes. Now do let's be sensible. I've got a racking head still, and I've been nearly squeezed to death by you. I want to get the hang of things. Where are we and what's happened?"

For the first time, Bundle began to take stock of her surroundings. They were in the secret room, she noted, and the baize door was closed and presumably locked. They were prisoners, then!

Bundle's eyes came back to Bill. Quite oblivious of her question he was watching her with adoring eyes.

"Bill, darling," said Bundle, "pull yourself together. We've got to get out of here."

"Eh?" said Bill. "What? Oh, yes. That'll be all right. No difficulty about that."

"It's being in love makes you feel like that," said Bundle. "I feel rather the same myself. As though everything's easy and possible."

“So it is,” said Bill. “Now that I know you care for me—”

“Stop it,” said Bundle. “Once we begin again any serious conversation will be hopeless. Unless you pull yourself together and become sensible, I shall very likely change my mind.”

“I shan’t let you,” said Bill. “You don’t think that once having got you I’d be such a fool as to let you go, do you?”

“You would not coerce me against my will, I hope,” said Bundle grandiloquently.

“Wouldn’t I?” said Bill. “You just watch me do it, that’s all.”

“You really are rather a darling, Bill. I was afraid you might be too meek, but I see there’s going to be no danger of that. In another half hour you’d be ordering me about. Oh, dear, we’re getting silly again. Now, look here, Bill. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“I tell you that’ll be quite all right. I shall—”

He broke off, obedient to a pressure from Bundle’s hand. She was leaning forward, listening intently. Yes, she had not been mistaken. A step was crossing the outer room. The key was thrust into the lock and turned. Bundle held her breath. Was it Jimmy coming to rescue them—or was it someone else?

The door opened and the black-bearded Mr. Mosgorovsky stood on the threshold.

Immediately Bill took a step forward, standing in front of Bundle.

“Look here,” he said, “I want a word with you privately.”

The Russian did not reply for a minute or two. He stood stroking his long, silky black beard and smiling quietly to himself.

“So,” he said at last, “it is like that. Very well. The lady will be pleased to come with me.”

“It’s all right, Bundle,” said Bill. “Leave it to me. You go with this chap. Nobody’s going to hurt you. I know what I’m doing.”

Bundle rose obediently. That note of authority in Bill’s voice was new to her. He seemed absolutely sure of himself and confident of being able to deal with the situation. Bundle wondered vaguely what it was that Bill had—or thought he had—up his sleeve.

She passed out of the room in front of the Russian. He followed her, closing the door behind him and locking it.

“This way, please,” he said.

He indicated the staircase and she mounted obediently to the floor above. Here she was directed to pass into a small frowsy room, which she took to be Alfred’s bedroom.

Mosgorovsky said: “You will wait here quietly, please. There must be no noise.”

Then he went out, closing the door behind him and locking her in.

Bundle sat down on a chair. Her head was aching badly still and she felt incapable of sustained thought. Bill seemed to have the situation well in hand. Sooner or later, she supposed, someone would come and let her out.

The minutes passed. Bundle’s watch had stopped, but she judged that over an hour had passed since the Russian had brought her here. What was happening? What, indeed, had happened?

At last she heard footsteps on the stairs. It was Mosgorovsky once more. He spoke very formally to her.

“Lady Eileen Brent, you are wanted at an emergency meeting of the Seven Dials Society. Please follow me.”

He led the way down the stairs and Bundle followed him. He opened the door of the secret chamber and Bundle passed in, catching her breath in surprise as she did so.

She was seeing for the second time what she had only had a glimpse of the first time through her peephole. The masked figures were sitting round the table. As she stood there, taken aback by the suddenness of it, Mosgorovsky slipped into his place, adjusting his clock mask as he did so.

But this time the chair at the head of the table was occupied. No 7 was in his place.

Bundle's heart beat violently. She was standing at the foot of the table directly facing him and she stared and stared at the mocking piece of hanging stuff, with the clock dial on it, that hid his features.

He sat quite immovable and Bundle got an odd sensation of power radiating from him. His inactivity was not the inactivity of weakness—and she wished violently, almost hysterically, that he would speak—that he would make some sign, some gesture—not just sit there like a gigantic spider in the middle of its web waiting remorselessly for its prey.

She shivered and as she did so Mosgorovsky rose. His voice, smooth, silky, persuasive, seemed curiously far away.

“Lady Eileen, you have been present unasked at the secret councils of this society. It is therefore necessary that you should identify yourself with our aims and ambitions. The place 2 o'clock, you may notice, is vacant. It is that place that is offered to you.”

Bundle gasped. The thing was like a fantastic nightmare. Was it possible that she, Bundle Brent, was being asked to join a murderous secret society? Had the same proposition been made to Bill, and had he refused indignantly?

“I can't do that,” she said bluntly.

“Do not answer precipitately.”

She fancied that Mosgorovsky, beneath his clock mask, was smiling significantly into his beard.

“You do not as yet know, Lady Eileen, what it is you are refusing.”

“I can make a pretty good guess,” said Bundle.

“Can you?”

It was the voice of 7 o’clock. It awoke some vague chord of memory in Bundle’s brain. Surely she knew that voice?

Very slowly No 7 raised a hand to his head and fumbled with the fastening of the mask.

Bundle held her breath. At last—she was going to know.

The mask fell.

Bundle found herself looking into the expressionless, wooden face of Superintendent Battle.

Thirty-two

BUNDLE IS DUMBFOUNDED

“That’s right,” said Battle, as Mosgorovsky leapt up and came round to Bundle. “Get a chair for her. It’s been a bit of a shock, I can see.”

Bundle sank down on the chair. She felt limp and faint with surprise. Battle went on talking in a quiet, comfortable way wholly characteristic of him.

“You didn’t expect to see me, Lady Eileen. No, and no more did some of the others sitting round the table. Mr. Mosgorovsky’s been my lieutenant in a manner of speaking. He’s been in the know all along. But most of the others have taken their orders blindly from him.”

Still Bundle said no word. She was—a most unusual state of affairs for her—simply incapable of speech.

Battle nodded at her comprehendingly, seeming to understand the state of her feelings.

“You’ll have to get rid of one or two preconceived ideas of yours, I’m afraid, Lady Eileen. About this society, for instance—I know it’s common enough in books—a secret organization of criminals with a mysterious supercriminal at the head of it whom no one ever sees. That sort of thing may exist in real life, but I can only say that I’ve never come across anything of the sort, and I’ve had a good deal of experience one way or another.

“But there’s a lot of romance in the world, Lady Eileen. People, especially young people, like reading about such things, and they like still better really doing them. I’m going to introduce you now to a very creditable band of amateurs that has done remarkably fine work for my Department, work that nobody else could have done. If they’ve chosen rather melodramatic trappings, well, why shouldn’t they? They’ve been willing to face real

danger—danger of the very worst kind—and they’ve done it for these reasons: love of danger for its own sake—which to my mind is a very healthy sign in these Safety First days—and an honest wish to serve their country.

“And now, Lady Eileen, I’m going to introduce you. First of all, there’s Mr. Mosgorovsky, whom you already know in a manner of speaking. As you’re aware, he runs the club and he runs a host of other things too. He’s our most valuable Secret Anti-Bolshevist Agent in England. No 5 is Count Andras of the Hungarian Embassy, a very near and dear friend of the late Gerald Wade. No 4 is Mr. Hayward Phelps, an American journalist, whose British sympathies are very keen and whose aptitude for scenting ‘news’ is remarkable. No 3—”

He stopped, smiling, and Bundle stared dumbfounded into the sheepish, grinning face of Bill Eversleigh.

“No 2,” went on Battle in a graver voice, “can only show an empty place. It is the place belonging to Mr. Ronald Devereux, a very gallant young gentleman who died for his country if any man ever did. No 1—well, No 1 was Mr. Gerald Wade, another very gallant gentleman who died in the same way. His place was taken—not without some grave misgivings on my part—by a lady—a lady who has proved her fitness to have it and who has been a great help to us.”

The last to do so, No 1, removed her mask, and Bundle looked without surprise into the beautiful, dark face of Countess Radzky.

“I might have known,” said Bundle resentfully, “that you were too completely the beautiful foreign adventuress to be anything of the kind really.”

“But you don’t know the real joke,” said Bill. “Bundle, this is Babe St. Maur—you remember my telling you about her and what a ripping actress she was—and she’s about proved it.”

“That’s so,” said Miss Maur in pure transatlantic nasal. “But it’s not a terrible lot of credit to me, because Poppa and Momma came from that part

of Yurup—so I got the patter fairly easy. Gee, but I nearly gave myself away once at the Abbey, talking about gardens.”

She paused and then said abruptly:

“It’s—it’s not been just fun. You see, I was kinder engaged to Ronny, and when he handed in his checks—well, I had to do something to track down the skunk who murdered him. That’s all.”

“I’m completely bewildered,” said Bundle. “Nothing is what it seems.”

“It’s very simple, Lady Eileen,” said Superintendent Battle. “It began with some of the young people wanting a bit of excitement. It was Mr. Wade who first got on to me. He suggested the formation of a band of what you might call amateur workers to do a bit of secret service work. I warned him that it might be dangerous—but he wasn’t the kind to weigh that in the balance. I made it plain to him that anyone who came in must do so on that understanding. But, bless you, that wasn’t going to stop any of Mr. Wade’s friends. And so the thing began.”

“But what was the object of it all?” asked Bundle.

“We wanted a certain man—wanted him badly. He wasn’t an ordinary crook. He worked in Mr. Wade’s world, a kind of Raffles, but much more dangerous than any Raffles ever was or could be. He was out for big stuff, international stuff. Twice already valuable secret inventions had been stolen, and clearly stolen by someone who had inside knowledge. The professionals had had a try—and failed. Then the amateurs took on—and succeeded.”

“Succeeded?”

“Yes—but they didn’t come out of it unscathed. The man was dangerous. Two lives fell victim to him and he got away with it. But the Seven Dials stuck to it. And as I say they succeeded. Thanks to Mr. Eversleigh, the man was caught at last red-handed.”

“Who was he?” asked Bundle. “Do I know him?”

“You know him very well, Lady Eileen. His name is Mr. Jimmy Thesiger, and he was arrested this afternoon.”

Thirty-three

BATTLE EXPLAINS

Superintendent Battle settled down to explain. He spoke comfortably and cosily.

“I didn’t suspect him myself for a long time. The first hint of it I had was when I heard what Mr. Devereux’s last words had been. Naturally, you took them to mean that Mr. Devereux was trying to send word to Mr. Thesiger that the Seven Dials had killed him. That’s what the words seemed to mean on their face value. But of course I knew that that couldn’t be so. It was the Seven Dials that Mr. Devereux wanted told—and what he wanted them told was something about Mr. Jimmy Thesiger.

“The thing seemed incredible, because Mr. Devereux and Mr. Thesiger were close friends. But I remembered something else—that these thefts must have been committed by someone who was absolutely in the know. Someone, who, if not in the Foreign Office himself, was in the way of hearing all its chitchat. And I found it very hard to find out where Mr. Thesiger got his money. The income his father left him was a small one, yet he was able to live at a most expensive rate. Where did the money come from?

“I knew that Mr. Wade had been very excited by something that he had found out. He was quite sure that he was on the right track. He didn’t confide in anyone about what he thought that track was, but he did say something to Mr. Devereux about being on the point of making sure. That was just before they both went down to Chimneys for that weekend. As you know, Mr. Wade died there—apparently from an overdose of a sleeping draught. It seemed straightforward enough, but Mr. Devereux did not accept that explanation for a minute. He was convinced that Mr. Wade had been very cleverly put out of the way and that someone in the house must actually be the criminal we were all after. He came, I think, very near

confiding in Mr. Thesiger, for he certainly had no suspicions of him at that moment. But something held him back.

“Then he did a rather curious thing. He arranged seven clocks upon the mantelpiece, throwing away the eighth. It was meant as a symbol that the Seven Dials would revenge the death of one of their members—and he watched eagerly to see if anyone betrayed themselves or showed signs of perturbation.”

“And it was Jimmy Thesiger who poisoned Gerry Wade?”

“Yes, he slipped the stuff into a whisky and soda which Mr. Wade had downstairs before retiring to bed. That’s why he was already feeling sleepy when he wrote that letter to Miss Wade.”

“Then the footman, Bauer, hadn’t anything to do with it?” asked Bundle.

“Bauer was one of our people, Lady Eileen. It was thought likely that our crook would go for Herr Eberhard’s invention and Bauer was got into the house to watch events on our behalf. But he wasn’t able to do much. As I say, Mr. Thesiger administered the fatal dose easily enough. Later, when everyone was asleep, a bottle, glass and empty chloral bottle were placed by Mr. Wade’s bedside by Mr. Thesiger. Mr. Wade was unconscious then, and his fingers were probably pressed round the glass and the bottle so that they should be found there if any questions should arise. I don’t know what effect the seven clocks on the mantelpiece made on Mr. Thesiger. He certainly didn’t let on anything to Mr. Devereux. All the same, I think he had a bad five minutes now and again thinking of them. And I think he kept a pretty wary eye on Mr. Devereux after that.

“We don’t know exactly what happened next. No one saw much of Mr. Devereux after Mr. Wade’s death. But it is clear that he worked along the same lines that he knew Mr. Wade had been working on and reached the same result—namely, that Mr. Thesiger was the man. I fancy, too, that he was betrayed in the same way.”

“You mean?”

“Through Miss Loraine Wade. Mr. Wade was devoted to her—I believe he hoped to marry her—she wasn’t really his sister, of course—and there is no doubt that he told her more than he should have done. But Miss Loraine Wade was devoted body and soul to Mr. Thesiger. She would do anything he told her. She passed on the information to him. In the same way, later, Mr. Devereux was attracted to her, and probably warned her against Mr. Thesiger. So Mr. Devereux in turn was silenced—and died trying to send word to the Seven Dials that his murderer was Mr. Thesiger.”

“How ghastly,” cried Bundle. “If I had only known.”

“Well, it didn’t seem likely. In fact, I could hardly credit it myself. But then we came to the affair at the Abbey. You will remember how awkward it was—specially awkward for Mr. Eversleigh here. You and Mr. Thesiger were hand in glove. Mr. Eversleigh had already been embarrassed by your insisting on being brought to this place, and when he found that you had actually overheard what went on at a meeting, he was dumbfounded.”

The Superintendent paused and a twinkle came into his eye.

“So was I, Lady Eileen. I never dreamed of such a thing being possible. You put one over on me there all right.

“Well, Mr. Eversleigh was in a dilemma. He couldn’t let you into the secret of the Seven Dials without letting Mr. Thesiger in also—and that would never do. It all suited Mr. Thesiger very well, of course, for it gave him a bona fide reason for getting himself asked to the Abbey, which made things easier for him.

“I may say that the Seven Dials had already sent a warning letter to Mr. Lomax. That was to ensure his applying to me for assistance, so that I should be able to be on the spot in a perfectly natural manner. I made no secret of my presence, as you know.”

And again the Superintendent’s eye twinkled.

“Well, ostensibly, Mr. Eversleigh and Mr. Thesiger were to divide the night into two watches. Really, Mr. Eversleigh and Miss St. Maur did so. She was

on guard at the library window when she heard Mr. Thesiger coming and had to dart behind the screen.

“And now comes the cleverness of Mr. Thesiger. Up to a point he told me a perfectly true story, and I must admit that with the fight and everything, I was distinctly shaken—and began to wonder whether he had had anything to do with the theft at all, or whether we were completely on the wrong track. There were one or two suspicious circumstances that pointed in an entirely different direction, and I can tell you I didn’t know what to make of things, when something turned up to clinch matters.

“I found the burnt glove in the fireplace with the teeth marks on it—and then—well—I knew that I’d been right after all. But, upon my word, he was a clever one.”

“What actually happened?” said Bundle. “Who was the other man?”

“There wasn’t any other man. Listen, and I’ll show you how in the end I reconstructed the whole story. To begin with, Mr. Thesiger and Miss Wade were in this together. And they have a rendezvous for an exact time. Miss Wade comes over in her car, climbs through the fence and comes up to the house. She’s got a perfectly good story if anyone stops her—the one she told eventually. But she arrived unmolested on the terrace just after the clock had struck two.

“Now, I may say to begin with that she was seen coming in. My men saw her, but they had orders to stop nobody coming in—only going out. I wanted, you see, to find out as much as possible. Miss Wade arrives on the terrace, and at that minute a parcel falls at her feet and she picks it up. A man comes down the ivy and she starts to run. What happens next? The struggle—and presently the revolver shots. What will everyone do? Rush to the scene of the fight. And Miss Loraine Wade could have left the grounds and driven off with the formula safely in her possession.

“But things don’t happen quite like that. Miss Wade runs straight into my arms. And at that moment the game changes. It’s no longer attack but defence. Miss Wade tells her story. It is perfectly true and perfectly sensible.

“And now we come to Mr. Thesiger. One thing struck me at once. The bullet wound alone couldn’t have caused him to faint. Either he had fallen and hit his head—or—well he hadn’t fainted at all. Later we had Miss St. Maur’s story. It agreed perfectly with Mr. Thesiger’s—there was only one suggestive point. Miss St. Maur said that after the lights were turned out and Mr. Thesiger went over to the window, he was so still that she thought he must have left the room and gone outside. Now, if anyone is in the room, you can hardly help hearing their breathing if you are listening for it. Supposing, then, that Mr. Thesiger had gone outside. Where next? Up the ivy to Mr. O’Rourke’s room—Mr. O’Rourke’s whisky and soda having been doped the night before. He gets the papers, throws them down to the girl, climbs down the ivy again, and—starts the fight. That’s easy enough when you come to think of it. Knock the tables down, stagger about, speak in your own voice and then in a hoarse half whisper. And then, the final touch, the two revolver shots. His own Colt automatic, bought openly the day before, is fired at an imaginary assailant. Then, with his left gloved hand, he takes from his pocket the small Mauser pistol and shoots himself through the fleshy part of the right arm. He flings the pistol through the window, tears off the glove with his teeth, and throws it into the fire. When I arrive he is lying on the floor in a faint.”

Bundle drew a deep breath.

“You didn’t realize all this at the time, Superintendent Battle?”

“No, that I didn’t. I was taken in as much as anyone could be. It wasn’t till long afterwards that I pieced it all together. Finding the glove was the beginning of it. Then I made Sir Oswald throw the pistol through the window. It fell a good way farther on than it should have done. But a man who is right-handed doesn’t throw nearly as far with the left hand. Even then it was only suspicion—and a very faint suspicion at that.

“But there was one point struck me. The papers were obviously thrown down for someone to pick up. If Miss Wade was there by accident, who was the real person? Of course, for those who weren’t in the know, that question was answered easily enough—the Countess. But there I had the pull over you. I knew the Countess was all right. So what follows? Why, the idea that the papers had actually been picked up by the person they were meant for.

And the more I thought of it, the more it seemed to me a very remarkable coincidence that Miss Wade should have arrived at the exact moment she did.”

“It must have been very difficult for you when I came to you full of suspicion about the Countess.”

“It was, Lady Eileen. I had to say something to put you off the scent. And it was very difficult for Mr. Eversleigh here, with the lady coming out of a dead faint and no knowing what she might say.”

“I understand Bill’s anxiety now,” said Bundle. “And the way he kept urging her to take time and not talk till she felt quite all right.”

“Poor old Bill,” said Miss St. Maur. “That poor baby had to be vamped against his will—getting madder’n a hornet every minute.”

“Well,” said Superintendent Battle, “there it was. I suspected Mr. Thesiger—but I couldn’t get definite proof. On the other hand, Mr. Thesiger himself was rattled. He realized more or less what he was up against in the Seven Dials—but he wanted badly to know who No 7 was. He got himself asked to the Cootes under the impression that Sir Oswald Coote was No 7.”

“I suspected Sir Oswald,” said Bundle, “especially when he came in from the garden that night.”

“I never suspected him,” said Battle. “But I don’t mind telling you that I did have my suspicions of that young chap, his secretary.”

“Pongo?” said Bill. “Not old Pongo?”

“Yes, Mr. Eversleigh, old Pongo as you call him. A very efficient gentleman and one that could have put anything through if he’d a mind to. I suspected him partly because he’d been the one to take the clocks into Mr. Wade’s room that night. It would have been easy for him to put the bottle and glass by the bedside then. And then, for another thing, he was left-handed. That glove pointed straight to him—if it hadn’t been for one thing—”

“What?”

“The teeth marks—only a man whose right hand was incapacitated would have needed to tear off that glove with his teeth.”

“So Pongo was cleared.”

“So Pongo was cleared, as you say. I’m sure it would be a great surprise to Mr. Bateman to know he was ever suspected.”

“It would,” agreed Bill. “A solemn card—a silly ass like Pongo. How could you ever think—”

“Well, as far as that goes, Mr. Thesiger was what you might describe as an empty-headed young ass of the most brainless description. One of the two was playing a part. When I decided that it was Mr. Thesiger, I was interested to get Mr. Bateman’s opinion of him. All along, Mr. Bateman had the gravest suspicions of Mr. Thesiger and frequently said as much to Sir Oswald.”

“It’s curious,” said Bill, “but Pongo always is right. It’s maddening.”

“Well, as I say,” went on Superintendent Battle, “we got Mr. Thesiger fairly on the run, badly rattled over this Seven Dials business and uncertain just where the danger lay. That we got him in the end was solely through Mr. Eversleigh. He knew what he was up against, and he risked his life cheerfully. But he never dreamt that you would be dragged into it, Lady Eileen.”

“My God, no,” said Bill with feeling.

“He went round to Mr. Thesiger’s rooms with a cooked-up tale,” continued Battle. “He was to pretend that certain papers of Mr. Devereux’s had come into his hands. Those papers were to suggest a suspicion of Mr. Thesiger. Naturally, as the honest friend, Mr. Eversleigh rushed round, sure that Mr. Thesiger would have an explanation. We calculated that if we were right, Mr. Thesiger would try and put Mr. Eversleigh out of the way, and we were fairly certain as to the way he’d do it. Sure enough, Mr. Thesiger gave his

guest a whisky and soda. During the minute or two that his host was out of the room. Mr. Eversleigh poured that into a jar on the mantelpiece, but he had to pretend, of course, that the drug was taking effect. It would be slow, he knew, not sudden. He began his story, and Mr. Thesiger at first denied it all indignantly, but as soon as he saw (or thought he saw) that the drug was taking effect, he admitted everything and told Mr. Eversleigh that he was the third victim.

“When Mr. Eversleigh was nearly unconscious, Mr. Thesiger took him down to the car and helped him in. The hood was up. He must already have telephoned to you unknown to Mr. Eversleigh. He made a clever suggestion to you. You were to say that you were taking Miss Wade home.

“You made no mention of a message from him. Later when your body was found here, Miss Wade would swear that you had driven her home and gone up to London with the idea of penetrating into this house by yourself.

“Mr. Eversleigh continued to play his part, that of the unconscious man. I may say that as soon as the two young men had left Jermyn Street, one of my men gained admission and found the doctored whisky, which contained enough hydrochloride of morphia to kill two men. Also the car they were in was followed. Mr. Thesiger drove out of town to a well-known golf course, where he showed himself for a few minutes, speaking of playing a round. That, of course, was for an alibi, should one be needed. He left the car with Mr. Eversleigh in it a little way down the road. Then he drove back to town and to the Seven Dials Club. As soon as he saw Alfred leave, he drove up to the door, spoke to Mr. Eversleigh as he got out in case you might be listening and came into the house and played his little comedy.

“When he pretended to go for a doctor, he really only slammed the door and then crept quietly upstairs and hid behind the door of this room, where Miss Wade would presently send you up on some excuse. Mr. Eversleigh, of course, was horror-struck when he saw you, but he thought it best to keep up the part he was playing. He knew our people were watching the house, and he imagined that there was no immediate danger intended to you. He could always ‘come to life’ at any moment. When Mr. Thesiger threw his revolver on the table and apparently left the house it seemed safer than ever.

As for the next bit—” He paused, looking at Bill. “Perhaps you’d like to tell that, sir.”

“I was still lying on that bally sofa,” said Bill, “trying to look done in and getting the fidgets worse and worse. Then I heard someone run down the stairs, and Loraine got up and went to the door. I heard Thesiger’s voice, but not what he said. I heard Loraine say: ‘That’s all right—it’s gone splendidly.’ Then he said: ‘Help me carry him up. It will be a bit of a job, but I want them both together there—a nice little surprise for No 7.’ I didn’t quite understand what they were jawing about, but they hauled me up the stairs somehow or other. It was a bit of a job for them. I made myself a dead weight all right. They heaved me in here, and then I heard Loraine say: ‘You’re sure it’s all right? She won’t come round?’ And Jimmy said—the damned blackguard: ‘No fear. I hit her with all my might.’

“They went away and locked the door, and then I opened my eyes and saw you. My God, Bundle, I shall never feel so perfectly awful again. I thought you were dead.”

“I suppose my hat saved me,” said Bundle.

“Partly,” said Superintendent Battle. “But partly it was Mr. Thesiger’s wounded arm. He didn’t realize it himself—but it had only half its usual strength. Still, that’s all no credit to the Department. We didn’t take the care of you we ought to have done, Lady Eileen—and it’s a black blot on the whole business.”

“I’m very tough,” said Bundle. “And also rather lucky. What I can’t get over is Loraine being in it. She was such a gentle little thing.”

“Ah!” said the Superintendent. “So was the Pentonville murderess that killed five children. You can’t go by that. She’s got bad blood in her—her father ought to have seen the inside of a prison more than once.”

“You’ve got her too?”

Superintendent Battle nodded.

“I daresay they won’t hang her—juries are softhearted. But young Thesiger will swing all right—and a good thing too—a more utterly depraved and callous criminal I never met.”

“And now,” he added, “if your head isn’t aching too badly, Lady Eileen, what about a little celebration? There’s a nice little restaurant round the corner.”

Bundle heartily agreed.

“I’m starving, Superintendent Battle. Besides,” she looked round. “I’ve got to get to know all my colleagues.”

“The Seven Dials,” said Bill. “Hurrah! Some fizz is what we need. Do they run to fizz at this place, Battle?”

“You won’t have anything to complain of, sir. You leave it to me.”

“Superintendent Battle,” said Bundle, “you are a wonderful man. I’m sorry you’re married already. As it is, I shall have to put up with Bill.”

Thirty-four

LORD CATERHAM APPROVES

“Father,” said Bundle, “I’ve got to break a piece of news to you. You’re going to lose me.”

“Nonsense,” said Lord Caterham. “Don’t tell me that you’re suffering from galloping consumption or a weak heart or anything like that, because I simply don’t believe it.”

“It’s not death,” said Bundle. “It’s marriage.”

“Very nearly as bad,” said Lord Caterham. “I suppose I shall have to come to the wedding, all dressed up in tight uncomfortable clothes, and give you away. And Lomax may think it necessary to kiss me in the vestry.”

“Good heavens! You don’t think I’m going to marry George, do you?” cried Bundle.

“Well, something like that seemed to be in the wind last time I saw you,” said her father. “Yesterday morning, you know.”

“I’m going to be married to someone a hundred times nicer than George,” said Bundle.

“I hope so, I’m sure,” said Lord Caterham. “But one never knows. I don’t feel you’re really a good judge of character, Bundle. You told me that young Thesiger was a cheerful inefficient, and from all I hear now it seems that he was one of the most efficient criminals of the day. The sad thing is that I never met him. I was thinking of writing my reminiscences soon—with a special chapter on murderers I have met—and by a purely technical oversight, I never met this young man.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Bundle. “You know you haven’t got the energy to write reminiscences or anything else.”

“I wasn’t actually going to write them myself,” said Lord Caterham. “I believe that’s never done. But I met a very charming girl the other day and that’s her special job. She collects the material and does all the actual writing.”

“And what do you do?”

“Oh, just give her a few facts for half an hour every day. Nothing more than that.” After a slight pause, Lord Catherham said: “She was a nice-looking girl—very restful and sympathetic.”

“Father,” said Bundle, “I have a feeling that without me you will run into deadly danger.”

“Different kinds of danger suit different kinds of people,” said Lord Caterham.

He was moving away, when he turned back and said over his shoulder:

“By the way, Bundle, who are you marrying?”

“I was wondering,” said Bundle, “when you were going to ask me that. I’m going to marry Bill Eversleigh.”

The egoist thought it over for a minute. Then he nodded in complete satisfaction.

“Excellent,” he said. “He’s scratch, isn’t he? He and I can play together in the foursomes in the Autumn Meeting.”

Murder Is Easy (1939)

By Agatha Christie

One

A FELLOW TRAVELLER

England!

England after many years!

How was he going to like it?

Luke Fitzwilliam asked himself that question as he walked down the gangplank to the dock. It was present at the back of his mind all through the wait in the Customs' shed. It came suddenly to the fore when he was finally seated in the boat train.

England on leave was one thing. Plenty of money to burn (to begin with anyway!), old friends to look up, meetings with other fellows home like himself—a carefree atmosphere of “Well, it won't be long. Might as well enjoy myself! Soon be going back.”

But now there was no question of going back. No more of the hot stifling nights, no more blinding sun and tropical beauty of rich vegetation, no more lonely evenings reading and re-reading old copies of *The Times*.

Here he was, honourably retired on a pension, with some small private means of his own, a gentleman of leisure, come home to England. What was he going to do with himself?

England! England on a June day, with a grey sky and a sharp biting wind. Nothing welcoming about her on a day like this! And the people! Heavens, the people! Crowds of them, all with grey faces like the sky—anxious worried faces. The houses too, springing up everywhere like mushrooms. Nasty little houses! Revolting little houses! Chicken coops in the grandiose manner all over the countryside!

With an effort Luke Fitzwilliam averted his eyes from the landscape outside the railway carriage window and settled down to a perusal of the papers he had just bought. The Times, the Daily Clarion and Punch.

He started with the Daily Clarion. The Clarion was given over entirely to Epsom.

Luke thought: "A pity we didn't get in yesterday. Haven't seen the Derby run since I was nineteen."

He had drawn a horse in the Club sweep and he looked now to see what the Clarion's racing correspondent thought of its chance. He found it dismissed contemptuously in a sentence.

"Of the others, Jujube the II., Mark's Mile, Santony and Jerry Boy are hardly likely to qualify for a place. A likely outsider is—"

But Luke paid no attention to the likely outsider. His eye had shifted to the betting. Jujube the II. was listed at a modest 40 to 1.

He glanced at his watch. A quarter to four. "Well," he thought. "It's over now." And he wished he'd had a bet on Clarigold who was the second favourite.

Then he opened The Times and became absorbed in more serious matters.

Not for long, however, for a fierce-looking colonel in the corner opposite was so incensed at what he himself had just read that he had to pass on his indignation to his fellow passenger. A full half hour passed before the colonel tired of saying what he thought about "these damned Communist agitators, sir."

The colonel died down at last and finally dropped off to sleep with his mouth open. Shortly afterwards the train slowed down and finally stopped. Luke looked out of the window. They were in a large empty-looking station with many platforms. He caught sight of a bookstall some way up the platform with a placard: DERBY RESULT. Luke opened the door, jumped

out, and ran towards the bookstall. A moment later he was staring with a broad grin at a few smudged lines in the stop press.

Derby Result

JUJUBE THE II.

MAZEPPA

CLARIGOLD

Luke grinned broadly. A hundred pounds to blue! Good old Jujube the II., so scornfully dismissed by all the tipsters.

He folded the paper, still grinning to himself, and turned back—to face emptiness. In the excitement of Jujube the II.’s victory, his train had slipped out of the station unnoticed by him.

“When the devil did that train go out?” he demanded of a gloomy-looking porter.

The latter replied:

“What train? There hasn’t been no train since the 3:14.”

“There was a train here just now. I got out of it. The boat express.”

The porter replied austerely:

“The boat express don’t stop anywhere till London.”

“But it did,” Luke assured him. “I got out of it.”

“No stop anywhere till London,” repeated the porter immovably.

“It stopped at this very platform and I got out of it, I tell you.”

Faced by facts, the porter changed his ground.

“You didn’t ought to have done,” he said reproachfully. “It don’t stop here.”

“But it did.”

“That ’twas signal, that was. Signal against it. It didn’t what you’d call ‘stop.’”

“I’m not so good at these fine distinctions as you are,” said Luke. “The point is, what do I do next?”

The porter, a man of slow ideas, repeated reproachfully: “You didn’t ought to have got out.”

“We’ll admit that,” said Luke. “The wrong is done, past all recall—weep we never so bitterly we can never bring back the dead past—Quoth the raven ‘Nevermore’—The moving finger writes; and having writ moves on, etc., etc., and so on and so forth. What I’m trying to get at is, what do you, a man experienced in the service of the railway company, advise me to do now?”

“You’re asking what you’d better do?”

“That,” said Luke, “is the idea. There are, I presume, trains that stop, really officially stop, here?”

“Reckon,” said the porter. “You’d best go on by the 4:25.”

“If the 4:25 goes to London,” said Luke, “the 4:25 is the train for me.”

Reassured on that point, Luke strolled up and down the platform. A large board informed him that he was at Fenny Clayton Junction for Wychwood-under-Ashe, and presently a train consisting of one carriage pushed backwards by an antiquated little engine came slowly puffing in and deposited itself in a modest bay. Six or seven people alighted, and crossing over a bridge, came to join Luke on his platform. The gloomy porter suddenly awoke to life and began pushing about a large truck of crates and baskets, another porter joined him and began to rattle milk cans. Fenny Clayton awoke to life.

At last, with immense importance the London train came in. The third-class carriages were crowded, and of firsts there were only three and each one contained a traveller or travellers. Luke scrutinized each compartment. The first, a smoker, contained a gentleman of military aspect smoking a cigar. Luke felt he had had enough of Anglo-Indian colonels today. He passed on to the next one, which contained a tired-looking genteel young woman, possibly a nursery governess, and an active-looking small boy of about three. Luke passed on quickly. The next door was open and the carriage contained one passenger, an elderly lady. She reminded Luke slightly of one of his aunts, his Aunt Mildred, who had courageously allowed him to keep a grass snake when he was ten years old. Aunt Mildred had been decidedly a good aunt as aunts go. Luke entered the carriage and sat down.

After some five minutes of intense activity on the part of milk vans, luggage trucks and other excitements, the train moved slowly out of the station. Luke unfolded his paper and turned to such items of news as might interest a man who had already read his morning paper.

He did not hope to read it for long. Being a man of many aunts, he was fairly certain that the nice old lady in the corner did not propose to travel in silence to London.

He was right—a window that needed adjusting, dropped umbrella—and the way the old lady was telling him what a good train this was.

“Only an hour and ten minutes. That’s very good, you know, very good indeed. Much better than the morning one. That takes an hour and forty minutes.”

She went on:

“Of course, nearly everyone goes by the morning one. I mean, when it is the cheap day it’s silly to go up in the afternoon. I meant to go up this morning, but Wonky Pooh was missing—that’s my cat, a Persian, such a beauty only he’s had a painful ear lately—and of course I couldn’t leave home till he was found!”

Luke murmured:

“Of course not,” and let his eyes drop ostentatiously to his paper. But it was of no avail. The flood went on.

“So I just made the best of a bad job and took the afternoon train instead, and of course it’s a blessing in one way because it’s not so crowded—not that that matters when one is travelling first class. Of course, I don’t usually do that. I mean, I should consider it an extravagance, what with taxes and one’s dividends being less and servants’ wages so much more and everything—but really I was so upset because you see, I’m going up on very important business, and I wanted to think out exactly what I was going to say—just quietly, you know—” Luke repressed a smile. “And when there are people you know travelling up too—well, one can’t be unfriendly—so I thought just for once, the expense was quite permissible—though I do think nowadays there is so much waste—and nobody saves or thinks of the future. One is sorry the seconds were ever abolished—it did make just that little difference.

“Of course,” she went on quickly, with a swift glance at Luke’s bronzed face, “I know soldiers on leave have to travel first class. I mean, being officers, it’s expected of them—”

Luke sustained the inquisitive glance of a pair of bright twinkling eyes. He capitulated at once. It would come to it, he knew, in the end.

“I’m not a soldier,” he said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—I just thought—you were so brown—perhaps home from the East on leave.”

“I’m home from the East,” said Luke. “But not on leave.” He stalled off further researches with a bald statement. “I’m a policeman.”

“In the police? Now really, that’s very interesting. A dear friend of mine—her boy has just joined the Palestine police.”

“Mayang Straits,” said Luke, taking another shortcut.

“Oh, dear—very interesting. Really, it’s quite a coincidence—I mean, that you should be travelling in this carriage. Because, you see, this business I’m going up to town about—well, actually it is to Scotland Yard I’m going.”

“Really?” said Luke.

He thought to himself, “Will she run down soon like a clock or will this go on all the way to London?” But he did not really mind very much, because he had been very fond of his Aunt Mildred, and he remembered how she had once stumped up a fiver in the nick of time. Besides, there was something very cosy and English about old ladies like this old lady and his Aunt Mildred. There was nothing at all like them in the Mayang Straits. They could be classed with plum pudding on Christmas Day and village cricket and open fireplaces with wood fires. The sort of things you appreciated a good deal when you hadn’t got them and were on the other side of the world. (They were also the sort of thing you got very bored with when you had a good deal of them, but as has been already told, Luke had only landed in England three or four hours ago.)

The old lady was continuing happily:

“Yes, I meant to go up this morning—and then, as I told you, I was so worried about Wonky Pooh. But you don’t think it will be too late, do you? I mean, there aren’t any special office hours at Scotland Yard.”

“I don’t think they close down at four or anything like that,” said Luke.

“No, of course, they couldn’t, could they? I mean, somebody might want to report a serious crime at any minute, mightn’t they?”

“Exactly,” said Luke.

For a moment the old lady relapsed into silence. She looked worried.

“I always think it’s better to go right to the fountainhead,” she said at last. “John Reed is quite a nice fellow—that’s our constable in Wychwood—a very civil-spoken, pleasant man—but I don’t feel, you know—that he would be quite the person to deal with anything serious. He’s quite used to

dealing with people who've drunk too much, or with exceeding the speed limit, or lighting-up time—or people who haven't taken out a dog licence—and perhaps with burglary even. But I don't think—I'm quite sure—he isn't the person to deal with murder!”

Luke's eyebrows rose.

“Murder?”

The old lady nodded vigorously.

“Yes, murder. You're surprised, I can see. I was myself at first...I really couldn't believe it. I thought I must be imagining things.”

“Are you quite sure you weren't?” Luke asked gently.

“Oh, no.” She shook her head positively. “I might have been the first time, but not the second, or the third or the fourth. After that one knows.”

Luke said:

“Do you mean there have been—er—several murders?”

The quiet gentle voice replied:

“A good many, I'm afraid.”

She went on:

“That's why I thought it would be best to go straight to Scotland Yard and tell them about it. Don't you think that's the best thing to do?”

Luke looked at her thoughtfully, then he said:

“Why, yes—I think you're quite right.”

He thought to himself:

“They’ll know how to deal with her. Probably get half a dozen old ladies a week coming in burbling about the amount of murders committed in their nice quiet country villages! There may be a special department for dealing with the old dears.”

And he saw in imagination a fatherly superintendent, or a good-looking young inspector, tactfully murmuring:

“Thank you, ma’am, very grateful to you, I’m sure. Now just go back and leave it all in our hands and don’t worry anymore about it.”

He smiled a little to himself at the picture. He thought:

“I wonder why they get these fancies? Deadly dull lives, I suppose—an unacknowledged craving for drama. Some old ladies, so I’ve heard, fancy everyone is poisoning their food.”

He was roused from these meditations by the thin, gentle voice continuing:

“You know, I remember reading once—I think it was the Abercrombie case—of course he’d poisoned quite a lot of people before any suspicion was aroused—what was I saying? Oh, yes, somebody said that there was a look—a special look that he gave anyone—and then very shortly afterwards that person would be taken ill. I didn’t really believe that when I read about it—but it’s true!”

“What’s true?”

“The look on a person’s face....”

Luke stared at her. She was trembling a little, and her nice pink cheeks had lost some of their colour.

“I saw it first with Amy Gibbs—and she died. And then it was Carter. And Tommy Pierce. But now—yesterday—it was Dr. Humbleby—and he’s such a good man—a really good man. Carter, of course, drank, and Tommy Pierce was a dreadfully cheeky impertinent little boy, and bullied the tiny boys, twisting their arms and pinching them. I didn’t feel quite so badly

about them, but Dr. Humbleby's different. He must be saved. And the terrible thing is that if I went to him and told him about it he wouldn't believe me! He'd only laugh! And John Reed wouldn't believe me either. But at Scotland Yard it will be different. Because, naturally, they're used to crime there!"

She glanced out of the window.

"Oh, dear, we shall be in in a minute." She fussed a little, opening and shutting her bag, collecting her umbrella.

"Thank you—thank you so much." This to Luke as he picked the umbrella up for the second time. "It's been such a relief talking to you—most kind of you, I'm sure—so glad you think I'm doing the right thing."

Luke said kindly:

"I'm sure they'll give you good advice at Scotland Yard."

"I really am most grateful." She fumbled in her bag. "My card—oh, dear, I only have one—I must keep that—for Scotland Yard—"

"Of course, of course—"

"But my name is Pinkerton."

"Very suitable name, too, Miss Pinkerton," said Luke, smiling, adding hastily as she looked a little bewildered, "My name is Luke Fitzwilliam."

As the train drew in to the platform he added:

"Can I get you a taxi?"

"Oh, no, thank you." Miss Pinkerton seemed quite shocked at the idea. "I shall take the tube. That will take me to Trafalgar Square, and I shall walk down Whitehall."

"Well, good luck," said Luke.

Miss Pinkerton shook him warmly by the hand.

“So kind,” she murmured again. “You know, just at first I thought you didn’t believe me.”

Luke had the grace to blush.

“Well,” he said. “So many murders! Rather hard to do a lot of murders and get away with it, eh?”

Miss Pinkerton shook her head.

She said earnestly:

“No, no, my dear boy, that’s where you’re wrong. It’s very easy to kill—so long as no one suspects you. And you see, the person in question is just the last person anyone would suspect!”

“Well, anyway, good luck,” said Luke.

Miss Pinkerton was swallowed up in the crowd. He himself went off in search of his luggage, thinking as he did so:

“Just a little bit batty? No, I don’t think so. A vivid imagination, that’s all. Hope they let her down lightly. Rather an old dear.”

Two

OBITUARY NOTICE

I

Jimmy Lorrimer was one of Luke's oldest friends. As a matter of course, Luke stayed with Jimmy as soon as he got to London. It was with Jimmy that he sallied forth on the evening of his arrival in search of amusement. It was Jimmy's coffee that he drank with an aching head the morning after, and it was Jimmy's voice that went unanswered while he read twice over a small insignificant paragraph in the morning paper.

"Sorry, Jimmy," he said, coming to himself with a start.

"What were you absorbed in—the political situation?"

Luke grinned.

"No fear. No, it's rather queer—old pussy I travelled up with in the train yesterday got run over."

"Probably trusted to a Belisha Beacon," said Jimmy. "How do you know it's her?"

"Of course, it mayn't be. But it's the same name—Pinkerton—she was knocked down and killed by a car as she was crossing Whitehall. The car didn't stop."

"Nasty business," said Jimmy.

"Yes, poor old bean. I'm sorry. She reminded me of my Aunt Mildred."

"Whoever was driving that car will be for it. Bring it in manslaughter as likely as not. I tell you, I'm scared stiff of driving a car nowadays."

"What have you got at present in the way of a car?"

“Ford V 8. I tell you, my boy—”

The conversation became severely mechanical.

Jimmy broke it off to ask:

“What the devil are you humming?”

Luke was humming to himself:

“Fiddle de dee, fiddle de dee, the fly has married the bumblebee.”

He apologized.

“Nursery rhyme remembered from my childhood. Can’t think what put it into my head.”

II

It was over a week later that Luke, carelessly scanning the front page of The Times, gave a sudden startled exclamation.

“Well, I’m damned!”

Jimmy Lorrimer looked up.

“What’s the matter?”

Luke did not answer. He was staring at a name in the printed column.

Jimmy repeated his question.

Luke raised his head and looked at his friend. His expression was so peculiar that Jimmy was quite taken aback.

“What’s up, Luke? You look as though you’d seen a ghost.”

For a minute or two the other did not reply. He dropped the paper, strode to the window and back again. Jimmy watched him with increasing surprise.

Luke dropped into a chair and leaned forward.

“Jimmy, old son, do you remember my mentioning an old lady I travelled up to town with—the day I arrived in England?”

“The one you said reminded you of your Aunt Mildred? And then she got run over by a car?”

“That’s the one. Listen, Jimmy. The old girl came out with a long rigmarole of how she was going up to Scotland Yard to tell them about a lot of murders. There was a murderer loose in her village—that’s what it amounted to, and he’s been doing some pretty rapid execution.”

“You didn’t tell me she was batty,” said Jimmy.

“I didn’t think she was.”

“Oh, come now, old boy, wholesale murder—”

Luke said impatiently:

“I didn’t think she was off her head. I thought she was just letting her imagination run away with her like old ladies sometimes do.”

“Well, yes, I suppose that might have been it. But she was probably a bit touched as well, I should think.”

“Never mind what you think, Jimmy. At the moment, I’m telling you, see?”

“Oh, quite—quite—get on with it.”

“She was quite circumstantial, mentioned one or two victims by name and then explained that what had really rattled her was the fact that she knew who the next victim was going to be.”

“Yes?” said Jimmy encouragingly.

“Sometimes a name sticks in your head for some silly reason or other. This name stuck in mine because I linked it up with a silly nursery rhyme they

used to sing to me when I was a kid. Fiddle de dee, fiddle de dee, the fly has married the bumblebee.”

“Very intellectual, I’m sure, but what’s the point?”

“The point, my good ass, is that the man’s name was Humbleby—Dr. Humbleby. My old lady said Dr. Humbleby would be the next, and she was distressed because he was ‘such a good man.’ The name stuck in my head because of the aforementioned rhyme.”

“Well?” said Jimmy.

“Well, look at this.”

Luke passed over the paper, his finger pressed against an entry in the column of deaths.

HUMBLEBY.—On June 13, suddenly, at his residence, Sandgate, Wychwood-under-Ashe, JOHN EDWARD HUMBLEBY, MD, beloved husband of JESSIE ROSE HUMBLEBY. Funeral Friday. No flowers, by request.

“You see, Jimmy? That’s the name and the place and he’s a doctor. What do you make of it?”

Jimmy took a moment or two to answer. His voice was serious when he said at last rather uncertainly:

“I suppose it’s just a damned odd coincidence.”

“Is it, Jimmy? Is it? Is that all it is?”

Luke began to walk up and down again.

“What else could it be?” asked Jimmy.

Luke wheeled round suddenly.

“Suppose that every word that dear bleating old sheep said was true! Suppose that that fantastic story was just the plain literal truth!”

“Oh, come now, old boy! That would be a bit thick! Things like that don’t happen.”

“What about the Abercrombie case? Wasn’t he supposed to have done away with a goodish few?”

“More than ever came out,” said Jimmy. “A pal of mine had a cousin who was the local coroner. I heard a bit through him. They got Abercrombie for feeding the local vet with arsenic, then they dug up his wife and she was full of it, and it’s pretty certain his brother-in-law went the same way—and that wasn’t all, by a long chalk. This pal of mine told me the unofficial view was that Abercrombie had done away with at least fifteen people in his time. Fifteen!”

“Exactly. So these things do happen!”

“Yes, but they don’t happen often.”

“How do you know? They may happen a good deal oftener than you suppose.”

“There speaks the police wallah! Can’t you forget you’re a policeman now that you’ve retired into private life?”

“Once a policeman, always a policeman, I suppose,” said Luke. “Now look here, Jimmy, supposing that before Abercrombie had got so foolhardy as fairly to push his murders under the nose of the police, some dear loquacious old spinster had just simply guessed what he was up to and had trotted off to tell someone in authority all about it. Do you suppose they’d have listened to her?”

Jimmy grinned.

“No fear!”

“Exactly. They’d have said she’d got bats in the belfry. Just as you said! Or they’d have said, ‘Too much imagination. Not enough to do.’ As I said! And both of us, Jimmy, would have been wrong.”

Lorrimer took a moment or two to consider, then he said:

“What’s the position exactly—as it appears to you?”

Luke said slowly:

“The case stands like this. I was told a story—an improbable, but not an impossible story. One piece of evidence, the death of Dr. Humbleby, supports that story. And there’s one other significant fact. Miss Pinkerton was going to Scotland Yard with this improbable story of hers. But she didn’t get there. She was run over and killed by a car that didn’t stop.”

Jimmy objected.

“You don’t know that she didn’t get there. She might have been killed after her visit, not before.”

“She might have been, yes—but I don’t think she was.”

“That’s pure supposition. It boils down to this—you believe in this—this melodrama.”

Luke shook his head sharply.

“No, I don’t say that. All I say is, there’s a case for investigation.”

“In other words, you are going to Scotland Yard.”

“No, it hasn’t come to that yet—not nearly. As you say, this man Humbleby’s death may be merely a coincidence.”

“Then what, may I ask, is the idea?”

“The idea is to go down to this place and look into the matter.”

“So that’s the idea, is it?”

“Don’t you agree that that is the only sensible way to set about it?”

Jimmy stared at him, then he said:

“Are you serious about this business, Luke?”

“Absolutely.”

“Suppose the whole thing’s a mare’s nest?”

“That would be the best thing that could happen.”

“Yes, of course...” Jimmy frowned. “But you don’t think it is, do you?”

“My dear fellow, I’m keeping an open mind.” Jimmy was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“Got any plan? I mean, you’ll have to have some reason for suddenly arriving in this place.”

“Yes, I suppose I shall.”

“No ‘suppose’ about it. Do you realize what a small English country town is like? Anyone new sticks out a mile!”

“I shall have to adopt a disguise,” said Luke with a sudden grin. “What do you suggest? Artist? Hardly—I can’t draw, let alone paint.”

“You could be a modern artist,” suggested Jimmy. “Then that wouldn’t matter.”

But Luke was intent on the matter in hand.

“An author? Do authors go to strange country inns to write? They might, I suppose. A fisherman, perhaps—but I’ll have to find out if there’s a handy river. An invalid ordered country air? I don’t look the part, and anyway everyone goes to a nursing home nowadays. I might be looking for a house

in the neighbourhood. But that's not very good. Hang it all, Jimmy, there must be some plausible reason for a hearty stranger to descend upon an English village?"

Jimmy said:

"Wait a sec—give me that paper again."

Taking it, he gave it a cursory glance and announced triumphantly:

"I thought so! Luke, old boy—to put it in a nutshell—I'll fix you OK. Everything's as easy as winking!"

Luke wheeled round.

"What?"

Jimmy was continuing with modest pride:

"I thought something struck a chord! Wychwood-under-Ashe. Of course! The very place!"

"Have you, by any chance, a pal who knows the coroner there?"

"Not this time. Better than that, my boy. Nature, as you know, has endowed me plentifully with aunts and cousins—my father having been one of a family of thirteen. Now listen to this: I have a cousin in Wychwood-under-Ashe."

"Jimmy, you're a blinking marvel."

"It is pretty good, isn't it?" said Jimmy modestly.

"Tell me about him."

"It's a her. Her name's Bridget Conway. For the last two years she's been secretary to Lord Whitfield."

"The man who owns those nasty little weekly papers?"

“That’s right. Rather a nasty little man too! Pompous! He was born in Wychwood-under-Ashe, and being the kind of snob who rams his birth and breeding down your throat and glories in being self-made, he has returned to his home village, bought up the only big house in the neighbourhood (it belonged to Bridget’s family originally, by the way) and is busy making the place into a ‘model estate.’”

“And your cousin is his secretary?”

“She was,” said Jimmy darkly. “Now she’s gone one better! She’s engaged to him!”

“Oh,” said Luke, rather taken aback.

“He’s a catch, of course,” said Jimmy. “Rolling in money. Bridget took rather a toss over some fellow—it pretty well knocked the romance out of her. I dare say this will pan out very well. She’ll probably be kind of firm with him and he’ll eat out of her hand.”

“And where do I come in?”

Jimmy replied promptly.

“You go down there to stay—you’d better be another cousin. Bridget’s got so many that one more or less won’t matter. I’ll fix that up with her all right. She and I have always been pals. Now for your reason for going there—witchcraft, my boy.”

“Witchcraft?”

“Folklore, local superstitions—all that sort of thing. Wychwood-under-Ashe has got rather a reputation that way. One of the last places where they had a Witches’ Sabbath—witches were still burnt there in the last century—all sorts of traditions. You’re writing a book, see? Correlating the customs of the Mayang Straits and old English folklore—points of resemblance, etc. You know the sort of stuff. Go round with a notebook and interview the oldest inhabitant about local superstitions and customs. They’re quite used

to that sort of thing down there, and if you're staying at Ashe Manor it vouches for you."

"What about Lord Whitfield?"

"He'll be all right. He's quite uneducated and completely credulous—actually believes things he reads in his own papers. Anyway Bridget will fix him. Bridget's all right. I'll answer for her."

Luke drew a deep breath.

"Jimmy, old scout, it looks as though the thing is going to be easy. You're a wonder. If you can really fix up with your cousin—"

"That will be absolutely OK. Leave it to me."

"I'm no end grateful to you."

Jimmy said:

"All I ask is, if you're hunting down a homicidal murderer, let me be in at the death!"

He added sharply:

"What is it?"

Luke said slowly:

"Just something I remembered my old lady saying to me. I'd said to her that it was a bit thick to do a lot of murders and get away with it, and she answered that I was wrong—that it was very easy to kill..." He stopped, and then said slowly, "I wonder if that's true, Jimmy? I wonder if it is—"

"What?"

"Easy to kill...."

Three

WITCH WITHOUT BROOMSTICK

I

The sun was shining when Luke came over the hill and down into the little country town of Wychwood-under-Ashe. He had bought a secondhand Standard Swallow, and he stopped for a moment on the brow of the hill and switched off the engine.

The summer day was warm and sunny. Below him was the village, singularly unspoilt by recent developments. It lay innocently and peacefully in the sunlight—mainly composed of a long straggling street that ran along under the overhanging brow of Ashe Ridge.

It seemed singularly remote, strangely untouched. Luke thought, “I’m probably mad. The whole thing’s fantastic.”

Had he really come here solemnly to hunt down a killer—simply on the strength of some garrulous ramblings on the part of an old lady, and a chance obituary notice?

He shook his head.

“Surely these things don’t happen,” he murmured. “Or—do they? Luke, my boy, it’s up to you to find out if you’re the world’s most credulous prize ass, or if your policeman’s nose has led you hot on the scent.”

He switched on the engine, threw in the gear and drove gently down the twisting road and so entered the main street.

Wychwood, as has been said, consists mainly of its one principal street. There were shops, small Georgian houses, prim and aristocratic, with whitened steps and polished knockers, there were picturesque cottages with flower gardens. There was an inn, the Bells and Motley, standing a little

back from the street. There was a village green and a duck pond, and presiding over them a dignified Georgian house which Luke thought at first must be his destination, Ashe Manor. But on coming nearer he saw that there was a large painted board announcing that it was the Museum and Library. Farther on there was an anachronism, a large white modern building, austere and irrelevant to the cheerful haphazardness of the rest of the place. It was, Luke gathered, a local Institute and Lads' Club.

It was at this point that he stopped and asked the way to his destination.

He was told that Ashe Manor was about half a mile farther on—he would see the gates on his right.

Luke continued his course. He found the gates easily—they were of new and elaborate wrought iron. He drove in, caught a gleam of red brick through the trees, and turned a corner of the drive to be stupefied by the appalling and incongruous castellated mass that greeted his eyes.

While he was contemplating the nightmare, the sun went in. He became suddenly conscious of the overlying menace of Ashe Ridge. There was a sudden sharp gust of wind, blowing back the leaves of the trees, and at that moment a girl came round the corner of the castellated mansion.

Her black hair was blown up off her head by the sudden gust and Luke was reminded of a picture he had once seen—Nevinson's "Witch." The long pale delicate face, the black hair flying up to the stars. He could see this girl on a broomstick flying up to the moon....

She came straight towards him.

"You must be Luke Fitzwilliam. I'm Bridget Conway."

He took the hand she held out. He could see her now as she was—not in a sudden moment of fantasy. Tall, slender, a long delicate face with slightly hollow cheekbones—ironic black brows—black eyes and hair. She was like a delicate etching, he thought—poignant and beautiful.

He had had an acknowledged picture at the back of his mind during his voyage home to England—a picture of an English girl flushed and sunburnt—stroking a horse’s neck, stooping to weed a herbaceous border, sitting holding out her hands to the blaze of a wood fire. It had been a warm gracious vision....

Now—he didn’t know if he liked Bridget Conway or not—but he knew that that secret picture wavered and broke up—became meaningless and foolish....

He said:

“How d’you do? I must apologize for wishing myself on you like this. Jimmy would have it that you wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh, we don’t. We’re delighted.” She smiled, a sudden curving smile that brought the corners of her long mouth halfway up her cheeks. “Jimmy and I always stand in together. And if you’re writing a book on folklore this is a splendid place. All sorts of legends and picturesque spots.”

“Splendid,” said Luke.

They went together towards the house. Luke stole another glance at it. He discerned now traces of a sober Queen Anne dwelling overlaid and smothered by the florid magnificence. He remembered that Jimmy had mentioned the house as having originally belonged to Bridget’s family. That, he thought grimly, was in its unadorned days. Stealing a glance at the line of her profile, at the long beautiful hands, he wondered.

She was about twenty-eight or -nine, he supposed. And she had brains. And she was one of those people about whom you knew absolutely nothing unless they chose that you should....

Inside, the house was comfortable and in good taste—the good taste of a first-class decorator. Bridget Conway led the way to a room with bookshelves and comfortable chairs where a tea table stood near the window with two people sitting by it.

She said:

“Gordon, this is Luke, a sort of cousin of a cousin of mine.”

Lord Whitfield was a small man with a semi-bald head. His face was round and ingenuous, with a pouting mouth and boiled gooseberry eyes. He was dressed in careless-looking country clothes. They were unkind to his figure, which ran mostly to stomach.

He greeted Luke with affability.

“Glad to see you—very glad. Just come back from the East, I hear? Interesting place. Writing a book, so Bridget tells me. They say too many books are written nowadays. I say no—always room for a good one.”

Bridget said, “My aunt, Mrs. Anstruther,” and Luke shook hands with a middle-aged woman with a rather foolish mouth.

Mrs. Anstruther, as Luke soon learned, was devoted body and soul to gardening. She never talked of anything else, and her mind was constantly occupied by considerations of whether some rare plant was likely to do well in the place she intended to put it.

After acknowledging the introduction, she said now:

“You know, Gordon, the ideal spot for a rockery would be just beyond the rose garden, and then you could have the most marvellous water garden where the stream comes through that dip.”

Lord Whitfield stretched himself back in his chair.

“You fix all that with Bridget,” he said easily. “Rock plants are niggly little things, I think—but that doesn’t matter.”

Bridget said:

“Rock plants aren’t sufficiently in the grand manner for you, Gordon.”

She poured out some tea for Luke and Lord Whitfield said placidly:

“That’s right. They’re not what I call good value for money. Little bits of flowers you can hardly see...I like a nice show in a conservatory, or some good beds of scarlet geraniums.”

Mrs. Anstruther, who possessed par excellence the gift of continuing with her own subject undisturbed by that of anyone else, said:

“I believe those new rock roses would do perfectly in this climate,” and proceeded to immerse herself in catalogues.

Throwing his squat little figure back in his chair, Lord Whitfield sipped his tea and studied Luke appraisingly.

“So you write books,” he murmured.

Feeling slightly nervous, Luke was about to enter on explanations when he perceived that Lord Whitfield was not really seeking for information.

“I’ve often thought,” said his lordship complacently, “that I’d like to write a book myself.”

“Yes?” said Luke.

“I could, mark you,” said Lord Whitfield. “And a very interesting book it would be. I’ve come across a lot of interesting people. Trouble is, I haven’t got the time. I’m a very busy man.”

“Of course. You must be.”

“You wouldn’t believe what I’ve got on my shoulders,” said Lord Whitfield. “I take a personal interest in each one of my publications. I consider that I’m responsible for moulding the public mind. Next week millions of people will be thinking and feeling just exactly what I’ve intended to make them feel and think. That’s a very solemn thought. That means responsibility. Well, I don’t mind responsibility. I’m not afraid of it. I can do with responsibility.”

Lord Whitfield swelled out his chest, attempted to draw in his stomach, and glared amiably at Luke.

Bridget Conway said lightly:

“You’re a great man, Gordon. Have some more tea.”

Lord Whitfield replied simply:

“I am a great man. No, I won’t have anymore tea.”

Then, descending from his own Olympian heights to the level of more ordinary mortals, he inquired kindly of his guest:

“Know anybody round this part of the world?”

Luke shook his head. Then, on an impulse, and feeling that the sooner he began to get down to his job the better, he added:

“At least, there’s a man here that I promised to look up—friend of friends of mine. Man called Humbleby. He’s a doctor.”

“Oh!” Lord Whitfield struggled upright in his chair. “Dr. Humbleby? Pity.”

“What’s a pity?”

“Died about a week ago,” said Lord Whitfield.

“Oh, dear,” said Luke. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t think you’d have cared for him,” said Lord Whitfield. “Opinionated, pestilential, muddleheaded old fool.”

“Which means,” put in Bridget, “that he disagreed with Gordon.”

“Question of our water supply,” said Lord Whitfield. “I may tell you, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that I’m a public-spirited man. I’ve got the welfare of this town at heart. I was born here. Yes, born in this very town—”

With chagrin Luke perceived that they had left the topic of Dr. Humbleby and had reverted to the topic of Lord Whitfield.

“I’m not ashamed of it and I don’t care who knows it,” went on that gentleman. “I had none of your natural advantages. My father kept a boot-shop—yes, a plain boot-shop. And I served in that shop when I was a young lad. I raised myself by my own efforts, Fitzwilliam—I determined to get out of the rut—and I got out of the rut! Perseverance, hard work and the help of God—that’s what did it! That’s what made me what I am today.”

Exhaustive details of Lord Whitfield’s career were produced for Luke’s benefit and the former wound up triumphantly:

“And here I am and the whole world’s welcome to know how I’ve got here! I’m not ashamed of my beginnings—no, sir—I’ve come back here where I was born. Do you know what stands where my father’s shop used to be? A fine building built and endowed by me—Institute, Boys’ Clubs, everything tip-top and up to date. Employed the best architect in the country! I must say he’s made a bare plain job of it—looks like a workhouse or a prison to me—but they say it’s all right, so I suppose it must be.”

“Cheer up,” said Bridget. “You had your own way over this house!”

Lord Whitfield chuckled appreciatively.

“Yes, they tried to put it over on me here! Carry out the original spirit of the building. No, I said, I’m going to live in the place, and I want something to show for my money! When one architect wouldn’t do what I wanted I sacked him and got another. The fellow I got in the end understood my ideas pretty well.”

“He pandered to your worst flights of imagination,” said Bridget.

“She’d have liked the place left as it was,” said Lord Whitfield. He patted her arm. “No use living in the past, my dear. Those old Georges didn’t know much. I didn’t want a plain redbrick house. I always had a fancy for a castle—and now I’ve got one!” He added, “I know my taste isn’t very classy, so I gave a good firm carte blanche to do the inside, and I must say they haven’t done too badly—though some of it is a bit drab.”

“Well,” said Luke, a little at a loss for words, “it’s a great thing to know what you want.”

“And I usually get it too,” said the other, chuckling.

“You nearly didn’t get your way about the water scheme,” Bridget reminded him.

“Oh, that!” said Lord Whitfield. “Humbleby was a fool. These elderly men are inclined to be pigheaded. They won’t listen to reason.”

“Dr. Humbleby was rather an outspoken man, wasn’t he?” Luke ventured. “He made a good many enemies that way, I should imagine.”

“N-no, I don’t know that I should say that,” demurred Lord Whitfield, rubbing his nose. “Eh, Bridget?”

“He was very popular with everyone, I always thought,” said Bridget. “I only saw him when he came about my ankle that time, but I thought he was a dear.”

“Yes, he was popular enough on the whole,” admitted Lord Whitfield. “Though I know one or two people who had it in for him. Pigheadedness again.”

“One or two of the people living here?”

Lord Whitfield nodded.

“Lots of little feuds and cliques in a place like this,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Luke. He hesitated, uncertain of his next step.

“What sort of people live here mostly?” he queried.

It was rather a weak question, but he got an instant response.

“Relicts, mostly,” said Bridget. “Clergymen’s daughters and sisters and wives. Doctors’ dittoes. About six women to every man.”

“But there are some men?” hazarded Luke.

“Oh, yes, there’s Mr. Abbot, the solicitor, and young Dr. Thomas, Dr. Humbleby’s partner, and Mr. Wake, the rector, and—who else is there, Gordon? Oh! Mr. Ellsworthy, who keeps the antique shop and who is too, too terribly sweet! And Major Horton and his bulldogs.”

“There’s somebody else I believe my friends mentioned as living down here,” said Luke. “They said she was a nice old pussy but talked a lot.”

Bridget laughed. “That applies to half the village!”

“What was the name now? I’ve got it. Pinkerton.”

Lord Whitfield said with a hoarse chuckle:

“Really, you’ve no luck! She’s dead too. Got run over the other day in London. Killed outright.”

“You seem to have a lot of deaths here,” said Luke lightly.

Lord Whitfield bridled immediately.

“Not at all. One of the healthiest places in England. Can’t count accidents. They may happen to anyone.”

But Bridget Conway said thoughtfully:

“As a matter of fact, Gordon, there have been a lot of deaths in the last year. They’re always having funerals.”

“Nonsense, my dear.”

Luke said:

“Was Dr. Humbleby’s death an accident too?”

Lord Whitfield shook his head.

“Oh, no,” he said. “Humbleby died of acute septicæmia. Just like a doctor. Scratched his finger with a rusty nail or something—paid no attention to it, and it turned septic. He was dead in three days.”

“Doctors are rather like that,” said Bridget. “And of course, they’re very liable to infection, I suppose, if they don’t take care. It was sad, though. His wife was brokenhearted.”

“No good rebelling against the will of providence,” said Lord Whitfield easily.

II

“But was it the will of providence?” Luke asked himself later as he changed into his dinner jacket. Septicæmia? Perhaps. A very sudden death, though.

And there echoed through his head Bridget Conway’s lightly spoken words:

“There have been a lot of deaths in the last year.”

Four

LUKE MAKES A BEGINNING

Luke had thought out his plan of campaign with some care, and prepared to put it into action without more ado when he came down to breakfast the following morning.

The gardening aunt was not in evidence, but Lord Whitfield was eating kidneys and drinking coffee, and Bridget Conway had finished her meal and was standing at the window, looking out.

After good mornings had been exchanged and Luke had sat down with a plentifully heaped plate of eggs and bacon, he began:

“I must get to work,” he said. “Difficult thing is to induce people to talk. You know what I mean—not people like you and—er—Bridget.” (He remembered just in time not to say Miss Conway.) “You’d tell me anything you knew—but the trouble is you wouldn’t know the things I want to know—that is the local superstitions. You’d hardly believe the amount of superstition that still lingers in out-of-the-way parts of the world. Why, there’s a village in Devonshire. The rector had to remove some old granite menhirs that stood by the church because the people persisted in marching round them in some old ritual every time there was a death. Extraordinary how old heathen rites persists.”

“Dare say you’re right,” said Lord Whitfield. “Education, that’s what people need. Did I tell you that I’d endowed a very fine library here? Used to be the old manor house—was going for a song—now it’s one of the finest libraries—”

Luke firmly quelled the tendency of the conversation to turn in the direction of Lord Whitfield’s doings.

“Splendid,” he said heartily. “Good work. You’ve evidently realized the background of old-world ignorance there is here. Of course, from my point

of view, that's just what I want. Old customs—old wives' tales—hints of the old rituals such as—”

Here followed almost verbatim a page of a work that Luke had read up for the occasion.

“Deaths are the most hopeful line,” he ended. “Burial rites and customs always survive longer than any others. Besides, for some reason or other, village people always like talking about deaths.”

“They enjoy funerals,” agreed Bridget from the window.

“I thought I'd make that my starting-point,” went on Luke. “If I can get a list of recent demises in the parish, track down the relatives and get into conversation, I've no doubt I shall soon get a hint of what I'm after. Whom had I better get the data from—the parson?”

“Mr. Wake would probably be very interested,” said Bridget. “He's quite an old dear and a bit of an antiquary. He could give you a lot of stuff, I expect.”

Luke had a momentary qualm during which he hoped that the clergyman might not be so efficient an antiquary as to expose his own pretensions.

Aloud he said heartily:

“Good. You've no idea, I suppose, of likely people who've died during the last year.”

Bridget murmured:

“Let me see. Carter, of course. He was the landlord of the Seven Stars, that nasty little pub down by the river.”

“A drunken ruffian,” said Lord Whitfield. “One of these socialistic, abusive brutes, a good riddance.”

“And Mrs. Rose, the laundress,” went on Bridget. “And little Tommy Pierce—he was a nasty little boy if you like. Oh, of course, and that girl Amy

what's-her-name.”

Her voice changed slightly as she uttered the last name.

“Amy?” said Luke.

“Amy Gibbs. She was housemaid here and then she went to Miss Waynflete. There was an inquest on her.”

“Why?”

“Fool of a girl mixed up some bottles in the dark,” said Lord Whitfield.

“She took what she thought was cough mixture and it was hat paint,” explained Bridget.

Luke raised his eyebrows.

“Somewhat of a tragedy.”

Bridget said:

“There was some idea of her having done it on purpose. Some row with a young man.”

She spoke slowly—almost reluctantly.

There was a pause. Luke felt instinctively the presence of some unspoken feeling weighing down the atmosphere.

He thought:

“Amy Gibbs? Yes, that was one of the names old Miss Pinkerton mentioned.”

She had also mentioned a small boy—Tommy someone—of whom she had evidently held a low opinion (this, it seemed, was shared by Bridget!) And yes—he was almost sure—the name Carter had been spoken too.

Rising, he said lightly:

“Talking like this makes me feel rather ghoulish—as though I dabbled only in graveyards. Marriage customs are interesting too—but rather more difficult to introduce into conversation unconcernedly.”

“I should imagine that was likely,” said Bridget with a faint twitch of the lips.

“Ill-wishing or overlooking, there’s another interesting subject,” went on Luke with a would-be show of enthusiasm. “You often get that in these old-world places. Know of any gossip of that kind here?”

Lord Whitfield slowly shook his head. Bridget Conway said:

“We shouldn’t be likely to hear of things like that—”

Luke took it up almost before she finished speaking.

“No doubt about it, I’ve got to move in lower social spheres to get what I want. I’ll be off to the vicarage first and see what I can get there. After that perhaps a visit to the—Seven Stars, did you say? And what about the small boy of unpleasant habits? Did he leave any sorrowing relatives?”

“Mrs. Pierce keeps a tobacco and paper shop in High Street.”

“That,” said Luke, “is nothing less than providential. Well, I’ll be on my way.”

With a swift graceful movement Bridget moved from the window.

“I think,” she said, “I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.”

He said it as heartily as possible, but he wondered if she had noticed that, just for a moment, he had been taken aback.

It would have been easier for him to handle an elderly antiquarian clergyman without an alert discerning intelligence by his side.

“Oh well,” he thought to himself. “It’s up to me to do my stuff convincingly.”

Bridget said:

“Will you just wait, Luke, while I change my shoes?”

Luke—the Christian name uttered so easily gave him a queer warm feeling. And yet what else could she have called him? Since she had agreed to Jimmy’s scheme of cousinship she could hardly call him Mr. Fitzwilliam. He thought suddenly and uneasily, “What does she think of it all? In God’s name what does she think?”

Queer that that had not worried him beforehand. Jimmy’s cousin had just been a convenient abstraction—a lay figure. He had hardly visualized her, just accepted his friend’s dictum that “Bridget would be all right.”

He had thought of her—if he had thought of her at all—as a little blonde secretary person—astute enough to have captured a rich man’s fancy.

Instead she had force, brains, a cool clear intelligence and he had no idea what she was thinking of him. He thought: She’s not an easy person to deceive.

“I’m ready now.”

She had joined him so silently that he had not heard her approach. She wore no hat, and there was no net on her hair. As they stepped out from the house the wind, sweeping round the corner of the castellated monstrosity, caught her long black hair and whipped it into a sudden frenzy round her face.

She said smiling:

“You need me to show you the way.”

“It’s very kind of you,” he answered punctiliously.

And wondered if he had imagined a sudden swiftly passing ironic smile.

Looking back at the battlements behind him, he said irritably:

“What an abomination! Couldn’t anyone stop him?”

Bridget answered: “An Englishman’s house is his castle—literally so in Gordon’s case! He adores it.”

Conscious that the remark was in bad taste, yet unable to control his tongue, he said:

“It’s your old home, isn’t it? Do you ‘adore’ to see it the way it is now?”

She looked at him then—a steady slightly amused look it was.

“I hate to destroy the dramatic picture you are building up,” she murmured. “But actually I left here when I was two and a half, so you see the old home motive doesn’t apply. I can’t even remember this place.”

“You’re right,” said Luke. “Forgive the lapse into film language.”

She laughed.

“Truth,” she said, “is seldom romantic.”

And there was a sudden bitter scorn in her voice that startled him. He flushed a deep red under his tan, then realized suddenly that the bitterness had not been aimed at him. It was her own scorn and her own bitterness. Luke was wisely silent. But he wondered a good deal about Bridget Conway....

Five minutes brought them to the church and to the vicarage that adjoined it. They found the vicar in his study.

Alfred Wake was a small stooping old man with very mild blue eyes, and an absentminded but courteous air. He seemed pleased but a little surprised by the visit.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam is staying with us at Ashe Manor,” said Bridget, “and he wants to consult you about a book he is writing.”

Mr. Wake turned his mild inquiring eyes towards the younger man, and Luke plunged into explanations.

He was nervous—doubly so. Nervous in the first place because this man had no doubt a far deeper knowledge of folklore and superstitious rites and customs than one could acquire by merely hurriedly cramming from a haphazard collection of books. Secondly he was nervous because Bridget Conway was standing by listening.

Luke was relieved to find that Mr. Wake’s special interest was Roman remains. He confessed gently that he knew very little of medieval folklore and witchcraft. He mentioned the existence of certain items in the history of Wychwood, offered to take Luke to the particular ledge of hill where it was said the Witches’ Sabbaths had been held, but expressed himself regretful that he could add no special information of his own.

Inwardly much relieved, Luke expressed himself as somewhat disappointed, and then plunged into inquiries as to deathbed superstitions.

Mr. Wake shook his head gently.

“I am afraid I should be the last person to know about those. My parishioners would be careful to keep anything unorthodox from my ears.”

“That’s so, of course.”

“But I’ve no doubt, all the same, there is a lot of superstition still rife. These village communities are very backward.”

Luke plunged boldly.

“I’ve been asking Miss Conway for a list of all the recent deaths she could remember. I thought I might get at something that way. I suppose you could supply me with a list, so that I could pick out the likelies.”

“Yes—yes—that could be managed. Giles, our sexton, a good fellow but sadly deaf, could help you there. Let me see now. There have been a good many—a good many—a treacherous spring and a hard winter behind it—and then a good many accidents—quite a cycle of bad luck there seems to have been.”

“Sometimes,” said Luke, “a cycle of bad luck is attributed to the presence of a particular person.”

“Yes, yes. The old story of Jonah. But I do not think there have been any strangers here—nobody, that is to say, outstanding in any way, and I’ve certainly never heard any rumour of such feeling—but then again, as I said, perhaps I shouldn’t. Now let me see—quite recently we have had Dr. Humbleby and poor Lavinia Pinkerton—a fine man, Dr. Humbleby—”

Bridget put in:

“Mr. Fitzwilliam knows friends of his.”

“Do you indeed? Very sad. His loss will be much felt. A man with many friends.”

“But surely a man with some enemies too,” said Luke. “I’m only going by what I’ve heard my friends say,” he went on hastily.

Mr. Wake sighed.

“A man who spoke his mind—and a man who wasn’t always very tactful, shall we say—” he shook his head. “It does get people’s backs up. But he was greatly beloved among the poorer classes.”

Luke said carelessly:

“You know I always feel that one of the most unpalatable facts to be faced in life, is the fact that every death that occurs means a gain to someone—I don’t mean only financially.”

The vicar nodded thoughtfully.

“I see your meaning, yes. We read in an obituary notice that a man is regretted by everybody, but that can only be true very rarely I fear. In Dr. Humbleby’s case, there is no denying that his partner, Dr. Thomas, will find his position very much improved by Dr. Humbleby’s death.”

“How is that?”

“Thomas, I believe, is a very capable fellow—certainly Humbleby always said so, but he didn’t get on here very well. He was, I think, overshadowed by Humbleby who was a man of very definite magnetism. Thomas appeared rather colourless in contrast. He didn’t impress his patients at all. I think he worried over it, too, and that made him worse—more nervous and tongue-tied. As a matter of fact I’ve noticed an astonishing difference already. More aplomb—more personality. I think he feels a new confidence in himself. He and Humbleby didn’t always agree, I believe. Thomas was all for newer methods of treatment and Humbleby preferred to stick to the old ways. There were clashes between them more than once—over that as well as over a matter nearer home—but there, I mustn’t gossip—”

Bridget said softly and clearly:

“But I think Mr. Fitzwilliam would like you to gossip!”

Luke shot her a quick disturbed look.

Mr. Wake shook his head doubtfully, and then went on, smiling a little in deprecation.

“I am afraid one learns to take too much interest in one’s neighbours’ affairs. Rose Humbleby is a very pretty girl. One doesn’t wonder that Geoffrey Thomas lost his heart. And of course Humbleby’s point of view was quite understandable too—the girl is young and buried away here she hadn’t much chance of seeing other men.”

“He objected?” said Luke.

“Very definitely. Said they were far too young. And of course young people resent being told that! There was a very definite coldness between the two

men. But I must say that I'm sure Dr. Thomas was deeply distressed at his partner's unexpected death."

"Septicæmia, Lord Whitfield told me."

"Yes—just a little scratch that got infected. Doctors run grave risks in the course of their profession, Mr. Fitzwilliam."

"They do indeed," said Luke.

Mr. Wake gave a sudden start.

"But I have wandered a long way from what we were talking about," he said. "A gossiping old man, I am afraid. We were speaking of the survival of pagan death customs and of recent deaths. There was Lavinia Pinkerton—one of our more kindly Church helpers. Then there was that poor girl, Amy Gibbs—you might discover something in your line there, Mr. Fitzwilliam—there was just a suspicion, you know, that it might have been suicide—and there are certain rather eerie rites in connection with that type of death. There is an aunt—not, I fear, a very estimable woman, and not very much attached to her niece—but a great talker."

"Valuable," said Luke.

"Then there was Tommy Pierce—he was in the choir at one time—a beautiful treble—quite angelic—but not a very angelic boy otherwise, I am afraid. We had to get rid of him in the end, he made the other boys behave so badly. Poor lad, I'm afraid he was not very much liked anywhere. He was dismissed from the post office where we got him a job as telegraph boy. He was in Mr. Abbot's office for a while, but there again he was dismissed very soon—interfered with some confidential papers, I believe. Then, of course, he was at Ashe Manor for a time, wasn't he, Miss Conway, as garden boy, and Lord Whitfield had to discharge him for gross impertinence. I was so sorry for his mother—a very decent hardworking soul. Miss Waynflete very kindly got him some odd window cleaning work. Lord Whitfield objected at first, then suddenly he gave in—actually it was sad that he did so."

“Why?”

“Because the boy was killed that way. He was cleaning the top windows of the library (the old Hall, you know) and tried some silly fooling—dancing on the window ledge or something of that sort—lost his balance, or else became dizzy, and fell. A nasty business! He never recovered consciousness and died a few hours after they got him to hospital.”

“Did anyone see him fall?” asked Luke with interest.

“No. He was on the garden side—not the front of the house. They estimate he lay there for about half an hour before anyone found him.”

“Who did find him?”

“Miss Pinkerton. You remember, the lady I mentioned just now who was unfortunately killed in a street accident the other day. Poor soul, she was terribly upset. A nasty experience! She had obtained permission to take a cutting of some plants and found the boy there lying where he had fallen.”

“It must have been a very unpleasant shock,” said Luke thoughtfully.

“A greater shock,” he thought to himself, “than you know.”

“A young life cut short is a very sad thing,” said the old man, shaking his head. “Tommy’s faults may have been mainly due to high spirits.”

“He was a disgusting bully,” said Bridget. “You know he was, Mr. Wake. Always tormenting cats and stray puppies and pinching other little boys.”

“I know—I know.” Mr. Wake shook his head sadly. “But you know, my dear Miss Conway, sometimes cruelty is not so much innate as due to the fact that imagination is slow in ripening. That is why if you conceive of a grown man with the mentality of a child you realize that the cunning and brutality of a lunatic may be quite unrealized by the man himself. A lack of growth somewhere, that, I am convinced, is at the root of much of the cruelty and stupid brutality in the world today. One must put away childish things—”

He shook his head and spread out his hands.

Bridget said in a voice suddenly hoarse:

“Yes, you’re right. I know what you mean. A man who is a child is the most frightening thing in the world....”

Luke looked at her with some curiosity. He was convinced that she was thinking of some particular person, and although Lord Whitfield was in some respects exceedingly childish, he did not believe she was thinking of him. Lord Whitfield was slightly ridiculous, but he was certainly not frightening.

Luke Fitzwilliam wondered very much whom the person Bridget was thinking of might be.

Five

VISIT TO MISS WAYNFLETE

Mr. Wake murmured a few more names to himself.

“Let me see now—poor Mrs. Rose, and old Bell and that child of the Elkins and Harry Carter—they’re not all my people, you understand. Mrs. Rose and Carter were dissenters. And that cold spell in March took off poor old Ben Stanbury at last—ninety-two he was.”

“Amy Gibbs died in April,” said Bridget.

“Yes, poor girl—a sad mistake to happen.”

Luke looked up to find Bridget watching him. She lowered her eyes quickly. He thought, with some annoyance:

“There’s something here that I haven’t got on to. Something to do with this girl Amy Gibbs.”

When they had taken leave of the vicar and were outside again, he said:

“Just who and what was Amy Gibbs?”

Bridget took a minute or two to answer. Then she said—and Luke noticed the slight constraint in her voice:

“Amy was one of the most inefficient housemaids I have ever known.”

“That’s why she got the sack?”

“No. She stayed out after hours playing about with some young man. Gordon has very moral and old-fashioned views. Sin in his view does not take place until after eleven o’clock, but then it is rampant. So he gave the girl notice and she was impertinent about it!”

Luke asked: "A good-looking girl?"

"Very good-looking."

"She's the one who swallowed hat paint in mistake for cough mixture?"

"Yes."

"Rather a stupid thing to do?" Luke hazarded.

"Very stupid."

"Was she stupid?"

"No, she was quite a sharp girl."

Luke stole a look at her. He was puzzled. Her replies were given in an even tone, without emphasis or even much interest. But behind what she said, there was, he felt convinced, something not put into words.

At that moment Bridget stopped to speak to a tall man who swept off his hat and greeted her with breezy heartiness.

Bridget, after a word or two, introduced Luke.

"This is my cousin, Mr. Fitzwilliam, who is staying at the Manor. He's down here to write a book. This is Mr. Abbot."

Luke looked at Mr. Abbot with some interest. This was the solicitor who had employed Tommy Pierce.

Luke had a somewhat illogical prejudice against lawyers in general—based on the grounds that so many politicians were recruited from their ranks. Also their cautious habit of not committing themselves annoyed him. Mr. Abbot, however, was not at all the conventional type of lawyer, he was neither thin, spare, nor tight-lipped. He was a big florid man, dressed in tweeds with a hearty manner and a jovial effusiveness. There were little creases at the corners of his eyes, and the eyes themselves were more shrewd than one appreciated in a first casual glance.

“Writing a book, eh? Novel?”

“Folklore,” said Bridget.

“You’ve come to the right place for that,” said the lawyer. “Wonderfully interesting part of the world here.”

“So I’ve been led to understand,” said Luke. “I dare say you could help me a bit. You must come across curious old deeds—or know of some interesting surviving customs.”

“Well, I don’t know about that—maybe—maybe—”

“Much belief in ghosts round here?” asked Luke.

“As to that I couldn’t say—I really couldn’t say.”

“No haunted house?”

“No—I don’t know of anything of that kind.”

“There’s the child superstition, of course,” said Luke. “Death of a boy child—a violent death that is—the boy always walks. Not a girl child—interesting that.”

“Very,” said Mr. Abbot. “I never heard that before.”

Since Luke had just invented it, that was hardly surprising.

“Seems there’s a boy here—Tommy something—was in your office at one time. I’ve reason to believe they think that he’s walking.”

Mr. Abbot’s red face turned slightly purple.

“Tommy Pierce? A good for nothing, prying, meddlesome jackanapes.”

“Spirits always seem to be mischievous. Good law-abiding citizens seldom trouble this world after they’ve left it.”

“Who’s seen him—what’s this story?”

“These things are difficult to pin down,” said Luke. “People won’t come out into the open with a statement. It’s just in the air, so to speak.”

“Yes—yes, I suppose so.”

Luke changed the subject adroitly.

“The real person to get hold of is the local doctor. They hear a lot in the poorer cases they attend. All sorts of superstitions and charms—probably love philtres and all the rest of it.”

“You must get on to Thomas. Good fellow, Thomas, thoroughly up-to-date man. Not like poor old Humbleby.”

“Bit of a reactionary, wasn’t he?”

“Absolutely pigheaded—a diehard of the worst description.”

“You had a real row over the water scheme, didn’t you?” asked Bridget.

Again a rich ruddy glow suffused Abbot’s face.

“Humbleby stood dead in the way of progress,” he said sharply. “He held out against the scheme! He was pretty rude, too, in what he said. Didn’t mince his words. Some of the things he said to me were positively actionable.”

Bridget murmured: “But lawyers never go to law, do they? They know better.”

Abbot laughed immoderately. His anger subsided as quickly as it had arisen.

“Pretty good, Miss Bridget! And you’re not far wrong. We who are in it know too much about law, ha, ha. Well, I must be getting along. Give me a call if you think I can help you in any way, Mr.—er—”

“Fitzwilliam,” said Luke. “Thanks, I will.”

As they walked on Bridget said:

“Your methods, I note, are to make statements and see what they provoke.”

“My methods,” said Luke, “are not strictly truthful, if that is what you mean?”

“I’ve noticed that.”

A little uneasy, he hesitated what to say next. But before he could speak, she said:

“If you want to hear more about Amy Gibbs, I can take you to someone who could help you.”

“Who is that?”

“A Miss Waynflete. Amy went there after she left the Manor. She was there when she died.”

“Oh, I see—” he was a little taken aback. “Well—thank you very much.”

“She lives just here.”

They were crossing the village green. Inclining her head in the direction of the big Georgian house that Luke had noticed the day before, Bridget said: “That’s Wych Hall. It’s a library now.”

Adjoining the Hall was a little house that looked rather like a doll’s house in proportion. Its steps were dazzlingly white, its knocker shone and its window curtains showed white and prim.

Bridget pushed open the gate and advanced to the steps.

As she did so the front door opened and an elderly woman came out.

She was, Luke thought, completely the country spinster. Her thin form was neatly dressed in a tweed coat and skirt and she wore a grey silk blouse with a cairn-gorm brooch. Her hat, a conscientious felt, sat squarely upon her well-shaped head. Her face was pleasant and her eyes, through their pince-nez, decidedly intelligent. She reminded Luke of those nimble black goats that one sees in Greece. Her eyes held just that quality of mild inquiring surprise.

“Good morning, Miss Waynflete,” said Bridget. “This is Mr. Fitzwilliam.” Luke bowed. “He’s writing a book—about deaths and village customs and general gruesomeness.”

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Waynflete. “How very interesting.”

And she beamed encouragingly upon him.

He was reminded of Miss Pinkerton.

“I thought,” said Bridget—and again he noted that curious flat tone in her voice—“that you might tell him something about Amy.”

“Oh,” said Miss Waynflete. “About Amy? Yes. About Amy Gibbs.”

He was conscious of a new factor in her expression. She seemed to be thoughtfully summing him up.

Then, as though coming to a decision, she drew back into the hall.

“Do come in,” she said. “I can go out later. No, no,” in answer to a protest from Luke. “I had really nothing urgent to do. Just a little unimportant domestic shopping.”

The small drawing room was exquisitely neat and smelled faintly of burnt lavender. There were some Dresden china shepherds and shepherdesses on the mantelpiece, simpering sweetly. There were framed water-colours, two samplers, and three needlework pictures on the wall. There were some photographs of what were obviously nephews and nieces and some good

furniture—a Chippendale desk, some little satinwood tables—and a hideous and rather uncomfortable Victorian sofa.

Miss Waynflete offered her guests chairs and then said apologetically:

“I’m afraid I don’t smoke myself, so I have no cigarettes, but do please smoke if you like.”

Luke refused but Bridget promptly lighted a cigarette.

Sitting bolt upright in a chair with carved arms, Miss Waynflete studied her guest for a moment or two and then dropping her eyes as though satisfied, she said:

“You want to know about that poor girl Amy? The whole thing was very sad and caused me a great deal of distress. Such a tragic mistake.”

“Wasn’t there some question of—suicide?” asked Luke.

Miss Waynflete shook her head.

“No, no, that I cannot believe for a moment. Amy was not at all that type.”

“What type was she?” asked Luke bluntly. “I’d like to hear your account of her.”

Miss Waynflete said:

“Well, of course, she wasn’t at all a good servant. But nowadays, really, one is thankful to get anybody. She was very slipshod over her work and always wanting to go out—well, of course she was young and girls are like that nowadays. They don’t seem to realize that their time is their employer’s.”

Luke looked properly sympathetic and Miss Waynflete proceeded to develop her theme.

“She wasn’t the sort of girl I care for—rather a bold type though of course I wouldn’t like to say much now that she’s dead. One feels unchristian—

though really I don't think that that is a logical reason for suppressing the truth."

Luke nodded. He realized that Miss Waynflete differed from Miss Pinkerton in having a more logical mind and better processes of thought.

"She was fond of admiration," went on Miss Waynflete, "and was inclined to think a lot of herself. Mr. Ellsworthy—he keeps the new antique shop but he is actually a gentleman—he dabbles a little in water-colours and he had done one or two sketches of the girl's head—and I think, you know, that rather gave her ideas. She was inclined to quarrel with the young man she was engaged to—Jim Harvey. He's a mechanic at the garage and very fond of her."

Miss Waynflete paused and then went on.

"I shall never forget that dreadful night. Amy had been out of sorts—a nasty cough and one thing and another (those silly cheap silk stockings they will wear and shoes with paper soles practically—of course they catch chills) and she'd been to the doctor that afternoon."

Luke asked quickly:

"Dr. Humbleby or Dr. Thomas?"

"Dr. Thomas. And he gave her the bottle of cough mixture that she brought back with her. Something quite harmless, a stock mixture, I believe. She went to bed early and it must have been about one in the morning when the noise began—an awful kind of choking scream. I got up and went to her door but it was locked on the inside. I called to her but couldn't get any answer. Cook was with me and we were both terribly upset. And then we went to the front door and luckily there was Reed (our constable) just passing on his beat, and we called to him. He went round the back of the house and managed to climb up on the outhouse roof, and as her window was open he got in quite easily that way and unlocked the door. Poor girl, it was terrible. They couldn't do anything for her, and she died in Hospital a few hours later."

“And it was—what—hat paint?”

“Yes. Oxalic acid poisoning is what they called it. The bottle was about the same size as the cough linctus one. The latter was on her washstand and the hat paint was by her bed. She must have picked up the wrong bottle and put it by her in the dark ready to take if she felt badly. That was the theory at the inquest.”

Miss Waynflete stopped. Her intelligent goat’s eyes looked at him, and he was aware that some particular significance lay behind them. He had the feeling that she was leaving some part of the story untold—and a stronger feeling that, for some reason, she wanted him to be aware of the fact.

There was a silence—a long and rather difficult silence. Luke felt like an actor who does not know his cue. He said rather weakly:

“And you don’t think it was suicide?”

Miss Waynflete said promptly:

“Certainly not. If the girl had decided to make away with herself, she would have bought something probably. This was an old bottle of stuff that she must have had for years. And anyway, as I’ve told you, she wasn’t that kind of girl.”

“So you think—what?” said Luke bluntly.

Miss Waynflete said:

“I think it was very unfortunate.”

She closed her lips and looked at him earnestly.

Just when Luke was feeling that he must try desperately to say something anticipated, a diversion occurred. There was a scratching at the door and a plaintive mew.

Miss Waynflete sprang up and went to open the door, whereupon a magnificent orange Persian walked in. He paused, looked disapprovingly at

the visitor, and sprang upon the arm of Miss Waynflete's chair.

Miss Waynflete addressed him in a cooing voice.

"Why Wonky Pooh—where's my Wonky Pooh been all the morning?"

The name struck a chord of memory. Where had he heard something about a Persian cat called Wonky Pooh? He said:

"That's a very handsome cat. Have you had him long?"

Miss Waynflete shook her head.

"Oh, no, he belonged to an old friend of mine, Miss Pinkerton. She was run over by one of these horrid motorcars and of course I couldn't have let Wonky Pooh go to strangers. Lavinia would have been most upset. She simply worshipped him—and he is very beautiful isn't he?"

Luke admired the cat gravely.

Miss Waynflete said: "Be careful of his ears. They've been rather painful lately."

Luke stroked the animal warily.

Bridget rose to her feet.

She said, "We must be going."

Miss Waynflete shook hands with Luke.

"Perhaps," she said, "I shall see you again before long."

Luke said cheerfully: "I hope so, I'm sure."

He thought she looked puzzled and a little disappointed. Her gaze shifted to Bridget—a rapid look with a hint of interrogation in it. Luke felt that there was some understanding between the two women from which he was

excluded. It annoyed him, but he promised himself to get to the bottom of it before long.

Miss Waynflete came out with them. Luke stood a minute on the top of the steps looking with approval on the untouched primness of the village green and the duck pond.

“Marvellously unspoilt, this place,” he said.

Miss Waynflete’s face lit up.

“Yes, indeed,” she said eagerly. “Really it is still just as I remember it as a child. We lived in the Hall, you know. But when it came to my brother he did not care to live in it—indeed could not afford to do so, and it was put up for sale. A builder had made an offer and was, I believe, going to ‘develop the land,’ I think that was the phrase. Fortunately, Lord Whitfield stepped in and acquired the property and saved it. He turned the house into a library and museum—really it is practically untouched. I act as librarian twice a week there—unpaid, of course—and I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to be in the old place and know that it will not be vandalised. And really it is a perfect setting—you must visit our little museum one day, Mr. Fitzwilliam. There are some quite interesting local exhibits.”

“I certainly shall make a point of doing so, Miss Waynflete.”

“Lord Whitfield has been a great benefactor to Wychwood,” said Miss Waynflete. “It grieves me that there are people who are sadly ungrateful.”

Her lips pressed themselves together. Luke discreetly asked no questions. He said good-bye again.

When they were outside the gate Bridget said:

“Do you want to pursue further researches or shall we go home by way of the river? It’s a pleasant walk.”

Luke answered promptly. He had no mind for further investigations with Bridget Conway standing by listening. He said:

“Go round by the river, by all means.”

They walked along the High Street. One of the last houses had a sign decorated in old gold lettering with the word Antiques on it. Luke paused and peered through one of the windows into the cool depths.

“Rather a nice slipware dish there,” he remarked. “Do for an aunt of mine. Wonder how much they want for it?”

“Shall we go in and see?”

“Do you mind? I like pottering about antique shops. Sometimes one picks up a good bargain.”

“I doubt if you will here,” said Bridget dryly. “Ellsworthy knows the value of his stuff pretty accurately, I should say.”

The door was open. In the hall were chairs and settees and dressers with china and pewter on them. Two rooms full of goods opened at either side.

Luke went into the room on the left and picked up the slipware dish. At the same moment a dim figure came forward from the back of the room where he had been sitting at a Queen Anne walnut desk.

“Ah, dear Miss Conway, what a pleasure to see you.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ellsworthy.”

Mr. Ellsworthy was a very exquisite young man dressed in a colour scheme of russet brown. He had a long pale face with a womanish mouth, long black artistic hair and a mincing walk.

Luke was introduced and Mr. Ellsworthy immediately transferred his attention to him.

“Genuine old English slipware. Delicious, isn’t it? I love my bits and pieces, you know, hate to sell them. It’s always been my dream to live in the country and have a little shop. Marvellous place, Wychwood—it has atmosphere, if you know what I mean.”

“The artistic temperament,” murmured Bridget.

Ellsworthy turned on her with a flash of long white hands.

“Not that terrible phrase, Miss Conway. No—no, I implore you. Don’t tell me I’m all arty and crafty—I couldn’t bear it. Really, really, you know, I don’t stock handwoven tweeds and beaten pewter. I’m a tradesman, that’s all, just a tradesman.”

“But you’re really an artist, aren’t you?” said Luke. “I mean, you do water-colours, don’t you?”

“Now who told you that?” cried Mr. Ellsworthy, clasping his hands together. “You know this place is really too marvellous—one simply can’t keep a secret! That’s what I like about it—it’s so different from that inhuman you-mind-your-own-business-and-I-will-mind-mine of a city! Gossip and malice and scandal—all so delicious if one takes them in the right spirit!”

Luke contented himself with answering Mr. Ellsworthy’s question and paying no attention to the latter part of his remarks.

“Miss Waynflete told us that you had made several sketches of a girl—Amy Gibbs.”

“Oh, Amy,” said Mr. Ellsworthy. He took a step backwards and set a beer mug rocking. He steadied it carefully. He said: “Did I? Oh, yes, I suppose I did.”

His poise seemed somewhat shaken.

“She was a pretty girl,” said Bridget.

Mr. Ellsworthy had recovered his aplomb.

“Oh, do you think so?” he asked. “Very commonplace, I always thought. If you’re interested in slipware,” he went on to Luke, “I’ve got a couple of slipware birds—delicious things.”

Luke displayed a faint interest in the birds and then asked the price of the dish.

Ellsworthy named a figure.

“Thanks,” said Luke, “but I don’t think I’ll deprive you of it after all.”

“I’m always relieved, you know,” said Ellsworthy, “when I don’t make a sale. Foolish of me, isn’t it? Look here, I’ll let you have it for a guinea less. You care for the stuff. I can see that—it makes all the difference. And after all, this is a shop!”

“No, thanks,” said Luke.

Mr. Ellsworthy accompanied them out to the door, waving his hands—very unpleasant hands, Luke thought they were—the flesh seemed not so much white as faintly greenish.

“Nasty bit of goods, Mr. Ellsworthy,” he remarked when he and Bridget were out of earshot.

“A nasty mind and nasty habits I should say,” said Bridget.

“Why does he really come to a place like this?”

“I believe he dabbles in black magic. Not quite black Masses but that sort of thing. The reputation of this place helps.”

Luke said rather awkwardly: “Good lord—I suppose he’s the kind of chap I really need. I ought to have talked to him on the subject.”

“Do you think so?” said Bridget. “He knows a lot about it.”

Luke said rather uneasily:

“I’ll look him up some other day.”

Bridget did not answer. They were out of the town now. She turned aside to follow a footpath and presently they came to the river.

There they passed a small man with a stiff moustache and protuberant eyes. He had three bulldogs with him to whom he was shouting hoarsely in turn. "Nero, come here, sir. Nelly, leave it. Drop it, I tell you. Augustus— AUGUSTUS, I say—"

He broke off to raise his hat to Bridget, stared at Luke with what was evidently a devouring curiosity and passed on resuming his hoarse expostulations.

"Major Horton and his bulldogs?" quoted Luke.

"Quite right."

"Haven't we seen practically everyone of note in Wychwood this morning?"

"Practically."

"I feel rather obtrusive," said Luke. "I suppose a stranger in an English village is bound to stick out a mile," he added ruefully, remembering Jimmy Lorrimer's remarks.

"Major Horton never disguises his curiosity very well," said Bridget. "He did stare, rather."

"He's the sort of man you could tell was a Major anywhere," said Luke rather viciously.

Bridget said abruptly: "Shall we sit on the bank a bit? We've got lots of time."

They sat on a fallen tree that made a convenient seat. Bridget went on:

"Yes, Major Horton is very military—has an orderly room manner. You'd hardly believe he was the most henpecked man in existence a year ago!"

"What, that fellow?"

“Yes. He had the most disagreeable woman for a wife that I’ve ever known. She had the money too, and never scrupled to underline the fact in public.”

“Poor brute—Horton, I mean.”

“He behaved very nicely to her—always the officer and gentleman. Personally, I wonder he didn’t take a hatchet to her.”

“She wasn’t popular, I gather.”

“Everybody disliked her. She snubbed Gordon and patronized me and made herself generally unpleasant wherever she went.”

“But I gather a merciful providence removed her?”

“Yes, about a year ago. Acute gastritis. She gave her husband, Dr. Thomas and two nurses absolute Hell—but she died all right. The bulldogs brightened up at once.”

“Intelligent brutes!”

There was a silence. Bridget was idly picking at the long grass. Luke frowned at the opposite bank unseeingly. Once again the dreamlike quality of his mission obsessed him. How much was fact—how much imagination? Wasn’t it bad for one to go about studying every fresh person you met as a potential murderer? Something degrading about that point of view.

“Damn it all,” thought Luke, “I’ve been a policeman too long!”

He was brought out of his abstraction with a shock. Bridget’s cold clear voice was speaking.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam,” she said, “just exactly why have you come down here?”

Six

HAT PAINT

Luke had been just in the act of applying a match to a cigarette. The unexpectedness of her remark momentarily paralysed his hand. He remained quite motionless for a second or two, the match burned down and scorched his fingers.

“Damn,” said Luke as he dropped the match and shook his hand vigorously. “I beg your pardon. You gave me rather a nasty jolt.” He smiled ruefully.

“Did I?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “Oh, well, I suppose anyone of real intelligence was bound to see through me! That story of my writing a book on folklore didn’t take you in for a moment, I suppose?”

“Not after I’d once seen you.”

“You believed it up to then?”

“Yes.”

“All the same it wasn’t really a good story,” said Luke critically. “I mean, any man might want to write a book, but the bit about coming down here and passing myself off as a cousin—I suppose that made you smell a rat?”

Bridget shook her head.

“No. I had an explanation for that—I thought I had, I mean. I presumed you were pretty hard up—a lot of my and Jimmy’s friends are that—and I thought he suggested the cousin stunt so that—well, so that it would save your pride.”

“But when I arrived,” said Luke, “my appearance immediately suggested such opulence that that explanation was out of the question?”

Her mouth curved in its slow smile.

“Oh, no,” she said. “It wasn’t that. It was simply that you were the wrong kind of person.”

“Not sufficient brains to write a book? Don’t spare my feelings. I’d rather know.”

“You might write a book—but not that kind of book—old superstitions—delving into the past—not that sort of thing! You’re not the kind of man to whom the past means much—perhaps not even the future—only just the present.”

“H’m—I see.” He made a wry face. “Damn it all, you’ve made me nervous ever since I got here! You look so confoundedly intelligent.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bridget drily. “What did you expect?”

“Well, I really hadn’t thought about it.”

But she went on calmly:

“A fluffy little person—with just enough brains to realize her opportunities and marry her boss?”

Luke made a confused noise. She turned a cool amused glance on him.

“I quite understand. It’s all right. I’m not annoyed.”

Luke chose effrontery.

“Well, perhaps, it was something faintly approaching that. But I didn’t think much about it.”

She said slowly:

“No, you wouldn’t. You don’t cross your fences till you get to them.”

But Luke was despondent.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt I did my stuff pretty rottenly! Has Lord Whitfield seen through me too?”

“Oh, no. If you said you’d come down here to study the habits of water beetles and write a monograph about them, it would have been OK with Gordon. He’s got a beautiful believing mind.”

“All the same I wasn’t a bit convincing! I got rattled somehow.”

“I cramped your style,” said Bridget. “I saw that. It rather amused me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, it would! Women with any brains are usually cold-bloodedly cruel.”

Bridget murmured:

“One has to take one’s pleasures as one can in this life!” She paused a minute, then said: “Why are you down here, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

They had returned full circle to the original question. Luke had been aware that it must be so. In the last few seconds he had been trying to make up his mind. He looked up now and met her eyes—shrewd inquiring eyes that met his with a calm, steady gaze. There was a gravity in them which he had not quite expected to find there.

“It would be better, I think,” he said meditatively, “not to tell you anymore lies.”

“Much better.”

“But the truth’s awkward...Look here, have you yourself formed any opinion—I mean has anything occurred to you about my being here?”

She nodded slowly and thoughtfully.

“What was your idea? Will you tell me? I fancy it may help somehow.”

Bridget said quietly:

“I had an idea that you came down here in connection with the death of that girl, Amy Gibbs.”

“That’s it, then! That’s what I saw—what I felt—whenever her name cropped up! I knew there was something. So you thought I came down about that?”

“Didn’t you?”

“In a way—yes.”

He was silent—frowning. The girl beside him sat equally silent, not moving. She said nothing to disturb his train of thought.

He made up his mind.

“I’ve come down here on a wild goose chase—on a fantastical and probably quite absurd and melodramatic supposition. Amy Gibbs is part of that whole business. I’m interested to find out exactly how she died.”

“Yes, I thought so.”

“But dash it all—why did you think so? What is there about her death that—well—aroused your interest?”

Bridget said:

“I’ve thought—all along—that there was something wrong about it. That’s why I took you to see Miss Waynflete.”

“Why?”

“Because she thinks so too.”

“Oh.” Luke thought back rapidly. He understood now the underlying suggestions of that intelligent spinster’s manner. “She thinks as you do—that there’s something—odd about it?”

Bridget nodded.

“Why exactly?”

“Hat paint, to begin with.”

“What do you mean, hat paint?”

“Well, about twenty years ago, people did paint hats—one season you had a pink straw, next season a bottle of hat paint and it became dark blue—then perhaps another bottle and a black hat! But nowadays—hats are cheap—tawdry stuff to be thrown away when out of fashion.”

“Even girls of the class of Amy Gibbs?”

“I’d be more likely to paint a hat than she would! Thrift’s gone out. And there’s another thing. It was red hat paint.”

“Well?”

“And Amy Gibbs had red hair—carrots!”

“You mean it doesn’t go together?”

Bridget nodded.

“You wouldn’t wear a scarlet hat with carroty hair. It’s the sort of thing a man wouldn’t realize, but—”

Luke interrupted her with heavy significance.

“No—a man wouldn’t realize that. It fits in—it all fits in.”

Bridget said:

“Jimmy has got some odd friends at Scotland Yard. You’re not—”

Luke said quickly:

“I’m not an official detective—and I’m not a well-known private investigator with rooms in Baker Street, etc. I’m exactly what Jimmy told you I was—a retired policeman from the East. I’m horning in on this business because of an odd thing that happened in the train to London.”

He gave a brief synopsis of his conversation with Miss Pinkerton and the subsequent events which had brought about his presence in Wychwood.

“So you see,” he ended. “It’s fantastic! I’m looking for a certain man—a secret killer—a man here in Wychwood—probably well-known and respected. If Miss Pinkerton’s right and you’re right and Miss What’s-’er-name is right—that man killed Amy Gibbs.”

Bridget said: “I see.”

“It could have been done from outside, I suppose?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Bridget slowly. “Reed, the constable, climbed up to her window by means of an outhouse. The window was open. It was a bit of a scramble, but a reasonably active man would find no real difficulty.”

“And having done that, he did what?”

“Substituted a bottle of hat paint for the cough linctus.”

“Hoping she’d do exactly what she did do—wake up, drink it off, and that everyone would say she’d made a mistake or committed suicide?”

“Yes.”

“There was no suspicion of what they call in books, ‘foul play’ at the inquest?”

“No.”

“Men again, I suppose—the hat paint point wasn’t raised?”

“No.”

“But it occurred to you?”

“Yes.”

“And to Miss Waynflete? Have you discussed it together?”

Bridget smiled faintly:

“Oh, no—not in the sense you mean. I mean we haven’t said anything right out. I don’t really know how far the old pussy has gone in her own mind. I’d say she’d been just worried to start with—and gradually getting more so. She’s quite intelligent, you know, went to Girton or wanted to, and was advanced when she was young. She’s not got quite the woolly mind of most of the people down here.”

“Miss Pinkerton had rather a woolly mind I should imagine,” said Luke.
“That’s why I never dreamed there was anything in her story to begin with.”

“She was pretty shrewd, I always thought,” said Bridget. “Most of these rambling old dears are as sharp as nails in some ways. You said she mentioned other names?”

Luke nodded.

“Yes. A small boy—that was Tommy Pierce—I remembered the name as soon as I heard it. And I’m pretty sure that the man Carter came in too.”

“Carter, Tommy Pierce, Amy Gibbs, Dr. Humbleby,” said Bridget thoughtfully. “As you say, it’s almost too fantastic to be true! Who on earth would want to kill all those people? They were all so different!”

Luke said:

“Any idea as to why anyone should want to do away with Amy Gibbs?”

Bridget shook her head.

“I can’t imagine.”

“What about the man Carter? How did he die, by the way?”

“Fell into the river and was drowned. He was on his way home, it was a misty night and he was quite drunk. There’s a footbridge with a rail on only one side. It was taken for granted that he missed his footing.”

“But someone could quite easily have given him a shove?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And somebody else could quite easily have given nasty little Tommy a push when he was window cleaning?”

“Again yes.”

“So it boils down to the fact that it’s really quite easy to remove three human beings without anyone suspecting.”

“Miss Pinkerton suspected,” Bridget pointed out.

“So she did, bless her. She wasn’t troubled with ideas of being too melodramatic, or of imagining things.”

“She often told me the world was a very wicked place.”

“And you smiled tolerantly, I suppose?”

“In a superior manner!”

“Anybody who can believe six impossible things before breakfast wins hands down at this game.”

Bridget nodded.

Luke said:

“I suppose it’s no good my asking you if you’ve a hunch of any kind? There’s no particular individual in Wychwood who gives you a creepy feeling down the spine, or who has strange pale eyes—or a queer maniacal giggle.”

“Everybody I’ve met in Wychwood appears to me to be eminently sane, respectable, and completely ordinary.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” said Luke.

Bridget said:

“You think this man is definitely mad?”

“Oh, I should say so. A lunatic all right, but a cunning one. The last person you’d ever suggest—probably a pillar of society like a Bank Manager.”

“Mr. Jones? I certainly can’t imagine him committing wholesale murders.”

“Then he’s probably the man we want.”

“It may be anyone,” said Bridget. “The butcher, the baker, the grocer, a farm labourer, a road mender, or the man who delivers the milk.”

“It may be—yes—but I think the field is a little more restricted than that.”

“Why?”

“My Miss Pinkerton spoke of the look in his eyes when he was measuring up his next victim. From the way she spoke I got the impression—it’s only an impression, mark you—that the man she was speaking of was at least her social equal. Of course, I may be wrong.”

“You’re probably quite right! Those nuances of conversation can’t be put down in black and white, but they’re the sort of things one doesn’t really make mistakes about.”

“You know,” said Luke, “it’s a great relief to have you knowing all about it.”

“It will probably cramp your style less, I agree. And I can probably help you.”

“Your help will be invaluable. You really mean to see it through?”

“Of course.”

Luke said with a sudden slight embarrassment:

“What about Lord Whitfield? Do you think—?”

“Naturally we don’t tell Gordon anything about it!” said Bridget.

“You mean he wouldn’t believe it?”

“Oh, he’d believe it! Gordon could believe anything! He’d probably be simply thrilled and insist on having half a dozen of his bright young men down to beat up the neighbourhood! He’d simply adore it!”

“That does rather rule it out,” agreed Luke.

“Yes, we can’t allow him to have his simple pleasures, I’m afraid.”

Luke looked at her. He seemed about to say something then changed his mind. He looked instead at his watch.

“Yes,” said Bridget, “we ought to be getting home.”

She got up. There was a sudden constraint between them as though Luke’s unspoken words hovered uncomfortably in the air.

They walked home in silence.

Seven

POSSIBILITIES

Luke sat in his bedroom. At lunch time he had sustained an interrogation by Mrs. Anstruther as to what flowers he had had in his garden in the Mayang Straits. He had then been told what flowers would have done well there. He had also listened to further “Talks to Young Men on the Subject of Myself” by Lord Whitfield. Now he was mercifully alone.

He took a sheet of paper and wrote down a series of names. It ran as follows:

Dr. Thomas.

Mr. Abbot.

Major Horton.

Mr. Ellsworthy.

Mr. Wake.

Mr. Jones.

Amy’s young man.

The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, etc.

He then took another sheet of paper and headed it VICTIMS. Under this heading, he wrote:

Amy Gibbs: Poisoned.

Tommy Pierce: Pushed out of window.

Harry Carter: Shoved off footbridge (drunk? drugged?).

Dr. Humbleby: Blood Poisoning.

Miss Pinkerton: Run down by car.

He added:

Mrs. Rose?

Old Ben?

And after a pause:

Mrs. Horton?

He considered his lists, smoked awhile, then took up his pencil once more.

Dr. Thomas: Possible case against him.

Definite motive in the case of Dr. Humbleby. Manner of latter's death suitable—namely, scientific poisoning by germs. Amy Gibbs visited him on afternoon of the day she died. (Anything between them? Blackmail?)

Tommy Pierce? No connection known. (Did Tommy know of connection between him and Amy Gibbs?)

Harry Carter? No connection known.

Was Dr. Thomas absent from Wychwood on the day Miss Pinkerton went to London?

Luke sighed and started a fresh heading:

Mr. Abbot: Possible case against him.

(Feel a lawyer is definitely a suspicious person. Possibly prejudice.) His personality, florid, genial, etc., would be definitely suspicious in a book—always suspect bluff genial men. Objection: this is not a book, but real life.

Motive for murder of Dr. Humbleby. Definite antagonism existed between them. H. defied Abbot. Sufficient motive for a deranged brain. Antagonism could have been easily noted by Miss Pinkerton.

Tommy Pierce? Latter snooped among Abbot's papers. Did he find out something he shouldn't have known?

Harry Carter? No definite connection.

Amy Gibbs? No connection known. Hat paint quite suitable to Abbot's mentality—an old-fashioned mind. Was Abbot away from the village the day Miss Pinkerton was killed?

Major Horton: Possible case against him.

No connection known with Amy Gibbs, Tommy Pierce or Carter.

What about Mrs. Horton? Death sounds as though it might be arsenical poisoning. If so other murders might be result of that—blackmail? NB—Thomas was doctor in attendance. (Suspicious for Thomas again.)

Mr. Ellsworthy: Possible case against him.

Nasty bit of goods—dabbles in black magic. Might be temperament of a bloodlust killer. Connection with Amy Gibbs. Any connection with Tommy Pierce? Carter? Nothing known. Humbleby? Might have tumbled to Ellsworthy's mental condition.

Miss Pinkerton? Was Ellsworthy away from Wychwood when Miss Pinkerton was killed?

Mr. Wake: Possible case against him.

Very unlikely. Possible religious mania? A mission to kill?

Saintly old clergymen likely starters in books, but (as before) this is real life.

Note. Carter, Tommy, Amy all definitely unpleasant characters. Better removed by divine decree?

Mr. Jones.

Data—none.

Amy's young man.

Probably every reason to kill Amy—but seems unlikely on general grounds.

The etceteras?

Don't fancy them.

He read through what he had written.

Then he shook his head.

He murmured softly:

“—which is absurd! How nicely Euclid put things.”

He tore up the lists and burnt them.

He said to himself:

“This job isn't going to be exactly easy.”

Eight

DR. THOMAS

Dr. Thomas leant back in his chair, and passed a long delicate hand over his thick fair hair. He was a young man whose appearance was deceptive. Though he was over thirty, a casual glance would have put him down in the early twenties if not in his teens. His shock of rather unruly fair hair, his slightly startled expression and his pink and white complexion gave him an irresistibly schoolboyish appearance. Immature as he might look, though, the diagnosis he had just pronounced on Luke's rheumatic knee agreed almost precisely with that delivered by an eminent Harley Street specialist only a week earlier.

"Thanks," said Luke. "Well, I'm relieved you think that electrical treatment will do the trick. I don't want to turn a cripple at my age."

Dr. Thomas smiled boyishly.

"Oh, I don't think there's any danger of that, Mr. Fitzwilliam."

"Well, you've relieved my mind," said Luke. "I was thinking of going to some specialist chap—but I'm sure there's no need now."

Dr. Thomas smiled again.

"Go if it makes your mind easier. After all, it's always a good thing to have an expert's opinion."

"No, no, I've got full confidence in you."

"Frankly, there is no complexity about the matter. If you take my advice, I am quite sure you will have no further trouble."

"You've relieved my mind no end, doctor. Fancied I might be getting arthritis and would soon be all tied up in knots and unable to move."

Dr. Thomas shook his head with a slightly indulgent smile.

Luke said quickly:

“Men get the wind up pretty badly in these ways. I expect you find that? I often think a doctor must feel himself a ‘medicine man’—a kind of magician to most of his patients.”

“The element of faith enters in very largely.”

“I know. ‘The doctor says so’ is a remark always uttered with something like reverence.”

Dr. Thomas raised his shoulders.

“If one’s patients only knew!” he murmured humorously.

Then he said:

“You’re writing a book on magic, aren’t you, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

“Now how did you know that?” exclaimed Luke, perhaps with somewhat overdone surprise.

Dr. Thomas looked amused.

“Oh, my dear sir, news gets about very rapidly in a place like this. We have so little to talk about.”

“It probably gets exaggerated too. You’ll be hearing I’m raising the local spirits and emulating the Witch of Endor.”

“Rather odd you should say that.”

“Why?”

“Well, the rumour has been going round that you had raised the ghost of Tommy Pierce.”

“Pierce? Pierce? Is that the small boy who fell out of a window?”

“Yes.”

“Now I wonder how—of course—I made some remark to the solicitor—what’s his name, Abbot.”

“Yes, the story originated with Abbot.”

“Don’t say I’ve converted a hard-boiled solicitor to a belief in ghosts?”

“You believe in ghosts yourself, then?”

“Your tone suggests that you do not, doctor. No, I wouldn’t say I actually ‘believe in ghosts’—to put it crudely. But I have known curious phenomena in the case of sudden or violent death. But I’m more interested in the various superstitions pertaining to violent deaths—that a murdered man, for instance, can’t rest in his grave. And the interesting belief that the blood of a murdered man flows if his murderer touches him. I wonder how that arose.”

“Very curious,” said Thomas. “But I don’t suppose many people remember that nowadays.”

“More than you would think. Of course, I don’t suppose you have many murders down here—so it’s hard to judge.”

Luke had smiled as he spoke, his eyes resting with seeming carelessness on the other’s face. But Dr. Thomas seemed quite unperturbed and smiled in return.

“No, I don’t think we’ve had a murder for—oh, very many years—certainly not in my time.”

“No, this is a peaceful spot. Not conducive to foul play. Unless somebody pushed little Tommy What’s-his-name out of the window.”

Luke laughed. Again Dr. Thomas’s smile came in answer—a natural smile full of boyish amusement.

“A lot of people would have been willing to wring that child’s neck,” he said. “But I don’t think they actually got to the point of throwing him out of windows.”

“He seems to have been a thoroughly nasty child—the removal of him might have been conceived as a public duty.”

“It’s a pity one can’t apply that theory fairly often.”

“I’ve always thought a few wholesale murders would be beneficial to the community,” said Luke. “A club bore, for instance, should be finished off with a poisoned liqueur brandy. Then there are the women who gush at you and tear all their dearest friends to pieces with their tongues. Backbiting spinsters. Inveterate diehards who oppose progress. If they were painlessly removed, what a difference it would make to social life!”

Dr. Thomas’s smile lengthened to a grin.

“In fact, you advocate crime on a grand scale?”

“Judicious elimination,” said Luke. “Don’t you agree that it would be beneficial?”

“Oh, undoubtedly.”

“Ah, but you’re not being serious,” said Luke. “Now I am. I haven’t the respect for human life that the normal Englishman has. Any man who is a stumbling block on the way of progress ought to be eliminated—that’s how I see it!”

Running his hand through his short fair hair, Dr. Thomas said:

“Yes, but who is to be the judge of a man’s fitness or unfitness?”

“That’s the difficulty, of course,” Luke admitted.

“The Catholics would consider a Communist agitator unfit to live—the Communist agitator would sentence the priest to death as a purveyor of

superstition, the doctor would eliminate the unhealthy man, the pacifist would condemn the soldier, and so on.”

“You’d have to have a scientific man as judge,” said Luke. “Someone with an unbiased but highly specialized mind—a doctor, for instance. Come to that, I think you’d be a pretty good judge yourself, doctor.”

“Of unfitness to live?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Thomas shook his head.

“My job is to make the unfit fit. Most of the time it’s an uphill job, I’ll admit.”

“Now just for the sake of argument,” said Luke. “Take a man like the late Harry Carter—”

Dr. Thomas said sharply:

“Carter? You mean the landlord of the Seven Stars?”

“Yes, that’s the man. I never knew him myself, but my cousin, Miss Conway, was talking about him. He seems to have been a really thoroughgoing scoundrel.”

“Well,” said the other, “he drank, of course. Ill-treated his wife, bullied his daughter. He was quarrelsome and abusive and had had a row with most people in the place.”

“In fact, the world is a better place without him?”

“One might be inclined to say so, I agree.”

“In fact, if somebody had given him a push and sent him into the river instead of his kindly electing to fall in of his own accord, that person would have been acting in the public interest?”

Dr. Thomas said drily:

“These methods that you advocate—did you put them into practice in the—Mayang Straits, I think you said?”

Luke laughed.

“Oh, no, with me it’s theory—not practice.”

“No, I do not think you are the stuff of which murderers are made.”

Luke asked:

“Why not? I’ve been frank enough in my views.”

“Exactly. Too frank.”

“You mean that if I were really the kind of man who takes the law into his own hands I shouldn’t go about airing my views?”

“That was my meaning.”

“But it might be a kind of gospel with me. I might be a fanatic on the subject!”

“Even so, your sense of self-protection would be active.”

“In fact, when looking for a murderer, look out for a nice gentle wouldn’t-hurt-a-fly type of man.”

“Slightly exaggerated perhaps,” said Dr. Thomas, “but not far from the truth.”

Luke said abruptly:

“Tell me—it interests me—have you ever come across a man whom you believed might be a murderer?”

Dr. Thomas said sharply:

“Really—what an extraordinary question!”

“Is it? After all, a doctor must come across so many queer characters. He would be better able to detect—for instance—the signs of homicidal mania—in an early stage—before it’s noticeable.”

Thomas said rather irritably:

“You have the general layman’s idea of a homicidal maniac—a man who runs amok with a knife, a man more or less foaming at the mouth. Let me tell you a homicidal lunatic may be the most difficult thing on this earth to spot. To all seeming he may be exactly like everyone else—a man, perhaps, who is easily frightened—who may tell you, perhaps, that he has enemies. No more than that. A quiet, inoffensive fellow.”

“Is that really so?”

“Of course it’s so. A homicidal lunatic often kills (as he thinks) in self-defence. But of course a lot of killers are ordinary sane fellows like you and me.”

“Doctor, you alarm me! Fancy if you should discover later that I have five or six nice quiet little killings to my credit.”

Dr. Thomas smiled.

“I don’t think it’s very likely, Mr. Fitzwilliam.”

“Don’t you? I’ll return the compliment. I don’t believe you’ve got five or six murders to your credit either.”

Dr. Thomas said cheerfully:

“You’re not counting my professional failures.”

Both men laughed.

Luke got up and said good-bye.

“I’m afraid I’ve taken up a lot of your time,” he said apologetically.

“Oh, I’m not busy. Wychwood is a pretty healthy place. It’s a pleasure to have a talk with someone from the outside world.”

“I was wondering—” said Luke and stopped.

“Yes?”

“Miss Conway told me when she sent me to you what a very—well—what a first-class man you were. I wondered if you didn’t feel rather buried down here? Not much opportunity for talent.”

“Oh, general practice is a good beginning. It’s valuable experience.”

“But you won’t be content to stay in a rut all your life? Your late partner, Dr. Humbleby, was an unambitious fellow, so I’ve heard—quite content with his practice here. He’d been here for a good many years, I believe?”

“Practically a lifetime.”

“He was sound but old-fashioned, so I hear.”

Dr. Thomas said:

“At times he was difficult...Very suspicious of modern innovations, but a good example of the old school of physicians.”

“Left a very pretty daughter, I’m told,” said Luke in jocular fashion.

He had the pleasure of seeing Dr. Thomas’s pale pink countenance go a deep scarlet.

“Oh—er—yes,” he said.

Luke gazed at him kindly. He was pleased at the prospect of erasing Dr. Thomas from his list of suspected persons.

The latter recovered his normal hue and said abruptly:

“Talking about crime just now, I can lend you rather a good book as you are interested in the subject! Translation from the German. Kreuzhammer on Inferiority and Crime.”

“Thank you,” said Luke.

Dr. Thomas ran his finger along a shelf and drew out the book in question.

“Here you are. Some of the theories are rather startling—and of course they are only theories, but they are interesting. The early life of Menzheld, for instance, the Frankfurt butcher, as they called him, and the chapter on Anna Helm, the little nursemaid killer, are really extremely interesting.”

“She killed about a dozen of her charges before the authorities tumbled to it, I believe,” said Luke.

Dr. Thomas nodded.

“Yes. She had a most sympathetic personality—devoted to children—and apparently quite genuinely heartbroken at each death. The psychology is amazing.”

“Amazing how these people get away with it,” said Luke.

He was on the doorstep now. Dr. Thomas had come out with him.

“Not amazing really,” said Dr. Thomas. “It’s quite easy, you know.”

“What is?”

“To get away with it.” He was smiling again—a charming, boyish smile. “If you’re careful. One just has to be careful—that’s all! But a clever man is extremely careful not to make a slip. That’s all there is to it.”

He smiled and went into the house.

Luke stood staring up the steps.

There had been something condescending in the doctor's smile. Throughout their conversation Luke had been conscious of himself as a man of full maturity and of Dr. Thomas as a youthful and ingenuous young man.

Just for a moment he felt the rôles reversed. The doctor's smile had been that of a grown-up amused by the cleverness of a child.

Nine

MRS. PIERCE TALKS

In the little shop in the High Street Luke had bought a tin of cigarettes and today's copy of Good Cheer, the enterprising little weekly which provided Lord Whitfield with a good portion of his substantial income. Turning to the football competition, Luke, with a groan, gave forth the information that he had just failed to win a hundred and twenty pounds. Mrs. Pierce was roused at once to sympathy and explained similar disappointments on the part of her husband. Friendly relations thus established, Luke found no difficulty in prolonging the conversation.

"A great interest in football Mr. Pierce takes," said Mr. Pierce's spouse. "Turns to it first of all in the news, he does. And as I say, many a disappointment he's had, but there, everybody can't win, that's what I say, and what I say is you can't go against luck."

Luke concurred heartily in these sentiments, and proceeded to advance by an easy transition to a further profound statement that troubles never come singly.

"Ah, no, indeed, sir, that I do know." Mrs. Pierce sighed. "And when a woman has a husband and eight children—six living and buried two, that is—well, she knows what trouble is, as you may say."

"I suppose she does—oh, undoubtedly," said Luke. "You've—er—buried two, you say?"

"One no longer than a month ago," said Mrs. Pierce with a kind of melancholy enjoyment.

"Dear me, very sad."

"It wasn't only sad, sir. It was a shock—that's what it was, a shock! I came all over queer, I did, when they broke it to me. Never having expected

anything of that kind to happen to Tommy, as you might say, for when a boy's a trouble to you it doesn't come natural to think of him being took. Now my Emma Jane, a sweet little mite she was. 'You'll never rear her.' That's what they said. 'She's too good to live.' And it was true, sir. The Lord knows His own."

Luke acknowledged the sentiment and strove to return from the subject of the saintly Emma Jane to that of the less saintly Tommy.

"Your boy died quite recently?" he said. "An accident?"

"An accident it was, sir. Cleaning the windows of the old Hall, which is now the library, and he must have lost his balance and fell—from the top windows, that was."

Mrs. Pierce expatiated at some length on all the details of the accident.

"Wasn't there some story," said Luke carelessly, "of his having been seen dancing on the windowsill?"

Mrs. Pierce said that boys would be boys—but no doubt it did give the major a turn, him being a fussy gentleman.

"Major Horton?"

"Yes, sir, the gentleman with the bulldogs. After the accident happened he chanced to mention having seen our Tommy acting very rash-like—and of course it does show that if something sudden had startled him he would have fallen easy enough. High spirits, sir, that was Tommy's trouble. A sore trial he's been to me in many ways," she finished, "but there it was, just high spirits—nothing but high spirits—such as any lad might have. There wasn't no real harm in him, as you might say."

"No, no—I'm sure there wasn't, but sometimes, you know, Mrs. Pierce, people—sober middle-aged people—find it hard to remember they've ever been young themselves."

Mrs. Pierce sighed.

“Very true those words are, sir. I can’t help but hoping that some gentlemen I could name but won’t will have taken it to heart the way they were hard upon the lad—just on account of his high spirits.”

“Played a few tricks upon his employers, did he?” asked Luke with an indulgent smile.

Mrs. Pierce responded immediately.

“It was just his fun, sir, that was all. Tommy was always good at imitations. Make us hold our sides with laughing the way he’d mince about pretending to be that Mr. Ellsworthy at the curio shop—or old Mr. Hobbs, the churchwarden—and he was imitating his lordship up at the manor and the two under-gardeners laughing, when up came his lordship quiet-like and gave Tommy the sack on the spot—and naturally that was only to be expected, and quite right, and his lordship didn’t bear malice afterwards, and helped Tommy to get another job.”

“But other people weren’t so magnanimous, eh?” said Luke.

“That they were not, sir. Naming no names. And you’d never think it with Mr. Abbot, so pleasant in his manner and always a kind word or a joke.”

“Tommy got into trouble with him?”

Mrs. Pierce said:

“It’s not, I’m sure, that the boy meant any harm...And after all, if papers are private and not meant to be looked at, they shouldn’t be laid out on a table—that’s what I say.”

“Oh, quite,” said Luke. “Private papers in a lawyer’s office ought to be kept in the safe.”

“That’s right, sir. That’s what I think, and Mr. Pierce he agrees with me. It’s not even as though Tommy had read much of it.”

“What was it—a will?” asked Luke.

He judged (probably rightly) that a question as to what the document in question had been might make Mrs. Pierce halt. But this direct question brought an instant response.

“Oh, no, sir, nothing of that kind. Nothing really important. Just a private letter it was—from a lady—and Tommy didn’t even see who the lady was. All such a fuss about nothing—that’s what I say.”

“Mr. Abbot must be the sort of man who takes offence very easily,” said Luke.

“Well, it does seem so, doesn’t it, sir? Although, as I say, he’s always such a pleasant gentleman to speak to—always a joke or a cheery word. But it’s true that I have heard he was a difficult man to get up against, and him and Dr. Humbleby was daggers drawn, as the saying is, just before the poor gentleman died. And not a pleasant thought for Mr. Abbot afterwards. For once there’s a death one doesn’t like to think there’s been harsh words spoken and no chance of taking them back.”

Luke shook his head solemnly and murmured:

“Very true—very true.”

He went on:

“A bit of a coincidence—that. Hard words with Dr. Humbleby and Dr. Humbleby died—harsh treatment of your Tommy—and the boy dies! I should think that a double experience like that would tend to make Mr. Abbot careful of his tongue in future.”

“Harry Carter, too, down at the Seven Stars,” said Mrs. Pierce. “Very sharp words passed between them only a week before Carter went and drowned himself—but one can’t blame Mr. Abbot for that. The abuse was all on Carter’s side—went up to Mr. Abbot’s house, he did, being in liquor at the time, and shouting out the foulest language at the top of his voice. Poor Mrs. Carter, she had a deal to put up with, and it must be owned Carter’s death was a merciful release as far as she was concerned.”

“He left a daughter, too, didn’t he?”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Pierce. “I’m never one to gossip.”

This was unexpected but promising. Luke pricked up his ears and waited.

“I don’t say there was anything in it but talk. Lucy Carter’s a fine-looking young woman in her way, and if it hadn’t been for the difference in station I dare say no notice would have been taken. But talk there has been and you can’t deny it—especially after Carter went right up to his house, shouting and swearing.”

Luke gathered the implications of this somewhat confused speech.

“Mr. Abbot looks as though he’d appreciate a good-looking girl,” he said.

“It’s often the way with gentlemen,” said Mrs. Pierce. “They don’t mean anything by it—just a word or two in passing, but the gentry’s the gentry and it gets noticed in consequence. It’s only to be expected in a quiet place like this.”

“It’s a very charming place,” said Luke. “So unspoilt.”

“That’s what artists always say, but I think we’re a bit behind the times myself. Why, there’s been no building here to speak of. Over at Ashevale, for instance, they’ve got a lovely lot of new houses, some of them with green roofs and stained glass in the windows.”

Luke shuddered slightly.

“You’ve got a grand new institute here,” he said.

“They say it’s a very fine building,” said Mrs. Pierce, without great enthusiasm. “Of course, his lordship’s done a lot for the place. He means well, we all know that.”

“But you don’t think his efforts are quite successful?” said Luke, amused.

“Well, of course, sir, he isn’t really gentry—not like Miss Waynflete, for instance, and Miss Conway. Why, Lord Whitfield’s father kept a boot-shop only a few doors from here. My mother remembers Gordon Ragg serving in the shop—remembers it as well as anything. Of course he’s his lordship now and he’s a rich man—but it’s never the same, is it, sir?”

“Evidently not,” said Luke.

“You’ll excuse me mentioning it, sir,” said Mrs. Pierce. “And of course I know you’re staying at the manor and writing a book. But you’re a cousin of Miss Bridget’s, I know, and that’s quite a different thing. Very pleased we shall be to have her back as mistress of Ashe Manor.”

“Rather,” said Luke. “I’m sure you will.”

He paid for his cigarettes and paper with sudden abruptness.

He thought to himself:

“The personal element. One must keep that out of it! Hell, I’m here to track down a criminal. What does it matter who that black-haired witch marries or doesn’t marry? She doesn’t come into this....”

He walked slowly along the street. With an effort he thrust Bridget into the back of his mind.

“Now then,” he said to himself. “Abbot. The case against Abbot. I’ve linked him up with three of the victims. He had a row with Humbleby, a row with Carter and a row with Tommy Pierce—and all three died. What about the girl Amy Gibbs? What was the private letter that infernal boy saw? Did he know who it was from? Or didn’t he? He mayn’t have said so to his mother. But suppose he did. Suppose Abbot thought it necessary to shut his mouth. It could be! That’s all one can say about it. It could be! Not good enough!”

Luke quickened his pace, looking about him with sudden exasperation.

“This damned village—it’s getting on my nerves. So smiling and peaceful—so innocent—and all the time this crazy streak of murder running through it. Or am I the crazy one? Was Lavinia Pinkerton crazy? After all, the whole thing could be coincidence—yes, Humbleby’s death and all....”

He glanced back down the length of the High Street—and he was assailed by a strong feeling of unreality.

He said to himself:

“These things don’t happen....”

Then he lifted his eyes to the long frowning line of Ashe Ridge—and at once the unreality passed. Ashe Ridge was real—it knew strange things—witchcraft and cruelty and forgotten bloodlusts and evil rites....

He started. Two figures were walking along the side of the ridge. He recognized them easily—Bridget and Ellsworthy. The young man was gesticulating with those curious, unpleasant hands of his. His head was bent to Bridget’s. They looked like two figures out of a dream. One felt that their feet made no sound as they sprang catlike from turf to turf. He saw her black hair stream out behind her blown by the wind. Again that queer magic of hers held him.

“Bewitched, that’s what I am, bewitched,” he said to himself.

He stood quite still—a queer numbed feeling spreading over him.

He thought to himself ruefully:

“Who’s to break the spell? There’s no one.”

Ten

ROSE HUMBLEBY

A soft sound behind him made him turn sharply. A girl was standing there, a remarkably pretty girl with brown hair curling round her ears and rather timid-looking dark-blue eyes. She flushed a little with embarrassment before she spoke.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes. I—”

“I’m Rose Humbleby. Bridget told me that—that you knew some people who knew my father.”

Luke had the grace to flush slightly under his tan.

“It was a long time ago,” he said rather lamely. “They—er—knew him as a young man—before he married.”

“Oh, I see.”

Rose Humbleby looked a little crestfallen. But she went on:

“You’re writing a book, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’m making notes for one, that is. About local superstitions. All that sort of thing.”

“I see. It sounds frightfully interesting.”

“It will probably be as dull as ditch water,” Luke assured her.

“Oh, no, I’m sure it won’t.”

Luke smiled at her.

He thought:

“Our Dr. Thomas is in luck!”

“There are people,” he said, “who can make the most exciting subject unbearably boring. I’m afraid I’m one of them.”

“Oh, but why should you be?”

“I don’t know. But the conviction is growing upon me.”

Rose Humbleby said:

“You might be one of the people who make dull subjects sound frightfully exciting!”

“Now that is a nice thought,” said Luke. “Thank you for it.”

Rose Humbleby smiled back. Then she said:

“Do you believe in—in superstitions and all that?”

“That’s a difficult question. It doesn’t follow, you know. One can be interested in things one doesn’t believe in.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” the girl sounded doubtful.

“Are you superstitious?”

“N-no—I don’t think so. But I do think things come in—in waves.”

“Waves?”

“Waves of bad luck and good luck. I mean—I feel as though lately all Wychwood was under a spell of—of misfortune. Father dying—and Miss Pinkerton being run over, and that little boy who fell out of the window. I—I began to feel as though I hated this place—as though I must get away!”

Her breath came rather faster. Luke looked at her thoughtfully.

“So you feel like that?”

“Oh! I know it’s silly. I suppose really it was poor daddy dying so unexpectedly—it was so horribly sudden.” She shivered. “And then Miss Pinkerton. She said—”

The girl paused.

“What did she say? She was a delightful old lady, I thought—very like a rather special aunt of mine.”

“Oh, did you know her?” Rose’s face lit up. “I was very fond of her and she was devoted to daddy. But I’ve sometimes wondered if she was what the Scotch call ‘fey.’”

“Why?”

“Because—it’s so odd—she seemed quite afraid that something was going to happen to daddy. She almost warned me. Especially about accidents. And then that day—just before she went up to town—she was so odd in her manner—absolutely in a dither. I really do think, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that she was one of those people who have second sight. I think she knew that something was going to happen to her. And she must have known that something was going to happen to daddy too. It’s—it’s rather frightening, that sort of thing!”

She moved a step nearer to him.

“There are times when one can foresee the future,” said Luke. “It isn’t always supernatural, though.”

“No, I suppose it’s quite natural really—just a faculty that most people lack. All the same it—worries me—”

“You mustn’t worry,” said Luke gently. “Remember, it’s all behind you now. It’s no good going back over the past. It’s the future one has to live for.”

“I know. But there’s more, you see...” Rose hesitated. “There was something—to do with your cousin.”

“My cousin? Bridget?”

“Yes. Miss Pinkerton was worried about her in some way. She was always asking me questions...I think she was afraid for her—too.”

Luke turned sharply, scanning the hillside. He had an unreasoning sense of fear. Bridget—alone with the man whose hands had that unhealthy hue of greenish decomposing flesh! Fancy—all fancy! Ellsworthy was only a harmless dilettante who played at shopkeeping.

As though reading his thoughts, Rose said:

“Do you like Mr. Ellsworthy?”

“Emphatically no.”

“Geoffrey—Dr. Thomas, you know, doesn’t like him either.”

“And you?”

“Oh, no—I think he’s dreadful.” She drew a little nearer. “There’s a lot of talk about him. I was told that he had some queer ceremony in the Witches’ Meadow—a lot of his friends came down from London—frightfully queer-looking people. And Tommy Pierce was a kind of acolyte.”

“Tommy Pierce?” said Luke sharply.

“Yes. He had a surplice and a red cassock.”

“When was this?”

“Oh, some time ago—I think it was in March.”

“Tommy Pierce seems to have been mixed-up in everything that ever took place in this village.”

Rose said:

“He was frightfully inquisitive. He always had to know what was going on.”

“He probably knew a bit too much in the end,” said Luke grimly.

Rose accepted the words at their face value.

“He was rather an odious little boy. He liked cutting up wasps and he teased dogs.”

“The kind of boy whose decease is hardly to be regretted!”

“No, I suppose not. It was terrible for his mother, though.”

“I gather she has five blessings left to console her. She’s got a good tongue, that woman.”

“She does talk a lot, doesn’t she?”

“After buying a few cigarettes from her, I feel I know the full history of everyone in the place!”

Rose said ruefully:

“That’s the worst of a place like this. Everybody knows everything about everybody else.”

“Oh, no,” said Luke.

She looked at him inquiringly.

Luke said with significance:

“No one human being knows the full truth about another human being.”

Rose’s face grew grave. She gave a slight involuntary shiver.

“No,” she said slowly. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Not even one’s nearest and dearest,” said Luke.

“Not even—” she stopped. “Oh, I suppose you’re right—but I wish you wouldn’t say frightening things like that, Mr. Fitzwilliam.”

“Does it frighten you?”

Slowly she nodded her head.

Then she turned abruptly.

“I must be going now. If—if you have nothing better to do—I mean if you could—do come and see us. Mother would—would like to see you because of your knowing friends of daddy’s long ago.”

She walked slowly away down the road. Her head was bent a little as though some weight of care or perplexity bowed it down.

Luke stood looking after her. A sudden wave of solicitude swept over him. He felt a longing to shield and protect this girl.

From what? Asking himself the question, he shook his head with a momentary impatience at himself. It was true that Rose Humbleby had recently lost her father, but she had a mother, and she was engaged to be married to a decidedly attractive young man who was fully adequate to anything in the protection line. Then why should he, Luke Fitzwilliam, be assailed by this protection complex?

Good old sentimentality to the fore again, thought Luke. The protective male! Flourishing in the Victorian era, going strong in the Edwardian, and still showing signs of life despite what our friend Lord Whitfield would call the rush and strain of modern life!

“All the same,” he said to himself as he strolled on towards the looming mass of Ashe Ridge, “I like that girl. She’s much too good for Thomas—a cool, superior devil like that.”

A memory of the doctor's last smile on the doorstep recurred to him. Decidedly smug it had been! Complacent!

The sound of footsteps a little way ahead roused Luke from his slightly irritable meditations. He looked up to see young Mr. Ellsworthy coming down the path from the hillside. His eyes were on the ground and he was smiling to himself. His expression struck Luke disagreeably. Ellsworthy was not so much walking as prancing—like a man who keeps time to some devilish little jig running in his brain. His smile was a strange secret contortion of the lips—it had a gleeful slyness that was definitely unpleasant.

Luke had stopped, and Ellsworthy was nearly abreast of him when he at last looked up. His eyes, malicious and dancing, met the other man's for just a minute before recognition came. Then, or so it seemed to Luke, a complete change came over the man. Where a minute before there had been the suggestion of a dancing satyr, there was now a somewhat effeminate and priggish young man.

“Oh, Mr. Fitzwilliam, good morning.”

“Good morning,” said Luke. “Have you been admiring the beauties of Nature?”

Mr. Ellsworthy's long, pale hands flew up in a reproving gesture.

“Oh, no, no—oh, dear me, no. I abhor Nature. Such a coarse, unimaginative wench. I have always held that one cannot enjoy life until one has put Nature in her place.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“There are ways!” said Mr. Ellsworthy. “In a place like this, a delicious provincial spot, there are some most delectable amusements if one has the goût—the flair. I enjoy life, Mr. Fitzwilliam.”

“So do I,” said Luke.

“Mens sana in corpore sano,” said Mr. Ellsworthy. His tone was delicately ironic. “I’m sure that’s so true of you.”

“There are worse things,” said Luke.

“My dear fellow! Sanity is the one unbelievable bore. One must be mad—deliciously mad—perverted—slightly twisted—then one sees life from a new and entrancing angle.”

“The leper’s squint,” suggested Luke.

“Ah, very good—very good—quite witty! But there’s something in it, you know. An interesting angle of vision. But I mustn’t detain you. You’re having exercise—one must have exercise—the public school spirit!”

“As you say,” said Luke, and with a curt nod walked on.

He thought:

“I’m getting too darned imaginative. The fellow’s just an ass, that’s all.”

But some indefinable uneasiness drove his feet on faster. That queer, sly, triumphant smile that Ellsworthy had had on his face—was that just imagination on his, Luke’s part? And his subsequent impression that it had been wiped off as though by a sponge the moment the other man caught sight of Luke coming towards him—what of that?

And with quickening uneasiness he thought:

“Bridget? Is she all right? They came up here together and he came back alone.”

He hurried on. The sun had come out while he was talking to Rose Humbleby. Now it had gone in again. The sky was dull and menacing, and wind came in sudden erratic little puffs. It was as though he had stepped out of normal everyday life into that queer half-world of enchantment, the consciousness of which had enveloped him ever since he came to Wychwood.

He turned a corner and came out on the flat ledge of green grass that had been pointed out to him from below and which went, he knew, by the name of the Witches' Meadow. It was here, so tradition had it, that the witches had held revelry on Walpurgis Night and Hallowe'en.

And then a quick wave of relief swept over him. Bridget was here. She sat with her back against a rock on the hillside. She was sitting bent over, her head in her hands.

He walked quickly over to her. Lovely springing turf strangely green and fresh.

He said:

“Bridget?”

Slowly she raised her face from her hands. Her face troubled him. She looked as though she were returning from some far-off world, as though she had difficulty in adjusting herself to the world of now and here.

Luke said—rather inadequately:

“I say—you're—you're all right, aren't you?”

It was a minute or two before she answered—as though she still had not quite come back from that far-off world that had held her. Luke felt that his words had to travel a long way before they reached her.

Then she said:

“Of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be?”

And now her voice was sharp and almost hostile.

Luke grinned.

“I'm hanged if I know. I got the wind up about you suddenly.”

“Why?”

“Mainly, I think, because of the melodramatic atmosphere in which I’m living at present. It makes me see things out of all proportion. If I lose sight of you for an hour or two I naturally assume that the next thing will be to find your gory corpse in a ditch. It would be in a play or a book.”

“Heroines are never killed,” said Bridget.

“No, but—”

Luke stopped—just in time.

“What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.”

Thank goodness he had just stopped himself in time. One couldn’t very well say to an attractive young woman, “But you’re not the heroine.”

Bridget went on:

“They are abducted, imprisoned, left to die of sewer gas or be drowned in cellars—they are always in danger, but they don’t ever die.”

“Nor even fade away,” said Luke.

He went on:

“So this is the Witches’ Meadow?”

“Yes.”

He looked down at her.

“You only need a broomstick,” he said kindly.

“Thank you. Mr. Ellsworthy said much the same.”

“I met him just now,” said Luke.

“Did you talk to him at all?”

“Yes. I think he tried to annoy me.”

“Did he succeed?”

“His methods were rather childish.” He paused and then went on abruptly.

“He’s an odd sort of fellow. One minute you think he’s just a mess—and then suddenly one wonders if there isn’t a bit more to it than that.”

Bridget looked up at him.

“You’ve felt that too?”

“You agree then?”

“Yes.”

Luke waited.

Bridget said:

“There’s something—odd about him. I’ve been wondering you know...I lay awake last night racking my brains. About the whole business. It seemed to me that if there was a—a killer about, I ought to know who it was! I mean, living down here and all that. I thought and I thought and it came to this—if there is a killer, he must definitely be mad.”

Thinking of what Dr. Thomas had said, Luke asked:

“You don’t think that a murderer can be as sane as you or I?”

“Not this kind of a murderer. As I see it, this murderer must be crazy. And that, you see, brought me straight to Ellsworthy. Of all the people down here, he’s the only one who is definitely queer. He is queer, you can’t get away from it!”

Luke said doubtfully:

“There are a good many of his sort, dilettanti, poseurs—usually quite harmless.”

“Yes. But I think there might be a little more than that. He’s got such nasty hands.”

“You noticed that? Funny, I did too!”

“They’re not just white—they’re green.”

“They do give one that effect. All the same, you can’t convict a man of being a murderer because of the colour of his flesh tints.”

“Oh, quite. What we want is evidence.”

“Evidence!” growled Luke. “Just the one thing that’s absolutely lacking. The man’s been too careful. A careful murderer! A careful lunatic!”

“I’ve been trying to help,” said Bridget.

“With Ellsworthy, you mean?”

“Yes. I thought I could probably tackle him better than you could. I’ve made a beginning.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, it seems that he has a kind of little coterie—a band of nasty friends. They come down here from time to time and celebrate.”

“Do you mean what are called nameless orgies?”

“I don’t know about nameless but certainly orgies. Actually it all sounds very silly and childish.”

“I suppose they worship the devil and do obscene dances.”

“Something of the kind. Apparently they get a kick out of it.”

“I can contribute something to this,” said Luke. “Tommy Pierce took part in one of their ceremonies. He was an acolyte. He had a red cassock.”

“So he knew about it?”

“Yes. And that might explain his death.”

“You mean he talked about it?”

“Yes—or he may have tried a spot of quiet blackmail.”

Bridget said thoughtfully:

“I know it’s all fantastic—but it doesn’t seem quite so fantastic when applied to Ellsworthy as it does to anyone else.”

“No, I agree—the thing becomes just conceivable instead of being ludicrously unreal.”

“We’ve got a connection with two of the victims,” said Bridget. “Tommy Pierce and Amy Gibbs.”

“Where do the publican and Humbleby come in?”

“At the moment they don’t.”

“Not the publican. But I can imagine a motive for Humbleby’s removal. He was a doctor and he may have tumbled to Ellsworthy’s abnormal state.”

“Yes, that’s possible.”

Then Bridget laughed.

“I did my stuff pretty well this morning. My psychic possibilities are grand, it seems, and when I told how one of my great-great-grandmothers had a near escape of being burnt for witchcraft my stock went soaring up. I rather think that I shall be invited to take part in the orgies at the next meeting of the Satanic Games whenever that may be.”

Luke said:

“Bridget, for God’s sake, be careful.”

She looked at him, surprised. He got up.

“I met Humbleby’s daughter just now. We were talking about Miss Pinkerton. And the Humbleby girl said that Miss Pinkerton had been worried about you.”

Bridget, in the act of rising, stopped as though frozen into immobility.

“What’s that? Miss Pinkerton—worried—about me?”

“That’s what Rose Humbleby said.”

“Rose Humbleby said that?”

“Yes.”

“What more did she say?”

“Nothing more.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

There was a pause, then Bridget said, “I see.”

“Miss Pinkerton was worried about Humbleby and he died. Now I hear she was worried about you—”

Bridget laughed. She stood up and shook her head so that her long black hair flew out round her head.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “The devil looks after his own.”

Eleven

DOMESTIC LIFE OF MAJOR HORTON

Luke leaned back in his chair on the other side of the bank manager's table.

"Well, that seems very satisfactory," he said. "I'm afraid I've been taking up a lot of your time."

Mr. Jones waved a deprecating hand. His small, dark, plump face wore a happy expression.

"No, indeed, Mr. Fitzwilliam. This is a quiet spot, you know. We are always glad to see a stranger."

"It's a fascinating part of the world," said Luke. "Full of superstitions."

Mr. Jones sighed and said it took a long time for education to eradicate superstition. Luke remarked that he thought education was too highly rated nowadays and Mr. Jones was slightly shocked by the statement.

"Lord Whitfield," he said, "has been a handsome benefactor here. He realizes the disadvantages under which he himself suffered as a boy and is determined that the youth of today shall be better equipped."

"Early disadvantages haven't prevented him from making a large fortune," said Luke.

"No, he must have had ability—great ability."

"Or luck," said Luke.

Mr. Jones looked rather shocked.

"Luck is the one thing that counts," said Luke. "Take a murderer, for example. Why does the successful murderer get away with it? Is it ability? Or is it sheer luck?"

Mr. Jones admitted that it was probably luck.

Luke continued:

“Take a fellow like this man Carter, the landlord of one of your pubs. The fellow was probably drunk six nights out of seven—yet one night he goes and pitches himself off the footbridge into the river. Luck again.”

“Good luck for some people,” said the bank manager.

“You mean?”

“For his wife and daughter.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

A clerk knocked and entered bearing papers. Luke gave two specimen signatures and was given a cheque-book. He rose.

“Well, I’m glad that’s all fixed up. Had a bit of luck over the Derby this year. Did you?”

Mr. Jones said smilingly that he was not a betting man. He added that Mrs. Jones had very strong views on the subject of horse racing.

“Then I suppose you didn’t go to the Derby?”

“No indeed.”

“Anybody go to it from here?”

“Major Horton did. He’s quite a keen racing man. And Mr. Abbot usually takes the day off. He didn’t back the winner, though.”

“I don’t suppose many people did,” said Luke, and departed after the exchange of farewells.

He lit a cigarette as he emerged from the bank. Apart from the theory of the “least likely person,” he saw no reason for retaining Mr. Jones on his list of

suspects. The bank manager had shown no interesting reactions to Luke's test questions. It seemed quite impossible to visualize him as a murderer. Moreover, he had not been absent on Derby Day. Incidentally, Luke's visit had not been wasted, he had received two small items of information. Both Major Horton and Mr. Abbot, the solicitor, had been away from Wychwood on Derby Day. Either of them, therefore, could have been in London at the time when Miss Pinkerton was run down by a car.

Although Luke did not now suspect Dr. Thomas he felt he would be more satisfied if he knew for a fact that the latter had been at Wychwood engaged in his professional duties on that particular day. He made a mental note to verify that point.

Then there was Ellsworthy. Had Ellsworthy been in Wychwood on Derby Day? If he had, the presumption that he was the killer was correspondingly weakened. Although, Luke noted, it was possible that Miss Pinkerton's death had been neither more nor less than the accident that it was supposed to be.

But he rejected that theory. Her death was too opportune.

Luke got into his own car, which was standing by the kerb, and drove in it to Pipwell's Garage, situated at the far end of the High Street.

There were various small matters in the car's running that he wanted to discuss. A good-looking young mechanic with a freckled face listened intelligently. The two men lifted the bonnet and became absorbed in a technical discussion.

A voice called:

"Jim, come here a minute."

The freckled-faced mechanic obeyed.

Jim Harvey. That was right. Jim Harvey, Amy Gibbs's young man. He returned presently, apologizing, and conversation became technical once more. Luke agreed to leave the car there.

As he was about to leave he inquired casually:

“Do any good on the Derby this year?”

“No, sir. Backed Clarigold.”

“Can’t be many people who backed Jujube the II.?”

“No, indeed, sir. I don’t believe any of the papers even tipped it as an outside chance.”

Luke shook his head.

“Racing’s an uncertain game. Ever seen the Derby run?”

“No, sir, wish I had. Asked for a day off this year. There was a cheap ticket up to town and down to Epsom, but the boss wouldn’t hear of it. We were shorthanded, as a matter of fact, and had a lot of work in that day.”

Luke nodded and took his departure.

Jim Harvey was crossed off his list. That pleasant-faced boy was not a secret killer, and it was not he who had run down Lavinia Pinkerton.

He strolled home by way of the riverbank. Here, as once before, he encountered Major Horton and his dogs. The major was still in the same condition of apoplectic shouting. “Augustus—Nelly—NELLY, I say. Nero—Nero—NERO.”

Again the protuberant eyes stared at Luke. But this time there was more to follow. Major Horton said:

“Excuse me. Mr. Fitzwilliam, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Horton here—Major Horton. Believe I’m going to meet you tomorrow up at the Manor. Tennis party. Miss Conway very kindly asked me. Cousin of yours, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Thought so. Soon spot a new face down here, you know.”

Here a diversion occurred, the three bulldogs advancing upon a nondescript white mongrel.

“Augustus—Nero. Come here, sir—come here, I say.”

When Augustus and Nero had finally reluctantly obeyed the command, Major Horton returned to the conversation. Luke was patting Nelly, who was gazing up at him sentimentally.

“Nice bitch, that, isn’t she?” said the major. “I like bulldogs. I’ve always had ’em. Prefer ’em to any other breed. My place is just near here, come in and have a drink.”

Luke accepted and the two men walked together while Major Horton held forth on the subject of dogs and the inferiority of all other breeds to that which he himself preferred.

Luke heard of the prizes Nelly had won, of the infamous conduct of a judge in awarding Augustus merely a Highly Commended, and of the triumphs of Nero in the show ring.

By then they had turned in at the major’s gate. He opened the front door, which was not locked, and the two men passed into the house. Leading the way into a small slightly doggy-smelling room lined with bookshelves, Major Horton busied himself with the drinks. Luke looked round him. There were photographs of dogs, copies of the Field and Country Life and a couple of well-worn armchairs. Silver cups were arranged round the bookcases. There was one oil painting over the mantelpiece.

“My wife,” said the major, looking up from the siphon and noting the direction of Luke’s glance. “Remarkable woman. A lot of character in her face, don’t you think?”

“Yes, indeed,” said Luke, looking at the late Mrs. Horton.

She was represented in a pink satin dress and was holding a bunch of lilies of the valley. Her brown hair was parted in the middle and her lips were pressed grimly together. Her eyes, of a cold grey, looked out ill-temperedly at the beholder.

“A remarkable woman,” said the major, handing a glass to Luke. “She died over a year ago. I haven’t been the same man since.”

“No?” said Luke, a little at a loss to know what to say.

“Sit down,” said the major, waving a hand towards one of the leather chairs.

He himself took the other one and sipping his whisky and soda, he went on:

“No, I haven’t been the same man since.”

“You must miss her,” said Luke awkwardly.

Major Horton shook his head darkly.

“Fellow needs a wife to keep him up to scratch,” he said. “Otherwise he gets slack—yes, slack. He lets himself go.”

“But surely—”

“My boy, I know what I’m talking about. Mind you, I’m not saying marriage doesn’t come hard on a fellow at first. It does. Fellow says to himself, damn it all, he says, I can’t call my soul my own! But he gets broken in. It’s all discipline.”

Luke thought that Major Horton’s married life must have been more like a military campaign than an idyll of domestic bliss.

“Women,” soliloquized the major, “are a rum lot. It seems sometimes that there’s no pleasing them. But by Jove, they keep a man up to the mark.”

Luke preserved a respectful silence.

“You married?” inquired the major.

“No.”

“Ah, well, you’ll come to it. And mind you, my boy, there’s nothing like it.”

“It’s always cheering,” said Luke, “to hear someone speak well of the marriage state. Especially in these days of easy divorce.”

“Pah!” said the major. “Young people make me sick. No stamina—no endurance. They can’t stand anything. No fortitude!”

Luke itched to ask why such exceptional fortitude should be needed, but he controlled himself.

“Mind you,” said the major, “Lydia was a woman in a thousand—in a thousand! Everyone here respected and looked up to her.”

“Yes?”

“She wouldn’t stand any nonsense. She’d got a way of fixing a person with her eye—and the person wilted—just wilted. Some of these half-baked girls who call themselves servants nowadays. They think you’ll put up with any insolence. Lydia soon showed them! Do you know we had fifteen cooks and house-parlourmaids in one year. Fifteen!”

Luke felt that this was hardly a tribute to Mrs. Horton’s domestic management, but since it seemed to strike his host differently he merely murmured some vague remark.

“Turned ’em out neck and crop, she did, if they didn’t suit.”

“Was it always that way about?” asked Luke.

“Well, of course a lot of them walked out on us. A good riddance—that’s what Lydia used to say!”

“A fine spirit,” said Luke, “but wasn’t it sometimes rather awkward?”

“Oh! I didn’t mind turning to and putting my hand to things,” said Horton. “I’m a pretty fair cook and I can lay a fire with anyone. I’ve never cared for

washing up but of course it's got to be done—you can't get away from that."

Luke agreed that you couldn't. He asked whether Mrs. Horton had been good at domestic work.

"I'm not the sort of fellow to let his wife wait on him," said Major Horton. "And anyway Lydia was far too delicate to do any housework."

"She wasn't strong then?"

Major Horton shook his head.

"She had wonderful spirit. She wouldn't give in. But what that woman suffered! And no sympathy from the doctors either. Doctors are callous brutes. They only understand downright physical pain. Anything out of the ordinary is beyond most of them. Humbleby, for instance, everyone seemed to think he was a good doctor."

"You don't agree."

"The man was an absolute ignoramus. Knew nothing of modern discoveries. Doubt if he'd ever heard of a neurosis! He understood measles and mumps and broken bones all right, I suppose. But nothing else. Had a row with him in the end. He didn't understand Lydia's case at all. I gave it him straight from the shoulder and he didn't like it. Got huffed and backed right out. Said I could send for any other doctor I chose. After that, we had Thomas."

"You liked him better?"

"Altogether a much cleverer man. If anyone could have pulled her through her last illness Thomas would have done it. As a matter of fact she was getting better, but she had a sudden relapse."

"Was it painful?"

"H'm, yes. Gastritis. Acute pain—sickness—all the rest of it. How that poor woman suffered! She was a martyr if there ever was one. And a couple of

hospital nurses in the house who were about as sympathetic as a brace of grandfather clocks! ‘The patient this’ and ‘the patient that.’” The major shook his head and drained his glass. “Can’t stand hospital nurses! So smug. Lydia insisted they were poisoning her. That wasn’t true, of course—a regular sick fancy—lots of people have it, so Thomas said—but there was this much truth behind it—those women disliked her. That’s the worst of women—always down on their own sex.”

“I suppose,” said Luke, feeling that he was putting it awkwardly but not seeing how to put it better, “that Mrs. Horton had a lot of devoted friends in Wychwood?”

“People were very kind,” said the major somewhat grudgingly. “Whitfield sent down grapes and peaches from his hothouse. And the old tabbies used to come and sit with her. Honoria Waynflete and Lavinia Pinkerton.”

“Miss Pinkerton came often, did she?”

“Yes. Regular old maid—but a kind creature! Very worried about Lydia she was. Used to inquire into the diet and the medicines. All kindly meant, you know, but what I call a lot of fuss.”

Luke nodded comprehendingly.

“Can’t stand fuss,” said the major. “Too many women in this place. Difficult to get a decent game of golf.”

“What about the young fellow at the antique shop?” said Luke.

The major snorted:

“He doesn’t play golf. Much too much of a Miss Nancy.”

“Has he been in Wychwood long?”

“About two years. Nasty sort of fellow. Hate those long-haired purring chaps. Funnily enough Lydia liked him. You can’t trust women’s judgement about men. They cotton to some amazing bounders. She even insisted on taking some patent quack nostrum of his. Stuff in a purple glass jar with

signs of the Zodiac all over it! Supposed to be certain herbs picked at the full of the moon. Lot of tomfoolery, but women swallow that stuff—swallow it literally too—ha, ha!”

Luke said, feeling that he was changing the subject rather abruptly, but correctly judging that Major Horton would not be aware of the fact:

“What sort of fellow is Abbot, the local solicitor? Pretty sound on the law? I’ve got to have some legal advice about something and I thought I might go to him.”

“They say he’s pretty shrewd,” acknowledged Major Horton. “I don’t know. Matter of fact I’ve had a row with him. Not seen him since he came out here to make Lydia’s will for her just before she died. In my opinion that man’s a cad. But of course,” he added, “that doesn’t affect his ability as a lawyer.”

“No, of course not,” said Luke. “He seems a quarrelsome sort of man, though. Seems to have fallen out with a good many people from what I hear.”

“Trouble with him is that he’s so confoundedly touchy,” said Major Horton. “Seems to think he’s God Almighty and that anyone who disagrees with him is committing lèse-majesté. Heard of his row with Humbleby?”

“They had a row, did they?”

“First-class row. Mind you, that doesn’t surprise me. Humbleby was an opinionated ass! Still, there it is.”

“His death was very sad.”

“Humbleby’s? Yes, I suppose it was. Lack of ordinary care. Blood poisoning’s a damned dangerous thing. Always put iodine on a cut—I do! Simple precaution. Humbleby, who’s a doctor, doesn’t do anything of the sort. It just shows.”

Luke was not quite sure what it showed, but he let that pass. Glancing at his watch he got up.

Major Horton said:

“Getting on for lunchtime? So it is. Well, glad to have had a chat with you. Does me good to see a man who’s been about the world a bit. We must have a yarn some other time. Where was your show? Mayang Straits? Never been there. Hear you’re writing a book. Superstitions and all that.”

“Yes—I—”

But Major Horton swept on.

“I can tell you several very interesting things. When I was in India, my boy —”

Luke escaped some ten minutes later after enduring the usual histories of fakirs, rope and mango tricks, dear to the retired Anglo-Indian.

As he stepped out into the open air, and heard the major’s voice bellowing to Nero behind him, he marvelled at the miracle of married life. Major Horton seemed genuinely to regret a wife who, by all accounts, not excluding his own, must have been nearly allied to a man-eating tiger.

Or was it—Luke asked himself the question suddenly—was it an exceedingly clever bluff?

Twelve

PASSAGE OF ARMS

The afternoon of the tennis party was fortunately fine. Lord Whitfield was in his most genial mood, acting the part of the host with a good deal of enjoyment. He referred frequently to his humble origin. The players were eight in all. Lord Whitfield, Bridget, Luke, Rose Humbleby, Mr. Abbot, Dr. Thomas, Major Horton and Hetty Jones, a giggling young woman who was the daughter of the bank manager.

In the second set of the afternoon, Luke found himself partnering Bridget against Lord Whitfield and Rose Humbleby. Rose was a good player with a strong forehand drive and played in county matches. She atoned for Lord Whitfield's failures, and Bridget and Luke, who were neither of them particularly strong, made quite an even match of it. They were three games all, and then Luke found a streak of erratic brilliance and he and Bridget forged ahead to five-three.

It was then he observed that Lord Whitfield was losing his temper. He argued over a line ball, declared a serve to be a fault in spite of Rose's disclaimer, and displayed all the attributes of a peevish child. It was set point, but Bridget sent an easy shot into the net and immediately after served a double fault. Deuce. The next ball was returned down the middle line and as he prepared to take it he and his partner collided. Then Bridget served another double fault and the game was lost.

Bridget apologized. "Sorry, I've gone to pieces."

It seemed true enough. Bridget's shots were wild and she seemed to be unable to do anything right. The set ended with Lord Whitfield and his partner victorious at the score of eight-six.

There was a momentary discussion as to the composition of the next set. In the end Rose played again with Mr. Abbot as her partner against Dr. Thomas and Miss Jones.

Lord Whitfield sat down, wiping his forehead and smiling complacently, his good humour quite restored. He began to talk to Major Horton on the subject of a series of articles on Fitness for Britain which one of his papers was starring.

Luke said to Bridget:

“Show me the kitchen garden.”

“Why the kitchen garden?”

“I have a feeling for cabbages.”

“Won’t green peas do?”

“Green peas would be admirable.”

They walked away from the tennis court and came to the walled kitchen garden. It was empty of gardeners this Saturday afternoon and looked lazy and peaceful in the sunshine.

“Here are your peas,” said Bridget.

Luke paid no attention to the object of the visit. He said:

“Why the hell did you give them the set?”

Bridget’s eyebrows went up a fraction.

“I’m sorry. I went to bits. My tennis is erratic.”

“Not so erratic as that! Those double faults of yours wouldn’t deceive a child! And those wild shots—each of them half a mile out!”

Bridget said calmly:

“That’s because I’m such a rotten tennis player. If I were a bit better I could perhaps have made it a bit more plausible! But as it is if I try to make a ball go just out, it’s always on the line and all the good work still to do.”

“Oh, you admit it then?”

“Obvious, my dear Watson.”

“And the reason?”

“Equally obvious, I should have thought. Gordon doesn’t like losing.”

“And what about me? Supposing I like to win?”

“I’m afraid, my dear Luke, that that isn’t equally important.”

“Would you like to make your meaning just a little clearer still?”

“Certainly, if you like. One mustn’t quarrel with one’s bread and butter. Gordon is my bread and butter. You are not.”

Luke drew a deep breath. Then he exploded.

“What the hell do you mean by marrying that absurd little man? Why are you doing it?”

“Because as his secretary I get six pounds a week, and as his wife I shall get a hundred thousand settled on me, a jewel case full of pearls and diamonds, a handsome allowance, and various perquisites of the married state!”

“But for somewhat different duties!”

Bridget said coldly:

“Must we have this melodramatic attitude towards every single thing in life? If you are contemplating a pretty picture of Gordon as an uxorious husband, you can wash it right out! Gordon, as you should have realized, is a small boy who has not quite grown up. What he needs is a mother, not a wife. Unfortunately his mother died when he was four years old. What he wants is someone at hand to whom he can brag, someone who will reassure him about himself and who is prepared to listen indefinitely to Lord Whitfield on the subject of Himself!”

“You’ve got a bitter tongue, haven’t you?”

Bridget retorted sharply:

“I don’t tell myself fairy stories if that’s what you mean! I’m a young woman with a certain amount of intelligence, very moderate looks, and no money. I intend to earn an honest living. My job as Gordon’s wife will be practically indistinguishable from my job as Gordon’s secretary. After a year I doubt if he’ll remember to kiss me good night. The only difference is in the salary.”

They looked at each other. Both of them were pale with anger. Bridget said jeeringly:

“Go on. You’re rather old-fashioned, aren’t you, Mr. Fitzwilliam? Hadn’t you better trot out the old clichés—say that I’m selling myself for money—that’s always a good one, I think!”

Luke said: “You’re a cold-blooded little devil!”

“That’s better than being a hot-blooded little fool!”

“Is it?”

“Yes. I know.”

Luke sneered. “What do you know?”

“I know what it is to care about a man! Did you ever meet Johnnie Cornish? I was engaged to him for three years. He was adorable—I cared like hell about him—cared so much that it hurt! Well, he threw me over and married a nice plump widow with a North-Country accent and three chins and an income of thirty thousand a year! That sort of thing rather cures one of romance, don’t you think?”

Luke turned away with a sudden groan. He said:

“It might.”

“It did....”

There was a pause. The silence lay heavy between them. Bridget broke it at last. She said, but with a slight uncertainty in her tone:

“I hope you realize that you had no earthly right to speak to me as you did. You’re staying in Gordon’s house and it’s damned bad taste!”

Luke recovered his composure.

“Isn’t that rather a cliché too?” he inquired politely.

Bridget flushed. “It’s true, anyway!”

“It isn’t. I had every right.”

“Nonsense!”

Luke looked at her. His face had a queer pallor, like a man who is suffering physical pain. He said:

“I have a right. I’ve the right of caring for you—what did you say just now?—of caring so much that it hurts!”

She drew back a step. She said: “You—”

“Yes, funny, isn’t it? The sort of thing that ought to give you a hearty laugh! I came down here to do a job of work and you came round the corner of that house and—how can I say it—put a spell on me! That’s what it feels like. You mentioned fairy stories just now. I’m caught up in a fairy story! You’ve bewitched me. I’ve a feeling that if you pointed your finger at me and said: ‘Turn into a frog,’ I’d go hopping away with my eyes popping out of my head.”

He took a step nearer to her.

“I love you like hell, Bridget Conway. And, loving you like hell, you can’t expect me to enjoy seeing you get married to a potbellied pompous little peer who loses his temper when he doesn’t win at tennis.”

“What do you suggest I should do?”

“I suggest that you should marry me instead! But doubtless that suggestion will give rise to a lot of merry laughter.”

“The laughter is positively uproarious.”

“Exactly. Well, now we know where we are. Shall we return to the tennis court? Perhaps this time you will find me a partner who can play to win!”

“Really,” said Bridget sweetly, “I believe you mind losing just as much as Gordon does!”

Luke caught her suddenly by the shoulders.

“You’ve got a devilish tongue, haven’t you, Bridget?”

“I’m afraid you don’t like me very much, Luke, however great your passion for me!”

“I don’t think I like you at all.”

Bridget said, watching him:

“You meant to get married and settle down when you came home, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But not to someone like me?”

“I never thought of anyone in the least like you.”

“No—you wouldn’t—I know your type. I know it exactly.”

“You are so clever, dear Bridget.”

“A really nice girl—thoroughly English—fond of the country and good with dogs...You probably visualized her in a tweed skirt stirring a log fire

with the tip of her shoe.”

“The picture sounds most attractive.”

“I’m sure it does. Shall we return to the tennis court? You can play with Rose Humbleby. She’s so good that you’re practically certain to win.”

“Being old-fashioned I must allow you to have the last word.”

Again there was a pause. Then Luke took his hands slowly from her shoulders. They both stood uncertain as though something still unsaid lingered between them.

Then Bridget turned abruptly and led the way back. The next set was just ending. Rose protested against playing again.

“I’ve played two sets running.”

Bridget, however, insisted.

“I’m feeling tired. I don’t want to play. You and Mr. Fitzwilliam take on Miss Jones and Major Horton.”

But Rose continued to protest and in the end a men’s four was arranged. Afterwards came tea.

Lord Whitfield conversed with Dr. Thomas, describing at length and with great self-importance a visit he had recently paid to the Wellerman Kreitz Research Laboratories.

“I wanted to understand the trend of the latest scientific discoveries for myself,” he explained earnestly. “I’m responsible for what my papers print. I feel that very keenly. This is a scientific age. Science must be made easily assimilable by the masses.”

“A little science might possibly be a dangerous thing,” said Dr. Thomas with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“Science in the home, that’s what we have to aim at,” said Lord Whitfield.
“Science minded—”

“Test tube conscious,” said Bridget gravely.

“I was impressed,” said Lord Whitfield. “Wellerman took me round himself, of course. I begged him to leave me to an underling, but he insisted.”

“Naturally,” said Luke.

Lord Whitfield looked gratified.

“And he explained everything most clearly—the culture—the serum—the whole principle of the thing. He agreed to contribute the first article in the series himself.”

Mrs. Anstruther murmured:

“They use guinea-pigs, I believe—so cruel—though of course not so bad as dogs—or even cats.”

“Fellows who use dogs ought to be shot,” said Major Horton, hoarsely.

“I really believe, Horton,” said Mr. Abbot, “that you value canine life above human life.”

“Every time!” said the major. “Dogs can’t turn round on you like human beings can. Never get a nasty word from a dog.”

“Only a nasty tooth stuck into your leg,” said Mr. Abbot. “Eh, Horton?”

“Dogs are a good judge of character,” said Major Horton.

“One of your brutes nearly pinned me by the leg last week. What do you say to that, Horton?”

“Same as I said just now!”

Bridget interposed tactfully:

“What about some more tennis?”

A couple more sets were played. Then, as Rose Humbleby said good-bye, Luke appeared beside her.

“I’ll see you home,” he said. “And carry the tennis bat. You haven’t got a car, have you?”

“No, but it’s no distance.”

“I’d like a walk.”

He said no more, merely taking her racquet and shoes from her. They walked down the drive without speaking. Then Rose mentioned one or two trivial matters. Luke answered rather shortly but the girl did not seem to notice.

As they turned into the gate of her house, Luke’s face cleared.

“I’m feeling better now,” he said.

“Were you feeling badly before?”

“Nice of you to pretend you didn’t notice it. You’ve exorcised the brute’s sulky temper, though. Funny, I feel as though I’d come out of a dark cloud into the sun.”

“So you have. There was a cloud over the sun when we left the Manor and now it’s passed over.”

“So it’s literally as well as figuratively. Well, well—the world’s a good place after all.”

“Of course it is.”

“Miss Humbleby, may I be impertinent?”

“I’m sure you couldn’t be.”

“Oh, don’t be too sure of that. I wanted to say that I think Dr. Thomas is a very lucky man.”

Rose blushed and smiled.

She said: “So you’ve heard?”

“Was it supposed to be a secret? I’m so sorry.”

“Oh! Nothing is a secret in this place,” said Rose ruefully.

“So it is true—you and he are engaged?”

Rose nodded.

“Only—just now—we’re not announcing it officially. You see, daddy was against it and it seems—well—unkind to—to blazon it abroad the moment he’s dead.”

“Your father disapproved?”

“Well, not disapproved exactly. Oh, I suppose it did amount to that, really.”

Luke said gently:

“He thought you were too young?”

“That’s what he said.”

Luke said acutely: “But you think there was something more than that?”

Rose bent her head slowly and reluctantly.

“Yes—I’m afraid what it really amounted to was that daddy didn’t—well, didn’t really like Geoffrey.”

“They were antagonistic to each other?”

“It seemed like that sometimes...Of course, daddy was rather a prejudiced old dear.”

“And I suppose he was very fond of you and didn’t like the thought of losing you?”

Rose assented but still with a shade of reservation in her manner.

“It went deeper than that?” asked Luke. “He definitely didn’t want Thomas as a husband for you?”

“No. You see—daddy and Geoffrey are so very unlike—and in some ways they clashed. Geoffrey was really very patient and good about it—but knowing daddy didn’t like him made him even more reserved and shy in his manner, so that daddy really never got to know him any better.”

“Prejudices are very hard to combat,” said Luke.

“It was so completely unreasonable!”

“Your father didn’t advance any reasons?”

“Oh, no. He couldn’t! Naturally, I mean, there wasn’t anything he could say against Geoffrey except that he didn’t like him.”

“I do not like thee, Dr. Fell, the reason why I cannot tell.”

“Exactly.”

“No tangible thing to get hold of? I mean, your Geoffrey doesn’t drink or back horses?”

“Oh, no. I don’t believe Geoffrey even knows what won the Derby.”

“That’s funny,” said Luke. “You know, I could swear I saw your Dr. Thomas at Epsom on Derby Day.”

For a moment he was anxious lest he might already have mentioned that he only arrived in England on that day. But Rose responded at once quite

unsuspiciously.

“You thought you saw Geoffrey at the Derby? Oh, no. He couldn’t get away, for one thing. He was over at Ashewold nearly all that day at a difficult confinement case.”

“What a memory you’ve got!”

Rose laughed.

“I remember that, because he told me they called the baby Jujube as a nickname!”

Luke nodded abstractedly.

“Anyway,” said Rose, “Geoffrey never goes to race meetings. He’d be bored to death.”

She added, in a different tone:

“Won’t you—come in? I think mother would like to see you.”

“If you’re sure of that?”

Rose led the way into a room where twilight hung rather sadly. A woman was sitting in an armchair in a curiously huddled up position.

“Mother, this is Mr. Fitzwilliam.”

Mrs. Humbleby gave a start and shook hands. Rose went quietly out of the room.

“I’m glad to see you, Mr. Fitzwilliam. Some friends of yours knew my husband many years ago, so Rose tells me.”

“Yes, Mrs. Humbleby.” He rather hated repeating the lie to the widowed woman, but there was no way out of it.

Mrs. Humbleby said:

“I wish you could have met him. He was a fine man and a great doctor. He cured many people who had been given up as hopeless just by the strength of his personality.”

Luke said gently:

“I’ve heard a lot about him since I’ve been here. I know how much people thought of him.”

He could not see Mrs. Humbleby’s face very distinctly. Her voice was rather monotonous, but its very lack of feeling seemed to emphasize the fact that actually feeling was in her, strenuously held back.

She said rather unexpectedly:

“The world is a very wicked place, Mr. Fitzwilliam. Do you know that?”

Luke was a little surprised.

“Yes, perhaps that may be.”

She insisted:

“No, but do you know it? It’s important that. There’s a lot of wickedness about...One must be prepared—to fight it! John was. He knew. He was on the side of the right!”

Luke said gently:

“I’m sure he was.”

“He knew the wickedness there was in this place,” said Mrs. Humbleby.
“He knew—”

She burst suddenly into tears.

Luke murmured:

“I’m so sorry—” and stopped.

She controlled herself as suddenly as she had lost control.

“You must forgive me,” she said. She held out her hand and he took it. “Do come and see us while you are here,” she said. “It would be so good for Rose. She likes you so much.”

“I like her. I think your daughter is the nicest girl I’ve met for a long time, Mrs. Humbleby.”

“She’s very good to me.”

“Dr. Thomas is a very lucky man.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Humbleby dropped his hand. Her voice had gone flat again. “I don’t know—it’s all so difficult.”

Luke left her standing in the half gloom, her fingers nervously twisting and untwisting themselves.

As he walked home his mind went over various aspects of the conversation.

Dr. Thomas had been absent from Wychwood for a good part of Derby Day. He had been absent in a car. Wychwood was thirty-five miles from London. Supposedly he had been attending a confinement case. Was there more than his word? The point, he supposed, could be verified. His mind went on to Mrs. Humbleby.

What had she meant by her insistence on that phrase, “There’s a lot of wickedness about...?”

Was she just nervous and overwrought by the shock of her husband’s death? Or was there something more to it than that?

Did she perhaps know something? Something that Dr. Humbleby had known before he died?

“I’ve got to go on with this,” said Luke to himself. “I’ve got to go on.”

Resolutely he averted his mind from the passage of arms that had taken place between him and Bridget.

Thirteen

MISS WAYNFLETE TALKS

On the following morning Luke came to a decision. He had, he felt, proceeded as far as he could with indirect inquiries. It was inevitable that sooner or later he would be forced into the open. He felt that the time had come to drop the book-writing camouflage and reveal that he had come to Wychwood with a definite aim in view.

In pursuance of this plan of campaign he decided to call upon Honoria Waynflete. Not only had he been favourably impressed by that middle-aged spinster's air of discretion and a certain shrewdness of outlook—but he fancied that she might have information that would help him. He believed that she had told him what she knew. He wanted to induce her to tell him what she might have guessed. He had a shrewd idea that Miss Waynflete's guesses might be fairly near the truth.

He called immediately after church.

Miss Waynflete received him in a matter-of-fact manner, showing no surprise at his call. As she sat down near him, her prim hands folded and her intelligent eyes—so like an amiable goat's—fixed on his face, he found little difficulty in coming to the object of his visit.

He said: "I dare say you have guessed, Miss Waynflete, that the reason of my coming here is not merely to write a book on local customs?"

Miss Waynflete inclined her head and continued to listen.

Luke was not minded as yet to go into the full story. Miss Waynflete might be discreet—she certainly gave him the impression of being so—but where an elderly spinster was concerned Luke felt he could hardly rely on her resisting the temptation to confide an exciting story to one or two trusted cronies. He thereupon proposed to adopt a middle course.

“I am down here to inquire into the circumstances of the death of that poor girl, Amy Gibbs.”

Miss Waynflete said:

“You mean you have been sent down by the police?”

“Oh, no—I’m not a plainclothes dick.” He added with a slightly humorous inflection, “I’m afraid I’m that well-known character in fiction, the private investigator.”

“I see. Then it was Bridget Conway who brought you down here?”

Luke hesitated a moment. Then he decided to let it go at that. Without going into the whole Pinkerton story, it was difficult to account for his presence. Miss Waynflete was continuing, a note of gentle admiration in her voice.

“Bridget is so practical—so efficient! I’m afraid, if it had been left to me, I should have distrusted my own judgement—I mean, that if you are not absolutely sure of a thing, it is so difficult to commit yourself to a definite course of action.”

“But you are sure, aren’t you?”

Miss Waynflete said gravely:

“No, indeed, Mr. Fitzwilliam. It is not a thing one can be sure about! I mean, it might all be imagination. Living alone, with no one to consult or to talk to, one might easily become melodramatic and imagine things which had no foundation in fact.”

Luke assented readily to this statement, recognizing its inherent truth, but he added gently:

“But you are sure in your own mind?”

Even here Miss Waynflete showed a little reluctance.

“We are not talking at cross-purposes, I hope?” she demurred.

Luke smiled.

“You would like me to put it in plain words? Very well. You do think that Amy Gibbs was murdered?”

Honorita Waynflete flinched a little at the crudity of the language. She said:

“I don’t feel at all happy about her death. Not at all happy. The whole thing is profoundly unsatisfactory in my opinion.”

Luke said patiently:

“But you don’t think her death was a natural one?”

“No.”

“You don’t believe it was an accident?”

“It seems to me most improbable. There are so many—”

Luke cut her short.

“You don’t think it was suicide?”

“Emphatically not.”

“Then,” said Luke gently, “you do think that it was murder?”

Miss Waynflete hesitated, gulped, and bravely took the plunge.

“Yes,” she said. “I do!”

“Good. Now we can get on with things.”

“But I have really no evidence on which to base that belief,” Miss Waynflete explained anxiously. “It is entirely an idea!”

“Quite so. This is a private conversation. We are merely speaking about what we think and suspect. We suspect Amy Gibbs was murdered. Who do

we think murdered her?”

Miss Waynflete shook her head. She was looking very troubled.

Luke said, watching her:

“Who had reason to murder her?”

Miss Waynflete said slowly:

“She had had a quarrel, I believe, with her young man at the garage, Jim Harvey—a most steady, superior young man. I know one reads in the papers of young men attacking their sweethearts and dreadful things like that, but I really can’t believe that Jim would do such a thing.”

Luke nodded.

Miss Waynflete went on.

“Besides, I can’t believe that he would do it that way. Climb up to her window and substitute a bottle of poison for the other one with the cough mixture. I mean, that doesn’t seem—”

Luke came to the rescue as she hesitated.

“It’s not the act of an angry lover? I agree. In my opinion we can wash Jim Harvey right out. Amy was killed (we’re agreeing she was killed) by someone who wanted to get her out of the way and who planned the crime carefully so that it should appear to be an accident. Now have you any idea—any hunch—shall we put it like that?—who that person could be?”

Miss Waynflete said:

“No—really—no, I haven’t the least idea!”

“Sure?”

“N-no—no, indeed.”

Luke looked at her thoughtfully. The denial, he felt, had not rung quite true. He went on:

“You know of no motive?”

“No motive whatever.”

That was more emphatic.

“Had she been in many places in Wychwood?”

“She was with the Hortons for a year before going to Lord Whitfield.”

Luke summed up rapidly.

“It’s like this, then. Somebody wanted that girl out of the way. From the given facts we assume that—first—it was a man and a man of moderately old-fashioned outlook (as shown by the hat paint touch), and secondly that it must have been a reasonably athletic man since it is clear he must have climbed up over the outhouse to the girl’s window. You agree on those points?”

“Absolutely,” said Miss Waynflete.

“Do you mind if I go round and have a try myself?”

“Not at all. I think it is a very good idea.”

She led him out by a side door and round to the backyard. Luke managed to reach the outhouse roof without much trouble. From there he could easily raise the sash of the girl’s window and with a slight effort hoist himself into the room. A few minutes later he rejoined Miss Waynflete on the path below, wiping his hands on his handkerchief.

“Actually it’s easier than it looks,” he said. “You want a certain amount of muscle, that’s all. There were no signs on the sill or outside?”

Miss Waynflete shook her head.

“I don’t think so. Of course the constable climbed up this way.”

“So that if there were any traces they would be taken to be his. How the police force assists the criminal! Well, that’s that!”

Miss Waynflete led the way back to the house.

“Was Amy Gibbs a heavy sleeper?” he asked.

Miss Waynflete replied acidly:

“It was extremely difficult to get her up in the morning. Sometimes I would knock again and again, and call out to her before she answered. But then, you know, Mr. Fitzwilliam, there’s a saying there are none so deaf as those who will not hear!”

“That’s true,” acknowledged Luke. “Well, now, Miss Waynflete, we come to the question of motive. Starting with the most obvious one, do you think there was anything between that fellow Ellsworthy and the girl?” He added hastily, “This is just your opinion I’m asking. Only that.”

“If it’s a matter of opinion, I would say yes.”

Luke nodded.

“In your opinion, would the girl Amy have stuck at a spot of blackmail?”

“Again as a matter of opinion, I should say that that was quite possible.”

“Do you happen to know if she had much money in her possession at the time of her death?”

Miss Waynflete reflected.

“I do not think so. If she had had any unusual amount I think I should have heard about it.”

“And she hadn’t launched into any unusual extravagance before she died?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That rather militates against the blackmail theory. The victim usually pays once before he decides to proceed to extremes. There’s another theory. The girl might know something.”

“What kind of thing?”

“She might have knowledge that was dangerous to someone here in Wychwood. We’ll take a strictly hypothetical case. She’d been in service in a good many houses here. Supposing she came to know of something that would damage say, someone like Mr. Abbot, professionally.”

“Mr. Abbot?”

Luke said quickly:

“Or possibly some negligence or unprofessional conduct on the part of Dr. Thomas.”

Miss Waynflete began, “But surely—” and then stopped.

Luke went on:

“Amy Gibbs was housemaid, you said, in the Hortons’ house at the time when Mrs. Horton died.”

There was a moment’s pause, then Miss Waynflete said:

“Will you tell me, Mr. Fitzwilliam, why you bring the Hortons into this? Mrs. Horton died over a year ago.”

“Yes, and the girl Amy was there at the time.”

“I see. What have the Hortons to do with it?”

“I don’t know. I—just wondered. Mrs. Horton died of acute gastritis, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Was her death at all unexpected?”

Miss Waynflete said slowly:

“It was to me. You see, she had been getting much better—seemed well on the road to recovery—and then she had a sudden relapse and died.”

“Was Dr. Thomas surprised?”

“I don’t know. I believe he was.”

“And the nurses, what did they say?”

“In my experience,” said Miss Waynflete, “hospital nurses are never surprised at any case taking a turn for the worse! It is recovery that surprises them.”

“But her death surprised you?” Luke persisted.

“Yes. I had been with her only the day before, and she had seemed very much better, talked and seemed quite cheerful.”

“What did she think about her own illness?”

“She complained that the nurses were poisoning her. She had had one nurse sent away, but she said these two were just as bad!”

“I suppose you didn’t pay much attention to that?”

“Well, no, I thought it was all part of the illness. And she was a very suspicious woman and—it may be unkind to say so—but she liked to make herself important. No doctor ever understood her case—and it was never anything simple—it must either be some very obscure disease or else somebody was ‘trying to get her out of the way.’”

Luke tried to make his voice casual.

“She didn’t suspect her husband of trying to do her in?”

“Oh, no, that idea never occurred to her!”

Miss Waynflete paused a minute, then she asked quietly:

“Is that what you think?”

Luke said slowly:

“Husbands have done that before and got away with it. Mrs. Horton from all accounts was a woman any man might have longed to be rid of! And I understand that he came into a good deal of money on her death.”

“Yes, he did.”

“What do you think, Miss Waynflete?”

“You want my opinion?”

“Yes, just your opinion.”

Miss Waynflete said quietly and deliberately:

“In my opinion, Major Horton was quite devoted to his wife and would never have dreamed of doing such a thing.”

Luke looked at her and received the mild amber glance in reply. It did not waver.

“Well,” he said, “I expect you’re right. You’d probably know if it was the other way round.”

Miss Waynflete permitted herself a smile.

“We women are good observers, you think?”

“Absolutely first class. Would Miss Pinkerton have agreed with you, do you think?”

“I don’t think I ever heard Lavinia express an opinion.”

“What did she think about Amy Gibbs?”

Miss Waynflete frowned a little as though thinking.

“It’s difficult to say. Lavinia had a very curious idea.”

“What idea?”

“She thought that there was something odd going on here in Wychwood.”

“She thought, for instance, that somebody pushed Tommy Pierce out of that window?”

Miss Waynflete stared at him in astonishment.

“How did you know that, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

“She told me so. Not in these words, but she gave me the general idea.”

Miss Waynflete leant forward, pink with excitement.

“When was this, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

Luke said quietly, “The day she was killed. We travelled together to London.”

“What did she tell you exactly?”

“She told me that there had been too many deaths in Wychwood. She mentioned Amy Gibbs, and Tommy Pierce and that man Carter. She also said that Dr. Humbleby would be the next to go.”

Miss Waynflete nodded slowly.

“Did she tell you who was responsible?”

“A man with a certain look in his eyes,” said Luke grimly. “A look you couldn’t mistake, according to her. She’d seen that look in his eye when he was talking to Humbleby. That’s why she said Humbleby would be the next to go.”

“And he was,” whispered Miss Waynflete. “Oh, dear. Oh, dear.”

She leaned back. Her eyes had a stricken look in them.

“Who was the man?” said Luke. “Come now, Miss Waynflete, you know, you must know!”

“I don’t. She didn’t tell me.”

“But you can guess,” said Luke keenly. “You’ve a very shrewd idea of who was in her mind.”

Reluctantly Miss Waynflete bowed her head.

“Then tell me.”

But Miss Waynflete shook her head energetically.

“No, indeed. You’re asking me to do something that is highly improper! You’re asking me to guess at what may—only may, mind you—have been in the mind of a friend who is now dead. I couldn’t make an accusation of that kind!”

“It wouldn’t be an accusation—only an opinion.”

But Miss Waynflete was unexpectedly firm.

“I’ve nothing to go on—nothing whatever,” she said. “Lavinia never actually said anything to me. I may think she had a certain idea—but you see I might be entirely wrong. And then I should have misled you and perhaps serious consequences might ensue. It would be very wicked and unfair of me to mention a name. And I may be quite, quite wrong! In fact, I probably am wrong!”

And Miss Waynflete set her lips firmly and glared at Luke with a grim determination.

Luke knew how to accept defeat when he met it.

He realized that Miss Waynflete's sense of rectitude and something else more nebulous that he could not quite place were both against him.

He accepted defeat with a good grace and rose to say good-bye. He had every intention of returning to the charge later, but he allowed no hint of that to escape into his manner.

"You must do as you think right, of course," he said. "Thank you for the help you have given me."

Miss Waynflete seemed to become a little less sure of herself as she accompanied him to the door.

"I hope you don't think," she began, then changed the form of the sentence. "If there is anything else I can do to help you, please, please let me know."

"I will. You won't repeat this conversation, will you?"

"Of course not. I shan't say a word to anybody."

Luke hoped that that was true.

"Give my love to Bridget," said Miss Waynflete. "She's such a handsome girl, isn't she? And clever too. I—I hope she will be happy."

And as Luke looked a question, she added:

"Married to Lord Whitfield, I mean. Such a great difference in age."

"Yes, there is."

Miss Waynflete sighed.

"You know that I was engaged to him once," she said unexpectedly.

Luke stared in astonishment. She was nodding her head and smiling rather sadly.

“A long time ago. He was such a promising boy. I had helped him, you know, to educate himself. And I was so proud of his—his spirit and the way he was determined to succeed.”

She sighed again.

“My people, of course, were scandalized. Class distinctions in those days were very strong.” She added after a minute or two, “I’ve always followed his career with great interest. My people, I think, were wrong.”

Then, with a smile, she nodded a farewell and went back into the house.

Luke tried to collect his thoughts. He had placed Miss Waynflete as definitely “old.” He realized now that she was probably still under sixty. Lord Whitfield must be well over fifty. She might, perhaps, be a year or two older than he, no more.

And he was going to marry Bridget. Bridget, who was twenty-eight. Bridget, who was young and alive....

“Oh, damn,” said Luke. “Don’t let me go on thinking of it. The job. Get on with the job.”

Fourteen

MEDITATIONS OF LUKE

Mrs. Church, Amy Gibbs's aunt, was definitely an unpleasant woman. Her sharp nose, shifty eyes, and her voluble tongue all alike filled Luke with nausea.

He adopted a curt manner with her and found it unexpectedly successful.

"What you've got to do," he told her, "is to answer my questions to the best of your ability. If you hold back anything or tamper with the truth the consequences may be extremely serious to you."

"Yes, sir. I see. I'm sure I'm only too willing to tell you anything I can. I've never been mixed up with the police—"

"And you don't want to be," finished Luke. "Well, if you do as I've told you there won't be any question of that. I want to know all about your late niece—who her friends were—what money she had—anything she said that might be out of the way. We'll start with her friends. Who were they?"

Mrs. Church leered at him slyly out of the corner of an unpleasant eye.

"You'll be meaning gentlemen, sir?"

"Had she any girl friends?"

"Well—hardly—not to speak of, sir. Of course there was girls she'd been in service with—but Amy didn't keep up with them much. You see—"

"She preferred the sterner sex. Go on. Tell me about that."

"It was Jim Harvey down at the garage she was actually going with, sir. And a nice steady young fellow he was. 'You couldn't do better,' I've said to her many a time—"

Luke cut in:

“And the others?”

Again he got the sly look.

“I expect you’re thinking of the gentleman who keeps the curiosity shop? I didn’t like it myself, and I tell you that straight, sir! I’ve always been respectable and I don’t hold with carrying on! But with what girls are nowadays it’s no use speaking to them. They go their own way. And often they live to regret it.”

“Did Amy live to regret it?” asked Luke bluntly.

“No, sir—that I do not think.”

“She went to consult Dr. Thomas on the day of her death. That wasn’t the reason?”

“No, sir, I’m nearly sure it wasn’t. Oh! I’d take my oath on it! Amy had been feeling ill and out of sorts, but it was just a bad cough and cold she had. It wasn’t anything of the kind you suggest, I’m sure it wasn’t, sir.”

“I’ll take your word for that. How far had matters gone between her and Ellsworthy?”

Mrs. Church leered.

“I couldn’t exactly say, sir. Amy wasn’t one for confiding in me.”

Luke said curtly:

“But they’d gone pretty far?”

Mrs. Church said smoothly:

“The gentleman hasn’t got at all a good reputation here, sir. All sorts of goings on. And friends down from town and many very queer happenings. Up in the Witches’ Meadow in the middle of the night.”

“Did Amy go?”

“She did go once, sir, I believe. Stayed out all night and his lordship found out about it (she was at the Manor then) and spoke to her pretty sharp, and she sauced him back and he gave her notice for it, which was only to be expected.”

“Did she ever talk to you much about what went on in the places she was in?”

Mrs. Church shook her head.

“Not very much, sir. More interested in her own doings, she was.”

“She was with Major and Mrs. Horton for a while, wasn’t she?”

“Nearly a year, sir.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Just to better herself. There was a place going at the Manor, and of course the wages was better there.”

Luke nodded.

“She was with the Hortons at the time of Mrs. Horton’s death?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. She grumbled a lot about that—with two hospital nurses in the house, and all the extra work nurses make, and the trays and one thing and another.”

“She wasn’t with Mr. Abbot, the lawyer, at all?”

“No, sir. Mr. Abbot has a man and wife do for him. Amy did go to see him once at his office, but I don’t know why.”

Luke stored away that small fact as possibly relevant. Since Mrs. Church, however, clearly knew nothing more about it, he did not pursue the subject.

“Any other gentlemen in the town who were friends of hers?”

“Nothing that I’d care to repeat.”

“Come now, Mrs. Church. I want the truth, remember.”

“It wasn’t a gentleman, sir, very far from it. Demeaning herself, that’s what it was, and so I told her.”

“Do you mind speaking more plainly, Mrs. Church?”

“You’ll have heard of the Seven Stars, sir? Not a good-class house, and the landlord, Harry Carter, a low-class fellow and half-seas over most of the time.”

“Amy was a friend of his?”

“She went a walk with him once or twice. I don’t believe there was more in it than that. I don’t indeed, sir.”

Luke nodded thoughtfully and changed the subject.

“Did you know a small boy, Tommy Pierce?”

“What? Mrs. Pierce’s son? Of course I did. Always up to mischief.”

“He ever see much of Amy?”

“Oh, no, sir. Amy would soon send him off with a flea in his ear if he tried any of his tricks on her.”

“Was she happy in her place with Miss Waynflete?”

“She found it a bit dull, sir, and the pay wasn’t high. But of course after she’d been dismissed the way she was from Ashe Manor, it wasn’t so easy to get another good place.”

“She could have gone away, I suppose?”

“To London, you mean?”

“Or some other part of the country?”

Mrs. Church shook her head. She said slowly:

“Amy didn’t want to leave Wychwood—not as things were.”

“How do you mean, as things were?”

“What with Jim and the gentleman at the curio shop.”

Luke nodded thoughtfully. Mrs. Church went on:

“Miss Waynflete is a very nice lady, but very particular about brass and silver and everything being dusted and the mattresses turned. Amy wouldn’t have put up with the fussing if she hadn’t been enjoying herself in other ways.”

“I can imagine that,” said Luke drily.

He turned things over in his mind. He could see no further questions to ask. He was fairly certain that he had extracted all that Mrs. Church knew. He decided on one last tentative attack.

“I dare say you can guess the reason of all these questions. The circumstances of Amy’s death were rather mysterious. We’re not entirely satisfied as to its being an accident. If not, you realize what it must have been.”

Mrs. Church said with a certain ghoulish relish:

“Foul play!”

“Quite so. Now supposing your niece did meet with foul play, who do you think is likely to be responsible for her death?”

Mrs. Church wiped her hands on her apron.

“There’d be a reward, as likely as not, for setting the police on the right track,” she inquired meaningfully.

“There might be,” said Luke.

“I wouldn’t like to say anything definite.” Mrs. Church passed a hungry tongue over her thin lips. “But the gentleman at the curio shop is a queer one. You’ll remember the Castor case, sir—and how they found little bits of the poor girl pinned up all over Castor’s seaside bungalow and how they found five or six other poor girls he’d served the same way. Maybe this Mr. Ellsworthy is one of that kind?”

“That’s your suggestion, is it?”

“Well, it might be that way, sir, mightn’t it?”

Luke admitted that it might. Then he said:

“Was Ellsworthy away from here on the afternoon of Derby Day? That’s a very important point.”

Mrs. Church stared.

“Derby Day?”

“Yes—a fortnight ago last Wednesday.”

She shook her head.

“Really, I couldn’t say as to that. He usually was away on Wednesdays—went up to town as often as not. It’s early closing Wednesday, you see.”

“Oh,” said Luke. “Early closing.”

He took his leave of Mrs. Church, disregarding her insinuations that her time had been valuable and that she was therefore entitled to monetary compensation. He found himself disliking Mrs. Church intensely. Nevertheless the conversation he had had with her, though not strikingly illuminative in any way, had provided several suggestive small points.

He went over things carefully in his mind.

Yes, it still boiled down to those four people. Thomas, Abbot, Horton and Ellsworthy. The attitude of Miss Waynflete seemed to him to prove that.

Her distress and reluctance to mention a name. Surely that meant, that must mean, that the person in question was someone of standing in Wychwood, someone whom a chance insinuation might definitely injure. It tallied, too, with Miss Pinkerton's determination to take her suspicions to headquarters. The local police would ridicule her theory.

It was not a case of the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker. It was not a case of a mere garage mechanic. The person in question was one against whom an accusation of murder was a fantastic and, moreover, a serious matter.

There were four possible candidates. It was up to him to go carefully once more into the case against each one and make up his own mind.

First to examine the reluctance of Miss Waynflete. She was a conscientious and scrupulous person. She believed that she knew the man whom Miss Pinkerton had suspected, but it was, she pointed out, only a belief on her part. It was possible that she was mistaken.

Who was the person in Miss Waynflete's mind?

Miss Waynflete was distressed lest an accusation by her might injure an innocent man. Therefore the object of her suspicions must be a man of high standing, generally liked and respected by the community.

Therefore, Luke argued, that automatically barred out Ellsworthy. He was practically a stranger to Wychwood, his local reputation was bad, not good. Luke did not believe that, if Ellsworthy was the person in Miss Waynflete's mind, she would have had any objection to mentioning him. Therefore as far as Miss Waynflete was concerned, wash out Ellsworthy.

Now as to the others. Luke believed that he could also eliminate Major Horton. Miss Waynflete had rebutted with some warmth the suggestion that

Horton might have poisoned his wife. If she had suspected him of later crimes, she would hardly have been so positive about his innocence of the death of Mrs. Horton.

That left Dr. Thomas and Mr. Abbot. Both of them fulfilled the necessary requirements. They were men of high professional standing against whom no word of scandal had ever been uttered. They were, on the whole, both popular and well liked, and were known as men of integrity and rectitude.

Luke proceeded to another aspect of the matter. Could he, himself, eliminate Ellsworthy and Horton? Immediately he shook his head. It was not so simple. Miss Pinkerton had known—really known—who the man was. That was proved, in the first case by her own death, and in the second case, by the death of Dr. Humbleby. But Miss Pinkerton had never actually mentioned a name to Honoria Waynflete. Therefore, though Miss Waynflete thought she knew, she might quite easily be wrong. We often know what other people are thinking—but sometimes we find out that we did not know after all—and have, in fact, made an egregious mistake!

Therefore the four candidates were still in the field. Miss Pinkerton was dead and could give no further assistance. It was up to Luke to do what he had done before, on the day after he came to Wychwood, weigh up the evidence and consider the probabilities.

He began with Ellsworthy. On the face of it Ellsworthy was the likeliest starter. He was abnormal and had possibly a perverted personality. He might quite easily be a “lust killer.”

“Let’s take it this way,” said Luke to himself. “Suspect everyone in turn. Ellsworthy, for instance. Let’s say he’s the killer! For the moment, let’s take it quite definitely that I know that. Now we’ll take the possible victims in chronological order. First, Mrs. Horton. Difficult to see what motive Ellsworthy could have had for doing away with Mrs. Horton. But there was a means. Horton spoke of some quack nostrum that she got from him and took. Some poison like arsenic could have been given that way. The question is—Why?

“Now the others. Amy Gibbs. Why did Ellsworthy kill Amy Gibbs? The obvious reason—she was being a nuisance! Threatened an action for breach of promise, perhaps? Or had she assisted at a midnight orgy? Did she threaten to talk? Lord Whitfield has a good deal of influence in Wychwood and Lord Whitfield, according to Bridget, is a very moral man. He might have taken up the matter against Ellsworthy if the latter had been up to anything particularly obscene. So—exit Amy. Not, I think, a sadistic murder. The method employed is against that.

“Who’s next—Carter? Why Carter? Unlikely he would know about midnight orgies (or did Amy tell him?). Was the pretty daughter mixed up in it? Did Ellsworthy start making love to her? (Must have a look at Lucy Carter.) Perhaps he was just abusive to Ellsworthy, and Ellsworthy in his catlike feline way, resented it. If he’d already committed one or two murders he would be getting sufficiently callous to contemplate a killing for a very slight reason.

“Now Tommy Pierce. Why did Ellsworthy kill Tommy Pierce? Easy. Tommy had assisted at a midnight ritual of some kind. Tommy threatened to talk about it. Perhaps Tommy was talking about it. Shut Tommy’s mouth.

“Dr. Humbleby. Why did Ellsworthy kill Dr. Humbleby? That’s the easiest of the lot! Humbleby was a doctor and he’d noticed that Ellsworthy’s mental balance was none too good. Probably was getting ready to do something about it. So Humbleby was doomed. There’s a stumbling block there in the method. How did Ellsworthy ensure that Humbleby should die of blood poisoning? Or did Humbleby die of something else? Was the poisoned finger a coincidence?

“Last of all, Miss Pinkerton. Wednesday’s early closing. Ellsworthy might have gone up to town that day. Has he a car, I wonder? Never seen him in one, but that proves nothing. He knew she’d suspected him and he was going to take no chances of Scotland Yard believing her story. Perhaps they already knew something about him then?

“That’s the case against Ellsworthy! Now what is there for him? Well, for one thing, he’s certainly not the man Miss Waynflete thought Miss Pinkerton meant. For another, he doesn’t fit—quite—with my own vague

impression. When she was talking I got a picture of a man—and it wasn't a man like Ellsworthy. The impression she gave me was of a very normal man—outwardly, that is—the kind of man nobody would suspect. Ellsworthy is the kind of man you would suspect. No, I got more the impression of a man like—Dr. Thomas.

“Thomas, now. What about Thomas? I wiped him clean off the list after I'd had a chat with him. Nice unassuming fellow. But the whole point of this murderer—unless I've got the whole thing wrong—is that he would be a nice unassuming fellow. The last person you'd think ever would be a murderer! Which, of course, is exactly what one feels about Thomas.

“Now then, let's go through it all again. Why did Dr. Thomas kill Amy Gibbs? Really, it seems most unlikely that he did! But she did go to see him that day, and he did give her that bottle of cough mixture. Suppose that was really oxalic acid. That would be very simple and clever! Who was called in, I wonder, when she was found poisoned—Humbleby or Thomas? If it was Thomas he might just come along with an old bottle of hat paint in his pocket, put it down unobtrusively on the table—and take off both bottles to be analysed as bold as brass! Something like that. It could be done if you were cool enough!

“Tommy Pierce? Again I can't see a likely motive. That's the difficulty with our Dr. Thomas—motive. There's not even a crazy motive! Same with Carter. Why should Dr. Thomas want to dispose of Carter? One can only assume that Amy, Tommy and the publican all knew something about Dr. Thomas that it was unhealthy to know. Ah! Supposing now that that something was the death of Mrs. Horton. Dr. Thomas attended her. And she died of a rather unexpected relapse. He could have managed that easily enough. And Amy Gibbs, remember, was in the house at the time. She might have seen or heard something. That would account for her. Tommy Pierce, we have it on good authority, was a particularly inquisitive small boy. He may have got wise to something. Can't get Carter in. Amy Gibbs told him something. He may have repeated it in his cups, and Thomas may have decided to silence him too. All this, of course, is pure conjecture. But what else can one do?

“Now Humbleby. Ah! At last we come to a perfectly plausible murder. Adequate motive and ideal means! If Dr. Thomas couldn’t give his partner blood poisoning, no one could! He could reinfect the wound every time he dressed it! I wish the earlier killings were a little more plausible.

“Miss Pinkerton? She’s more difficult, but there is one definite fact. Dr. Thomas was not in Wychwood for at least a good part of the day. He gave out that he was attending a confinement. That may be. But the fact remains that he was away from Wychwood in a car.

“Is there anything else? Yes, just one thing. The look he gave me when I went away from the house the other day. Superior, condescending, the smile of a man who’d just led me up the garden path and knew it.”

Luke sighed, shook his head and went on with his reasoning.

“Abbot? He’s the right kind of man too. Normal, well-to-do, respected, last sort of man, etc., etc. He’s conceited, too, and confident. Murderers usually are! They’ve got overweening conceit! Always think they’ll get away with it. Amy Gibbs paid him a visit once. Why? What did she want to see him for? To get legal advice? Why? Or was it a personal matter? There’s that mention of “a letter from a lady” that Tommy saw. Was that letter from Amy Gibbs? Or was it a letter written by Mrs. Horton—a letter, perhaps, that Amy Gibbs had got hold of? What other lady could there be writing to Mr. Abbot on a matter so private that he loses control when the office boy inadvertently sees it? What else can we think of re Amy Gibbs? The hat paint? Yes, right kind of old-fashioned touch—men like Abbot are usually well behind the times where women are concerned. The old-world style of philanderer! Tommy Pierce? Obvious—on account of the letter (really, it must have been a very damning letter!). Carter? Well, there was trouble about Carter’s daughter. Abbot wasn’t going to have a scandal—a low-down ruffianly half-wit like Carter dare to threaten him! He who had got away with two clever killings! Away with Mr. Carter! Dark night and a well-directed push. Really, this killing business is almost too easy.

“Have I got the Abbot mentality? I think so. Nasty look in an old lady’s eye. She’s thinking things about him... Then, row with Humbleby. Old Humbleby daring to set himself against Abbot, the clever solicitor and

murderer. The old fool—he little knows what’s in store for him! He’s for it! Daring to browbeat me!

“And then—what? Turning to catch Lavinia Pinkerton’s eyes. And his own eyes falter—show a consciousness of guilt. He who was boasting of being unsuspected has definitely aroused suspicion. Miss Pinkerton knows his secret...She knows what he has done...Yes, but she can’t have proof. But suppose she goes about looking for it...Suppose she talks...Suppose...He’s quite a shrewd judge of character. He guesses what she will finally do. If she goes with this tale of hers to Scotland Yard they may believe her—they may start making inquiries. Something pretty desperate has got to be done. Has Abbot got a car or did he hire one in London? Anyway, he was away from here on Derby Day....”

Again Luke paused. He was so entering into the spirit of the thing that he found it hard to make a transition from one suspect to another. He had to wait a minute before he could force himself into the mood where he could visualize Major Horton as a successful murderer.

“Horton murdered his wife. Let’s start with that! He had ample provocation and he gained considerably by her death. In order to carry it off successfully he had to make a good show of devotion. He’s had to keep that up. Sometimes, shall we say, he overdoes it a bit?

“Very good, one murder successfully accomplished. Who’s the next? Amy Gibbs. Yes, perfectly credible. Amy was in the house. She may have seen something—the major administering a soothing cup of beef tea or gruel? She mayn’t have realized the point of what she saw till some time later. The hat paint trick is the sort of thing that would occur to the major quite naturally—a very masculine man with little knowledge of women’s fripperies.

“Amy Gibbs all serene and accounted for.

“The drunken Carter? Same suggestion as before. Amy told him something. Another straightforward murder.

“Now Tommy Pierce. We’ve got to fall back on his inquisitive nature. I suppose the letter in Abbot’s office couldn’t have been a complaint from Mrs. Horton that her husband was trying to poison her? That’s a wild suggestion, but it might be so. Anyway, the major becomes alive to the fact that Tommy is a menace, so Tommy joins Amy and Carter. All quite simple and straightforward and according to Cocker. Easy to kill? My God, yes.

“But now we come to something rather more difficult. Humbleby! Motive? Very obscure. Humbleby was attending Mrs. Horton originally. Did he get puzzled by the illness, and did Horton influence his wife to change to the younger, more unsuspicious doctor? But if so, what made Humbleby a danger so long after? Difficult, that...The manner of his death, too. A poisoned finger. Doesn’t connect up with the major.

“Miss Pinkerton? That’s perfectly possible. He has a car. I saw it. And he was away from Wychwood that day, supposedly gone to the Derby. It might be—yes. Is Horton a cold-blooded killer? Is he? Is he? I wish I knew....”

Luke stared ahead of him. His brow was puckered with thought.

“It’s one of them...I don’t think it’s Ellsworthy—but it might be! He’s the most obvious one! Thomas is wildly unlikely—if it weren’t for the manner of Humbleby’s death. That blood poisoning definitely points to a medical murderer! It could be Abbot—there’s not as much evidence against him as against the others—but I can see him in the part, somehow...Yes—he fits as the others don’t. And it could be Horton! Bullied by his wife for years, feeling his insignificance—yes, it could be! But Miss Waynflete doesn’t think it is, and she’s no fool—and she knows the place and the people in it....

“Which does she suspect, Abbot or Thomas? It must be one of these two... If I tackled her outright—‘Which of them is it?’—I’d get it out of her then, perhaps.

“But even then she might be wrong. There’s no way of proving her right—like Miss Pinkerton proved herself. More evidence—that’s what I want. If there were to be one more case—just one more—then I’d know—”

He stopped himself with a start.

“My God,” he said under his breath. “What I’m asking for is another murder....”

Fifteen

IMPROPER CONDUCT OF A CHAUFFEUR

In the bar of the Seven Stars Luke drank his pint and felt somewhat embarrassed. The stare of half a dozen bucolic pairs of eyes followed his least movement, and conversation had come to a standstill upon his entrance. Luke essayed a few comments of general interest such as the crops, the state of the weather, and football coupons, but to none did he get any response.

He was reduced to gallantry. The fine-looking girl behind the counter with her black hair and red cheeks he rightly judged to be Miss Lucy Carter.

His advances were received in a pleasant spirit. Miss Carter duly giggled and said, "Go on with you! I'm sure you don't think nothing of the kind! That's telling!"—and other such rejoinders. But the performance was clearly mechanical.

Luke, seeing no advantage to be gained by remaining, finished his beer and departed. He walked along the path to where the river was spanned by a footbridge. He was standing looking at this when a quavering voice behind him said:

"That's it, mister, that's where old Harry went over."

Luke turned to see one of his late fellow drinkers, one who had been particularly unresponsive to the topic of crops, weather and coupons. He was now clearly about to enjoy himself as a guide to the macabre.

"Went over into the mud he did," said the ancient labourer. "Right into the mud and stuck in it head downwards."

"Odd he should have fallen off here," said Luke.

"He were drunk, he were," said the rustic indulgently.

“Yes, but he must have come this way drunk many times before.”

“Most every night,” said the other. “Always in liquor, Harry were.”

“Perhaps someone pushed him over,” said Luke, making the suggestion in a casual fashion.

“They might of,” the rustic agreed. “But I don’t know who’d go for to do that,” he added.

“He might have made a few enemies. He was fairly abusive when he was drunk, wasn’t he?”

“His language was a treat to hear! Didn’t mince his words, Harry didn’t. But no one would go for to push a man what’s drunk.”

Luke did not combat this statement. It was evidently regarded as wildly unsporting for advantage to be taken of a man’s state of intoxication. The rustic had sounded quite shocked at the idea.

“Well,” he said vaguely, “it was a sad business.”

“None so sad for his missus,” said the old man. “Reckon her and Lucy haven’t no call to be sad about it.”

“There may be other people who are glad to have him out of the way.”

The old man was vague about that.

“Maybe,” he said. “But he didn’t mean no harm, Harry didn’t.”

On this epitaph for the late Mr. Carter, they parted.

Luke bent his steps towards the old Hall. The library transacted its business in the two front rooms. Luke passed on to the back through a door which was labelled Museum. There he moved from case to case, studying the not very inspiring exhibits. Some Roman pottery and coins. Some South Sea curiosities, a Malay headdress. Various Indian gods “presented by Major

Horton,” together with a large and malevolent-looking Buddha, and a case of doubtful-looking Egyptian beads.

Luke wandered out again into the hall. There was no one about. He went quietly up the stairs. There was a room with magazines and papers there, and a room filled with nonfiction books.

Luke went a storey higher. Here were rooms filled with what he designated to himself as junk. Stuffed birds removed from the museum owing to the moth having attacked them, stacks of torn magazines and a room whose shelves were covered with out-of-date works of fiction and children’s books.

Luke approached the window. Here it must have been that Tommy Price had sat, possibly whistling and occasionally rubbing a pane of glass vigorously when he heard anyone coming.

Somebody had come in. Tommy had shown his zeal—sitting half out of the window and polishing with zest. And then that somebody had come up to him, and while talking, had given a sudden sharp push.

Luke turned away. He walked down the stairs and stood a minute or two in the hall. Nobody had noticed him come in. Nobody had seen him go upstairs.

“Anyone might have done it!” said Luke. “Easiest thing in the world.”

He heard footsteps coming from the direction of the library proper. Since he was an innocent man with no objection to being seen, he could remain where he was. If he had not wanted to be seen, how easy just to step back inside the door of the museum room!

Miss Waynflete came out from the library, a little pile of books under her arm. She was pulling on her gloves. She looked very happy and busy. When she saw him her face lit up and she exclaimed:

“Oh, Mr. Fitzwilliam, have you been looking at the museum? I’m afraid there isn’t very much there, really. Lord Whitfield is talking of getting us

some really interesting exhibits.”

“Really?”

“Yes, something modern, you know, and up-to-date. Like they have at the Science Museum in London. He suggests a model aeroplane and a locomotive and some chemical things too.”

“That would, perhaps, brighten things up.”

“Yes, I don’t think a museum should deal solely with the past, do you?”

“Perhaps not.”

“Then some food exhibits, too—calories and vitamins—all that sort of thing. Lord Whitfield is so keen on the Greater Fitness Campaign.”

“So he was saying the other night.”

“It’s the thing at present, isn’t it? Lord Whitfield was telling me how he’d been to the Wellerman Institute—and seen such a lot of germs and cultures and bacteria—it quite made me shiver. And he told me all about mosquitoes and sleeping sickness and something about a liver fluke that I’m afraid was a little too difficult for me.”

“It was probably too difficult for Lord Whitfield,” said Luke cheerfully. “I’ll bet he got it all wrong! You’ve got a much clearer brain than he has, Miss Waynflete.”

Miss Waynflete said sedately:

“That’s very nice of you, Mr. Fitzwilliam, but I’m afraid women are never quite such deep thinkers as men.”

Luke repressed a desire to criticize adversely Lord Whitfield’s processes of thought. Instead he said:

“I did look into the museum but afterwards I went up to have a look at the top windows.”

“You mean where Tommy—” Miss Waynflete shivered. “It’s really very horrible.”

“Yes, it’s not a nice thought. I’ve spent about an hour with Mrs. Church—Amy’s aunt—not a nice woman!”

“Not at all.”

“I had to take rather a strong line with her,” said Luke. “I fancy she thinks I’m a kind of super policeman.”

He stopped as he noted a sudden change of expression on Miss Waynflete’s face.

“Oh, Mr. Fitzwilliam, do you think that was wise?”

Luke said:

“I don’t really know. I think it was inevitable. The book story was wearing thin—I can’t get much further on that. I had to ask the kind of questions that were directly to the point.”

Miss Waynflete shook her head—the troubled expression still on her face.

“In a place like this, you see—everything gets round so fast.”

“You mean that everybody will say ‘there goes the tec’ as I walk down the street? I don’t think that really matters now. In fact, I may get more that way.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that.” Miss Waynflete sounded a little breathless.

“What I meant was—that he’ll know. He’ll realize that you’re on his track.”

Luke said slowly:

“I suppose he will.”

Miss Waynflete said:

“But don’t you see—that’s horribly dangerous. Horribly!”

“You mean—” Luke grasped her point at last, “you mean that the killer will have a crack at me?”

“Yes.”

“Funny,” said Luke. “I never thought of that! I believe you’re right, though. Well, that might be the best thing that could happen.”

Miss Waynflete said earnestly:

“I don’t think you realize that he’s—he’s a very clever man. He’s cautious, too! And remember, he’s got a great deal of experience—perhaps more than we know.”

“Yes,” said Luke thoughtfully. “That’s probably true.”

Miss Waynflete exclaimed:

“Oh, I don’t like it! Really, I feel quite alarmed!”

Luke said gently:

“You needn’t worry. I shall be very much on my guard I can assure you. You see I’ve narrowed the possibilities down pretty closely. I’ve an idea at any rate who the killer might be....”

She looked up sharply.

Luke came a step nearer. He lowered his voice to a whisper:

“Miss Waynflete, if I were to ask you which of two men you considered the most likely—Dr. Thomas or Mr. Abbot—what would you say?”

“Oh—” said Miss Waynflete. Her hand flew to her breast. She stepped back. Her eyes met Luke’s in an expression that puzzled him. They showed impatience and something closely allied to it that he could not quite place.

She said:

“I can’t say anything—”

She turned away abruptly with a curious sound—half a sigh, half a sob.

Luke resigned himself.

“Are you going home?” he asked.

“No, I was going to take these books to Mrs. Humbleby. That lies on your way back to the Manor. We might go part of the way together.”

“That will be very nice,” said Luke.

They went down the steps, turned to the left skirting the village green.

Luke looked back at the stately lines of the house they had left.

“It must have been a lovely house in your father’s day,” he said.

Miss Waynflete sighed.

“Yes, we were all very happy there. I am so thankful it hasn’t been pulled down. So many of the old houses are going.”

“I know. It’s sad.”

“And really the new ones aren’t nearly as well built.”

“I doubt if they will stand the test of time as well.”

“But of course,” said Miss Waynflete, “the new ones are convenient—so labour-saving, and not such big draughty passages to scrub.”

Luke assented.

When they arrived at the gate of Dr. Humbleby’s house, Miss Waynflete hesitated and said:

“Such a beautiful evening. I think, if you don’t mind, I will come a little farther. I am enjoying the air.”

Somewhat surprised, Luke expressed pleasure politely. It was hardly what he would have described as a beautiful evening. There was a strong wind blowing, turning back the leaves viciously on the trees. A storm, he thought, might come at any minute.

Miss Waynflete, however, clutching her hat with one hand, walked by his side with every appearance of enjoyment, talking as she went in little gasps.

It was a somewhat lonely lane they were taking, since from Dr. Humbleby’s house the shortest way to Ashe Manor was not by the main road, but by a side lane which led to one of the back gates of the Manor House. This gate was not of the same ornate ironwork but had two handsome gate pillars surmounted by two vast pink pineapples. Why pineapples, Luke had been unable to discover! But he gathered that to Lord Whitfield pineapples spelt distinction and good taste.

As they approached the gate the sound of voices raised in anger came to them. A moment later they came in sight of Lord Whitfield confronting a young man in chauffeur’s uniform.

“You’re fired,” Lord Whitfield was shouting. “D’you hear? You’re fired.”

“If you’d overlook it, m’lord—just this once.”

“No, I won’t overlook it! Taking my car out. My car—and what’s more you’ve been drinking—yes, you have, don’t deny it! I’ve made it clear there are three things I won’t have on my estate—one’s drunkenness, another’s immorality and the other’s impertinence.”

Though the man was not actually drunk, he had had enough to loosen his tongue. His manner changed.

“You won’t have this and you won’t have that, you old bastard! Your estate! Think we don’t all know your father kept a boot-shop down here? Makes us laugh ourselves sick, it does, seeing you strutting about as cock of the walk!

Who are you, I'd like to know? You're no better than I am—that's what you are."

Lord Whitfield turned purple.

"How dare you speak to me like that? How dare you?"

The young man took a threatening step forward.

"If you wasn't such a miserable potbellied little swine I'd give you a sock on the jaw—yes, I would."

Lord Whitfield hastily retreated a step, tripped over a root and went down in a sitting position.

Luke had come up.

"Get out of here," he said roughly to the chauffeur.

The latter regained sanity. He looked frightened.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what came over me, I'm sure."

"A couple of glasses too much, I should say," said Luke.

He assisted Lord Whitfield to his feet.

"I—I beg your pardon, m'lord," stammered the man.

"You'll be sorry for this, Rivers," said Lord Whitfield.

His voice trembled with intense feeling.

The man hesitated a minute, then shambled away slowly.

Lord Whitfield exploded:

"Colossal impertinence! To me. Speaking to me like that. Something very serious will happen to that man! No respect—no proper sense of his station

in life. When I think of what I do for these people—good wages—every comfort—a pension when they retire. The ingratitude—the base ingratitude....”

He choked with excitement, then perceived Miss Waynflete who was standing silently by.

“Is that you, Honoria? I’m deeply distressed you should have witnessed such a disgraceful scene. That man’s language—”

“I’m afraid he wasn’t quite himself, Lord Whitfield,” said Miss Waynflete primly.

“He was drunk, that’s what he was, drunk!”

“Just a bit lit up,” said Luke.

“Do you know what he did?” Lord Whitfield looked from one to the other of them. “Took out my car—my car! Thought I shouldn’t be back so soon. Bridget drove me over to Lyne in the two-seater. And this fellow had the impertinence to take a girl—Lucy Carter, I believe—out in my car!”

Miss Waynflete said gently:

“A most improper thing to do.”

Lord Whitfield seemed a little comforted.

“Yes, wasn’t it?”

“But I’m sure he’ll regret it.”

“I shall see that he does!”

“You’ve dismissed him,” Miss Waynflete pointed out.

Lord Whitfield shook his head.

“He’ll come to a bad end, that fellow.”

He threw back his shoulders.

“Come up to the house, Honoria, and have a glass of sherry.”

“Thank you, Lord Whitfield, but I must go to Mrs. Humbleby with these books. Good night, Mr. Fitzwilliam. You’ll be quite all right now.”

She gave him a smiling nod and walked briskly away. It was so much the attitude of a nurse who delivers a child at a party that Luke caught his breath as a sudden idea struck him. Was it possible that Miss Waynflete had accompanied him solely in order to protect him? The idea seemed ludicrous, but—

Lord Whitfield’s voice interrupted his meditations.

“Very capable woman, Honoria Waynflete.”

“Very, I should think.”

Lord Whitfield began to walk towards the house. He moved rather stiffly and his hand went to his posterior and rubbed it gingerly.

Suddenly he chuckled.

“I was engaged to Honoria once—years ago. She was a nice-looking girl—not so skinny as she is today. Seems funny to think of now. Her people were the nobs of this place.”

“Yes?”

Lord Whitfield ruminated:

“Old Colonel Waynflete bossed the show. One had to come out and touch one’s cap pretty sharp. One of the old school he was, and proud as Lucifer.”

He chuckled again.

“The fat was in the fire all right when Honoria announced she was going to marry me! Called herself a Radical, she did. Very earnest. Was all for

abolishing class distinctions. She was a serious kind of girl.”

“So her family broke up the romance?”

Lord Whitfield rubbed his nose.

“Well—not exactly. Matter of fact we had a bit of a row over something. Blinking bird she had—one of those beastly twittering canaries—always hated them—bad business—wrung its neck. Well—no good dwelling on all that now. Let’s forget it.”

He shook his shoulders like a man who throws off an unpleasant memory.

Then he said, rather jerkily:

“Don’t think she’s ever forgiven me. Well, perhaps it’s only natural....”

“I think she’s forgiven you all right,” said Luke.

Lord Whitfield brightened up.

“Do you? Glad of that. You know I respect Honoria. Capable woman and a lady! That still counts even in these days. She runs that library business very well.”

He looked up and his voice changed.

“Hallo,” he said. “Here comes Bridget.”

Sixteen

THE PINEAPPLE

Luke felt a tightening of his muscles as Bridget approached.

He had had no word alone with her since the day of the tennis party. By mutual consent they had avoided each other. He stole a glance at her now.

She looked provokingly calm, cool and indifferent.

She said lightly:

“I was beginning to wonder what on earth had become of you, Gordon?”

Lord Whitfield grunted:

“Had a bit of a dust up! That fellow Rivers had the impertinence to take the Rolls out this afternoon.”

“Lèse-majesté,” said Bridget.

“It’s no good making a joke out of it, Bridget. The thing’s serious. He took a girl out.”

“I don’t suppose it would have given him any pleasure to go solemnly for a drive by himself!”

Lord Whitfield drew himself up.

“On my estate I’ll have decent moral behaviour.”

“It isn’t actually immoral to take a girl joyriding.”

“It is when it’s my car.”

“That, of course, is worse than immorality! It practically amounts to blasphemy. But you can’t cut out the sex stuff altogether, Gordon. The moon is at the full and it’s actually Midsummer Eve.”

“Is it, by Jove?” said Luke.

Bridget threw him a glance.

“That seems to interest you?”

“It does.”

Bridget turned back to Lord Whitfield.

“Three extraordinary people have arrived at the Bells and Motley. Item one, a man with shorts, spectacles and a lovely plum-coloured silk shirt! Item two, a female with no eyebrows, dressed in a peplum, a pound of assorted sham Egyptian beads and sandals. Item three, a fat man in a lavender suit and co-respondent shoes. I suspect them of being friends of our Mr. Ellsworthy! Says the gossip writer: ‘Someone has whispered that there will be gay doings in the Witches’ Meadow tonight.’”

Lord Whitfield turned purple and said:

“I won’t have it!”

“You can’t help it, darling. The Witches’ Meadow is public property.”

“I won’t have this irreligious mumbo jumbo going on down here! I’ll expose it in Scandals.” He paused, then said, “Remind me to make a note about that and get Siddely on to it. I must go up to town tomorrow.”

“Lord Whitfield’s campaign against witchcraft,” said Bridget flippantly. “Medieval superstitions still rife in quiet country village.”

Lord Whitfield stared at her with a puzzled frown, then he turned and went into the house.

Luke said pleasantly:

“You must do your stuff better than that, Bridget!”

“What do you mean?”

“It would be a pity if you lost your job! That hundred thousand isn’t yours yet. Nor are the diamonds and pearls. I should wait until after the marriage ceremony to exercise your sarcastic gifts if I were you.”

Her glance met his coolly.

“You are so thoughtful, dear Luke. It’s kind of you to take my future so much to heart!”

“Kindness and consideration have always been my strong points.”

“I hadn’t noticed it.”

“No? You surprise me.”

Bridget twitched the leaf off a creeper. She said:

“What have you been doing today?”

“The usual spot of sleuthing.”

“Any results?”

“Yes and no, as the politicians say. By the way, have you got any tools in the house?”

“I expect so. What kind of tools?”

“Oh, any handy little gadgets. Perhaps I could inspect some.”

Ten minutes later Luke had made a selection from a cupboard shelf.

“That little lot will do nicely,” he said, slapping the pocket in which he had stowed them away.

“Are you thinking of doing a spot of forcing and entering?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re very uncommunicative on the subject.”

“Well, after all, the situation bristles with difficulties. I’m in the hell of a position. After our little knock up on Saturday I suppose I ought to clear out of here.”

“To behave as a perfect gentleman, you should.”

“But since I’m convinced that I am pretty hot on the trail of a homicidal maniac, I’m more or less forced to remain. If you could think of any convincing reason for me to leave here and take up my quarters at the Bells and Motley, for goodness’ sake trot it out.”

Bridget shook her head.

“That’s not feasible—you being a cousin and all that. Besides, the inn is full of Mr. Ellsworthy’s friends. They only run to three guest rooms.”

“So I am forced to remain, painful as it must be for you.”

Bridget smiled sweetly at him.

“Not at all. I can always do with a few scalps to dangle.”

“That,” said Luke appreciatively, “was a particularly dirty crack. What I admire about you, Bridget, is that you have practically no instincts of kindness. Well, well. The rejected lover will now go and change for dinner.”

The evening passed uneventfully. Luke won Lord Whitfield’s approval even more deeply than before by the apparent absorbed interest with which he listened to the other’s nightly discourse.

When they came into the drawing room Bridget said:

“You men have been a long time.”

Luke replied:

“Lord Whitfield was being so interesting that the time passed like a flash. He was telling me how he founded his first newspaper.”

Mrs. Anstruther said:

“These new little fruiting trees in pots are perfectly marvellous, I believe. You ought to try them along the terrace, Gordon.”

The conversation then proceeded on normal lines.

Luke retired early.

He did not, however, go to bed. He had other plans.

It was just striking twelve when he descended the stairs noiselessly in tennis shoes, passed through the library and let himself out by a window.

The wind was still blowing in violent gusts interspersed with brief lulls. Clouds scudded across the sky, obliterating the moon so that darkness alternated with bright moonlight.

Luke made his way by a circuitous route to Mr. Ellsworthy's establishment. He saw his way clear to doing a little investigation. He was fairly certain that Ellsworthy and his friends would be out together on this particular date. Midsummer Eve, Luke thought, was sure to be marked by some ceremony or other. Whilst this was in progress, it would be a good opportunity to search Mr. Ellsworthy's house.

He climbed a couple of walls, got round to the back of the house, took the assorted tools from his pocket and selected a likely implement. He found a scullery window amenable to his efforts. A few minutes later he had slipped back the catch, raised the sash and hoisted himself over.

He had a torch in his pocket. He used it sparingly—a brief flash to show him his way and to avoid running into things.

In a quarter of an hour he had satisfied himself that the house was empty. The owner was out and abroad on his own affairs.

Luke smiled with satisfaction and settled down to his task.

He made a minute and thorough search of every available nook and corner. In a locked drawer, below two or three innocuous water-colour sketches, he came upon some artistic efforts which caused him to lift his eyebrows and whistle. Mr. Ellsworthy's correspondence was unilluminating, but some of his books—those tucked away at the back of a cupboard—repaid attention.

Besides these, Luke accumulated three meagre but suggestive scraps of information. The first was a pencil scrawl in a little notebook. "Settle with Tommy Pierce"—the date being a couple of days before the boy's death. The second was a crayon sketch of Amy Gibbs with a furious red cross right across the face. The third was a bottle of cough mixture. None of these things were in any way conclusive, but taken together they might be considered as encouraging.

Luke was just restoring some final order, replacing things in their place, when he suddenly stiffened and switched off his torch.

He had heard the key inserted in the lock of a side door.

He stepped across to the door of the room he was in, and applied an eye to a crack. He hoped Ellsworthy, if it was he, would go straight upstairs.

The side door opened and Ellsworthy stepped in, switching on a hall light as he did so.

As he passed along the hall, Luke saw his face and caught his breath.

It was unrecognizable. There was foam on the lips, the eyes were alight with a strange mad exultation as he pranced along the hall in little dancing steps.

But what caused Luke to catch his breath was the sight of Ellsworthy's hands. They were stained a deep brownish red—the colour of dried

blood....

He disappeared up the stairs. A moment later the light in the hall was extinguished.

Luke waited a little longer, then very cautiously he crept out of the hall, made his way to the scullery and left by the window. He looked up at the house, but it was dark and silent.

He drew a deep breath.

“My God,” he said, “the fellow’s mad all right! I wonder what he’s up to? I’ll swear that was blood on his hands!”

He made a detour round the village and returned to Ashe Manor by a roundabout route. It was as he was turning into the side lane that a sudden rustle of leaves made him swing round.

“Who’s there?”

A tall figure wrapped in a dark cloak came out from the shadow of a tree. It looked so eerie that Luke felt his heart miss a beat. Then he recognized the long pale face under the hood.

“Bridget? How you startled me!”

She said sharply:

“Where have you been? I saw you go out.”

“And you followed me?”

“No. You’d gone too far. I’ve been waiting till you came back.”

“That was a damned silly thing to do,” Luke grumbled.

She repeated her question impatiently.

“Where have you been?”

Luke said gaily:

“Raiding our Mr. Ellsworthy!”

Bridget caught her breath.

“Did you—find anything?”

“I don’t know. I know a bit more about the swine—his pornographical tastes and all that, and there are three things that might be suggestive.”

She listened attentively as he recounted the result of his search.

“It’s very slight evidence, though,” he ended. “But, Bridget, just as I was leaving Ellsworthy came back. And I tell you this—the man’s as mad as a hatter!”

“You really think so?”

“I saw his face—it was—unspeakable! God knows what he’d been up to! He was in a delirium of mad excitement. And his hands were stained. I’ll swear with blood.”

Bridget shivered.

“Horrible...” she murmured.

Luke said irritably:

“You shouldn’t have come out by yourself, Bridget. It was absolute madness. Somebody might have knocked you on the head.”

She laughed shakily.

“The same applies to you, my dear.”

“I can look after myself.”

“I’m pretty good at taking care of myself, too. Hard-boiled, I should think you’d call me.”

A sharp gust of wind came. Luke said suddenly:

“Take off that hood thing.”

“Why?”

With an unexpected movement he snatched at her cloak and whipped it away. The wind caught her hair and blew it out straight up from her head. She stared at him, her breath coming fast.

Luke said:

“You certainly are incomplete without a broomstick, Bridget. That’s how I saw you first.” He stared a minute longer and said, “You’re a cruel devil.”

With a sharp impatient sigh he tossed the cloak back to her.

“There—put it on. Let’s get home.”

“Wait....”

“Why?”

She came up to him. She spoke in a low, rather breathless voice.

“Because I’ve got something to say to you—that’s partly why I waited for you here—outside the Manor. I want to say it to you now—before we go inside—into Gordon’s property....”

“Well?”

She gave a short, rather bitter laugh.

“Oh, it’s quite simple. You win, Luke. That’s all!”

He said sharply:

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve given up the idea of being Lady Whitfield.”

He took a step nearer.

“Is that true?” he demanded.

“Yes, Luke.”

“You’ll marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I wonder?”

“I don’t know. You say such beastly things to me—and I seem to like it....”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. He said:

“It’s a mad world!”

“Are you happy, Luke?”

“Not particularly.”

“Do you think you’ll ever be happy with me?”

“I don’t know. I’ll risk it.”

“Yes—that’s what I feel....”

He slipped his arm through hers.

“We’re rather queer about all this, my sweet. Come along. Perhaps we shall be more normal in the morning.”

“Yes—it’s rather frightening the way things happen to one...” She looked down and tugged him to a standstill. “Luke—Luke—what’s that...?”

The moon had come out from the clouds. Luke looked down to where Bridget's shoe trembled by a huddled mass.

With a startled exclamation he dragged his arm free and knelt down. He looked from the shapeless heap to the gatepost above. The pineapple was gone.

He stood up at last. Bridget was standing, her hands pressed together on her mouth.

He said:

"It's the chauffeur—Rivers. He's dead...."

"That beastly stone thing—it's been loose for some time—I suppose it blew down on him?"

Luke shook his head.

"The wind wouldn't do a thing like that. Oh! that's what it's meant to look like—that's what it's meant to be—another accident! But it's a fake. It's the killer again...."

"No—no, Luke—"

"I tell you it is. Do you know what I felt on the back of his head—in with the stickiness and mess—grains of sand. There's no sand about here. I tell you, Bridget, somebody stood here and slugged him as he came through the gate back to his cottage. Then laid him down and rolled that pineapple thing down on top of him."

Bridget said faintly:

"Luke—there's blood—on your hands...."

Luke said grimly:

"There was blood on someone else's hands. Do you know what I was thinking this afternoon—that if there were to be one more crime we'd

surely know. And we do know! Ellsworthy! He was out tonight and he came in with blood on his hands capering and prancing and mad—drunk with the homicidal maniac’s expression....”

Looking down, Bridget shivered and said in a low voice: “Poor Rivers....”

Luke said pityingly:

“Yes, poor fellow. It’s damnable bad luck. But this will be the last, Bridget! Now we know, we’ll get him!”

He saw her sway and in two steps he had caught her in his arms.

She said in a small childlike voice:

“Luke, I’m frightened....”

He said, “It’s all over, darling. It’s all over....”

She murmured:

“Be kind to me—please. I’ve been hurt so much.”

He said: “We’ve hurt each other. We won’t do that anymore.”

Seventeen

LORD WHITFIELD TALKS

Dr. Thomas stared across his consulting room desk at Luke.

“Remarkable,” he said. “Remarkable! You are really serious, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

“Absolutely. I am convinced that Ellsworthy is a dangerous maniac.”

“I have not paid special attention to the man. I should say, though, that he is possibly an abnormal type.”

“I’d go a good deal further than that,” said Luke grimly.

“You seriously believe that this man Rivers was murdered?”

“I do. You noticed the grains of sand in the wound?”

Dr. Thomas nodded.

“I looked out for them after your statement. I am bound to say that you were correct.”

“That makes it clear, does it not, that the accident was faked and that the man was killed by a blow from a sandbag—or at any rate was stunned by one.”

“Not necessarily.”

“What do you mean?”

Dr. Thomas leaned back and joined his fingertips together.

“Supposing that this man Rivers had been lying out in a sand-pit during the day—there are several about in this part of the world. That might account

for grains of sand in the hair.”

“Man, I tell you he was murdered!”

“You may tell me so,” said Dr. Thomas drily, “but that doesn’t make it a fact.”

Luke controlled his exasperation.

“I suppose you don’t believe a word of what I’m telling you.”

Dr. Thomas smiled, a kindly superior smile.

“You must admit, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that it’s rather a wild story. You assert that this man Ellsworthy has killed a servant girl, a small boy, a drunken publican, my own partner and finally this man Rivers.”

“You don’t believe it?”

Dr. Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

“I have some knowledge of Humbleby’s case. It seems to me quite out of the question that Ellsworthy could have caused his death, and I really cannot see that you have any evidence at all that he did so.”

“I don’t know how he managed it,” confessed Luke, “but it all hangs together with Miss Pinkerton’s story.”

“There again you assert that Ellsworthy followed her up to London and ran her down in a car. Again you haven’t a shadow of proof that happened! It’s all—well—romancing!”

Luke said sharply:

“Now that I know where I am it will be my business to get proofs. I’m going up to London tomorrow to see an old pal of mine. I saw in the paper two days ago that he’d been made Assistant Commissioner of Police. He knows me and he’ll listen to what I have to say. One thing I’m sure of, he’ll order a thorough investigation of the whole business.”

Dr. Thomas stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Well—no doubt that should be very satisfactory. If it turns out that you’re mistaken—”

Luke interrupted him.

“You definitely don’t believe a word of all this?”

“In wholesale murder?” Dr. Thomas raised his eyebrows. “Quite frankly, Mr. Fitzwilliam, I don’t. The thing is too fantastic.”

“Fantastic, perhaps. But it hangs together. You’ve got to admit it hangs together. Once you accept Miss Pinkerton’s story as true.”

Dr. Thomas was shaking his head. A slight smile came to his lips. “If you knew some of these old maids as well as I do,” he murmured.

Luke rose, trying to control his annoyance.

“At any rate, you’re well named,” he said. “A doubting Thomas, if there ever was one!”

Thomas replied good-humouredly:

“Give me a few proofs, my dear fellow. That’s all I ask. Not just a long melodramatic rigmarole based on what an old lady fancied she saw.”

“What old ladies fancy they see is very often right. My Aunt Mildred was positively uncanny! Have you got any aunts yourself, Thomas?”

“Well—er—no.”

“A mistake!” said Luke. “Every man should have aunts. They illustrate the triumph of guesswork over logic. It is reserved for aunts to know that Mr. A. is a rogue because he looks like a dishonest butler they once had. Other people say reasonably enough that a respectable man like Mr. A. couldn’t be a crook. The old ladies are right every time.”

Dr. Thomas smiled his superior smile again.

Luke said, his exasperation mounting once more:

“Don’t you realize that I’m a policeman myself? I’m not the complete amateur.”

Dr. Thomas smiled and murmured:

“In the Mayang Straits!”

“Crime is crime even in the Mayang Straits.”

“Of course—of course.”

Luke left Dr. Thomas’s surgery in a state of suppressed irritation.

He joined Bridget, who said:

“Well, how did you get on?”

“He didn’t believe me,” said Luke. “Which, when you come to think of it, is hardly surprising. It’s a wild story with no proofs. Dr. Thomas is emphatically not the sort of man who believes six impossible things before breakfast!”

“Will anybody believe you?”

“Probably not, but when I get hold of old Billy Bones tomorrow, the wheels will start turning. They’ll check up on our long-haired friend, Ellsworthy, and in the end they’re bound to get somewhere.”

Bridget said thoughtfully:

“We’re coming out into the open very much, aren’t we?”

“We’ve got to. We can’t—we simply can’t afford anymore murders.”

Bridget shivered.

“For God’s sake be careful, Luke.”

“I’m being careful all right. Don’t walk near gates with pineapples on them, avoid the lonely wood at nightfall, watch out for your food and drink. I know all the ropes.”

“It’s horrible feeling you’re a marked man.”

“So long as you’re not a marked woman, my sweet.”

“Perhaps I am.”

“I don’t think so. But I don’t intend to take risks! I’m watching over you like an old-fashioned guardian angel.”

“Is it any good saying anything to the police here?”

Luke considered.

“No, I don’t think it is—better go straight to Scotland Yard.”

Bridget murmured:

“That’s what Miss Pinkerton thought.”

“Yes, but I shall be watching out for trouble.”

Bridget said:

“I know what I’m going to do tomorrow. I shall march Gordon down to that brute’s shop and make him buy things.”

“Thereby ensuring that our Mr. Ellsworthy is not lying in ambush for me on the steps of Whitehall?”

“That’s the idea.”

Luke said with some slight embarrassment: “About Whitfield—”

Bridget said quickly:

“Let’s leave it till you come back tomorrow. Then we’ll have it out.”

“Will he be very cut up, do you think?”

“Well—” Bridget considered the question. “He’ll be annoyed.”

“Annoyed? Ye gods! Isn’t that putting it a bit mildly?”

“No. Because you see Gordon doesn’t like being annoyed! It upsets him!”

Luke said soberly, “I feel rather uncomfortable about it all.”

That feeling was uppermost in his mind when he prepared that evening to listen for the twentieth time to Lord Whitfield on the subject of Lord Whitfield. It was, he admitted, a cad’s trick to stay in a man’s house and steal his fiancée. He still felt, however, that a potbellied, pompous, strutting little nincompoop like Lord Whitfield ought never to have aspired to Bridget at all!

But his conscience so far chastened him that he listened with an extra dose of fervent attention and in consequence made a thoroughly favourable impression on his host.

Lord Whitfield was in high good humour this evening. The death of his erstwhile chauffeur seemed to have exhilarated rather than depressed him.

“Told you that fellow would come to a bad end,” he crowed, holding up a glass of port to the light and squinting through it. “Didn’t I tell you so yesterday evening?”

“You did, indeed, sir.”

“And you see I was right! It’s amazing how often I’m right!”

“That must be splendid for you,” said Luke.

“I’ve had a wonderful life—yes, a wonderful life! My path’s been smoothed clear before me. I’ve always had great faith and trust in Providence. That’s the secret, Fitzwilliam, that’s the secret.”

“Yes?”

“I’m a religious man. I believe in good and evil and eternal justice. There is such a thing as divine justice, Fitzwilliam, not a doubt of it!”

“I believe in justice, too,” said Luke.

Lord Whitfield, as usual, was not interested in the beliefs of other people.

“Do right by your Creator and your Creator will do right by you! I’ve always been an upright man. I’ve subscribed to charity, and I’ve made my money honestly. I’m not beholden to any man! I stand alone. You remember in the Bible how the patriarchs became prosperous, herds and flocks were added to them, and their enemies were smitten down!”

Luke stifled a yawn and said:

“Quite—quite.”

“It’s remarkable—absolutely remarkable,” said Lord Whitfield. “The way that a righteous man’s enemies are struck down! Look at yesterday. That fellow abuses me—even goes so far as to try to raise his hand against me. And what happens? Where is he today?”

He paused rhetorically and then answered himself in an impressive voice:

“Dead! Struck down by divine wrath!”

Opening his eyes a little, Luke said:

“Rather an excessive punishment, perhaps, for a few hasty words uttered after a glass too much.”

Lord Whitfield shook his head.

“It’s always like that! Retribution comes swiftly and terribly. And there’s good authentic authority for it. Remember the children that mocked Elisha—how the bears came out and devoured them. That’s the way things happen, Fitzwilliam.”

“I always thought that was rather unnecessarily vindictive.”

“No, no. You’re looking at it the wrong way. Elisha was a great and holy man. No one could be suffered to mock at him and live! I understand that because of my own case!”

Luke looked puzzled.

Lord Whitfield lowered his voice.

“I could hardly believe it at first. But it happened every time! My enemies and detractors were cast down and exterminated.”

“Exterminated?”

Lord Whitfield nodded gently and sipped his port.

“Time after time. One case quite like Elisha—a little boy. I came upon him in the gardens here—he was employed by me then. Do you know what he was doing? He was giving an imitation of Me—of ME! Mocking me! Strutting up and down with an audience to watch him. Making fun of me on my own ground! D’you know what happened to him? Not ten days later he fell out of an upper window and was killed!

“Then there was that ruffian Carter—a drunkard and a man of evil tongue. He came here and abused me. What happened to him? A week later he was dead—drowned in the mud. There had been a servant girl, too. She lifted her voice and called me names. Her punishment soon came. She drank poison by mistake! I could tell you heaps more. Humbleby dared to oppose me over the Water scheme. He died of blood poisoning. Oh, it’s been going on for years—Mrs. Horton, for instance, was abominably rude to me and it wasn’t long before she passed away.”

He paused and leaning forward passed the port decanter round to Luke.

“Yes,” he said. “They all died. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Luke stared at him. A monstrous, an incredible suspicion leapt into his mind! With new eyes, he stared at the small fat man who sat at the head of the table, who was gently nodding his head and whose light protuberant eyes met Luke’s with a smiling insouciance.

A rush of disconnected memories flashed rapidly through Luke’s brain. Major Horton saying “Lord Whitfield was very kind. Sent down grapes and peaches from his hothouse.” It was Lord Whitfield who so graciously allowed Tommy Pierce to be employed on window cleaning at the library. Lord Whitfield holding forth on his visit to the Wellerman Kreutz Institute with its serums and germ cultures just a short time before Dr. Humbleby’s death. Everything pointing plainly in one direction and he, fool that he had been, never even suspecting....

Lord Whitfield was still smiling. A quiet happy smile. He nodded his head gently at Luke.

“They all die,” said Lord Whitfield.

Eighteen

CONFERENCE IN LONDON

Sir William Ossington, known to the cronies of earlier days as Billy Bones, stared incredulously at his friend.

“Didn’t you have enough crime out in Mayang?” he asked plaintively.
“Have you got to come home and do our work for us here?”

“Crime in Mayang isn’t on a wholesale basis,” said Luke. “What I’m up against now is a man who’s done a round half-dozen murders at least—and got away with it without a breath of suspicion!”

Sir William sighed.

“It does happen. What’s his speciality—wives?”

“No, he’s not that kind. He doesn’t actually think he’s God yet—but he soon will.”

“Mad?”

“Oh, unquestionably, I should say.”

“Ah! but he probably isn’t legally mad. There’s a difference, you know.”

“I should say he knows the nature and consequence of his acts,” said Luke.

“Exactly,” said Billy Bones.

“Well, don’t let’s quibble about legal technicalities. We’re not nearly at that stage yet. Perhaps we never shall be. What I want from you, old boy, is a few facts. There was a street accident took place on Derby Day between five and six o’clock in the afternoon. Old lady run over in Whitehall and the car didn’t stop. Her name was Lavinia Pinkerton. I want you to dig up all facts you can about that.”

Sir William sighed. "I can soon get hold of that for you. Twenty minutes ought to do it."

He was as good as his word. In less than that time Luke was talking to the police officer in charge of the matter.

"Yes, sir, I remember the details. I've got most of them written down here." He indicated the sheet that Luke was studying. "An inquest was held—Mr. Satcherverell was the Coroner. Censure of the driver of the car."

"Did you ever get him?"

"No, sir."

"What make of car was it?"

"It seems pretty certain it was a Rolls—big car driven by a chauffeur. All witnesses unanimous on that point. Most people know a Rolls by sight."

"You didn't get the number?"

"No, unfortunately, nobody thought to look at it. There was a note of a number FZX 4498—but it was the wrong number, a woman spotted it and mentioned it to another woman who gave it to me. I don't know whether the second woman got it wrong but anyway it was no good."

Luke asked sharply: "How did you know it was no good?"

The young officer smiled.

"FZX 4498 is the number of Lord Whitfield's car. That car was standing outside Boomington House at the time in question and the chauffeur was having tea. He had a perfect alibi—no question of his being concerned and the car never left the building till 6:30 when his lordship came out."

"I see," said Luke.

"It's always the way, sir," the man sighed, "half the witnesses have disappeared before a constable can get there and take down particulars."

Sir William nodded.

“We assumed it was probably a number not unlike that FZX 4498—a number beginning probably with two fours. We did our best, but could not trace any car. We investigated several likely numbers but they could all give satisfactory accounts of themselves.”

Sir William looked at Luke questioningly.

Luke shook his head. Sir William said:

“Thanks, Bonner, that will do.”

When the man had gone out, Billy Bones looked inquiringly at his friend.

“What’s it all about, Fitz?”

Luke sighed. “It all tallies. Lavinia Pinkerton was coming up to blow the gaff—to tell the clever people at Scotland Yard all about the wicked murderer. I don’t know whether you’d have listened to her—probably not —”

“We might,” said Sir William. “Things do come through to us that way. Just hearsay and gossip—we don’t neglect that sort of thing, I assure you.”

“That’s what the murderer thought. He wasn’t going to risk it. He eliminated Lavinia Pinkerton and although one woman was sharp enough to spot his number no one believed her.”

Billy Bones sprang upright in his chair.

“You don’t mean—”

“Yes, I do. I’ll bet you anything you like it was Whitfield who ran her down. I don’t know how he managed it. The chauffeur was away at tea. Somehow or other, I suppose, he sneaked away putting on a chauffeur’s coat and cap. But he did it, Billy!”

“Impossible!”

“Not at all. Lord Whitfield has committed at least seven murders to my certain knowledge and probably a lot more.”

“Impossible,” said Sir William again.

“My dear fellow, he practically boasted to me of it last night!”

“He’s mad, then?”

“He’s mad, all right, but he’s a cunning devil. You’ll have to go warily. Don’t let him know we suspect him.”

Billy Bones murmured: “Incredible....”

Luke said: “But true!”

He laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Look here, Billy, old son, we must get right down to this. Here are the facts.”

The two men talked long and earnestly.

On the following day Luke returned to Wychwood. He drove down early in the morning. He could have returned the night before but he felt a marked distaste for sleeping under Lord Whitfield’s roof or accepting his hospitality under the circumstances.

On his way through Wychwood, he drew up his car at Miss Waynflete’s house. The maid who opened the door stared at him in astonishment but showed him into the little dining room where Miss Waynflete was sitting at breakfast.

She rose to receive him in some surprise.

He did not waste time. “I must apologize for breaking in on you at this hour.”

He looked round. The maid had left the room, shutting the door. "I'm going to ask you a question, Miss Waynflete. It's rather a personal one, but I think you will forgive me for asking it."

"Please ask me anything you like. I am quite sure your reason for doing so will be a good one."

"Thank you."

He paused.

"I want to know exactly why you broke off your engagement to Lord Whitfield all those years ago."

She had not expected that. The colour rose in her cheeks and one hand went to her breast.

"Has he told you anything?"

Luke replied: "He told me there was something about a bird—a bird whose neck was wrung...."

"He said that?" Her voice was wondering. "He admitted it? That's extraordinary!"

"Will you tell me, please."

"Yes, I will tell you. But I beg that you will never speak of the matter to him—to Gordon. It is all past—all over and finished with—I don't want it—raked up."

She looked at him appealingly.

Luke nodded.

"It is only for my personal satisfaction," he said. "I shall not repeat what you tell me."

“Thank you.” She had recovered her composure. Her voice was quite steady as she went on. “It was like this. I had a little canary—I was very fond of it—and—perhaps—rather silly about it—girls were, then. They were rather—well—coy about their pets. It must have been irritating to a man—I do realize that.”

“Yes,” said Luke as she paused.

“Gordon was jealous of the bird. He said one day quite ill-temperedly, ‘I believe you prefer that bird to me.’ And I, in the rather silly way girls went on in those days, laughed and held it up on my finger saying something like: ‘Of course I love you, dicky bird, better than a great silly boy! Of course I do!’ Then—oh, it was frightening—Gordon snatched the bird from me and wrung its neck. It was such a shock—I shall never forget it!”

Her face had gone very pale.

“And so you broke off the engagement?” said Luke.

“Yes. I couldn’t feel the same afterwards. You see, Mr. Fitzwilliam—” she hesitated. “It wasn’t just the action—that might have been done in a fit of jealousy and temper—it was the awful feeling I had that he’d enjoyed doing it—it was that that frightened me!”

“Even long ago,” murmured Luke. “Even in these days....”

She laid a hand on his arm.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam—”

He met the frightened appeal in her eyes with a grave steady look.

“It is Lord Whitfield who committed all these murders!” he said. “You’ve known that all along, haven’t you?”

She shook her head with vigour.

“Not known it! If I had known it, then—then of course I would have spoken out—no, it was just a fear.”

“And yet you never gave me a hint?”

She clasped her hands in a sudden anguish.

“How could I? How could I? I was fond of him once....”

“Yes,” said Luke gently. “I see.”

She turned away, fumbled in her bag, and a small lace-edged handkerchief was pressed for a moment to her eyes. Then she turned back again, dry-eyed, dignified and composed.

“I am so glad,” she said, “that Bridget has broken off her engagement. She is going to marry you instead, is she not?”

“Yes.”

“That will be much more suitable,” said Miss Waynflete rather primly.

Luke was unable to help smiling a little.

But Miss Waynflete’s face grew grave and anxious. She leaned forward and once more laid a hand on his arm.

“But be very careful,” she said. “Both of you must be very careful.”

“You mean—with Lord Whitfield?”

“Yes. It would be better not to tell him.”

Luke frowned. “I don’t think either of us would like the idea of that.”

“Oh! what does that matter? You don’t seem to realize that he’s mad—mad. He won’t stand it—not for a moment! If anything happens to her—”

“Nothing shall happen to her!”

“Yes, I know—but do realize that you’re not a match for him! He’s so dreadfully cunning! Take her away at once—it’s the only hope. Make her

go abroad! You'd better both go abroad!"

Luke said slowly:

"It might be as well if she went. I shall stay."

"I was afraid you would say that. But at any rate get her away. At once, mind!"

Luke nodded slowly.

"I think," he said, "that you're right."

"I know I'm right! Get her away—before it's too late."

Nineteen

BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

Bridget heard Luke drive up. She came out on the steps to meet him.

She said without preamble:

“I’ve told him.”

“What?” Luke was taken aback.

His dismay was so patent that Bridget noticed it.

“Luke—what is it? You seem quite upset.”

He said slowly:

“I thought we agreed to wait until I came back.”

“I know, but I thought it was better to get it over. He was making plans—for our marriage—our honeymoon—all that! I simply had to tell him!”

She added—a touch of reproach in her voice:

“It was the only decent thing to do.”

He acknowledged it.

“From your point of view, yes. Oh, yes, I see that.”

“From every point of view I should have thought!”

Luke said slowly:

“There are times when one can’t afford—decency!”

“Luke, what do you mean?”

He made an impatient gesture.

“I can’t tell you now and here. How did Whitfield take it?”

Bridget said slowly:

“Extraordinarily well. Really extraordinarily well. I felt ashamed. I believe, Luke, that I’ve underestimated Gordon—just because he’s rather pompous and occasionally futile. I believe really he’s rather—well—a great little man!”

Luke nodded.

“Yes, possibly he is a great man—in ways we haven’t suspected. Look here, Bridget, you must get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Naturally, I shall pack up my things and leave today. You might drive me up to town. I suppose we can’t both go and stay at the Bells and Motley—that is, if the Ellsworthy contingent have left?”

Luke shook his head.

“No, you’d better go back to London. I’ll explain presently. In the meantime I suppose I’d better see Whitfield.”

“I suppose it’s the thing to do—it’s all rather beastly, isn’t it? I feel such a rotten little gold digger.”

Luke smiled at her.

“It was a fair enough bargain. You’d have played straight with him. Anyway, it’s no use lamenting over things that are past and done with! I’ll go in and see Whitfield now.”

He found Lord Whitfield striding up and down the drawing room. He was outwardly calm, there was even a slight smile on his lips. But Luke noticed that a pulse in his temple was beating furiously.

He wheeled round as Luke entered.

“Oh! there you are, Fitzwilliam.”

Luke said:

“It’s no good my saying I’m sorry for what I’ve done—that would be hypocritical! I admit that from your point of view I’ve behaved badly and I’ve very little to say in defence. These things happen.”

Lord Whitfield resumed his pacing.

“Quite—quite!” He waved a hand.

Luke went on:

“Bridget and I have treated you shamefully. But there it is! We care for each other—and there’s nothing to be done about it—except tell you the truth and clear out.”

Lord Whitfield stopped. He looked at Luke with pale protuberant eyes.

“No,” he said, “there’s nothing you can do about it!”

There was a very curious tone in his voice. He stood looking at Luke, gently shaking his head as though in commiseration.

Luke said sharply: “What do you mean?”

“There’s nothing you can do!” said Lord Whitfield. “It’s too late!”

Luke took a step nearer him.

“Tell me what you mean.”

Lord Whitfield said unexpectedly:

“Ask Honoria Waynflete. She’ll understand. She knows what happens. She spoke to me about it once!”

“What does she understand?”

Lord Whitfield said:

“Evil doesn’t go unpunished. There must be justice! I’m sorry because I’m fond of Bridget. In a way I’m sorry for you both!”

Luke said:

“Are you threatening us?”

Lord Whitfield seemed genuinely shocked.

“No, no, my dear fellow. I’ve no feeling in the matter! When I did Bridget the honour to choose her as my wife, she accepted certain responsibilities. Now, she repudiates them—but there’s no going back in this life. If you break laws you pay the penalty....”

Luke clenched both hands. He said:

“You mean that something is going to happen to Bridget? Now understand me, Whitfield, nothing is going to happen to Bridget—nor to me! If you attempt anything of that kind it’s the finish. You’d better be careful! I know a good deal about you!”

“It’s nothing to do with me,” said Lord Whitfield. “I’m only the instrument of a higher Power. What that Power decrees happens!”

“I see you believe that,” said Luke.

“Because it’s the truth! Anyone who goes against me pays the penalty. You and Bridget will be no exception.”

Luke said:

“That’s where you’re wrong. However long a run of luck may be, it breaks in the end. Yours is very near breaking now.”

Lord Whitfield said gently:

“My dear young man, you don’t know who it is you’re talking to. Nothing can touch Me!”

“Can’t it? We’ll see. You’d better watch your step, Whitfield.”

A little ripple of movement passed over the other. His voice had changed when he spoke.

“I’ve been very patient,” said Lord Whitfield. “Don’t strain my patience too far. Get out of here.”

“I’m going,” said Luke. “As quick as I can. Remember that I’ve warned you.”

He turned on his heel and went quickly out of the room. He ran upstairs. He found Bridget in her room superintending the packing of her clothes by a housemaid.

“Ready soon?”

“In ten minutes.”

Her eyes asked a question which the presence of the maid prevented her from putting into words.

Luke gave a short nod.

He went to his own room and flung his things hurriedly into his suitcase.

He returned ten minutes later to find Bridget ready for departure.

“Shall we go now?”

“I’m ready.”

As they descended the staircase they met the butler ascending.

“Miss Waynflete has called to see you, miss.”

“Miss Waynflete? Where is she?”

“In the drawing room with his lordship.”

Bridget went straight to the drawing room, Luke close behind her.

Lord Whitfield was standing by the window talking to Miss Waynflete. He had a knife in his hand—a long slender blade.

“Perfect workmanship,” he was saying. “One of my young men brought it back to me from Morocco where he’d been special correspondent. It’s Moorish, of course, a Riff knife.” He drew a finger lovingly along the blade. “What an edge!”

Miss Waynflete said sharply:

“Put it away, Gordon, for goodness’ sake!”

He smiled and laid it down among a collection of other weapons on a table.

“I like the feel of it,” he said softly.

Miss Waynflete had lost some of her usual poise. She looked white and nervous.

“Ah, there you are, Bridget, my dear,” she said.

Lord Whitfield chuckled.

“Yes, there’s Bridget. Make the most of her, Honoria. She won’t be with us long.”

Miss Waynflete said, sharply:

“What d’you mean?”

“Mean? I mean she’s going to London. That’s right, isn’t it? That’s all I meant.”

He looked round at them all.

“I’ve got a bit of news for you, Honoria,” he said. “Bridget isn’t going to marry me after all. She prefers Fitzwilliam here. A queer thing, life. Well, I’ll leave you to have your talk.”

He went out of the room, his hands jingling the coins in his pockets.

“Oh, dear—” said Miss Waynflete. “Oh, dear—”

The deep distress in her voice was so noticeable that Bridget looked slightly surprised. She said uncomfortably:

“I’m sorry. I really am frightfully sorry.”

Miss Waynflete said:

“He’s angry—he’s frightfully angry—oh, dear, this is terrible. What are we going to do?”

Bridget stared.

“Do? What do you mean?”

Miss Waynflete said, including them both in her reproachful glance:

“You should never have told him!”

Bridget said:

“Nonsense. What else could we do?”

“You shouldn’t have told him now. You should have waited till you’d got right away.”

Bridget said shortly:

“That’s a matter of opinion. I think myself it’s better to get unpleasant things over as quickly as possible.”

“Oh, my dear, if it were only a question of that—”

She stopped. Then her eyes asked a question of Luke.

Luke shook his head. His lips formed the words, “Not yet.”

Miss Waynflete murmured, “I see.”

Bridget said with some slight exasperation:

“Did you want to see me about something in particular, Miss Waynflete?”

“Well—yes. As a matter of fact I came to suggest that you should come and pay me a little visit. I thought—er—you might find it uncomfortable to remain on here and that you might want a few days to—er—well, mature your plans.”

“Thank you, Miss Waynflete, that was very kind of you.”

“You see, you’d be quite safe with me and—”

Bridget interrupted:

“Safe?”

Miss Waynflete, a little flustered, said hurriedly:

“Comfortable—that’s what I meant—quite comfortable with me. I mean, not nearly so luxurious as here, naturally—but the hot water is hot and my little maid Emily really cooks quite nicely.”

“Oh, I’m sure everything would be lovely, Miss Waynflete,” said Bridget mechanically.

“But, of course, if you are going up to town, that is much better....”

Bridget said slowly:

“It’s a little awkward. My aunt went off early to a flower show today. I haven’t had a chance yet to tell her what has happened. I shall leave a note for her telling her I’ve gone up to the flat.”

“You’re going to your aunt’s flat in London?”

“Yes. There’s no one there. But I can go out for meals.”

“You’ll be alone in that flat? Oh, dear, I shouldn’t do that. Not stay there alone.”

“Nobody will eat me,” said Bridget impatiently. “Besides, my aunt will come up tomorrow.”

Miss Waynflete shook her head in a worried manner.

Luke said:

“Better go to a hotel.”

Bridget wheeled round on him.

“Why? What’s the matter with you all? Why are you treating me as though I was an imbecile child?”

“No, no, dear,” protested Miss Waynflete. “We just want you to be careful—that’s all!”

“But why? Why? What’s it all about?”

“Look here, Bridget,” said Luke. “I want to have a talk with you. But I can’t talk here. Come with me now in the car and we’ll go somewhere quiet.”

He looked at Miss Waynflete.

“May we come to your house in about an hour’s time? There are several things I want to say to you.”

“Please do. I will wait for you there.”

Luke put his hand on Bridget's arm. He gave a nod of thanks to Miss Waynflete.

He said: "We'll pick up the luggage later. Come on."

He led her out of the room and along the hall to the front door. He opened the door of the car. Bridget got in. Luke started the engine and drove rapidly down the drive. He gave a sigh of relief as they emerged from the iron gates.

"Thank God I've got you out of there safely," he said.

"Have you gone quite mad, Luke? Why all this 'hush hush—I can't tell you what I mean now'—business?"

Luke said grimly:

"Well, there are difficulties, you know, in explaining that a man's a murderer when you're actually under his roof!"

Twenty

WE'RE IN IT—TOGETHER

Bridget sat for a minute motionless beside him. She said:

“Gordon?”

Luke nodded.

“Gordon? Gordon—a murderer? Gordon the murderer? I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life!”

“That’s how it strikes you?”

“Yes, indeed. Why, Gordon wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Luke said grimly:

“That may be true. I don’t know. But he certainly killed a canary bird, and I’m pretty certain he’s killed a large number of human beings as well.”

“My dear Luke, I simply can’t believe it!”

“I know,” said Luke. “It does sound quite incredible. Why, he never even entered my head as a possible suspect until the night before last.”

Bridget protested:

“But I know all about Gordon! I know what he’s like! He’s really a sweet little man—pompous, yes, but rather pathetic really.”

Luke shook his head. “You’ve got to readjust your ideas about him, Bridget.”

“It’s no good, Luke, I simply can’t believe it! What put such an absurd idea into your head? Why, two days ago you were quite positive it was

Ellsworthy.”

Luke winced slightly.

“I know. I know. You probably think that tomorrow I shall suspect Thomas, and the day after I shall be convinced that it’s Horton I’m after! I’m not really so unbalanced as that. I admit the idea’s completely startling when it first comes to you, but if you look into it a bit closer, you’ll see that it all fits in remarkably well. No wonder Miss Pinkerton didn’t dare to go to the local authorities. She knew they’d laugh at her! Scotland Yard was her only hope.”

“But what possible motive could Gordon have for all this killing business? Oh, it’s all so silly!”

“I know. But don’t you realize that Gordon Whitfield has a very exalted opinion of himself?”

Bridget said: “He pretends to be very wonderful and very important. That’s just inferiority complex, poor lamb!”

“Possibly that’s at the root of the trouble. I don’t know. But think, Bridget—just think a minute. Remember all the phrases you’ve used laughingly yourself about him—lèse-majesté, etc. Don’t you realize that the man’s ego is swollen out of all proportion? And it’s allied with religion. My dear girl, the man’s as mad as a hatter!”

Bridget thought for a minute.

She said at last: “I still can’t believe it. What evidence have you got, Luke?”

“Well, there are his own words. He told me, quite plainly and distinctly, the night before last, that anyone who opposed him in any way always died.”

“Go on.”

“I can’t quite explain to you what I mean—but it was the way he said it. Quite calm and complacent and—how shall I put it?—quite used to the

idea! He just sat there smiling to himself...It was uncanny and rather horrible, Bridget!”

“Go on.”

“Well, then he went on to give me a list of people who’d passed out because they’d incurred his sovereign displeasure! And, listen to this, Bridget, the people he mentioned were Mrs. Horton, Amy Gibbs, Tommy Pierce, Harry Carter, Humbleby, and that chauffeur fellow, Rivers.”

Bridget was shaken at last. She went very pale.

“He mentioned those actual people?”

“Those actual people! Now do you believe?”

“Oh, God, I suppose I must...What were his reasons?”

“Horribly trivial—that’s what made it so frightening. Mrs. Horton had snubbed him, Tommy Pierce had done imitations of him and made the gardeners laugh, Harry Carter had abused him, Amy Gibbs had been grossly impertinent, Humbleby had dared to oppose him publicly, Rivers threatened him before me and Miss Waynflete—”

Bridget put her hands to her eyes.

“Horrible...Quite horrible...” she murmured.

“I know. Then there’s some other outside evidence. The car that ran down Miss Pinkerton in London was a Rolls, and its number was the number of Lord Whitfield’s car.”

“That definitely clinches it,” said Bridget slowly.

“Yes. The police thought the woman who gave them that number must have made a mistake. Mistake indeed!”

“I can understand that,” said Bridget. “When it comes to a rich, powerful man like Lord Whitfield, naturally his story is the one to be believed!”

“Yes. One appreciates Miss Pinkerton’s difficulty.”

Bridget said thoughtfully:

“Once or twice she said rather queer things to me. As though she were warning me against something...I didn’t understand in the least at the time...I see now!”

“It all fits in,” said Luke. “That’s the way of it. At first one says (as you said), “Impossible!” and then once one accepts the idea, everything fits in! The grapes he sent to Mrs. Horton—and she thought the nurses were poisoning her! And that visit of his to the Wellerman Kreutz Institute—somehow or other he must have got hold of some culture of germs and infected Humbleby.”

“I don’t see how he managed that.”

“I don’t either, but the connection is there. One can’t get away from that.”

“No...As you say, if fits. And of course he could do things that other people couldn’t! I mean he would be so completely above suspicion!”

“I think Miss Waynflete suspected. She mentioned that visit to the institute. Brought it into conversation quite casually—but I believe she hoped I’d act upon it.”

“She knew, then, all along?”

“She had a very strong suspicion. I think she was handicapped by having once been in love with him.”

Bridget nodded.

“Yes, that accounts for several things. Gordon told me they had once been engaged.”

“She wanted, you see, not to believe it was him. But she became more and more sure that it was. She tried to give me hints, but she couldn’t bear to do

anything outright against him! Women are odd creatures! I think, in a way, she still cares about him....”

“Even after he jilted her?”

“She jilted him. It was rather an ugly story. I’ll tell you.”

He recounted the short, ugly episode. Bridget stared at him.

“Gordon did that?”

“Yes. Even in those days, you see, he can’t have been normal!”

Bridget shivered and murmured:

“All those years ago...all those years....”

Luke said:

“He may have got rid of a lot more people than we shall ever know about! It’s just the rapid succession of deaths lately that drew attention to him! As though he’d got reckless with success!”

Bridget nodded. She was silent for a minute or two, thinking, then she asked abruptly:

“What exactly did Miss Pinkerton say to you—in the train that day? How did she begin?”

Luke cast his mind back.

“Told me she was going to Scotland Yard, mentioned the village constable, said he was a nice fellow but not up to dealing with murder.”

“That was the first mention of the word?”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“Then she said, ‘You’re surprised, I can see. I was myself at first. I really couldn’t believe it. I thought I must be imagining things.’”

“And then?”

“I asked her if she was sure she wasn’t—imagining things, I mean—and she said quite placidly, ‘Oh, no! I might have been the first time, but not the second, or the third or the fourth. After that one knows.’”

“Marvellous,” commented Bridget. “Go on.”

“So of course I humoured her—said I was sure she was doing the right thing. I was an unbelieving Thomas if there ever was one!”

“I know. So easy to be wise after the event! I’d have felt the same, nice and superior to the poor old dame! How did the conversation go on?”

“Let me see—oh! she mentioned the Abercrombie case—you know, the Welsh poisoner. Said she hadn’t really believed that there had been a look—a special look—that he gave his victims. But that she believed it now because she had seen it herself.”

“What words did she use exactly?”

Luke thought, creasing his brow.

“She said, still in that nice ladylike voice, ‘Of course, I didn’t really believe that when I read about it—but it’s true.’ And I said, ‘What’s true?’ And she said, ‘The look on a person’s face.’ And by Jove, Bridget, the way she said that absolutely got me! Her quiet voice and the look on her face—like someone who had really seen something almost too horrible to speak about!”

“Go on, Luke. Tell me everything.”

“And then she enumerated the victims—Amy Gibbs and Carter and Tommy Pierce, and said that Tommy was a horrid boy and Carter drank. And then she said, ‘But now—yesterday—it was Dr. Humbleby—and he’s such a

good man—a really good man.’ And she said if she went to Humbleby and told him, he wouldn’t believe her, he’d only laugh!”

Bridget gave a deep sigh.

“I see,” she said. “I see.”

Luke looked at her.

“What is it, Bridget? What are you thinking of?”

“Something Mrs. Humbleby once said. I wondered—no, never mind, go on. What was it she said to you right at the end?”

Luke repeated the words soberly. They had made an impression on him and he was not likely to forget them.

“I’d said it was difficult to get away with a lot of murders, and she answered, ‘No, no, my dear boy, that’s where you’re wrong. It’s very easy to kill—so long as no one suspects you. And you see, the person in question is just the last person anyone would suspect....’”

He was silent. Bridget said with a shiver:

“Easy to kill? Horribly easy—that’s true enough! No wonder those words stuck in your mind, Luke. They’ll stick in mine—all my life! A man like Gordon Whitfield—oh! of course it’s easy.”

“It’s not so easy to bring it home to him,” said Luke.

“Don’t you think so? I’ve an idea I can help there.”

“Bridget, I forbid you—”

“You can’t. One can’t just sit back and play safe. I’m in this, Luke. It may be dangerous—yes, I’ll admit that—but I’ve got to play my part.”

“Bridget—”

“I’m in this, Luke! I shall accept Miss Waynflete’s invitation and stay down here.”

“My darling, I implore you—”

“It’s dangerous for both of us. I know that. But we’re in it, Luke—we’re in it—together!”

Twenty-one

“O WHY DO YOU WALK THROUGH THE FIELDS IN GLOVES?”

The calm interior of Miss Waynflete's house was almost an anti-climax after that tense moment in the car.

Miss Waynflete received Bridget's acceptance of her invitation a little doubtfully, hastening, however, to reiterate her offer of hospitality by way of showing that her doubts were due to quite another cause than unwillingness to receive the girl.

Luke said:

“I really think it will be the best thing, since you are so kind, Miss Waynflete. I am staying at the Bells and Motley. I'd rather have Bridget under my eye than up in town. After all, remember what happened there before.”

Miss Waynflete said:

“You mean—Lavinia Pinkerton?”

“Yes. You would have said, wouldn't you, that anyone would be quite safe in the middle of a crowded city.”

“You mean,” said Miss Waynflete, “that anyone's safety depends principally on the fact that nobody wishes to kill them?”

“Exactly. We have come to depend upon what has been called the goodwill of civilization.”

Miss Waynflete nodded her head thoughtfully.

Bridget said:

“How long have you known that—that Gordon was the killer, Miss Waynflete?”

Miss Waynflete sighed.

“That is a difficult question to answer, my dear. I suppose that I have been quite sure, in my inmost heart, for sometime...But I did my best not to recognize that belief! You see, I didn’t want to believe it and so I pretended to myself that it was a wicked and monstrous idea on my part.”

Luke said bluntly:

“Have you never been afraid—for yourself?”

Miss Waynflete considered.

“You mean that if Gordon had suspected that I knew, he would have found some means of getting rid of me?”

“Yes.”

Miss Waynflete said gently:

“I have, of course, been alive to that possibility...I tried to be—careful of myself. But I do not think that Gordon would have considered me a real menace.”

“Why?”

Miss Waynflete flushed a little.

“I don’t think that Gordon would ever believe that I would do anything to—to bring him into danger.”

Luke said abruptly:

“You went as far, didn’t you, as to warn him?”

“Yes. That is, I did hint to him that it was odd that anyone who displeased him should shortly meet with an accident.”

Bridget demanded:

“And what did he say?”

A worried expression passed over Miss Waynflete’s face.

“He didn’t react at all in the way I meant. He seemed—really it’s most extraordinary!—he seemed pleased...He said, ‘So you’ve noticed that?’ He quite—quite preened himself, if I may use that expression.”

“He’s mad, of course,” said Luke.

Miss Waynflete agreed eagerly.

“Yes, indeed, there isn’t any other explanation possible. He’s not responsible for his acts.” She laid a hand on Luke’s arm. “They—they won’t hang him, will they, Mr. Fitzwilliam?”

“No, no. Send him to Broadmoor, I expect.”

Miss Waynflete sighed and leaned back.

“I’m so glad.”

Her eyes rested on Bridget, who was frowning down at the carpet.

Luke said:

“But we’re a long way from all that still. I’ve notified the powers that be and I can say this much, they’re prepared to take the matter seriously. But you must realize that we’ve got remarkably little evidence to go upon.”

“We’ll get evidence,” said Bridget.

Miss Waynflete looked up at her. There was some quality in her expression that reminded Luke of someone or something that he had seen not long ago.

He tried to pin down the elusive memory but failed.

Miss Waynflete said doubtfully:

“You are confident, my dear. Well, perhaps you are right.”

Luke said:

“I’ll go along with the car, Bridget, and fetch your things from the Manor.”

Bridget said immediately:

“I’ll come too.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Yes, but I’d rather come.”

Luke said irritably:

“Don’t do the mother and child act with me, Bridget! I refuse to be protected by you.”

Miss Waynflete murmured:

“I really think, Bridget, that it will be quite all right—in a car—and in daylight.”

Bridget gave a slightly shamefaced laugh.

“I’m being rather an idiot. This business gets on one’s nerves.”

Luke said:

“Miss Waynflete protected me home the other night. Come now, Miss Waynflete, admit it! You did, didn’t you?”

She admitted it, smiling.

“You see, Mr. Fitzwilliam, you were so completely unsuspecting! And if Gordon Whitfield had really grasped the fact that you were down here to look into this business and for no other reason—well, it wasn’t very safe. And that’s a very lonely lane—anything might have happened!”

“Well, I’m alive to the danger now all right,” said Luke grimly. “I shan’t be caught napping, I can assure you.”

Miss Waynflete said anxiously:

“Remember, he is very cunning. And much cleverer than you would ever imagine! Really, a most ingenious mind.”

“I’m forewarned.”

“Men have courage—one knows that,” said Miss Waynflete, “but they are more easily deceived than women.”

“That’s true,” said Bridget.

Luke said:

“Seriously, Miss Waynflete, do you really think that I am in any danger? Do you think, in film parlance, that Lord Whitfield is really out to get me?”

Miss Waynflete hesitated.

“I think,” she said, “that the principal danger is to Bridget. It is her rejection of him that is the supreme insult! I think that after he has dealt with Bridget he will turn his attention to you. But I think that undoubtedly he will try for her first.”

Luke groaned.

“I wish to goodness you’d go abroad—now—at once, Bridget.”

Bridget’s lips set themselves together.

“I’m not going.”

Miss Waynflete sighed.

“You are a brave creature, Bridget. I admire you.”

“You’d do the same in my place.”

“Well, perhaps.”

Bridget said, her voice dropping to a full, rich note:

“Luke and I are in this together.”

She went out with him to the door. Luke said:

“I’ll give you a ring from the Bells and Motley when I’m safely out of the lion’s den.”

“Yes, do.”

“My sweet, don’t let’s get all het up! Even the most accomplished murderers have to have a little time to mature their plans! I should say we’re quite all right for a day or two. Superintendent Battle is coming down from London today. From then on Whitfield will be under observation.”

“In fact, everything is OK, and we can cut out the melodrama.”

Luke said gravely, laying a hand on her shoulder:

“Bridget, my sweet, you will oblige me by not doing anything rash!”

“Same to you, darling Luke.”

He squeezed her shoulder, jumped into the car and drove off.

Bridget returned to the sitting room. Miss Waynflete was fussing a little in a gentle spinsterish manner.

“My dear, your room’s not quite ready yet. Emily is seeing to it. Do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to get you a nice cup of tea! It’s just

what you need after all these upsetting incidents.”

“It’s frightfully kind of you, Miss Waynflete, but I really don’t want any.”

What Bridget would have liked was a strong cocktail, mainly composed of gin, but she rightly judged that that form of refreshment was not likely to be forthcoming. She disliked tea intensely. It usually gave her indigestion. Miss Waynflete, however, had decided that tea was what her young guest needed. She bustled out of the room and reappeared about five minutes later, her face beaming, carrying a tray on which stood two dainty Dresden cups full of a fragrant, steaming beverage.

“Real Lapsang Souchong,” said Miss Waynflete proudly.

Bridget, who disliked China tea even more than Indian, gave a wan smile.

At that moment Emily, a small clumsy-looking girl with pronounced adenoids, appeared in the doorway and said:

“If you please, biss—did you bean the frilled billowcases?”

Miss Waynflete hurriedly left the room, and Bridget took advantage of the respite to pour her tea out of the window, narrowly escaping scalding Wonky Pooh, who was on the flower bed below.

Wonky Pooh accepted her apologies, sprang up on the windowsill and proceeded to wind himself in and out over Bridget’s shoulders, purring in an affected manner.

“Handsome!” said Bridget, drawing a hand down his back.

Wonky Pooh arched his tail and purred with redoubled vigour.

“Nice pussy,” said Bridget, tickling his ears.

Miss Waynflete returned at that minute.

“Dear me,” she exclaimed. “Wonky Pooh has quite taken to you, hasn’t he? He’s so standoffish as a rule! Mind his ear, my dear, he’s had a bad ear

lately and it's still very painful."

The injunction came too late. Bridget's hand had tweaked the painful ear. Wonky Pooh spat at her and retired, a mass of orange offended dignity.

"Oh, dear, has he scratched you?" cried Miss Waynflete.

"Nothing much," said Bridget, sucking a diagonal scratch on the back of her hand.

"Shall I put some iodine on?"

"Oh, no, it's quite all right. Don't let's fuss."

Miss Waynflete seemed a little disappointed. Feeling that she had been ungracious, Bridget said hastily:

"I wonder how long Luke will be?"

"Now don't worry, my dear. I'm sure Mr. Fitzwilliam is well able to look after himself."

"Oh, Luke's tough all right!"

At that moment the telephone rang. Bridget hurried to it. Luke's voice spoke.

"Hallo? That you, Bridget? I'm at the Bells and Motley. Can you wait for your traps till after lunch? Because Battle has arrived here—you know who I mean—"

"The superintendent man from Scotland Yard?"

"Yes. And he wants to have a talk with me right away."

"That's all right by me. Bring my things round after lunch and tell me what he says about it all."

"Right. So long, my sweet."

“So long.”

Bridget replaced the receiver and retailed the conversation to Miss Waynflete. Then she yawned. A feeling of fatigue had succeeded her excitement.

Miss Waynflete noticed it.

“You’re tired, my dear! You’d better lie down—no, perhaps that would be a bad thing just before lunch. I was just going to take some old clothes to a woman in a cottage not very far away—quite a pretty walk over the fields. Perhaps you’d care to come with me? We’ll just have time before lunch.”

Bridget agreed willingly.

They went out the back way. Miss Waynflete wore a straw hat and, to Bridget’s amusement, had put on gloves.

“We might be going to Bond Street!” she thought to herself.

Miss Waynflete chatted pleasantly of various small village matters as they walked. They went across two fields, crossed a rough lane and then took a path leading through a ragged copse. The day was hot and Bridget found the shade of the trees pleasant.

Miss Waynflete suggested that they should sit down and rest a minute.

“It’s really rather oppressively warm today, don’t you think? I fancy there must be thunder about!”

Bridget acquiesced somewhat sleepily. She lay back against the bank—her eyes half-closed—some lines of poetry wandering through her brain.

“O why do you walk through the fields in gloves

O fat white woman whom nobody loves?”

But that wasn’t quite right! Miss Waynflete wasn’t fat. She amended the words to fit the case.

“O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,

O lean grey woman whom nobody loves?”

Miss Waynflete broke in upon her thoughts.

“You’re very sleepy, dear, aren’t you?”

The words were said in a gentle everyday tone, but something in them jerked Bridget’s eyes suddenly open.

Miss Waynflete was leaning forward towards her. Her eyes were eager, her tongue passed gently over her lips. She repeated her question:

“You’re very sleepy, aren’t you?”

This time there was no mistaking the definite significance of the tone. A flash passed through Bridget’s brain—a lightning flash of comprehension, succeeded by one of contempt at her own density!

She had suspected the truth—but it had been no more than a dim suspicion. She had meant, working quietly and secretly, to make sure. But not for one moment had she realized that anything was to be attempted against herself. She had, she thought, concealed her suspicious entirely. Nor would she have dreamed that anything would be contemplated so soon. Fool—seven times fool!

And she thought suddenly:

“The tea—there was something in the tea. She doesn’t know I never drank it. Now’s my chance! I must pretend! What stuff was it, I wonder? Poison? Or just sleeping stuff? She expects me to be sleepy—that’s evident.”

She let her eyelids droop again. In what she hoped was a natural drowsy voice, she said:

“I do—frightfully...How funny! I don’t know when I’ve felt so sleepy.”

Miss Waynflete nodded softly.

Bridget watched the older woman narrowly through her almost closed eyes.

She thought:

“I’m a match for her anyway! My muscles are pretty tough—she’s a skinny frail old pussy. But I’ve got to make her talk—that’s it—make her talk!”

Miss Waynflete was smiling. It was not a nice smile. It was sly and not very human.

Bridget thought:

“She’s like a goat. God! how like a goat she is! A goat’s always been an evil symbol! I see why now! I was right—I was right in that fantastic idea of mine! Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned...That was the start of it—it’s all there.”

She murmured, and this time her voice held a definite note of apprehension.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me...I feel so queer—so very queer!”

Miss Waynflete gave a swift glance round her. The spot was entirely desolate. It was too far from the village for a shout to be heard. There were no houses or cottages near. She began to fumble with the parcel she carried—the parcel that was supposed to contain old clothes. Apparently it did. The paper came apart, revealing a soft woolly garment. And still those gloved hands fumbled and fumbled.

“O why do you walk through the fields in gloves?”

“Yes—why? Why gloves?”

Of course! Of course! The whole thing so beautifully planned!

The wrapping fell aside. Carefully, Miss Waynflete extracted the knife, holding it very carefully so as not to obliterate the fingerprints which were already on it—where the short podgy fingers of Lord Whitfield had held it earlier that day in the drawing room at Ashe Manor.

The Moorish knife with the sharp blade.

Bridget felt slightly sick. She must play for time—yes and she must make the woman talk—this lean, grey woman whom nobody loved. It ought not to be difficult—not really. Because she must want to talk, oh, so badly—and the only person she could ever talk to was someone like Bridget—someone who was going to be silenced for ever.

Bridget said—in a faint, thick voice:

“What’s—that—knife?”

And then Miss Waynflete laughed.

It was a horrible laugh, soft and musical and ladylike, and quite inhuman. She said:

“It’s for you, Bridget. For you! I’ve hated you, you know, for a very long time.”

Bridget said:

“Because I was going to marry Gordon Whitfield?”

Miss Waynflete nodded.

“You’re clever. You’re quite clever! This, you see, will be the crowning proof against him. You’ll be found here, with your throat cut—and—his knife, and his fingerprints on the knife! Clever the way I asked to see it this morning!

“And then I slipped it into my bag wrapped in a handkerchief whilst you were upstairs. So easy! But the whole thing has been easy. I would hardly have believed it.”

Bridget said—still in the thick, muffled voice of a person heavily drugged:

“That’s—because—you’re—so—devilishly—clever....”

Miss Waynflete laughed her ladylike little laugh again. She said with a horrible kind of pride:

“Yes, I always had brains, even as a girl! But they wouldn’t let me do anything...I had to stay at home—doing nothing. And then Gordon—just a common boot-maker’s son, but he had ambition, I knew. I knew he would rise in the world. And he jilted me—jilted me! All because of that ridiculous business with the bird.”

Her hands made a queer gesture as though she were twisting something.

Again a wave of sickness passed over Bridget.

“Gordon Ragg daring to jilt me—Colonel Waynflete’s daughter! I swore I’d pay him out for that! I used to think about it night after night...And then we got poorer and poorer. The house had to be sold. He bought it! He came along patronizing me, offering me a job in my own old home. How I hated him then! But I never showed my feelings. We were taught that as girls—a most valuable training. That, I always think, is where breeding tells.”

She was silent a minute. Bridget watched her, hardly daring to breathe lest she should stem the flow of words.

Miss Waynflete went on softly:

“All the time I was thinking and thinking...First of all I just thought of killing him. That’s when I began to read up criminology—quietly, you know—in the library. And really I found my reading came in most useful more than once later. The door of Amy’s room, for instance, turning the key in the lock from the outside with pincers after I’d changed the bottles by her bed. How she snored, that girl, quite disgusting, it was!”

She paused.

“Let me see, where was I?”

That gift which Bridget had cultivated, which had charmed Lord Whitfield, the gift of the perfect listener, stood her in good stead now. Honoria

Waynflete might be a homicidal maniac but she was also something much more common than that. She was a human being who wanted to talk about herself. And with that class of human being Bridget was well fitted to cope.

She said, and her voice had exactly the right invitation in it:

“You meant at first to kill him—”

“Yes, but that didn’t satisfy me—much too ordinary—it had to be something better than just killing. And then I got this idea. It just came to me. He should suffer for committing a lot of crimes of which he was quite innocent. He should be a murderer! He should be hanged for my crimes. Or else they’d say he was mad and he would be shut up all his life...That might be even better.”

She giggled now. A horrible little giggle...Her eyes were light and staring with queer elongated pupils.

“As I told you, I read a lot of books on crime. I chose my victims carefully—there was not to be too much suspicion at first. You see,” her voice deepened, “I enjoyed the killing...That disagreeable woman, Lydia Horton—she’d patronized me—once she referred to me as an old maid. I was glad when Gordon quarrelled with her. Two birds with one stone, I thought! Such fun, sitting by her bedside and slipping the arsenic in her tea, and then going out and telling the nurse how Mrs. Horton had complained of the bitter taste of Lord Whitfield’s grapes! The stupid woman never repeated that, which was such a pity.

“And then the others! As soon as I heard that Gordon had a grievance against anyone, it was so easy to arrange for an accident! And he was such a fool—such an incredible fool! I made him believe that there was something very special about him! That anyone who went against him suffered. He believed it quite easily. Poor dear Gordon, he’d believe anything. So gullible!”

Bridget thought of herself saying to Luke scornfully:

“Gordon! He could believe anything!”

Easy? How easy! Poor pompous credulous little Gordon.

But she must learn more! Easy? This was easy too! She'd done it as a secretary for years. Quietly encouraged her employers to talk about themselves. And this woman wanted badly to talk, to boast about her own cleverness.

Bridget murmured:

"But how did you manage it all? I don't see how you could."

"Oh, it was quite easy! It just needed organisation! When Amy was discharged from the Manor I engaged her at once. I think the hat paint idea was quite clever—and the door being locked on the inside made me quite safe. But of course I was always safe because I never had any motive, and you can't suspect anyone of murder if there isn't a motive. Carter was quite easy too—he was lurching about in the fog and I caught up with him on the footbridge and gave him a quick push. I'm really very strong, you know."

She paused and the soft horrible little giggle came again.

"The whole thing was such fun! I shall never forget Tommy's face when I pushed him off the windowsill that day. He hadn't the least idea...."

She leaned towards Bridget confidentially.

"People are really very stupid, you know. I'd never realized that before."

Bridget said very softly:

"But then—you're unusually clever."

"Yes—yes—perhaps you're right."

Bridget said:

"Dr. Humbleby—that must have been more difficult?"

“Yes, it was really amazing how that succeeded. It might not have worked, of course. But Gordon had been talking to everybody of his visit to the Wellerman Kreutz Institute, and I thought if I could manage it so that people remembered that visit and connected it afterwards. And Wonky Pooh’s ear was really very nasty, a lot of discharge. I managed to run the point of my scissors into the doctor’s hand, and then I was so distressed and insisted on putting on a dressing and bandaging it up. He didn’t know the dressing had been infected first from Wonky Pooh’s ear. Of course, it mightn’t have worked—it was just a long shot. I was delighted when it did—especially as Wonky Pooh had been Lavinia’s cat.”

Her face darkened.

“Lavinia Pinkerton! She guessed...It was she who found Tommy that day. And then when Gordon and old Dr. Humbleby had that row, she caught me looking at Humbleby. I was off my guard. I was just wondering exactly how I’d do it...And she knew! I turned round to find her watching me and—I gave myself away. I saw that she knew. She couldn’t prove anything, of course. I knew that. But I was afraid all the same someone might believe her. I was afraid they might believe her at Scotland Yard. I felt sure that was where she was going that day. I was in the same train and I followed her.

“The whole thing was so easy. She was on an island crossing Whitehall. I was close behind her. She never saw me. A big car came along and I shoved with all my might. I’m very strong! She went right down in front of it. I told the woman next to me I’d seen the number of the car and gave her the number of Gordon’s Rolls. I hoped she’d repeat it to the police.

“It was lucky the car didn’t stop. Some chauffeur joyriding without his master’s knowledge, I suspect. Yes, I was lucky there. I’m always lucky. That scene the other day with Rivers, and Luke Fitzwilliam as witness. I’ve had such fun leading him along! Odd how difficult it was to make him suspect Gordon. But after Rivers’s death he would be sure to do so. He must!

“And now—well, this will just finish the whole thing nicely.”

She got up and came towards Bridget. She said softly:

“Gordon jilted me! He was going to marry you. All my life I’ve been disappointed. I’ve had nothing—nothing at all....”

“O lean grey woman whom nobody loves...”

She was bending over her, smiling, with mad light eyes...The knife gleamed....

With all her youth and strength, Bridget sprang. Like a tiger cat, she flung herself full force on the other woman, knocking her back, seizing her right wrist.

Taken by surprise, Honoria Waynflete fell back before the onslaught. But then, after a moment’s inertia, she began to fight. In strength there was no comparison between them. Bridget was young and healthy with muscles toughened by games. Honoria Waynflete was a slender-built, frail creature.

But there was one factor on which Bridget had not reckoned. Honoria Waynflete was mad. Her strength was the strength of the insane. She fought like a devil and her insane strength was stronger than the sane muscled strength of Bridget. They swayed to and fro, and still Bridget strove to wrest the knife away from her, and still Honoria Waynflete hung on to it.

And then, little by little, the mad woman’s strength began to prevail. Bridget cried out now:

“Luke...Help...Help...”

But she had no hope of help coming. She and Honoria Waynflete were alone. Alone in a dead world. With a supreme effort she wrenched the other’s wrist back, and at last she heard the knife fall.

The next minute Honoria Waynflete’s two hands had fastened round her neck in a maniac grasp, squeezing the life out of her. She gave one last choked cry....

Twenty-two

MRS. HUMBLEBY SPEAKS

Luke was favourably impressed by the appearance of Superintendent Battle. He was a solid, comfortable-looking man with a broad red face and a large handsome moustache. He did not exactly express brilliance at a first glance, but a second glance was apt to make an observant person thoughtful, for Superintendent Battle's eye was unusually shrewd.

Luke did not make the mistake of underestimating him. He had met men of Battle's type before. He knew that they could be trusted, and that they invariably got results. He could not have wished for a better man to be put in charge of the case.

When they were alone together Luke said:

"You're rather a big noise to be sent down on a case like this?"

Superintendent Battle smiled.

"It may turn out to be a serious business, Mr. Fitzwilliam. When a man like Lord Whitfield is concerned, we don't want to have any mistakes."

"I appreciate that. Are you alone?"

"Oh, no. Got a detective-sergeant with me. He's at the other pub, the Seven Stars, and his job is to keep an eye on his lordship."

"I see."

Battle asked:

"In your opinion, Mr. Fitzwilliam, there's no doubt whatever? You're pretty sure of your man?"

“On the facts I don’t see that any alternative theory is possible. Do you want me to give you the facts?”

“I’ve had them, thank you, from Sir William.”

“Well, what do you think? I suppose it seems to you wildly unlikely that a man in Lord Whitfield’s position should be a homicidal criminal?”

“Very few things seem unlikely to me,” said Superintendent Battle.

“Nothing’s impossible in crime. That’s what I’ve always said. If you were to tell me that a dear old maiden lady, or an archbishop, or a schoolgirl, was a dangerous criminal, I wouldn’t say no. I’d look into the matter.”

“If you’ve heard the main facts of the case from Sir William, I’ll just tell you what happened this morning,” said Luke.

He ran over briefly the main lines of his scene with Lord Whitfield. Superintendent Battle listened with a good deal of interest.

He said:

“You say he was fingering a knife. Did he make a special point of that knife, Mr. Fitzwilliam? Was he threatening with it?”

“Not openly. He tested the edge in a rather nasty way—a kind of æsthetic pleasure about that that I didn’t care about. Miss Waynflete felt the same, I believe.”

“That’s the lady you spoke about—the one who’s known Lord Whitfield all her life, and was once engaged to marry him?”

“That’s right.”

Superintendent Battle said:

“I think you can make your mind easy about the young lady, Mr. Fitzwilliam. I’ll have someone put on to keep a sharp watch on her. With that, and with Jackson tailing his lordship, there ought to be no danger of anything happening.”

“You relieve my mind a good deal,” said Luke.

The superintendent nodded sympathetically.

“It’s a nasty position for you, Mr. Fitzwilliam. Worrying about Miss Conway. Mind you, I don’t expect this will be an easy case. Lord Whitfield must be a pretty shrewd man. He will probably lie low for a good long while. That is, unless he’s got to the last stage.”

“What do you call the last stage?”

“A kind of swollen egoism where a criminal thinks he simply can’t be found out! He’s too clever and everybody else is too stupid! Then, of course, we get him!”

Luke nodded. He rose.

“Well,” he said, “I wish you luck. Let me help in any way I can.”

“Certainly.”

“There’s nothing that you can suggest?”

Battle turned the question over in his mind.

“I don’t think so. Not at the moment. I just want to get the general hang of things in the place. Perhaps I could have another word with you in the evening?”

“Rather.”

“I shall know better where we are then.”

Luke felt vaguely comforted and soothed. Many people had had that feeling after an interview with Superintendent Battle.

He glanced at his watch. Should he go round and see Bridget before lunch?

Better not, he thought. Miss Waynflete might feel that she had to ask him to stay for the meal, and it might disorganize her housekeeping. Middle-aged ladies, Luke knew from experience with aunts, were liable to be fussed over problems of housekeeping. He wondered if Miss Waynflete was an aunt? Probably.

He had strolled out to the door of the inn. A figure in black hurrying down the street stopped suddenly when she saw him.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam.”

“Mrs. Humbleby.”

He came forward and shook hands.

She said:

“I thought you had left?”

“No—only changed my quarters. I’m staying here now.”

“And Bridget? I heard she had left Ashe Manor?”

“Yes, she has.”

Mrs. Humbleby sighed.

“I am so glad—so very glad she has gone right away from Wychwood.”

“Oh, she’s still here. As a matter of fact, she’s staying with Miss Waynflete.”

Mrs. Humbleby moved back a step. Her face, Luke noted with surprise, looked extraordinarily distressed.

“Staying with Honoria Waynflete? Oh, but why?”

“Miss Waynflete very kindly asked her to stay for a few days.”

Mrs. Humbleby gave a little shiver. She came close to Luke and laid a hand on his arm.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam, I know I have no right to say anything—anything at all. I have had a lot of sorrow and grief lately and—perhaps—it makes me fanciful! These feelings of mine may be only sick fancies.”

Luke said gently:

“What feelings?”

“This conviction I have of—of evil!”

She looked timidly at Luke. Seeing that he merely bowed his head gravely and did not appear to question her statement, she went on:

“So much wickedness—that is the thought that is always with me—wickedness here in Wychwood. And that woman is at the bottom of it all. I am sure of it!”

Luke was mystified.

“What woman?”

Mrs. Humbleby said:

“Honorina Waynflete is, I am sure, a very wicked woman! Oh, I see, you don’t believe me! No one believed Lavinia Pinkerton either. But we both felt it. She, I think, knew more than I did...Remember, Mr. Fitzwilliam, if a woman is not happy she is capable of terrible things.”

Luke said gently:

“That may be—yes.”

Mrs. Humbleby said quickly:

“You don’t believe me? Well, why should you? But I can’t forget the day when John came home with his hand bound up from her house, though he

pooh-poohed it and said it was only a scratch.”

She turned.

“Good-bye. Please forget what I have just said. I—I don’t feel quite myself these days.”

Luke watched her go. He wondered why Mrs. Humbleby called Honoria Waynflete a wicked woman. Had Dr. Humbleby and Honoria Waynflete been friends, and was the doctor’s wife jealous?

What had she said? “Nobody believed Lavinia Pinkerton either.” Then Lavinia Pinkerton must have confided some of her suspicions to Mrs. Humbleby.

With a rush the memory of the railway carriage came back, and the worried face of a nice old lady. He heard again an earnest voice saying, “The look on a person’s face.” And the way her own face had changed as though she were seeing something very clearly in her mind. Just for a moment, he thought, her face had been quite different, the lips drawn back from the teeth and a queer, almost gloating look in her eyes.

He suddenly thought: But I’ve seen someone look just like that—that same expression...Quite lately—when? This morning! Of course! Miss Waynflete, when she was looking at Bridget in the drawing room at the Manor.

And quite suddenly another memory assailed him. One of many years ago. His Aunt Mildred saying, “She looked, you know, my dear, quite half-witted!” and just for a minute her own sane comfortable face had borne an imbecile, mindless expression....

Lavinia Pinkerton had been speaking of the look she had seen on a man’s—no, a person’s face. Was it possible that, just for a second, her vivid imagination had reproduced the look that she saw—the look of a murderer looking at his next victim....

Half unaware of what he was doing, Luke quickened his pace towards Miss Waynflete's house.

A voice in his brain was saying over and over again:

“Not a man—she never mentioned a man—you assumed it was a man because you were thinking of a man—but she never said so...Oh, God, am I quite mad? It isn't possible what I'm thinking...surely it isn't possible—it wouldn't make sense...But I must get to Bridget. I must know she's all right...Those eyes—those queer, light amber eyes. Oh, I'm mad! I must be mad! Whitfield's the criminal! He must be. He practically said so!”

And still, like a nightmare, he saw Miss Pinkerton's face in its momentary impersonation of something horrible and not quite sane.

The stunted little maid opened the door to him. A little startled by his vehemence, she said:

“The lady's gone out. Miss Waynflete told me so. I'll see if Miss Waynflete's in.”

He pushed past her, went into the drawing room. Emily ran upstairs. She came down breathless.

“The mistress is out too.”

Luke took her by the shoulder.

“Which way? Where did they go?”

She gaped at him.

“They must have gone out by the back. I'd have seen them if they'd gone out frontways because the kitchen looks out there.”

She followed him as he raced out through the door into the tiny garden and out beyond. There was a man clipping a hedge. Luke went up to him and asked a question, striving to keep his voice normal.

The man said slowly:

“Two ladies? Yes. Some while since. I was having my dinner under the hedge. Reckon they didn’t notice me.”

“Which way did they go?”

He strove desperately to make his voice normal. Yet the other’s eyes opened a little wider as he replied slowly:

“Across them fields...Over that way. I don’t know where after that.”

Luke thanked him and began to run. His strong feeling of urgency was deepened. He must catch up with them—he must! He might be quite mad. In all probability they were just taking an amicable stroll, but something in him clamoured for haste. More haste!

He crossed the two fields, stood hesitating in a country lane. Which way now?

And then he heard the call—faint, far away, but unmistakable....

“Luke, help.” And again, “Luke...”

Unerringly he plunged into the wood and ran in the direction from which the cry had come. There were more sounds now—scuffling—panting—a low gurgling cry.

He came through the trees in time to tear a mad woman’s hands from her victim’s throat, to hold her, struggling, foaming, cursing, till at last she gave a convulsive shudder and turned rigid in his grasp.

Twenty-three

NEW BEGINNING

“But I don’t understand,” said Lord Whitfield. “I don’t understand.”

He strove to maintain his dignity, but beneath the pompous exterior a rather pitiable bewilderment was evident. He could hardly credit the extraordinary things that were being told him.

“It’s like this, Lord Whitfield,” said Battle patiently. “To begin with there is a touch of insanity in the family. We’ve found that out now. Often the way with these old families. I should say she had a predisposition that way. And then she was an ambitious lady—and she was thwarted. First her career and then her love affair.” He coughed. “I understand it was you who jilted her?”

Lord Whitfield said stiffly:

“I don’t like the term jilt.”

Superintendent Battle amended the phrase.

“It was you who terminated the engagement?”

“Well—yes.”

“Tell us why, Gordon,” said Bridget.

Lord Whitfield got rather red. He said:

“Oh, very well, if I must. Honoria had a canary. She was very fond of it. It used to take sugar from her lips. One day it pecked her violently instead. She was angry and picked it up—and—wrung its neck! I—I couldn’t feel the same after that. I told her I thought we’d both made a mistake.”

Battle nodded. He said:

“That was the beginning of it! As she told Miss Conway, she turned her thoughts and her undoubted mental ability to one aim and purpose.”

Lord Whitfield said incredulously:

“To get me convicted as a murderer? I can’t believe it.”

Bridget said, “It’s true, Gordon. You know, you were surprised yourself at the extraordinary way that everybody who annoyed you was instantly struck down.”

“There was a reason for that.”

“Honorina Waynflete was the reason,” said Bridget. “Do get it into your head, Gordon, that it wasn’t Providence that pushed Tommy Pierce out of the window, and all the rest of them. It was Honorina.”

Lord Whitfield shook his head.

“It all seems to me quite incredible!” he said.

Battle said:

“You say you got a telephone message this morning?”

“Yes—about twelve o’clock. I was asked to go to the Shaw Wood at once as you, Bridget, had something to say to me. I was not to come by car but to walk.”

Battle nodded.

“Exactly. That would have been the finish. Miss Conway would have been found with her throat cut; and beside her your knife with your fingerprints on it! And you yourself would have been seen in the vicinity at the time! You wouldn’t have had a leg to stand upon. Any jury in the world would have convicted you.”

“Me?” said Lord Whitfield, startled and distressed. “Anyone would have believed a thing like that of Me?”

Bridget said gently:

“I didn’t, Gordon. I never believed it.”

Lord Whitfield looked at her coldly, then he said stiffly:

“In view of my character and my standing in the county, I do not believe that anyone for one moment would have believed in such a monstrous charge!”

He went out with dignity and closed the door behind him.

Luke said:

“He’ll never realize that he was really in danger!”

Then he said:

“Go on, Bridget, tell me how you came to suspect the Waynflete woman.”

Bridget explained:

“It was when you were telling me that Gordon was the killer. I couldn’t believe it! You see, I knew him so well. I’d been his secretary for two years! I knew him in and out! I knew that he was pompous and petty and completely self-absorbed, but I knew, too, that he was a kindly person and almost absurdly tenderhearted. It worried him even to kill a wasp. That story about his killing Miss Waynflete’s canary—it was all wrong. He just couldn’t have done it. He’d told me once that he had jilted her. Now you insisted that it was the other way about. Well, that might be so! His pride might not have allowed him to admit that she had thrown him over. But not the canary story! That simply wasn’t Gordon! He didn’t even shoot because seeing things killed made him feel sick.

“So I simply knew that that part of the story was untrue. But if so, Miss Waynflete must have lied. And it was really, when you came to think of it, a very extraordinary lie! And I wondered suddenly if she’d told anymore lies. She was a very proud woman—one could see that. To be thrown over must have hurt her pride horribly. It would probably make her feel very angry

and revengeful against Lord Whitfield—especially, I felt, if he turned up again later all rich and prosperous and successful. I thought, ‘Yes, she’d probably enjoy helping to fix a crime upon him.’ And then a curious sort of whirling feeling came in my brain and I thought—but suppose everything she says is a lie—and I suddenly saw how easily a woman like that could make a fool of a man! And I thought, ‘It’s fantastic, but suppose it was she who killed all these people and fed Gordon up with the idea that it was a kind of divine retribution!’ It would be quite easy for her to make him believe that. As I told you once, Gordon would believe anything! And I thought, ‘Could she have done all those murders?’ And I saw that she could! She could give a shove to a drunken man—and push a boy out of a window, and Amy Gibbs had died in her house. Mrs. Horton, too—Honoraria Waynflete used to go and sit with her when she was ill. Dr. Humbleby was more difficult. I didn’t know then that Wonky Pooh had a nasty septic ear and that she infected the dressing she put on his hand. Miss Pinkerton’s death was even more difficult, because I couldn’t imagine Miss Waynflete dressed up as a chauffeur driving a Rolls.

“And then, suddenly, I saw that that was the easiest of the lot! It was the old shove from behind—easily done in a crowd. The car didn’t stop and she saw a fresh opportunity and told another woman she had seen the number of the car, and gave the number of Lord Whitfield’s Rolls.

“Of course, all this only came very confusedly through my head. But if Gordon definitely hadn’t done the murders—and I knew—yes, knew that he hadn’t—well, who had? And the answer seemed quite clear. ‘Someone who hates Gordon!’ Who hates Gordon? Honoraria Waynflete, of course.

“And then I remembered that Miss Pinkerton had definitely spoken of a man as the killer. That knocked out all my beautiful theory, because, unless Miss Pinkerton was right, she wouldn’t have been killed...So I got you to repeat exactly Miss Pinkerton’s words and I soon discovered that she hadn’t actually said ‘man’ once. Then I felt that I was definitely on the right track! I decided to accept Miss Waynflete’s invitation to stay with her and I resolved to try to ferret out the truth.”

“Without saying a word to me?” said Luke angrily.

“But, my sweet, you were so sure—and I wasn’t sure a bit! It was all vague and doubtful. But I never dreamed that I was in any danger. I thought I’d have plenty of time....”

She shivered.

“Oh, Luke, it was horrible...Her eyes...And that dreadful, polite, inhuman laugh....”

Luke said with a slight shiver:

“I shan’t forget how I only got there just in time.”

He turned to Battle. “What’s she like now?”

“Gone right over the edge,” said Battle. “They do, you know. They can’t face the shock of not having been as clever as they thought they were.”

Luke said ruefully:

“Well, I’m not much of a policeman! I never suspected Honoria Waynflete once. You’d have done better, Battle.”

“Maybe, sir, maybe not. You’ll remember my saying that nothing’s impossible in crime. I mentioned a maiden lady, I believe.”

“You also mentioned an archbishop and a schoolgirl! Am I to understand that you consider all these people as potential criminals?”

Battle’s smile broadened to a grin.

“Anyone may be a criminal, sir, that’s what I meant.”

“Except Gordon,” said Bridget. “Luke, let’s go and find him.”

They found Lord Whitfield in his study busily making notes.

“Gordon,” said Bridget in a small meek voice. “Please, now that you know everything, will you forgive us?”

Lord Whitfield looked at her graciously.

“Certainly, my dear, certainly. I realize the truth. I was a busy man. I neglected you. The truth of the matter is as Kipling so wisely puts it: ‘He travels the fastest who travels alone. My path in life is a lonely one.’” He squared his shoulders. “I carry a big responsibility. I must carry it alone. For me there can be no companionship, no easing of the burden—I must go through life alone—till I drop by the wayside.”

Bridget said:

“Dear Gordon! You really are sweet!”

Lord Whitfield frowned.

“It is not a question of being sweet. Let us forget all this nonsense. I am a busy man.”

“I know you are.”

“I am arranging for a series of articles to start at once. Crimes committed by Women through the Ages.”

Bridget gazed at him with admiration.

“Gordon, I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Lord Whitfield puffed out his chest.

“So please leave me now. I must not be disturbed. I have a lot of work to get through.”

Luke and Bridget tiptoed from the room.

“But he really is sweet!” said Bridget.

“Bridget, I believe you were really fond of that man!”

“Do you know, Luke, I believe I was.”

Luke looked out of the window.

“I’ll be glad to get away from Wychwood. I don’t like this place. There’s a lot of wickedness here, as Mrs. Humbleby would say. I don’t like the way Ashe Ridge broods over the village.”

“Talking of Ashe Ridge, what about Ellsworthy?”

Luke laughed a little shamefacedly.

“That blood on his hands?”

“Yes.”

“They’d sacrificed a white cock apparently!”

“How perfectly disgusting!”

“I think something unpleasant is going to happen to our Mr. Ellsworthy. Battle is planning a little surprise.”

Bridget said:

“And poor Major Horton never even attempted to kill his wife, and Mr. Abbot, I suppose, just had a compromising letter from a lady, and Dr. Thomas is just a nice unassuming young doctor.”

“He’s a superior ass!”

“You say that because you’re jealous of his marrying Rose Humbleby.”

“She’s much too good for him.”

“I always have felt you liked that girl better than me!”

“Darling, aren’t you being rather absurd?”

“No, not really.”

She was silent a minute and then said:

“Luke, do you like me now?”

He made a movement towards her but she warded him off.

“I said like, Luke—not love.”

“Oh! I see... Yes, I do... I like you, Bridget, as well as loving you.”

Bridget said:

“I like you, Luke....”

They smiled at each other—a little timidly—like children who have made friends at a party.

Bridget said:

“Liking is more important than loving. It lasts. I want what is between us to last, Luke. I don’t want us just to love each other and marry and get tired of each other and then want to marry someone else.”

“Oh! my dear Love, I know. You want reality. So do I. What’s between us will last forever because it’s founded on reality.”

“Is that true, Luke?”

“It’s true, my sweet. That’s why, I think, I was afraid of loving you.”

“I was afraid of loving you, too.”

“Are you afraid now?”

“No.”

He said:

“We’ve been close to Death for a long time. Now—that’s over! Now—we’ll begin to Live....”

Towards Zero (1944)

By Agatha Christie

Prologue

NOVEMBER 19TH

The group round the fireplace was nearly all composed of lawyers or those who had an interest in the law. There was Martin-dale the solicitor, Rufus Lord, KC, young Daniels who had made a name for himself in the Carstairs case, a sprinkling of other barristers, Mr. Justice Cleaver, Lewis of Lewis and Trench and old Mr. Treves. Mr. Treves was close on eighty, a very ripe and experienced eighty. He was a member of a famous firm of solicitors, and the most famous member of that firm, he was said to know more of backstairs history than any man in England and he was a specialist on criminology.

Unthinking people said Mr. Treves ought to write his memoirs. Mr. Treves knew better. He knew that he knew too much.

Though he had long retired from active practice, there was no man in England whose opinion was so respected by the members of his own fraternity. Whenever his thin precise little voice was raised there was always a respectful silence.

The conversation now was on the subject of a much talked of case which had finished that day at the Old Bailey. It was a murder case and the prisoner had been acquitted. The present company was busy trying the case over again and making technical criticisms.

The prosecution had made a mistake in relying on one of its witnesses—old Depleach ought to have realized what an opening he was giving to the defence. Young Arthur had made the most of that servant girl's evidence. Bentmore, in his summing up, had very rightly put the matter in its correct perspective, but the mischief was done by then—the jury had believed the girl. Juries were funny—you never knew what they'd swallow and what they wouldn't. But let them once get a thing into their heads and no one was ever going to get it out again. They believed that the girl was speaking the truth about the crowbar and that was that. The medical evidence had been a

bit above their heads. All those long terms and scientific jargon—damned bad witnesses, these scientific johnnies—always hemmed and hawed and couldn't say yes or no to a plain question—always “in certain circumstances that might take place”—and so on!

They talked themselves out, little by little, and as the remarks became more spasmodic and disjointed, a general feeling grew of something lacking. One head after another turned in the direction of Mr. Treves. For Mr. Treves had as yet contributed nothing to the discussion. Gradually it became apparent that the company was waiting for a final word from its most respected colleague.

Mr. Treves, leaning back in his chair, was absentmindedly polishing his glasses. Something in the silence made him look up sharply.

“Eh?” he said. “What was that? You asked me something?”

Young Lewis spoke.

“We were talking, sir, about the Lamorne case.”

He paused expectantly.

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Treves. “I was thinking of that.”

There was a respectful hush.

“But I'm afraid,” said Mr. Treves, still polishing, “that I was being fanciful. Yes, fanciful. Result of getting on in years, I suppose. At my age one can claim the privilege of being fanciful, if one likes.”

“Yes, indeed, sir,” said young Lewis, but he looked puzzled.

“I was thinking,” said Mr. Treves, “not so much of the various points of law raised—though they were interesting—very interesting—if the verdict had gone the other way there would have been good grounds for appeal. I rather think—but I won't go into that now. I was thinking, as I say, not of the points of law but of the—well, of the people in the case.”

Everybody looked rather astonished. They had considered the people in the case only as regarding their credibility or otherwise as witnesses. No one had even hazarded a speculation as to whether the prisoner had been guilty or as innocent as the court had pronounced him to be.

“Human beings, you know,” said Mr. Treves thoughtfully. “Human beings. All kinds and sorts and sizes and shapes of ’em. Some with brains and a good many more without. They’d come from all over the place, Lancashire, Scotland—that restaurant proprietor from Italy and that school teacher woman from somewhere out Middle West. All caught up and enmeshed in the thing and finally all brought together in a court of law in London on a grey November day. Each one contributing his little part. The whole thing culminating in a trial for murder.”

He paused and gently beat a delicate tattoo on his knee.

“I like a good detective story,” he said. “But, you know, they begin in the wrong place! They begin with the murder. But the murder is the end. The story begins long before that—years before sometimes—with all the causes and events that bring certain people to a certain place at a certain time on a certain day. Take that little maid servant’s evidence—if the kitchenmaid hadn’t pinched her young man she wouldn’t have thrown up her situation in a huff and gone to the Lamornes and been the principal witness for the defence. That Guiseppe Antonelli—coming over to exchange with his brother for a month. The brother is as blind as a bat. He wouldn’t have seen what Guiseppe’s sharp eyes saw. If the constable hadn’t been sweet on the cook at No. 48, he wouldn’t have been late on his beat....”

He nodded his head gently:

“All converging towards a given spot...And then, when the time comes—over the top! Zero Hour. Yes, all of them converging towards zero....”

He repeated: “Towards zero....”

Then gave a quick little shudder.

“You’re cold, sir, come nearer the fire.”

“No, no,” said Mr. Treves. “Just someone walking over my grave, as they say. Well, well, I must be making my way homewards.”

He gave an affable little nod and went slowly and precisely out of the room.

There was a moment of dubious silence and then Rufus Lord, KC, remarked that poor old Treves was getting on.

Sir William Cleaver said:

“An acute brain—a very acute brain—but Anno Domini tells in the end.”

“Got a groggy heart, too,” said Lord. “May drop down any minute, I believe.”

“He takes pretty good care of himself,” said young Lewis.

At that moment Mr. Treves was carefully stepping into his smooth-running Daimler. It deposited him at a house in a quiet square. A solicitous butler valet helped him off with his coat. Mr. Treves walked into his library where a coal fire was burning. His bedroom lay beyond, for out of consideration for his heart he never went upstairs.

He sat down in front of the fire and drew his letters towards him.

His mind was still dwelling on the fancy he had outlined at the Club.

“Even now,” thought Mr. Treves to himself, “some drama—some murder to be—is in course of preparation. If I were writing one of these amusing stories of blood and crime, I should begin now with an elderly gentleman sitting in front of the fire opening his letters—going, unbeknownst to himself—towards zero....”

He slit open an envelope and gazed down absently at the sheet he abstracted from it.

Suddenly his expression changed. He came back from romance to reality.

“Dear me,” said Mr. Treves. “How extremely annoying! Really, how very vexing. After all these years! This will alter all my plans.”

“OPEN THE DOOR AND HERE ARE THE PEOPLE”

January 11th

The man in the hospital bed shifted his body slightly and stifled a groan.

The nurse in charge of the ward got up from her table and came down to him. She shifted his pillows and moved him into a more comfortable position.

Angus MacWhirter only gave a grunt by way of thanks.

He was in a state of seething rebellion and bitterness.

By this time it ought to have been over. He ought to have been out of it all! Curse that damned ridiculous tree growing out of the cliff! Curse those officious sweethearts who braved the cold of a winter's night to keep a tryst on the cliff edge.

But for them (and the tree!) it would have been over—a plunge into the deep icy water, a brief struggle perhaps, and then oblivion—the end of a misused, useless, unprofitable life.

And now where was he? Lying ridiculously in a hospital bed with a broken shoulder and with the prospect of being hauled up in a police court for the crime of trying to take his own life.

Curse it, it was his own life, wasn't it?

And if he had succeeded in the job, they would have buried him piously as of unsound mind!

Unsound mind, indeed! He'd never been saner! And to commit suicide was the most logical and sensible thing that could be done by a man in his position.

Completely down and out, with his health permanently affected, with a wife who had left him for another man. Without a job, without affection, without money, health or hope, surely to end it all was the only possible solution?

And now here he was in this ridiculous plight. He would shortly be admonished by a sanctimonious magistrate for doing the commonsense thing with a commodity which belonged to him and to him only—his life.

He snorted with anger. A wave of fever passed over him.

The nurse was beside him again.

She was young, red-haired, with a kindly, rather vacant face.

“Are you in much pain?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I’ll give you something to make you sleep.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

“But—”

“Do you think I can’t bear a bit of pain and sleeplessness?”

She smiled in a gentle, slightly superior way.

“Doctor said you could have something.”

“I don’t care what doctor said.”

She straightened the covers and set a glass of lemonade a little nearer to him. He said, slightly ashamed of himself:

“Sorry if I was rude.”

“Oh, that’s all right.”

It annoyed him that she was so completely undisturbed by his bad temper. Nothing like that could penetrate her nurse's armour of indulgent indifference. He was a patient—not a man.

He said:

“Damned interference—all this damned interference....”

She said reprovingly:

“Now, now, that isn't very nice.”

“Nice?” he demanded. “Nice? My God.”

She said calmly: “You'll feel better in the morning.”

He swallowed.

“You nurses. You nurses! You're inhuman, that's what you are!”

“We know what's best for you, you see.”

“That's what's so infuriating! About you. About a hospital. About the world. Continual interference! Knowing what's best for other people. I tried to kill myself. You know that, don't you?”

She nodded.

“Nobody's business but mine whether I threw myself off a bloody cliff or not. I'd finished with life. I was down and out!”

She made a little clicking noise with her tongue. It indicated abstract sympathy. He was a patient. She was soothing him by letting him blow off steam.

“Why shouldn't I kill myself if I want to?” he demanded.

She replied to that quite seriously.

“Because it’s wrong.”

“Why is it wrong?”

She looked at him doubtfully. She was not disturbed in her own belief, but she was much too inarticulate to explain her reaction.

“Well—I mean—it’s wicked to kill yourself. You’ve got to go on living whether you like it or not.”

“Why have you?”

“Well, there are other people to consider, aren’t there?”

“Not in my case. There’s not a soul in the world who’d be the worse for my passing on.”

“Haven’t you got any relations? No mother or sisters or anything?”

“No. I had a wife once but she left me—quite right too! She saw I was no good.”

“But you’ve got friends, surely?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m not a friendly sort of man. Look here, nurse, I’ll tell you something. I was a happy sort of chap once. Had a good job and a good-looking wife. There was a car accident. My boss was driving the car and I was in it. He wanted me to say he was driving under thirty at the time of the accident. He wasn’t. He was driving nearer fifty. Nobody was killed, nothing like that, he just wanted to be in the right for the insurance people. Well, I wouldn’t say what he wanted. It was a lie. I don’t tell lies.”

The nurse said:

“Well, I think you were quite right. Quite right.”

“You do, do you? That pigheadedness of mine cost me my job. My boss was sore. He saw to it that I didn’t get another. My wife got fed up seeing me mooch about unable to get anything to do. She went off with a man who

had been my friend. He was doing well and going up in the world. I drifted along, going steadily down. I took to drinking a bit. That didn't help me to hold down jobs. Finally I came down to hauling—strained my inside—the doctor told me I'd never be strong again. Well, there wasn't much to live for then. Easiest way, and the cleanest way, was to go right out. My life was no good to myself or anyone else."

The little nurse murmured:

"You don't know that."

He laughed. He was better-tempered already. Her naïve obstinacy amused him.

"My dear girl, what use am I to anybody?"

She said confusedly:

"You don't know. You may be—someday—"

"Someday? There won't be any someday. Next time I shall make sure."

She shook her head decidedly.

"Oh, no," she said. "You won't kill yourself now."

"Why not?"

"They never do."

He stared at her. "They never do." He was one of a class of would-be suicides. Opening his mouth to protest energetically, his innate honesty suddenly stopped him.

Would he do it again? Did he really mean to do it?

He knew suddenly that he didn't. For no reason. Perhaps the right reason was the one she had given out of her specialized knowledge. Suicides didn't do it again.

All the more he felt determined to force an admission from her on the ethical side.

“At any rate I’ve got a right to do what I like with my own life.”

“No—no, you haven’t.”

“But why not, my dear girl, why?”

She flushed. She said, her fingers playing with the little gold cross that hung round her neck:

“You don’t understand. God may need you.”

He stared—taken aback. He did not want to upset her childlike faith. He said mockingly:

“I suppose that one day I may stop a runaway horse and save a golden-haired child from death—eh? Is that it?”

She shook her head. She said with vehemence and trying to express what was so vivid in her mind and so halting on her tongue:

“It may be just by being somewhere—not doing anything—just by being at a certain place at a certain time—oh, I can’t say what I mean, but you might just—just walk along a street some day and just by doing that accomplish something terribly important—perhaps even without knowing what it was.”

The red-haired little nurse came from the west coast of Scotland and some of her family had “the sight.”

Perhaps, dimly, she saw a picture of a man walking up a road on a night in September and thereby saving a human being from a terrible death....

February 14th

There was only one person in the room and the only sound to be heard was the scratching of that person’s pen as it traced line after line across the paper.

There was no one to read the words that were being traced. If there had been, they would hardly have believed their eyes. For what was being written was a clear, carefully detailed project for murder.

There are times when a body is conscious of a mind controlling it—when it bows obedient to that alien something that controls its actions. There are other times when a mind is conscious of owning and controlling a body and accomplishing its purpose by using that body.

The figure sitting writing was in the last-named state. It was a mind, a cool, controlled intelligence. This mind had only one thought and one purpose—the destruction of another human being. To the end that this purpose might be accomplished, the scheme was being worked out meticulously on paper. Every eventuality, every possibility was being taken into account. The thing had got to be absolutely foolproof. The scheme, like all good schemes, was not absolutely cut and dried. There were certain alternative actions at certain points. Moreover, since the mind was intelligent, it realized that there must be intelligent provision left for the unforeseen. But the main lines were clear and had been closely tested. The time, the place, the method, the victim!...

The figure raised its head. With its hand, it picked up the sheets of paper and read them carefully through. Yes, the thing was crystal clear.

Across the serious face a smile came. It was a smile that was not quite sane. The figure drew a deep breath.

As man was made in the image of his Maker, so there was now a terrible travesty of a creator's joy.

Yes, everything planned—everyone's reaction foretold and allowed for, the good and evil in everybody played upon and brought into harmony with one evil design.

There was one thing lacking still....

With a smile the writer traced a date—a date in September.

Then, with a laugh, the paper was torn in pieces and the pieces carried across the room and put into the heart of the glowing fire. There was no carelessness. Every single piece was consumed and destroyed. The plan was now only existent in the brain of its creator.

March 8th

Superintendent Battle was sitting at the breakfast table. His jaw was set in a truculent fashion and he was reading, slowly and carefully, a letter that his wife had just tearfully handed to him. There was no expression visible on his face, for his face never did register any expression. It had the aspect of a face carved out of wood. It was solid and durable and, in some way, impressive. Superintendent Battle had never suggested brilliance; he was, definitely, not a brilliant man, but he had some other quality, difficult to define, that was nevertheless forceful.

“I can’t believe it,” said Mrs. Battle, sobbing. “Sylvia!”

Sylvia was the youngest of Superintendent and Mrs. Battle’s five children. She was sixteen and at school near Maidstone.

The letter was from Miss Amphrey, headmistress of the school in question. It was a clear, kindly and extremely tactful letter. It set out, in black and white, that various small thefts had been puzzling the school authorities for some time, that the matter had at last been cleared up, that Sylvia Battle had confessed, and that Miss Amphrey would like to see Mr. and Mrs. Battle at the earliest opportunity “to discuss the position.”

Superintendent Battle folded up the letter, put it in his pocket, and said: “You leave this to me, Mary.”

He got up, walked round the table, patted her on the cheek and said, “Don’t worry, dear, it will be all right.”

He went from the room, leaving comfort and reassurance behind him.

That afternoon, in Miss Amphrey’s modern and individualistic drawing room, Superintendent Battle sat very squarely on his chair, his large wooden

hands on his knees, confronting Miss Amphrey and managing to look, far more than usual, every inch a policeman.

Miss Amphrey was a very successful headmistress. She had personality—a great deal of personality, she was enlightened and up to date, and she combined discipline with modern ideas of self-determination.

Her room was representative of the spirit of Meadway. Everything was of a cool oatmeal colour—there were big jars of daffodils and bowls of tulips and hyacinths. One or two good copies of the antique Greek, two pieces of advanced modern sculpture, two Italian primitives on the walls. In the midst of all this, Miss Amphrey herself, dressed in a deep shade of blue, with an eager face suggestive of a conscientious greyhound, and clear blue eyes looking serious through thick lenses.

“The important thing,” she was saying in her clear well-modulated voice, “is that this should be taken the right way. It is the girl herself we have to think of, Mr. Battle. Sylvia herself! It is most important—most important, that her life should not be crippled in any way. She must not be made to assume a burden of guilt—blame must be very very sparingly meted out, if at all. We must arrive at the reason behind these quite trivial pilferings. A sense of inferiority, perhaps? She is not good at games, you know—an obscure wish to shine in a different sphere—the desire to assert her ego? We must be very very careful. That is why I wanted to see you alone first—to impress upon you to be very very careful with Sylvia. I repeat again, it’s very important to get at what is behind this.”

“That, Miss Amphrey,” said Superintendent Battle, “is why I have come down.”

His voice was quiet, his face unemotional, his eyes surveyed the school mistress appraisingly.

“I have been very gentle with her,” said Miss Amphrey.

Battle said laconically:

“Good of you, Ma’am.”

“You see, I really love and understand these young things.”

Battle did not reply directly. He said:

“I’d like to see my girl now, if you don’t mind, Miss Amphrey.”

With renewed emphasis Miss Amphrey admonished him to be careful—to go slow—not to antagonize a child just budding into womanhood.

Superintendent Battle showed no signs of impatience. He just looked blank.

She took him at last to her study. They passed one or two girls in the passages. They stood politely to attention but their eyes were full of curiosity. Having ushered Battle into a small room, not quite so redolent of personality as the one downstairs, Miss Amphrey withdrew and said she would send Sylvia to him.

Just as she was leaving the room, Battle stopped her.

“One minute, Ma’am, how did you come to pitch upon Sylvia as the one responsible for these—er—leakages?”

“My methods, Mr. Battle, were psychological.”

Miss Amphrey spoke with dignity.

“Psychological? H’m. What about the evidence, Miss Amphrey?”

“Yes, yes, I quite understand, Mr. Battle—you would feel that way. Your—er—profession steps in. But psychology is beginning to be recognized in criminology. I can assure you that there is no mistake—Sylvia freely admits the whole thing.”

“Yes, yes—I know that. I was just asking how you came to pitch upon her to begin with.”

“Well, Mr. Battle, this business of things being taken out of the girls’ lockers was on the increase. I called the school together and told them the facts. At the same time, I studied their faces unobtrusively. Sylvia’s

expression struck me at once. It was guilty—confused. I knew at that moment who was responsible. I wanted, not to confront her with her guilt, but to get her to admit it herself. I set a little test for her—a word association.”

Battle nodded to show he understood.

“And finally the child admitted it all.”

Her father said:

“I see.”

Miss Amphrey hesitated a minute, then went out.

Battle was standing looking out of the window when the door opened again.

He turned round slowly and looked at his daughter.

Sylvia stood just inside the door, which she had closed behind her. She was tall, dark, angular. Her face was sullen and bore marks of tears. She said timidly rather than defiantly:

“Well, here I am.”

Battle looked at her thoughtfully for a minute or two. He sighed.

“I should never have sent you to this place,” he said. “That woman’s a fool.”

Sylvia lost sight of her own problems in sheer amazement.

“Miss Amphrey? Oh, but she’s wonderful. We all think so.”

“H’m,” said Battle. “Can’t be quite a fool, then, if she sells the idea of herself as well as that. All the same, Meadway wasn’t the place for you—although I don’t know—this might have happened anywhere.”

Sylvia twisted her hands together. She looked down. She said:

“I’m—I’m sorry, Father. I really am.”

“So you should be,” said Battle shortly. “Come here.”

She came slowly and unwillingly across the room to him. He took her chin in his great square hand and looked closely into her face.

“Been through a good deal, haven’t you?” he said gently.

Tears started into her eyes.

Battle said slowly:

“You see, Sylvia, I’ve known all along with you, that there was something. Most people have got a weakness of some kind or another. Usually it’s plain enough. You can see when a child’s greedy, or bad-tempered, or got a streak of the bully in him. You were a good child, very quiet—very sweet-tempered—no trouble in any way—and sometimes I’ve worried. Because if there’s a flaw you don’t see, sometimes it wrecks the whole show when the article is tried out.”

“Like me!” said Sylvia.

“Yes, like you. You’ve cracked under strain—and in a damned queer way too. It’s a way, oddly enough, I’ve never come across before.”

The girl said suddenly and scornfully:

“I should think you’d come across thieves often enough!”

“Oh yes—I know all about them. And that’s why, my dear—not because I’m your father (fathers don’t know much about their children) but because I’m a policeman I know well enough you’re not a thief. You never took a thing in this place. Thieves are of two kinds, the kind that yields to sudden and overwhelming temptation—(and that happens damned seldom—it’s amazing what temptation the ordinary normal honest human being can withstand) and there’s the kind that just takes what doesn’t belong to them almost as a matter of course. You don’t belong to either type. You’re not a thief. You’re a very unusual type of liar.”

Sylvia began, “But—”

He swept on.

“You’ve admitted it all? Oh yes, I know that. There was a saint once—went out with bread for the poor. Husband didn’t like it. Met her and asked what there was in her basket. She lost her nerve and said it was roses—he tore open her basket and roses it was—a miracle! Now if you’d been Saint Elizabeth and were out with a basket of roses, and your husband had come along and asked what you’d got, you’d have lost your nerve and said ‘Bread.’”

He paused and then said gently:

“That’s how it happened, isn’t it?”

There was a longer pause and then the girl suddenly bent her head.

Battle said:

“Tell me, child. What happened exactly?”

“She had us all up. Made a speech. And I saw her eyes on me and I knew she thought it was me! I felt myself getting red—and I saw some of the girls looking at me. It was awful. And then the others began looking at me and whispering in corners. I could see they all thought so. And then the Amp had me up here with some of the others one evening and we played a sort of word game—she said words and we gave answers—”

Battle gave a disgusted grunt.

“And I could see what it meant—and—and I sort of got paralysed. I tried not to give the wrong word—I tried to think of things quite outside—like squirrels or flowers—and the Amp was there watching me with eyes like gimlets—you know, sort of boring inside one. And after that—oh, it got worse and worse, and one day the Amp talked to me quite kindly and so—so understandingly—and—and I broke down and said I had done it—and oh! Daddy, the relief!”

Battle was stroking his chin.

“I see.”

“You do understand?”

“No, Sylvia, I don’t understand, because I’m not made that way. If anyone tried to make me say I’d done something I hadn’t I’d feel more like giving them a sock on the jaw. But I see how it came about in your case—and that gimlet-eyed Amp of yours has had as pretty an example of unusual psychology shoved under her nose as any half-baked exponent of misunderstood theories could ask for. The thing to do now is clear up this mess. Where’s Miss Amphrey?”

Miss Amphrey was hovering tactfully near at hand. Her sympathetic smile froze on her face as Superintendent Battle said bluntly:

“In justice to my daughter, I must ask that you call in your local police over this.”

“But, Mr. Battle, Sylvia herself—”

“Sylvia has never touched a thing that didn’t belong to her in this place.”

“I quite understand that, as a father—”

“I’m not talking as a father, but as a policeman. Get the police to give you a hand over this. They’ll be discreet. You’ll find the things hidden away somewhere and the right set of fingerprints on them, I expect. Petty pilferers don’t think of wearing gloves. I’m taking my daughter away with me now. If the police find evidence—real evidence—to connect her with the thefts, I’m prepared for her to appear in court and take what’s coming to her, but I’m not afraid.”

As he drove out of the gate with Sylvia beside him some five minutes later, he asked:

“Who’s the girl with fair hair, rather fuzzy, very pink cheeks and a spot on her chin, blue eyes far apart? I passed her in the passage.”

“That sounds like Olive Parsons.”

“Ah, well, I shouldn’t be surprised if she were the one.”

“Did she look frightened?”

“No, looked smug! Calm smug look I’ve seen in the police court hundreds of times! I’d bet good money she’s the thief—but you won’t find her confessing—not much!”

Sylvia said with a sigh:

“It’s like coming out of a bad dream. Oh Daddy, I am sorry! Oh, I am sorry! How could I be such a fool, such an utter fool? I do feel awful about it.”

“Ah, well,” said Superintendent Battle, patting her on the arm with a hand he disengaged from the wheel, and uttering one of his pet forms of trite consolation. “Don’t you worry. These things are sent to try us. Yes, these things are sent to try us. At least, I suppose so. I don’t see what else they can be sent for....”

April 19th

The sun was pouring down on Neville Strange’s house at Hindhead.

It was an April day such as usually occurs at least once in a month, hotter than most of the June days to follow.

Neville Strange was coming down the stairs. He was dressed in white flannels and held four tennis racquets under his arm.

If a man could have been selected from amongst other Englishmen as an example of a lucky man with nothing to wish for, a Selection Committee might have chosen Neville Strange. He was a man well known to the British public, a first-class tennis player and all-round sportsman. Though he had never reached the finals at Wimbledon, he had lasted several of the opening rounds and in the mixed doubles had twice reached the semifinals. He was, perhaps, too much of an all-round athlete to be a Champion tennis player. He was scratch at golf, a fine swimmer and had done some good climbs in

the Alps. He was thirty-three, had magnificent health, good looks, plenty of money, an extremely beautiful wife whom he had recently married and, to all appearances, no cares or worries.

Nevertheless as Neville Strange went downstairs this fine morning a shadow went with him. A shadow perceptible, perhaps, to no eyes but his. But he was aware of it, the thought of it furrowed his brow and made his expression troubled and indecisive.

He crossed the hall, squared his shoulders as though definitely throwing off some burden, passed through the living room and out on to a glass-enclosed veranda where his wife, Kay, was curled up amongst cushions drinking orange juice.

Kay Strange was twenty-three and unusually beautiful. She had a slender but subtly voluptuous figure, dark red hair, such a perfect skin that she used only the slightest makeup to enhance it, and those dark eyes and brows which so seldom go with red hair and which are so devastating when they do.

Her husband said lightly:

“Hullo, Gorgeous, what’s for breakfast?”

Kay replied: “Horribly bloody-looking kidneys for you—and mushrooms—and rolls of bacon.”

“Sounds all right,” said Neville.

He helped himself to the aforementioned viands and poured out a cup of coffee. There was a companionable silence for some minutes.

“Oo,” said Kay voluptuously, wriggling bare toes with scarlet manicured nails. “Isn’t the sun lovely? England’s not so bad after all.”

They had just come back from the South of France.

Neville, after a bare glance at the newspaper headlines, had turned to the Sports page and merely said “Um...”

Then, proceeding to toast and marmalade, he put the paper aside and opened his letters.

There were a good many of these, but most of them he tore across and chucked away. Circulars, advertisements, printed matter.

Kay said: "I don't like my colour scheme in the living room. Can I have it done over, Neville?"

"Anything you like, beautiful."

"Peacock blue," said Kay dreamily, "and ivory satin cushions."

"You'll have to throw in an ape," said Neville.

"You can be the ape," said Kay.

Neville opened another letter.

"Oh, by the way," said Kay. "Shirley has asked us to go to Norway on the yacht at the end of June. Rather sickening we can't."

She looked cautiously sideways at Neville and added wistfully: "I would love it so."

Something, some cloud, some uncertainty, seemed hovering on Neville's face.

Kay said rebelliously:

"Have we got to go to dreary old Camilla's?"

Neville frowned.

"Of course we have. Look here, Kay, we've had this out before. Sir Matthew was my guardian. He and Camilla looked after me. Gull's Point is my home, as far as any place is home to me."

“Oh all right, all right,” said Kay. “If we must, we must. After all, we get all that money when she dies, so I suppose we have to suck up a bit.”

Nevile said angrily:

“It’s not a question of sucking up! She’s no control over the money. Sir Matthew left it in trust for her during her lifetime and to come to me and my wife afterwards. It’s a question of affection. Why can’t you understand that?”

Kay said, after a moment’s pause:

“I do understand really. I’m just putting on an act because—well because I know I’m only allowed there on sufferance as it were. They hate me! Yes, they do! Lady Tressilian looks down that long nose of hers at me and Mary Aldin looks over my shoulder when she talks to me. It’s all very well for you. You don’t see what goes on.”

“They always seem to be very polite to you. You know quite well I wouldn’t stand for it if they weren’t.”

Kay gave him a curious look from under her dark lashes.

“They’re polite enough. But they know how to get under my skin all right. I’m the interloper, that’s what they feel.”

“Well,” said Nevile, “after all, I suppose—that’s natural enough, isn’t it?”

His voice had changed slightly. He got up and stood looking out at the view with his back to Kay.

“Oh yes, I daresay, it’s natural. They were devoted to Audrey, weren’t they?” Her voice shook a little. “Dear, well-bred, cool, colourless Audrey! Camilla’s not forgiven me for taking her place.”

Nevile did not turn. His voice was lifeless, dull. He said: “After all, Camilla’s old—past seventy. Her generation doesn’t really like divorce, you know. On the whole I think she’s accepted the position very well considering how fond she was of—of Audrey.”

His voice changed just a little as he spoke the name.

“They think you treated her badly.”

“So I did,” said Neville under his breath, but his wife heard.

“Oh Neville—don’t be so stupid. Just because she chose to make such a frightful fuss.”

“She didn’t make a fuss. Audrey never made fusses.”

“Well, you know what I mean. Because she went away and was ill, and went about everywhere looking brokenhearted. That’s what I call a fuss! Audrey’s not what I call a good loser. From my point of view if a wife can’t hold her husband she ought to give him up gracefully! You two had nothing in common. She never played a game and was as anaemic and washed up as—as a dish rag. No life or go in her! If she really cared about you, she ought to have thought about your happiness first and been glad you were going to be happy with someone more suited to you.”

Neville turned. A faintly sardonic smile played around his lips.

“What a little sportsman! How to play the game in love and matrimony!”

Kay laughed and reddened.

“Well, perhaps I was going a bit too far. But at any rate once the thing had happened, there it was. You’ve got to accept these things!”

Neville said quietly:

“Audrey accepted it. She divorced me so that you and I could marry.”

“Yes, I know—” Kay hesitated.

Neville said: “You’ve never understood Audrey.”

“No, I haven’t. In a way, Audrey gives me the creeps. I don’t know what it is about her. You never know what she’s thinking...She’s—she’s a little

frightening.”

“Oh, nonsense, Kay.”

“Well, she frightens me. Perhaps it’s because she’s got brains.”

“My lovely nitwit!”

Kay laughed.

“You always call me that!”

“Because it’s what you are!”

They smiled at each other. Neville came over to her and, bending down, kissed the back of her neck.

“Lovely, lovely Kay,” he murmured.

“Very good Kay,” said Kay. “Giving up a lovely yachting trip to go and be snubbed by her husband’s prim Victorian relations.”

Neville went back and sat down by the table.

“You know,” he said. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t go on that trip with Shirty if you really want to so much.”

Kay sat up in astonishment.

“And what about Saltcreek and Gull’s Point?”

Neville said in a rather unnatural voice:

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t go there early in September.”

“Oh, but Neville, surely—” She stopped.

“We can’t go in July and August because of the Tournaments,” said Neville. “But we’d finish up at St. Loo the last week in August, and it would fit in

very well if we went on to Saltcreek from there.”

“Oh, it would fit in all right—beautifully. But I thought—well, she always goes there for September, doesn’t she?”

“Audrey, you mean?”

“Yes. I suppose they could put her off, but—”

“Why should they put her off?”

Kay stared at him dubiously.

“You mean, we’d be there at the same time? What an extraordinary idea.”

Nevile said irritably:

“I don’t think it’s at all an extraordinary idea. Lots of people do it nowadays. Why shouldn’t we all be friends together? It makes things so much simpler. Why, you said so yourself only the other day.”

“I did?”

“Yes, don’t you remember? We were talking about the Howes, and you said it was the sensible civilized way to look at things, and that Leonard’s new wife and his Ex were the best of friends.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind. I do think it’s sensible. But—well, I don’t think Audrey would feel like that about it.”

“Nonsense.”

“It isn’t nonsense. You know, Nevile, Audrey really was terribly fond of you...I don’t think she’d stand it for a moment.”

“You’re quite wrong, Kay. Audrey thinks it would be quite a good thing.”

“Audrey—what do you mean, Audrey thinks? How do you know what Audrey thinks?”

Nevile looked slightly embarrassed. He cleared his throat a little self-consciously.

“As a matter of fact, I happened to run into her yesterday when I was up in London.”

“You never told me.”

Nevile said irritably:

“I’m telling you now. It was absolute chance. I was walking across the Park and there she was coming towards me. You wouldn’t want me to run away from her, would you?”

“No, of course not,” said Kay, staring. “Go on.”

“I—we—well, we stopped, of course, and then I turned round and walked with her. I—I felt it was the least I could do.”

“Go on,” said Kay.

“And then we sat down on a couple of chairs and talked. She was very nice—very nice indeed.”

“Delightful for you,” said Kay.

“And we got talking, you know, about one thing and another. She was quite natural and normal and—and all that.”

“Remarkable!” said Kay.

“And she asked how you were—”

“Very kind of her!”

“And we talked about you for a bit. Really, Kay, she couldn’t have been nicer.”

“Darling Audrey!”

“And then it sort of came to me—you know—how nice it would be if—if you two could be friends—if we could all get together. And it occurred to me that perhaps we might manage it at Gull’s Point this summer. Sort of place it could happen quite naturally.”

“You thought of that?”

“I—well—yes, of course. It was all my idea.”

“You’ve never said anything to me about having any such idea.”

“Well, I only happened to think of it just then.”

“I see. Anyway, you suggested it and Audrey thought it was a marvellous brainwave?”

For the first time, something in Kay’s manner seemed to penetrate to Neville’s consciousness.

He said:

“Is anything the matter, gorgeous?”

“Oh no, nothing! Nothing at all! It didn’t occur to you or Audrey whether I should think it a marvellous idea?”

Neville stared at her.

“But, Kay, why on earth should you mind?”

Kay bit her lip.

Neville went on:

“You said yourself only the other day—”

“Oh, don’t go into all that again! I was talking about other people—not us.”

“But that’s partly what made me think of it.”

“More fool me. Not that I believe that.”

Nevile was looking at her with dismay.

“But, Kay, why should you mind? I mean, there’s nothing for you to mind about!”

“Isn’t there?”

“Well, I mean—any jealousy or that—would be on the other side.” He paused, his voice changed. “You see, Kay, you and I treated Audrey damned badly. No, I don’t mean that. It was nothing to do with you. I treated her very badly. It’s no good just saying that I couldn’t help myself. I feel that if this could come off I’d feel better about the whole thing. It would make me a lot happier.”

Kay said slowly: “So you haven’t been happy?”

“Darling idiot, what do you mean? Of course I’ve been happy, radiantly happy. But—”

Kay cut in.

“But—that’s it! There’s always been a ‘but’ in this house. Some damned creeping shadow about the place. Audrey’s shadow.”

Nevile stared at her.

“You mean to say you’re jealous of Audrey?” he asked.

“I’m not jealous of her. I’m afraid of her...Nevile, you don’t know what Audrey’s like.”

“Not know what she’s like when I’ve been married to her for over eight years?”

“You don’t know,” Kay repeated, “what Audrey is like.”

April 30th

“Preposterous!” said Lady Tressilian. She drew herself up on her pillow and glared fiercely round the room. “Absolutely preposterous! Neville must be mad.”

“It does seem rather odd,” said Mary Aldin.

Lady Tressilian had a striking-looking profile with a slender bridged nose down which, when so inclined, she could look with telling effect. Though now over seventy and in frail health, her native vigour of mind was in no way impaired. She had, it is true, long periods of retreat from life and its emotions when she would lie with half-closed eyes, but from these semi-comas she would emerge with all her faculties sharpened to the uttermost, and with an incisive tongue. Propped up by pillows in a large bed set across one corner of her room, she held her court like some French Queen. Mary Aldin, a distant cousin, lived with her and looked after her. The two women got on together excellently. Mary was thirty-six, but had one of those smooth ageless faces that change little with passing years. She might have been thirty or forty-five. She had a good figure, an air of breeding, and dark hair to which one lock of white across the front gave a touch of individuality. It was at one time a fashion, but Mary’s white lock of hair was natural and she had had it since her girlhood.

She looked down now reflectively at Neville Strange’s letter which Lady Tressilian had handed to her.

“Yes,” she said. “It does seem rather odd.”

“You can’t tell me,” said Lady Tressilian, “that this is Neville’s own idea! Somebody’s put it into his head. Probably that new wife of his.”

“Kay. You think it was Kay’s idea?”

“It would be quite like her. New and vulgar! If husbands and wives have to advertise their difficulties in public and have recourse to divorce, then they might at least part decently. The new wife and the old wife making friends is quite disgusting in my mind. Nobody has any standards nowadays!”

“I suppose it is just the modern way,” said Mary.

“It won’t happen in my house,” said Lady Tressilian. “I consider I’ve done all that could be asked of me having that scarlet-toed creature here at all.”

“She is Neville’s wife.”

“Exactly. Therefore I felt that Matthew would have wished it. He was devoted to the boy and always wanted him to look on this as his home. Since to refuse to receive his wife would have made an open breach, I gave way and asked her here. I do not like her—she’s quite the wrong wife for Neville—no background, no roots!”

“She’s quite well born,” said Mary placatingly.

“Bad stock!” said Lady Tressilian. “Her father, as I’ve told you, had to resign from all his clubs after that card business. Luckily he died shortly after. And her mother was notorious on the Riviera. What a bringing up for the girl. Nothing but Hotel life—and that mother! Then she meets Neville on the tennis courts, makes a dead set at him and never rests until she gets him to leave his wife—of whom he was extremely fond—and go off with her! I blame her entirely for the whole thing!”

Mary smiled faintly. Lady Tressilian had the old-fashioned characteristic of always blaming the woman and being indulgent towards the man in the case.

“I suppose, strictly speaking, Neville was equally to blame,” she suggested.

“Neville was very much to blame,” agreed Lady Tressilian. “He had a charming wife who had always been devoted—perhaps too devoted—to him. Nevertheless, if it hadn’t been for that girl’s persistence, I am convinced he would have come to his senses. But she was determined to marry him! Yes, my sympathies are entirely with Audrey. I am very fond of Audrey.”

Mary sighed. “It has all been very difficult,” she said.

“Yes, indeed. One is at a loss to know how to act in such difficult circumstances. Matthew was fond of Audrey, and so am I, and one cannot

deny that she was a very good wife to Neville though perhaps it is a pity that she could not have shared his amusements more. She was never an athletic girl. The whole business was very distressing. When I was a girl, these things simply did not happen. Men had their affairs, naturally, but they were not allowed to break up married life.”

“Well, they happen now,” said Mary bluntly.

“Exactly. You have so much common sense, dear. It is of no use recalling bygone days. These things happen, and girls like Kay Mortimer steal other women’s husbands and nobody thinks the worse of them!”

“Except people like you, Camilla!”

“I don’t count. That Kay creature doesn’t worry whether I approve of her or not. She’s too busy having a good time. Neville can bring her here when he comes and I’m even willing to receive her friends—though I do not much care for that very theatrical-looking young man who is always hanging round her—what is his name?”

“Ted Latimer?”

“That is it. A friend of her Riviera days—and I should very much like to know how he manages to live as he does.”

“By his wits,” suggested Mary.

“One might pardon that. I rather fancy he lives by his looks. Not a pleasant friend for Neville’s wife! I disliked the way he came down last summer and stayed at the Easterhead Bay Hotel while they were here.”

Mary looked out of the open window. Lady Tressilian’s house was situated on a steep cliff overlooking the River Tern. On the other side of the river was the newly created summer resort of Easterhead Bay, consisting of a big sandy bathing beach, a cluster of modern bungalows and a large Hotel on the headland looking out to sea. Saltcreek itself was a straggling picturesque fishing village set on the side of a hill. It was old-fashioned,

conservative and deeply contemptuous of Easterhead Bay and its summer visitors.

The Easterhead Bay Hotel was nearly exactly opposite Lady Tressilian's house, and Mary looked across the narrow strip of water at it now where it stood in its blatant newness.

"I am glad," said Lady Tressilian, closing her eyes, "that Matthew never saw that vulgar building. The coastline was quite un-spoilt in his time."

Sir Matthew and Lady Tressilian had come to Gull's Point thirty years ago. It was nine years since Sir Matthew, an enthusiastic sailing man, had capsized his dinghy and been drowned almost in front of his wife's eyes.

Everybody had expected her to sell Gull's Point and leave Saltcreek, but Lady Tressilian had not done so. She had lived on in the house, and her only visible reaction had been to dispose of all the boats and do away with the boathouse. There were no boats available for guests at Gull's Point. They had to walk along to the ferry and hire a boat from one of the rival boatmen there.

Mary said, hesitating a little:

"Shall I write, then, to Neville and tell him that what he proposes does not fit in with our plans?"

"I certainly shall not dream of interfering with Audrey's visit. She has always come to us in September and I shall not ask her to change her plans."

Mary said, looking down at the letter:

"You did see that Neville says Audrey—er—approves of the idea—that she is quite willing to meet Kay?"

"I simply don't believe it," said Lady Tressilian. "Neville, like all men, believes what he wants to believe!"

Mary persisted:

“He says he has actually spoken to her about it.”

“What a very odd thing to do! No—perhaps, after all, it isn’t!”

Mary looked at her inquiringly.

“Like Henry the Eighth,” said Lady Tressilian.

Mary looked puzzled.

Lady Tressilian elaborated her last remark.

“Conscience, you know! Henry was always trying to get Catherine to agree that the divorce was the right thing. Neville knows that he has behaved badly—he wants to feel comfortable about it all. So he has been trying to bully Audrey into saying everything is all right and that she’ll come and meet Kay and that she doesn’t mind at all.”

“I wonder,” said Mary slowly.

Lady Tressilian looked at her sharply.

“What’s in your mind, my dear?”

“I was wondering—” She stopped, then went on: “It—it seems so unlike Neville—this letter! You don’t think that, for some reason, Audrey wants this—this meeting?”

“Why should she?” said Lady Tressilian sharply. “After Neville left her she went to her aunt, Mrs. Royde, at the Rectory, and had a complete breakdown. She was absolutely like a ghost of her former self. Obviously it hit her terribly hard. She’s one of those quiet self-contained people who feel things intensely.”

Mary moved uneasily.

“Yes, she is intense. A queer girl in many ways....”

“She suffered a lot...Then the divorce went through and Neville married the girl, and little by little Audrey began to get over it. Now she’s almost back to her old self. You can’t tell me she wants to rake up old memories again?”

Mary said with gentle obstinacy: “Nevile says she does.”

The old lady looked at her curiously.

“You’re extraordinarily obstinate about this, Mary. Why? Do you want to have them here together?”

Mary Aldin flushed. “No, of course not.”

Lady Tressilian said sharply:

“It’s not you who have been suggesting all this to Nevile?”

“How can you be so absurd?”

“Well, I don’t believe for a minute it’s really his idea. It’s not like Nevile.” She paused a minute, then her face cleared. “It’s the 1st of May tomorrow, isn’t it? Well, on the 3rd Audrey is coming to stay with the Darlingtones at Esbank. It’s only twenty miles away. Write and ask her to come over and lunch here.”

May 5th

“Mrs. Strange, m’lady.”

Audrey Strange came into the big bedroom, crossed the room to the big bed, stooped down and kissed the old lady and sat down in the chair placed ready for her.

“Nice to see you, my dear,” said Lady Tressilian.

“And nice to see you,” said Audrey.

There was a quality of intangibility about Audrey Strange. She was of medium height with very small hands and feet. Her hair was ash-blonde and

there was very little colour in her face. Her eyes were set wide apart and were a clear pale grey. Her features were small and regular, a straight little nose set in a small oval pale face. With such colouring, with a face that was pretty but not beautiful, she had nevertheless a quality about her that could not be denied nor ignored and that drew your eyes to her again and again. She was a little like a ghost, but you felt at the same time that a ghost might be possessed of more reality than a live human being....

She had a singularly lovely voice; soft and clear like a small silver bell.

For some minutes she and the old lady talked of mutual friends and current events. Then Lady Tressilian said:

“Besides the pleasure of seeing you, my dear, I asked you to come because I’ve had rather a curious letter from Neville.”

Audrey looked up. Her eyes were wide, tranquil and calm. She said:

“Oh yes?”

“He suggests—a preposterous suggestion, I call it!—that he and—and Kay should come here in September. He says he wants you and Kay to be friends and that you yourself think it a good idea?”

She waited. Presently Audrey said in her gentle placid voice:

“Is it—so preposterous?”

“My dear—do you really want this to happen?”

Audrey was silent again for a minute or two, then she said gently:

“I think, you know, it might be rather a good thing.”

“You really want to meet this—you want to meet Kay?”

“I do think, Camilla, that it might—simplify things.”

“Simplify things!” Lady Tressilian repeated the words helplessly.

Audrey spoke very softly.

“Dear Camilla. You have been so good. If Nevile wants this—”

“A fig for what Nevile wants!” said Lady Tressilian robustly. “Do you want it, that’s the question?”

A little colour came in Audrey’s cheeks. It was the soft delicate glow of a sea shell.

“Yes,” she said. “I do want it.”

“Well,” said Lady Tressilian. “Well—”

She stopped.

“But, of course,” said Audrey. “It is entirely your choice. It is your house and—”

Lady Tressilian shut her eyes.

“I’m an old woman,” she said. “Nothing makes sense any more.”

“But of course—I’ll come some other time. Any time will suit me.”

“You’ll come in September as you always do,” snapped Lady Tressilian.

“And Nevile and Kay shall come too. I may be old but I can adapt myself, I suppose, as well as anyone else, to the changing phases of modern life. Not another word, that’s settled.”

She closed her eyes again. After a minute or two she said, peering through half-shut lids at the young woman sitting beside her: “Well, got what you want?”

Audrey started.

“Oh, yes, yes. Thank you.”

“My dear,” said Lady Tressilian, and her voice was deep and concerned, “are you sure this isn’t going to hurt you? You were very fond of Neville, you know. This may reopen old wounds.”

Audrey was looking down at her small gloved hands. One of them, Lady Tressilian noticed, was clenched on the side of the bed.

Audrey lifted her head. Her eyes were calm and untroubled.

She said:

“All that is quite over now. Quite over.”

Lady Tressilian leaned more heavily back on her pillows. “Well, you should know. I’m tired—you must leave me now, dear. Mary is waiting for you downstairs. Tell them to send Barrett to me.”

Barrett was Lady Tressilian’s elderly and devoted maid.

She came in to find her mistress lying back with closed eyes.

“The sooner I’m out of this world the better, Barrett,” said Lady Tressilian. “I don’t understand anything or anyone in it.”

“Ah! don’t say that, my lady, you’re tired.”

“Yes, I’m tired. Take that eiderdown off my feet and give me a dose of my tonic.”

“It’s Mrs. Strange coming that’s upset you. A nice lady, but she could do with a tonic, I’d say. Not healthy. Always looks as though she’s seeing things other people don’t see. But she’s got a lot of character. She makes herself felt, as you might say.”

“That’s very true, Barrett,” said Lady Tressilian. “Yes, that’s very true.”

“And she’s not the kind you forget easily, either. I’ve often wondered if Mr. Neville thinks about her sometimes. The new Mrs. Strange is very handsome

—very handsome indeed—but Miss Audrey is the kind you remember when she isn't there.”

Lady Tressilian said with a sudden chuckle:

“Nevile's a fool to want to bring those two women together. He's the one who'll be sorry for it!”

May 29th

Thomas Royde, pipe in mouth, was surveying the progress of his packing with which the deft-fingered Malayan No. 1 boy was busy. Occasionally his glance shifted to the view over the plantations. For some six months he would not see that view which had been so familiar for the past seven years.

It would be queer to be in England again.

Allen Drake, his partner, looked in.

“Hullo, Thomas, how goes it?”

“All set now.”

“Come and have a drink, you lucky devil. I'm consumed with envy.”

Thomas Royde moved slowly out of the bedroom and joined his friend. He did not speak, for Thomas Royde was a man singularly economical of words. His friends had learned to gauge his reactions correctly from the quality of his silences.

A rather thickset figure, with a straight solemn face and observant thoughtful eyes, he walked a little sideways, crablike. This, the result of being jammed in a door during an earthquake, had contributed toward his nickname of the Hermit Crab. It had left his right arm and shoulder partially helpless which, added to an artificial stiffness of gait, often led people to think he was feeling shy and awkward when in reality he seldom felt anything of the kind.

Allen Drake mixed the drinks.

“Well,” he said. “Good hunting!”

Royde said something that sounded like “Ah hum.”

Drake looked at him curiously.

“Phlegmatic as ever,” he remarked. “Don’t know how you manage it. How long is it since you went home?”

“Seven years—nearer eight.”

“It’s a long time. Wonder you haven’t gone completely native.”

“Perhaps I have.”

“You always did belong to Our Dumb Friends rather than to the human race! Planned out your leave?”

“Well—yes—partly.”

The bronze impassive face took a sudden and a deeper brick red tinge.

Allen Drake said with lively astonishment:

“I believe there’s a girl! Damn it all, you are blushing!”

Thomas Royde said rather huskily: “Don’t be a fool!”

And he drew very hard on his ancient pipe.

He broke all previous records by continuing the conversation himself.

“Dare say,” he said, “I shall find things a bit changed.”

Allen Drake said curiously:

“I’ve always wondered why you chucked going home last time. Right at the last minute, too.”

Royde shrugged his shoulders.

“Thought that shooting trip might be interesting. Bad news from home about then.”

“Of course. I forgot. Your brother was killed—in that motoring accident.”

Thomas Royde nodded.

Drake reflected that, all the same, it seemed a curious reason for putting off a journey home. There was a mother—he believed a sister also. Surely at such a time—then he remembered something. Thomas had cancelled his passage before the news of his brother’s death arrived.

Allen looked at his friend curiously. Dark horse, old Thomas!

After a lapse of three years he could ask:

“You and your brother great pals?”

“Adrian and I? Not particularly. Each of us always went his own way. He was a barrister.”

“Yes,” thought Drake, “a very different life. Chambers in London, parties—a living earned by the shrewd use of the tongue.” He reflected that Adrian Royde must have been a very different chap from old Silent Thomas.

“Your mother’s alive, isn’t she?”

“The mater? Yes.”

“And you’ve got a sister, too.”

Thomas shook his head.

“Oh, I thought you had. In that snapshot—”

Royde mumbled, “Not a sister. Sort of distant cousin or something. Brought up with us because she was an orphan.”

Once more a slow tide of colour suffused the bronzed skin.

Drake thought, “Hullo—o—?”

He said: “Is she married?”

“She was. Married that fellow Nevile Strange.”

“Fellow who plays tennis and racquets and all that?”

“Yes. She divorced him.”

“And you’re going home to try your luck with her,” thought Drake.

Mercifully he changed the subject of the conversation.

“Going to get any fishing or shooting?”

“Shall go home first. Then I thought of doing a bit of sailing down at Saltcreek.”

“I know it. Attractive little place. Rather a decent old-fashioned Hotel there.”

“Yes. The Balmoral Court. May stay there, or may put up with friends who’ve got a house there.”

“Sounds all right to me.”

“Ah hum. Nice peaceful place, Saltcreek. Nobody to hustle you.”

“I know,” said Drake. “The kind of place where nothing ever happens.”

May 29th

“It is really most annoying,” said old Mr. Treves. “For twenty-five years now I have been to the Marine Hotel at Leahead—and now, would you believe it, the whole place is being pulled down. Widening the front or some nonsense of that kind. Why they can’t let these seaside places alone—

Leahead always had a peculiar charm of its own—Regency—pure Regency.”

Rufus Lord said consolingly:

“Still, there are other places to stay there, I suppose?”

“I really don’t feel I can go to Leahead at all. At the Marine, Mrs. Mackay understood my requirements perfectly. I had the same rooms every year—and there was hardly ever a change in the service. And the cooking was excellent—quite excellent.”

“What about trying Saltcreek? There’s rather a nice old-fashioned Hotel there. The Balmoral Court. Tell you who keeps it. Couple of the name of Rogers. She used to be cook to old Lord Mounthead—he had the best dinners in London. She married the butler and they run this hotel now. It sounds to me just your kind of place. Quiet—none of these jazz bands—and first-class cooking and service.”

“It’s an idea—it’s certainly an idea. Is there a sheltered terrace?”

“Yes—a covered-in veranda and a terrace beyond. You can get sun or shade as you prefer. I can give you some introductions in the neighbourhood, too, if you like. There’s old Lady Tressilian—she lives almost next door. A charming house and she herself is a delightful woman in spite of being very much of an invalid.”

“The judge’s widow, do you mean?”

“That’s it.”

“I used to know Matthew Tressilian, and I think I’ve met her. A charming woman—though, of course, that’s a long time ago. Saltcreek is near St. Loo, isn’t it? I’ve several friends in that part of the world. Do you know, I really think Saltcreek is a very good idea. I shall write and get particulars. The middle of August is when I wish to go there—the middle of August to the middle of September. There is a garage for the car, I suppose? And my chauffeur?”

“Oh yes. It’s thoroughly up-to-date.”

“Because, as you know, I have to be careful about walking uphill. I should prefer rooms on the ground floor, though I suppose there is a lift.”

“Oh yes, all that sort of thing.”

“It sounds,” said Mr. Treves, “as though it would solve my problem perfectly. And I should enjoy renewing my acquaintance with Lady Tressilian.”

July 28th

Kay Strange, dressed in shorts, and a canary-coloured woolly, was leaning forward watching the tennis players. It was the semifinal of the St. Loo tournament, men’s singles, and Neville was playing young Merrick, who was regarded as the coming star in the tennis firmament. His brilliance was undeniable—some of his serves quite unreturnable—but he occasionally struck a wild patch when the older man’s experience and court crafts won the day.

The score was three all in the final set.

Slipping on to a seat next to Kay, Ted Latimer observed in a lazy ironic voice:

“Devoted wife watches her husband slash his way to victory!”

Kay started.

“How you startled me. I didn’t know you were there.”

“I am always there. You should know that by this time.”

Ted Latimer was twenty-five and extremely good-looking—even though unsympathetic old colonels were wont to say of him:

“Touch of the Dago!”

He was dark and beautifully sunburnt and a wonderful dancer.

His dark eyes could be very eloquent, and he managed his voice with the assurance of an actor. Kay had known him since she was fifteen. They had oiled and sunned themselves at Juan les Pins, had danced together and played tennis together. They had been not only friends but allies.

Young Merrick was serving from the left-hand court. Neville's return was unplayable, a superb shot to the extreme corner.

"Neville's backhand is good," said Ted. "It's better than his forehand. Merrick's weak on the backhand and Neville knows it. He's going to pound at it all he knows how."

The game ended. "Four three—Strange leads."

He took the next game on his service. Young Merrick was hitting out wildly.

"Five three."

"Good for Neville," said Latimer.

And then the boy pulled himself together. His play became cautious. He varied the pace of his shots.

"He's got a head on him," said Ted. "And his footwork is first-class. It's going to be a fight."

Slowly the boy pulled up to five all. They went to seven all, and Merrick finally won the match at nine seven.

Neville came up to the net, grinning and shaking his head ruefully, to shake hands.

"Youth tells," said Ted Latimer. "Nineteen against thirty-three. But I can tell you the reason, Kay, why Neville has never been actual championship class. He's too good a loser."

“Nonsense.”

“It isn’t. Nevile, blast him, is always the complete good sportsman. I’ve never seen him lose his temper over losing a match.”

“Of course not,” said Kay. “People don’t.”

“Oh yes, they do! We’ve all seen them. Tennis stars who give way to nerves—and who damn’ well snatch every advantage. But old Nevile—he’s always ready to take the count and grin. Let the best man win and all that. God, how I hate the public school spirit! Thank the lord I never went to one.”

Kay turned her head.

“Being rather spiteful, aren’t you?”

“Positively feline!”

“I wish you wouldn’t make it so clear you don’t like Nevile.”

“Why should I like him? He pinched my girl.”

His eyes lingered on her.

“I wasn’t your girl. Circumstances forbade.”

“Quite so. Not even the proverbial tuppence a year between us.”

“Shut up. I fell in love with Nevile and married him—”

“And he’s a jolly good fellow—and so say all of us!”

“Are you trying to annoy me?”

She turned her head as she asked the question. He smiled—and presently she returned his smile.

“How’s the summer going, Kay?”

“So, so. Lovely yachting trip. I’m rather tired of all this tennis business.”

“How long have you got of it? Another month?”

“Yes. Then in September we go to Gull’s Point for a fortnight.”

“I shall be at the Easterhead Bay Hotel,” said Ted. “I’ve booked my room.”

“It’s going to be a lovely party!” said Kay. “Nevile and I, and Nevile’s Ex, and some Malayan planter who’s home on leave.”

“That does sound hilarious!”

“And the dowdy cousin, of course. Slaving away round that unpleasant old woman—and she won’t get anything for it, either, since the money comes to me and Nevile.”

“Perhaps,” said Ted, “she doesn’t know that?”

“That would be rather funny,” said Kay.

But she spoke absently. She stared down at the racquet she was twiddling in her hands. She caught her breath suddenly.

“Oh Ted!”

“What’s the matter, sugar?”

“I don’t know. It’s just sometimes I get—I get cold feet! I get scared and feel queer.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Kay.”

“It doesn’t, does it? Anyway,” she smiled rather uncertainly, “you’ll be at the Easterhead Bay Hotel.”

“All according to plan.”

When Kay met Nevile outside the changing rooms, he said:

“I see the boy friend’s arrived.”

“Ted?”

“Yes, the faithful dog—or faithful lizard might be more apt.”

“You don’t like him, do you?”

“Oh, I don’t mind him. If it amuses you to pull him around on a string—”

He shrugged his shoulders.

Kay said:

“I believe you’re jealous.”

“Of Latimer?” His surprise was genuine.

Kay said:

“Ted’s supposed to be very attractive.”

“I’m sure he is. He has that lithe South American charm.”

“You are jealous.”

Nevile gave her arm a friendly squeeze.

“No, I’m not, Gorgeous. You can have your tame adorers—a whole court of them if you like. I’m the man in possession, and possession is nine points of the law.”

“You’re very sure of yourself,” said Kay with a slight pout.

“Of course. You and I are Fate. Fate let us meet. Fate brought us together. Do you remember when we met at Cannes and I was going on to Estoril and suddenly, when I got there, the first person I met was lovely Kay! I knew then that it was Fate—and that I couldn’t escape.”

“It wasn’t exactly Fate,” Kay said. “It was me!”

“What do you mean by ‘it was me?’”

“Because it was! You see, I heard you say at Cannes you were going to Estoril, so I set to work on Mums and got her all worked up—and that’s why the first person you saw when you got there was Kay.”

Nevile looked at her with a rather curious expression. He said slowly: “You never told me that before.”

“No, because it wouldn’t have been good for you. It might have made you conceited! But I always have been good at planning. Things don’t happen unless you make them! You call me a nitwit sometimes—but in my own way I’m quite clever. I make things happen. Sometimes I have to plan a long way beforehand.”

“The brainwork must be intense.”

“It’s all very well to laugh.”

Nevile said with a sudden curious bitterness:

“Am I just beginning to understand the woman I’ve married? For Fate—read Kay!”

Kay said:

“You’re not cross, are you, Nevile?”

He said rather absently:

“No—no, of course not. I was just—thinking....”

August 10th

Lord Cornelly, that rich and eccentric peer, was sitting at the monumental desk which was his especial pride and pleasure. It had been designed for him at immense expense and the whole furnishing of the room was

subordinated to it. The effect was terrific and only slightly marred by the unavoidable addition of Lord Cornelly himself, an insignificant and rotund little man completely dwarfed by the desk's magnificence.

Into this scene of City splendour there entered a blonde secretary, also in harmony with the luxury furnishings.

Gliding silently across the floor, she laid a slip of paper before the great man.

Lord Cornelly peered down at it.

"MacWhirter? MacWhirter? Who's he? Never heard of him. Has he got an appointment?"

The blonde secretary indicated that such was the case.

"MacWhirter, eh? Oh! MacWhirter! That fellow! Of course! Send him in. Send him in at once."

Lord Cornelly chuckled gleefully. He was in high good-humour.

Throwing himself back in his chair, he stared up into the dour unsmiling face of the man he had summoned to an interview.

"You're MacWhirter, eh? Angus MacWhirter?"

"That's my name."

MacWhirter spoke stiffly, standing erect and unsmiling.

"You were with Herbert Clay? That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Lord Cornelly began to chuckle again.

"I know all about you. Clay got his driving licence endorsed, all because you wouldn't back him up and swear he was going at twenty miles an hour!"

Livid about it he was!” The chuckle increased. “Told us all about it in the Savoy Grill. ‘That damned pig-headed Scot!’ That’s what he said! Went on and on. D’you know what I was thinking?”

“I’ve not the least idea.”

MacWhirter’s tone was repressive. Lord Cornelly took no notice. He was enjoying his remembrance of his own reactions.

“I thought to myself: ‘That’s the kind of chap I could do with! Man who can’t be bribed to tell lies.’ You won’t have to tell lies for me. I don’t do my business that way. I go about the world looking for honest men—and there are damned few of them!”

The little peer cackled with shrill laughter, his shrewd monkeylike face wrinkled with mirth. MacWhirter stood solidly, not amused.

Lord Cornelly stopped laughing. His face became shrewd, alert.

“If you want a job MacWhirter, I’ve got one for you.”

“I could do with a job,” said MacWhirter.

“It’s an important job. It’s a job that can only be given to a man with good qualifications—you’ve got those all right—I’ve been into that—and to a man who can be trusted—absolutely.”

Lord Cornelly waited. MacWhirter did not speak.

“Well, man, can I depend upon you absolutely?”

MacWhirter said dryly:

“You’ll not know that from hearing me answer that of course you can.”

Lord Cornelly laughed.

“You’ll do. You’re the man I’ve been looking for. Do you know South America at all?”

He went into details. Half an hour later MacWhirter stood on the pavement, a man who had landed an interesting and extremely well-paid job—and a job that promised a future.

Fate, after having frowned, had chosen to smile upon him. But he was in no mood to smile back. There was no exultation in him, though his sense of humour was grimly tickled when he thought back over the interview. There was a stern poetic justice in the fact that it was his former employer's diatribes against him that had actually got him his present advancement!

He was a fortunate man, he supposed. Not that he cared! He was willing to address himself to the task of living, not with enthusiasm, not even with pleasure, but in a methodical day after day spirit. Seven months ago, he had attempted to take his own life; chance, and nothing but chance, had intervened, but he was not particularly grateful. True, he felt no present disposition to do away with himself. That phase was over for good. You could not, he admitted, take your life in cold blood. There had to be some extra fillip of despair, of grief, of desperation or of passion. You could not commit suicide merely because you felt that life was a dreary round of uninteresting happenings.

On the whole he was glad that his work would take him out of England. He was to sail for South America the end of September. The next few weeks would be busy getting together certain equipment and being put in touch with the somewhat complicated ramifications of the business.

But there would be a week's leisure before he left the country. He wondered what he should do with that week? Stay in London? Go away?

An idea stirred nebulously in his brain.

Saltcreek?

"I've a damned good mind to go down there," said MacWhirter to himself.

It would be, he thought, grimly amusing.

August 19th

“And bang goes my holiday,” said Superintendent Battle disgustedly.

Mrs. Battle was disappointed, but long years as the wife of a police officer had prepared her to take disappointments philosophically.

“Oh well,” she said, “it can’t be helped. And I suppose it is an interesting case?”

“Not so that you’d notice it,” said Superintendent Battle. “It’s got the Foreign Office in a twitter—all those tall thin young men rushing about and saying Hush Hush here, there and everywhere. It’ll straighten out easy enough—and we shall save everybody’s face. But it’s not the kind of case I’d put in my Memoirs, supposing I was ever foolish enough to write any.”

“We could put our holiday off, I suppose—” began Mrs. Battle doubtfully, but her husband interrupted her decisively.

“Not a bit of it. You and the girls go off to Britlington—the rooms have been booked since March—pity to waste them. I tell you what I’ll do—go down and spend a week with Jim when this blows over.”

Jim was Superintendent Battle’s nephew, Inspector James Leach.

“Saltington’s quite close to Easterhead Bay and Saltcreek,” he went on. “I can get a bit of sea air and a dip in the briny.”

Mrs. Battle sniffed.

“More likely he’ll rope you in to help him over a case!”

“They don’t have any cases this time of the year—unless it’s a woman who pinches a few sixpennyworths from Woolworth’s. And anyway Jim’s all right—he doesn’t need his wits sharpening for him.”

“Oh well,” said Mrs. Battle. “I suppose it will work out all right, but it is disappointing.”

“These things are sent to try us,” Superintendent Battle assured her.

SNOW WHITE AND RED ROSE

I

Thomas Royde found Mary Aldin waiting for him on the platform at Saltington when he got out of the train.

He had only a dim recollection of her, and now that he saw her again he was rather surprisedly aware of pleasure in her brisk capable way of dealing with things.

She called him by his Christian name.

“How nice to see you, Thomas. After all these years.”

“Nice of you to put me up. Hope it isn’t a bother.”

“Not at all. On the contrary. You’ll be particularly welcome. Is that your porter? Tell him to bring the things out this way. I’ve got the car right at the end.”

The bags were stowed in the Ford. Mary took the wheel and Royde got in beside her. They drove off and Thomas noticed that she was a good driver, deft and careful in traffic and with a nice judgement of distance and spaces.

Saltington was seven miles from Saltcreek. Once they were out of the small market town and on the open road, Mary Aldin reopened the subject of his visit.

“Really, Thomas, your visit just now is going to be a godsend. Things are rather difficult—and a stranger—or partial stranger is just what is needed.”

“What’s the trouble?”

His manner, as always, was incurious—almost lazy. He asked the question, it seemed, more from politeness than because he had any desire for the information. It was a manner particularly soothing to Mary Aldin. She

wanted badly to talk to someone—but she much preferred to talk to someone who was not too much interested.

She said:

“Well—we’ve got rather a difficult situation. Audrey is here, as you probably know?”

She paused questioningly and Thomas Royde nodded.

“And Neville and his wife also.”

Thomas Royde’s eyebrows went up. He said after a minute or two: “Bit awkward—what?”

“Yes it is. It was Neville’s idea.”

She paused. Royde did not speak, but as though aware of some current of disbelief issuing from him, she repeated assertively: “It was Neville’s idea.”

“Why?”

She raised her hands for a moment from the steering wheel.

“Oh, some modern reaction! All sensible and friends together. That idea. But I don’t think, you know, it’s working very well.”

“Possibly it mightn’t.” He added, “What’s the new wife like?”

“Kay? Good-looking, of course. Really very good-looking. And quite young.”

“And Neville’s keen on her?”

“Oh yes. Of course they’ve only been married a year.”

Thomas Royde turned his head slowly to look at her. His mouth smiled a little. Mary said hastily:

“I didn’t mean that exactly.”

“Come now, Mary. I think you did.”

“Well, one can’t help seeing that they’ve really got very little in common. Their friends, for instance—” She came to a stop.

Royde asked:

“He met her, didn’t he, on the Riviera? I don’t know much about it. Only just the bare facts that the mater wrote.”

“Yes, they met first at Cannes. Neville was attracted, but I should imagine he’d been attracted before—in a harmless sort of way. I still think myself that if he’d been left to himself nothing would have come of it. He was fond of Audrey, you know.”

Thomas nodded.

Mary went on:

“I don’t think he wanted to break up his marriage—I’m sure he didn’t. But the girl was absolutely determined. She wouldn’t rest until she’d got him to leave his wife—and what’s a man to do in those circumstances? It flatters him, of course.”

“Head over heels in love with him, was she?”

“I suppose it may have been that.”

Mary’s tone sounded doubtful. She met his inquiring glance with a flush.

“What a cat I am! There’s a young man always hanging about—good-looking in a gigolo kind of way—an old friend of hers—and I can’t help wondering sometimes whether the fact that Neville is very well off and distinguished and all that didn’t have something to do with it. The girl hadn’t a penny of her own, I gather.”

She paused, looking rather ashamed. Thomas Royde merely said: “Uh hum,” in a speculative voice.

“However,” said Mary, “that’s probably plain cat! The girl is what one would call glamorous—and that probably rouses the feline instincts of middle-aged spinsters.”

Royde looked thoughtfully at her, but his poker face showed no recognizable reaction. He said, after a minute or two:

“But what, exactly, is the present trouble about?”

“Really, you know, I haven’t the least idea! That’s what’s so odd. Naturally we consulted Audrey first—and she seemed to have no feeling against meeting Kay—she was charming about it all. She has been charming. No one could have been nicer. Audrey, of course, in everything she does is always just right. Her manner to them both is perfect. She’s very reserved, as you know, and one never has any idea of what she is really thinking or feeling—but honestly I don’t believe she minds at all.”

“No reason why she should,” said Thomas Royde. He added, rather belatedly, “After all, it’s three years ago.”

“Do people like Audrey forget? She was very fond of Neville.”

Thomas Royde shifted in his seat.

“She’s only thirty-two. Got her life in front of her.”

“Oh, I know. But she did take it hard. She had quite a bad nervous breakdown, you know.”

“I know. The mater wrote me.”

“In a way,” said Mary, “I think it was good for your mother to have Audrey to look after. It took her mind off her own grief—about your brother’s death. We were so sorry about that.”

“Yes. Poor old Adrian. Always did drive too fast.”

There was a pause. Mary stretched out her hand as a sign she was taking the turn that led down the hill to Saltcreek.

Presently, as they were slipping down the narrow twisting road, she said:

“Thomas—you know Audrey very well?”

“So so. Haven’t seen much of her for the last ten years.”

“No, but you knew her as a child. She was like a sister to you and Adrian?”

He nodded.

“Was she—was she at all unbalanced in any way? Oh I don’t mean that quite the way it sounds. But I’ve a feeling that there is something very wrong with her now. She’s so completely detached, her poise is so unnaturally perfect—but I wonder sometimes what is going on behind the façade. I’ve a feeling, now and then, of some really powerful emotion. And I don’t quite know what it is! But I do feel that she isn’t normal. There’s something! It worries me. I do know that there’s an atmosphere in the house that affects everybody. We’re all nervous and jumpy. But I don’t know what it is. And sometimes, Thomas, it frightens me.”

“Frightens you?” His slow wondering tone made her pull herself together with a little nervous laugh.

“It sounds absurd...But that’s what I meant just now—your arrival will be good for us—create a diversion. Ah, here we are.”

They had slipped round the last corner. Gull’s Point was built on a plateau of rock overlooking the river. On two sides it had sheer cliff going down to the water. The gardens and tennis court were on the left of the house. The garage—a modern afterthought—was actually farther along the road, on the other side of it.

Mary said:

“I’ll put the car away now and come back. Hurstall will look after you.”

Hurstall, the aged butler, was greeting Thomas with the pleasure of an old friend.

“Very glad to see you, Mr. Royde, after all these years. And so will her ladyship be. You’re in the east room, sir. I think you’ll find everyone in the garden, unless you want to go to your room first.”

Thomas shook his head. He went through the drawing room to the window which opened on to the terrace. He stood there for a moment, watching, unobserved himself.

Two women were the only occupants of the terrace. One was sitting on the corner of the balustrade looking out over the water. The other woman was watching her.

The first was Audrey—the other, he knew, must be Kay Strange. Kay did not know she was being overlooked and she took no pains to disguise her expression. Thomas Royde was not, perhaps, a very observant man where women were concerned, but he could not fail to notice that Kay Strange disliked Audrey Strange very much.

As for Audrey, she was looking out across the river and seemed unconscious of, or indifferent to, the other’s presence.

It was seven years since Thomas had seen Audrey Strange. He studied her now very carefully. Had she changed, and, if so, in what way?

There was a change, he decided. She was thinner, paler, altogether more ethereal-looking—but there was something else, something he could not quite define. It was as though she were holding herself tightly in leash, watchful over every movement—and yet all the time intensely aware of everything going on round her. She was like a person, he thought, who had a secret to hide. But what secret? He knew a little of the events that had befallen her in the last few years. He had been prepared for lines of sorrow and loss—but this was something else. She was like a child who, by a tightly clenched hand over a treasure—calls attention to what it wants to hide.

And then his eyes went to the other woman—the girl who was now Neville Strange’s wife. Beautiful, yes. Mary Aldin had been right. He rather fancied dangerous, too. He thought: I wouldn’t like to trust her near Audrey if she had a knife in her hand....

And yet, why should she hate Neville’s first wife? All that was over and done with. Audrey had no part or parcel in their lives nowadays. Footsteps rang out on the terrace as Neville came round the corner of the house. He looked warm and was carrying a picture paper.

“Here’s the Illustrated Review,” he said. “Couldn’t get the other—”

Then two things happened at precisely the same minute.

Kay said: “Oh good, give it to me,” and Audrey, without moving her head, held out her hand almost absentmindedly.

Neville had stopped halfway between the two women. A dawn of embarrassment showed in his face. Before he could speak, Kay said, her voice rising with a slight note of hysteria, “I want it. Give it me! Give it me, Neville!”

Audrey Strange started, turned her head, withdrew her hand and murmured with just the slightest air of confusion:

“Oh sorry. I thought you were speaking to me, Neville.”

Thomas Royde saw the colour come up brick red in Neville Strange’s neck. He took three quick steps forward and held out the picture paper to Audrey.

She said, hesitating, her air of embarrassment growing:

“Oh, but—”

Kay pushed back her chair with a rough movement. She stood up, then, turning, she made for the drawing room window. Royde had no time to move before she had charged into him blindly.

The shock made her recoil; she looked at him as he apologized. He saw then why she had not seen him, her eyes were brimming with tears—tears, he fancied, of anger.

“Hullo,” she said. “Who are you? Oh, of course, the man from Malay!”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “I’m the man from Malay.”

“I wish to God I was in Malay,” said Kay. “Anywhere but here! I loathe this beastly lousy house! I loathe everyone in it!”

Emotional scenes always alarmed Thomas. He regarded Kay warily and murmured nervously:

“Ah—hum.”

“Unless they’re very careful,” said Kay, “I shall kill someone! Either Neville or that whey-faced cat out there!”

She brushed past him and went out of the room, banging the door.

Thomas Royde stood stock-still. He was not quite sure what to do next, but he was glad that young Mrs. Strange had gone. He stood and looked at the door that she had slammed so vigorously. Something of a tiger cat, the new Mrs. Strange.

The window was darkened as Neville Strange paused in the space between the french doors. He was breathing rather fast.

He greeted Thomas vaguely.

“Oh—er—hullo, Royde, didn’t know you’d arrived. I say, have you seen my wife?”

“She passed through about a minute ago,” said the other.

Neville in his turn went out through the drawing room door. He was looking annoyed.

Thomas Royde went slowly through the open window. He was not a heavy walker. Not until he was a couple of yards away did Audrey turn her head.

Then he saw those wide-apart eyes open wider, saw her lips part. She slipped down from the wall and came towards him, hands outstretched.

“Oh Thomas,” she said. “Dear Thomas! How glad I am you’ve come.”

As he took the two small white hands in his and bent down to her, Mary Aldin in her turn arrived at the french windows. Seeing the two on the terrace she checked herself, watched them for a moment or two, then slowly turned away and went back into the house.

II

Upstairs Neville had found Kay in her bedroom. The only large double bedroom in the house was Lady Tressilian’s. A married couple was always given the two rooms with the communicating door and a small bathroom beyond on the west side of the house. It was a small isolated suite.

Neville passed through his own room and on into his wife’s. Kay had flung herself down on her bed. Raising a tearstained face, she cried angrily:

“So you’ve come! About time, too!”

“What is all this fuss about? Have you gone quite crazy, Kay?”

Neville spoke quietly, but there was a dent at the corner of his nostril that registered restrained anger.

“Why did you give that Illustrated Review to her and not to me?”

“Really, Kay, you are a child! All this fuss about a wretched little picture paper.”

“You gave it to her and not to me,” repeated Kay obstinately.

“Well, why not? What does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you. You can’t behave in this hysterical fashion when you’re staying in other people’s houses. Don’t you know how to behave in public?”

“Why did you give it to Audrey?”

“Because she wanted it.”

“So did I, and I’m your wife.”

“All the more reason, in that case, for giving it to an older woman and one who, technically, is no relation.”

“She scored off me! She wanted to and she did. You were on her side!”

“You’re talking like an idiotic jealous child. For goodness’ sake, control yourself, and try to behave properly in public!”

“Like she does, I suppose?”

Nevile said coldly: “At any rate Audrey can behave like a lady. She doesn’t make an exhibition of herself.”

“She’s turning you against me! She hates me and she’s getting her revenge.”

“Look here, Kay, will you stop being melodramatic and completely foolish? I’m fed up!”

“Then let’s go away from here! Let’s go tomorrow. I hate this place!”

“We’ve only been here four days.”

“It’s quite enough! Do let’s go, Nevile.”

“Now look here, Kay, I’ve had enough of this. We came here for a fortnight and I’m going to stay for a fortnight.”

“If you do,” said Kay, “you’ll be sorry. You and your Audrey! You think she’s wonderful!”

“I don’t think Audrey is wonderful. I think she’s an extremely nice and kindly person whom I’ve treated very badly and who has been most generous and forgiving.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Kay. She got up from the bed. Her fury had died down. She spoke seriously—almost soberly.

“Audrey hasn’t forgiven you, Nevile. Once or twice I’ve seen her looking at you...I don’t know what is going on in her mind but something is—She’s the kind that doesn’t let anyone know what they’re thinking.”

“It’s a pity,” said Nevile, “that there aren’t more people like that.”

Kay’s face went very white.

“Do you mean that for me?” There was a dangerous edge to her voice.

“Well—you haven’t shown much reticence, have you? Every bit of ill temper and spite that comes into your mind you blurt straight out. You make a fool of yourself and you make a fool of me!”

“Anything more to say?”

Her voice was icy.

He said in an equally cold tone:

“I’m sorry if you think that was unfair. But it’s the plain truth. You’ve no more self-control than a child.”

“You never lose your temper, do you? Always the self-controlled charming-mannered little pukka sahib! I don’t believe you’ve got any feelings. You’re just a fish—a damned cold-blooded fish! Why don’t you let yourself go now and then? Why don’t you shout at me, swear at me, tell me to go to Hell?”

Nevile sighed. His shoulders sagged.

“Oh lord,” he said.

Turning on his heel he left the room.

III

“You look exactly as you did at seventeen, Thomas Royde,” said Lady Tressilian. “Just the same owlish look. And no more conversation now than you had then. Why not?”

Thomas said vaguely,

“I dunno. Never had the gift of the gab.”

“Not like Adrian. Adrian was a very clever and witty talker.”

“Perhaps that’s why. Always left the talking to him.”

“Poor Adrian. So much promise.”

Thomas nodded.

Lady Tressilian changed the subject. She was granting an audience to Thomas. She usually preferred her visitors one at a time. It did not tire her and she was able to concentrate her attention on them.

“You’ve been here twenty-four hours,” she said. “What do you think of our Situation?”

“Situation?”

“Don’t look stupid. You do that deliberately. You know quite well what I mean. The eternal triangle which has established itself under my roof.”

Thomas said cautiously: “Seems a bit of friction.”

Lady Tressilian smiled rather diabolically.

“I will confess to you, Thomas, I am rather enjoying myself. This came about through no wish of mine—indeed I did my utmost to prevent it. Neville was obstinate. He would insist on bringing these two together—and now he is reaping what he has sown!”

Thomas Royde shifted a little in his chair.

“Seems funny,” he said.

“Elucidate,” snapped Lady Tressilian.

“Shouldn’t have thought Strange was that kind of chap.”

“It’s interesting your saying that. Because it is what I felt. It was uncharacteristic of Neville. Neville, like most men, is usually anxious to avoid any kind of embarrassment or possible unpleasantness. I suspected that it wasn’t originally Neville’s idea—but, if not, I don’t see whose idea it can have been.” She paused and said with only the slightest upward inflection, “It wouldn’t be Audrey’s?”

Thomas said promptly, “No, not Audrey.”

“And I can hardly believe it was that unfortunate young woman, Kay’s, idea. Not unless she is a remarkable actress. You know, I have almost felt sorry for her lately.”

“You don’t like her much, do you?”

“No. She seems to me empty-headed and lacking in any kind of poise. But, as I say, I do begin to feel sorry for her. She is blundering about like a daddy longlegs in lamplight. She has no idea of what weapons to use. Bad temper, bad manners, childish rudeness—all things which have a most unfortunate effect upon a man like Neville.”

Thomas said quietly:

“I think Audrey is the one who is in a difficult position.”

Lady Tressilian gave him a sharp glance.

“You’ve always been in love with Audrey, haven’t you, Thomas?”

His reply was quite imperturbable. “Suppose I have.”

“Practically from the time you were children together?”

He nodded.

“And then Neville came along and carried her off from under your nose?”

He moved uneasily in his chair.

“Oh well—I always knew I hadn’t a chance.”

“Defeatist,” said Lady Tressilian.

“I always have been a dull dog.”

“Dobbin!”

“Good old Thomas!—that’s what Audrey feels about me.”

“‘True Thomas,’” said Lady Tressilian. “That was your nickname, wasn’t it?”

He smiled as the words brought back memories of childish days. “Funny! I haven’t heard that for years.”

“It might stand you in good stead now,” said Lady Tressilian.

She met his glance clearly and deliberately.

“Fidelity,” she said, “is a quality that anyone who has been through Audrey’s experience might appreciate. The doglike devotion of a lifetime, Thomas, does sometimes get its reward.”

Thomas Royde looked down, his fingers fumbling with a pipe.

“That,” he said, “is what I came home hoping.”

IV

“So here we all are,” said Mary Aldin.

Hurstall, the old butler, wiped his forehead. When he went into the kitchen, Mrs. Spicer, the cook, remarked upon his expression.

“I don’t think I can be well, and that’s the truth,” said Hurstall. “If I can so express myself, everything that’s said and done in this house lately seems to me to mean something that’s different from what it sounds like—if you know what I mean?”

Mrs. Spicer did not seem to know what he meant, so Hurstall went on:

“Miss Aldin, now, as they all sat down to dinner—she says ‘So here we all are’—and just that gave me a turn! Made me think of a trainer who’s got a lot of wild animals into a cage, and then the cage door shuts. I felt, all of a sudden, as though we were all caught in a trap.”

“Law, Mr. Hurstall,” said Mrs. Spicer, “you must have eaten something that’s disagreed.”

“It’s not my digestion. It’s the way everyone’s strung up. The front door banged just now and Mrs. Strange—our Mrs. Strange, Miss Audrey—she jumped as though she had been shot. And there’s the silences, too. Very queer they are. It’s as though, all of a sudden, everybody’s afraid to speak. And then they all break out at once just saying the things that first come into their heads.”

“Enough to make anyone embarrassed,” said Mrs. Spicer.

“Two Mrs. Stranges in the house. What I feel is, it isn’t decent.”

In the dining room, one of those silences that Hurstall had described was proceeding.

It was with quite an effort that Mary Aldin turned to Kay and said:

“I asked your friend, Mr. Latimer, to dine tomorrow night!”

“Oh good,” said Kay.

Nevile said:

“Latimer? Is he down here?”

“He’s staying at the Easterhead Bay Hotel,” said Kay.

Nevile said:

“We might go over and dine there one night. How late does the ferry go?”

“Until half past one,” said Mary.

“I suppose they dance there in the evenings?”

“Most of the people are about a hundred,” said Kay.

“Not very amusing for your friend,” said Nevile to Kay.

Mary said quickly:

“We might go over and bathe one day at Easterhead Bay. It’s quite warm still and it’s a lovely sandy beach.”

Thomas Royde said in a low voice to Audrey:

“I thought of going out sailing tomorrow. Will you come?”

“I’d like to.”

“We might all go sailing,” said Nevile.

“I thought you said you were going to play golf,” said Kay.

“I did think of going over to the links. I was right off my wooden shots the other day.”

“What a tragedy!” said Kay.

Nevile said good-humouredly:

“Golf’s a tragic game.”

Mary asked Kay if she played.

“Yes—after a fashion.”

Nevile said:

“Kay would be very good if she took a little trouble. She’s got a natural swing.”

Kay said to Audrey:

“You don’t play any games, do you?”

“Not really. I play tennis after a fashion—but I’m a complete rabbit.”

“Do you still play the piano, Audrey?” asked Thomas.

She shook her head.

“Not nowadays.”

“You used to play rather well,” said Nevile.

“I thought you didn’t like music, Nevile,” said Kay.

“I don’t know much about it,” said Nevile vaguely. “I always wondered how Audrey managed to stretch an octave, her hands are so small.”

He was looking at them as she laid down her dessert knife and fork.

She flushed a little and said quickly:

“I’ve got a very long little finger. I expect that helps.”

“You must be selfish then,” said Kay. “If you’re unselfish you have a short little finger.”

“Is that true?” asked Mary Aldin. “Then I must be unselfish. Look, my little fingers are quite short.”

“I think you are very unselfish,” said Thomas Royde, eyeing her thoughtfully.

She went red—and continued, quickly.

“Who’s the most unselfish of us? Let’s compare little fingers. Mine are shorter than yours, Kay. But Thomas, I think, beats me.”

“I beat you both,” said Nevile. “Look,” he stretched out a hand.

“Only one hand, though,” said Kay. “Your left hand little finger is short but your right hand one is much longer. And your left hand is what you are born with and the right hand is what you make of your life. So that means that you were born unselfish but have become more selfish as time goes on.”

“Can you tell fortunes, Kay?” asked Mary Aldin. She stretched out her hand, palm upward. “A fortune-teller told me I should have two husbands and three children. I shall have to hurry up!”

Kay said:

“Those little crosses aren’t children, they’re journeys. That means you’ll take three journeys across water.”

“That seems unlikely too,” said Mary Aldin.

Thomas Royde asked her: “Have you travelled much?”

“No, hardly at all.”

He heard an undercurrent of regret in her voice.

“You would like to?”

“Above everything.”

He thought in his slow reflective way of her life. Always in attendance on an old woman. Calm, tactful, an excellent manager. He asked curiously:

“Have you lived with Lady Tressilian long?”

“For nearly fifteen years. I came to be with her after my father died. He had been a helpless invalid for some years before his death.”

And then, answering the question she felt to be in his mind:

“I’m thirty-six. That’s what you wanted to know, wasn’t it?”

“I did wonder,” he admitted. “You might be—any age, you see.”

“That’s rather a two-edged remark!”

“I suppose it is. I didn’t mean it that way.”

That sombre thoughtful gaze of his did not leave her face. She did not find it embarrassing. It was too free from self-consciousness for that—a genuine thoughtful interest. Seeing his eyes on her hair, she put up her hand to the one white lock.

“I’ve had that,” she said, “since I was very young.”

“I like it,” said Thomas Royde simply.

He went on looking at her. She said at last, in a slightly amused tone of voice:

“Well, what is the verdict?”

He reddened under his tan.

“Oh, I suppose it is rude of me to stare. I was wondering about you—what you are really like.”

“Please,” she said hurriedly and rose from the table. She said as she went into the drawing room with her arm through Audrey’s:

“Old Mr. Treves is coming to dinner tomorrow, too.”

“Who’s he?” asked Nevile.

“He brought an introduction from the Rufus Lords. A delightful old gentleman. He’s staying at the Balmoral Court. He’s got a weak heart and looks very frail, but his faculties are perfect and he has known a lot of interesting people. He was a solicitor or a barrister—I forget which.”

“Everybody down here is terribly old,” said Kay discontentedly.

She was standing just under a tall lamp. Thomas was looking that way, and he gave her that same slow interested attention that he gave to anything that was immediately occupying his line of vision.

He was struck suddenly with her intense and passionate beauty. A beauty of vivid colouring, of abundant and triumphant vitality. He looked across from her to Audrey, pale and mothlike in a silvery grey dress.

He smiled to himself and murmured:

“Red Rose and Snow White.”

“What?” It was Mary Aldin at his elbow.

He repeated the words. “Like the old fairy story, you know—”

Mary Aldin said: “It’s a very good description....”

V

Mr. Treves sipped his glass of port appreciatively. A very nice wine. And an excellently cooked and served dinner. Clearly Lady Tressilian had no difficulties with her servants.

The house was well managed, too, in spite of the mistress of it being an invalid.

A pity, perhaps, that the ladies did not leave the dining room when the port went round. He preferred the old-fashioned routine. But these young people had their own ways.

His eyes rested thoughtfully on that brilliant and beautiful young woman who was the wife of Neville Strange.

It was Kay's night tonight. Her vivid beauty glowed and shone in the candlelit room. Beside her, Ted Latimer's sleek dark head bent to hers. He was playing up to her. She felt triumphant and sure of herself.

The mere sight of such radiant vitality warmed Mr. Treves' old bones.

Youth—there was really nothing like youth!

No wonder the husband had lost his head and left his first wife. Audrey was sitting next to him. A charming creature and a lady—but then that was the kind of woman who invariably did get left, in Mr. Treves' experience.

He glanced at her. Her head had been down and she was staring at her plate. Something in the complete immobility of her attitude struck Mr. Treves. He looked at her more keenly. He wondered what she was thinking about. Charming the way the hair sprang up from that small shell-like ear....

With a little start, Mr. Treves came to himself as he realized that a move was being made. He got hurriedly to his feet.

In the drawing room, Kay Strange went straight to the gramophone and put on a record of dance music.

Mary Aldin said apologetically to Mr. Treves:

"I'm sure you hate jazz."

"Not at all," said Mr. Treves, untruly but politely.

“Later, perhaps, we might have some bridge?” she suggested. “But it is no good starting a rubber now, as I know Lady Tressilian is looking forward to having a chat with you.”

“That will be delightful. Lady Tressilian never joins you down here?”

“No, she used to come down in an invalid chair. That is why we had a lift put in. But nowadays she prefers her own room. There she can talk to whomsoever she likes, summoning them by a kind of Royal Command.”

“Very aptly put, Miss Aldin. I am always sensible of the Royal touch in Lady Tressilian’s manner.”

In the middle of the room Kay was moving in a slow dance step.

She said: “Just take that table out of the way, Nevile.”

Her voice was autocratic, assured. Her eyes were shining, her lips parted.

Nevile obediently moved the table. Then he took a step towards her, but she turned deliberately towards Ted Latimer.

“Come on, Ted, let’s dance.”

Ted’s arm went round her immediately. They danced, swaying, bending, their steps perfectly together. It was a lovely performance to watch.

Mr. Treves murmured:

“Er—quite professional.”

Mary Aldin winced slightly at the word—yet surely Mr. Treves had spoken in simple admiration. She looked at his little wise nut-cracker face. It bore, she thought, an absentminded look as though he were following some train of thought of his own.

Nevile stood hesitating a moment, then he walked to where Audrey was standing by the window.

“Dance, Audrey?”

His tone was formal, almost cold. Mere politeness, you might have said, inspired his request. Audrey Strange hesitated a minute before nodding her head and taking a step towards him.

Mary Aldin made some commonplace remarks to which Mr. Treves did not reply. He had so far shown no signs of deafness and his courtesy was punctilious—she realized that it was absorption that held him aloof. She could not quite make out if he was watching the dancers, or was staring across the room at Thomas Royde, standing alone at the other end.

With a little start Mr. Treves said:

“Excuse me, my dear lady, you were saying?”

“Nothing. Only that it was an unusually fine September.”

“Yes, indeed—rain is badly needed locally, so they tell me at my hotel.”

“You are comfortable there, I hope?”

“Oh yes, though I must say I was vexed when I arrived to find—”

Mr. Treves broke off.

Audrey had disengaged herself from Neville. She said with an apologetic little laugh:

“It’s really too hot to dance.”

She went towards the open window and out on to the terrace.

“Oh! go after her, you fool,” murmured Mary. She meant the remark to be under her breath, but it was loud enough for Mr. Treves to turn and stare at her in astonishment.

She reddened and gave an embarrassed laugh.

“I’m speaking my thoughts aloud,” she said ruefully. “But really he does irritate me so. He’s so slow.”

“Mr. Strange?”

“Oh no, not Nevile. Thomas Royde.”

Thomas Royde was just preparing to move forward, but by now Nevile, after a moment’s pause, had followed Audrey out of the window.

For a moment Mr. Treves’ eye, interestedly speculative, rested on the window, then his irritation returned to the dancers.

“A beautiful dancer, young Mr.—Latimer, did you say the name was?”

“Yes. Edward Latimer.”

“Ah yes, Edward Latimer. An old friend, I gather, of Mrs. Strange?”

“Yes.”

“And what does this very—er—decorative young gentleman do for a living?”

“Well, really, I don’t quite know.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Treves, managing to put a good deal of comprehension into one harmless word.

Mary went on:

“He is staying at the Easterhead Bay Hotel.”

“A very pleasant situation,” said Mr. Treves.

He added dreamily after a moment or two: “Rather an interesting shaped head—a curious angle from the crown to the neck—rendered less noticeable by the way he has his hair cut, but distinctly unusual.” After another pause, he went on still more dreamily: “The last man I saw with a

head like that got ten years' penal servitude for a brutal assault on an elderly jeweller."

"Surely," exclaimed Mary, "you don't mean—?"

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Treves. "You mistake me entirely. I am suggesting no disparagement of a guest of yours. I was merely pointing out that a hardened and brutal criminal can be in appearance a most charming and personable young man. Odd, but so it is."

He smiled gently at her. Mary said: "You know, Mr. Treves, I think I am a little frightened of you."

"Nonsense, dear lady."

"But I am. You are—such a very shrewd observer."

"My eyes," said Mr. Treves complacently, "are as good as ever they were." He paused and added: "Whether that is fortunate or unfortunate, I cannot at the moment decide."

"How could it be unfortunate?"

Mr. Treves shook his head doubtfully.

"One is sometimes placed in a position of responsibility. The right course of action is not always easy to determine."

Hurstall entered bearing the coffee tray.

After taking it to Mary and the old lawyer, he went down the room to Thomas Royde. Then, by Mary's directions, he put the tray down on a low table and left the room.

Kay called over Ted's shoulder. "We'll finish out this tune."

Mary said: "I'll take Audrey's out to her."

She went to the french windows, cup in hand. Mr. Treves accompanied her. As she paused on the threshold he looked out over her shoulder.

Audrey was sitting on the corner of the balustrade. In the bright moonlight her beauty came to life—a beauty born of line rather than colour. The exquisite line from the jaw to the ear, the tender modelling of chin and mouth, and the really lovely bones of the head and the small straight nose. That beauty would be there when Audrey Strange was an old woman—it had nothing to do with the covering flesh—it was the bones themselves that were beautiful. The sequinned dress she wore accentuated the effect of the moonlight. She sat very still and Neville Strange stood and looked at her.

Neville took a step towards her.

“Audrey,” he said, “you—”

She shifted her position, then sprang lightly to her feet and clapped a hand to her ear:

“Oh! my earring—I must have dropped it.”

“Where? Let me look—”

They both bent down, awkward and embarrassed—and collided in doing so. Audrey sprang away. Neville exclaimed:

“Wait a sec—my cuff button—it’s caught in your hair. Stand still.”

She stood quite still as he fumbled with the button.

“Oo—you’re pulling it out by the roots—how clumsy you are, Neville, do be quick.”

“Sorry I—I seem to be all thumbs.”

The moonlight was bright enough for the two onlookers to see what Audrey could not see, the trembling of Neville’s hands as he strove to free the strand of fair silvery hair.

But Audrey herself was trembling too—as though suddenly cold.

Mary Aldin jumped as a quiet voice said behind her:

“Excuse me—”

Thomas Royde passed between them and out.

“Shall I do that, Strange?” he asked.

Nevile straightened up and he and Audrey moved apart.

“It’s all right. I’ve done it.”

Nevile’s face was rather white.

“You’re cold,” said Thomas to Audrey. “Come in and have coffee.”

She came back with him and Nevile turned away staring out to sea.

“I was bringing it out to you,” said Mary. “But perhaps you’d better come in.”

“Yes,” said Audrey, “I think I’d better come in.”

They all went back into the drawing room. Ted and Kay had stopped dancing.

The door opened and a tall gaunt woman dressed in black came in. She said respectfully:

“Her ladyship’s compliments and she would be glad to see Mr. Treves up in her room.”

VI

Lady Tressilian received Mr. Treves with evident pleasure.

He and she were soon deep in an agreeable flood of reminiscences and a recalling of mutual acquaintances.

At the end of half an hour Lady Tressilian gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

“Ah,” she said, “I’ve enjoyed myself! There’s nothing like exchanging gossip and remembering old scandals.”

“A little malice,” agreed Mr. Treves, “adds a certain savour to life.”

“By the way,” said Lady Tressilian, “what do you think of our example of the eternal triangle?”

Mr. Treves looked discreetly blank. “Er—what triangle?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed it! Neville and his wives.”

“Oh that! The present Mrs. Strange is a singularly attractive young woman.”

“So is Audrey,” said Lady Tressilian.

Mr. Treves admitted: “She has charm—yes.”

Lady Tressilian exclaimed:

“Do you mean to tell me you can understand a man leaving Audrey, who is a—a person of rare quality—for—for a Kay?”

Mr. Treves replied calmly:

“Perfectly. It happens frequently.”

“Disgusting. I should soon grow tired of Kay if I were a man and wish I had never made such a fool of myself!”

“That also happens frequently. These sudden passionate infatuations,” said Mr. Treves, looking very passionless and precise himself, “are seldom of long duration.”

“And then what happens?” demanded Lady Tressilian.

“Usually,” said Mr. Treves, “the—er—parties adjust themselves. Quite often there is a second divorce. The man then marries a third party—someone of a sympathetic nature.”

“Nonsense! Neville isn’t a Mormon—whatever some of your clients may be!”

“The remarriage of the original parties occasionally takes place.”

Lady Tressilian shook her head.

“That no! Audrey has too much pride.”

“You think so?”

“I am sure of it. Do not shake your head in that aggravating fashion!”

“It has been my experience,” said Mr. Treves, “that women possess little or no pride where love affairs are concerned. Pride is a quality often on their lips, but not apparent in their actions.”

“You don’t understand Audrey. She was violently in love with Neville. Too much so, perhaps. After he left her for this girl (though I don’t blame him entirely—the girl pursued him everywhere, and you know what men are!) she never wanted to see him again.”

Mr. Treves coughed gently:

“And yet,” he said, “she is here!”

“Oh well,” said Lady Tressilian, annoyed. “I don’t profess to understand these modern ideas. I imagine that Audrey is here just to show that she doesn’t care, and that it doesn’t matter!”

“Very likely,” Mr. Treves stroked his jaw. “She can put it to herself that way, certainly.”

“You mean,” said Lady Tressilian, “that you think she is still hankering after Neville and that—oh no! I won’t believe such a thing!”

“It could be,” said Mr. Treves.

“I won’t have it,” said Lady Tressilian. “I won’t have it in my house.”

“You are already disturbed, are you not?” asked Mr. Treves shrewdly. “There is tension. I have felt it in the atmosphere.”

“So you feel it too?” said Lady Tressilian sharply.

“Yes, I am puzzled, I must confess. The true feelings of the parties remain obscure, but in my opinion, there is gunpowder about. The explosion may come any minute.”

“Stop talking like Guy Fawkes and tell me what to do,” said Lady Tressilian.

Mr. Treves held up his hands.

“Really, I am at a loss to know what to suggest. There is, I feel sure, a focal point. If we could isolate that—but there is so much that remains obscure.”

“I have no intention of asking Audrey to leave,” said Lady Tressilian. “As far as my observation goes, she has behaved perfectly in a very difficult situation. She has been courteous, but aloof. I consider her conduct irreproachable.”

“Oh quite,” said Mr. Treves. “Quite. But it’s having a most marked effect on young Neville Strange all the same.”

“Neville,” said Lady Tressilian, “is not behaving well. I shall speak to him about it. But I couldn’t turn him out of the house for a moment. Matthew regarded him as practically his adopted son.”

“I know.”

Lady Tressilian sighed. She said in a lowered voice:

“You know that Matthew was drowned here?”

“Yes.”

“So many people have been surprised at my remaining here. Stupid of them. I have always felt Matthew near to me here. The whole house is full of him. I should feel lonely and strange anywhere else.” She paused, and went on. “I hoped at first that it might not be very long before I joined him. Especially when my health began to fail. But it seems I am one of these creaking gates—these perpetual invalids who never die.” She thumped her pillow angrily.

“It doesn’t please me, I can tell you! I always hoped that when my time came, it would come quickly—that I should meet Death face to face—not feel him creeping along behind me, always at my shoulder—gradually forcing me to sink to one indignity after another of illness. Increased helplessness—increasing dependence on other people!”

“But very devoted people, I am sure. You have a faithful maid?”

“Barrett? The one who brought you up. The comfort of my life! A grim old battleaxe, absolutely devoted. She’s been with me for years.”

“And you are lucky, I should say, in having Miss Aldin.”

“You are right. I am lucky in having Mary.”

“She is a relation?”

“A distant cousin. One of those selfless creatures whose lives are continually being sacrificed to those of other people. She looked after her father—a clever man—but terribly exacting. When he died I begged her to make her home with me, and I have blessed the day she came to me. You’ve no idea what horrors most companions are. Futile boring creatures. Driving one mad with their inanity. They are companions because they are fit for nothing better. To have Mary, who is a well-read intelligent woman, is marvellous. She has really a first-class brain—a man’s brain. She has read widely and deeply and there is nothing she cannot discuss. And she is as

clever domestically as she is intellectually. She runs the house perfectly and keeps the servants happy—she eliminates all quarrels and jealousies—I don't know how she does it—just tact, I suppose.”

“She has been with you long?”

“Twelve years—no, more than that. Thirteen—fourteen—something like that. She has been a great comfort.”

Mr. Treves nodded.

Lady Tressilian, watching him through half-closed lids, said suddenly:

“What's the matter? You're worried about something?”

“A trifle,” said Mr. Treves. “A mere trifle. Your eyes are sharp.”

“I like studying people,” said Lady Tressilian. “I always knew at once if there was anything on Matthew's mind.” She sighed and leaned back on her pillows. “I must say goodnight to you now”—it was a Queen's dismissal, nothing discourteous about it—“I am very tired. But it has been a great, great pleasure. Come and see me again soon.”

“You may depend upon my taking advantage of those kind words. I only hope I have not talked too long.”

“Oh no. I always tire very suddenly. Ring my bell for me, will you, before you go.”

Mr. Treves pulled gingerly at a large old-fashioned bellpull that ended in a huge tassel.

“Quite a survival,” he remarked.

“My bell? Yes. No newfangled electric bells for me. Half the time they're out of order and you go on pressing away! This thing never fails. It rings in Barrett's room upstairs—the bell hangs over her bed. So there's never any delay in answering it. If there is I pull it again pretty quickly.”

As Mr. Treves went out of the room he heard the bell pulled a second time and heard the tinkle of it somewhere above his head. He looked up and noticed the wires that ran along the ceiling. Barrett came hurriedly down a flight of stairs and passed him, going to her mistress.

Mr. Treves went slowly downstairs, not troubling with the little lift on the downward journey. His face was drawn into a frown of uncertainty.

He found the whole party assembled in the drawing room, and Mary Aldin at once suggested bridge, but Mr. Treves refused politely on the plea that he must very shortly be starting home.

“My hotel,” he said, “is old-fashioned. They do not expect anyone to be out after midnight.”

“It’s a long time from that—only half past ten,” said Neville. “They don’t lock you out, I hope?”

“Oh no. In fact I doubt if the door is locked at all at night. It is shut at nine o’clock but one has only to turn the handle and walk in. People seem very haphazard down here, but I suppose they are justified in trusting to the honesty of the local people.”

“Certainly no one locks their door in the daytime here,” said Mary. “Ours stands wide open all day long—but we do lock it up at night.”

“What’s the Balmoral Court like?” asked Ted Latimer. It looks a queer high Victorian atrocity of a building.”

“It lives up to its name,” said Mr. Treves. “And has good solid Victorian comfort. Good beds, good cooking—roomy, Victorian wardrobes. Immense baths with mahogany surrounds.”

“Weren’t you saying you were annoyed about something at first?” asked Mary.

“Ah yes. I had carefully reserved by letter two rooms on the ground floor. I have a weak heart, you know, and stairs are forbidden me. When I arrived I

was vexed to find the rooms were not available. Instead I was allotted two rooms (very pleasant rooms, I must admit) on the top floor. I protested, but it seems that an old resident who had been going to Scotland this month was ill and had been unable to vacate the rooms.”

“Mr. Lucan, I expect?” said Mary.

“I believe that is the name. Under the circumstances, I had to make the best of things. Fortunately there is a good automatic lift—so that I have really suffered no inconvenience.”

Kay said, “Ted, why don’t you come and stay at the Balmoral Court? You’d be much more accessible.”

“Oh, I don’t think it looks my kind of place.”

“Quite right, Mr. Latimer,” said Mr. Treves. “It would not be at all in your line of country.”

For some reason or other Ted Latimer flushed.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” he said.

Mary Aldin, sensing constraint, hurriedly made a remark about a newspaper sensation of the moment.

“I see they’ve detained a man in the Kentish Town trunk case—” she said.

“It’s the second man they’ve detained,” said Neville. “I hope they’ve got the right one this time.”

“They may not be able to hold him even if he is,” said Mr. Treves.

“Insufficient evidence?” asked Royde.

“Yes.”

“Still,” said Kay, “I suppose they always get the evidence in the end.”

“Not always, Mrs. Strange. You’d be surprised if you knew how many of the people who have committed crimes are walking about the country free and unmolested.”

“Because they’ve never been found out, you mean?”

“Not only that. There is a man”—he mentioned a celebrated case of two years back—“the police know who committed those child murders—know it without a shadow of doubt—but they are powerless. That man has been given an alibi by two people, and though that alibi is false there is no proving it to be so. Therefore the murderer goes free.”

“How dreadful,” said Mary.

Thomas Royde knocked out his pipe and said in his quiet reflective voice:

“That confirms what I have always thought—that there are times when one is justified in taking the law into one’s own hands.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Royde?”

Thomas began to refill his pipe. He looked thoughtfully down at his hands as he spoke in jerky disconnected sentences.

“Suppose you knew—of a dirty piece of work—knew that the man who did it isn’t accountable to existing laws—that he’s immune from punishment. Then I hold—that one is justified in executing sentence oneself.”

Mr. Treves said warmly: “A most pernicious doctrine, Mr. Royde! Such an action would be quite unjustifiable!”

“Don’t see it. I’m assuming, you know, that the facts are proved—it’s just the law is powerless!”

“Private action is still not to be excused.”

Thomas smiled—a very gentle smile:

“I don’t agree,” he said. “If a man ought to have his neck wrung, I wouldn’t mind taking the responsibility of wringing it for him!”

“And in turn would render yourself liable to the law’s penalties!”

Still smiling, Thomas said: “I’d have to be careful, of course...In fact one would have to go in for a certain amount of low cunning....”

Audrey said in her clear voice:

“You’d be found out, Thomas.”

“Matter of fact,” said Thomas, “I don’t think I should.”

“I knew a case once,” began Mr. Treves, and stopped. He said apologetically: “Criminology is rather a hobby of mine, you know.”

“Please go on,” said Kay.

“I have had a fairly wide experience of criminal cases,” said Mr. Treves. “Only a few of them have held any real interest. Most murderers have been lamentably uninteresting and very shortsighted. However! I could tell you of one interesting example.”

“Oh do,” said Kay. “I like murders.”

Mr. Treves spoke slowly, apparently choosing his words with great deliberation and care.

“The case concerned a child. I will not mention the child’s age or sex. The facts were as follows: two children were playing with bows and arrows. One child sent an arrow through the other child in a vital spot and death resulted. There was an inquest, the surviving child was completely distraught and the accident was commiserated and sympathy expressed for the unhappy author of the deed.” He paused.

“Was that all?” asked Ted Latimer.

“That was all. A regrettable accident. But there is, you see, another side to the story. A farmer, some time previously, happened to have passed up a certain path in a wood nearby. There, in a little clearing, he had noticed a child practising with a bow and arrow.”

He paused—to let his meaning sink in.

“You mean,” said Mary Aldin incredulously, “that it was not an accident—that it was intentional?”

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Treves. “I have never known. But it was stated at the inquest that the children were unused to bows and arrows and in consequence shot wildly and ignorantly.”

“And that was not so?”

“That, in the case of one of the children, was certainly not so!”

“What did the farmer do?” said Audrey breathlessly.

“He did nothing. Whether he acted rightly or not, I have never been sure. It was the future of a child that was at stake. A child, he felt, ought to be given the benefit of a doubt.”

Audrey said:

“But you yourself have no doubt about what really happened?”

Mr. Treves said gravely:

“Personally, I am of the opinion that it was a particularly ingenious murder—a murder committed by a child and planned down to every detail beforehand.”

Ted Latimer asked:

“Was there a reason?”

“Oh yes, there was a motive. Childish teasings, unkind words—enough to foment hatred. Children hate easily—”

Mary exclaimed: “But the deliberation of it.”

Mr. Treves nodded.

“Yes, the deliberation of it was bad. A child, keeping that murderous intention in its heart, quietly practising day after day and then the final piece of acting—the awkward shooting—the catastrophe, the pretence of grief and despair. It was all incredible—so incredible that probably it would not have been believed in court.”

“What happened to—to the child?” asked Kay curiously.

“Its name was changed, I believe,” said Mr. Treves. “After the publicity of the inquest that was deemed advisable. That child is a grown-up person today—somewhere in the world. The question is, has it still got a murderer’s heart?”

He added thoughtfully:

“It was a long time ago, but I would recognize my little murderer anywhere.”

“Surely not,” objected Royde.

“Oh, yes, there was a certain physical peculiarity—well, I will not dwell on the subject. It is not a very pleasant one. I must really be on my way home.”

He rose.

Mary said, “You will have a drink first?”

The drinks were on a table at the other end of the room. Thomas Royde, who was near them, stepped forward and took the stopper out of the whisky decanter.

“A whisky and soda, Mr. Treves? Latimer, what about you?”

Nevile said to Audrey in a low voice:

“It’s a lovely evening. Come out for a little.”

She had been standing by the window looking out at the moonlit terrace. He stepped past her and stood outside, waiting. She turned back into the room, shaking her head quickly.

“No, I’m tired. I—I think I’ll go to bed.”

She crossed the room and went out. Kay gave a wide yawn.

“I’m sleepy too. What about you, Mary?”

“Yes, I think so. Goodnight, Mr. Treves. Look after Mr. Treves, Thomas.”

“Goodnight, Miss Aldin. Goodnight, Mrs. Strange.”

“We’ll be over for lunch tomorrow, Ted,” said Kay. “We could bathe if it’s still like this.”

“Right. I’ll be looking for you. Goodnight, Miss Aldin.”

The two women left the room.

Ted Latimer said agreeably to Mr. Treves:

“I’m coming your way, sir. Down to the ferry, so I pass the Hotel.”

“Thank you, Mr. Latimer. I shall be glad of your escort.”

Mr. Treves, although he had declared his intention of departing, seemed in no hurry. He sipped his drink with pleasant deliberation and devoted himself to the task of extracting information from Thomas Royde as to the condition of life in Malaya.

Royde was monosyllabic in his answers. The everyday details of existence might have been secrets of National importance from the difficulty with which they were dragged from him. He seemed to be lost in some

abstraction of his own, out of which he roused himself with difficulty to reply to his questioner.

Ted Latimer fidgeted. He looked bored, impatient, anxious to be gone.

Suddenly interrupting, he exclaimed:

“I nearly forgot! I brought Kay over some gramophone records she wanted. They’re in the hall. I’ll get them. Will you tell her about them tomorrow, Royde?”

The other man nodded. Ted left the room.

“That young man has a restless nature,” murmured Mr. Treves.

Royde grunted without replying.

“A friend, I think, of Mrs. Strange’s?” pursued the old lawyer.

“Of Kay Strange’s,” said Thomas.

Mr. Treves smiled.

“Yes,” he said. “I meant that. He would hardly be a friend of the first Mrs. Strange.”

Royde said emphatically:

“No, he wouldn’t.”

Then, catching the other’s quizzical eye, he said, flushing a little:

“What I mean is—”

“Oh, I quite understood what you meant, Mr. Royde. You yourself are a friend of Mrs. Audrey Strange, are you not?”

Thomas Royde slowly filled his pipe from his tobacco pouch. His eyes bent to his task, he said or rather mumbled:

“M—yes. More or less brought up together.”

“She must have been a very charming young girl?”

Thomas Royde said something that sounded like “Um—yum.”

“A little awkward having two Mrs. Stranges in the house?”

“Oh yes—yes, rather.”

“A difficult position for the original Mrs. Strange.”

Thomas Royde’s face flushed.

“Extremely difficult.”

Mr. Treves leaned forward. His question popped out sharply:

“Why did she come, Mr. Royde?”

“Well—I suppose—” The other’s voice was indistinct. “She—didn’t like to refuse.”

“To refuse whom?”

Royde shifted awkwardly.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I believe she always comes this time of year—beginning of September.”

“And Lady Tressilian asked Neville Strange and his new wife at the same time?” The old gentleman’s voice held a nice note of polite incredulity.

“As to that, I believe Neville asked himself.”

“He was anxious, then, for this—reunion?”

Royde shifted uneasily. He replied, avoiding the other’s eye:

“I suppose so.”

“Curious,” said Mr. Treves.

“Stupid sort of thing to do,” said Thomas Royde, goaded into longer speech.

“Somewhat embarrassing one would have thought,” said Mr. Treves.

“Oh well—people do that sort of thing nowadays,” said Thomas Royde vaguely.

“I wondered,” said Mr. Treves, “if it had been anybody else’s idea?”

Royde stared.

“Whose else’s could it have been?”

Mr. Treves sighed.

“There are so many kind friends about in the world—always anxious to arrange other people’s lives for them—to suggest courses of action that are not in harmony—” He broke off as Neville Strange strolled back through the french windows. At the same moment Ted Latimer entered by the door from the hall.

“Hullo, Ted, what have you got there?” asked Neville.

“Gramophone records for Kay. She asked me to bring them over.”

“Oh did she? She didn’t tell me.” There was just a moment of constraint between the two, then Neville strolled over to the drink tray and helped himself to a whisky and soda. His face looked excited and unhappy and he was breathing deeply.

Someone in Mr. Treves’ hearing had referred to Neville as “that lucky beggar Strange—got everything in the world anyone could wish for.” Yet he did not look, at this moment, at all a happy man.

Thomas Royde, with Neville's re-entry, seemed to feel that his duties as host were over. He left the room without attempting to say goodnight, and his walk was slightly more hurried than usual. It was almost an escape.

"A delightful evening," said Mr. Treves politely as he set down his glass. "Most—er—instructive."

"Instructive?" Neville raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Information re the Malay States," suggested Ted, smiling broadly. "Hard work dragging answers out of Taciturn Thomas."

"Extraordinary fellow, Royde," said Neville. "I believe he's always been the same. Just smokes that awful old pipe of his and listens and says Um and Ah occasionally and looks wise like an owl."

"Perhaps he thinks the more," said Mr. Treves. "And now I really must take my leave."

"Come and see Lady Tressilian again soon," said Neville as he accompanied the two men to the hall. "You cheer her up enormously. She has so few contacts now with the outside world. She's wonderful, isn't she?"

"Yes, indeed. A most stimulating conversationalist."

Mr. Treves dressed himself carefully with overcoat and muffler, and after renewed goodnights he and Ted Latimer set out together.

The Balmoral Court was actually only about a hundred yards away, around one curve of the road. It loomed up prim and forbidding, the first outpost of the straggling country street.

The ferry, where Ted Latimer was bound, was two or three hundred yards farther down, at a point where the river was at its narrowest.

Mr. Treves stopped at the door of the Balmoral Court and held out his hand.

"Goodnight, Mr. Latimer. You are staying down here much longer?"

Ted smiled with a flash of white teeth. “That depends, Mr. Treves. I haven’t had time to be bored—yet.”

“No—no, so I should imagine. I suppose like most young people nowadays, boredom is what you dread most in the world, and yet, I can assure you, there are worse things.”

“Such as?”

Ted Latimer’s voice was soft and pleasant, but it held an undercurrent of something else—something not quite so easy to define.

“Oh, I leave it to your imagination, Mr. Latimer. I would not presume to give you advice, you know. The advice of such elderly fogeys as myself is invariably treated with scorn. Rightly so, perhaps, who knows? But we old buffers like to think that experience has taught us something. We have noticed a good deal, you know, in the course of a lifetime.”

A cloud had come over the face of the moon. The street was very dark. Out of the darkness a man’s figure came towards them walking up the hill.

It was Thomas Royde.

“Just been down to the ferry for a bit of a walk,” he said indistinctly because of the pipe clenched between his teeth.

“This your pub?” he asked Mr. Treves. “Looks as though you were locked out.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mr. Treves.

He turned the big brass door knob and the door swung back.

“We’ll see you safely in,” said Royde.

The three of them entered the hall. It was dimly lit with only one electric light. There was no one to be seen, and an odour of bygone dinner, rather dusty velvet, and good furniture polish met their nostrils.

Suddenly Mr. Treves gave an exclamation of annoyance.

On the lift in front of them hung a notice:

LIFT OUT OF ORDER

“Dear me,” said Mr. Treves. “How extremely vexing. I shall have to walk up all those stairs.”

“Too bad,” said Royde. “Isn’t there a service lift—luggage—all that?”

“I’m afraid not. This one is used for all purposes. Well I must take it slowly, that is all. Goodnight to you both.”

He started slowly up the wide staircase. Royde and Latimer wished him goodnight, then let themselves out into the dark street.

There was a moment’s pause, then Royde said abruptly:

“Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Ted Latimer strode lightly down the hill towards the ferry. Thomas Royde stood looking after him for a moment, then he walked slowly in the opposite direction towards Gull’s Point.

The moon came out from behind the cloud and Saltcreek was once more bathed in silvery radiance.

VII

“Just like summer,” murmured Mary Aldin.

She and Audrey were sitting on the beach just below the imposing edifice of the Easterhead Bay Hotel. Audrey wore a white swimsuit and looked like

a delicate ivory figure. Mary had not bathed. A little way along from them Kay lay on her face exposing her bronzed limbs and back to the sun.

“Ugh,” she sat up. “The water’s horribly cold,” she said accusingly.

“Oh well, it is September,” said Mary.

“It’s always cold in England,” said Kay discontentedly. “How I wish we were in the South of France. That really is hot.”

Ted Latimer from beyond her murmured:

“The sun here isn’t a real sun.”

“Aren’t you going in at all, Mr. Latimer?” asked Mary.

Kay laughed.

“Ted never goes in the water. Just suns himself like a lizard.”

She stretched out a toe and prodded him. He sprang up.

“Come and walk, Kay. I’m cold.”

They went off together along the beach.

“Like a lizard? Rather an unfortunate comparison,” murmured Mary Aldin looking after them.

“Is that what you think of him?” asked Audrey.

Mary Aldin frowned.

“Not quite. A lizard suggests something quite tame. I don’t think he is tame.”

“No,” said Audrey thoughtfully. “I don’t think so either.”

“How well they look together,” said Mary, watching the retreating pair.
“They match somehow, don’t they?”

“I suppose they do.”

“They like the same things,” went on Mary. “And have the same opinions and—and use the same language. What a thousand pities it is that—”

She stopped.

Audrey said sharply:

“That what?”

Mary said slowly:

“I suppose I was going to say what a pity it was that Neville and she ever met.”

Audrey sat up stiffly. What Mary called to herself “Audrey’s frozen look” had come over her face. Mary said quickly:

“I’m sorry, Audrey. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I’d so much rather—not talk about it if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, of course. It was very stupid of me. I—I hoped you’d got over it, I suppose.”

Audrey turned her head slowly. With a calm expressionless face she said:

“I assure you there is nothing to get over. I—I have no feeling of any kind in the matter. I hope—I hope with all my heart that Kay and Neville will always be very happy together.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you, Audrey.”

“It isn’t nice. It is—just true. But I do think it is—well—unprofitable to keep on going back over the past. ‘It’s a pity this happened—that!’ It’s all

over now. Why take it up? We've got to go on living our lives in the present."

"I suppose," said Mary simply, "that people like Kay and Ted are exciting to me because—well, they are so different from anything or anyone that I have ever come across."

"Yes, I suppose they are."

"Even you," said Mary with sudden bitterness, "have lived and had experiences that I shall probably never have. I know you've been unhappy—very unhappy—but I can't help feeling that even that is better than—well—nothing. Emptiness!"

She said the last word with a fierce emphasis.

Audrey's wide eyes looked a little startled.

"I never dreamt you ever felt like that."

"Didn't you?" Mary Aldin laughed apologetically. "Oh just a momentary fit of discontent, my dear. I didn't really mean it."

"It can't be very gay for you," said Audrey slowly. "Just living here with Camilla—dear thing though she is. Reading to her, managing the servants, never going away."

"I'm well-fed and -housed," said Mary. "Thousands of women aren't even that. And really, Audrey, I am quite contented. I have," a smile played for a moment round her lips, "my private distractions."

"Secret vices?" asked Audrey, smiling also.

"Oh, I plan things," said Mary vaguely. "In my mind, you know. And I like experimenting sometimes—upon people. Just seeing, you know, if I can make them react to what I say in the way I mean."

"You sound almost sadistic, Mary. How little I really know you!"

“Oh it’s all quite harmless. Just a childish little amusement.”

Audrey asked curiously:

“Have you experimented on me?”

“No. You’re the only person I have always found quite incalculable. I never know, you see, what you are thinking.”

“Perhaps,” said Audrey gravely, “that is just as well.”

She shivered and Mary exclaimed:

“You’re cold.”

“Yes. I think I will go and dress. After all, it is September.”

Mary Aldin remained alone, staring at the reflection on the water. The tide was going out. She stretched herself out on the sand, closing her eyes.

They had had a good lunch at the Hotel. It was still quite full although it was past the height of the season. A queer, mixed-looking lot of people. Oh well, it had been a day out. Something to break the monotony of day following day. It had been a relief, too, to get away from that sense of tension, that strung-up atmosphere that there had been lately at Gull’s Point. It hadn’t been Audrey’s fault, but Neville—

Her thoughts broke up abruptly as Ted Latimer plumped himself down on the beach beside her.

“What have you done with Kay?” Mary asked.

Ted replied briefly:

“She’s been claimed by her legal owner.”

Something in his tone made Mary Aldin sit up. She glanced across the stretch of shining golden sands to where Neville and Kay were walking by the water’s edge. Then she glanced quickly at the man beside her.

She had thought of him as nerveless, as queer, as dangerous, even. Now for the first time she got a glimpse of someone young and hurt. She thought:

“He was in love with Kay—really in love with her—and then Neville came and took her away....”

She said gently:

“I hope you are enjoying yourself down here.”

They were conventional words. Mary Aldin seldom used any words but conventional ones—that was her language. But her tone was an offer—for the first time—of friendliness. Ted Latimer responded to it.

“As much, probably, as I should enjoy myself anywhere.”

Mary said:

“I’m sorry.”

“But you don’t care a damn, really! I’m an outsider—and what does it matter what outsiders feel and think.”

She turned her head to look at this bitter and handsome young man.

He returned her look with one of defiance.

She said slowly as one who makes a discovery:

“I see. You don’t like us.”

He laughed shortly.

“Did you expect me to?”

She said thoughtfully:

“I suppose, you know, that I did expect just that. One takes, of course, too much for granted. One should be more humble. Yes, it would not have

occurred to me that you would not like us. We have tried to make you welcome—as Kay’s friend.”

“Yes—as Kay’s friend!”

The interruption came with a quick venom.

Mary said with disarming sincerity:

“I wish you would tell me—really I wish it—just why you dislike us? What have we done? What is wrong with us?”

Ted Latimer said, with a blistering emphasis on the one word: “Smug!”

“Smug?” Mary queried it without rancour, examining the charge with judicial appraisal.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I see that we could seem like that.”

“You are like that. You take all the good things of life for granted. You’re happy and superior in your little roped-off enclosure shut off from the common herd. You look at people like me as though I were one of the animals outside!”

“I’m sorry,” said Mary.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“No, not quite. We are stupid, perhaps, and unimaginative—but not malicious. I myself am conventional and, superficially, I dare say, what you call smug. But really, you know, I’m quite human inside. I’m very sorry, this minute, because you are unhappy, and I wish I could do something about it.”

“Well—if that’s so—it’s nice of you.”

There was a pause, then Mary said gently:

“Have you always been in love with Kay?”

“Pretty well.”

“And she?”

“I thought so—until Strange came along.”

Mary said gently:

“And you’re still in love with her?”

“I should think that was obvious.”

After a moment or two, Mary said quietly:

“Hadn’t you better go away from here?”

“Why should I?”

“Because you are only letting yourself in for more unhappiness.”

He looked at her and laughed.

“You’re a nice creature,” he said. “But you don’t know much about the animals prowling about outside your little enclosure. Quite a lot of things may happen in the near future.”

“What sort of things?” said Mary sharply.

“Wait and see.”

VIII

When Audrey had dressed she went along the beach and out along a jutting point of rocks, joining Thomas Royde, who was sitting there smoking a pipe exactly opposite to Gull’s Point, which stood white and serene on the opposite side of the river.

Thomas turned his head at Audrey’s approach, but he did not move. She sat down beside him without speaking. They were silent with the comfortable

silence of two people who know each other very well indeed.

“How near it looks,” said Audrey at last, breaking the silence.

Thomas looked across at Gull’s Point.

“Yes, we could swim home.”

“Not at this tide. There was a housemaid Camilla had once. She was an enthusiastic bather, used to swim across and back whenever the tide was right. It has to be low or high—but when it’s running out it sweeps you right down to the mouth of the river. It did that to her one day—only luckily she kept her head and came ashore all right on Easter Point—only very exhausted.”

“It doesn’t say anything about its being dangerous here.”

“It isn’t this side. The current is the other side. It’s deep there under the cliffs. There was a would-be suicide last year—threw himself off Stark Head—but he was caught by a tree halfway down the cliff and the coastguards got to him all right.”

“Poor devil,” said Thomas. “I bet he didn’t thank them. Must be sickening to have made up your mind to get out of it all and then be saved. Makes a fellow feel a fool.”

“Perhaps he’s glad now,” suggested Audrey dreamily.

She wondered vaguely where the man was now and what he was doing.

Thomas puffed away at his pipe. By turning his head very slightly he could look at Audrey. He noted her grave absorbed face as she stared across the water. The long brown lashes that rested on the pure line of the cheek, the small shell-like ear.

That reminded him of something.

“Oh by the way, I’ve got your earring—the one you lost last night.”

His fingers delved into his pocket. Audrey stretched out a hand.

“Oh good, where did you find it? On the terrace?”

“No. It was near the stairs. You must have lost it as you came down to dinner. I noticed you hadn’t got it at dinner.”

“I’m glad to have it back.”

She took it. Thomas reflected that it was rather a large barbaric earring for so small an ear. The ones she had on today were large, too.

He remarked:

“You wear your earrings even when you bathe. Aren’t you afraid of losing them?”

“Oh, these are very cheap things. I hate being without earrings because of this.”

She touched her left ear. Thomas remembered.

“Oh yes, that time old Bouncer bit you.”

Audrey nodded.

They were silent, reliving a childish memory. Audrey Standish (as she then was), a long spindle-legged child, putting her face down on old Bouncer who had had a sore paw. A nasty bite, he had given her. She had had to have a stitch put in it. Not that there was much to show now—just the tiniest little scar.

“My dear girl,” he said, “you can hardly see the mark. Why do you mind?”

Audrey paused before answering with evident sincerity:

“It’s because—because I just can’t bear a blemish.”

Thomas nodded. It fitted in with his knowledge of Audrey—of her instinct for perfection. She was in herself so perfectly finished an article.

He said suddenly:

“You’re far more beautiful than Kay.”

She turned quickly.

“Oh no, Thomas. Kay—Kay is really lovely.”

“On the outside. Not underneath.”

“Are you referring,” said Audrey with faint amusement, “to my beautiful soul?”

Thomas knocked out the ashes of his pipe.

“No,” he said. “I think I mean your bones.”

Audrey laughed.

Thomas packed a new pipeful of tobacco. They were silent for quite five minutes, but Thomas glanced at Audrey more than once though he did it so unobtrusively that she was unaware of it.

He said at last quietly:

“What’s wrong, Audrey?”

“Wrong? What do you mean by wrong?”

“Wrong with you. There’s something.”

“No, there’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

“But there is.”

She shook her head.

“Won’t you tell me?”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“I suppose I’m being a chump—but I’ve got to say it—” He paused.

“Audrey—can’t you forget about it? Can’t you let it all go?”

She dug her small hands convulsively into the rock.

“You don’t understand—you can’t begin to understand.”

“But Audrey, my dear, I do. That’s just it. I know.”

She turned a small doubtful face to him.

“I know exactly what you’ve been through. And—and what it must have meant to you.”

She was very white now, white to the lips.

“I see,” she said. “I didn’t think—anyone knew.”

“Well, I do. I—I’m not going to talk about it. But what I want to impress upon you is that it’s all over—it’s past and done with.”

She said in a low voice:

“Some things don’t pass.”

“Look here, Audrey, it’s no good brooding and remembering. Granted you’ve been through Hell. It does no good to go over and over a thing in your mind. Look forward—not back. You’re quite young. You’ve got your life to live and most of that is in front of you now. Think of tomorrow, not of yesterday.”

She looked at him with a steady wide-eyed gaze that was singularly unrevealing of her real thoughts.

“And supposing,” she said, “that I can’t do that.”

“But you must.”

Audrey said gently:

“I thought you didn’t understand. I’m—I’m not quite normal about—some things, I suppose.”

He broke in roughly,

“Rubbish. You—” He stopped.

“I—what?”

“I was thinking of you as you were when you were a girl—before you married Nevile. Why did you marry Nevile?”

Audrey smiled.

“Because I fell in love with him.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. But why did you fall in love with him? What attracted you to him so much?”

She crinkled her eyes as though trying to see through the eyes of a girl now dead.

“I think,” she said, “it was because he was so ‘positive.’ He was always so much the opposite of what I was, myself. I always felt shadowy—not quite real. Nevile was very real. And so happy and sure of himself and so—everything that I was not.” She added with a smile: “And very good-looking.”

Thomas Royde said bitterly:

“Yes, the ideal Englishman—good at sport, modest, good-looking, always the little pukka sahib—getting everything he wanted all along the line.”

Audrey sat very upright and stared at him.

“You hate him,” she said slowly. “You hate him very much, don’t you?”

He avoided her eyes, turning away to cup a match in his hands as he relit the pipe, that had gone out.

“Wouldn’t be surprising if I did, would it?” he said indistinctly. “He’s got everything that I haven’t. He can play games, and swim and dance, and talk. And I’m a tongue-tied oaf with a crippled arm. He’s always been brilliant and successful and I’ve always been a dull dog. And he married the only girl I ever cared for.”

She made a faint sound. He said savagely:

“You’ve always known that, haven’t you? You knew I cared about you ever since you were fifteen. You know that I still care—”

She stopped him.

“No. Not now.”

“What do you mean—not now?”

Audrey got up. She said in a quiet reflective voice:

“Because—now—I am different.”

“Different in what way?”

He got up too and stood facing her.

Audrey said in a quick rather breathless voice:

“If you don’t know, I can’t tell you...I’m not always sure myself. I only know—”

She broke off, and turning abruptly away she walked quickly back over the rocks towards the Hotel.

Turning a corner of the cliff she came across Neville. He was lying full length peering into a rock pool. He looked up and grinned.

“Hullo, Audrey.”

“Hullo, Neville.”

“I’m watching a crab. Awfully active little beggar. Look, there he is.”

She knelt down and stared where he pointed.

“See him?”

“Yes.”

“Have a cigarette?”

She accepted one and he lighted it for her. After a moment or two, during which she did not look at him, he said, nervously:

“I say, Audrey?”

“Yes.”

“It’s all right, isn’t it? I mean—between us.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“I mean—we’re friends and all that.”

“Oh yes—yes, of course.”

“I do want us to be friends.”

He looked at her anxiously. She gave him a nervous smile.

He said conversationally:

“It’s been a jolly day, hasn’t it? Weather good and all that?”

“Oh yes—yes.”

“Quite hot really for September.”

There was a pause.

“Audrey—”

She got up.

“Your wife wants you. She’s waving to you.”

“Who—oh, Kay.”

“I said your wife.”

He scrambled to his feet and stood looking at her.

He said in a very low voice:

“You’re my wife, Audrey....”

She turned away. Nevile ran down on to the beach and across the sand to join Kay.

IX

On their arrival back at Gull’s Point, Hurstall came out into the hall and spoke to Mary.

“Would you go up at once to her ladyship, Miss? She is feeling very upset and wanted to see you as soon as you got in.”

Mary hurried up the stairs. She found Lady Tressilian looking white and shaken.

“Dear Mary, I’m so glad you have come. I am feeling most distressed. Poor Mr. Treves is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, isn’t it terrible? So sudden. Apparently he didn’t even get undressed last night. He must have collapsed as soon as he got home.”

“Oh dear, I am sorry.”

“One knows, of course, that he was delicate. A weak heart. I hope nothing happened while he was here to overstrain it? There was nothing indigestible for dinner?”

“I don’t think so—no, I am sure there wasn’t. He seemed quite well and in good spirits.”

“I am really very distressed. I wish, Mary, that you would go to the Balmoral Court and make a few inquiries of Mrs. Rogers. Ask her if there is anything we can do. And then the funeral. For Matthew’s sake I would like to do anything we could. These things are so awkward at a Hotel.”

Mary spoke firmly.

“Dear Camilla, you really must not worry. This has been a shock to you.”

“Indeed it has.”

“I will go to the Balmoral Court at once and then come back and tell you all about things.”

“Thank you, Mary dear, you are always so practical and understanding.”

“Please try and rest now. A shock of this kind is so bad for you.”

Mary Aldin left the room and came downstairs. Entering the drawing room she exclaimed: “Old Mr. Treves is dead. He died last night after returning home.”

“Poor old boy,” exclaimed Neville. “What was it?”

“Heart apparently. He collapsed as soon as he got in.”

Thomas Royde said thoughtfully:

“I wonder if the stairs did him in.”

“Stairs?” Mary looked at him inquiringly.

“Yes. When Latimer and I left him he was just starting up. We told him to take it slow.”

Mary exclaimed:

“But how very foolish of him not to take the lift.”

“The lift was out of order.”

“Oh, I see. How very unfortunate. Poor old man.”

She added: “I’m going round there now. Camilla wants to know if there is anything we can do.”

Thomas said: “I’ll come with you.”

They walked together down the road and round the corner to the Balmoral Court. Mary remarked:

“I wonder if he has any relatives who ought to be notified?”

“He didn’t mention anyone.”

“No, and people usually do. They say ‘my niece,’ or ‘my cousin.’”

“Was he married?”

“I believe not.”

They entered the open door of the Balmoral Court.

Mrs. Rogers, the proprietress, was talking to a tall middle-aged man, who raised a friendly hand in greeting to Mary.

“Good afternoon, Miss Aldin.”

“Good afternoon, Dr. Lazenby. This is Mr. Royde. We came round with a message from Lady Tressilian to know if there is anything we can do.”

“That’s very kind of you, Miss Aldin,” said the Hotel proprietress. “Come into my room, won’t you?”

They all went into the small comfortable sitting room and Dr. Lazenby said:

“Mr. Treves was dining at your place last night, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“How did he seem? Did he show any signs of distress?”

“No, he seemed very well and cheerful.”

The doctor nodded.

“Yes, that’s the worst of these heart cases. The end is nearly always sudden. I had a look at his prescriptions upstairs and it seems quite clear that he was in a very precarious state of health. I shall communicate with his London doctor, of course.”

“He was very careful of himself always,” said Mrs. Rogers. “And I’m sure he had every care here we could give him.”

“I’m sure of that, Mrs. Rogers,” said the doctor tactfully. “It was just some tiny additional strain, no doubt.”

“Such as walking upstairs,” suggested Mary.

“Yes, that might do it. In fact almost certainly would—that is, if he ever walked up those three flights—but surely he never did anything of that kind?”

“Oh no,” said Mrs. Rogers. “He always used the lift. Always. He was most particular.”

“I mean,” said Mary, “that with the lift being out of order last night—”

Mrs. Rogers was staring at her in surprise.

“But the lift wasn’t out of order at all yesterday, Miss Aldin.”

Thomas Royde coughed.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I came home with Mr. Treves last night. There was a placard on the lift saying ‘Out of order.’”

Mrs. Rogers stared.

“Well, that’s an odd thing. I’d have declared there was nothing wrong with the lift—in fact I’m sure there wasn’t. I’d have heard about it if there was. We haven’t had anything go wrong with the lift (touching wood) since—oh, not for a good eighteen months. Very reliable it is.”

“Perhaps,” suggested the doctor, “some porter or hall boy put that notice up when he was off duty?”

“It’s an automatic lift, doctor, it doesn’t need anyone to work it.”

“Ah yes, so it is. I was forgetting.”

“I’ll have a word with Joe,” said Mrs. Rogers. She bustled out of the room calling, “Joe—Joe.”

Dr. Lazenby looked curiously at Thomas.

“Excuse me, you’re quite sure, Mr.—er—”

“Royde,” put in Mary.

“Quite sure,” said Thomas.

Mrs. Rogers came back with the porter. Joe was emphatic that nothing whatever had been wrong with the lift on the preceding night. There was

such a placard as Thomas had described—but it was tucked away under the desk and hadn't been used for over a year.

They all looked at each other and agreed it was a most mysterious thing. The doctor suggested some practical joke on the part of one of the Hotel visitors, and perforce they left it at that.

In reply to Mary's inquiries, Doctor Lazenby explained that Mr. Treves' chauffeur had given him the address of Mr. Treves' solicitors, and he was communicating with them and that he would come round and see Lady Tressilian and tell her what was going to be done about the funeral.

Then the busy cheerful doctor hurried off and Mary and Thomas walked slowly back to Gull's Point.

Mary said:

"You're quite sure you saw that notice, Thomas?"

"Both Latimer and I saw it."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Mary.

X

It was the 12th of September. "Only two more days," said Mary Aldin. Then she bit her lip and flushed.

Thomas Royde looked at her thoughtfully.

"Is that how you feel about it?"

"I don't know what's the matter with me," said Mary. "Never in all my life have I been so anxious for a visit to come to an end. And usually we enjoy having Nevile so much. And Audrey too."

Thomas nodded.

“But this time,” went on Mary, “one feels as though one were sitting on dynamite. At any minute the whole thing may explode. That’s why I said to myself first thing this morning: ‘Only two days more.’ Audrey goes on Wednesday and Neville and Kay on Thursday.”

“And I go on Friday,” said Thomas.

“Oh I’m not counting you. You’ve been a tower of strength. I don’t know what I should have done without you.”

“The human buffer?”

“More than that. You’ve been so kind and so—so calm. That sounds rather ridiculous but it really does express what I mean.”

Thomas looked pleased though slightly embarrassed.

“I don’t know why we’ve all been so het up,” said Mary reflectively. “After all, if there were an—an outburst—it would be awkward and embarrassing, but nothing more.”

“But there’s been more to your feeling than that.”

“Oh yes, there has. A definite feeling of apprehension. Even the servants feel it. The kitchenmaid burst into tears and gave notice this morning—for no reason at all. The cook’s jumpy—Hurstall is all on edge—even Barrett, who is usually as calm as a—a battleship—has shown signs of nerves. And all because Neville has this ridiculous idea of wanting his former and present wife to make friends and so soothe his own conscience.”

“In which ingenious idea he has singularly failed,” remarked Thomas.

“Yes. Kay is—is getting quite beside herself. And really, Thomas, I can’t help sympathizing with her.” She paused. “Did you notice the way Neville looked after Audrey as she went up the stairs last night? He still cares about her, Thomas. The whole thing has been the most tragic mistake.”

Thomas started filling his pipe.

“He should have thought of that before,” he said in a hard voice.

“Oh I know. That’s what one says. But it doesn’t alter the fact that the whole thing is a tragedy. I can’t help feeling sorry for Neville.”

“People like Neville—” began Thomas and then stopped.

“Yes.”

“People like Neville think they can always have everything their own way—and have everything they want, too. I don’t suppose Neville has ever had a setback over anything in his life till he came up against this business of Audrey. Well, he’s got it now. He can’t have Audrey. She’s out of his reach. No good his making a song and dance about it. He’s just got to lump it.”

“I suppose you’re quite right. But you do sound hard. Audrey was so much in love with Neville when she married him—and they always got on together so well.”

“Well, she’s out of love with him now.”

“I wonder,” murmured Mary under her breath.

Thomas was going on:

“And I’ll tell you something else. Neville had better look out for Kay. She’s a dangerous kind of young woman—really dangerous. If she got her temper up she’d stop at nothing.”

“Oh dear,” Mary sighed and, returning to her original remarks, said hopefully: “Well, it’s only two days more.”

Things had been very difficult for the last four or five days. The death of Mr. Treves had given Lady Tressilian a shock which had told adversely on her health. The funeral had taken place in London, for which Mary was thankful, since it enabled the old lady to take her mind off the sad event more quickly than she might have been able to do otherwise. The domestic side of the household had been very nervy and difficult and Mary really felt tired and dispirited this morning.

“It’s partly the weather,” she said aloud. “It’s unnatural.”

It had indeed been an unusually hot and fine spell for September. On several days the thermometer had registered 70 in the shade.

Nevile strolled out of the house and joined them as she spoke.

“Blaming the weather?” he asked, with a glance up at the sky. “It is rather incredible. Hotter than ever today. And no wind. Makes one feel jumpy somehow. However, I think we’ll get rain before very long. Today is just a bit too tropical to last.”

Thomas Royde had moved very gently and aimlessly away and now disappeared round the corner of the house.

“Departure of gloomy Thomas,” said Nevile. “Nobody could say he shows any enjoyment of my company.”

“He’s rather a dear,” said Mary.

“I disagree. Narrow-minded prejudiced sort of chap.”

“He always hoped to marry Audrey, I think. And then you came along and cut him out.”

“It would have taken him about seven years to make up his mind to ask her to marry him. Did he expect the poor girl to wait while he made up his mind?”

“Perhaps,” said Mary deliberately, “it will all come right now.”

Nevile looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

“True love rewarded? Audrey marry that wet fish? She’s a lot too good for that. No, I don’t see Audrey marrying gloomy Thomas.”

“I believe she is really very fond of him, Nevile.”

“What matchmakers you women always are! Can’t you let Audrey enjoy her freedom for a bit?”

“If she does enjoy it, certainly.”

Nevile said quickly:

“You think she’s not happy?”

“I really haven’t the least idea.”

“No more have I,” said Nevile slowly. “One never does know what Audrey is feeling.” He paused and then added, “But Audrey is one hundred per cent thoroughbred. She’s white all through.”

Then he said, more to himself than to Mary:

“God, what a damned fool I’ve been!”

Mary went into the house a little worried. For the third time she repeated to herself the comforting words, “Only two days more.”

Nevile wandered restlessly about the garden and terraces.

Right at the end of the garden he found Audrey sitting on the low wall looking down at the water below. It was high tide and the river was full.

She got up at once and came towards him.

“I was just coming back to the house. It must be nearly tea-time.”

She spoke quickly and nervously without looking at him.

He walked beside her without speaking.

Only when they reached the terrace again did he say:

“Can I talk to you, Audrey?”

She said at once, her fingers gripping the edge of the balustrade: "I think you'd better not."

"That means you know what I want to say."

She did not answer.

"What about it, Audrey? Can't we go back to where we were? Forget everything that has happened?"

"Including Kay?"

"Kay," said Nevile, "will be sensible."

"What do you mean by sensible?"

"Simply this. I shall go to her and tell her the truth. Fling myself on her generosity. Tell her, what is true, that you are the only woman I ever loved."

"You loved Kay when you married her."

"My marriage to Kay was the biggest mistake I ever made. I—"

He stopped. Kay had come out of the drawing room window. She walked towards them, and before the fury in her eyes even Nevile shrank a little.

"Sorry to interrupt this touching scene," said Kay. "But I think it's about time I did."

Audrey moved away. "I'll leave you alone," she said.

Her face and voice were colourless.

"That's right," said Kay. "You've done all the mischief you wanted to do, haven't you? I'll deal with you later. Just now I'd rather have it out with Nevile."

"Look here, Kay, Audrey has absolutely nothing to do with this. It's not her fault. Blame me if you like—"

“And I do like,” said Kay. Her eyes blazed at Neville. “What sort of man do you think you are?”

“A pretty poor sort of man,” said Neville bitterly.

“You leave your wife, come bullheaded after me, get your wife to give you a divorce. Crazy about me one minute, tired of me the next! Now I suppose you want to go back to that whey-faced, mewling, double-crossing little cat —”

“Stop that, Kay!”

“Well, what do you want?”

Neville was very white. He said:

“I’m every kind of a worm you like to call me. But it’s no good, Kay. I can’t go on. I think—really—I must have loved Audrey all the time. My love for you was—was a kind of madness. But it’s no good, my dear—you and I don’t belong. I shouldn’t be able to make you happy in the long run. Believe me, Kay, it’s better to cut our losses. Let’s try and part friends. Be generous.”

Kay said in a deceptively quiet voice:

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

Neville did not look at her. His chin took on a dogged angle.

“We can get a divorce. You can divorce me for desertion.”

“Not for some time. You’ll have to wait for it.”

“I’ll wait,” said Neville.

“And then, after three years or whatever it is, you’ll ask dear sweet Audrey to marry you all over again?”

“If she’ll have me.”

“She’ll have you all right!” said Kay viciously. “And where do I come in?”

“You’ll be free to find a better man than I am. Naturally I shall see you’re well provided for—”

“Cut out the bribes!” Her voice rose, as she lost control of herself. “Listen to me, Nevile. You can’t do this thing to me! I’ll not divorce you. I married you because I loved you. I know when you started turning against me. It was after I let you know I followed you to Estoril. You wanted to think it was all Fate. It’s upset your vanity to think it was me. Well, I’m not ashamed of what I did. You fell in love with me and married me and I’m not going to let you go back to that sly little cat who’s got her hooks into you again. She meant this to happen—but she’s not going to bring it off! I’ll kill you first. Do you hear? I’ll kill you. I’ll kill her too. I’ll see you both dead. I’ll—”

Nevile took a step forward and caught her by the arm.

“Shut up, Kay. For goodness’ sake. You can’t make this kind of scene here.”

“Can’t I? You’ll see. I’ll—”

Hurstall stepped out on the terrace. His face was quite impassive.

“Tea is served in the drawing room,” he announced.

Kay and Nevile walked slowly towards the drawing room window.

Hurstall stood aside to let them pass in.

Up in the sky the clouds were gathering.

XI

The rain started falling at a quarter to seven. Nevile watched it from the window of his bedroom. He had no further conversation with Kay. They had avoided each other after tea.

Dinner that evening was a stilted difficult meal. Neville was sunk in abstraction; Kay's face had an unusual amount of makeup for her; Audrey sat like a frozen ghost. Mary Aldin did her best to keep some kind of a conversation going and was slightly annoyed with Thomas Royde for not playing up to her better.

Hurstall was nervous and his hands trembled as he handed the vegetables.

As the meal drew to a close, Neville said with elaborate casualness: "Think I shall go over to Easterhead after dinner and look up Latimer. We might have a game of billiards."

"Take the latch key," said Mary. "In case you're back late."

"Thanks, I will."

They went into the drawing room, where coffee was served.

The turning on of the wireless and the news was a welcome diversion.

Kay, who had been yawning ostentatiously ever since dinner, said she would go up to bed. She had a headache, she said.

"Have you got any aspirin?" asked Mary.

"Yes, thank you."

Kay left the room.

Neville turned the wireless on to a programme with music. He sat silent on the sofa for some time. He did not look once at Audrey, but sat huddled up looking like an unhappy little boy. Against her will, Mary felt quite sorry for him.

"Well," he said, at last rousing himself, "better be off if I'm going."

"Are you taking your car or going by ferry?"

“Oh, ferry. No sense in going a round of fifteen miles. I shall enjoy a bit of a walk.”

“It’s raining, you know.”

“I know. I’ve got a Burberry.” He went towards the door.

“Goodnight.”

In the hall, Hurstall came to him.

“If you please, sir, will you go up to Lady Tressilian? She wants to see you specially.”

Nevile glanced at the clock. It was already ten o’clock.

He shrugged his shoulders and went upstairs and along the corridor to Lady Tressilian’s room and tapped on the door. While he waited for her to say Come in, he heard the voices of the others in the hall down below. Everybody was going to bed early tonight, it seemed.

“Come in,” said Lady Tressilian’s clear voice.

Nevile went in, shutting the door behind him.

Lady Tressilian was all ready for the night. All the lights were extinguished except one reading lamp by her bed. She had been reading, but she now laid down the book. She looked at Nevile over the top of her spectacles. It was, somehow, a formidable glance.

“I want to speak to you, Nevile,” she said.

In spite of himself, Nevile smiled faintly.

“Yes, Headmaster,” he said.

Lady Tressilian did not smile.

“There are certain things, Neville, that I will not permit in my house. I have no wish to listen to anybody’s private conversations, but if you and your wife insist on shouting at each other exactly under my bedroom windows, I can hardly fail to hear what you say. I gather that you were outlining a plan whereby Kay was to divorce you and in due course you would remarry Audrey. That, Neville, is a thing you simply cannot do and I will not hear of it for a moment.”

Neville seemed to be making an effort to control his temper.

“I apologize for the scene,” he said, shortly. “As for the rest of what you say, surely that is my business!”

“No, it is not. You have used my house in order to get into touch with Audrey—or else Audrey has used it—”

“She has done nothing of the sort. She—”

Lady Tressilian stopped him with upraised hand.

“Anyway, you can’t do this thing, Neville. Kay is your wife. She has certain rights of which you cannot deprive her. In this matter I am entirely on Kay’s side. You have made your bed and must lie upon it. Your duty now is to Kay and I’m telling you so plainly—”

Neville took a step forward. His voice rose:

“This is nothing whatever to do with you—”

“What is more,” Lady Tressilian swept on, regardless of his protest.

“Audrey leaves this house tomorrow—”

“You can’t do that! I won’t stand for it—”

“Don’t shout at me, Neville.”

“I tell you I won’t have it—”

Somewhere along the passage a door shut....

XII

Alice Bentham, the gooseberry-eyed housemaid, came to Mrs. Spicer, the cook, in some perturbation.

“Oh, Mrs. Spicer, I don’t rightly know what I ought to do.”

“What’s the matter, Alice?”

“It’s Miss Barrett. I took her in her cup of tea over an hour ago. Fast asleep she was and never woke up, but I didn’t like to do much. And then, five minutes ago, I went in again because she hadn’t come down and her ladyship’s tea all ready and waiting for her to take in. So I went in again and she’s sleeping ever so—I can’t stir her.”

“Have you shaken her?”

“Yes, Mrs. Spicer. I shook her head—but she just goes on lying there and she’s ever such a horrid colour.”

“Goodness, she’s not dead, is she?”

“Oh no, Mrs. Spicer, because I can hear her breathing, but it’s funny breathing. I think she’s ill or something.”

“Well, I’ll go up and see myself. You take in her ladyship’s tea. Better make a fresh pot. She’ll be wondering what’s happened.”

Alice obediently did as she was told whilst Mrs. Spicer went up to the second floor.

Taking the tray along the corridor, Alice knocked at Lady Tressilian’s door. After knocking twice and getting no answer she went in. A moment later, there was a crash of broken crockery and a series of wild screams, and Alice came rushing out of the room and down the stairs to where Hurstall was crossing the hall to the dining room.

“Oh, Mr. Hurstall—there’ve been burglars and her ladyship’s dead—killed—with a great hole in her head and blood everywhere....”

A FINE ITALIAN HAND...

I

Superintendent Battle had enjoyed his holiday. There were still three days of it to run and he was a little disappointed when the weather changed and the rain fell. Still, what else could you expect in England? And he'd been extremely lucky up to now.

He was breakfasting with Inspector James Leach, his nephew, when the telephone rang.

"I'll come right along, sir." Jim put the receiver back.

"Serious?" asked Superintendent Battle. He noted the expression on his nephew's face.

"We've got a murder. Lady Tressilian. An old lady, very well known down here, an invalid. Has that house at Saltcreek that hangs right over the cliff."

Battle nodded.

"I'm going along to see the old man" (thus disrespectfully did Leach speak of his Chief Constable). "He's a friend of hers. We're going along together."

As he went to the door he said pleadingly:

"You'll give me a hand, won't you, Uncle, over this? First case of this kind I've had."

"As long as I'm here, I will. Case of robbery and housebreaking, is it?"

"I don't know yet."

II

Half an hour later, Major Robert Mitchell, the Chief Constable, was speaking gravely to uncle and nephew.

“It’s early to say as yet,” he said, “but one thing seems clear. This wasn’t an outside job. Nothing taken, no signs of breaking in. All the windows and doors found shut this morning.”

He looked directly at Battle.

“If I were to ask Scotland Yard, do you think they’d put you on the job? You’re on the spot, you see. And then there’s your relationship with Leach here. That is, if you’re willing. It means cutting the end of your holiday.”

“That’s all right,” said Battle. “As for the other, sir, you’ll have to put it up to Sir Edgar” (Sir Edgar Cotton was Assistant Commissioner) “but I believe he’s a friend of yours?”

Mitchell nodded.

“Yes, I think I can manage Edgar all right. That’s settled, then! I’ll get through right away.”

He spoke into the telephone: “Get me the Yard.”

“You think it’s going to be an important case, sir?” asked Battle.

Mitchell said gravely:

“It’s going to be a case where we don’t want the possibility of making a mistake. We want to be absolutely sure of our man—or woman, of course.”

Battle nodded. He understood quite well that there was something behind the words.

“Thinks he knows who did it,” he said to himself. “And doesn’t relish the prospect. Somebody well-known and popular or I’ll eat my boots!”

III

Battle and Leach stood in the doorway of the well-furnished handsome bedroom. On the floor in front of them a police officer was carefully testing for fingerprints the handle of a golf club—a heavy niblick. The head of the club was bloodstained and had one or two white hairs sticking to it.

By the bed, Dr. Lazenby, who was police surgeon for the district, was bending over the body of Lady Tressilian.

He straightened up with a sigh.

“Perfectly straightforward. She was hit from in front with terrific force. First blow smashed in the bone and killed her, but the murderer struck again to make sure. I won’t give you fancy terms—just the plain horse sense of it.”

“How long has she been dead?” asked Leach.

“I’d put it between ten o’clock and midnight.”

“You can’t go nearer than that?”

“I’d rather not. All sorts of factors to take into account. We don’t hang people on rigor mortis nowadays. Not earlier than ten, not later than midnight.”

“And she was hit with this niblick?”

The doctor glanced over at it.

“Presumably. Luck, though, that the murderer left it behind. I couldn’t have deduced a niblick from the wound. As it happens the sharp edge of the club didn’t touch the head—it was the angled back of the club that must have hit her.”

“Wouldn’t that have been rather difficult to do?” asked Leach.

“If it had been done on purpose, yes,” agreed the doctor. “I can only suppose, that by a rather odd chance, it just happened that way.”

Leach was raising his hands, instinctively trying to reconstruct the blow.

“Awkward,” he commented.

“Yes,” said the doctor thoughtfully. “The whole thing was awkward. She was struck, you see, on the right temple—but whoever did it must have stood on the right-hand side of the bed—facing the head of the bed—there’s no room on the left, the angle from the wall is too small.”

Leach pricked up his ears.

“Left-handed?” he queried.

“You won’t get me to commit myself on that point,” said Lazenby. “Far too many snags. I’ll say, if you like, that the easiest explanation is that the murderer was left-handed—but there are other ways of accounting for it. Suppose, for instance, the old lady had turned her head slightly to the left just as the man hit. Or he may have previously moved the bed out, stood on the left of it and afterwards moved the bed back.”

“Not very likely—that last.”

“Perhaps not, but it might have happened. I’ve had some experience in these things, and I can tell you, my boy, deducing that a murderous blow was struck left-handed is full of pitfalls.”

Detective Sergeant Jones, from the floor, remarked, “This golf club is the ordinary right-handed kind.”

Leach nodded. “Still, it mayn’t have belonged to the man who used it. It was a man, I suppose, doctor?”

“Not necessarily. If the weapon was that heavy niblick a woman could have landed a terrible swipe with it.”

Superintendent Battle said in his quiet voice:

“But you couldn’t swear that that was the weapon, could you, doctor?”

Lazenby gave him a quick interested glance.

“No. I can only swear that it might have been the weapon, and that presumably it was the weapon. I’ll analyse the blood on it, make sure that it’s the same blood group—also the hairs.”

“Yes,” said Battle approvingly. “It’s always as well to be thorough.”

Lazenby asked curiously:

“Got any doubts about that golf club yourself, Superintendent?”

Battle shook his head.

“Oh no, no. I’m a simple man. Like to believe the things I see with my eyes. She was hit with something heavy—that’s heavy. It has blood and hair on it, therefore presumably her blood and hair. Ergo—that was the weapon used.”

Leach asked: “Was she awake or asleep when she was hit?”

“In my opinion, awake. There’s astonishment on her face. I’d say—this is just a private personal opinion—that she didn’t expect what was going to happen. There’s no sign of any attempt to fight—and no horror or fear. I’d say offhand that either she had just woken up from sleep and was hazy and didn’t take things in—or else she recognized her assailant as someone who could not possibly wish to harm her.”

“The bedside lamp was on and nothing else,” said Leach thoughtfully.

“Yes, that cuts either way. She may have turned it on when she was suddenly woken up by someone entering her room. Or it may have been on already.”

Detective Sergeant Jones rose to his feet. He was smiling appreciatively.

“Lovely set of prints on that club,” he said. “Clear as anything!”

Leach gave a deep sigh.

“That ought to simplify things.”

“Obliging chap,” said Dr. Lazenby. “Left the weapon—left his fingerprints on it—wonder he didn’t leave his visiting card!”

“It might be,” said Superintendent Battle, “that he just lost his head. Some do.”

The doctor nodded.

“True enough. Well, I must go and look after my other patient.”

“What patient?” Battle sounded suddenly interested.

“I was sent for by the butler before this was discovered. Lady Tressilian’s maid was found in a coma this morning.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Heavily doped with one of the barbiturates. She’s pretty bad, but she’ll pull round.”

“The maid?” said Battle. His rather oxlike eyes went heavily to the big bell pull, the tassel of which rested on the pillow near the dead woman’s hand.

Lazenby nodded.

“Exactly. That’s the first thing Lady Tressilian would have done if she’d cause to feel alarm—pull that bell and summon the maid. Well, she could have pulled it till all was blue. The maid wouldn’t have heard.”

“That was taken care of, was it?” said Battle. “You’re sure of that? She wasn’t in the habit of taking sleeping draughts?”

“I’m positive she wasn’t. There’s no sign of such a thing in her room. And I’ve found out how it was given to her. Senna pods. She drank a brew of senna pods every night. The stuff was in that.”

Superintendent Battle scratched his chin.

“H’m,” he said. “Somebody knew all about this house. You know, doctor, this is a very odd sort of murder.”

“Well,” said Lazenby, “that’s your business.”

“He’s a good man, our doctor,” said Leach when Lazenby had left the room.

The two men were alone now. The photographs had been taken, and measurements recorded. The two police officers knew every fact that was to be known about the room where the crime had been committed.

Battle nodded in answer to his nephew’s remark. He seemed to be puzzling over something.

“Do you think anyone could have handled that club—with gloves on, say—after those fingerprints were made?”

Leach shook his head.

“I don’t and no more do you. You couldn’t grasp that club—not use it, I mean, without smearing those prints. They weren’t smeared. They were as clear as clear. You saw for yourself.”

Battle agreed.

“And now we ask very nicely and politely if every body will allow us to take their fingerprints—no compulsion, of course. And everyone will say yes—and then one of two things will happen. Either none of these fingerprints will agree, or else—”

“Or else we’ll have got our man?”

“I suppose so. Or our woman, perhaps.”

Leach shook his head.

“No, not a woman. Those prints on the club were a man’s. Too big for a woman’s. Besides, this isn’t a woman’s crime.”

“No.” agreed Battle. “Quite a man’s crime. Brutal, masculine, rather athletic and slightly stupid. Know anybody in the house like that?”

“I don’t know anyone in the house yet. They’re all together in the dining room.”

Battle moved towards the door.

“We’ll go and have a look at them.” He glanced over his shoulder at the bed, shook his head and remarked:

“I don’t like that bell pull.”

“What about it?”

“It doesn’t fit.”

He added as he opened the door:

“Who wanted to kill her, I wonder? A lot of cantankerous old ladies about just asking for a tap on the skull. She doesn’t look that sort. I should think she was liked.” He paused a minute and then asked:

“Well off, wasn’t she? Who gets her money?”

Leach answered the implication of the words.

“You’ve hit it! That will be the answer. It’s one of the first things to find out.”

As they went downstairs together, Battle glanced at the list in his hand. He read out:

“Miss Aldin, Mr. Royde, Mr. Strange, Mrs. Strange, Mrs. Audrey Strange. H’m, seem a lot of the Strange family.”

“Those are his two wives, I understand.”

Battle’s eyebrows rose and he murmured:

“Bluebeard, is he?”

The family were assembled round the dining room table, where they had made a pretence of eating.

Superintendent Battle glanced keenly at the faces turned to him. He was sizing them up after his own peculiar methods. His view of them might have surprised them had they known it. It was a sternly biased view. No matter what the law pretends as to regarding people as innocent until they are proved guilty, Superintendent Battle always regarded everyone connected with a murder case as a potential murderer.

He glanced from Mary Aldin, sitting upright and pale at the head of the table, to Thomas Royde, filling a pipe beside her, to Audrey sitting with her chair pushed back, a coffee cup and saucer in her right hand, a cigarette in her left, to Neville looking dazed and bewildered, trying with a shaking hand to light a cigarette, to Kay with her elbows on the table and the pallor of her face showing through her makeup.

These were Superintendent Battle’s thoughts:

Suppose that’s Miss Aldin. Cool customer—competent woman, I should say. Won’t catch her off guard easily. Man next to her is a dark horse—got a groggy arm—poker face—got an inferiority complex as likely as not. That’s one of these wives, I suppose—she’s scared to death—yes, she’s scared all right. Funny about that coffee cup. That’s Strange, I’ve seen him before somewhere. He’s got the jitters all right—nerves shot to pieces. Redheaded girl’s a tartar—devil of a temper. Brains as well as temper, though.

Whilst he was thus sizing them up Inspector Leach was making a stiff little speech. Mary Aldin mentioned everyone present by name.

She ended up:

“It has been a terrible shock to us, of course, but we are anxious to help you in any way we can.”

“To begin with,” said Leach, holding it up, “does anybody know anything about this golf club?”

With a little cry, Kay said, “How horrible. Is that what—?” and stopped.

Nevile Strange got up and came round the table.

“Looks like one of mine. Can I just see?”

“It’s quite all right now,” said Inspector Leach. “You can handle it.”

That significant “now” did not seem to produce any reaction in the onlookers. Nevile examined the club.

“I think it’s one of the niblicks out of my bag,” he said. “I can tell you for sure in a minute or two. If you will just come with me.” They followed him to a big cupboard under the stairs. He flung open the door of it and to Battle’s confused eyes it seemed literally crowded with tennis racquets. At the same time, he remembered where he had seen Nevile Strange before. He said quickly:

“I’ve seen you play at Wimbledon, sir.”

Nevile half turned his head. “Oh yes, have you?”

He was throwing aside some of the racquets. There were two golf bags in the cupboard leaning up against fishing tackle.

“Only my wife and I play golf,” explained Nevile. “And that’s a man’s club. Yes, that’s right—it’s mine.”

He had taken out his bag, which contained at least fourteen clubs.

Inspector Leach thought to himself:

“These athletic chaps certainly take themselves seriously. Wouldn’t like to be his caddy.”

Nevile was saying:

“It’s one of Walter Hudson’s niblicks from St. Esbert’s.”

“Thank you, Mr. Strange. That settles one question.”

Nevile said: “What beats me is that nothing was taken. And the house doesn’t seem to have been broken into?” His voice was bewildered—but it was also frightened.

Battle said to himself:

“They’ve been thinking it out, all of them....”

“The servants,” said Nevile, “are so absolutely harmless.”

“I shall talk to Miss Aldin about the servants,” said Inspector Leach smoothly. “In the meantime I wonder if you could give me any idea who Lady Tressilian’s solicitors are?”

“Askwith & Trelawny,” replied Nevile promptly. “St. Loo.”

“Thank you, Mr. Strange. We shall have to find out from them all about Lady Tressilian’s property.”

“Do you mean,” asked Nevile, “who inherits her money?”

“That’s right, sir. Her will, and all that.”

“I don’t know about her will,” said Nevile. “She had not very much of her own to leave so far as I know. I can tell you about the bulk of her property.”

“Yes, Mr. Strange?”

“It comes to me and my wife under the will of the late Sir Matthew Tressilian. Lady Tressilian only had a life interest in it.”

“Indeed, is that so?” Inspector Leach looked at Nevile with the interested attention of someone who spots a possibly valuable addition to his pet collection. The look made Nevile wince nervously. Inspector Leach went on and his voice was impossibly genial.

“You’ve no idea of the amount, Mr. Strange?”

“I couldn’t tell you offhand. In the neighbourhood of a hundred thousand pounds, I believe.”

“Indeed. To each of you?”

“No, divided between us.”

“I see. A very considerable sum.”

Nevile smiled. He said quietly: “I’ve got plenty to live on of my own, you know, without hankering to step into dead people’s shoes.”

Inspector Leach looked shocked at having such ideas attributed to him.

They went back into the dining room and Leach said his next little piece. This was on the subject of fingerprints—a matter of routine—elimination of those of the household in the dead woman’s bedroom.

Everyone expressed willingness—almost eagerness—to have their fingerprints taken. They were shepherded into the library for that purpose, where Detective Sergeant Jones was waiting for them with his little roller.

Battle and Leach began on the servants.

Nothing very much was to be got from them. Hurstall explained his system of locking up the house and swore that he had found it untouched in the morning. There were no signs of any entry by an intruder. The front door, he explained, had been left on the latch. That is to say, it was not bolted, but could be opened from outside with a key. It was left like that because Mr. Nevile had gone over to Easterhead Bay and would be back late.

“Do you know what time he came in?”

“Yes, sir, I think it was about half past two. Someone came back with him, I think. I heard voices and then a car drive away and then I heard the door close and Mr. Nevile come upstairs.”

“What time did he leave here last night for Easterhead Bay?”

“About twenty past ten. I heard the door close.”

Leach nodded. There did not seem to be much more to be got from Hurstall at the moment. He interviewed the others. They were all disposed to be nervous and frightened, but no more so than was natural under the circumstances.

Leach looked questioningly at his uncle as the door closed behind the slightly hysterical kitchenmaid, who had tailed the procession.

Battle said: “Have the housemaid back—not the pop-eyed one—the tall thin bit of vinegar. She knows something.”

Emma Wales was clearly uneasy. It alarmed her that this time it was the big square elderly man who took upon himself the task of questioning her.

“I’m just going to give you a bit of advice, Miss Wales,” he said pleasantly. “It doesn’t do, you know, to hold anything back from the police. Makes them look at you unfavourably, if you understand what I mean—”

Emma Wales protested indignantly but uneasily:

“I’m sure I never—”

“Now, now.” Battle held up a large square hand. “You saw something or else you heard something—what was it?”

“I didn’t exactly hear it—I mean I couldn’t help hearing it—Mr. Hurstall, he heard it too. And I don’t think, not for a moment I don’t, that it had anything to do with the murder.”

“Probably not, probably not. Just tell us what it was.”

“Well, I was going up to bed. Just after ten it was—and I’d slipped along first to put Miss Aldin’s hot water bottle in her bed. Summer or winter she always has one, and so of course I had to pass right by her ladyship’s door.”

“Go on,” said Battle.

“And I heard her and Mr. Neville going at it hammer and tongs. Voices right up. Shouting, he was. Oh, it was a proper quarrel!”

“Remember exactly what was said?”

“Well, I wasn’t really listening as you might say.”

“No. But still you must have heard some of the words.”

“Her ladyship was saying as she wouldn’t have something or other going on in her house and Mr. Neville was saying, ‘Don’t you dare say anything against her.’ All worked up he was.”

Battle, with an expressionless face, tried once more, but he could get no more out of her. In the end he dismissed the woman.

He and Jim looked at each other. Leach said, after a minute or two:

“Jones ought to be able to tell us something about those prints by now.”

Battle asked:

“Who’s doing the rooms?”

“Williams. He’s a good man. He won’t miss anything.”

“You’re keeping the occupants out of them?”

“Yes, until Williams has finished.”

The door opened at that minute and young Williams put his head in.

“There’s something I’d like you to see. In Mr. Neville Strange’s room.”

They got up and followed him to the suite on the west side of the house.

Williams pointed to a heap on the floor. A dark blue coat, trousers and waistcoat.

Leach said sharply:

“Where did you find this?”

“Bundled down into the bottom of the wardrobe. Just look at this, sir.”

He picked up the coat and showed the edges of the dark blue cuffs.

“See those dark stains? That’s blood, sir, or I’m a Dutchman. And see here, it’s spattered all up the sleeve.”

“H’m.” Battle avoided the other’s eager eyes. “Looks bad for young Nevile, I must say. Any other suit in the room?”

“Dark grey pinstripe hanging over a chair. Lot of water on the floor here by the washbasin.”

“Looking as though he washed the blood off himself in the devil of a hurry? Yes. It’s near the open window, though, and the rain has come in a good deal.”

“Not enough to make those pools on the floor, sir. They’re not dried up yet.”

Battle was silent. A picture was forming itself before his eyes. A man with blood on his hands and sleeves, flinging off his clothes, bundling the bloodstained garments into the cupboard, sluicing water furiously over his hands and bare arms.

He looked across at a door in the other wall.

Williams answered the look.

“Mrs. Strange’s room, sir. The door is locked.”

“Locked? On this side?”

“No. On the other.”

“On her side, eh?”

Battle was reflective for a minute or two. He said at last:

“Let’s see that old butler again.”

Hurstall was nervous. Leach said crisply:

“Why didn’t you tell us, Hurstall, that you overheard a quarrel between Mr. Strange and Lady Tressilian last night?”

The old man blinked.

“I really didn’t think twice about it, sir. I don’t imagine it was what you’d call a quarrel—just an amicable difference of opinion.”

Resisting the temptation to say, “Amicable difference of opinion my foot!” Leach went on:

“What suit was Mr. Strange wearing last night at dinner?”

Hurstall hesitated. Battle said quietly:

“Dark blue suit or grey pinstripe? I dare say someone else can tell us if you don’t remember.”

Hurstall broke his silence.

“I remember now, sir. It was his dark blue. The family,” he added, anxious not to lose prestige, “have not been in the habit of changing into evening dress during the summer months. They frequently go out after dinner—sometimes in the garden, sometimes down to the quay.”

Battle nodded. Hurstall left the room. He passed Jones in the doorway. Jones looked excited.

He said:

“It’s a cinch, sir. I’ve got all their prints. There’s only one lot fills the bill. Of course I’ve only been able to make a rough comparison as yet, but I’ll bet they’re the right ones.”

“Well?” said Battle.

“The prints on that niblick, sir, were made by Mr. Nevile Strange.”

Battle leaned back in his chair.

“Well,” he said, “that seems to settle it, doesn’t it?”

IV

They were in the Chief Constable’s office—three men with grave worried faces.

Major Mitchell said with a sigh:

“Well, I suppose there’s nothing to be done but arrest him?”

Leach said quietly:

“Looks like it, sir.”

Mitchell looked across at Superintendent Battle.

“Cheer up, Battle,” he said kindly. “Your best friend isn’t dead.”

Superintendent Battle sighed.

“I don’t like it,” he said.

“I don’t think any of us like it,” said Mitchell. “But we’ve ample evidence, I think, to apply for a warrant.”

“More than ample,” said Battle.

“In fact if we don’t apply for one, anybody might ask why the dickens not?”

Battle nodded an unhappy head.

“Let’s go over it,” said the Chief Constable. “You’ve got motive—Strange and his wife come into a considerable sum of money at the old lady’s death. He’s the last person known to have seen her alive—he was heard quarrelling with her. The suit he wore that night had bloodstains on it, of course, most damning of all, his fingerprints were found on the actual weapon—and no one else’s.”

“And yet sir,” said Battle, “you don’t like it either.”

“I’m damned if I do.”

“What is it exactly you don’t like about it, sir?”

Major Mitchell rubbed his nose. “Makes the fellow out a bit too much of a fool, perhaps?” he suggested.

“And yet, sir, they do behave like fools sometimes.”

“Oh I know—I know. Where would we be if they didn’t?”

Battle said to Leach:

“What don’t you like about it, Jim?”

Leach stirred unhappily.

“I’ve always liked Mr. Strange. Seen him on and off down here for years. He’s a nice gentleman—and he’s a sportsman.”

“I don’t see,” said Battle slowly, “why a good tennis player shouldn’t be a murderer as well. There’s nothing against it.” He paused. “What I don’t like is the niblick.”

“The niblick?” asked Mitchell, slightly puzzled.

“Yes, sir, or alternatively, the bell. The bell or the niblick—not both.”

He went on in his slow careful voice.

“What do we think actually happened? Did Mr. Strange go to her room, have a quarrel, lose his temper, and hit her over the head with a niblick? If so, and it was unpremeditated, how did he happen to have a niblick with him? It’s not the sort of thing you carry about with you in the evenings.”

“He might have been practising swings—something like that.”

“He might—but nobody says so. Nobody saw him doing it. The last time anybody saw him with a niblick in his hand was about a week previously when he was practising sand shots down on the sands. As I look at it, you see, you can’t have it both ways. Either there was a quarrel and he lost his temper—and, mind you, I’ve seen him on the courts, and in one of these tournament matches these tennis stars are all het up and a mass of nerves, and if their tempers fray easily it’s going to show. I’ve never seen Mr. Strange ruffled. I should say he’d got an excellent control over his temper—better than most—and yet we’re suggesting that he goes berserk and hits a frail old lady over the head.”

“There’s another alternative, Battle,” said the Chief Constable.

“I know, sir. The theory that it was premeditated. He wanted the old lady’s money. That fits in with the bell—which entailed the doping of the maid—but it doesn’t fit in with the niblick and the quarrel! If he’d made up his mind to do her in, he’d be very careful not to quarrel with her. He could dope the maid, creep into her room in the night—crack her over the head and stage a nice little robbery, wiping the niblick and putting it carefully back where it belonged! It’s all wrong, sir—it’s a mixture of cold premeditation and unpremeditated violence—and the two don’t mix!”

“There’s something in what you say, Battle—but—what’s the alternative?”

“It’s the niblick that takes my fancy, sir.”

“Nobody could have hit her over the head with that niblick without disturbing Neville’s prints—that’s quite certain.”

“In that case,” said Superintendent Battle, “she was hit over the head with something else.”

Major Mitchell drew a deep breath.

“That’s rather a wild assumption, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s common sense, sir. Either Strange hit her with that niblick or nobody did. I plump for nobody. In that case that niblick was put there deliberately and blood and hair smeared on it. Dr. Lazenby doesn’t like the niblick much—had to accept it because it was the obvious thing and because he couldn’t say definitely that it hadn’t been used.”

Major Mitchell leaned back in his chair.

“Go on, Battle,” he said. “I’m giving you a free hand. What’s the next step?”

“Take away the niblick,” said Battle, “and what is left? First, motive. Had Neville Strange really got a motive for doing away with Lady Tressilian? He inherited money—a lot depends to my mind on whether he needed that money. He says not. I suggest we verify that. Find out the state of his finances. If he’s in a hole financially, and needs money, then the case against him is very much strengthened. If, on the other hand, he was speaking the truth and his finances are in a good state, why then—”

“Well, what then?”

“Why then, we might have a look at the motives of the other people in the house.”

“You think, then, that Neville Strange was framed?”

Superintendent Battle screwed up his eyes.

“There’s a phrase I read somewhere that tickled my fancy. Something about a fine Italian hand. That’s what I seem to see in this business. Ostensibly it’s a blunt brutal straightforward crime, but it seems to me I catch glimpses of something else—of a fine Italian hand at work behind the scenes....”

There was a long pause while the Chief Constable looked at Battle. “You may be right,” he said at last. “Dash it all, there’s something funny about this business. What’s your idea, now, of our plan of campaign?”

Battle stroked his square jaw.

“Well, sir,” he said. “I’m always in favour of going about things the obvious way. Everything’s been set to make us suspicious of Mr. Neville Strange. Let’s go on being suspicious of him. Needn’t go so far as actually to arrest him, but hint at it, question him, put the wind up him—and observe everybody’s reaction generally. Verify his statements, go over his movements that night with a toothcomb. In fact, show our hand as plainly as may be.”

“Quite Machiavellian,” said Major Mitchell with a twinkle. “Imitation of a heavy-handed policeman by star actor Battle.”

The Superintendent smiled.

“I always like doing what’s expected of me, sir. This time I mean to be a bit slow about it—take my time. I want to do some nosing about. Being suspicious of Mr. Neville Strange is a very good excuse for nosing about. I’ve an idea, you know, that something rather odd has been going on in that house.”

“Looking for the sex angle?”

“If you like to put it that way, sir.”

“Handle it your own way, Battle. You and Leach carry on between you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Battle stood up. “Nothing suggestive from the solicitors?”

“No, I rang them up. I know Trelawny fairly well. He’s sending me a copy of Sir Matthew’s will and also of Lady Tressilian’s. She had about five hundred a year of her own—invested in gilt-edged securities. She left a legacy to Barrett and a small one to Hurstall, the rest to Mary Aldin.”

“That’s three we might keep an eye on,” said Battle.

Mitchell looked amused.

“Suspicious fellow, aren’t you?”

“No use letting oneself be hypnotized by fifty thousand pounds,” said Battle stolidly. “Many a murder has been done for less than fifty pounds. It depends on how much you want the money. Barrett got a legacy—and maybe she took the precaution to dope herself so as to avert suspicion.”

“She very nearly passed out. Lazenby hasn’t let us question her yet.”

“Overdid it out of ignorance, perhaps. Then Hurstall may have been in bad need of cash for all we know. And Miss Aldin, if she’s no money of her own, might have fancied a bit of life on a nice little income before she’s too old to enjoy it.”

The Chief Constable looked doubtful.

“Well,” he said, “it’s up to you two. Get on with the job.”

V

Back at Gull’s Point, the two police officers received Williams’ and Jones’ reports.

Nothing of a suspicious nature had been found in any of the bedrooms. The servants were clamouring to be allowed to get on with the housework. Should he give them the word?

“Might as well, I suppose,” said Battle. “I’ll just have a stroll myself first through the two upper floors. Rooms that haven’t been done very often tell you something about their occupants that’s useful to know.”

Sergeant Jones put down a small cardboard box on the table.

“From Mr. Neville Strange’s dark blue coat,” he announced. “The red hairs were on the cuff, blonde hairs on the inside of the collar and the right shoulder.”

Battle took out the two long red hairs and the half-dozen blonde ones and looked at them. He said, with a faint twinkle in his eye:

“Convenient. One blonde, one red head and one brunette in this house. So we know where we are at once. Red hair on the cuff, blonde on the collar? Mr. Neville Strange does seem to be a bit of a Bluebeard. His arm round one wife and the other one’s head on his shoulder.”

“The blood on the sleeve has gone for analysis, sir. They’ll ring us up as soon as they get the result.”

Leach nodded.

“What about the servants?”

“I followed your instructions, sir. None of them is under notice to leave, or seems likely to have borne a grudge against the old lady. She was strict, but well liked. In any case the management of the servants lay with Miss Aldin. She seems to have been popular with them.”

“Thought she was an efficient woman the moment I laid eyes on her,” said Battle. “If she’s our murderess, she won’t be easy to hang.”

Jones looked startled.

“But those prints on that niblick, sir, were—”

“I know—I know,” said Battle. “The singularly obliging Mr. Strange’s. There’s a general belief that athletes aren’t overburdened with brains (not at all true, by the way) but I can’t believe Neville Strange is a complete moron. What about those senna pods of the maid’s?”

“They were always on the shelf in the servants’ bathroom on the second floor. She used to put ’em in to soak midday, and they stood there until the evening when she went to bed.”

“So that absolutely anybody could get at them! Anybody inside the house, that is to say.”

Leach said with conviction:

“It’s an inside job all right!”

“Yes, I think so. Not that this is one of those closed circle crimes. It isn’t. Anyone who had a key could have opened the front door and walked in. Neville Strange had that key last night—but it would probably be a simple matter to have got one cut, or an old hand could do it with a bit of wire. But I don’t see any outsider knowing about the bell and that Barrett took senna at night! That’s local inside knowledge!

“Come along, Jim, my boy. Let’s go up and see this bathroom and all the rest of it.”

They started on the top floor. First came a boxroom full of old broken furniture and junk of all kinds.

“I haven’t looked through this, sir,” said Jones. “I didn’t know—”

“What you were looking for? Quite right. Only waste of time. From the dust on the floor nobody has been in here for at least six months.”

The servants’ rooms were all on this floor, also two unoccupied bedrooms with a bathroom, and Battle looked into each room and gave it a cursory glance, noticing that Alice, the pop-eyed housemaid, slept with her window shut; that Emma, the thin one, had a great many relations, photographs of whom were crowded on her chest of drawers, and that Hurstall had one or two pieces of good, though cracked, Dresden and Crown Derby porcelain.

The cook’s room was severely neat and the kitchen maid’s chaotically untidy. Battle passed on into the bathroom which was the room nearest to the head of the stairs. Williams pointed out the long shelf over the washbasin, on which stood tooth glasses and brushes, various unguents and bottles of salts and hair lotion. A packet of senna pods stood open at one end.

“No prints on the glass or packet?”

“Only the maid’s own. I got hers from her room.”

“He didn’t need to handle the glass,” said Leach. “He’d only have to drop the stuff in.”

Battle went down the stairs followed by Leach. Halfway down this top flight was a rather awkwardly placed window. A pole with a hook on the end stood in a corner.

“You draw down the top sash with that,” explained Leach. “But there’s a burglar screw. The window can be drawn down, only so far. Too narrow for anyone to get in that way.”

“I wasn’t thinking of anyone getting in,” said Battle. His eyes were thoughtful.

He went in the first bedroom on the next floor, which was Audrey Strange’s. It was neat and fresh, ivory brushes on the dressing table—no clothes lying about. Battle looked into the wardrobe. Two plain coats and skirts, a couple of evening dresses, one or two summer frocks. The dresses were cheap, the tailor-mades well cut and expensive, but not new.

Battle nodded. He stood at the writing table a minute or two, fiddling with the pen tray on the left of the blotter.

Williams said: “Nothing of any interest on the blotting paper or in the waste paper basket.”

“Your word’s good enough,” said Battle. “Nothing to be seen here.”

They went on to the other rooms.

Thomas Royde’s was untidy, with clothes lying about. Pipes and pipe ash on the tables and beside the bed, where a copy of Kipling’s *Kim* lay half open.

“Used to native servants clearing up after him,” said Battle. “Likes reading old favourites. Conservative type.”

Mary Aldin's room was small but comfortable. Battle looked at the travel books on the shelves and the old-fashioned dented silver brushes. The furnishings and colouring in the room were more modern than the rest of the house.

"She's not so conservative," said Battle. "No photographs either. Not one who lives in the past."

There were three or four empty rooms, all well kept and dusted ready for occupation, and a couple of bathrooms. Then came Lady Tressilian's big double room. After that, reached by going down three little steps, came the two rooms and bathroom occupied by the Stranges.

Battle did not waste much time in Neville's room. He glanced out of the open casement window below which the rocks fell sheer to the sea. The view was to the west, towards Stark Head, which rose wild and forbidding out of the water.

"Gets the afternoon sun," he murmured. "But rather a grim morning outlook. Nasty smell of seaweed at low tide, too. And that headland has got a grim look. Don't wonder it attracts suicides!"

He passed into the larger room, the door of which had been unlocked.

Here everything was in wild confusion. Clothes lay about in heaps—filmy underwear, stockings, jumpers tried on and discarded—a patterned summer frock thrown sprawling over the back of a chair. Battle looked inside the wardrobe. It was full of furs, evening dresses, shorts, tennis frocks, playsuits.

Battle shut the doors again almost reverently.

"Expensive tastes," he remarked. "She must cost her husband a lot of money."

Leach said darkly:

"Perhaps that's why—"

He left the sentence unfinished.

“Why he needed a hundred—or rather fifty thousand pounds? Maybe. We’d better see, I think, what he has to say about it.”

They went down to the library. Williams was despatched to tell the servants they could get on with the housework. The family were free to return to their rooms if they wished. They were to be informed of that fact and also that Inspector Leach would like an interview with each of them separately, starting with Mr. Neville Strange.

When Williams had gone out of the room, Battle and Leach established themselves behind a massive Victorian table. A young policeman with notebook sat in the corner of the room, his pencil poised.

Battle said:

“You carry on for a start, Jim. Make it impressive.” As the other nodded his head, Battle rubbed his chin and frowned.

“I wish I knew what keeps putting Hercule Poirot into my head.”

“You mean that old chap—the Belgian—comic little guy?”

“Comic my foot,” said Superintendent Battle. “About as dangerous as a black mamba and a she-leopard—that’s what he is when he starts making a mountebank of himself! I wish he was here—this sort of thing would be right up his street.”

“In what way?”

“Psychology,” said Battle. “Real psychology—not the half-baked stuff people hand out who know nothing about it.” His memory dwelt resentfully on Miss Amphrey and his daughter Sylvia. “No—the real genuine article—knowing just what makes the wheels go round. Keep a murderer talking—that’s one of his lines. Says everyone is bound to speak what’s true sooner or later—because in the end it’s easier than telling lies. And so they make some little slip they don’t think matters—and that’s when you get them.”

“So you’re going to give Neville Strange plenty of rope?”

Battle gave an absentminded assent. Then he added, in some annoyance and perplexity:

“But what’s really worrying me is—what put Hercule Poirot into my head? Upstairs—that’s where it was. Now what did I see that reminded me of that little guy?”

The conversation was put to an end by the arrival of Neville Strange.

He looked pale and worried, but much less nervous than he had done at the breakfast table. Battle eyed him keenly. Incredible that a man who knew—and he must know if he were capable of any thought processes at all—that he had left his fingerprints on the instrument of the crime—and who had since had his fingerprints taken by the police—should show neither intense nervousness nor elaborate brazening of it out.

Neville Strange looked quite natural—shocked, worried, grieved—and just slightly and healthily nervous.

Jim Leach was speaking in his pleasant west country voice.

“We would like you to answer certain questions, Mr. Strange. Both as to your movements last night, and in reference to particular facts. At the same time I must caution you that you are not bound to answer these questions unless you like and that if you prefer to do so you may have your solicitor present.”

He leaned back to observe the effect of this.

Neville Strange looked, quite plainly, bewildered.

“He hasn’t the least idea what we’re getting at, or else he’s a damned good actor,” Leach thought to himself. Aloud he said, as Neville did not answer, “Well, Mr. Strange?”

Neville said: “Of course, ask me anything you like.”

“You realize,” said Battle pleasantly, “that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may subsequently be used in a court of law in evidence.”

A flash of temper showed on Strange’s face. He said sharply:

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, no, Mr. Strange. Warning you.”

Nevile shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose all this is part of your routine. Go ahead.”

“You are ready to make a statement?”

“If that’s what you call it.”

“Then will you tell us exactly what you did last night? From dinner onwards, shall we say?”

“Certainly. After dinner we went into the drawing room. We had coffee. We listened to the wireless—the news and so on. Then I decided to go across to Easterhead Bay Hotel and look up a chap who is staying there—a friend of mine.”

“That friend’s name is?”

“Latimer. Edward Latimer.”

“An intimate friend?”

“Oh, so-so. We’ve seen a good deal of him since he’s been down here. He’s been over to lunch and dinner and we’ve been over there.”

Battle said:

“Rather late, wasn’t it, to go off to Easterhead Bay?”

“Oh, it’s a gay spot—they keep it up till all hours.”

“But this is rather an early-to-bed household, isn’t it?”

“Yes, on the whole. However, I took the latchkey with me. Nobody had to sit up.”

“Your wife didn’t think of going with you?”

There was a slight change, a stiffening in Neville’s tone as he said:

“No, she had a headache. She’d already gone up to bed.”

“Please go on, Mr. Strange.”

“I was just going up to change—”

Leach interrupted.

“Excuse me, Mr. Strange. Change into what? Into evening dress, or out of evening dress?”

“Neither. I was wearing a blue suit—my best, as it happened, and as it was raining a bit and I proposed to take the ferry and walk the other side—it’s about half a mile, as you know—I changed into an older suit—a grey pinstripe, if you want me to go into every detail.”

“We do like to get things clear,” said Leach humbly. “Please go on.”

“I was going upstairs, as I say, when Barrett came and told me Lady Tressilian wanted to see me, so I went along and had a jaw with her for a bit.”

Battle said gently:

“You were the last person to see her alive, I think, Mr. Strange?”

Nevile flushed.

“Yes—yes—I suppose I was. She was quite all right then.”

“How long were you with her?”

“About twenty minutes to half an hour, I should think, then I went to my room, changed my suit and hurried off. I took the latchkey with me.”

“What time was that?”

“About half past ten, I should think. I hurried down the hill, just caught the ferry starting and went across to the Easterhead side. I found Latimer at the Hotel, we had a drink or two and a game of billiards. The time passed so quickly that I found I’d lost the last ferry back. It goes at one thirty. So Latimer very decently got out his car and drove me back. That, as you know, means going all the way round by Saltington—sixteen miles. We left the Hotel at two o’clock and got back here somewhere around half past, I should say. I thanked Ted Latimer, asked him in for a drink, but he said he’d rather get straight back, so I let myself in and went straight up to bed. I didn’t see or hear anything amiss. The house seemed all asleep and peaceful. Then this morning I heard that girl screaming and—”

Leach stopped him.

“Quite, quite. Now to go back a little—to your conversation with Lady Tressilian—she was quite normal in her manner?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Oh, one thing and another.”

“Amicably?”

Nevile flushed.

“Certainly.”

“You didn’t, for instance,” went on Leach smoothly, “have a violent quarrel?”

Nevile did not answer at once. Leach said:

“You had better tell the truth, you know. I’ll tell you frankly some of your conversation was overheard.”

Nevile said shortly:

“We had a bit of a disagreement. It was nothing.”

“What was the subject of the disagreement?”

With an effort Nevile recovered his temper. He smiled. “Frankly,” he said, “she ticked me off. That often happened. If she disapproved of anyone she let them have it straight from the shoulder. She was old-fashioned, you see, and she was inclined to be down on modern ways and modern lines of thought—divorce—all that. We had an argument and I may have got a bit heated, but we parted on perfectly friendly terms—agreeing to differ.” He added, with some heat, “I certainly didn’t bash her over the head because I lost my temper over an argument—if that’s what you think!”

Leach glanced at Battle. Battle leaned forward ponderously across the table. He said:

“You recognized that niblick as your property this morning. Have you any explanation for the fact that your fingerprints were found upon it?”

Nevile stared. He said sharply:

“I—but of course they would be—it’s my club—I’ve often handled it.”

“Any explanation, I mean, for the fact that your fingerprints show that you were the last person to have handled it?”

Nevile sat quite still. The colour had gone out of his face.

“That’s not true,” he said at last. “It can’t be. Somebody could have handled it after me—someone wearing gloves.”

“No, Mr. Strange—nobody could have handled it in the sense you mean—by raising it to strike—without blurring your own marks.”

There was a pause—a very long pause.

“Oh, God,” said Neville convulsively, and gave a long shudder. He put his hands over his eyes. The two policemen watched him.

Then he took away his hands. He sat up straight.

“It isn’t true,” he said quietly. “It simply isn’t true. You think I killed her, but I didn’t. I swear I didn’t. There’s some horrible mistake.”

“You’ve no explanation to offer about these fingerprints?”

“How can I have? I’m dumbfounded.”

“Have you any explanation for the fact that the sleeves and cuffs of your dark blue suit are stained with blood?”

“Blood?” It was a horror-struck whisper. “It couldn’t be!”

“You didn’t, for instance, cut yourself—”

“No. No, of course I didn’t!”

They waited a little while.

Neville Strange, his forehead creased, seemed to be thinking. He looked up at them at last with frightened horror-stricken eyes.

“It’s fantastic!” he said. “Simply fantastic. It’s none of it true.”

“Facts are true enough,” said Superintendent Battle.

“But why should I do such a thing? It’s unthinkable—unbelievable! I’ve known Camilla all my life.”

Leach coughed.

“I believe you told us yourself, Mr. Strange, that you come into a good deal of money upon Lady Tressilian’s death?”

“You think that’s why—But I don’t want money! I don’t need it!”

“That,” said Leach, with his little cough, “is what you say, Mr. Strange.”

Nevile sprang up.

“Look here, that’s something I can prove. That I didn’t need money. Let me ring up my bank manager—you can talk to him yourself.”

The call was put through. The line was clear and in a very few minutes they were through to London. Nevile spoke:

“That you, Ronaldson? Nevile Strange speaking. You know my voice. Look here, will you give the police—they’re here now—all the information they want about my affairs—yes—yes, please.”

Leach took the phone. He spoke quietly. It went on, question and answer.

He replaced the phone at last.

“Well?” said Nevile eagerly.

Leach said impassively:

“You have a substantial credit balance, and the Bank have charge of all your investments and report them to be in a favourable condition.”

“So you see it’s true what I said!”

“It seems so—but again, Mr. Strange, you may have commitments, debts—payment of blackmail—reasons for requiring money of which we do not

know.”

“But I haven’t! I assure you I haven’t. You won’t find anything of that kind.”

Superintendent Battle shifted his heavy shoulders. He spoke in a kind, fatherly voice.

“We’ve sufficient evidence, as I’m sure you’ll agree, Mr. Strange, to ask for a warrant for your arrest. We haven’t done so—as yet. We’re giving you the benefit of the doubt, you see.”

Nevile said bitterly: “You mean, don’t you, that you’ve made up your minds I did it, but you want to get at the motive so as to clinch the case against me?”

Battle was silent. Leach looked at the ceiling.

Nevile said desperately:

“It’s like some awful dream. There’s nothing I can say or do. It’s like—like being in a trap and you can’t get out.”

Superintendent Battle stirred. An intelligent gleam showed between his half-closed lids.

“That’s very nicely put,” he said. “Very nicely put indeed. It gives me an idea....”

VI

Sergeant Jones adroitly got rid of Nevile through the hall and then brought Kay in by the french window so that husband and wife did not meet.

“He’ll see all the others, though,” Leach remarked.

“All the better,” said Battle. “It’s only this one I want to deal with whilst she’s still in the dark.”

The day was overcast with a sharp wind. Kay was dressed in a tweed skirt and a purple sweater, above which her hair looked like a burnished copper bowl. She looked half frightened, half excited. Her beauty and vitality bloomed against the dark Victorian background of books and saddleback chairs.

Leach led her easily enough over her account of the previous evening.

She had had a headache and gone to bed early—about quarter past nine, she thought. She had slept heavily and heard nothing until the next morning, when she was wakened by hearing someone screaming.

Battle took up the questioning.

“Your husband didn’t come in to see how you were before he went off for the evening?”

“No.”

“You didn’t see him from the time you left the drawing room until the following morning. Is that right?”

Kay nodded.

Battle stroked his jaw.

“Mrs. Strange, the door between your room and that of your husband was locked. Who locked it?”

Kay said shortly: “I did.”

Battle said nothing—but he waited—waited like an elderly fatherly cat—for a mouse to come out of the hole he was watching.

His silence did what questions might not have accomplished. Kay burst out impetuously:

“Oh, I suppose you’ve got to have it all! That old doddering Hurstall must have heard us before tea and he’ll tell you if I don’t. He’s probably told you

already. Nevile and I had had a row—a flaming row! I was furious with him! I went up to bed and locked the door, because I was still in a flaming rage with him!”

“I see—I see,” said Battle, at his most sympathetic. “And what was the trouble all about?”

“Does it matter? Oh, I don’t mind telling you. Nevile has been behaving like a perfect idiot. It’s all that woman’s fault, though.”

“What woman?”

“His first wife. She got him to come here in the first place.”

“You mean—to meet you?”

“Yes. Nevile thinks it was all his own idea—poor innocent! But it wasn’t. He never thought of such a thing until he met her in the Park one day and she got the idea into his head and made him believe he’d thought of it himself. He quite honestly thinks it was his idea, but I’ve seen Audrey’s fine Italian hand behind it from the first.”

“Why should she do such a thing?” asked Battle.

“Because she wanted to get hold of him again,” said Kay. She spoke quickly and her breath came fast. “She’s never forgiven him for going off with me. This is her revenge. She got him to fix up that we’d all be here together and then she got to work on him. She’s been doing it ever since we arrived. She’s clever, you know. Knows just how to look pathetic and elusive—yes, and how to play up another man, too. She got Thomas Royde, a faithful old dog who’s always adored her, to be here at the same time, and she drove Nevile mad by pretending she was going to marry him.”

She stopped, breathing angrily.

Battle said mildly:

“I should have thought he’d be glad for her to—er—find happiness with an old friend.”

“Glad? He’s as jealous as Hell!”

“Then he must be very fond of her.”

“Oh, he is,” said Kay bitterly. “She’s seen to that!”

Battle’s finger still ran dubiously over his jaw.

“You might have objected to this arrangement of coming here,” he suggested.

“How could I? It would have looked as though I were jealous!”

“Well,” said Battle, “after all, you were, weren’t you?”

Kay flushed.

“Always! I’ve always been jealous of Audrey. Right from the beginning—or nearly the beginning. I used to feel her there in the house. It was as though it were her house, not mine. I changed the colour scheme and did it all up but it was no good! I’d feel her there like a grey ghost creeping about. I knew Neville worried because he thought he’d treated her badly. He couldn’t quite forget about her—she was always there—a reproachful feeling at the back of his mind. There are people, you know, who are like that. They seem rather colourless and not very interesting—but they make themselves felt.”

Battle nodded thoughtfully. He said:

“Well, thank you, Mrs. Strange. That’s all at present. We have to ask—er—a good many questions—especially with your husband inheriting so much money from Lady Tressilian—fifty thousand pounds—”

“Is it as much as that? We get it from old Sir Matthew’s will, don’t we?”

“You know all about it?”

“Oh yes. He left it to be divided between Neville and Neville’s wife after Lady Tressilian’s death. Not that I’m glad the old thing is dead. I’m not. I

didn't like her very much—probably because she didn't like me—but it's too horrible to think of some burglar coming along and cracking her head open."

She went out on that. Battle looked at Leach.

"What do you think of her? Good-looking bit of goods, I will say. A man could lose his head over her easy enough."

Leach agreed.

"Doesn't seem to me quite a lady, though," he said dubiously.

"They aren't nowadays," said Battle. "Shall we see No. 1? No, I think we'll have Miss Aldin next, and get an outside angle on this matrimonial business."

Mary Aldin came in composedly and sat down. Beneath her outward calmness her eyes looked worried.

She answered Leach's questions clearly enough, confirming Neville's account of the evening. She had come up to bed about ten o'clock.

"Mr. Strange was then with Lady Tressilian?"

"Yes, I could hear them talking."

"Talking, Miss Aldin, or quarrelling?"

She flushed but answered quietly:

"Lady Tressilian, you know, was fond of discussion. She often sounded acrimonious when she was really nothing of the kind. Also, she was inclined to be autocratic and to domineer over people—and a man doesn't take that kind of thing as easily as a woman does."

"As you do, perhaps," thought Battle.

He looked at her intelligent face. It was she who broke the silence.

“I don’t want to be stupid—but it really seems to me incredible—quite incredible, that you should suspect one of the people in this house. Why shouldn’t it be an outsider?”

“For several reasons, Miss Aldin. For one thing, nothing was taken and no entry was forced. I needn’t remind you of the geography of your own house and grounds, but just bear this in mind. On the west is a sheer cliff down to the sea, to the south are a couple of terraces with a wall and a drop to the sea, on the east the garden slopes down almost to the shore, but it is surrounded by a high wall. The only ways out are a small door leading through on to the road which was found bolted inside as usual this morning and the main door to the house, which is set on the road. I’m not saying no one could climb that wall, nor that they could not have got in by using a spare key to the front door or even a skeleton key—but I’m saying that as far as I can see no one did anything of the sort. Whoever committed this crime knew that Barrett took senna pod decoction every night, and doped it—that means someone in the house. The niblick was taken from the cupboard under the stairs. It wasn’t an outsider, Miss Aldin.”

“It wasn’t Neville! I’m sure it wasn’t Neville!”

“Why are you so sure?”

She raised her hands hopelessly.

“It just isn’t like him—that’s why! He wouldn’t kill a defence-less old woman in bed—Neville!”

“It doesn’t seem very likely,” said Battle reasonably, “but you’d be surprised at the things people do when they’ve got a good enough reason. Mr. Strange may have wanted money very badly.”

“I’m sure he didn’t. He’s not an extravagant person—he never has been.”

“No, but his wife is.”

“Kay? Yes, perhaps—but oh, it’s too ridiculous. I’m sure the last thing Neville has been thinking of lately is money.”

Superintendent Battle coughed.

“He’s had other worries, I understand?”

“Kay told you, I suppose? Yes, it really has been rather difficult. Still, it’s nothing to do with this dreadful business.”

“Probably not, but all the same I’d like to hear your version of the affair, Miss Aldin.”

Mary said slowly: “Well, as I say, it has created a difficult—situation. Whosoever’s idea it was to begin with—”

He interrupted her deftly.

“I understood it was Mr. Nevile Strange’s idea?”

“He said it was.”

“But you yourself didn’t think so?”

“I—no—it isn’t like Nevile somehow. I’ve had a feeling all along that somebody else put the idea into his head.”

“Mrs. Audrey Strange, perhaps?”

“It seems incredible that Audrey should do such a thing.”

“Then who else could it have been?”

Mary raised her shoulders helplessly.

“I don’t know. It’s just—queer.”

“Queer,” said Battle thoughtfully. “That’s what I feel about this case. It’s queer.”

“Everything’s been queer. There’s been a feeling—I can’t describe it. Something in the air. A menace.”

“Everybody strung up and on edge?”

“Yes, just that...We’ve all suffered from it. Even Mr. Latimer—” She stopped.

“I was just coming to Mr. Latimer. What can you tell me, Miss Aldin, about Mr. Latimer? Who is Mr. Latimer?”

“Well, really, I don’t know much about him. He’s a friend of Kay’s.”

“He’s Mrs. Strange’s friend. Known each other a long time?”

“Yes, she knew him before her marriage.”

“Mr. Strange like him?”

“Quite well, I believe.”

“No—trouble there?”

Battle put it delicately. Mary replied at once and emphatically: “Certainly not!”

“Did Lady Tressilian like Mr. Latimer?”

“Not very much.”

Battle took warning from the aloof tone of her voice and changed the subject.

“This maid, now, Jane Barrett, she has been with Lady Tressilian a long time? You consider her trustworthy?”

“Oh absolutely. She was devoted to Lady Tressilian.”

Battle leaned back in his chair.

“In fact you wouldn’t consider for a moment the possibility that Barrett hit Lady Tressilian over the head and then doped herself to avoid being

suspected?”

“Of course not. Why on earth should she?”

“She gets a legacy, you know.”

“So do I,” said Mary Aldin.

She looked at him steadily.

“Yes,” said Battle. “So do you. Do you know how much?”

“Mr. Trelawny has just arrived. He told me.”

“You didn’t know about it beforehand?”

“No. I certainly assumed, from what Lady Tressilian occasionally let fall, that she had left me something. I have very little of my own, you know. Not enough to live on without getting work of some kind. I thought that Lady Tressilian would leave me at least a hundred a year—but she has some cousins, and I did not at all know how she proposed to leave that money which was hers to dispose of. I knew, of course, that Sir Matthew’s estate went to Nevile and Audrey.”

“So she didn’t know what Lady Tressilian was leaving her,” Leach said when Mary Aldin had been dismissed. “At least that’s what she says.”

“That’s what she says,” agreed Battle. “And now for Bluebeard’s first wife.”

VII

Audrey was wearing a pale grey flannel coat and skirt. In it she looked so pale and ghostlike that Battle was reminded of Kay’s words, “a grey ghost creeping about the house.”

She answered his questions simply and without any signs of emotion.

Yes, she had gone to bed at ten o'clock, the same time as Miss Aldin. She had heard nothing during the night.

“You’ll excuse me butting into your private affairs,” said Battle, “but will you explain just how it comes about that you are here in the house?”

“I always come to stay at this time. This year, my—my late husband wanted to come at the same time and asked me if I would mind.”

“It was his suggestion?”

“Oh yes.”

“Not yours?”

“Oh no.”

“But you agreed?”

“Yes, I agreed...I didn’t feel—that I could very well refuse.”

“Why not, Mrs. Strange?”

But she was vague.

“One doesn’t like to be disobliging.”

“You were the injured party?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It was you who divorced your husband?”

“Yes.”

“Do you—excuse me—feel any rancour against him?”

“No—not at all.”

“You have a very forgiving nature, Mrs. Strange.”

She did not answer. He tried silence—but Audrey was not Kay, to be thus goaded into speech. She could remain silent without any hint of uneasiness. Battle acknowledged himself beaten.

“You are sure it was not your idea—this meeting?”

“Quite sure.”

“You are on friendly terms with the present Mrs. Strange?”

“I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“Do you like her?”

“Yes. I think she is very beautiful.”

“Well—thank you—I think that is all.”

She got up and walked towards the door. Then she hesitated and came back.

“I would just like to say—” she spoke nervously and quickly. “You think Neville did this—that he killed her because of the money. I’m quite sure that isn’t so. Neville has never cared much about money. I do know that. I was married to him for eight years, you know. I just can’t see him killing anyone like that for money—it—it—isn’t Neville. I know my saying so isn’t of any value as evidence—but I do wish you could believe it.”

She turned and hurried out of the room.

“And what do you make of her?” asked Leach. “I’ve never seen anyone so—so devoid of emotion.”

“She didn’t show any,” said Battle. “But it’s there. Some very strong emotion. And I don’t know what it is....”

Thomas Royde came last. He sat, solemn and stiff, blinking a little like an owl.

He was home from Malaya—first time for eight years. Had been in the habit of staying at Gull's Point ever since he was a boy. Mrs. Audrey Strange was a distant cousin—and had been brought up by his family from the age of nine. On the preceding night he had gone to bed just before eleven. Yes, he had heard Mr. Neville Strange leave the house but had not seen him. Neville had left at about twenty past ten or perhaps a little later. He himself had heard nothing during the night. He was up and in the garden when the discovery of Lady Tressilian's body had been made. He was an early riser.

There was a pause.

"Miss Aldin has told us that there was a state of tension in the house. Did you notice this too?"

"I don't think so. Don't notice things much."

"That's a lie," thought Battle to himself. "You notice a good deal, I should say—more than most."

No, he didn't think Neville Strange had been short of money in any way. He certainly had not seemed so. But he knew very little about Mr. Strange's affairs.

"How well did you know the second Mrs. Strange?"

"I met her here for the first time."

Battle played his last card.

"You may know, Mr. Royde, that we've found Mr. Neville Strange's fingerprints on the weapon. And we've found blood on the sleeve of the coat he wore last night."

He paused. Royde nodded.

“He was telling us,” he muttered.

“I’m asking you frankly: Do you think he did it?”

Thomas Royde never liked to be hurried. He waited for a minute—which is a very long time—before he answered:

“Don’t see why you ask me! Not my business. It’s yours. Should say myself—very unlikely.”

“Can you think of anyone who seems to you more likely?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Only person I think likely, can’t possibly have done it. So that’s that.”

“And who is that?”

But Royde shook his head more decidedly.

“Couldn’t possibly say. Only my private opinion.”

“It’s your duty to assist the police.”

“Tell you any facts. This isn’t facts. Just an idea. And it’s impossible, anyway.”

“We didn’t get much out of him,” said Leach when Royde had gone.

Battle agreed.

“No, we didn’t. He’s got something in his mind—something quite definite. I’d like to know what it is. This is a very peculiar sort of crime, Jim, my boy—”

The telephone rang before Leach could answer. He took up the receiver and spoke. After a minute or two of listening he said “Good,” and slammed it down.

“Blood on the coat sleeve is human,” he announced. “Same blood group as Lady T’s. Looks as though Neville Strange is for it—”

Battle had walked over to the window and was looking out with considerable interest.

“A beautiful young man out there,” he remarked. “Quite beautiful and a definite wrong ’un, I should say. It’s a pity Mr. Latimer—for I feel that that’s Mr. Latimer—was over at Easterhead Bay last night. He’s the type that would smash in his own grandmother’s head if he thought he could get away with it and if he knew he’d make something out of it.”

“Well, there wasn’t anything in it for him,” said Leach. “Lady T’s death doesn’t benefit him in any way whatever.” The telephone bell rang again. “Damn this phone, what’s the matter now?”

He went to it.

“Hullo. Oh, it’s you, doctor. What? Come round, has she? What? What?”

He turned his head. “Uncle, just come and listen to this.”

Battle came over and took the phone. He listened, his face as usual showing no expression. He said to Leach:

“Get Neville Strange, Jim.”

When Neville came in, Battle was just replacing the phone on its hook.

Neville, looking white and spent, stared curiously at the Scotland Yard superintendent, trying to read the emotion behind the wooden mask.

“Mr. Strange,” said Battle. “Do you know anyone who dislikes you very much?”

Neville stared and shook his head.

“Sure?” Battle was impressive. “I mean, sir, someone who does more than dislike you—someone who—frankly—hates your guts?”

Nevile sat bolt upright.

“No. No, certainly not. Nothing of the kind.”

“Think, Mr. Strange. Is there no one you’ve injured in any way—?”

Nevile flushed.

“There’s only one person I can be said to have injured and she’s not the kind who bears rancour. That’s my first wife, when I left her for another woman. But I can assure you that she doesn’t hate me. She’s—she’s been an angel.”

The Superintendent leaned forward across the table.

“Let me tell you, Mr. Strange; you’re a very lucky man. I don’t say I liked the case against you—I didn’t. But it was a case! It would have stood up all right, and unless the jury happened to have liked your personality, it would have hanged you.”

“You speak,” said Nevile, “as though all that were past?”

“It is past,” said Battle. “You’ve been saved, Mr. Strange, by pure chance.”

Nevile still looked inquiringly at him.

“After you left her last night,” said Battle, “Lady Tressilian rang the bell for her maid.”

He watched whilst Nevile took it in.

“After. Then Barrett saw her—?”

“Yes. Alive and well. Barrett also saw you leave the house before she went in to her mistress.”

Nevile said:

“But the niblick—my fingerprints—”

“She wasn’t hit with that niblick. Dr. Lazenby didn’t like it at the time. I saw that. She was killed with something else. That niblick was put there deliberately to throw suspicion on you. It may be by someone who overheard the quarrel and so selected you as a suitable victim, or it may be because—”

He paused, and then repeated his question:

“Who is there in this house that hates you, Mr. Strange?”

IX

“I’ve got a question for you, doctor,” said Battle.

They were in the doctor’s house after returning from the nursing home, where they had had a short interview with Jane Barrett.

Barrett was weak and exhausted but quite clear in her statement.

She had just been getting into bed after drinking her senna when Lady Tressilian’s bell had rung. She had glanced at the clock and seen the time—twenty-five minutes past ten.

She had put on her dressing gown and come down. She had heard a noise in the hall below and had looked over the banisters.

“It was Mr. Nevile just going out. He was taking his raincoat down from the hook.”

“What suit was he wearing?”

“His grey pinstripe. His face was very worried and unhappy-looking. He shoved his arms into his coat as though he didn’t care how he put it on. Then he went out and banged the front door behind him. I went on in to her ladyship. She was very drowsy, poor dear, and couldn’t remember why she had rung for me—she couldn’t always, poor lady. But I beat up her pillows and brought her a fresh glass of water and settled her comfortably.”

“She didn’t seem upset or afraid of anything?”

“Just tired, that’s all. I was tired myself. Yawning. I went up and went right off to sleep.”

That was Barrett’s story, and it seemed impossible to doubt her genuine grief and horror at the news of her mistress’s death.

They went back to Lazenby’s house and it was then that Battle announced that he had a question to ask.

“Ask away,” said Lazenby.

“What time do you think Lady Tressilian died?”

“I’ve told you. Between ten o’clock and midnight.”

“I know that’s what you said. But it wasn’t my question. I asked you what you, personally, thought.”

“Off the record, eh?”

“Yes.”

“All right. My guess would be in the neighbourhood of eleven o’clock.”

“That’s what I wanted you to say,” said Battle.

“Glad to oblige. Why?”

“Never did like the idea of her being killed before ten twenty. Take Barrett’s sleeping draught—it wouldn’t have got to work by then. That sleeping draught shows that the murder was meant to be committed a good deal later—during the night. I prefer midnight, myself.”

“Could be. Eleven is only a guess.”

“But it definitely couldn’t be later than midnight?”

“No.”

“It couldn’t be after two thirty?”

“Good heavens, no.”

“Well, that seems to let Strange out all right. I’ll just have to check up on his movements after he left the house. If he’s telling the truth he’s washed out and we can go on to our other suspects.”

“The other people who inherit money?” suggested Leach.

“Maybe,” said Battle. “But somehow, I don’t think so. Someone with a kink, I’m looking for.”

“A kink?”

“A nasty kink.”

When they left the doctor’s house they went on to the ferry. The ferry consisted of a rowing boat operated by two brothers, Will and George Barnes. The Barnes brothers knew everybody in Saltcreek by sight and most of the people who came over from Easterhead Bay. George said at once that Mr. Strange from Gull’s Point had gone across at ten thirty on the preceding night. No, he had not brought Mr. Strange back again. Last ferry had gone at one thirty from the Easterhead side and Mr. Strange wasn’t on it.

Battle asked him if he knew Mr. Latimer.

“Latimer? Latimer? Tall handsome young gentleman? Comes over from the Hotel up to Gull’s Point? Yes, I know him. Didn’t see him at all last night, though. He’s been over this morning. Went back last trip.”

They crossed on the ferry and went up to the Easterhead Bay Hotel.

Here they found Mr. Latimer newly returned from the other side. He had crossed on the ferry before theirs.

Mr. Latimer was very anxious to do all he could to help.

“Yes, old Nevile came over last night. Looked very blue over something. Told me he’d had a row with the old lady. I hear he’d fallen out with Kay too, but he didn’t tell me that, of course. Anyway, he was a bit down in the mouth. Seemed quite glad of my company for once in a way.”

“He wasn’t able to find you at once, I understand?”

Latimer said sharply:

“Don’t know why. I was sitting in the lounge. Strange said he looked in and didn’t see me, but he wasn’t in a state to concentrate. Or I may have strolled out into the gardens for five minutes or so. Always get out when I can. Beastly smell in this Hotel. Noticed it last night in the Bar. Drains, I think! Strange mentioned it too! We both smelt it. Nasty decayed smell. Might be a dead rat under the billiard room floor.”

“You played billiards, and after your game?”

“Oh we talked a bit, had another drink or two. Then Nevile said ‘Hullo, I’ve missed the ferry,’ so I said I’d get out my car and drive him back, which I did. We got there about two thirty.”

“And Mr. Strange was with you all the evening?”

“Oh yes. Ask anybody. They’ll tell you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Latimer. We have to be so careful.”

Leach said as they left the smiling, self-possessed young man: “What’s the idea of checking up so carefully on Nevile Strange?”

Battle smiled. Leach got it suddenly.

“Good lord, it’s the other one you’re checking up on. So that’s your idea.”

“It’s too soon to have ideas,” said Battle. “I’ve just got to know exactly where Mr. Ted Latimer was last night. We know that from quarter past eleven, say—to after midnight—he was with Nevile Strange. But where was he before that—when Strange arrived and couldn’t find him?”

They pursued their inquiries doggedly—with bar attendants, waiters, lift boys. Latimer had been seen in the lounge between nine and ten. He had been in the bar at a quarter past ten. But between that time and eleven twenty he seemed to have been singularly elusive. Then one of the maids was found who declared that Mr. Latimer had been “in one of the small writing rooms with Mrs. Beddoes—that’s the fat North Country lady.”

Pressed as to time, she said she thought it was about eleven o’clock.

“That tears it,” said Battle gloomily. “He was here all right. Just didn’t want attention drawn to his fat (and no doubt rich) lady friend. That throws us back on those others—the servants, Kay Strange, Audrey Strange, Mary Aldin and Thomas Royde. One of them killed the old lady, but which? If we could find the real weapon—”

He stopped, then slapped his thigh.

“Got it, Jim, my boy! I know now what made me think of Hercule Poirot. We’ll have a spot of lunch and go back to Gull’s Point and I’ll show you something.”

X

Mary Aldin was restless. She went in and out of the house, picked off a dead dahlia head here and there, went back into the drawing room and shifted flower vases in an unmeaning fashion.

From the library came a vague murmur of voices. Mr. Trelawny was in there with Nevile. Kay and Audrey were nowhere to be seen.

Mary went out in the garden again. Down by the wall she spied Thomas Royde placidly smoking. She went and joined him.

“Oh dear.” She sat down beside him with a deep perplexed sigh.

“Anything the matter?” Thomas asked.

Mary laughed with a slight note of hysteria in the laugh.

“Nobody but you would say a thing like that. A murder in the house and you just say ‘Is anything the matter?’”

Looking a little surprised, Thomas said:

“I meant anything fresh?”

“Oh, I know what you meant. It’s really a wonderful relief to find anyone so gloriously just-the-same-as-usual as you are!”

“Not much good, is it, getting all het up over things?”

“No, no. You’re eminently sensible. It’s how you manage to do it beats me.”

“Well, I suppose I’m an outsider.”

“That’s true, of course. You can’t feel the relief all the rest of us do that Nevile is cleared.”

“I’m very pleased he is, of course,” said Royde.

Mary shuddered.

“It was a very near thing. If Camilla hadn’t taken it into her head to ring the bell for Barrett after Nevile had left her—”

She left the sentence unfinished. Thomas finished it for her.

“Then old Nevile would have been for it all right.”

He spoke with a certain grim satisfaction, then shook his head with a slight smile, as he met Mary’s reproachful gaze.

“I’m not really heartless, but now that Nevile’s all right I can’t help being pleased he had a bit of a shaking up. He’s always so damned complacent.”

“He isn’t really, Thomas.”

“Perhaps not. It’s just his manner. Anyway he was looking scared as Hell this morning!”

“What a cruel streak you have!”

“Anyway it’s all right now. You know, Mary, even here Neville has had the devil’s own luck. Some other poor beggar with all that evidence piled up against him mightn’t have had such a break.”

Mary shivered again. “Don’t say that. I like to think the innocent are—protected.”

“Do you, my dear?” His voice was gentle.

Mary burst out suddenly:

“Thomas, I’m worried. I’m frightfully worried.”

“Yes?”

“It’s about Mr. Treves.”

Thomas dropped his pipe on the stones. His voice changed as he bent to pick it up.

“What about Mr. Treves?”

“That night he was here—that story he told—about a little murderer! I’ve been wondering, Thomas...Was it just a story? Or did he tell it with a purpose?”

“You mean,” said Royde deliberately, “was it aimed at someone who was in the room?”

Mary whispered, “Yes.”

Thomas said quietly:

“I’ve been wondering, too. As a matter of fact that was what I was thinking about when you came along just now.”

Mary half closed her eyes.

“I’ve been trying to remember...He told it, you know, so very deliberately. He almost dragged it into the conversation. And he said he would recognize the person anywhere. He emphasized that. As though he had recognized him.”

“Mm,” said Thomas. “I’ve been through all that.”

“But why should he do it? What was the point?”

“I suppose,” said Royde, “it was a kind of warning. Not to try anything on.”

“You mean that Mr. Treves knew then that Camilla was going to be murdered?”

“No-o. I think that’s too fantastic. It may have been just a general warning.”

“What I’ve been wondering is, do you think we ought to tell the police?”

To that Thomas again gave his thoughtful consideration.

“I think not,” he said at last. “I don’t see that it’s relevant in any way. It’s not as though Treves were alive and could tell them anything.”

“No,” said Mary. “He’s dead!” She gave a quick shiver. “It’s so odd, Thomas, the way he died.”

“Heart attack. He had a bad heart.”

“I mean that curious business about the lift being out of order. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it very much myself,” said Thomas Royde.

Superintendent Battle looked round the bedroom. The bed had been made. Otherwise the room was unchanged. It had been neat when they first looked round it. It was neat now.

“That’s it,” said Superintendent Battle, pointing to the old-fashioned steel fender. “Do you see anything odd about that fender?”

“Must take some cleaning,” said Jim Leach. “It’s well kept. Nothing odd about it that I can see, except—yes, the left-hand knob is brighter than the right-hand one.”

“That’s what put Hercule Poirot into my head,” said Battle. “You know his fad about things not being quite symmetrical—gets him all worked up. I suppose I thought unconsciously ‘That would worry old Poirot,’ and then I began talking about him. Get your fingerprint kit, Jones, we’ll have a look at those two knobs.”

Jones reported presently.

“There are prints on the right-hand knob, sir, none on the left.”

“It’s the left one we want, then. Those other prints are the housemaid’s when she last cleaned it. That left-hand one has been cleaned twice.”

“There was a bit of screwed-up emery paper in this waste paper basket,” volunteered Jones. “I didn’t think it meant anything.”

“Because you didn’t know what you were looking for, then. Gently now, I’ll bet anything you like that knob unscrews—yes, I thought so.”

Presently Jones held the knob up.

“It’s a good weight,” he said, weighing it in his hands.

Leach, bending over it, said:

“There’s something dark—on the screw.”

“Blood, as likely as not,” said Battle. “Cleaned the knob itself and wiped it and that little stain on the screw wasn’t noticed. I’ll bet anything you like that’s the weapon that caved the old lady’s skull in. But there’s more to find. It’s up to you, Jones, to search the house again. This time, you’ll know exactly what you’re looking for.”

He gave a few swift detailed instructions. Going to the window he put his head out.

“There’s something yellow tucked into the ivy. That may be another piece of the puzzle. I rather think it is.”

XII

Crossing the hall, Superintendent Battle was waylaid by Mary Aldin.

“Can I speak to you a minute, Superintendent?”

“Certainly, Miss Aldin. Shall we come in here?”

He threw open the dining room door. Lunch had been cleared away by Hurstall.

“I want to ask you something, Superintendent. Surely you don’t, you can’t still think that this—this awful crime was done by one of us? It must have been someone from outside! Some maniac!”

“You may not be far wrong there, Miss Aldin. Maniac is a word that describes this criminal very well if I’m not mistaken. But not an outsider.”

Her eyes opened very wide.

“Do you mean that someone in this house is—is mad?”

“You’re thinking,” said the Superintendent, “of someone foaming at the mouth and rolling their eyes. Mania isn’t like that. Some of the most dangerous criminal lunatics have looked as sane as you or I. It’s a question, usually, of having an obsession. One idea, preying on the mind, gradually distorting it. Pathetic, reasonable people who come up to you and explain

how they're being persecuted and how everyone is spying on them—and you sometimes feel it must all be true.”

“I'm sure nobody here has any ideas of being persecuted.”

“I only gave that as an instance. There are other forms of insanity. But I believe whoever committed this crime was under the domination of one fixed idea—an idea on which they had brooded until literally nothing else mattered or had any importance.”

Mary shivered. She said:

“There's something I think you ought to know.”

Concisely and clearly she told him of Mr. Treves' visit to dinner and of the story he had told. Superintendent Battle was deeply interested.

“He said he could recognize this person? Man or woman—by the way?”

“I took it that it was a boy the story was about—but it's true Mr. Treves didn't actually say so—in fact I remember now—he distinctly stated he would not give any particulars as to sex or age.”

“Did he? Rather significant, perhaps. And he said there was a definite physical peculiarity by which he could be sure of knowing this child anywhere?”

“Yes.”

“A scar, perhaps—has anybody here got a scar?”

He noticed the faint hesitation before Mary Aldin replied:

“Not that I have noticed.”

“Come now, Miss Aldin,” he smiled. “You have noticed something. If so, don't you think that I shall be able to notice it, too?”

She shook her head.

“I—I haven’t noticed anything of the kind.”

But he saw that she was startled and upset. His words had obviously suggested a very unpleasant train of thought to her. He wished he knew just what it was, but his experience made him aware that to press her at this minute would not yield any result.

He brought the conversation back to old Mr. Treves.

Mary told him of the tragic sequel to the evening.

Battle questioned her at some length. Then he said quietly:

“That’s a new one on me. Never came across that before.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never come across a murder committed by the simple expedient of hanging a placard on a lift.”

She looked horrified.

“You don’t really think—?”

“That it was murder? Of course it was! Quick, resourceful murder. It might not have come off, of course—but it did come off.”

“Just because Mr. Treves knew—?”

“Yes. Because he would have been able to direct our attention to one particular person in this house. As it is, we’ve started in the dark. But we’ve got a glimmer of light now, and every minute the case is getting clearer. I’ll tell you this, Miss Aldin—this murder was very carefully planned beforehand down to the smallest detail. And I want to impress one thing on your mind—don’t let anybody know that you’ve told me what you have. That is important. Don’t tell anyone, mind.”

Mary nodded. She was still looking dazed.

Superintendent Battle went out of the room and proceeded to do what he had been about to do when Mary Aldin intercepted him. He was a methodical man. He wanted certain information, and a new and promising hare did not distract him from the orderly performance of his duties, however tempting this new hare might be.

He tapped on the library door, and Neville Strange's voice called "Come in."

Battle was introduced to Mr. Trelawny, a tall distinguished-looking man with a keen dark eye.

"Sorry if I am butting in," said Superintendent Battle apologetically. "But there's something I haven't got clear. You, Mr. Strange, inherit half the late Sir Matthew's estate, but who inherits the other half?"

Neville looked surprised.

"I told you. My wife."

"Yes. But—" Battle coughed in a deprecating manner, "which wife, Mr. Strange?"

"Oh, I see. Yes, I expressed myself badly. The money goes to Audrey, who was my wife at the time the will was made. That's right, Mr. Trelawny?"

The lawyer assented.

"The bequest is quite clearly worded. The estate is to be divided between Sir Matthew's ward, Neville Henry Strange, and his wife, Audrey Elizabeth Strange, née Standish. The subsequent divorce makes no difference whatever."

"That's clear, then," said Battle. "I take it Mrs. Audrey Strange is fully aware of these facts?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Trelawny.

"And the present Mrs. Strange?"

“Kay?” Neville looked slightly surprised. “Oh, I suppose so. At least—I’ve never talked much about it with her—”

“I think you’ll find,” said Battle, “that she’s under a misapprehension. She thinks that the money on Lady Tressilian’s death comes to you and your present wife. At least, that’s what she gave me to understand this morning. That’s why I came along to find out how the position really lay.”

“How extraordinary,” said Neville. “Still, I suppose it might have happened quite easily. She has said once or twice, now that I think about it, ‘We come into that money when Camilla dies,’ but I suppose I assumed that she was just associating herself with me in my share of it.”

“It’s extraordinary,” said Battle, “the amount of misunderstandings there are even between two people who discuss a thing quite often—both of them assuming different things and neither of them discovering the discrepancy.”

“I suppose so,” said Neville, not sounding very interested. “It doesn’t matter much in this case, anyway. It’s not as though we’re short of money at all. I’m very glad for Audrey. She has been very hard up and this will make a big difference to her.”

Battle said bluntly: “But surely, sir, at the time of the divorce, she was entitled to an allowance from you?”

Neville flushed. He said in a constrained voice:

“There is such a thing as—as pride, Superintendent. Audrey has always persistently refused to touch a penny of the allowance I wished to make her.”

“A very generous allowance,” put in Mr. Trelawny. “But Mrs. Audrey Strange has always returned it and refused to accept it.”

“Very interesting,” said Battle, and went out before anyone could ask him to elaborate that comment.

He went out and found his nephew.

“On its face value,” he said, “there’s a nice monetary motive for nearly everybody in this case. Neville Strange and Audrey Strange get a cool fifty thousand each. Kay Strange thinks she’s entitled to fifty thousand. Mary Aldin gets an income that frees her from having to earn her living. Thomas Royde, I’m bound to say, doesn’t gain. But we can include Hurstall and even Barrett if we admit that she’d take the risk of finishing herself off to avoid suspicion. Yes, as I say, there are no lack of money motives. And yet, if I’m right, money doesn’t enter into this at all. If there’s such a thing as murder for pure hate, this is it. And if no one comes along and throws a spanner into the works, I’m going to get the person who did it!”

XIII

Angus MacWhirter sat on the terrace of the Easterhead Bay Hotel and stared across the river to the frowning height of Stark Head opposite.

He was engaged at the moment in a careful stocktaking of his thoughts and emotions.

He hardly knew what it was that had made him choose to spend his last few days of leisure where he now was. Yet something had drawn him there. Perhaps the wish to test himself—to see if there remained in his heart any of the old despair.

Mona? How little he cared now. She was married to the other man. He had passed her in the street one day without feeling any emotion. He could remember his grief and bitterness when she left him, but they were past now and gone.

He was recalled from these thoughts by an impact of wet dog and the frenzied appeal of a newly made friend, Miss Diana Brinton, aged thirteen.

“Oh come away, Don. Come away. Isn’t it awful? He’s rolled on some fish or something down on the beach. You can smell him yards away. The fish was awfully dead, you know!”

MacWhirter’s nose confirmed this assumption.

“In a sort of crevice on the rocks,” said Miss Brinton. “I took him into the sea and tried to wash it off, but it doesn’t seem to have done much good.”

MacWhirter agreed. Don, a wirehaired terrier of amiable and loving disposition, was looking hurt by the tendency of his friends to keep him firmly at arm’s length.

“Sea water’s no good,” said MacWhirter. “Hot water and soap’s the only thing.”

“I know. But that’s not so jolly easy in a Hotel. We haven’t got a private bath.”

In the end MacWhirter and Diana surreptitiously entered by the side door with Don on a lead, and smuggling him up to MacWhirter’s bathroom, a thorough cleansing took place and both MacWhirter and Diana got very wet. Don was very sad when it was all over. That disgusting smell of soap again—just when he had found a really nice perfume such as any other dog would envy. Oh well, it was always the same with humans—they had no decent sense of smell.

The little incident had left MacWhirter in a more cheerful mood. He took the bus into Saltington, where he had left a suit to be cleaned.

The girl in charge of the 24-Hour Cleaners looked at him vacantly.

“MacWhirter, did you say? I’m afraid it isn’t ready yet.”

“It should be.” He had been promised that suit the day before, and even that would have been 48 and not 24 hours. A woman might have said all this. MacWhirter merely scowled.

“There’s not been time yet,” said the girl, smiling indifferently.

“Nonsense.”

The girl stopped smiling. She snapped,

“Anyway, it’s not done,” she said.

“Then I’ll take it away as it is,” said MacWhirter.

“Nothing’s been done to it,” the girl warned him.

“I’ll take it away.”

“I dare say we might get it done by tomorrow—as a special favour.”

“I’m not in the habit of asking for special favours. Just give me the suit, please.”

Giving him a bad-tempered look, the girl went into the back room. She returned with a clumsily done up parcel which she pushed across the counter.

MacWhirter took it and went out.

He felt, quite ridiculously, as though he had won a victory. Actually it merely meant that he would have to have the suit cleaned elsewhere!

He threw the parcel on his bed when he returned to the Hotel and looked at it with annoyance. Perhaps he could get it sponged and pressed in the Hotel. It was not really too bad—perhaps it didn’t actually need cleaning?

He undid the parcel and gave vent to an expression of annoyance. Really, the 24-Hour Cleaners were too inefficient for words. This wasn’t his suit. It wasn’t even the same colour. It had been a dark blue suit he had left with them. Impertinent, inefficient muddlers.

He glanced irritably at the label. It had the name MacWhirter all right. Another MacWhirter? Or some stupid interchange of labels?

Staring down vexedly at the crumpled heap, he suddenly sniffed.

Surely he knew that smell—a particularly unpleasant smell...connected somehow with a dog. Yes, that was it. Diana and her dog. Absolutely and literally stinking fish!

He bent down and examined the suit. There it was, a discoloured patch on the shoulder of the coat. On the shoulder—

Now that, thought MacWhirter, is really very curious....

Anyway, next day, he would have a few grim words with the girl at the 24-Hour Cleaners. Gross mismanagement!

XIV

After dinner he strolled out of the Hotel and down the road to the Ferry. It was a clear night, but cold, with a sharp foretaste of winter. Summer was over.

MacWhirter crossed in the ferry to the Saltcreek side. It was the second time that he was revisiting Stark Head. The place had a fascination for him. He walked slowly up the hill, passing the Balmoral Court Hotel and then a big house set on the point of a cliff. Gull's Point—he read the name on the painted door. Of course, that was where the old lady had been murdered. There had been a lot of talk in the Hotel about it, his chambermaid had insisted on telling him all about it and the newspapers had given it a prominence which had annoyed MacWhirter, who preferred to read of worldwide affairs and who was not interested in crime.

He went on, downhill again to skirt a small beach and some old-fashioned fishing cottages that had been modernized. Then up again till the road ended and petered out into the track that led up on Stark Head.

It was grim and forbidding on Stark Head. MacWhirter stood on the cliff edge looking down to the sea. So he had stood on that other night. He tried to recapture some of the feeling he had had then—the desperation, anger, weariness—the longing to be out of it all. But there was nothing to recapture. All that had gone. There was instead a cold anger. Caught on that tree, rescued by coastguards, fussed over like a naughty child in hospital, a series of indignities and affronts. Why couldn't he have been let alone? He would rather, a thousand times rather, be out of it all. He still felt that. The only thing he had lost was the necessary impetus.

How it had hurt him then to think of Mona! He could think of her quite calmly now. She had always been rather a fool. Easily taken by anyone who flattered her or played up to her idea of herself. Very pretty. Yes, very pretty—but no mind, not the kind of woman he had once dreamed about.

But that was beauty, of course—some vague fancied picture of a woman flying through the night with white draperies streaming out behind her... Something like the figurehead of a ship—only not so solid...not nearly so solid....

And then, with dramatic suddenness, the incredible happened! Out of the night came a flying figure. One minute she was not there, the next minute she was—a white figure running—running—to the cliff's edge. A figure, beautiful and desperate, driven to destruction by pursuing Furies! Running with a terrible desperation...He knew that desperation. He knew what it meant....

He came with a rush out of the shadows and caught her just as she was about to go over the edge!

He said fiercely: "No you don't...."

It was just like holding a bird. She struggled—struggled silently, and then, again like a bird, was suddenly dead still.

He said urgently:

"Don't throw yourself over! Nothing's worth it. Nothing. Even if you are desperately unhappy—"

She made a sound. It was, perhaps, a far-off ghost of a laugh.

He said sharply:

"You're not unhappy? What is it then?"

She answered him at once with the low softly breathed word:

"Afraid."

“Afraid?” He was so astonished that he let her go, standing back a pace to see her better.

He realized then the truth of her words. It was fear that had lent that urgency to her footsteps. It was fear that made her small white intelligent face blank and stupid. Fear that dilated those wide-apart eyes.

He said incredulously: “What are you afraid of?”

She replied so low that he hardly heard it.

“I’m afraid of being hanged....”

Yes, she had said just that. He stared and stared. He looked from her to the cliff’s edge.

“So that’s why?”

“Yes. A quick death instead of—” She closed her eyes and shivered. She went on shivering.

MacWhirter was piecing things together logically in his mind.

He said at last:

“Lady Tressilian? The old lady who was murdered?” Then, accusingly: “You’ll be Mrs. Strange—the first Mrs. Strange.”

Still shivering she nodded her head.

MacWhirter went on in his slow careful voice, trying to remember all that he had heard. Rumour had been incorporated with fact.

“They detained your husband—that’s right, isn’t it? A lot of evidence against him—and then they found that that evidence had been faked by someone....”

He stopped and looked at her. She wasn’t shivering any longer. She was standing looking at him like a docile child. He found her attitude

unendurably affecting.

His voice went on:

“I see...Yes, I see how it was...He left you for another woman, didn't he? And you loved him...That's why—” He broke off. He said, “I understand. My wife left me for another man....”

She flung out her arms. She began stammering wildly, hopelessly:

“It's n-n-not—it's n-n-not l-like that. N-not at all—”

He cut her short. His voice was stern and commanding.

“Go home. You needn't be afraid any longer. D'you hear? I'll see that you're not hanged!”

XV

Mary Aldin was lying on the drawing room sofa. Her head ached and her whole body felt worn out.

The inquest had taken place the day before and, after formal evidence of identification, had been adjourned for a week.

Lady Tressilian's funeral was to take place on the morrow. Audrey and Kay had gone into Saltington in the car to get some black clothes. Ted Latimer had gone with them. Neville and Thomas Royde had gone for a walk, so except for the servants, Mary was alone in the house.

Superintendent Battle and Inspector Leach had been absent today, and that, too, was a relief. It seemed to Mary that with their absence a shadow had been lifted. They had been polite, quite pleasant, in fact, but the ceaseless questions, that quiet deliberate probing and sifting of every fact was the sort of thing that wore hardly on the nerves. By now that wooden-faced Superintendent must have learned of every incident, every word, every gesture, even, of the past ten days.

Now, with their going, there was peace. Mary let herself relax. She would forget everything—everything. Just lie back and rest.

“Excuse me, Madam—”

It was Hurstall in the doorway, looking apologetic.

“Yes, Hurstall?”

“A gentleman wishes to see you. I have put him in the study.”

Mary looked at him in astonishment and some annoyance.

“Who is it?”

“He gave his name as Mr. MacWhirter, Miss.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“No, Miss.”

“He must be a reporter. You shouldn’t have let him in, Hurstall.”

Hurstall coughed.

“I don’t think he is a reporter, Miss. I think he is a friend of Miss Audrey’s.”

“Oh, that’s different.”

Smoothing her hair, Mary went wearily across the hall and into the small study. She was, somehow, a little surprised as the tall man standing by the window turned. He did not look in the least like a friend of Audrey’s.

However, she said pleasantly:

“I’m sorry Mrs. Strange is out. You wanted to see her?”

He looked at her in a thoughtful, considering way.

“You’ll be Miss Aldin?” he said.

“Yes.”

“I dare say you can help me just as well. I want to find some rope.”

“Rope?” said Mary in lively amazement.

“Yes, rope. Where would you be likely to keep a piece of rope?”

Afterwards Mary considered that she had been half-hypnotized. If this strange man had volunteered any explanation she might have resisted. But Angus MacWhirter, unable to think of a plausible explanation, decided very wisely to do without one. He just stated quite simply what he wanted. She found herself, semi-dazed, leading MacWhirter in search of rope.

“What kind of rope?” she had asked.

And he had replied: “Any rope will do.”

She said doubtfully: “Perhaps in the potting shed—”

“Shall we go there?”

She led the way. There was twine and an odd bit of cord, but MacWhirter shook his head.

He wanted rope—a good-sized coil of rope.

“There’s the boxroom,” said Mary hesitatingly.

“Ay, that might be the place.”

They went indoors and upstairs. Mary threw open the boxroom door. MacWhirter stood in the doorway looking in. He gave a curious sigh of contentment.

“There it is,” he said.

There was a big coil of rope lying on a chest just inside the door in company with old fishing tackle and some moth-eaten cushions. He laid a hand on her arm and impelled Mary gently forward until they stood looking down on the rope. He touched it and said:

“I’d like you to charge your memory with this, Miss Aldin. You’ll notice that everything round about is covered with dust. There’s no dust on this rope. Just feel it.”

She said:

“It feels slightly damp,” in a surprised tone.

“Just so.”

He turned to go out again.

“But the rope? I thought you wanted it?” said Mary in surprise.

MacWhirter smiled.

“I just wanted to know it was there. That’s all. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind locking this door, Miss Aldin—and taking the key out? Yes. I’d be obliged if you’d hand the key to Superintendent Battle or Inspector Leach. It would be best in their keeping.”

As they went downstairs, Mary made an effort to rally herself.

She protested as they reached the main hall:

“But really, I don’t understand.”

MacWhirter said firmly:

“There’s no need for you to understand.” He took her hand and shook it heartily. “I’m very much obliged to you for your cooperation.”

Whereupon he went straight out of the front door. Mary wondered if she had been dreaming!

Nevile and Thomas came in presently and the car arrived back shortly afterwards and Mary Aldin found herself envying Kay and Ted for being able to look quite cheerful. They were laughing and joking together. After all, why not? she thought. Camilla Tressilian had been nothing to Kay. All this tragic business was very hard on a bright young creature.

They had just finished lunch when the police came. There was something scared in Hurstall's voice as he announced that Superintendent Battle and Inspector Leach were in the drawing room.

Superintendent Battle's face was quite genial as he greeted them.

"Hope I haven't disturbed you all," he said apologetically. "But there are one or two things I'd like to know about. This glove, for instance, who does it belong to?"

He held it out, a small yellow chamois leather glove.

He addressed Audrey.

"Is it yours, Mrs. Strange?"

She shook her head.

"No—no, it isn't mine."

"Miss Aldin?"

"I don't think so. I have none of that colour."

"May I see?" Kay held out her hand. "No."

"Perhaps you'd just slip it on."

Kay tried, but the glove was too small.

"Miss Aldin?"

Mary tried in her turn.

“It’s too small for you also,” said Battle. He turned back to Audrey. “I think you’ll find it fits you all right. Your hand is smaller than either of the other ladies’.”

Audrey took it from him and slipped it on over her right hand.

Nevile Strange said sharply:

“She’s already told you, Battle, that it isn’t her glove.”

“Ah well,” said Battle, “perhaps she made a mistake. Or forgot.”

Audrey said: “It may be mine—gloves are so alike, aren’t they?”

Battle said:

“At any rate it was found outside your window, Mrs. Strange, pushed down into the ivy—with its fellow.”

There was a pause. Audrey opened her mouth to speak, then closed it up again. Her eyes fell before the Superintendent’s steady gaze.

Nevile sprang forward. “Look here, Superintendent—”

“Perhaps we might have a word with you, Mr. Strange, privately?” Battle said gravely.

“Certainly, Superintendent. Come into the library.”

He led the way and the two police officers followed him.

As soon as the door had closed Nevile said sharply:

“What’s this ridiculous story about gloves outside my wife’s window?”

Battle said quietly: “Mr. Strange, we’ve found some very curious things in this house.”

Nevile frowned.

“Curious? What do you mean by curious?”

“I’ll show you.”

In obedience to a nod, Leach left the room and came back holding a very strange implement.

Battle said:

“This consists, as you see, sir, of a steel ball taken from a Victorian fender—a heavy steel ball. Then the head has been sawed off a tennis racquet and the ball has been screwed into the handle of the racquet.” He paused. “I think there can be no doubt that this is what was used to kill Lady Tressilian.”

“Horrible!” said Neville with a shudder. “But where did you find this—this nightmare?”

“The ball had been cleaned and put back on the fender. The murderer had, however, neglected to clean the screw. We found a trace of blood on that. In the same way the handle and the head of the racquet were joined together again by means of adhesive surgical plaster. It was then thrown carelessly back into the cupboard under the stairs, where it would probably have remained quite unnoticed amongst so many others if we hadn’t happened to be looking for something of that kind.”

“Smart of you, Superintendent.”

“Just a matter of routine.”

“No fingerprints, I suppose?”

“That racquet which belongs by its weight, I should say, to Mrs. Kay Strange, had been handled by her and also by you and both your prints are on it. But it also shows unmistakable signs that someone wearing gloves handled it after you did. There was just one fingerprint—left this time in inadvertence, I think. That was on the surgical strapping that had been

applied to bind the racquet together again. I'm not going for the moment to say whose print that was. I've got some other points to mention first."

Battle paused, then he said:

"I want you to prepare yourself for a shock, Mr. Strange. And first I want to ask you something. Are you quite sure that it was your own idea to have this meeting here and that it was not actually suggested to you by Mrs. Audrey Strange?"

"Audrey did nothing of the sort, Audrey—"

The door opened and Thomas Royde came in.

"Sorry to butt in," he said, "but I thought I'd like to be in on this."

Nevile turned a harassed face towards him.

"Do you mind, old fellow? This is all rather private."

"I'm afraid I don't care about that. You see, I heard a name outside." He paused. "Audrey's name."

"And what the Hell has Audrey's name got to do with you?" demanded Nevile, his temper rising.

"Well, what has it to do with you if it comes to that? I haven't said anything definite to Audrey, but I came here meaning to ask her to marry me, and I think she knows it. What's more, I mean to marry her."

Superintendent Battle coughed. Nevile turned to him with a start.

"Sorry, Superintendent. This interruption—"

Battle said:

"It doesn't matter to me, Mr. Strange. I've got one more question to ask you. That dark blue coat you wore at dinner the night of the murder, it's got

fair hairs inside the collar and on the shoulders? Do you know how they got there?"

"I suppose they're my hairs."

"Oh no, they're not yours, sir. They're a lady's hairs, and there's a red hair on the sleeve."

"I suppose that's my wife's—Kay's. The others, you are suggesting, are Audrey's. Very likely they are. I caught my cuff button in her hair one night outside on the terrace, I remember."

"In that case," murmured Inspector Leach, "the fair hair would be on the cuff."

"What the devil are you suggesting?" cried Neville.

"There's a trace of powder, too, inside the coat collar," said Battle.

"Primavera Naturelle No. 1—a very pleasant-scented powder and expensive—but it's no good telling me that you use it, Mr. Strange, because I shan't believe you. And Mrs. Strange uses Orchid Sun Kiss. Mrs. Audrey Strange does use Primavera Naturelle No. 1."

"What are you suggesting?" repeated Neville.

Battle leaned forward.

"I'm suggesting that—on some occasion Mrs. Audrey Strange wore that coat. It's the only reasonable way the hair and the powder could get where it did. Then you've seen that glove I produced just now? It's her glove all right. That was the right hand, here's the left." He drew it out of his pocket and put it down on the table. It was crumpled and stained with rusty brown patches.

Neville said with a note of fear in his voice: "What's that on it?"

"Blood, Mr. Strange," said Battle firmly. "And you'll note this, it's the left hand. Now Mrs. Audrey Strange is left-handed. I noted that first thing when I saw her sitting with her coffee cup in her right hand and her cigarette in

her left at the breakfast table. And the pen tray on her writing table had been shifted to the left-hand side. It all fits in. The knob from her grate, the gloves outside her window, the hair and powder on the coat. Lady Tressilian was struck on the right temple—but the position of the bed made it impossible for anyone to have stood on the other side of it. It follows that to strike Lady Tressilian a blow with the right hand would be a very awkward thing to do—but it's the natural way to strike for a left-handed person...."

Nevile laughed scornfully.

"Are you suggesting that Audrey—Audrey would make all these elaborate preparations and strike down an old lady whom she had known for years in order to get her hands on that old lady's money?"

Battle shook his head.

"I'm suggesting nothing of the sort. I'm sorry, Mr. Strange, you've got to understand just how things are. This crime, first, last, and all the time was directed against you. Ever since you left her, Audrey Strange has been brooding over the possibilities of revenge. In the end she has become mentally unbalanced. Perhaps she was never mentally very strong. She thought, perhaps, of killing you but that wasn't enough. She thought at last of getting you hanged for murder. She chose an evening when she knew you had quarrelled with Lady Tressilian. She took the coat from your bedroom and wore it when she struck the old lady down so that it should be bloodstained. She put your niblick on the floor, knowing we would find your fingerprints on it, and smeared blood and hair on the head of the club. It was she who instilled into your mind the idea of coming here when she was here. And the thing that saved you was the one thing she couldn't count on—the fact that Lady Tressilian rang her bell for Barrett and that Barrett saw you leave the house."

Nevile had buried his face in his hands. He said now:

"It's not true. It's not true! Audrey's never borne a grudge against me. You've got the whole thing wrong. She's the straightest, truest creature—without thought of evil in her heart."

Battle sighed.

“It’s not my business to argue with you, Mr. Strange. I only wanted to prepare you. I shall caution Mrs. Strange and ask her to accompany me. I’ve got the warrant. You’d better see about getting a solicitor for her.”

“It’s preposterous. Absolutely preposterous.”

“Love turns to hate more easily than you think, Mr. Strange.”

“I tell you it’s all wrong—preposterous.”

Thomas Royde broke in. His voice was quiet and pleasant.

“Do stop repeating that it’s preposterous, Nevile. Pull yourself together. Don’t you see that the only thing that can help Audrey now is for you to give up all your ideas of chivalry and come out with the truth?”

“The truth? You mean—?”

“I mean the truth about Audrey and Adrian.” Royde turned to the police officers. “You see, Superintendent, you’ve got the facts wrong. Nevile didn’t leave Audrey. She left him. She ran away with my brother Adrian. Then Adrian was killed in a car accident. Nevile behaved with the utmost chivalry to Audrey. He arranged that she should divorce him and that he would take the blame.”

“Didn’t want her name dragged through the mud,” muttered Nevile sulkily. “Didn’t know anyone knew.”

“Adrian wrote out to me, just before,” explained Thomas briefly. He went on: “Don’t you see, Superintendent, that knocks your motive out! Audrey has no cause to hate Nevile. On the contrary, she has every reason to be grateful to him. He’s tried to get her to accept an allowance which she wouldn’t do. Naturally when he wanted her to come and meet Kay she didn’t feel she could refuse.”

“You see,” Nevile put in eagerly. “That cuts out her motive. Thomas is right.”

Battle's wooden face was immovable.

"Motive's only one thing," he said. "I may have been wrong about that. But facts are another. All the facts show that she's guilty."

Nevile said meaningly:

"All the facts showed that I was guilty two days ago!"

Battle seemed a little taken aback.

"That's true enough. But look here, Mr. Strange, at what you're asking me to believe. You're asking me to believe that there's someone who hates both of you—someone who, if the plot against you failed, had laid a second trail to lead to Audrey Strange. Now can you think of anyone, Mr. Strange, who hates both you and your former wife?"

Nevile's head had dropped into his hands again.

"When you say it like that you make it all sound fantastic!"

"Because it is fantastic. I've got to go by the facts. If Mrs. Strange has any explanations to offer—"

"Did I have any explanation?" asked Nevile.

"It's no good, Mr. Strange. I've got to do my duty."

Battle got up abruptly. He and Leach left the room first. Nevile and Royde came close behind them.

They went on across the hall into the drawing room. There they stopped.

Audrey Strange got up. She walked forward to meet them. She looked straight at Battle, her lips parted in what was very nearly a smile.

She said very softly:

"You want me, don't you?"

Battle became very official.

“Mrs. Strange, I have a warrant here for your arrest on the charge of murdering Camilla Tressilian on Monday last, September 12th. I must caution you that anything you say will be written down and may be used in evidence at your trial.”

Audrey gave a sigh. Her small clear-cut face was peaceful and pure as a cameo.

“It’s almost a relief. I’m glad it’s—over!”

Nevile sprang forward.

“Audrey—don’t say anything—don’t speak at all.”

She smiled at him.

“But why not, Nevile? It’s all true—and I’m so tired.”

Leach drew a deep breath. Well, that was that. Mad as a hatter, of course, but it would save a lot of worry! He wondered what had happened to his uncle. The old boy was looking as though he had seen a ghost. Staring at the poor demented creature as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. Oh, well, it had been an interesting case, Leach thought comfortably.

And then, an almost grotesque anticlimax, Hurstall opened the drawing room door and announced: “Mr. MacWhirter.”

MacWhirter strode in purposefully. He went straight up to Battle. “Are you the police officer in charge of the Tressilian case?” he asked.

“I am.”

“Then I have an important statement to make. I am sorry not to have come forward before, but the importance of something I happened to see on the night of Monday last has only just dawned on me.” He gave a quick glance round the room. “If I can speak to you somewhere?”

Battle turned to Leach.

“Will you stay here with Mrs. Strange?”

Leach said officially: “Yes, sir.”

Then he leaned forward and whispered something into the other’s ear.

Battle turned to MacWhirter. “Come this way.”

He led the way into the library.

“Now then, what’s all this? My colleague tells me that he’s seen you before—last winter?”

“Quite right,” said MacWhirter. “Attempted suicide. That’s part of my story.”

“Go on, Mr. MacWhirter.”

“Last January I attempted to kill myself by throwing myself off Stark Head. This year the fancy took me to revisit the spot. I walked up there on Monday night. I stood there for some time. I looked down at the sea and across to Easterhead Bay and I then looked to my left. That is to say I looked across towards this house. I could see it quite plainly in the moonlight.”

“Yes.”

“Until today I had not realized that that was the night when a murder was committed.”

He leant forward. “I’ll tell you what I saw.”

XVI

It was really only about five minutes before Battle returned to the drawing room, but to those there it seemed much longer.

Kay had suddenly lost control of herself. She had cried out to Audrey.

“I knew it was you. I always knew it was you. I knew you were up to something—”

Mary Aldin said quickly:

“Please, Kay.”

Nevile said sharply:

“Shut up, Kay, for God’s sake.”

Ted Latimer came over to Kay, who had begun to cry.

“Get a grip on yourself,” he said kindly.

He said to Nevile angrily:

“You don’t seem to realize that Kay has been under a lot of strain! Why don’t you look after her a bit, Strange?”

“I’m all right,” said Kay.

“For two pins,” said Ted, “I’d take you away from the lot of them!”

Inspector Leach cleared his throat. A lot of injudicious things were said at times like these, as he well knew. The unfortunate part was that they were usually remembered most inconveniently afterwards.

Battle came back into the room. His face was expressionless.

He said: “Will you put one or two things together, Mrs. Strange? I’m afraid Inspector Leach must come upstairs with you.”

Mary Aldin said: “I’ll come too.”

When the two women had left the room with the Inspector, Nevile said anxiously: “Well, what did that chap want?”

Battle said slowly:

“Mr. MacWhirter tells a very odd story.”

“Does it help Audrey? Are you still determined to arrest her?”

“I’ve told you, Mr. Strange. I’ve got to do my duty.”

Nevile turned away, the eagerness dying out of his face.

He said:

“I’d better telephone Trelawny, I suppose.”

“There’s no immediate hurry for that, Mr. Strange. There’s a certain experiment I want to make first as a result of Mr. MacWhirter’s statement. I’ll just see that Mrs. Strange gets off first.”

Audrey was coming down the stairs, Inspector Leach beside her. Her face still had that remote detached composure.

Nevile came towards her, his hands outstretched.

“Audrey—”

Her colourless glance swept over him. She said:

“It’s all right, Nevile. I don’t mind. I don’t mind anything.”

Thomas Royde stood by the front door, almost as though he would bar the way out.

A very faint smile came to her lips.

““True Thomas,”” she murmured.

He mumbled: “If there’s anything I can do—”

“No one can do anything,” said Audrey.

She went out with her head high. A police car was waiting outside with Sergeant Jones in it. Audrey and Leach got in.

Ted Latimer murmured appreciatively:

“Lovely exit!”

Nevile turned on him furiously. Superintendent Battle dexterously interposed his bulk and raised a soothing voice:

“As I said, I’ve got an experiment to make. Mr. MacWhirter is waiting down at the ferry. We’re to join him there in ten minutes’ time. We shall be going out in a motor launch, so the ladies had better wrap up warmly. In ten minutes, please.”

He might have been a stage manager ordering a company on to the stage. He took no notice at all of their puzzled faces.

ZERO HOUR

I

It was chilly on the water and Kay hugged the little fur jacket she was wearing closer round her.

The launch chugged down the river below Gull's Point, and then swung round into the little bay that divided Gull's Point from the frowning mass of Stark Head.

Once or twice a question began to be asked, but each time Superintendent Battle held up a large hand rather like a cardboard ham, intimating that the time had not come yet. So the silence was unbroken save for the rushing of the water past them. Kay and Ted stood together looking down into the water. Neville was slumped down, his legs stuck out. Mary Aldin and Thomas Royde sat up in the bows. And one and all glanced from time to time curiously at the tall aloof figure of MacWhirter by the stern. He looked at none of them, but stood with his back turned and his shoulders hunched up.

Not until they were under the frowning shadow of Stark Head did Battle throttle down the engine and begin to speak his piece. He spoke without self-consciousness and in a tone that was more reflective than anything else.

"This has been a very odd case—one of the oddest I've ever known, and I'd like to say something on the subject of murder generally. What I'm going to say is not original—actually I overheard young Mr. Daniels, the KC, say something of the kind, and I wouldn't be surprised if he'd got it from someone else—he's a trick of doing that!

"It's this! When you read the account of a murder—or say, a fiction story based on murder, you usually begin with the murder itself. That's all wrong. The murder begins a long time beforehand. A murder is the culmination of a lot of different circumstances, all converging at a given moment at a given point. People are brought into it from different parts of the globe and for

unforeseen reasons. Mr. Royde is here from Malaya. Mr. MacWhirter is here because he wanted to revisit a spot where he once tried to commit suicide. The murder itself is the end of the story. It's Zero Hour."

He paused.

"It's Zero Hour now."

Five faces were turned to him—only five, for MacWhirter did not turn his head. Five puzzled faces.

Mary Aldin said:

"You mean that Lady Tressilian's death was the culmination of a long train of circumstances?"

"No, Miss Aldin, not Lady Tressilian's death. Lady Tressilian's death was only incidental to the main object of the murderer. The murder I am talking of is the murder of Audrey Strange."

He listened to the sharp indrawing of breath. He wondered if, suddenly, someone was afraid....

"This crime was planned quite a long time ago—probably as early as last winter. It was planned down to the smallest detail. It had one object, and one object only: that Audrey Strange should be hanged by the neck till she was dead....

"It was cunningly planned by someone who thought themselves very clever. Murderers are usually vain. There was first the superficial unsatisfactory evidence against Neville Strange which we were meant to see through. But having been presented with one lot of faked evidence, it was not considered likely that we should consider a second edition of the same thing. And yet, if you come to look at it, all the evidence against Audrey Strange could be faked. The weapon taken from her fireplace, her gloves—the left-hand glove dipped in blood—hidden in the ivy outside her window. The powder she uses dusted on the inside of a coat collar, and a few hairs placed there

too. Her own fingerprint, occurring quite naturally on a roll of adhesive plaster taken from her room. Even the left-handed nature of the blow.

“And there was the final damning evidence of Mrs. Strange herself—I don’t believe there’s one of you (except the one who knows) who can credit her innocence after the way she behaved when we took her into custody. Practically admitted her guilt, didn’t she? I mightn’t have believed in her being innocent myself if it hadn’t been for a private experience of my own...Struck me right between the eyes it did, when I saw and heard her—because, you see, I’d known another girl who did that very same thing, who admitted guilt when she wasn’t guilty—and Audrey Strange was looking at me with that other girl’s eyes....

“I’d got to do my duty. I knew that. We police officers have to act on evidence—not on what we feel and think. But I can tell you that at that minute I prayed for a miracle—because I didn’t see that anything but a miracle was going to help that poor lady.

“Well, I got my miracle. Got it right away!

“Mr. MacWhirter, here, turned up with his story.”

He paused.

“Mr. MacWhirter, will you repeat what you told me up at the house?”

MacWhirter turned. He spoke in short sharp sentences that carried conviction just because of their conciseness.

He told of his rescue from the cliff the preceding January and of his wish to revisit the scene. He went on:

“I went up there on Monday night. I stood there lost in my own thoughts. It must have been, I suppose, in the neighbourhood of eleven o’clock. I looked across at that house on the point—Gull’s Point, as I know it now to be.”

He paused and then went on.

“There was a rope hanging from a window of that house into the sea. I saw a man climbing up that rope....”

Just a moment elapsed before they took it in. Mary Aldin cried out:

“Then it was an outsider after all? It was nothing to do with any of us. It was an ordinary burglar!”

“Not quite so fast,” said Battle. “It was someone who came from the other side of the river, yes, since he swam across. But someone in the house had to have the rope ready for him, therefore someone inside must have been concerned.”

He went on slowly:

“And we know of someone who was on the other side of the river that night—someone who wasn’t seen between ten thirty and a quarter past eleven, and who might have been swimming over and back. Someone who might have had a friend on this side of the water.”

He added: “Eh, Mr. Latimer?”

Ted took a step backward. He cried out shrilly:

“But I can’t swim! Everybody knows I can’t swim. Kay, tell them I can’t swim.”

“Of course Ted can’t swim!” Kay said.

“Is that so?” asked Battle pleasantly.

He moved along the boat as Ted moved in the other direction. There was some clumsy movement and a splash.

“Dear me,” said Superintendent Battle in deep concern. “Mr. Latimer’s gone overboard.”

His hand closed like a vice on Neville’s arm as the latter was preparing to jump in after him.

“No, no, Mr. Strange. No need for you to get yourself wet. There are two of my men handy—fishing in the dinghy there.” He peered over the side of the boat. “It’s quite true,” he said with interest. “He can’t swim. It’s all right. They’ve got him. I’ll apologize presently, but really there’s only one way to make sure that a person can’t swim and that’s to throw them in and watch. You see, Mr. Strange, I like to be thorough. I had to eliminate Mr. Latimer first. Mr. Royde here has got a groggy arm, he couldn’t do any rope climbing.”

Battle’s voice took on a purring quality.

“So that brings us to you, doesn’t it, Mr. Strange? A good athlete, a mountain climber, a swimmer and all that. You went over on the ten thirty ferry all right but no one can swear to seeing you at the Easterhead Hotel until a quarter past eleven in spite of your story of having been looking for Mr. Latimer then.”

Nevile jerked his arm away. He threw back his head and laughed.

“You suggest that I swam across the river and climbed up a rope—”

“Which you had left ready hanging from your window,” said Battle.

“Killed Lady Tressilian and swam back again? Why should I do such a fantastic thing? And who laid all those clues against me? I suppose I laid them against myself?”

“Exactly,” said Battle. “And not half a bad idea either.”

“And why should I want to kill Camilla Tressilian?”

“You didn’t,” said Battle. “But you did want to hang the woman who left you for another man. You’re a bit unhinged mentally, you know. Have been ever since you were a child—I’ve looked up that old bow and arrow case, by the way. Anyone who does you an injury has to be punished—and death doesn’t seem to you an excessive penalty for them to pay. Death by itself wasn’t enough for Audrey—your Audrey whom you loved—oh, yes, you loved her all right before your love turned to hate. You had to think of some

special kind of death, some long drawn out specialized death. And when you'd thought of it, the fact that it entailed the killing of a woman who had been something like a mother to you didn't worry you in the least...."

Nevile said, and his voice was quite gentle:

"All lies! All lies! And I'm not mad. I'm not mad."

Battle said contemptuously:

"Flicked you on the raw, didn't she, when she went off and left you for another man? Hurt your vanity! To think she should walk out on you. You salved your pride by pretending to the world at large that you'd left her and you married another girl who was in love with you just to bolster up that belief. But underneath you planned what you'd do to Audrey. You couldn't think of anything worse than this—to get her hanged. A fine idea—pity you hadn't the brains to carry it out better!"

Nevile's tweed-coated shoulders moved, a queer, wriggling movement.

Battle went on:

"Childish—all that niblick stuff! Those crude trails pointing to you! Audrey must have known what you were after! She must have laughed up her sleeve! Thinking I didn't suspect you! You murderers are funny little fellows! So puffed up. Always thinking you've been clever and resourceful and really being quite pitifully childish...."

It was a strange queer scream that came from Nevile.

"It was a clever idea—it was. You'd never have guessed. Never! Not if it hadn't been for this interfering jackanapes, this pompous Scotch fool. I'd thought out every detail—every detail! I can't help what went wrong. How was I to know Royde knew the truth about Audrey and Adrian? Audrey and Adrian...Curse Audrey—she shall hang—you've got to hang her—I want her to die afraid—to die—to die...I hate her. I tell you I want her to die...."

The high whinnying voice died away. Neville slumped down and began to cry quietly.

“Oh God,” said Mary Aldin. She was white to the lips.

Battle said gently, in a low voice:

“I’m sorry, but I had to push him over the edge...There was precious little evidence, you know.”

Nevile was still whimpering. His voice was like a child’s.

“I want her to be hanged. I do want her to be hanged....”

Mary Aldin shuddered and turned to Thomas Royde.

He took her hands in his.

II

“I was always frightened,” said Audrey.

They were sitting on the terrace. Audrey sat close to Superintendent Battle. Battle had resumed his holiday and was at Gull’s Point as a friend.

“Always frightened—all the time,” said Audrey.

Battle said, nodding his head:

“I knew you were dead scared first moment I saw you. And you’d got that colourless reserved way people have who are holding some very strong emotion in check. It might have been love or hate, but actually it was fear, wasn’t it?”

She nodded.

“I began to be afraid of Neville soon after we were married. But the awful thing is, you see, that I didn’t know why. I began to think that I was mad.”

“It wasn’t you,” said Battle.

“Nevile seemed to me when I married him so particularly sane and normal—always delightfully good-tempered and pleasant.”

“Interesting,” said Battle. “He played the part of the good sportsman, you know. That’s why he could keep his temper so well at tennis. His role as a good sportsman was more important to him than winning matches. But it put a strain upon him, of course; playing a part always does. He got worse underneath.”

“Underneath,” whispered Audrey with a shudder. “Always underneath. Nothing you could get hold of. Just sometimes a word or a look and then I’d fancy I’d imagined it...Something queer. And then, as I say, I thought I must be queer. And I went on getting more and more afraid—the kind of unreasoning fear, you know, that makes you sick!

“I told myself I was going mad—but I couldn’t help it. I felt I’d do anything in the world to get away! And then Adrian came and told me he loved me, and I thought it would be wonderful to go away with him, and he said...”

She stopped.

“You know what happened? I went off to meet Adrian—he never came...he was killed...I felt as though Nevile had managed it somehow.”

“Perhaps he did,” said Battle.

Audrey turned a startled face to him.

“Oh, do you think so?”

“We’ll never know now. Motor accidents can be arranged. Don’t brood on it, though, Mrs. Strange. As likely as not, it just happened naturally.”

“I—I was all broken up. I went back to the Rectory—Adrian’s home. We were going to have written to his mother, but as she didn’t know about us, I thought I wouldn’t tell her and give her pain. And Nevile came almost at once. He was very nice—and—kind—and all the time I talked to him I was

quite sick with fear! He said no one need know about Adrian, that I could divorce him on evidence he would send me and that he was going to remarry afterwards. I felt so thankful. I knew he had thought Kay attractive and I hoped that everything would turn out right and that I should get over this queer obsession of mine. I still thought it must be me.

“But I couldn’t get rid of it—quite. I never felt I’d really escaped. And then I met Neville in the Park one day and he explained that he did so want me and Kay to be friends and suggested that we should all come here in September. I couldn’t refuse, how could I? After all the kind things he’d done.”

“‘Will you walk into my parlour?’ said the spider to the fly,’” remarked Superintendent Battle.

Audrey shivered.

“Yes, just that....”

“Very clever he was about that,” said Battle. “Protested so loudly to everyone that it was his idea, that everyone at once got the impression that it wasn’t.”

Audrey said:

“And then I got here—and it was like a kind of nightmare. I knew something awful was going to happen—I knew Neville meant it to happen—and that it was to happen to me. But I didn’t know what it was. I think, you know, that I nearly did go off my head! I was just paralysed with fright—like you are in a dream when something’s going to happen and you can’t move....”

“I’ve always thought,” said Superintendent Battle, “that I’d like to have seen a snake fascinate a bird so that it can’t fly away—but now I’m not so sure.”

Audrey went on:

“Even when Lady Tressilian was killed, I didn’t realize what it meant. I was puzzled. I didn’t even suspect Neville. I knew he didn’t care about money—it was absurd to think he’d kill her in order to inherit fifty thousand pounds.

“I thought over and over again about Mr. Treves and the story he had told that evening. Even then I didn’t connect it with Neville. Treves had mentioned some physical peculiarity by which he could recognize the child of long ago. I’ve got a scar on my ear but I don’t think anyone else has any sign that you’d notice.”

Battle said: “Miss Aldin has a lock of white hair. Thomas Royde has a stiff arm which might not have been only the result of an earthquake. Mr. Ted Latimer has rather an odd-shaped skull. And Neville Strange—” He paused.

“Surely there was no physical peculiarity about Neville?”

“Oh yes, there was. His left-hand little finger is shorter than his right. That’s very unusual, Mrs. Strange—very unusual indeed.”

“So that was it?”

“That was it.”

“And Neville hung that sign on the lift?”

“Yes. Nipped down there and back whilst Royde and Latimer were giving the old boy drinks. Clever and simple—doubt if we could ever prove that was murder.”

Audrey shivered again.

“Now, now,” said Battle. “It’s all over now, my dear. Go on talking.”

“You’re very clever...I haven’t talked so much for years!”

“No! That’s what’s been wrong. When did it first dawn on you what Master Neville’s game was?”

“I don’t know exactly. It came to me all at once. He himself had been cleared and that left all of us. And then, suddenly, I saw him looking at me—a sort of gloating look. And I knew! That was when—”

She stopped abruptly.

“That was when what—?”

Audrey said slowly:

“When I thought a quick way out would be—best.”

Superintendent Battle shook his head.

“Never give in. That’s my motto.”

“Oh, you’re quite right. But you don’t know what it does to you being so afraid for so long. It paralyses you—you can’t think—you can’t plan—you just wait for something awful to happen. And then, when it does happen”—she gave a sudden quick smile—“you’d be surprised at the relief! No more waiting and fearing—it’s come. You’ll think I’m quite demented, I suppose, if I tell you that when you came to arrest me for murder I didn’t mind at all. Neville had done his worst and it was over. I felt so safe going off with Inspector Leach.”

“That’s partly why we did it,” said Battle. “I wanted you out of that madman’s reach. And besides, if I wanted to break him down I wanted to be able to count on the shock of the reaction. He’d seen his plan come off, as he thought—so the jolt would be all the greater.”

Audrey said in a low voice:

“If he hadn’t broken down would there have been any evidence?”

“Not too much. There was MacWhirter’s story of seeing a man climb up a rope in the moonlight. And there was the rope itself confirming his story, coiled up in the attic and still faintly damp. It was raining that night, you know.”

He paused and stared hard at Audrey as though he were expecting her to say something.

As she merely looked interested he went on:

“And there was the pinstripe suit. He stripped, of course, in the dark at that rocky point on the Easterhead Bay side, and thrust his suit into a niche in the rock. As it happened he put it down on a decayed bit of fish washed up by the flood tide. It made a stained patch on the shoulder—and it smelt. There was some talk, I found out, about the drains being wrong in the Hotel. Nevile himself put that story about. He’d got his raincoat on over his suit, but the smell was a pervasive one. Then he got the wind up about that suit afterwards and at the first opportunity he took it off to the cleaners and like a fool, didn’t give his own name. Took a name at random, actually one he’d seen in the Hotel register. That’s how your friend got hold of it and, having a good head on him, he linked it up with the man climbing up the rope. You step on decayed fish but you don’t put your shoulder down on it unless you have taken your clothes off to bathe at night, and no one would bathe for pleasure on a wet night in September. He fitted the whole thing together. Very ingenious man, Mr. MacWhirter.”

“More than ingenious,” said Audrey.

“Mm, well, perhaps. Like to know about him? I can tell you something of his history.”

Audrey listened attentively. Battle found her a good listener.

She said:

“I owe a lot to him—and to you.”

“Don’t owe very much to me,” said Superintendent Battle. “If I hadn’t been a fool I’d have seen the point of that bell.”

“Bell? What bell?”

“The bell in Lady Tressilian’s room. Always did feel there was something wrong about that bell. I nearly got it, too, when I came down the stairs from the top floor and saw one of those poles you open windows with.

“That was the whole point of the bell, see—to give Neville Strange an alibi. Lady T didn’t remember what she had rung for—of course she didn’t, because she hadn’t rung at all! Neville rang the bell from outside in the passage with that long pole, the wires ran along the ceiling. So down comes Barrett and sees Mr. Neville Strange go downstairs and out, and she finds Lady Tressilian alive and well. The whole business of the maid was fishy. What’s the good of doping her for a murder that’s going to be committed before midnight? Ten to one she won’t have gone off properly by then. But it fixes the murder as an inside job, and it allows a little time for Neville to play his role of first suspect—then Barrett speaks and Neville is so triumphantly cleared that no one is going to inquire very closely as to exactly what time he got to the Hotel. We know he didn’t cross back by ferry, and no boats had been taken. There remained the possibility of swimming. He was a powerful swimmer, but even then the time must have been short. Up the rope he’s left hanging into his bedroom and a good deal of water on the floor as we noticed (but without seeing the point, I’m sorry to say). Then into his blue coat and trousers, along to Lady Tressilian’s room—we won’t go into that—wouldn’t have taken more than a couple of minutes, he’d fixed that steel ball beforehand—then back, out of his clothes, down the rope and back to Easterhead.”

“Suppose Kay had come in?”

“She’d been mildly doped, I’ll bet. She was yawning from dinner on, so they tell me. Besides, he’d taken care to have a quarrel with her so that she’d lock her door and keep out of his way.”

“I’m trying to think if I noticed the ball was gone from the fender. I don’t think I did. When did he put it back?”

“Next morning when all the hullabaloo arose. Once he got back in Ted Latimer’s car, he had all night to clear up his traces and fix things, mend the tennis racquet, etc. By the way, he hit the old lady back-handed, you know.

That's why the crime appeared to be left-handed. Strange's backhand was always his strong point, remember!"

"Don't—don't—" Audrey put up her hands. "I can't bear any more."

He smiled at her.

"All the same it's done you good to talk it all out. Mrs. Strange, may I be impertinent and give you some advice?"

"Yes, please."

"You lived for eight years with a criminal lunatic—that's enough to sap any woman's nerves. But you've got to snap out of it now, Mrs. Strange. You don't need to be afraid any more—and you've got to make yourself realize that."

Audrey smiled at him. The frozen look had gone from her face; it was a sweet, rather timid, but confiding face, with the wide-apart eyes full of gratitude.

She said, hesitating a little: "You told the others there was a girl—a girl who acted as I did?"

Battle slowly nodded his head.

"My own daughter," he said. "So you see, my dear, that miracle had to happen. These things are sent to teach us!"

III

Angus MacWhirter was packing.

He laid three shirts carefully in his suitcase, and then that dark blue suit which he had remembered to fetch from the cleaners. Two suits left by two different MacWhirters had been too much for the girl in charge.

There was a tap on the door and he called "Come in."

Audrey Strange walked in. She said:

“I’ve come to thank you—are you packing?”

“Yes. I’m leaving here tonight. And sailing the day after tomorrow.”

“For South America?”

“For Chile.”

She said:

“I’ll pack for you.”

He protested, but she overbore him. He watched her as she worked deftly and methodically.

“There,” she said when she had finished.

“You did that well,” said MacWhirter.

There was a silence. Then Audrey said:

“You saved my life. If you hadn’t happened to see what you did see—”

She broke off.

Then she said: “Did you realize at once, that night on the cliff when you—you stopped me going over—when you said ‘Go home, I’ll see that you’re not hanged’—did you realize then that you’d got some important evidence?”

“Not precisely,” said MacWhirter. “I had to think it out.”

“Then how could you say—what you did say?”

MacWhirter always felt annoyed when he had to explain the intense simplicity of his thought processes.

“I meant just precisely that—that I intended to prevent you from being hanged.”

The colour came up in Audrey’s cheeks.

“Supposing I had done it?”

“That would have made no difference.”

“Did you think I had done it, then?”

“I didn’t speculate on the matter overmuch. I was inclined to believe you were innocent, but it would have made no difference to my course of action.”

“And then you remembered the man on the rope?”

MacWhirter was silent for a few moments. then he cleared his throat.

“You may as well know, I suppose. I did not actually see a man climbing up a rope—indeed I could not have done so, for I was up on Stark Head on Sunday night, not on Monday. I deduced what must have happened from the evidence of the suit and my suppositions were confirmed by the findings of a wet rope in the attic.”

From red Audrey had gone white. She said incredulously:

“Your story was all a lie?”

“Deductions would not have carried weight with the police. I had to say I saw what happened.”

“But—you might have had to swear to it at my trial.”

“Yes.”

“You would have done that?”

“I would.”

Audrey cried incredulously: “And you—you are the man who lost his job and came down to throwing himself off a cliff because he wouldn’t tamper with the truth!”

“I have a great regard for the truth. But I’ve discovered there are things that matter more.”

“Such as?”

“You,” said MacWhirter.

Audrey’s eyes dropped. MacWhirter cleared his throat in an embarrassed manner.

“There’s no need for you to feel under a great obligation or anything of that kind. You’ll never hear of me again after today. The police have got Strange’s confession and they’ll not need my evidence. In any case I hear he’s so bad he’ll maybe not live to come to trial.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Audrey.

“You were fond of him once?”

“Of the man I thought he was.”

MacWhirter nodded. “We’ve all felt that way, maybe.” He went on: “Everything’s turned out well. Superintendent Battle was able to act upon my story and break down the man—”

Audrey interrupted. She said:

“He worked upon your story, yes. But I don’t believe you fooled him. He deliberately shut his eyes.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When he was talking to me he mentioned it was lucky you saw what you did in the moonlight, and then added something—a sentence or two later—about its being a rainy night.”

MacWhirter was taken aback. “That’s true. On Monday night I doubt if I’d have seen anything at all.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Audrey.

“He knew that what you pretended to have seen was what had really happened. But it explains why he worked on Neville to break him down. He suspected Neville as soon as Thomas told him about me and Adrian. He knew then that if he was right about the kind of crime—he had fixed on the wrong person—what he wanted was some kind of evidence to use on Neville. He wanted, as he said, a miracle—you were Superintendent Battle’s answer to prayer.”

“That’s a curious thing for him to say,” said MacWhirter dryly.

“So you see,” said Audrey, “you are a miracle. My special miracle.”

MacWhirter said earnestly:

“I’d not like you to feel you’re under an obligation to me. I’m going right out of your life—”

“Must you?” said Audrey.

He stared at her. The colour came up, flooding her ears and temples.

She said:

“Won’t you take me with you?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying!”

“Yes, I do. I’m doing something very difficult—but that matters to me more than life or death. I know the time is very short. By the way, I’m conventional, I should like to be married before we go!”

“Naturally,” said MacWhirter, deeply shocked. “You don’t imagine I’d suggest anything else.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” said Audrey.

MacWhirter said:

“I’m not your kind. I thought you’d marry that quiet fellow who’s cared for you so long.”

“Thomas? Dear True Thomas. He’s too true. He’s faithful to the image of a girl he loved years ago. But the person he really cares for is Mary Aldin, though he doesn’t know it yet himself.”

MacWhirter took a step towards her. He spoke sternly.

“Do you mean what you’re saying?”

“Yes...I want to be with you always, never to leave you. If you go I shall never find anybody like you, and I shall go lonely all my days.”

MacWhirter sighed. He took out his wallet and carefully examined its contents.

He murmured:

“A special licence comes expensive. I’ll need to go to the Bank first thing tomorrow.”

“I could lend you some money,” murmured Audrey.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind. If I marry a woman, I pay for the licence. You understand?”

“You needn’t,” said Audrey softly, “look so stern.”

He said gently as he came towards her:

“Last time I had my hands on you, you felt like a bird—struggling to escape. You’ll never escape now....”

She said:

“I shall never want to escape.”

Parker Pyne Investigates (1934)

By Agatha Christie

One

THE CASE OF THE MIDDLE-AGED WIFE

“The Case of the Middle-Aged Wife” was first published as “The Woman Concerned” in *Woman’s Pictorial*, 8 October 1932.

Four grunts, an indignant voice asking why nobody could leave a hat alone, a slammed door, and Mr. Packington had departed to catch the eight forty-five to the city. Mrs. Packington sat on at the breakfast table. Her face was flushed, her lips were pursed, and the only reason she was not crying was that at the last minute anger had taken the place of grief. “I won’t stand it,” said Mrs. Packington. “I won’t stand it!” She remained for some moments brooding, and then murmured: “The minx. Nasty sly little cat! How George can be such a fool!”

Anger faded; grief came back. Tears came into Mrs. Packington’s eyes and rolled slowly down her middle-aged cheeks. “It’s all very well to say I won’t stand it, but what can I do?”

Suddenly she felt alone, helpless, utterly forlorn. Slowly she took up the morning paper and read, not for the first time, an advertisement on the front page.

“Absurd!” said Mrs. Packington. “Utterly absurd.” Then: “After all, I might just see. . . .”

Which explains why at eleven o’clock Mrs. Packington, a little nervous, was being shown into Mr. Parker Pyne’s private office.

As has been said, Mrs. Packington was nervous, but somehow or other, the mere sight of Mr. Parker Pyne brought a feeling of reassurance. He was large, not to say fat; he had a bald head of noble proportions, strong glasses, and little twinkling eyes.

“Pray sit down,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You have come in answer to my advertisement?” he added helpfully.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Packington, and stopped there.

“And you are not happy,” said Mr. Parker Pyne in a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice. “Very few people are. You would really be surprised if you knew how few people are happy.”

“Indeed?” said Mrs. Packington, not feeling, however, that it mattered whether other people were unhappy or not.

“Not interesting to you, I know,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “but very interesting to me. You see, for thirty-five years of my life I have been engaged in the compiling of statistics in a government office. Now I have retired, and it has occurred to me to use the experience I have gained in a novel fashion. It is all so simple. Unhappiness can be classified under five main heads—no more, I assure you. Once you know the cause of a malady, the remedy should not be impossible.

“I stand in the place of the doctor. The doctor first diagnoses the patient’s disorder, then he proceeds to recommend a course of treatment. There are cases where no treatment can be of avail. If that is so, I say frankly that I can do nothing. But I assure you, Mrs. Packington, that if I undertake a case, the cure is practically guaranteed.”

Could it be so? Was this nonsense, or could it, perhaps be true? Mrs. Packington gazed at him hopefully.

“Shall we diagnose your case?” said Mr. Parker Pyne, smiling. He leaned back in his chair and brought the tips of his fingers together. “The trouble concerns your husband. You have had, on the whole, a happy married life. Your husband has, I think, prospered. I think there is a young lady concerned in the case—perhaps a young lady in your husband’s office.”

“A typist,” said Mrs. Packington. “A nasty made-up little minx, all lipstick and silk stockings and curls.” The words rushed from her.

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded in a soothing manner. "There is no real harm in it—that is your husband's phrase, I have no doubt."

"His very words."

"Why, therefore, should he not enjoy a pure friendship with this young lady, and be able to bring a little brightness, a little pleasure, into her dull existence? Poor child, she has so little fun. Those, I imagine, are his sentiments."

Mrs. Packington nodded with vigour. "Humbug—all humbug! He takes her on the river—I'm fond of going on the river myself, but five or six years ago he said it interfered with his golf. But he can give up golf for her. I like the theatre—George has always said he's too tired to go out at night. Now he takes her out to dance—dance! And comes back at three in the morning. I—I—"

"And doubtless he deplors the fact that women are so jealous, so unreasonably jealous when there is absolutely no cause for jealousy?"

Again Mrs. Packington nodded. "That's it." She asked sharply: "How do you know all this?"

"Statistics," Mr. Parker Pyne said simply.

"I'm so miserable," said Mrs. Packington. "I've always been a good wife to George. I worked my fingers to the bone in our early days. I helped him to get on. I've never looked at any other man. His things are always mended, he gets good meals, and the house is well and economically run. And now that we've got on in the world and could enjoy ourselves and go about a bit and do all the things I've looked forward to doing some day—well, this!" She swallowed hard.

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded gravely. "I assure you I understand your case perfectly."

"And—can you do anything?" She asked it almost in a whisper.

“Certainly, my dear lady. There is a cure. Oh yes, there is a cure.”

“What is it?” She waited, round eyed and expectant.

Mr. Parker Pyne spoke quietly and firmly. “You will place yourself in my hands, and the fee will be two hundred guineas.”

“Two hundred guineas!”

“Exactly. You can afford to pay such a fee, Mrs. Packington. You would pay that sum for an operation. Happiness is just as important as bodily health.”

“I pay you afterwards, I suppose?”

“On the contrary,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You pay me in advance.”

Mrs. Packington rose. “I’m afraid I don’t see my way—”

“To buying a pig in a poke?” said Mr. Parker Pyne cheerfully. “Well, perhaps you’re right. It’s a lot of money to risk. You’ve got to trust me, you see. You’ve got to pay the money and take a chance. Those are my terms.”

“Two hundred guineas!”

“Exactly. Two hundred guineas. It’s a lot of money. Good morning, Mrs. Packington. Let me know if you change your mind.” He shook hands with her, smiling in an unperturbed fashion.

When she had gone he pressed a buzzer on his desk. A forbidding-looking young woman with spectacles answered it.

“A file, please, Miss Lemon. And you might tell Claude that I am likely to want him shortly.”

“A new client?”

“A new client. At the moment she has jibbed, but she will come back. Probably this afternoon about four. Enter her.”

“Schedule A?”

“Schedule A, of course. Interesting how everyone thinks his own case unique. Well, well, warn Claude. Not too exotic, tell him. No scent and he’d better get his hair cut short.”

It was a quarter past four when Mrs. Packington once more entered Mr. Parker Pyne’s office. She drew out a chequebook, made out a cheque and passed it to him. A receipt was given.

“And now?” Mrs. Packington looked at him hopefully.

“And now,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, smiling, “you will return home. By the first post tomorrow you will receive certain instructions which I shall be glad if you will carry out.”

Mrs. Packington went home in a state of pleasant anticipation. Mr. Packington came home in a defensive mood, ready to argue his position if the scene at the breakfast table was reopened. He was relieved, however, to find that his wife did not seem to be in a combative mood. She was unusually thoughtful.

George listened to the radio and wondered whether that dear child Nancy would allow him to give her a fur coat. She was very proud, he knew. He didn’t want to offend her. Still, she had complained of the cold. That tweed coat of hers was a cheap affair; it didn’t keep the cold out. He could put it so that she wouldn’t mind, perhaps. . . .

They must have another evening out soon. It was a pleasure to take a girl like that to a smart restaurant. He could see several young fellows were envying him. She was uncommonly pretty. And she liked him. To her, as she had told him, he didn’t seem a bit old.

He looked up and caught his wife’s eye. He felt suddenly guilty, which annoyed him. What a narrow-minded, suspicious woman Maria was! She grudged him any little bit of happiness.

He switched off the radio and went to bed.

Mrs. Packington received two unexpected letters the following morning. One was a printed form confirming an appointment at a noted beauty specialist's. The second was an appointment with a dressmaker. The third was from Mr. Parker Pyne, requesting the pleasure of her company at lunch at the Ritz that day.

Mr. Packington mentioned that he might not be home to dinner that evening as he had to see a man on business. Mrs. Packington merely nodded absently, and Mr. Packington left the house congratulating himself on having escaped the storm.

The beauty specialist was impressive. Such neglect! madame, but why? This should have been taken in hand years ago. However, it was not too late.

Things were done to her face; it was pressed and kneaded and steamed. It had mud applied to it. It had creams applied to it. It was dusted with powder. There were various finishing touches.

At last she was given a mirror. "I believe I do look younger," she thought to herself.

The dressmaking seance was equally exciting. She emerged feeling smart, modish, up-to-date.

At half past one, Mrs. Packington kept her appointment at the Ritz. Mr. Parker Pyne, faultlessly dressed and carrying with him his atmosphere of soothing reassurance, was waiting for her.

"Charming," he said, an experienced eye sweeping her from head to foot. "I have ventured to order you a White Lady."

Mrs. Packington, who had not contracted the cocktail habit, made no demur. As she sipped the exciting fluid gingerly, she listened to her benevolent instructor.

"Your husband, Mrs. Packington," said Mr. Parker Pyne, "must be made to Sit Up. You understand—to Sit Up. To assist in that, I am going to

introduce to you a young friend of mine. You will lunch with him today.”

At that moment a young man came along, looking from side to side. He espied Mr. Parker Pyne and came gracefully towards them.

“Mr. Claude Luttrell, Mrs. Packington.”

Mr. Claude Luttrell was perhaps just short of thirty. He was graceful, debonair, perfectly dressed, extremely handsome.

“Delighted to meet you,” he murmured.

Three minutes later Mrs. Packington was facing her new mentor at a small table for two.

She was shy at first, but Mr. Luttrell soon put her at her ease. He knew Paris well and had spent a good deal of time on the Riviera. He asked Mrs. Packington if she were fond of dancing. Mrs. Packington said she was, but that she seldom got any dancing nowadays as Mr. Packington didn’t care to go out in the evenings.

“But he couldn’t be so unkind as to keep you at home,” said Claude Luttrell, smiling and displaying a dazzling row of teeth. “Women will not tolerate male jealousy in these days.”

Mrs. Packington nearly said that jealousy didn’t enter into the question. But the words remained unspoken. After all, it was an agreeable idea.

Claude Luttrell spoke airily of nightclubs. It was settled that on the following evening Mrs. Packington and Mr. Luttrell should patronize the popular Lesser Archangel.

Mrs. Packington was a little nervous about announcing this fact to her husband. George, she felt, would think it extraordinary and possibly ridiculous. But she was saved all trouble on this score. She had been too nervous to make her announcement at breakfast, and at two o’clock a telephone message came to the effect that Mr. Packington would be dining in town.

The evening was a great success. Mrs. Packington had been a good dancer as a girl and under Claude Luttrell's skilled guidance she soon picked up modern steps. He congratulated her on her gown and also on the arrangement of her hair. (An appointment had been made for her that morning with a fashionable hairdresser.) On bidding her farewell, he kissed her hand in a most thrilling manner. Mrs. Packington had not enjoyed an evening so much for years.

A bewildering ten days ensued. Mrs. Packington lunched, teaed, tangoed, dined, danced and supped. She heard all about Claude Luttrell's sad childhood. She heard the sad circumstances in which his father lost all his money. She heard of his tragic romance and his embittered feelings towards women generally.

On the eleventh day they were dancing at the Red Admiral. Mrs. Packington saw her spouse before he saw her. George was with the young lady from his office. Both couples were dancing.

"Hallo, George," said Mrs. Packington lightly, as their orbits brought them together.

It was with considerable amusement that she saw her husband's face grow first red, then purple with astonishment. With the astonishment was blended an expression of guilt detected.

Mrs. Packington felt amusedly mistress of the situation. Poor old George! Seated once more at her table, she watched them. How stout he was, how bald, how terribly he bounced on his feet! He danced in the style of twenty years ago. Poor George, how terribly he wanted to be young! And that poor girl he was dancing with had to pretend to like it. She looked bored enough now, her face over his shoulder where he couldn't see it.

How much more enviable, thought Mrs. Packington contentedly, was her own situation. She glanced at the perfect Claude, now tactfully silent. How well he understood her. He never jarred—as husbands so inevitably did jar after a lapse of years.

She looked at him again. Their eyes met. He smiled; his beautiful dark eyes, so melancholy, so romantic, looked tenderly into hers.

“Shall we dance again?” he murmured.

They danced again. It was heaven!

She was conscious of George’s apologetic gaze following them. It had been the idea, she remembered, to make George jealous. What a long time ago that was! She really didn’t want George to be jealous now. It might upset him. Why should he be upset, poor thing? Everyone was so happy. . . .

Mr. Packington had been home an hour when Mrs. Packington got in. He looked bewildered and unsure of himself.

“Humph,” he remarked. “So you’re back.”

Mrs. Packington cast off an evening wrap which had cost her forty guineas that very morning. “Yes,” she said, smiling. “I’m back.”

George coughed. “Er—rather odd meeting you.”

“Wasn’t it?” said Mrs. Packington.

“I—well, I thought it would be a kindness to take that girl somewhere. She’s been having a lot of trouble at home. I thought—well, kindness, you know.”

Mrs. Packington nodded. Poor old George—bouncing on his feet and getting so hot and being so pleased with himself.

“Who’s that chap you were with? I don’t know him, do I?”

“Luttrell, his name is. Claude Luttrell.”

“How did you come across him?”

“Oh, someone introduced me,” said Mrs. Packington vaguely.

“Rather a queer thing for you to go out dancing—at your time of life. Musn’t make a fool of yourself, my dear.”

Mrs. Packington smiled. She was feeling much too kindly to the universe in general to make the obvious reply. “A change is always nice,” she said amiably.

“You’ve got to be careful, you know. A lot of these lounge lizard fellows going about. Middle-aged women sometimes make awful fools of themselves. I’m just warning you, my dear. I don’t like to see you doing anything unsuitable.”

“I find the exercise very beneficial,” said Mrs. Packington.

“Um—yes.”

“I expect you do, too,” said Mrs. Packington kindly.

“The great thing is to be happy, isn’t it? I remember your saying so one morning at breakfast, about ten days ago.”

Her husband looked at her sharply, but her expression was devoid of sarcasm. She yawned.

“I must go to bed. By the way, George, I’ve been dreadfully extravagant lately. Some terrible bills will be coming in. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Bills?” said Mr. Packington.

“Yes. For clothes. And massage. And hair treatment. Wickedly extravagant I’ve been—but I know you don’t mind.”

She passed up the stairs. Mr. Packington remained with his mouth open. Maria had been amazingly nice about this evening’s business; she hadn’t seemed to care at all. But it was a pity she had suddenly taken to spending Money. Maria—that model of economy!

Women! George Packington shook his head. The scrapes that girl’s brothers had been getting into lately. Well, he’d been glad to help. All the same—

and dash it all, things weren't going too well in the city.

Sighing, Mr. Packington in his turn slowly climbed the stairs.

Sometimes words that fail to make their effect at the time are remembered later. Not till the following morning did certain words uttered by Mr. Packington really penetrate his wife's consciousness.

Lounge lizards; middle-aged women; awful fools of themselves.

Mrs. Packington was courageous at heart. She sat down and faced facts. A gigolo. She had read all about gigolos in the papers. Had read, too, of the follies of middle-aged women.

Was Claude a gigolo? She supposed he was. But then, gigolos were paid for and Claude always paid for her. Yes, but it was Mr. Parker Pyne who paid, not Claude—or, rather, it was really her own two hundred guineas.

Was she a middle-aged fool? Did Claude Luttrell laugh at her behind her back? Her face flushed at the thought.

Well, what of it? Claude was a gigolo. She was a middle-aged fool. She supposed she should have given him something. A gold cigarette case. That sort of thing.

A queer impulse drove her out there and then to Asprey's. The cigarette case was chosen and paid for. She was to meet Claude at Claridge's for lunch.

As they were sipping coffee she produced it from her bag. "A little present," she murmured.

He looked up, frowned. "For me?"

"Yes. I—I hope you like it."

His hand closed over it and he slid it violently across the table. "Why did you give me that? I won't take it. Take it back. Take it back, I say." He was angry. His dark eyes flashed.

She murmured, "I'm sorry," and put it away in her bag again.

There was constraint between them that day.

The following morning he rang her up. "I must see you. Can I come to your house this afternoon?"

She told him to come at three o'clock.

He arrived very white, very tense. They greeted each other. The constraint was more evident.

Suddenly he sprang up and stood facing her. "What do you think I am? That is what I've come to ask you. We've been friends, haven't we? Yes, friends. But all the same, you think I'm—well, a gigolo. A creature who lives on women. A lounge lizard. You do, don't you?"

"No, no."

He swept aside her protest. His face had gone very white. "You do think that! Well, it's true. That's what I've come to say. It's true! I had my orders to take you about, to amuse you, to make love to you, to make you forget your husband. That was my job. A despicable one, eh?"

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"Because I'm through with it. I can't carry on with it. Not with you. You're different. You're the kind of woman I could believe in, trust, adore. You think I'm just saying this; that it's part of the game." He came closer to her. "I'm going to prove to you it isn't. I'm going away—because of you. I'm going to make myself into a man instead of the loathsome creature I am because of you."

He took her suddenly in his arms. His lips closed on hers. Then he released her and stood away.

"Goodbye. I've been a rotter—always. But I swear it will be different now. Do you remember once saying you liked to read the advertisements in the Agony column? On this day every year you'll find there a message from me

saying that I remember and am making good. You'll know, then, all you've meant to me. One thing more. I've taken nothing from you. I want you to take something from me." He drew a plain gold seal ring from his finger. "This was my mother's. I'd like you to have it. Now goodbye."

George Packington came home early. He found his wife gazing into the fire with a faraway look. She spoke kindly but absently to him.

"Look here, Maria," he jerked out suddenly. "About that girl?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I—I never meant to upset you, you know. About her. Nothing in it."

"I know. I was foolish. See as much as you like of her if it makes you happy."

These words, surely, should have cheered George Packington. Strangely enough, they annoyed him. How could you enjoy taking a girl about when your wife fairly urged you on? Dash it all, it wasn't decent! All that feeling of being a gay dog, of being a strong man playing with fire, fizzled out and died an ignominious death. George Packington felt suddenly tired and a great deal poorer in pocket. The girl was a shrewd little piece.

"We might go away together somewhere for a bit if you like, Maria?" he suggested timidly.

"Oh, never mind about me. I'm quite happy."

"But I'd like to take you away. We might go to the Riviera."

Mrs. Packington smiled at him from a distance.

Poor old George. She was fond of him. He was such a pathetic old dear. There was no secret splendour in his life as there was in hers. She smiled more tenderly still.

"That would be lovely, my dear," she said.

Mr. Parker Pyne was speaking to Miss Lemon. "Entertainment account?"

"One hundred and two pounds, fourteen and sixpence," said Miss Lemon.

The door was pushed open and Claude Luttrell entered. He looked moody.

"Morning, Claude," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Everything go off satisfactorily?"

"I suppose so."

"The ring? What name did you put in it, by the way?"

"Matilda," said Claude gloomily. "1899."

"Excellent. What wording for the advertisement?"

" 'Making good. Still remember. Claude.' "

"Make a note of that, please, Miss Lemon. The Agony column. November third for—let me see, expenses a hundred and two pounds, fourteen and six. Yes, for ten years, I think. That leaves us a profit of ninety-two pounds, two and fourpence. Adequate. Quite adequate."

Miss Lemon departed.

"Look here," Claude burst out. "I don't like this. It's a rotten game."

"My dear boy!"

"A rotten game. That was a decent woman—a good sort. Telling her all those lies, filling her up with this sob stuff, dash it all, it makes me sick!"

Mr. Parker Pyne adjusted his glasses and looked at Claude with a kind of scientific interest. "Dear me!" he said drily. "I do not seem to remember that your conscience ever troubled you during your somewhat—ahem!—notorious career. Your affairs on the Riviera were particularly brazen, and your exploitation of Mrs. Hattie West, the Californian Cucumber King's

wife, was especially notable for the callous mercenary instinct you displayed.”

“Well, I’m beginning to feel different,” grumbled Claude. “It isn’t—nice, this game.”

Mr. Parker Pyne spoke in the voice of a headmaster admonishing a favourite pupil. “You have, my dear Claude, performed a meritorious action. You have given an unhappy woman what every woman needs—a romance. A woman tears a passion to pieces and gets no good from it, but a romance can be laid up in lavender and looked at all through the long years to come. I know human nature, my boy, and I tell you that a woman can feed on such an incident for years.” He coughed. “We have discharged our commission to Mrs. Packington very satisfactorily.”

“Well,” muttered Claude, “I don’t like it.” He left the room.

Mr. Parker Pyne took a new file from a drawer. He wrote:

“Interesting vestiges of a conscience noticeable in hardened Lounge Lizard. Note: Study development.”

Two

THE CASE OF THE DISCONTENTED SOLDIER

“The Case of the Discontented Soldier” was first published in the USA as “The Soldier Who Wanted Danger” in *Cosmopolitan*, August 1932, then as “Adventure—By Request” in *Woman’s Pictorial*, 15 October 1932.

Major Wilbraham hesitated outside the door of Mr. Parker Pyne’s office to read, not for the first time, the advertisement from the morning paper which had brought him there. It was simple enough:

The major took a deep breath and abruptly plunged through the swing door leading to the outer office. A plain young woman looked up from her typewriter and glanced at him inquiringly.

“Mr. Parker Pyne?” said Major Wilbraham, blushing.

“Come this way, please.”

He followed her into an inner office—into the presence of the bland Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Good morning,” said Mr. Pyne. “Sit down, won’t you? And now tell me what I can do for you.”

“My name is Wilbraham—” began the other.

“Major? Colonel?” said Mr. Pyne.

“Major.”

“Ah! And recently returned from abroad? India? East Africa?”

“East Africa.”

“A fine country, I believe. Well, so you are home again—and you don’t like it. Is that the trouble?”

“You’re absolutely right. Though how you knew—”

Mr. Parker Pyne waved an impressive hand. “It is my business to know. You see, for thirty-five years of my life I have been engaged in the compiling of statistics in a government office. Now I have retired and it has occurred to me to use the experience I have gained in a novel fashion. It is all so simple. Unhappiness can be classified under five main heads—no more I assure you. Once you know the cause of a malady, the remedy should not be impossible.

“I stand in the place of the doctor. The doctor first diagnoses the patient’s disorder, then he recommends a course of treatment. There are cases where no treatment can be of any avail. If that is so, I say quite frankly that I can do nothing about it. But if I undertake a case, the cure is practically guaranteed.

“I can assure you. Major Wilbraham, that ninety-six percent of retired empire builders—as I call them—are unhappy. They exchange an active life, a life full of responsibility, a life of possible danger, for—what? Straitened means, a dismal climate and a general feeling of being a fish out of water.”

“All you’ve said is true,” said the major. “It’s the boredom I object to. The boredom and the endless tittle-tattle about petty village matters. But what can I do about it? I’ve got a little money besides my pension. I’ve a nice cottage near Cobham. I can’t afford to hunt or shoot or fish. I’m not married. My neighbours are all pleasant folk, but they’ve no ideas beyond this island.”

“The long and short of the matter is that you find life tame,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Damned tame.”

“You would like excitement, possibly danger?” asked Mr. Pyne.

The soldier shrugged. “There’s no such thing in this tinpot country.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Pyne seriously. “There you are wrong. There is plenty of danger, plenty of excitement, here in London if you know where to go for it. You have seen only the surface of our English life, calm, pleasant. But there is another side. If you wish it, I can show you that other side.”

Major Wilbraham regarded him thoughtfully. There was something reassuring about Mr. Pyne. He was large, not to say fat; he had a bald head of noble proportions, strong glasses and little twinkling eyes. And he had an aura—an aura of dependability.

“I should warn you, however,” continued Mr. Pyne, “that there is an element of risk.”

The soldier’s eye brightened. “That’s all right,” he said. Then, abruptly: “And—your fees?”

“My fee,” said Mr. Pyne, “is fifty pounds, payable in advance. If in a month’s time you are still in the same state of boredom, I will refund your money.”

Wilbraham considered. “Fair enough,” he said at last. “I agree. I’ll give you a cheque now.”

The transaction was completed. Mr. Parker Pyne pressed a buzzer on his desk.

“It is now one o’clock,” he said. “I am going to ask you to take a young lady out to lunch.” The door opened. “Ah, Madeleine, my dear, let me introduce Major Wilbraham, who is going to take you out to lunch.”

Wilbraham blinked slightly, which was hardly to be wondered at. The girl who entered the room was dark, languorous, with wonderful eyes and long black lashes, a perfect complexion and a voluptuous scarlet mouth. Her exquisite clothes set off the swaying grace of her figure. From head to foot she was perfect.

“Er—delighted,” said Major Wilbraham.

“Miss de Sara,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“How very kind of you,” murmured Madeleine de Sara.

“I have your address here,” announced Mr. Parker Pyne. “Tomorrow morning you will receive my further instructions.”

Major Wilbraham and the lovely Madeleine departed.

It was three o’clock when Madeleine returned.

Mr. Parker Pyne looked up. “Well?” he demanded.

Madeleine shook her head. “Scared of me,” she said. “Thinks I’m a vamp.”

“I thought as much,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You carried out my instructions?”

“Yes. We discussed the occupants of the other tables freely. The type he likes is fair-haired, blue-eyed, slightly anaemic, not too tall.”

“That should be easy,” said Mr. Pyne. “Get me Schedule B and let me see what we have in stock at present.” He ran his finger down a list, finally stopping at a name. “Freda Clegg. Yes, I think Freda Clegg will do excellently. I had better see Mrs. Oliver about it.”

The next day Major Wilbraham received a note, which read:

On Monday morning next at eleven o’clock go to Eaglemont, Friars Lane, Hampstead, and ask for Mr. Jones. You will represent yourself as coming from the Guava Shipping Company.

Obediently on the following Monday (which happened to be Bank Holiday), Major Wilbraham set out for Eaglemont, Friars Lane. He set out, I say, but he never got there. For before he got there, something happened.

All the world and his wife seemed to be on their way to Hampstead. Major Wilbraham got entangled in crowds, suffocated in the tube and found it hard to discover the whereabouts of Friars Lane.

Friars Lane was a cul-de-sac, a neglected road full of ruts, with houses on either side standing back from the road. They were largish houses which had seen better days and had been allowed to fall into disrepair.

Wilbraham walked along peering at the half-erased names on the gateposts, when suddenly he heard something that made him stiffen to attention. It was a kind of gurgling, half-choked cry.

It came again and this time it was faintly recognizable as the word "Help!" It came from inside the wall of the house he was passing.

Without a moment's hesitation, Major Wilbraham pushed open the rickety gate and sprinted noiselessly up the weed-covered drive. There in the shrubbery was a girl struggling in the grasp of two enormous Negroes. She was putting up a brave fight, twisting and turning and kicking. One Negro held his hand over her mouth in spite of her furious efforts to get her head free.

Intent on their struggle with the girl, neither of the blacks had noticed Wilbraham's approach. The first they knew of it was when a violent punch on the jaw sent the man who was covering the girl's mouth reeling backwards. Taken by surprise, the other man relinquished his hold of the girl and turned. Wilbraham was ready for him. Once again his fist shot out, and the Negro reeled backwards and fell. Wilbraham turned on the other man, who was closing in behind him.

But the two men had had enough. The second one rolled over, sat up; then, rising, he made a dash for the gate. His companion followed suit. Wilbraham started after them, but changed his mind and turned towards the girl, who was leaning against a tree, panting.

"Oh, thank you!" she gasped. "It was terrible."

Major Wilbraham saw for the first time who it was he had rescued so opportunely. She was a girl of about twenty-one or two, fair-haired and blue-eyed, pretty in a rather colourless way.

“If you hadn’t come!” she gasped.

“There, there,” said Wilbraham soothingly. “It’s all right now. I think, though, that we’d better get away from here. It’s possible those fellows might come back.”

A faint smile came to the girl’s lips. “I don’t think they will—not after the way you hit them. Oh, it was splendid of you!”

Major Wilbraham blushed under the warmth of her glance of admiration. “Nothin’ at all,” he said indistinctly. “All in day’s work. Lady being annoyed. Look here, if you take my arm, can you walk? It’s been a nasty shock, I know.”

“I’m all right now,” said the girl. However, she took the proffered arm. She was still rather shaky. She glanced behind her at the house as they emerged through the gate. “I can’t understand it,” she murmured. “That’s clearly an empty house.”

“It’s empty, right enough,” agreed the major, looking up at the shuttered windows and general air of decay.

“And yet it is Whitefriars.” She pointed to a half-obliterated name on the gate. “And Whitefriars was the place I was to go.”

“Don’t worry about anything now,” said Wilbraham. “In a minute or two we’ll be able to get a taxi. Then we’ll drive somewhere and have a cup of coffee.”

At the end of the lane they came out into a more frequented street, and by good fortune a taxi had just set down a fare at one of the houses. Wilbraham hailed it, gave an address to the driver and they got in.

“Don’t try to talk,” he admonished his companion. “Just lie back. You’ve had a nasty experience.”

She smiled at him gratefully.

“By the way—er—my name is Wilbraham.”

“Mine is Clegg—Freda Clegg.”

Ten minutes later, Freda was sipping hot coffee and looking gratefully across a small table at her rescuer.

“It seems like a dream,” she said. “A bad dream.” She shuddered. “And only a short while ago I was wishing for something to happen—anything! Oh, I don’t like adventures.”

“Tell me how it happened.”

“Well, to tell you properly I shall have to talk a lot about myself, I’m afraid.”

“An excellent subject,” said Wilbraham, with a bow.

“I am an orphan. My father—he was a sea captain—died when I was eight. My mother died three years ago. I work in the city. I am with the Vacuum Gas Company—a clerk. One evening last week I found a gentleman waiting to see me when I returned to my lodgings. He was a lawyer, a Mr. Reid from Melbourne.

“He was very polite and asked me several questions about my family. He explained that he had known my father many years ago. In fact, he had transacted some legal business for him. Then he told me the object of his visit. ‘Miss Clegg,’ he said, ‘I have reason to suppose that you might benefit as the result of a financial transaction entered into by your father several years before he died.’ I was very much surprised, of course.

“ ‘It is unlikely that you would ever have heard anything of the matter,’ he explained. ‘John Clegg never took the affair seriously, I fancy. However, it has materialized unexpectedly, but I am afraid any claim you might put in

would depend on your ownership of certain papers. These papers would be part of your father's estate, and of course it is possible that they have been destroyed as worthless. Have you kept any of your father's papers?'

"I explained that my mother had kept various things of my father's in an old sea chest. I had looked through it cursorily, but had discovered nothing of interest.

" 'You would hardly be likely to recognize the importance of these documents, perhaps,' he said, smiling.

"Well, I went to the chest, took out the few papers it contained and brought them to him. He looked at them, but said it was impossible to say offhand what might or might not be connected with the matter in question. He would take them away with him and would communicate with me if anything turned up.

"By the last post on Saturday I received a letter from him in which he suggested that I come to his house to discuss the matter. He gave me the address: Whitefriars, Friars Lane, Hampstead. I was to be there at a quarter to eleven this morning.

"I was a little late finding the place. I hurried through the gate and up towards the house, when suddenly those two dreadful men sprang at me from the bushes. I hadn't time to cry out. One man put his hand over my mouth. I wrenched my head free and screamed for help. Luckily you heard me. If it hadn't been for you—" She stopped. Her looks were more eloquent than further words.

"Very glad I happened to be on the spot. By Gad, I'd like to get hold of those two brutes. You'd never seen them before, I suppose?"

She shook her head. "What do you think it means?"

"Difficult to say. But one thing seems pretty sure. There's something someone wants among your father's papers. This man Reid told you a cock-and-bull story so as to get the opportunity of looking through them. Evidently what he wanted wasn't there."

“Oh!” said Freda. “I wonder. When I got home on Saturday I thought my things had been tampered with. To tell you the truth, I suspected my landlady of having pried about in my room out of curiosity. But now—”

“Depend upon it, that’s it. Someone gained admission to your room and searched it, without finding what he was after. He suspected that you knew the value of this paper, whatever it was, and that you carried it about on your person. So he planned this ambush. If you had it with you, it would have been taken from you. If not, you would have been held prisoner while he tried to make you tell where it was hidden.”

“But what can it possibly be?” cried Freda.

“I don’t know. But it must be something pretty good for him to go to this length.”

“It doesn’t seem possible.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Your father was a sailor. He went to out-of-the-way places. He might have come across something the value of which he never knew.”

“Do you really think so?” A pink flush of excitement showed in the girl’s pale cheeks.

“I do indeed. The question is, what shall we do next? You don’t want to go to the police, I suppose?”

“Oh, no, please.”

“I’m glad you say that. I don’t see what good the police could do, and it would only mean unpleasantness for you. Now I suggest that you allow me to give you lunch somewhere and that I then accompany you back to your lodgings, so as to be sure you reach them safely. And then, we might have a look for the paper. Because, you know, it must be somewhere.”

“Father may have destroyed it himself.”

“He may, of course, but the other side evidently doesn’t think so, and that looks hopeful for us.”

“What do you think it can be? Hidden treasure?”

“By jove, it might be!” exclaimed Major Wilbraham, all the boy in him rising joyfully to the suggestion. “But now, Miss Clegg, lunch!”

They had a pleasant meal together. Wilbraham told Freda all about his life in East Africa. He described elephant hunts, and the girl was thrilled. When they had finished, he insisted on taking her home in a taxi.

Her lodgings were near Notting Hill Gate. On arriving there, Freda had a brief conversation with her landlady. She returned to Wilbraham and took him up to the second floor, where she had a tiny bedroom and sitting room.

“It’s exactly as we thought,” she said. “A man came on Saturday morning to see about laying a new electric cable; he told her there was a fault in the wiring in my room. He was there some time.”

“Show me this chest of your father’s,” said Wilbraham.

Freda showed him a brass-bound box. “You see,” she said, raising the lid, “it’s empty.”

The soldier nodded thoughtfully. “And there are no papers anywhere else?”

“I’m sure there aren’t. Mother kept everything in here.”

Wilbraham examined the inside of the chest. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. “Here’s a slit in the lining.” Carefully he inserted his hand, feeling about. A slight crackle rewarded him. “Something’s slipped down behind.”

In another minute he had drawn out his find. A piece of dirty paper folded several times. He smoothed it out on the table; Freda was looking over his shoulder. She uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

“It’s just a lot of queer marks.”

“Why, the thing’s in Swahili. Swahili, of all things!” cried Major Wilbraham. “East African native dialect, you know.”

“How extraordinary!” said Freda. “Can you read it, then?”

“Rather. But what an amazing thing.” He took the paper to the window.

“Is it anything?” asked Freda tremulously. Wilbraham read the thing through twice, and then came back to the girl. “Well,” he said, with a chuckle, “here’s your hidden treasure, all right.”

“Hidden treasure? Not really? You mean Spanish gold—a sunken galleon—that sort of thing?”

“Not quite so romantic as that, perhaps. But it comes to the same thing. This paper gives the hiding place of a cache of ivory.”

“Ivory?” said the girl, astonished.

“Yes. Elephants, you know. There’s a law about the number you’re allowed to shoot. Some hunter got away with breaking that law on a grand scale. They were on his trail and he cached the stuff. There’s a thundering lot of it—and this gives fairly clear directions how to find it. Look here, we’ll have to go after this, you and I.”

“You mean there’s really a lot of money in it?”

“Quite a nice little fortune for you.”

“But how did that paper come to be among my father’s things?”

Wilbraham shrugged. “Maybe the Johnny was dying or something. He may have written the thing down in Swahili for protection and given it to your father, who possibly had befriended him in some way. Your father, not being able to read it, attached no importance to it. That’s only a guess on my part, but I daresay it’s not far wrong.”

Freda gave a sigh. “How frightfully exciting!”

“The thing is—what to do with the precious document,” said Wilbraham. “I don’t like leaving it here. They might come and have another look. I suppose you wouldn’t entrust it to me?”

“Of course I would. But—mightn’t it be dangerous for you?” she faltered.

“I’m a tough nut,” said Wilbraham grimly. “You needn’t worry about me.” He folded up the paper and put it in his pocketbook. “May I come to see you tomorrow evening?” he asked. “I’ll have worked out a plan by then, and I’ll look up the places on my map. What time do you get back from the city?”

“I get back about half past six.”

“Capital. We’ll have a powwow and then perhaps you’ll let me take you out to dinner. We ought to celebrate. So long, then. Tomorrow at half past six.”

Major Wilbraham arrived punctually on the following day. He rang the bell and enquired for Miss Clegg. A maidservant had answered the door.

“Miss Clegg? She’s out.”

“Oh!” Wilbraham did not like to suggest that he come in and wait. “I’ll call back presently,” he said.

He hung about in the street opposite, expecting every minute to see Freda tripping towards him. The minutes passed. Quarter to seven. Seven. Quarter past seven. Still no Freda. A feeling of uneasiness swept over him. He went back to the house and rang the bell again.

“Look here,” he said, “I had an appointment with Miss Clegg at half past six. Are you sure she isn’t in or hasn’t—er—left any message?”

“Are you Major Wilbraham?” asked the servant.

“Yes.”

“Then there’s a note for you. It come by hand.”

Dear Major Wilbraham,—Something rather strange has happened. I won't write more now, but will you meet me at Whitefriars? Go there as soon as you get this.

Yours sincerely,

Freda Clegg

Wilbraham drew his brows together as he thought rapidly. His hand drew a letter absentmindedly from his pocket. It was to his tailor. "I wonder," he said to the maidservant, "if you could let me have a stamp."

"I expect Mrs. Parkins could oblige you."

She returned in a moment with the stamp. It was paid for with a shilling. In another minute Wilbraham was walking towards the tube station, dropping the envelope in a box as he passed.

Freda's letter had made him most uneasy. What could have taken the girl, alone, to the scene of yesterday's sinister encounter?

He shook his head. Of all the foolish things to do! Had Reid appeared? Had he somehow or other prevailed upon the girl to trust him? What had taken her to Hampstead?

He looked at his watch. Nearly half past seven. She would have counted on his starting at half past six. An hour late. Too much. If only she had had the sense to give him some hint.

The letter puzzled him. Somehow its independent tone was not characteristic of Freda Clegg.

It was ten minutes to eight when he reached Friars Lane. It was getting dark. He looked sharply about him; there was no one in sight. Gently he pushed the rickety gate so that it swung noiselessly on its hinges. The drive was deserted. The house was dark. He went up the path cautiously, keeping a look out from side to side. He did not intend to be caught by surprise.

Suddenly he stopped. Just for a minute a chink of light had shone through one of the shutters. The house was not empty. There was someone inside.

Softly Wilbraham slipped into the bushes and worked his way round to the back of the house. At last he found what he was looking for. One of the windows on the ground floor was unfastened. It was the window of a kind of scullery. He raised the sash, flashed a torch (he had bought it at a shop on the way over) around the deserted interior and climbed in.

Carefully he opened the scullery door. There was no sound. He flashed the torch once more. A kitchen—empty. Outside the kitchen were half a dozen steps and a door evidently leading to the front part of the house.

He pushed open the door and listened. Nothing. He slipped through. He was now in the front hall. Still there was no sound. There was a door to the right and a door to the left. He chose the right-hand door, listened for a time, then turned the handle. It gave. Inch by inch he opened the door and stepped inside.

Again he flashed the torch. The room was unfurnished and bare.

Just at that moment he heard a sound behind him, whirled round—too late. Something came down on his head and he pitched forward into unconsciousness. . . .

How much time elapsed before he regained consciousness Wilbraham had no idea. He returned painfully to life, his head aching. He tried to move and found it impossible. He was bound with ropes.

His wits came back to him suddenly. He remembered now. He had been hit on the head.

A faint light from a gas jet high up on the wall showed him that he was in a small cellar. He looked around and his heart gave a leap. A few feet away lay Freda, bound like himself. Her eyes were closed, but even as he watched her anxiously, she sighed and they opened. Her bewildered gaze fell on him and joyous recognition leaped into them.

“You, too!” she said. “What has happened?”

“I’ve let you down badly,” said Wilbraham. “Tumbled headlong into the trap. Tell me, did you send me a note asking me to meet you here?”

The girl’s eyes opened in astonishment. “I? But you sent me one.”

“Oh, I sent you one, did I?”

“Yes. I got it at the office. It asked me to meet you here instead of at home.”

“Same method for both of us,” he groaned, and he explained the situation.

“I see,” said Freda. “Then the idea was—?”

“To get the paper. We must have been followed yesterday. That’s how they got on to me.”

“And—have they got it?” asked Freda.

“Unfortunately, I can’t feel and see,” said the soldier, regarding his bound hands ruefully.

And then they both started. For a voice spoke, a voice that seemed to come from the empty air.

“Yes, thank you,” it said. “I’ve got it, all right. No mistake about that.”

The unseen voice made them both shiver.

“Mr. Reid,” murmured Freda.

“Mr. Reid is one of my names, my dear young lady,” said the voice. “But only one of them. I have a great many. Now, I am sorry to say that you two have interfered with my plans—a thing I never allow. Your discovery of this house is a serious matter. You have not told the police about it yet, but you might do so in the future.

“I very much fear that I cannot trust you in the matter. You might promise—but promises are seldom kept. And, you see, this house is very useful to me. It is, you might say, my clearinghouse. The house from which there is no return. From here you pass on—elsewhere. You, I am sorry to say, are so passing on. Regrettable—but necessary.”

The voice paused for a brief second, then resumed: “No bloodshed. I abhor bloodshed. My method is much simpler. And really not too painful, so I understand. Well, I must be getting along. Good evening to you both.”

“Look here!” It was Wilbraham who spoke. “Do what you like to me, but this young lady has done nothing—nothing. It can’t hurt you to let her go.”

But there was no answer.

At that moment there came a cry from Freda. “The water—the water!”

Wilbraham twisted himself painfully and followed the direction of her eyes. From a hole up near the ceiling a steady trickle of water was pouring in.

Freda gave a hysterical cry. “They’re going to drown us!”

The perspiration broke out on Wilbraham’s brow. “We’re not done yet,” he said. “We’ll shout for help. Surely somebody will hear us. Now, both together.”

They yelled and shouted at the tops of their voices. Not until they were hoarse did they stop.

“No use, I’m afraid,” said Wilbraham sadly. “We’re too far underground and I expect the doors are muffled. After all, if we could be heard, I’ve no doubt that brute would have gagged us.”

“Oh,” cried Freda. “And it’s all my fault. I got you into this.”

“Don’t worry about that, little girl. It’s you I’m thinking about. I’ve been in tight corners before now and got out of them. Don’t you lose heart. I’ll get you out of this. We’ve plenty of time. At the rate that water’s flowing in, it will be hours before the worst happens.”

“How wonderful you are!” said Freda. “I’ve never met anybody like you—except in books.”

“Nonsense—just common sense. Now, I’ve got to loosen those infernal ropes.”

At the end of a quarter of an hour, by dint of straining and twisting, Wilbraham had the satisfaction of feeling that his bonds were appreciably loosened. He managed to bend his head down and his wrists up till he was able to attack the knots with his teeth.

Once his hands were free, the rest was only a matter of time. Cramped, stiff, but free, he bent over the girl. A minute later she was also free.

So far the water was only up to their ankles.

“And now,” said the soldier, “to get out of here.”

The door of the cellar was up a few stairs. Major Wilbraham examined it.

“No difficulty here,” he said. “Flimsy stuff. It will soon give at the hinges.” He set his shoulders to it and heaved.

There was a cracking of wood—a crash, and the door burst from its hinges.

Outside was a flight of stairs. At the top was another door—a very different affair—of solid wood, barred with iron.

“A bit more difficult, this,” said Wilbraham. “Hallo, here’s a piece of luck. It’s unlocked.”

He pushed it open, peered round it, then beckoned the girl to come on. They emerged into a passage behind the kitchen. In another moment they were standing under the stars in Friars Lane.

“Oh!” Freda gave a little sob. “Oh, how dreadful it’s been!”

“My poor darling.” He caught her in his arms. “You’ve been so wonderfully brave. Freda—darling angel—could you ever—I mean, would you—I love

you, Freda. Will you marry me?”

After a suitable interval, highly satisfactory to both parties, Major Wilbraham said, with a chuckle:

“And what’s more, we’ve still got the secret of the ivory cache.”

“But they took it from you!”

The major chuckled again. “That’s just what they didn’t do! You see, I wrote out a proof copy, and before joining you here tonight, I put the real thing in a letter I was sending to my tailor and posted it. They’ve got the spoof copy—and I wish them joy of it! Do you know what we’ll do, sweetheart! We’ll go to East Africa for our honeymoon and hunt out the cache.”

Mr. Parker Pyne left his office and climbed two flights of stairs. Here in a room at the top of the house sat Mrs. Oliver, the sensational novelist, now a member of Mr. Pyne’s staff.

Mr. Parker Pyne tapped at the door and entered. Mrs. Oliver sat at a table on which were a typewriter, several notebooks, a general confusion of loose manuscripts and a large bag of apples.

“A very good story, Mrs. Oliver,” said Mr. Parker Pyne genially.

“It went off well?” said Mrs. Oliver. “I’m glad.”

“That water-in-the-cellar business,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You don’t think, on a future occasion, that something more original—perhaps?” He made the suggestion with proper diffidence.

Mrs. Oliver shook her head and took an apple from her bag. “I think not, Mr. Pyne. You see, people are used to reading about such things. Water rising in a cellar, poison gas, et cetera. Knowing about it beforehand gives it

an extra thrill when it happens to oneself. The public is conservative, Mr. Pyne; it likes the old well-worn gadgets.”

“Well, you should know,” admitted Mr. Parker Pyne, mindful of the authoress’s forty-six successful works of fiction, all best sellers in England and America, and freely translated into French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Finnish, Japanese and Abyssinian. “How about expenses?”

Mrs. Oliver drew a paper towards her. “Very moderate, on the whole. The two darkies, Percy and Jerry, wanted very little. Young Lorrimer, the actor, was willing to enact the part of Mr. Reid for five guineas. The cellar speech was a phonograph record, of course.”

“Whitefriars has been extremely useful to me,” said Mr. Pyne. “I bought it for a song and it has already been the scene of eleven exciting dramas.”

“Oh, I forgot,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Johnny’s wages. Five shillings.”

“Johnny?”

“Yes. The boy who poured the water from the watering cans through the hole in the wall.”

“Ah yes. By the way, Mrs. Oliver, how did you happen to know Swahili?”

“I didn’t.”

“I see. The British Museum perhaps?”

“No. Delfridge’s Information Bureau.”

“How marvellous are the resources of modern commerce!” he murmured.

“The only thing that worries me,” said Mrs. Oliver, “is that those two young people won’t find any cache when they get there.”

“One cannot have everything in this world,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “They will have had a honeymoon.”

Mrs. Wilbraham was sitting in a deck chair. Her husband was writing a letter. "What's the date, Freda?"

"The sixteenth."

"The sixteenth. By jove!"

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing. I just remembered a chap named Jones."

However happily married, there are some things one never tells.

"Dash it all," thought Major Wilbraham. "I ought to have called at that place and got my money back." And then, being a fair-minded man, he looked at the other side of the question. "After all, it was I who broke the bargain. I suppose if I'd gone to see Jones something would have happened. And, anyway, as it turns out, if I hadn't been going to see Jones, I should never have heard Freda cry for help, and we might never have met. So, indirectly, perhaps they have a right to the fifty pounds!"

Mrs. Wilbraham was also following out a train of thought. "What a silly little fool I was to believe in that advertisement and pay those people three guineas. Of course, they never did anything for it and nothing ever happened. If I'd only known what was coming—first Mr. Reid, and then the queer, romantic way that Charlie came into my life. And to think that but for pure chance I might never have met him!"

She turned and smiled adoringly at her husband.

Three

THE CASE OF THE DISTRESSED LADY

“The Case of the Distressed Lady” was first published in the USA as “The Pretty Girl Who Wanted a Ring” in *Cosmopolitan*, August 1932, then as “Faked!” in *Woman’s Pictorial*, 22 October 1932.

The buzzer on Mr. Parker Pyne’s desk purred discreetly. “Yes?” said the great man.

“A young lady wishes to see you,” announced his secretary. “She has no appointment.”

“You may send her in, Miss Lemon.” A moment later he was shaking hands with his visitor. “Good morning,” he said. “Do sit down.”

The girl sat down and looked at Mr. Parker Pyne. She was a pretty girl and quite young. Her hair was dark and wavy with a row of curls at the nape of the neck. She was beautifully turned out from the white knitted cap on her head to the cobweb stockings and dainty shoes. Clearly she was nervous.

“You are Mr. Parker Pyne?” she asked.

“I am.”

“The one who—advertises?”

“The one who advertises.”

“You say that if people aren’t—aren’t happy—to—to come to you.”

“Yes.”

She took the plunge. “Well, I’m frightfully unhappy. So I thought I’d come along and just—and just see.”

Mr. Parker Pyne waited. He felt there was more to come.

“I—I’m in frightful trouble.” She clenched her hands nervously.

“So I see,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Do you think you could tell me about it?”

That, it seemed, was what the girl was by no means sure of. She stared at Mr. Parker Pyne with a desperate intentness. Suddenly she spoke with a rush.

“Yes, I will tell you. I’ve made up my mind now. I’ve been nearly crazy with worry. I didn’t know what to do or whom to go to. And then I saw your advertisement. I thought it was probably just a ramp, but it stayed in my mind. It sounded so comforting, somehow. And then I thought—well, it would do no harm to come and see. I could always make an excuse and get away again if I didn’t—well, it didn’t—”

“Quite so; quite so,” said Mr. Pyne.

“You see,” said the girl, “it means, well, trusting somebody.”

“And you feel you can trust me?” he said, smiling.

“It’s odd,” said the girl with unconsciousness rudeness, “but I do. Without knowing anything about you! I’m sure I can trust you.”

“I can assure you,” said Mr. Pyne, “that your trust will not be misplaced.”

“Then,” said the girl, “I’ll tell you about it. My name is Daphne St. John.”

“Yes, Miss St. John.”

“Mrs. I’m—I’m married.”

“Pshaw!” muttered Mr. Pyne, annoyed with himself as he noted the platinum circlet on the third finger of her left hand. “Stupid of me.”

“If I weren’t married,” said the girl, “I shouldn’t mind so much. I mean, it wouldn’t matter so much. It’s the thought of Gerald—well, here—here’s what all the trouble’s about!”

She dived into her bag, took something out and flung it down on the desk where, gleaming and flashing, it rolled over to Mr. Parker Pyne.

It was a platinum ring with a large solitaire diamond.

Mr. Pyne picked it up, took it to the window, tested it on the pane, applied a jeweller’s lens to his eye and examined it closely.

“An exceedingly fine diamond,” he remarked, coming back to the table; “worth, I should say, about two thousand pounds at least.”

“Yes. And it’s stolen! I stole it! And I don’t know what to do.”

“Dear me!” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “This is very interesting.”

His client broke down and sobbed into an inadequate handkerchief.

“Now, now,” said Mr. Pyne. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

The girl dried her eyes and sniffed. “Is it?” she said. “Oh, is it?”

“Of course it is. Now, just tell me the whole story.”

“Well, it began by my being hard up. You see, I’m frightfully extravagant. And Gerald gets so annoyed about it. Gerald’s my husband. He’s a lot older than I am, and he’s got very—well, very austere ideas. He thinks running into debt is dreadful. So I didn’t tell him. And I went over to Le Touquet with some friends and I thought perhaps I might be lucky at chemmy and get straight again. I did win at first. And then I lost, and then I thought I must go on. And I went on. And—and—”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You need not go into details. You were in a worse plight than ever. That is right, is it not?”

Daphne St. John nodded. "And by then, you see, I simply couldn't tell Gerald. Because he hates gambling. Oh, I was in an awful mess. Well, we went down to stay with the Dortheimers near Cobham. He's frightfully rich, of course. His wife, Naomi, was at school with me. She's pretty and a dear. While we were there, the setting of this ring got loose. On the morning we were leaving, she asked me to take it up to town and drop it at her jeweller's in Bond Street." She paused.

"And now we come to the difficult part," said Mr. Pyne helpfully. "Go on, Mrs. St. John."

"You won't ever tell, will you?" demanded the girl pleadingly.

"My clients' confidences are sacred. And anyway, Mrs. St. John, you have told me so much already that I could probably finish the story for myself."

"That's true. All right. But I hate saying it—it sounds so awful. I went to Bond Street. There's another shop there—Viro's. They—copy jewellery. Suddenly I lost my head. I took the ring in and said I wanted an exact copy; I said I was going abroad and didn't want to take real jewellery with me. They seemed to think it quite natural.

"Well, I got the paste replica—it was so good you couldn't have told it from the original—and I sent it off by registered post to Lady Dortheimer. I had a box with the jeweller's name on it, so that was all right, and I made a professional-looking parcel. And then I—I—pawned the real one." She hid her face in her hands. "How could I? How could I? I was a low, mean, common thief."

Mr. Parker Pyne coughed. "I do not think you have quite finished," he said.

"No, I haven't. This, you understand, was about six weeks ago. I paid off all my debts and got square again, but, of course, I was miserable all the time. And then an old cousin of mine died and I came into some money. The first thing I did was to redeem the wretched ring. Well, that's all right; here it is. But, something terribly difficult has happened."

"Yes?"

“We’ve had a quarrel with the Dorthheimers. It’s over some shares that Sir Reuben persuaded Gerald to buy. He was terribly let in over them and he told Sir Reuben what he thought of him—and oh, it’s all dreadful! And now, you see, I can’t get the ring back.”

“Couldn’t you send it to Lady Dorthheimer anonymously?”

“That gives the whole thing away. She’ll examine her own ring, find it’s a fake and guess at once what I’ve done.”

“You say she’s a friend of yours. What about telling her the whole truth—throwing yourself on her mercy?”

Mrs. St. John shook her head. “We’re not such friends as that. Where money or jewellery is concerned, Naomi’s as hard as nails. Perhaps she couldn’t prosecute me if I gave the ring back, but she could tell everyone what I’ve done and I’d be ruined. Gerald would know and he would never forgive me. Oh, how awful everything is!” She began to cry again. “I’ve thought and I’ve thought, and I can’t see what to do! Oh, Mr. Pyne, can’t you do anything?”

“Several things,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You can? Really?”

“Certainly. I suggested the simplest way because in my long experience I have always found it the best. It avoids unlooked-for complications. Still, I see the force of your objections. At present no one knows of this unfortunate occurrence but yourself?”

“And you,” said Mrs. St. John.

“Oh, I do not count. Well, then, your secret is safe at present. All that is needed is to exchange the rings in some unsuspecting manner.”

“That’s it,” the girl said eagerly.

“That should not be difficult. We must take a little time to consider the best method—”

She interrupted him. “But there is no time! That’s what’s driving me nearly crazy. She’s going to have the ring reset.”

“How do you know?”

“Just by chance. I was lunching with a woman the other day and I admired a ring she had on—a big emerald. She said it was the newest thing—and that Naomi Dortheimer was going to have her diamond reset that way.”

“Which means that we shall have to act quickly,” said Mr. Pyne thoughtfully. “It means gaining admission to the house—and if possible not in any menial capacity. Servants have little chance of handling valuable rings. Have you any ideas yourself, Mrs. St. John?”

“Well, Naomi is giving a big party on Wednesday. And this friend of mine mentioned that she had been looking for some exhibition dancers. I don’t know if anything has been settled—”

“I think it can be managed,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “If the matter is already settled it will be more expensive, that is all. One thing more, do you happen to know where the main light switch is situated?”

“As it happens I do know that, because a fuse blew out late one night when the servants had all gone to bed. It’s a box at the back of the hall—inside a little cupboard.”

At Mr. Parker Pyne’s request she drew him a sketch.

“And now,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “everything is going to be all right, so don’t worry, Mrs. St. John. What about the ring? Shall I take it now, or would you rather keep it till Wednesday?”

“Well, perhaps I’d better keep it.”

“Now, no more worry, mind you,” Mr. Parker Pyne admonished her.

“And your—fee?” she asked timidly.

“That can stand over for the moment. I will let you know on Wednesday what expenses have been necessary. The fee will be nominal, I assure you.”

He conducted her to the door, then rang the buzzer on his desk.

“Send Claude and Madeleine here.”

Claude Luttrell was one of the handsomest specimens of lounge lizard to be found in England. Madeleine de Sara was the most seductive of vamps.

Mr. Parker Pyne surveyed them with approval. “My children,” he said, “I have a job for you. You are going to be internationally famous exhibition dancers. Now, attend to this carefully, Claude, and mind you get it right. . . .”

Lady Dortheimer was fully satisfied with the arrangements for her ball. She surveyed the floral decorations and approved, gave a few last orders to the butler, and remarked to her husband that so far nothing had gone wrong!

It was a slight disappointment that Michael and Juanita, the dancers from the Red Admiral, had been unable to fulfil their contract at the last moment, owing to Juanita’s spraining her ankle, but instead, two new dancers were being sent (so ran the story over the telephone) who had created a furore in Paris.

The dancers duly arrived and Lady Dortheimer approved. The evening went splendidly. Jules and Sanchia did their turn, and most sensational it was. A wild Spanish Revolution dance. Then a dance called the Degenerate’s Dream. Then an exquisite exhibition of modern dancing.

The “cabaret” over, normal dancing was resumed. The handsome Jules requested a dance with Lady Dortheimer. They floated away. Never had Lady Dortheimer had such a perfect partner.

Sir Reuben was searching for the seductive Sanchia—in vain. She was not in the ballroom.

She was, as a matter of fact, out in the deserted hall near a small box, with her eyes fixed on the jewelled watch which she wore round her wrist.

“You are not English—you cannot be English—to dance as you do,” murmured Jules into Lady Dortheimer’s ear. “You are the sprite, the spirit of the wind. Droushcka petrovka navarouchi.”

“What is that language?”

“Russian,” said Jules mendaciously. “I say something to you in Russian that I dare not say in English.”

Lady Dortheimer closed her eyes. Jules pressed her closer to him.

Suddenly the lights went out. In the darkness Jules bent and kissed the hand that lay on his shoulder. As she made to draw it away, he caught it, raised it to his lips again. Somehow a ring slipped from her finger into his hand.

To Lady Dortheimer it seemed only a second before the lights went on again. Jules was smiling at her.

“Your ring,” he said. “It slipped off. You permit?” He replaced it on her finger. His eyes said a number of things while he was doing it.

Sir Reuben was talking about the main switch. “Some idiot. Practical joke, I suppose.”

Lady Dortheimer was not interested. Those few minutes of darkness had been very pleasant.

Mr. Parker Pyne arrived at his office on Thursday morning to find Mrs. St. John already awaiting him.

“Show her in,” said Mr. Pyne.

“Well?” She was all eagerness.

“You look pale,” he said accusingly.

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep last night. I was wondering—"

"Now, here is the little bill for expenses. Train fares, costumes, and fifty pounds to Michael and Juanita. Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

"Yes, yes! But about last night—was it all right? Did it happen?"

Mr. Parker Pyne looked at her in surprise. "My dear young lady, naturally it is all right. I took it for granted that you understood that."

"What a relief! I was afraid—"

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head reproachfully. "Failure is a word not tolerated in this establishment. If I do not think I can succeed I refuse to undertake a case. If I do take a case, its success is practically a foregone conclusion."

"She's really got her ring back and suspects nothing?"

"Nothing whatever. The operation was most delicately conducted."

Daphne St. John sighed. "You don't know the load off my mind. What were you saying about expenses?"

"Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

Mrs. St. John opened her bag and counted out the money. Mr. Parker Pyne thanked her and wrote out a receipt.

"But your fee?" murmured Daphne. "This is only for expenses."

"In this case there is no fee."

"Oh, Mr. Pyne! I couldn't, really!"

"My dear young lady, I insist. I will not touch a penny. It would be against my principles. Here is your receipt. And now—"

With the smile of a happy conjuror bringing off a successful trick, he drew a small box from his pocket and pushed it across the table. Daphne opened it. Inside, to all appearances, lay the identical diamond ring.

“Brute!” said Mrs. St. John, making a face at it. “How I hate you! I’ve a good mind to throw you out of the window.”

“I shouldn’t do that,” said Mr. Pyne. “It might surprise people.”

“You’re quite sure it isn’t the real one?” said Daphne.

“No, no! The one you showed me the other day is safely on Lady Dorthheimer’s finger.”

“Then, that’s all right.” Daphne rose with a happy laugh.

“Curious you asked me that,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Of course Claude, poor fellow, hasn’t many brains. He might easily have got muddled. So, to make sure, I had an expert look at this thing this morning.”

Mrs. St. John sat down again rather suddenly. “Oh! And he said?”

“That it was an extraordinarily good imitation,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, beaming. “First-class work. So that sets your mind at rest, doesn’t it?”

Mrs. St. John started to say something, then stopped. She was staring at Mr. Parker Pyne.

The latter resumed his seat behind the desk and looked at her benevolently. “The cat who pulled the chestnuts out of the fire,” he said dreamily. “Not a pleasant role. Not a role I should care to have any of my staff undertake. Excuse me. Did you say anything?”

“I—no, nothing.”

“Good. I want to tell you a little story, Mrs. St. John. It concerns a young lady. A fair-haired young lady, I think. She is not married. Her name is not St. John. Her Christian name is not Daphne. On the contrary, her name is

Ernestine Richards, and until recently she was secretary to Lady Dortheimer.

“Well, one day the setting of Lady Dortheimer’s diamond ring became loose and Miss Richards brought it up to town to have it fixed. Quite like your story here, is it not? The same idea occurred to Miss Richards that occurred to you. She had the ring copied. But she was a farsighted young lady. She saw a day coming when Lady Dortheimer would discover the substitution. When that happened, she would remember who had taken the ring to town and Miss Richards would be instantly suspected.

“So what happened? First, I fancy, Miss Richards invested in a La Merveilleuse transformation—Number Seven side parting, I think”—his eyes rested innocently on his client’s wavy locks—“shade dark brown. Then she called on me. She showed me the ring, allowed me to satisfy myself that it was genuine, thereby disarming suspicion on my part. That done, and a plan of substitution arranged, the young lady took the ring to the jeweller, who, in due course, returned it to Lady Dortheimer.

“Yesterday evening the other ring, the false ring, was hurriedly handed over at the last minute at Waterloo Station. Quite rightly, Miss Richards did not consider that Mr. Luttrell was likely to be an authority on diamonds. But just to satisfy myself that everything was above board I arranged for a friend of mine, a diamond merchant, to be on the train. He looked at the ring and pronounced at once, ‘This is not a real diamond; it is an excellent paste replica.’

“You see the point, of course, Mrs. St. John? When Lady Dortheimer discovered her loss, what would she remember? The charming young dancer who slipped the ring off her finger when the lights went out! She would make enquiries and find out that the dancers originally engaged were bribed not to come. If matters were traced back to my office, my story of a Mrs. St. John would seem feeble in the extreme. Lady Dortheimer never knew a Mrs. St. John. The story would sound a flimsy fabrication.

“Now you see, don’t you, that I could not allow that? And so my friend Claude replaced on Lady Dortheimer’s finger the same ring that he took off.” Mr. Parker Pyne’s smile was less benevolent now.

“You see why I could not take a fee? I guarantee to give happiness. Clearly I have not made you happy. I will say just one thing more. You are young; possibly this is your first attempt at anything of the kind. Now I, on the contrary, am comparatively advanced in years, and I have had a long experience in the compilation of statistics. From that experience I can assure you that in eighty-seven percent of cases dishonesty does not pay. Eighty-seven percent. Think of it!”

With a brusque movement the pseudo Mrs. St. John rose. “You oily old brute!” she said. “Leading me on! Making me pay expenses! And all the time—” She choked, and rushed towards the door.

“Your ring,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, holding it out to her.

She snatched it from him, looked at it and flung it out of the open window.

A door banged and she was gone.

Mr. Parker Pyne was looking out of the window with some interest. “As I thought,” he said. “Considerable surprise has been created. The gentleman selling Dismal Desmonds does not know what to make of it.”

Four

THE CASE OF THE DISCONTENTED HUSBAND

“The Case of the Discontented Husband” was first published in the USA as “The Husband Who Wanted to Keep His Wife” in *Cosmopolitan*, August 1932, and then as “His Lady’s Affair” in *Woman’s Pictorial*, 29 October 1932.

Undoubtedly one of Mr. Parker Pyne’s greatest assets was his sympathetic manner. It was a manner that invited confidence. He was well acquainted with the kind of paralysis that descended on clients as soon as they got inside his office. It was Mr. Pyne’s task to pave the way for the necessary disclosures.

On this particular morning he sat facing a new client, a Mr. Reginald Wade. Mr. Wade, he deduced at once, was the inarticulate type. The type that finds it hard to put into words anything connected with the emotions.

He was a tall, broadly-built man with mild, pleasant blue eyes and a well-tanned complexion. He sat pulling absentmindedly at a little moustache while he looked at Mr. Parker Pyne with all the pathos of a dumb animal.

“Saw your advertisement, you know,” he jerked. “Thought I might as well come along. Rum sort of show, but you never know, what?”

Mr. Parker Pyne interpreted these cryptic remarks correctly. “When things go badly, one is willing to take a chance,” he suggested.

“That’s it. That’s it, exactly. I’m willing to take a chance—any chance. Things are in a bad way with me, Mr. Pyne. I don’t know what to do about it. Difficult, you know; damned difficult.”

“That,” said Mr. Pyne, “is where I come in. I do know what to do! I am a specialist in every kind of human trouble.”

“Oh, I say—bit of a tall order, that!”

“Not really. Human troubles are easily classified into a few main heads. There is ill health. There is boredom. There are wives who are in trouble over their husbands. There are husbands”—he paused—“who are in trouble over their wives.”

“Matter of fact, you’ve hit it. You’ve hit it absolutely.”

“Tell me about it,” said Mr. Pyne.

“There’s nothing much to tell. My wife wants me to give her a divorce so that she can marry another chap.”

“Very common indeed in these days. Now you, I gather, don’t see eye to eye with her in this business?”

“I’m fond of her,” said Mr. Wade simply. “You see—well, I’m fond of her.”

A simple and somewhat tame statement, but if Mr. Wade had said, “I adore her. I worship the ground she walks on. I would cut myself into little pieces for her,” he could not have been more explicit to Mr. Parker Pyne.

“All the same, you know,” went on Mr. Wade, “what can I do? I mean, a fellow’s so helpless. If she prefers this other fellow—well, one’s got to play the game; stand aside and all that.”

“The proposal is that she should divorce you?”

“Of course. I couldn’t let her be dragged through the divorce court.”

Mr. Pyne looked at him thoughtfully. “But you come to me? Why?”

The other laughed in a shamefaced manner. “I don’t know. You see, I’m not a clever chap. I can’t think of things. I thought you might—well, suggest something. I’ve got six months, you see. She agreed to that. If at the end of six months she is still of the same mind—well, then, I get out. I thought you might give me a hint or two. At present everything I do annoys her.

“You see, Mr. Pyne, what it comes to is this: I’m not a clever chap! I like knocking balls about. I like a round of golf and a good set of tennis. I’m no good at music and art and such things. My wife’s clever. She likes pictures and the opera and concerts, and naturally she gets bored with me. This other fellow—nasty, long-haired chap—he knows all about these things. He can talk about them. I can’t. In a way, I can understand a clever, beautiful woman getting fed up with an ass like me.”

Mr. Parker Pyne groaned. “You have been married—how long? . . . Nine years? And I suppose you have adopted that attitude from the start. Wrong, my dear sir; disastrously wrong! Never adopt an apologetic attitude with a woman. She will take you at your own valuation—and you deserve it. You should have gloried in your athletic prowess. You should have spoken of art and music as ‘all that nonsense my wife likes.’ You should have condoled with her on not being able to play games better. The humble spirit, my dear sir, is a washout in matrimony! No woman can be expected to stand up against it. No wonder your wife has been unable to last the course.”

Mr. Wade was looking at him in bewilderment. “Well,” he said, “what do you think I ought to do?”

“That certainly is the question. Whatever you should have done nine years ago, it is too late now. New tactics must be adopted. Have you ever had any affairs with other women?”

“Certainly not.”

“I should have said, perhaps, any light flirtations?”

“I never bothered about women much.”

“A mistake. You must start now.”

Mr. Wade looked alarmed. “Oh, look here, I couldn’t really. I mean—”

“You will be put to no trouble in the matter. One of my staff will be supplied for the purpose. She will tell you what is required of you, and any

attentions you pay her she will, of course, understand to be merely a matter of business.”

Mr. Wade looked relieved. “That’s better. But do you really think—I mean, it seems to me that Iris will be keener to get rid of me than ever.”

“You do not understand human nature, Mr. Wade. Still less do you understand feminine human nature. At the present moment you are, from a feminine point of view, merely a waste product. Nobody wants you. What use has a woman for something that no one wants? None whatever. But take another angle. Suppose your wife discovers that you are looking forward to regaining your freedom as much as she is?”

“Then she ought to be pleased.”

“She ought to be, perhaps, but she will not be! Moreover, she will see that you have attracted a fascinating young woman—a young woman who could pick and choose. Immediately your stock goes up. Your wife knows that all her friends will say it was you who tired of her and wished to marry a more attractive woman. That will annoy her.”

“You think so?”

“I am sure of it. You will no longer be ‘poor dear old Reggie.’ You will be ‘that sly dog Reggie.’ All the difference in the world! Without relinquishing the other man, she will doubtless try to win you back. You will not be won. You will be sensible and repeat to her all her arguments. ‘Much better to part.’ ‘Temperamentally unsuited.’ You realize that while what she said was true—that you had never understood her—it is also true that she had never understood you. But we need not go into this now; you will be given full instructions when the time comes.”

Mr. Wade seemed doubtful still. “You really think that this plan of yours will do the trick?” he asked dubiously.

“I will not say I am absolutely sure of it,” said Mr. Parker Pyne cautiously. “There is a bare possibility that your wife may be so overwhelmingly in love with this other man that nothing you could say or do will affect her, but

I consider that unlikely. She has probably been driven into this affair through boredom—boredom with the atmosphere of uncritical devotion and absolute fidelity with which you have most unwisely surrounded her. If you follow my instructions, the chances are, I should say, ninety-seven percent in your favour.”

“Good enough,” said Mr. Wade. “I’ll do it. By the way—er—how much?”

“My fee is two hundred guineas, payable in advance.”

Mr. Wade drew out a chequebook.

The grounds of Lorrimer Court were lovely in the afternoon sunshine. Iris Wade, lying on a long chair, made a delicious spot of colour. She was dressed in delicate shades of mauve and by skilful makeup managed to look much younger than her thirty-five years.

She was talking to her friend Mrs. Massington, whom she always found sympathetic. Both ladies were afflicted with athletic husbands who talked stocks and shares and golf alternately.

“And so one learns to live and let live,” finished Iris.

“You’re wonderful, darling,” said Mrs. Massington, and added too quickly: “Tell me, who is this girl?”

Iris raised a weary shoulder. “Don’t ask me! Reggie found her. She’s Reggie’s little friend! So amusing. You know he never looks at girls as a rule. He came to me and hemmed and hawed, and finally said he wanted to ask this Miss de Sara down for the weekend. Of course I laughed—I couldn’t help it. Reggie you know! Well, here she is.”

“Where did he meet her?”

“I don’t know. He was very vague about it all.”

“Perhaps he’s known her some time.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Wade. “Of course,” she went on, “I’m delighted—simply delighted. I mean, it makes it so much easier for me, as things are. Because I have been unhappy about Reggie; he’s such a dear old thing. That’s what I kept saying to Sinclair—that it would hurt Reggie so. But he insisted that Reggie would soon get over it; it looks as if he were right. Two days ago Reggie seemed heartbroken—and now he wants this girl down! As I say, I’m amused. I like to see Reggie enjoying himself. I fancy the poor fellow actually thought I might be jealous. Such an absurd idea! ‘Of course,’ I said, ‘have your friend down.’ Poor Reggie—as though a girl like that could ever care about him. She’s just amusing herself.”

“She’s extremely attractive,” said Mrs. Massington. “Almost dangerously so, if you know what I mean. The sort of girl who cares only for men. I don’t feel, somehow, she can be a really nice girl.”

“Probably not,” said Mrs. Wade.

“She has marvellous clothes,” said Mrs. Massington.

“Almost too exotic don’t you think?”

“But very expensive.”

“Opulent. She’s too opulent looking.”

“Here they come,” said Mrs. Massington.

Madeleine de Sara and Reggie Wade were walking across the lawn. They were laughing and talking together and seemed very happy. Madeleine flung herself into a chair, tore off the beret she was wearing and ran her hands through her exquisitely dark curls.

She was undeniably beautiful.

“We’ve had such a marvellous afternoon!” she cried. “I’m terribly hot. I must be looking too dreadful.”

Reggie Wade started nervously at the sound of his cue. “You look—you look—” He gave a little laugh. “I won’t say it,” he finished.

Madeleine's eyes met his. It was a glance of complete understanding on her part. Mrs. Massington noted it alertly.

"You should play golf," said Madeleine to her hostess. "You miss such a lot. Why don't you take it up? I have a friend who did and became quite good, and she was a lot older than you."

"I don't care for that sort of thing," said Iris coldly.

"Are you bad at games? How rotten for you! It makes one feel so out of things. But really, Mrs. Wade, coaching nowadays is so good that almost anyone can play fairly well. I improved my tennis no end last summer. Of course I'm hopeless at golf."

"Nonsense!" said Reggie. "You only need coaching. Look how you were getting those brassie shots this afternoon."

"Because you showed me how. You're a wonderful teacher. Lots of people simply can't teach. But you've got the gift. It must be wonderful to be you—you can do everything."

"Nonsense. I'm no good—no use whatever." Reggie was confused.

"You must be very proud of him," said Madeleine, turning to Mrs. Wade. "How have you managed to keep him all these years? You must have been very clever. Or have you hidden him away?"

Her hostess made no reply. She picked up her book with a hand that trembled.

Reggie murmured something about changing, and went off.

"I do think it's so sweet of you to have me here," said Madeleine to her hostess. "Some women are so suspicious of their husbands' friends. I do think jealousy is absurd, don't you?"

"I do indeed. I should never dream of being jealous of Reggie."

“That’s wonderful of you! Because anyone can see that he’s a man who’s frightfully attractive to women. It was a shock to me when I heard he was married. Why do all the attractive men get snapped up so young?”

“I’m glad you find Reggie so attractive,” said Mrs. Wade.

“Well, he is, isn’t he? So good-looking, and so frightfully good at games. And that pretended indifference of his to women. That spurs us on of course.”

“I suppose you have lots of men friends,” said Mrs. Wade.

“Oh, yes. I like men better than women. Women are never really nice to me. I can’t think why.”

“Perhaps you are too nice to their husbands,” said Mrs. Massington with a tinkly laugh.

“Well, one’s sorry for people sometimes. So many nice men are tied to such dull wives. You know, ‘arty’ women and highbrow women. Naturally, the men want someone young and bright to talk to. I think that the modern ideas of marriage and divorce are so sensible. Start again while one is still young with someone who shares one’s tastes and ideas. It’s better for everybody in the end. I mean, the highbrow wives probably pick up some long-haired creature of their own type who satisfies them. I think cutting your losses and starting again is a wise plan, don’t you, Mrs. Wade?”

“Certainly.”

A certain frostiness in the atmosphere seemed to penetrate Madeleine’s consciousness. She murmured something about changing for tea and left them.

“Detestable creatures these modern girls are,” said Mrs. Wade. “Not an idea in their heads.”

“She’s got one idea in hers, Iris,” said Mrs. Massington. “That girl’s in love with Reggie.”

“Nonsense!”

“She is. I saw the way she looked at him just now. She doesn’t care a pin whether he’s married or not. She means to have him. Disgusting, I call it.”

Mrs. Wade was silent a moment, then she laughed uncertainly. “After all,” she said, “what does it matter?”

Presently Mrs. Wade, too, went upstairs. Her husband was in his dressing room changing. He was singing.

“Enjoyed yourself, dear?” said Mrs. Wade.

“Oh, er—rather, yes.”

“I’m glad. I want you to be happy.”

“Yes, rather.”

Acting a part was not Reggie Wade’s strong point, but as it happened, the acute embarrassment occasioned by his fancying he was doing so did just as well. He avoided his wife’s eye and jumped when she spoke to him. He felt ashamed; hated the farce of it all. Nothing could have produced a better effect. He was the picture of conscious guilt.

“How long have you known her?” asked Mrs. Wade suddenly.

“Er—who?”

“Miss de Sara, of course.”

“Well, I don’t quite know. I mean—oh, some time.”

“Really? You never mentioned her.”

“Didn’t I? I suppose I forgot.”

“Forgot indeed!” said Mrs. Wade. She departed with a whisk of mauve draperies.

After tea Mr. Wade showed Miss de Sara the rose garden. They walked across the lawn conscious of two pairs of eyes raking their backs.

“Look here.” Safe out of sight in the rose garden Mr. Wade unburdened himself. “Look here, I think we’ll have to give this up. My wife looked at me just now as though she hated me.”

“Don’t worry,” said Madeleine. “It’s quite all right.”

“Do you think so? I mean, I don’t want to put her against me. She said several nasty things at tea.”

“It’s all right,” said Madeleine. “You’re doing splendidly.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes.” In a lower voice she went on: “Your wife is walking round the corner of the terrace. She wants to see what we’re doing. You’d better kiss me.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Wade nervously. “Must I? I mean—”

“Kiss me!” said Madeleine fiercely.

Mr. Wade kissed her. Any lack of élan in the performance was remedied by Madeleine. She flung her arms around him. Mr. Wade staggered.

“Oh!” he said.

“Did you hate it very much?” said Madeleine.

“No, of course not,” said Mr. Wade gallantly. “It—it just took me by surprise.” He added wistfully: “Have we been in the rose garden long enough, do you think?”

“I think so,” said Madeleine. “We’ve put in a bit of good work here.”

They returned to the lawn. Mrs. Massington informed them that Mrs. Wade had gone to lie down.

Later, Mr. Wade joined Madeleine with a perturbed face.

“She’s in an awful state—hysterics.”

“Good.”

“She saw me kissing you.”

“Well, we meant her to.”

“I know, but I couldn’t say that, could I? I didn’t know what to say. I said it had just—just—well, happened.”

“Excellent.”

“She said you were scheming to marry me and that you were no better than you should be. That upset me—it seemed such awfully rough luck on you. I mean, when you’re just doing a job. I said that I had the utmost respect for you and that what she said wasn’t true at all, and I’m afraid I got angry when she went on about it.”

“Magnificent!”

“And then she told me to go away. She doesn’t ever want to speak to me again. She talked of packing up and leaving.” His face was dismayed.

Madeleine smiled. “I’ll tell you the answer to that one. Tell her that you’ll be the one to go; that you’ll pack up and clear out to town.”

“But I don’t want to!”

“That’s all right. You won’t have to. Your wife would hate to think of you amusing yourself in London.”

The following morning Reggie Wade had a fresh bulletin to impart.

“She says she’s been thinking that it isn’t fair for her to go away when she agreed to stay six months. But she says that as I have my friends down here she doesn’t see why she shouldn’t have hers. She is asking Sinclair Jordan.”

“Is he the one?”

“Yes, and I’m damned if I’ll have him in my house!”

“You must,” said Madeleine. “Don’t worry, I’ll attend to him. Say that on thinking things over you have no objection and that you know she won’t mind you asking me to stay on, too.”

“Oh dear!” sighed Mr. Wade.

“Now don’t lose heart,” said Madeleine. “Everything is going splendidly. Another fortnight—and all your troubles will be over.”

“A fortnight? Do you really think so?” demanded Mr. Wade.

“Think so? I’m sure of it,” said Madeleine.

A week later Madeleine de Sara entered Mr. Parker Pyne’s office and sank wearily into a chair.

“Enter the Queen of the Vamps,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, smiling.

“Vamps!” said Madeleine. She gave a hollow laugh. “I’ve never had such uphill work being a vamp. That man is obsessed by his wife! It’s a disease.”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. “Yes, indeed. Well, in one way it made our task easier. It is not every man, my dear Madeleine, whom I would expose to your fascination so lightheartedly.”

The girl laughed. “If you knew the difficulty I had to make him even kiss me as though he liked it!”

“A novel experience for you, my dear. Well, is your task accomplished?”

“Yes, I think all is well. We had a tremendous scene last night. Let me see, my last report was three days ago?”

“Yes.”

“Well, as I told you, I only had to look at that miserable worm, Sinclair Jordan, once. He was all over me—especially as he thought from my clothes that I had money. Mrs. Wade was furious, of course. Here were both her men dancing attendance on me. I soon showed where my preference lay. I made fun of Sinclair Jordan, to his face and to her. I laughed at his clothes, and at the length of his hair. I pointed out that he had knock knees.”

“Excellent technique,” said Mr. Parker Pyne appreciatively.

“Everything boiled up last night. Mrs. Wade came out in the open. She accused me of breaking up her home. Reggie Wade mentioned the little matter of Sinclair Jordan. She said that that was only the result of her unhappiness and loneliness. She had noticed her husband’s abstraction for some time, but had no idea as to the cause of it. She said they had always been ideally happy, that she adored him and he knew it, and that she wanted him and only him.

“I said it was too late for that. Mr. Wade followed his instructions splendidly. He said he didn’t give a damn! He was going to marry me! Mrs. Wade could have her Sinclair as soon as she pleased. There was no reason why the divorce proceedings shouldn’t be started at once; waiting six months was absurd.

“Within a few days, he said, she should have the necessary evidence and could instruct her solicitors. He said he couldn’t live without me. Then Mrs. Wade clutched her chest and talked about her weak heart and had to be given brandy. He didn’t weaken. He went up to town this morning, and I’ve no doubt she’s gone after him by this time.”

“So that’s all right,” said Mr. Pyne cheerfully. “A very satisfactory case.”

The door flew open. In the doorway stood Reggie Wade.

“Is she here?” he demanded, advancing into the room. “Where is she?” He caught sight of Madeleine. “Darling!” he cried. He seized both her hands. “Darling, darling. You knew, didn’t you, that it was real last night—that I meant every word I said to Iris? I don’t know why I was blind so long. But I’ve known for the last three days.”

“Known what?” said Madeleine faintly.

“That I adored you. That there was no woman in the world for me but you. Iris can bring her divorce and when it’s gone through you’ll marry me, won’t you? Say you will, Madeleine, I adore you.”

He caught the paralysed Madeleine in his arms just as the door flew open again, this time to admit a thin woman dressed in untidy green.

“I thought so,” said the newcomer. “I followed you! I knew you’d go to her!”

“I can assure you—” began Mr. Parker Pyne, recovering from the stupefaction that had descended upon him.

The intruder took no notice of him. She swept on: “Oh, Reggie, you can’t want to break my heart! Only come back! I’ll not say a word about this. I’ll learn golf. I won’t have any friends you don’t care about. After all these years, when we’ve been so happy together—”

“I’ve never been happy till now,” said Mr. Wade, still gazing at Madeleine. “Dash it all, Iris, you wanted to marry that ass Jordan. Why don’t you go and do it?”

Mrs. Wade gave a wail. “I hate him! I hate the very sight of him.” She turned to Madeleine. “You wicked woman! You horrible vampire—stealing my husband from me.”

“I don’t want your husband,” said Madeleine distractedly.

“Madeleine!” Mr. Wade was gazing at her in agony.

“Please go away,” said Madeleine.

“But look here, I’m not pretending. I mean it.”

“Oh, go away!” cried Madeleine hysterically. “Go away!”

Reggie moved reluctantly towards the door. “I shall come back,” he warned her. “You’ve not seen the last of me.” He went out, banging the door.

“Girls like you ought to be flogged and branded!” cried Mrs. Wade. “Reggie was an angel to me always till you came along. Now he’s so changed I don’t know him.” With a sob, she hurried out after her husband.

Madeleine and Mr. Parker Pyne looked at each other.

“I can’t help it,” said Madeleine helplessly. “He’s a very nice man—a dear—but I don’t want to marry him. I’d no idea of all this. If you knew the difficulty I had making him kiss me!”

“Ahem!” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I regret to admit it, but it was an error of judgement on my part.” He shook his head sadly, and drawing Mr. Wade’s file towards him, wrote across it:

FAILURE—owing to natural causes.

N.B.—They should have been foreseen.

Five

THE CASE OF THE CITY CLERK

“The Case of the City Clerk” was first published in the USA as “The Clerk Who Wanted Excitement” in *Cosmopolitan*, August 1932, and then as “The £10 Adventure” in *Strand Magazine*, November 1932.

Mr. Parker Pyne leaned back thoughtfully in his swivel chair and surveyed his visitor. He saw a small sturdily built man of forty-five with wistful, puzzled, timid eyes that looked at him with a kind of anxious hopefulness.

“I saw your advertisement in the paper,” said that little man nervously.

“You are in trouble, Mr. Roberts?”

“No, not in trouble exactly.”

“You are unhappy?”

“I shouldn’t like to say that either. I’ve a great deal to be thankful for.”

“We all have,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “But when we have to remind ourselves of the fact it is a bad sign.”

“I know,” said the little man eagerly. “That’s just it! You’ve hit the nail on the head, sir.”

“Supposing you tell me all about yourself,” suggested Mr. Parker Pyne.

“There’s not much to tell, sir. As I say, I’ve a great deal to be thankful for. I have a job; I’ve managed to save a little money; the children are strong and healthy.”

“So you want—what?”

“I—I don’t know.” He flushed. “I expect that sounds foolish to you, sir.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

By skilled questioning he elicited further confidences. He heard of Mr. Roberts’ employment in a well-known firm and of his slow but steady rise. He heard of his marriage; of the struggle to present a decent appearance, to educate the children and have them “looking nice”; of the plotting and planning and skimping and saving to put aside a few pounds each year. He heard, in fact, the saga of a life of ceaseless effort to survive.

“And—well, you see how it is,” confessed Mr. Roberts. “The wife’s away. Staying with her mother with the two children. Little change for them and a rest for her. No room for me and we can’t afford to go elsewhere. And being alone and reading the paper, I saw your advertisement and it set me thinking. I’m forty-eight. I just wondered . . . Things going on everywhere,” he ended, with all his wistful suburban soul in his eyes.

“You want,” said Mr. Pyne, “to live gloriously for ten minutes?”

“Well, I shouldn’t put it like that. But perhaps you’re right. Just to get out of the rut. I’d go back to it thankful afterwards—if only I had something to think about.” He looked at the other man anxiously. “I suppose there’s nothing possible, sir? I’m afraid—I’m afraid I couldn’t afford to pay much.”

“How much could you afford?”

“I could manage five pounds, sir.” He waited, breathless.

“Five pounds,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I fancy—I just fancy we might be able to manage something for five pounds. Do you object to danger?” he added sharply.

A tinge of colour came into Mr. Roberts’ sallow face. “Danger did you say, sir? Oh, no, not at all. I—I’ve never done anything dangerous.”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. "Come to see me again tomorrow and I'll tell you what I can do for you."

The Bon Voyageur is a little-known hostelry. It is a restaurant frequented by a few habitués. They dislike newcomers.

To the Bon Voyageur came Mr. Pyne and was greeted with respectful recognition. "Mr. Bonnington here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He's at his usual table."

"Good. I'll join him."

Mr. Bonnington was a gentleman of military appearance with a somewhat bovine face. He greeted his friend with pleasure.

"Hallo, Parker. Hardly ever see you nowadays. Didn't know you came here."

"I do now and then. Especially when I want to lay my hand on an old friend."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you. As a matter of fact, Lucas, I've been thinking over what we were talking about the other day."

"The Peterfield business? Seen the latest in the papers? No, you can't have. It won't be in till this evening."

"What is the latest?"

"They murdered Peterfield last night," said Mr. Bonnington, placidly eating salad.

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Pyne.

"Oh, I'm not surprised," said Mr. Bonnington. "Pigheaded old man, Peterfield. Wouldn't listen to us. Insisted on keeping the plans in his own

hands.”

“Did they get them?”

“No; it seems some woman came round and gave the professor a recipe for boiling a ham. The old ass, absentminded as usual, put the recipe for the ham in his safe and the plans in the kitchen.”

“Fortunate.”

“Almost providential. But I still don’t know who’s going to take ’em to Geneva. Maitland’s in the hospital. Carslake’s in Berlin. I can’t leave. It means young Hooper.” He looked at his friend.

“You’re still of the same opinion?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Absolutely. He’s been got at! I know it. I haven’t a shadow of proof, but I tell you, Parker, I know when a chap’s crooked! And I want those plans to get to Geneva. The League needs ’em. For the first time an invention isn’t going to be sold to a nation. It’s going to be handed over voluntarily to the League.

“It’s the finest peace gesture that’s ever been attempted, and it’s got to be put through. And Hooper’s crooked. You’ll see, he’ll be drugged on the train! If he goes in a plane it’ll come down at some convenient spot! But confound it all, I can’t pass him over. Discipline! You’ve got to have discipline! That’s why I spoke to you the other day.”

“You asked me whether I knew of anyone.”

“Yes. Thought you might in your line of business. Some fire eater spoiling for a row. Whoever I send stands a good chance of being done in. Your man would probably not be suspected at all. But he’s got to have nerve.”

“I think I know of someone who would do,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Thank God there are still chaps who will take a risk. Well, it’s agreed then?”

“It’s agreed,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

Mr. Parker Pyne was summing up instructions. “Now, that’s quite clear? You will travel in a first-class sleeper to Geneva. You leave London at ten forty-five, via Folkestone and Boulogne, and you get into your first-class sleeper at Boulogne. You arrive at Geneva at eight the following morning. Here is the address at which you will report. Please memorize it and I will destroy it. Afterwards go to this hotel and await further instructions. Here is sufficient money in French and Swiss notes and currency. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Roberts’ eyes were shining with excitement. “Excuse me, sir, but am I allowed to—er—know anything of what it is I am carrying?”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled beneficently. “You are carrying a cryptogram which reveals the secret hiding place of the crown jewels of Russia,” he said solemnly. “You can understand, naturally, that Bolshevist agents will be alert to intercept you. If it is necessary for you to talk about yourself, I should recommend that you say you have come into money and are enjoying a little holiday abroad.”

Mr. Roberts sipped a cup of coffee and looked out over the Lake of Geneva. He was happy but at the same time he was disappointed.

He was happy because, for the first time in his life, he was in a foreign country. Moreover, he was staying in the kind of hotel he would never stay in again, and not for one moment had he had to worry about money! He had a room with private bathroom, delicious meals and attentive service. All these things Mr. Roberts had enjoyed very much indeed.

He was disappointed because so far nothing that could be described as adventure had come his way. No disguised Bolsheviks or mysterious Russians had crossed his path. A pleasant chat on the train with a French commercial traveller who spoke excellent English was the only human intercourse that had come his way. He had secreted the papers in his sponge bag as he had been told to do and had delivered them according to instructions. There had been no dangers to overcome, no hair’s breadth escapes. Mr. Roberts was disappointed.

It was at that moment that a tall, bearded man murmured “Pardon,” and sat down on the other side of the little table. “You will excuse me,” he said, “but I think you know a friend of mine. ‘P.P.’ are the initials.”

Mr. Roberts was pleasantly thrilled. Here, at last, was a mysterious Russian. “Qu-quite right.”

“Then I think we understand each other,” said the stranger.

Mr. Roberts looked at him searchingly. This was far more like the real thing. The stranger was a man of about fifty, of distinguished though foreign appearance. He wore an eyeglass, and a small coloured ribbon in his buttonhole.

“You have accomplished your mission in the most satisfactory manner,” said the stranger. “Are you prepared to undertake a further one?”

“Certainly. Oh, yes.”

“Good. You will book a sleeper on the Geneva-Paris train for tomorrow night. You will ask for Berth Number Nine.”

“Supposing it is not free?”

“It will be free. That will have been seen to.”

“Berth Number Nine,” repeated Roberts. “Yes, I’ve got that.”

“During the course of your journey someone will say to you, ‘Pardon, Monsieur, but I think you were recently at Grasse?’ To that you will reply ‘Yes, last month.’ The person will then say, ‘Are you interested in scent?’ And you will reply, ‘Yes, I am a manufacturer of synthetic Oil of Jasmine.’ After that you will place yourself entirely at the disposal of the person who has spoken to you. By the way, are you armed?”

“No,” said Mr. Roberts in a flutter. “No; I never thought—that is—”

“That can soon be remedied,” said the bearded man. He glanced around. No one was near them. Something hard and shining was pressed into Mr.

Roberts' hand. "A small weapon but efficacious," said the stranger, smiling.

Mr. Roberts, who had never fired a revolver in his life, slipped it gingerly into a pocket. He had an uneasy feeling that it might go off at any minute.

They went over the passwords again. Then Roberts' new friend rose.

"I wish you good luck," he said. "May you come through safely. You are a brave man, Mr. Roberts."

"Am I?" thought Roberts, when the other had departed. "I'm sure I don't want to get killed. That would never do."

A pleasant thrill shot down his spine, slightly adulterated by a thrill that was not quite so pleasant.

He went to his room and examined the weapon. He was still uncertain about its mechanism and hoped he would not be called upon to use it.

He went out to book his seat.

The train left Geneva at nine thirty. Roberts got to the station in good time. The sleeping car conductor took his ticket and his passport, and stood aside while an underling swung Roberts' suitcase on to the rack. There was other luggage there: a pigskin case and a Gladstone bag.

"Number Nine is the lower berth," said the conductor.

As Roberts turned to leave the carriage he ran into a big man who was entering. They drew apart with apologies—Roberts' in English and the stranger's in French. He was a big burly man, with a closely shaven head and thick eyeglasses through which his eyes seemed to peer suspiciously.

"An ugly customer," said the little man to himself.

He sensed something vaguely sinister about his travelling companion. Was it to keep a watch on this man that he had been told to ask for Berth Number Nine? He fancied it might be.

He went out again into the corridor. There was still ten minutes before the train was due to start and he thought he would walk up and down the platform. Halfway along the passage he stood back to allow a lady to pass him. She was just entering the train and the conductor preceded her, ticket in hand. As she passed Roberts she dropped her handbag. The Englishman picked it up and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Monsieur.” She spoke in English but her voice was foreign, a rich low voice very seductive in quality. As she was about to pass on, she hesitated and murmured: “Pardon, Monsieur, but I think you were recently at Grasse?”

Roberts’ heart leaped with excitement. He was to place himself at the disposal of this lovely creature—for she was lovely, of that there was no doubt. She wore a travelling coat of fur, a chic hat. There were pearls round her neck. She was dark and her lips were scarlet.

Roberts made the required answer. “Yes, last month.”

“You are interested in scent?”

“Yes, I am a manufacturer of synthetic Oil of Jasmine.”

She bent her head and passed on, leaving a mere whisper behind her. “In the corridor as soon as the train starts.”

The next ten minutes seemed an age to Roberts. At last the train started. He walked slowly along the corridor. The lady in the fur coat was struggling with a window. He hurried to her assistance.

“Thank you, Monsieur. Just a little air before they insist on closing everything.” And then in a soft, low, rapid voice: “After the frontier, when our fellow traveller is asleep—not before—go into the washing place and through it into the compartment on the other side. You understand?”

“Yes.” He let down the window and said in a louder voice: “Is that better, madame?”

“Thank you very much.”

He retired to his compartment. His travelling companion was already stretched out in the upper berth. His preparations for the night had obviously been simple. The removal of boots and a coat, in fact.

Roberts debated his own costume. Clearly, if he were going into a lady's compartment he could not undress.

He found a pair of slippers, substituting them for his boots, and then lay down, switching out the light. A few minutes later, the man above began to snore.

Just after ten o'clock they reached the frontier. The door was thrown open; a perfunctory question was asked. Had Messieurs anything to declare? The door was closed again. Presently the train drew out of Bellegarde.

The man in the upper berth was snoring again. Roberts allowed twenty minutes to elapse, then he slipped to his feet and opened the door of the lavatory compartment. Once inside, he bolted the door behind him and eyed the door on the farther side. It was not bolted. He hesitated. Should he knock?

Perhaps it would be absurd to knock. But he didn't quite like entering without knocking. He compromised, opened the door gently about an inch and waited. He even ventured on a small cough.

The response was prompt. The door was pulled open, he was seized by the arm, pulled through into the farther compartment, and the girl closed and bolted the door behind him.

Roberts caught his breath. Never had he imagined anything so lovely. She was wearing a long foamy garment of cream chiffon and lace. She leaned against the door into the corridor, panting. Roberts had often read of beautiful hunted creatures at bay. Now for the first time, he saw one—a thrilling sight.

“Thank God!” murmured the girl.

She was quite young, Roberts noted, and her loveliness was such that she seemed to him like a being from another world. Here was romance at last—and he was in it!

She spoke in a low, hurried voice. Her English was good but the inflection was wholly foreign. “I am so glad you have come,” she said. “I have been horribly frightened. Vassilievitch is on the train. You understand what that means?”

Roberts did not understand in the least what it meant, but he nodded.

“I thought I had given them the slip. I might have known better. What are we to do? Vassilievitch is in the next carriage to me. Whatever happens, he must not get the jewels.”

“He’s not going to murder you and he’s not going to get the jewels,” said Robert with determination.

“Then what am I to do with them?”

Roberts looked past her to the door. “The door’s bolted,” he said.

The girl laughed. “What are locked doors to Vassilievitch?”

Roberts felt more and more as though he were in the middle of one of his favourite novels. “There’s only one thing to be done. Give them to me.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “They are worth a quarter of a million.”

Roberts flushed. “You can trust me.”

The girl hesitated a moment longer, then: “Yes, I will trust you,” she said. She made a swift movement. The next minute she was holding out to him a rolled-up pair of stockings—stockings of cobweb silk. “Take them, my friend,” she said to the astonished Roberts.

He took them and at once he understood. Instead of being light as air, the stockings were unexpectedly heavy.

“Take them to your compartment,” she said. “You can give them to me in the morning—if—if I am still here.”

Roberts coughed. “Look here,” he said. “About you.” He paused. “I—I must keep guard over you.” Then he flushed in an agony of propriety. “Not in here, I mean. I’ll stay in there.” He nodded towards the lavatory compartment.

“If you like to stay here—” She glanced at the upper unoccupied berth.

Roberts flushed to the roots of his hair. “No, no,” he protested. “I shall be all right in there. If you need me, call out.”

“Thank you, my friend,” said the girl softly.

She slipped into the lower berth, drew up the covers and smiled at him gratefully. He retreated into the washroom.

Suddenly—it must have been a couple of hours later—he thought he heard something. He listened—nothing. Perhaps he had been mistaken. And yet it certainly seemed to him that he had heard a faint sound from the next carriage. Supposing—just supposing. . . .

He opened the door softly. The compartment was as he had left it, with the tiny blue light in the ceiling. He stood there with his eyes straining through the dimness till they got accustomed to it. The girl was not there!

He switched the light full on. The compartment was empty. Suddenly he sniffed. Just a whiff but he recognized it—the sweet, sickly odour of chloroform!

He stepped from the compartment (unlocked now, he noted) out into the corridor and looked up and down it. Empty! His eyes fastened on the door next to the girl’s. She had said that Vassilievitch was in the next compartment. Gingerly Roberts tried the handle. The door was bolted on the inside.

What should he do? Demand admittance? But the man would refuse—and after all, the girl might not be there! And if she were, would she thank him for making a public business of the matter? He had gathered that secrecy was essential in the game they were playing.

A perturbed little man wandered slowly along the corridor. He paused at the end compartment. The door was open, and the conductor lay there sleeping. And above him, on a hook, hung his brown uniform coat and peaked cap.

In a flash Roberts had decided on his course of action. In another minute he had donned the coat and cap, and was hurrying back along the corridor. He stopped at the door next to that of the girl, summoned all his resolution and knocked peremptorily.

When the summons was not answered, he knocked again.

“Monsieur,” he said in his best accent.

The door opened a little way and a head peered out—the head of a foreigner, clean-shaven except for a black moustache. It was an angry, malevolent face.

“Qu’est-ce-qu’il y a?” he snapped.

“Votre passeport, monsieur.” Roberts stepped back and beckoned.

The other hesitated, then stepped out into the corridor. Roberts had counted on his doing that. If he had the girl inside, he naturally would not want the conductor to come in. Like a flash, Roberts acted. With all his force he shoved the foreigner aside—the man was unprepared and the swaying of the train helped—bolted into the carriage himself, shut the door and locked it.

Lying across the end of the berth was the girl, a gag across her mouth and her wrists tied together. He freed her quickly and she fell against him with a sigh.

“I feel so weak and ill,” she murmured. “It was chloroform, I think. Did he—did he get them?”

“No.” Roberts tapped his pocket. “What are we going to do now?” he asked.

The girl sat up. Her wits were returning. She took in his costume.

“How clever of you. Fancy thinking of that! He said that he would kill me if I did not tell him where the jewels were. I have been so afraid—and then you came.” Suddenly she laughed. “But we have outwitted him! He will not dare to do anything. He cannot even try to get back into his own compartment.

“We must stay here till morning. Probably he will leave the train at Dijon; we are due to stop there in about half an hour. He will telegraph to Paris and they will pick up our trail there. In the meantime, you had better throw that coat and cap out of the window. They might get you into trouble.”

Roberts obeyed.

“We must not sleep,” the girl decided. “We must stay on guard till morning.”

It was a strange, exciting vigil. At six o’clock in the morning, Roberts opened the door carefully and looked out. No one was about. The girl slipped quickly into her own compartment. Roberts followed her in. The place had clearly been ransacked. He regained his own carriage through the washroom. His fellow traveller was still snoring.

They reached Paris at seven o’clock. The conductor was declaiming at the loss of his coat and cap. He had not yet discovered the loss of a passenger.

Then began a most entertaining chase. The girl and Roberts took taxi after taxi across Paris. They entered hotels and restaurants by one door and left them by another. At last the girl gave a sign.

“I feel sure we are not followed now,” she said. “We have shaken them off.”

They breakfasted and drove to Le Bourget. Three hours later they were at Croydon. Roberts had never flown before.

At Croydon a tall gentleman with a far-off resemblance to Mr. Roberts' mentor at Geneva was waiting for them. He greeted the girl with especial respect.

"The car is here, madam," he said.

"This gentleman will accompany us, Paul," said the girl. And to Roberts: "Count Paul Stepanyi."

The car was a vast limousine. They drove for about an hour, then they entered the grounds of a country house and pulled up at the door of an imposing mansion. Mr. Roberts was taken to a room furnished as a study. There he handed over the precious pair of stockings. He was left alone for a while. Presently Count Stepanyi returned.

"Mr. Roberts," he said, "our thanks and gratitude are due to you. You have proved yourself a brave and resourceful man." He held out a red morocco case. "Permit me to confer upon you the Order of St. Stanislaus—tenth class with laurels."

As in a dream Roberts opened the case and looked at the jewelled order. The old gentleman was still speaking.

"The Grand Duchess Olga would like to thank you herself before you depart."

He was led to a big drawing room. There, very beautiful in a flowing robe, stood his travelling companion.

She made an imperious gesture of the hand, and the other man left them.

"I owe you my life, Mr. Roberts," said the grand duchess.

She held out her hand. Roberts kissed it. She leaned suddenly towards him.

"You are a brave man," she said.

His lips met hers; a waft of rich Oriental perfume surrounded him.

For a moment he held that slender, beautiful form in his arms. . . .

He was still in a dream when somebody said to him: “The car will take you anywhere you wish.”

An hour later, the car came back for the Grand Duchess Olga. She got into it and so did the white-haired man. He had removed his beard for coolness. The car set down the Grand Duchess Olga at a house in Streatham. She entered it and an elderly woman looked up from a tea table.

“Ah, Maggie, dear, so there you are.”

In the Geneva-Paris express this girl was the Grand Duchess Olga; in Mr. Parker Pyne’s office she was Madeleine de Sara, and in the house at Streatham she was Maggie Sayers, fourth daughter of an honest, hardworking family.

How are the mighty fallen!

Mr. Parker Pyne was lunching with his friend. “Congratulations,” said the latter, “your man carried the thing through without a hitch. The Tormali gang must be wild to think the plans of that gun have gone to the League. Did you tell your man what he was carrying?”

“No. I thought it better to—er—embroider.”

“Very discreet of you.”

“It wasn’t exactly discretion. I wanted him to enjoy himself. I fancied he might find a gun a little tame. I wanted him to have some adventures.”

“Tame?” said Mr. Bonnington, staring at him. “Why, that lot would murder him as soon as look at him.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Parker Pyne mildly. “But I didn’t want him to be murdered.”

“Do you make a lot of money in your business, Parker?” asked Mr. Bonnington.

“Sometimes I lose it,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “That is, if it is a deserving case.”

Three angry gentlemen were abusing one another in Paris.

“That confounded Hooper!” said one. “He let us down.”

“The plans were not taken by anyone from the office,” said the second. “But they went Wednesday, I am assured of that. And so I say you bungled it.”

“I didn’t,” said the third sulkily; “there was no Englishman on the train except a little clerk. He’d never heard of Peterfield or of the gun. I know. I tested him. Peterfield and the gun meant nothing to him.” He laughed. “He had a Bolshevik complex of some kind.”

Mr. Roberts was sitting in front of a gas fire. On his knee was a letter from Mr. Parker Pyne. It enclosed a cheque for fifty pounds “from certain people who are delighted with the way a certain commission was executed.”

On the arm of his chair was a library book. Mr. Roberts opened it at random. “She crouched against the door like a beautiful, hunted creature at bay.”

Well, he knew all about that.

He read another sentence: “He sniffed the air. The faint, sickly odour of chloroform came to his nostrils.”

That he knew all about too.

“He caught her in his arms and felt the responsive quiver of her scarlet lips.”

Mr. Roberts gave a sigh. It wasn't a dream. It had all happened. The journey out had been dull enough, but the journey home! He had enjoyed it. But he was glad to be home again. He felt vaguely that life could not be lived indefinitely at such a pace. Even the Grand Duchess Olga—even that last kiss—partook already of the unreal quality of a dream.

Mary and the children would be home tomorrow. Mr. Roberts smiled happily.

She would say: “We've had such a nice holiday. I hated thinking of you all alone here, poor old boy.” And he'd say: “That's all right, old girl. I had to go to Geneva for the firm on business—delicate bit of negotiations—and look what they've sent me.” And he'd show her the cheque for fifty pounds.

He thought of the Order of St. Stanislaus, tenth class with laurels. He'd hidden it, but supposing Mary found it! It would take a bit of explaining. . . .

Ah, that was it—he'd tell her he'd picked it up abroad. A curio.

He opened his book again and read happily. No longer was there a wistful expression on his face.

He, too, was of that glorious company to whom Things Happened.

Six

THE CASE OF THE RICH WOMAN

“The Case of the Rich Woman” was the first Parker Pyne story, published in the USA as “The Rich Woman Who Wanted Only to Be Happy” in *Cosmopolitan*, August 1932.

The name of Mrs. Abner Rymer was brought to Mr. Parker Pyne. He knew the name and he raised his eyebrows.

Presently his client was shown into the room.

Mrs. Rymer was a tall woman, big-boned. Her figure was ungainly and the velvet dress and the heavy fur coat she wore did not disguise the fact. The knuckles of her large hands were pronounced. Her face was big and broad and highly coloured. Her black hair was fashionably dressed, and there were many tips of curled ostrich in her hat.

She plumped herself down on a chair with a nod. “Good morning,” she said. Her voice had a rough accent. “If you’re any good at all you’ll tell me how to spend my money!”

“Most original,” murmured Mr. Parker Pyne. “Few ask me that in these days. So you really find it difficult, Mrs. Rymer?”

“Yes, I do,” said the lady bluntly. “I’ve got three fur coats, a lot of Paris dresses and such like. I’ve got a car and a house in Park Lane. I’ve had a yacht but I don’t like the sea. I’ve got a lot of those high-class servants that look down their nose at you. I’ve travelled a bit and seen foreign parts. And I’m blessed if I can think of anything more to buy or do.” She looked hopefully at Mr. Payne.

“There are hospitals,” he said.

“What? Give it away, you mean? No, that I won’t do! That money was worked for, let me tell you, worked for hard. If you think I’m going to hand it out like so much dirt—well, you’re mistaken. I want to spend it; spend it and get some good out of it. Now, if you’ve got any ideas that are worthwhile in that line, you can depend on a good fee.”

“Your proposition interests me,” said Mr. Pyne. “You do not mention a country house.”

“I forgot it, but I’ve got one. Bore me to death.”

“You must tell me more about yourself. Your problem is not easy to solve.”

“I’ll tell you and willing. I’m not ashamed of what I’ve come from. Worked in a farmhouse, I did, when I was a girl. Hard work it was too. Then I took up with Abner—he was a workman in the mills near by. He courted me for eight years, and then we got married.”

“And you were happy?” asked Mr. Pyne.

“I was. He was a good man to me, Abner. We had a hard struggle of it, though; he was out of a job twice, and children coming along. Four we had, three boys and a girl. And none of them lived to grow up. I daresay it would have been different if they had.” Her face softened; looked suddenly younger.

“His chest was weak—Abner’s was. They wouldn’t take him for the war. He did well at home. He was made foreman. He was a clever fellow, Abner. He worked out a process. They treated him fair, I will say; gave him a good sum for it. He used that money for another idea of his. That brought in money hand over fist. It’s still coming in.

“Mind you, it was rare fun at first. Having a house and a tip-top bathroom and servants of one’s own. No more cooking and scrubbing and washing to do. Just sit back on your silk cushions in the drawing room and ring the bell for tea—like any countess might! Grand fun it was, and we enjoyed it. And then we came up to London. I went to swell dressmakers for my clothes. We went to Paris and the Riviera. Rare fun it was.”

“And then,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“We got used to it, I suppose,” said Mrs. Rymer. “After a bit it didn’t seem so much fun. Why, there were days when we didn’t even fancy our meals properly—us, with any dish we fancied to choose from! As for baths—well, in the end, one bath a day’s enough for anyone. And Abner’s health began to worry him. Paid good money to doctors, we did, but they couldn’t do anything. They tried this and they tried that. But it was no use. He died.” She paused. “He was a young man, only forty-three.”

Mr. Pyne nodded sympathetically.

“That was five years ago. Money’s still rolling in. It seems wasteful not to be able to do anything with it. But as I tell you, I can’t think of anything else to buy that I haven’t got already.”

“In other words,” said Mr. Pyne, “your life is dull. You are not enjoying it.”

“I’m sick of it,” said Mrs. Rymer gloomily. “I’ve no friends. The new lot only want subscriptions, and they laugh at me behind my back. The old lot won’t have anything to do with me. My rolling up in a car makes them shy. Can you do anything or suggest anything?”

“It is possible that I can,” said Mr. Pyne slowly. “It will be difficult, but I believe there is a chance of success. I think it’s possible I can give you back what you have lost—your interest in life.”

“How?” demanded Mrs. Rymer curtly.

“That,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “is my professional secret. I never disclose my methods beforehand. The question is, will you take a chance? I do not guarantee success, but I do think there is a reasonable possibility of it.

“I shall have to adopt unusual methods, and therefore it will be expensive. My charges will be one thousand pounds, payable in advance.”

“You can open your mouth all right, can’t you?” said Mrs. Rymer appreciatively. “Well, I’ll risk it. I’m used to paying top price. Only, when I

pay for a thing, I take good care that I get it.”

“You shall get it,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Never fear.”

“I’ll send you the cheque this evening,” said Mrs. Rymer, rising. “I’m sure I don’t know why I should trust you. Fools and their money are soon parted, they say. I daresay I’m a fool. You’ve got nerve, to advertise in all the papers that you can make people happy!”

“Those advertisements cost me money,” said Mr. Pyne. “If I could not make my words good, that money would be wasted. I know what causes unhappiness, and consequently I have a clear idea of how to produce an opposite condition.”

Mrs. Rymer shook her head doubtfully and departed, leaving a cloud of expensive mixed essences behind her.

The handsome Claude Luttrell strolled into the office. “Something in my line?”

Mr. Pyne shook his head. “Nothing so simple,” he said. “No, this is a difficult case. We must, I fear, take a few risks. We must attempt the unusual.”

“Mrs. Oliver?”

Mr. Pyne smiled at the mention of the world-famous novelist. “Mrs. Oliver,” he said, “is really the most conventional of all of us. I have in mind a bold and audacious coup. By the way, you might ring up Dr. Antrobus.”

“Antrobus?”

“Yes. His services will be needed.”

A week later Mrs. Rymer once more entered Mr. Parker Pyne’s office. He rose to receive her.

“This delay, I assure you, has been necessary,” he said. “Many things had to be arranged, and I had to secure the services of an unusual man who had to

come half-across Europe.”

“Oh!” She said it suspiciously. It was constantly present in her mind that she had paid out a cheque for a thousand pounds and the cheque had been cashed.

Mr. Parker Pyne touched a buzzer. A young girl, dark, Oriental looking, but dressed in white nurse’s kit, answered it.

“Is everything ready, Nurse de Sara?”

“Yes. Doctor Constantine is waiting.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Mrs. Rymer with a touch of uneasiness.

“Introduce you to some Eastern magic, dear lady,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Mrs. Rymer followed the nurse up to the next floor. Here she was ushered into a room that bore no relation to the rest of the house. Oriental embroideries covered the walls. There were divans with soft cushions and beautiful rugs on the floor. A man was bending over a coffeepot. He straightened as they entered.

“Doctor Constantine,” said the nurse.

The doctor was dressed in European clothes, but his face was swarthy and his eyes were dark and oblique with a peculiarly piercing power in their glance.

“So this is my patient?” he said in a low, vibrant voice.

“I’m not a patient,” said Mrs. Rymer.

“Your body is not sick,” said the doctor, “but your soul is weary. We of the East know how to cure that disease. Sit down and drink a cup of coffee.”

Mrs. Rymer sat down and accepted a tiny cup of the fragrant brew. As she sipped it the doctor talked.

“Here in the West, they treat only the body. A mistake. The body is only the instrument. A tune is played upon it. It may be a sad, weary tune. It may be a gay tune full of delight. The last is what we shall give you. You have money. You shall spend it and enjoy. Life shall be worth living again. It is easy—easy—so easy. . . .”

A feeling of languor crept over Mrs. Rymer. The figures of the doctor and the nurse grew hazy. She felt blissfully happy and very sleepy. The doctor’s figure grew bigger. The whole world was growing bigger.

The doctor was looking into her eyes. “Sleep,” he was saying. “Sleep. Your eyelids are closing. Soon you will sleep. You will sleep. You will sleep. . . .”

Mrs. Rymer’s eyelids closed. She floated with a wonderful great big world. . . .

When her eyes opened it seemed to her that a long time had passed. She remembered several things vaguely—strange, impossible dreams; then a feeling of waking; then further dreams. She remembered something about a car and the dark, beautiful girl in a nurse’s uniform bending over her.

Anyway, she was properly awake now, and in her own bed.

At least, was it her own bed? It felt different. It lacked the delicious softness of her own bed. It was vaguely reminiscent of days almost forgotten. She moved, and it creaked. Mrs. Rymer’s bed in Park Lane never creaked.

She looked round. Decidedly, this was not Park Lane. Was it a hospital? No, she decided, not a hospital. Nor was it a hotel. It was a bare room, the walls an uncertain shade of lilac. There was a deal washstand with a jug and basin upon it. There was a deal chest of drawers and a tin trunk. There were unfamiliar clothes hanging on pegs. There was the bed covered with a much-mended quilt and there was herself in it.

“Where am I?” said Mrs. Rymer.

The door opened and a plump little woman bustled in. She had red cheeks and a good-humoured air. Her sleeves were rolled up and she wore an

apron.

“There!” she exclaimed. “She’s awake. Come in, doctor.”

Mrs. Rymer opened her mouth to say several things—but they remained unsaid, for the man who followed the plump woman into the room was not in the least like the elegant, swarthy Doctor Constantine. He was a bent old man who peered through thick glasses.

“That’s better,” he said, advancing to the bed and taking up Mrs. Rymer’s wrist. “You’ll soon be better now, my dear.”

“What’s been the matter with me?” demanded Mrs. Rymer.

“You had a kind of seizure,” said the doctor. “You’ve been unconscious for a day or two. Nothing to worry about.”

“Gave us a fright you did, Hannah,” said the plump woman. “You’ve been raving too, saying the oddest things.”

“Yes, yes, Mrs. Gardner,” said the doctor repressively. “But we musn’t excite the patient. You’ll soon be up and about again, my dear.”

“But don’t you worry about the work, Hannah,” said Mrs. Gardner. “Mrs. Roberts has been in to give me a hand and we’ve got on fine. Just lie still and get well, my dear.”

“Why do you call me Hannah?” said Mrs. Rymer.

“Well, it’s your name,” said Mrs. Gardner, bewildered.

“No, it isn’t. My name is Amelia. Amelia Rymer. Mrs. Abner Rymer.”

The doctor and Mrs. Gardner exchanged glances.

“Well, just you lie still,” said Mrs. Gardner.

“Yes, yes; no worry,” said the doctor.

They withdrew. Mrs. Rymer lay puzzling. Why did they call her Hannah, and why had they exchanged that glance of amused incredulity when she had given them her name? Where was she and what had happened?

She slipped out of bed. She felt a little uncertain on her legs, but she walked slowly to the small dormer window and looked out—on a farmyard! Completely mystified, she went back to bed. What was she doing in a farmhouse that she had never seen before?

Mrs. Gardner re-entered the room with a bowl of soup on a tray.

Mrs. Rymer began her questions. “What am I doing in this house?” she demanded. “Who brought me here?”

“Nobody brought you, my dear. It’s your home. Leastways, you’ve lived here for the last five years—and me not suspecting once that you were liable to fits.”

“Lived here! Five years?”

“That’s right. Why, Hannah, you don’t mean that you still don’t remember?”

“I’ve never lived here! I’ve never seen you before.”

“You see, you’ve had this illness and you’ve forgotten.”

“I’ve never lived here.”

“But you have, my dear.” Suddenly Mrs. Gardner darted across to the chest of drawers and brought to Mrs. Rymer a faded photograph in a frame.

It represented a group of four persons: a bearded man, a plump woman (Mrs. Gardner), a tall, lank man with a pleasantly sheepish grin, and somebody in a print dress and apron—herself!

Stupefied, Mrs. Rymer gazed at the photograph. Mrs. Gardner put the soup down beside her and quietly left the room.

Mrs. Rymer sipped the soup mechanically. It was good soup, strong and hot. All the time her brain was in a whirl. Who was mad? Mrs. Gardner or herself? One of them must be! But there was the doctor too.

“I’m Amelia Rymer,” she said firmly to herself. “I know I’m Amelia Rymer and nobody’s going to tell me different.”

She had finished the soup. She put the bowl back on the tray. A folded newspaper caught her eye and she picked it up and looked at the date on it, October 19. What day had she gone to Mr. Parker Pyne’s office? Either the fifteenth or the sixteenth. Then she must have been ill for three days.

“That rascally doctor!” said Mrs. Rymer wrathfully.

All the same, she was a shade relieved. She had heard of cases where people had forgotten who they were for years at a time. She had been afraid some such thing had happened to her.

She began turning the pages of the paper, scanning the columns idly, when suddenly a paragraph caught her eye.

Mrs. Abner Rymer, widow of Abner Rymer, the “button shank” king, was removed yesterday to a private home for mental cases. For the past two days she has persisted in declaring she was not herself, but a servant girl named Hannah Moorhouse.

“Hannah Moorhouse! So that’s it,” said Mrs. Rymer. “She’s me and I’m her. Kind of double, I suppose. Well, we can soon put that right! If that oily hypocrite of a Parker Pyne is up to some game or other—”

But at this minute her eye was caught by the name Constantine staring at her from the printed page. This time it was a headline.

DR. CONSTANTINE'S CLAIM

At a farewell lecture given last night on the eve of his departure for Japan, Dr. Claudius Constantine advanced some startling theories. He declared that it was possible to prove the existence of the soul by transferring a soul from

one body to another. In the course of his experiments in the East he had, he claimed, successfully effected a double transfer—the soul of a hypnotized body A being transferred to a hypnotized body B and the soul of body B to the soul of body A. On recovering from the hypnotic sleep, A declared herself to be B, and B thought herself to be A. For the experiment to succeed, it was necessary to find two people with a great bodily resemblance. It was an undoubted fact that two people resembling each other were en rapport. This was very noticeable in the case of twins, but two strangers, varying widely in social position, but with a marked similarity of feature, were found to exhibit the same harmony of structure.

Mrs. Rymer cast the paper from her. “The scoundrel! The black scoundrel!”

She saw the whole thing now! It was a dastardly plot to get hold of her money. This Hannah Moorhouse was Mr. Pyne’s tool—possibly an innocent one. He and that devil Constantine had brought off this fantastic coup.

But she’d expose him! She’d show him up! She’d have the law on him! She’d tell everyone—

Abruptly Mrs. Rymer came to a stop in the tide of her indignation. She remembered the first paragraph. Hannah Moorhouse had not been a docile tool. She had protested; had declared her individuality. And what had happened?

“Clapped into a lunatic asylum, poor girl,” said Mrs. Rymer.

A chill ran down her spine.

A lunatic asylum. They got you in there and they never let you get out. The more you said you were sane, the less they’d believe you. There you were and there you stayed. No, Mrs. Rymer wasn’t going to run the risk of that.

The door opened and Mrs. Gardner came in.

“Ah, you’ve drunk your soup, my dear. That’s good. You’ll soon be better now.”

“When was I taken ill?” demanded Mrs. Rymer.

“Let me see. It was three days ago—on Wednesday.

That was the fifteenth. You were took bad about four o’clock.”

“Ah!” The ejaculation was fraught with meaning. It had been just about four o’clock when Mrs. Rymer had entered the presence of Doctor Constantine.

“You slipped down in your chair,” said Mrs. Gardner. “Oh!” you says. “Oh!” just like that. And then: “I’m falling asleep,” you says in a dreamy voice. “I’m falling asleep.” And fall asleep you did, and we put you to bed and sent for the doctor, and here you’ve been ever since.”

“I suppose,” Mrs. Rymer ventured, “there isn’t any way you could know who I am—apart from my face, I mean.”

“Well, that’s a queer thing to say,” said Mrs. Gardner. “What is there to go by better than a person’s face, I’d like to know? There’s your birthmark, though, if that satisfies you better.”

“A birthmark?” said Mrs. Rymer, brightening. She had no such thing.

“Strawberry mark just under the right elbow,” said Mrs. Gardner. “Look for yourself, my dear.”

“This will prove it,” said Mrs. Rymer to herself. She knew that she had no strawberry mark under the right elbow. She turned back the sleeve of her nightdress. The strawberry mark was there.

Mrs. Rymer burst into tears.

Four days later Mrs. Rymer rose from her bed. She had thought out several plans of action and rejected them.

She might show the paragraph in the paper to Mrs. Gardner and explain. Would they believe her? Mrs. Rymer was sure they would not.

She might go to the police. Would they believe her? Again she thought not.

She might go to Mr. Pyne's office. That idea undoubtedly pleased her best. For one thing, she would like to tell that oily scoundrel what she thought of him. She was debarred from putting this plan into operation by a vital obstacle. She was at present in Cornwall (so she had learned), and she had no money for the journey to London. Two and fourpence in a worn purse seemed to represent her financial position.

And so, after four days, Mrs. Rymer made a sporting decision. For the present she would accept things! She was Hannah Moorhouse. Very well, she would be Hannah Moorhouse. For the present she would accept that role, and later, when she had saved sufficient money, she would go to London and beard the swindler in his den.

And having thus decided, Mrs. Rymer accepted her role with perfect good temper, even with a kind of sardonic amusement. History was repeating itself indeed. This life reminded her of her girlhood. How long ago that seemed!

The work was a bit hard after her years of soft living, but after the first week she found herself slipping into the ways of the farm.

Mrs. Gardner was a good-tempered, kindly woman. Her husband, a big, taciturn man, was kindly also. The lank, shambling man of the photograph had gone; another farmhand came in his stead, a good-humoured giant of forty-five, slow of speech and thought, but with a shy twinkle in his blue eyes.

The weeks went by. At last the day came when Mrs. Rymer had enough money to pay her fare to London. But she did not go. She put it off. Time enough, she thought. She wasn't easy in her mind about asylums yet. That scoundrel, Parker Pyne, was clever. He'd get a doctor to say she was mad and she'd be clapped away out of sight with no one knowing anything about it.

"Besides," said Mrs. Rymer to herself, "a bit of a change does one good."

She rose early and worked hard. Joe Welsh, the new farmhand, was ill that winter, and she and Mrs. Gardner nursed him. The big man was pathetically dependent on them.

Spring came—lambling time; there were wild flowers in the hedges, a treacherous softness in the air. Joe Welsh gave Hannah a hand with her work. Hannah did Joe's mending.

Sometimes, on Sundays, they went for a walk together. Joe was a widower. His wife had died four years before. Since her death he had, he frankly confessed it, taken a drop too much.

He didn't go much to the Crown nowadays. He bought himself some new clothes. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner laughed.

Hannah made fun of Joe. She teased him about his clumsiness. Joe didn't mind. He looked bashful but happy.

After spring came summer—a good summer that year. Everyone worked hard.

Harvest was over. The leaves were red and golden on the trees.

It was October eighth when Hannah looked up one day from a cabbage she was cutting and saw Mr. Parker Pyne leaning over the fence.

“You!” said Hannah, alias Mrs. Rymer. “You. . . .”

It was some time before she got it all out, and when she had said her say, she was out of breath.

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled blandly. “I quite agree with you,” he said.

“A cheat and a liar, that's what you are!” said Mrs. Rymer, repeating herself. “You with your Constantines and your hypnotizing, and that poor girl Hannah Moorhouse shut up with—loonies.”

“No,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “there you misjudge me. Hannah Moorhouse is not in a lunatic asylum, because Hannah Moorhouse never existed.”

“Indeed?” said Mrs. Rymer. “And what about the photograph of her that I saw with my own eyes?”

“Faked,” said Mr. Pyne. “Quite a simple thing to manage.”

“And the piece in the paper about her?”

“The whole paper was faked so as to include two items in a natural manner which would carry conviction. As it did.”

“That rogue, Doctor Constantine!”

“An assumed name—assumed by a friend of mine with a talent for acting.”

Mrs. Rymer snorted. “Ho! And I wasn’t hypnotized either, I suppose?”

“As a matter of fact, you were not. You drank in your coffee a preparation of Indian hemp. After that, other drugs were administered and you were brought down here by car and allowed to recover consciousness.”

“Then Mrs. Gardner has been in it all the time?” said Mrs. Rymer.

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded.

“Bribed by you, I suppose! Or filled up with a lot of lies!”

“Mrs. Gardner trusts me,” said Mr. Pyne. “I once saved her only son from penal servitude.”

Something in his manner silenced Mrs. Rymer on that tack. “What about the birthmark!” she demanded.

Mr. Pyne smiled. “It is already fading. In another six months it will have disappeared altogether.”

“And what’s the meaning of all this tomfoolery? Making a fool of me, sticking me down here as a servant—me with all that good money in the bank. But I suppose I needn’t ask. You’ve been helping yourself to it, my fine fellow. That’s the meaning of all this.”

“It is true,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “that I did obtain from you, while you were under the influence of drugs, a power of attorney and that during your—er—absence, I have assumed control of your financial affairs, but I can assure you, my dear madam, that apart from that original thousand pounds, no money of yours has found its way into my pocket. As a matter of fact, by judicious investments your financial position is actually improved.” He beamed at her.

“Then why—?” began Mrs. Rymer.

“I am going to ask you a question, Mrs. Rymer,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You are an honest woman. You will answer me honestly, I know. I am going to ask you if you are happy.”

“Happy! That’s a pretty question! Steal a woman’s money and ask her if she’s happy. I like your impudence!”

“You are still angry,” he said. “Most natural. But leave my misdeeds out of it for the moment. Mrs. Rymer, when you came to my office a year ago today, you were an unhappy woman. Will you tell me that you are unhappy now? If so, I apologize, and you are at liberty to take what steps you please against me. Moreover, I will refund the thousand pounds you paid me. Come, Mrs. Rymer, are you an unhappy woman now?”

Mrs. Rymer looked at Mr. Parker Pyne, but she dropped her eyes when she spoke at last.

“No,” she said. “I’m not unhappy.” A tone of wonder crept into her voice. “You’ve got me there. I admit it. I’ve not been as happy as I am now since Abner died. I—I’m going to marry a man who works here—Joe Welsh. Our banns are going up next Sunday; that, is they were going up next Sunday.”

“But now, of course, everything is different.”

Mrs. Rymer’s face flamed. She took a step forward.

“What do you mean, different? Do you think that if I had all the money in the world it would make me a lady? I don’t want to be a lady, thank you; a

helpless good-for-nothing lot they are. Joe's good enough for me and I'm good enough for him. We suit each other and we're going to be happy. As you for, Mr. Nosey Parker, you take yourself off and don't interfere with what doesn't concern you!"

Mr. Parker Pyne took a paper from his pocket and handed it to her. "The power of attorney," he said. "Shall I tear it up? You will assume control of your own fortune now, I take it."

A strange expression came over Mrs. Rymer's face. She thrust back the paper.

"Take it. I've said hard things to you—and some of them you deserved. You're a downy fellow, but all the same I trust you. Seven hundred pounds I'll have in the bank here—that'll buy us a farm we've got our eye on. The rest of it—well, let the hospitals have it."

"You cannot mean to hand over your entire fortune to hospitals?"

"That's just what I do mean. Joe's a dear, good fellow, but he's weak. Give him money and you'd ruin him. I've got him off the drink now, and I'll keep him off it. Thank God, I know my own mind. I'm not going to let money come between me and happiness."

"You are a remarkable woman," said Mr. Pyne slowly. "Only one woman in a thousand would act as you are doing."

"Then only one woman in a thousand's got sense," said Mrs. Rymer.

"I take my hat off to you," said Mr. Parker Pyne, and there was an unusual note in his voice. He raised his hat with solemnity and moved away.

"And Joe's never to know, mind!" Mrs. Rymer called after him.

She stood there with the dying sun behind her, a great blue-green cabbage in her hands, her head thrown back and her shoulders squared. A grand figure of a peasant woman, outlined against the setting sun. . . .

Seven

HAVE YOU GOT EVERYTHING YOU WANT?

“Have You Got Everything You Want?” was first published in the USA in Cosmopolitan, April 1933, and then as “On the Orient Express” in Nash’s Pall Mall, June 1933.

Par ici, madame.”

A tall woman in a mink coat followed her heavily encumbered porter along the platform of the Gare de Lyon.

She wore a dark-brown knitted hat pulled down over one eye and ear. The other side revealed a charming tip-tilted profile and little golden curls clustering over a shell-like ear. Typically an American, she was altogether a very charming-looking creature and more than one man turned to look at her as she walked past the high carriages of the waiting train.

Large plates were stuck in holders on the sides of the carriages.

PARIS-ATHENES. PARIS-BUCHAREST. PARIS-STAMBOUL.

At the last named the porter came to an abrupt halt. He undid the strap which held the suitcases together and they slipped heavily to the ground. “Voici, madame.”

The wagon-lit conductor was standing beside the steps. He came forward, remarking, “Bonsoir, madame,” with an empressement perhaps due to the richness and perfection of the mink coat.

The woman handed him her sleeping car ticket of flimsy paper.

“Number Six,” he said. “This way.”

He sprang nimbly into the train, the woman following him. As she hurried down the corridor after him, she nearly collided with a portly gentleman who was emerging from the compartment next to hers. She had a momentary glimpse of a large bland face with benevolent eyes.

“Voici, madame.”

The conductor displayed the compartment. He threw up the window and signalled to the porter. The lesser employee took in the baggage and put it up on the racks. The woman sat down.

Beside her on the seat she had placed a small scarlet case and her handbag. The carriage was hot, but it did not seem to occur to her to take off her coat. She stared out of the window with unseeing eyes. People were hurrying up and down the platform. There were sellers of newspapers, of pillows, of chocolate, of fruit, of mineral waters. They held up their wares to her, but her eyes looked blankly through them. The Gare de Lyon had faded from her sight. On her face were sadness and anxiety.

“If madame will give me her passport?”

The words made no impression on her. The conductor, standing in the doorway, repeated them. Elsie Jeffries roused herself with a start.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your passport, madame.”

She opened her bag, took out the passport and gave it to him.

“That will be all right, madame, I will attend to everything.” A slight significant pause. “I shall be going with madame as far as Stamboul.”

Elsie drew out a fifty-franc note and handed it to him. He accepted it in a businesslike manner, and inquired when she would like her bed made up and whether she was taking dinner.

These matters settled, he withdrew and almost immediately the restaurant man came rushing down the corridor ringing his little bell frantically, and

bawling out, "Premier service. Premier service."

Elsie rose, divested herself of the heavy fur coat, took a brief glance at herself in the little mirror, and picking up her handbag and jewel case stepped out into the corridor. She had gone only a few steps when the restaurant man came rushing along on his return journey. To avoid him, Elsie stepped back for a moment into the doorway of the adjoining compartment, which was now empty. As the man passed and she prepared to continue her journey to the dining car, her glance fell idly on the label of a suitcase which was lying on the seat.

It was a stout pigskin case, somewhat worn. On the label were the words: "J. Parker Pyne, passenger to Stamboul." The suitcase itself bore the initials "P.P."

A startled expression came over the girl's face. She hesitated a moment in the corridor, then going back to her own compartment she picked up a copy of *The Times* which she had laid down on the table with some magazines and books.

She ran her eye down the advertisement columns on the front page, but what she was looking for was not there. A slight frown on her face, she made her way to the restaurant car.

The attendant allotted her a seat at a small table already tenanted by one person—the man with whom she had nearly collided in the corridor. In fact, the owner of the pigskin suitcase.

Elsie looked at him without appearing to do so. He seemed very bland, very benevolent, and in some way impossible to explain, delightfully reassuring. He behaved in reserved British fashion, and it was not until the fruit was on the table that he spoke.

"They keep these places terribly hot," he said.

"I know," said Elsie. "I wish one could have the window open."

He gave a rueful smile. "Impossible! Every person present except ourselves would protest."

She gave an answering smile. Neither said any more.

Coffee was brought and the usual indecipherable bill. Having laid some notes upon it, Elsie suddenly took her courage in both hands.

"Excuse me," she murmured. "I saw your name upon your suitcase—Parker Pyne. Are you—are you, by any chance—?"

She hesitated and he came quickly to her rescue.

"I believe I am. That is"—he quoted from the advertisement which Elsie had noticed more than once in *The Times*, and for which she had searched vainly just now: " 'Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne.' Yes, I'm that one, all right."

"I see," said Elsie. "How—how extraordinary!"

He shook his head. "Not really. Extraordinary from your point of view, but not from mine." He smiled reassuringly, then leaned forward. Most of the other diners had left the car. "So you are unhappy?" he said.

"I—" began Elsie, and stopped.

"You would not have said 'How extraordinary' otherwise," he pointed out.

Elsie was silent for a minute. She felt strangely soothed by the mere presence of Mr. Parker Pyne. "Ye—es," she admitted at last. "I am—unhappy. At least, I am worried."

He nodded sympathetically.

"You see," she continued, "a very curious thing has happened—and I don't know the least what to make of it."

"Suppose you tell me about it," suggested Mr. Pyne.

Elsie thought of the advertisement. She and Edward had often commented on it and laughed. She had never thought that she . . . perhaps she had better not . . . if Mr. Parker Pyne were a charlatan . . . but he looked—nice!

Elsie made her decision. Anything to get this worry off her mind.

“I’ll tell you. I’m going to Constantinople to join my husband. He does a lot of Oriental business, and this year he found it necessary to go there. He went a fortnight ago. He was to get things ready for me to join him. I’ve been very excited at the thought of it. You see, I’ve never been abroad before. We’ve been in England six months.”

“You and your husband are both American?”

“Yes.”

“And you have not, perhaps, been married very long?”

“We’ve been married a year and a half.”

“Happily?”

“Oh, yes! Edward’s a perfect angel.” She hesitated. “Not, perhaps, very much so to him. Just a little—well, I’d call it straightlaced. Lot of puritan ancestry and all that. But he’s a dear,” she added hastily.

Mr. Parker Pyne looked at her thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he said, “Go on.”

“It was about a week after Edward had started. I was writing a letter in his study, and I noticed that the blotting paper was all new and clean, except for a few lines of writing across it. I’d just been reading a detective story with a clue in the blotter and so, just for fun, I held it up to a mirror. It really was just fun, Mr. Pyne—I mean, he’s such a mild lamb one wouldn’t dream of anything of that kind.”

“Yes, yes; I quite understand.”

“The thing was quite easy to read. First there was the word ‘wife’ then ‘Simplon Express,’ and lower down, ‘just before Venice would be the best time,’ ” She stopped.

“Curious,” said Mr. Pyne. “Distinctly curious. It was your husband’s handwriting?”

“Oh, yes. But I’ve cudgelled my brains and I cannot see under what circumstances he would write a letter with just those words in it.”

“ ‘Just before Venice would be the best time,’ ” repeated Mr. Parker Pyne. “Distinctly curious.”

Mrs. Jeffries was leaning forward looking at him with a flattering hopefulness. “What shall I do?” she asked simply.

“I am afraid,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “that we shall have to wait until before Venice.” He took up a folder from the table. “Here is the schedule time of our train. It arrives at Venice at two twenty-seven tomorrow afternoon.”

They looked at each other.

“Leave it to me,” said Parker Pyne.

It was five minutes past two. The Simplon Express was eleven minutes late. It had passed Mestre about a quarter of an hour before.

Mr. Parker Pyne was sitting with Mrs. Jeffries in her compartment. So far the journey had been pleasant and uneventful. But now the moment had arrived when, if anything was going to happen, it presumably would happen. Mr. Parker Pyne and Elsie faced each other. Her heart was beating fast, and her eyes sought him in a kind of anguished appeal for reassurance.

“Keep perfectly calm,” he said. “You are quite safe. I am here.”

Suddenly a scream broke out from the corridor.

“Oh, look—look! The train is on fire!”

With a bound Elsie and Mr. Parker Pyne were in the corridor. An agitated woman with a Slav countenance was pointing a dramatic finger. Out of one of the front compartments smoke was pouring in a cloud. Mr. Parker Pyne and Elsie ran along the corridor. Others joined them. The compartment in question was full of smoke. The first comers drew back, coughing. The conductor appeared.

“The compartment is empty!” he cried. “Do not alarm yourselves, messieurs et dames. Le feu, it will be controlled.”

A dozen excited questions and answers broke out. The train was running over the bridge that joins Venice to the mainland.

Suddenly Mr. Parker Pyne turned, forced his way through the little pack of people behind him and hurried down the corridor to Elsie’s compartment. The lady with the Slav face was seated in it, drawing deep breaths from the open window.

“Excuse me, madame,” said Parker Pyne. “But this is not your compartment.”

“I know. I know,” said the Slav lady. “Pardon. It is the shock, the emotion—my heart.” She sank back on the seat and indicated the open window. She drew in her breath in great gasps.

Mr. Parker Pyne stood in the doorway. His voice was fatherly and reassuring. “You must not be afraid,” he said. “I do not think for a moment the fire is serious.”

“Not? Ah, what a mercy! I feel restored.” She half rose. “I will return to my compartment.”

“Not just yet.” Mr. Parker Pyne’s hand pressed her gently back. “I will ask you to wait a moment, madame.”

“Monsieur, this is an outrage!”

“Madame, you will remain.”

His voice rang out coldly. The woman sat still looking at him. Elsie joined them.

“It seems it was a smoke bomb,” she said breathlessly. “Some ridiculous practical joke. The conductor is furious. He is asking everybody—” She broke off, staring at the second occupant of the carriage.

“Mrs. Jeffries,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “what do you carry in your little scarlet case?”

“My jewellery.”

“Perhaps you would be so kind as to look and see that everything is there.”

There was immediately a torrent of words from the Slav lady. She broke into French, the better to do justice to her feelings.

In the meantime Elsie had picked up the jewel case. “Oh!” she cried. “It’s unlocked.”

“Et je porterai plainte à la Compagnie des Wagons-Lits,” finished the Slav lady.

“They’re gone!” cried Elsie. “Everything! My diamond bracelet. And the necklace Pop gave me. And the emerald and ruby rings. And some lovely diamond brooches. Thank goodness I was wearing my pearls. Oh, Mr. Pyne, what shall we do?”

“If you will fetch the conductor,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “I will see that this woman does not leave this compartment till he comes.”

“Scélérat! Monstre!” shrieked the Slav lady. She went on to further insults. The train drew in to Venice.

The events of the next half hour may be briefly summarized. Mr. Parker Pyne dealt with several different officials in several different languages—and suffered defeat. The suspected lady consented to be searched—and emerged without a stain on her character. The jewels were not on her.

Between Venice and Trieste Mr. Parker Pyne and Elsie discussed the case.

“When was the last time you actually saw your jewels?”

“This morning. I put away some sapphire earrings I was wearing yesterday and took out a pair of plain pearl ones.”

“And all the jewellery was there intact?”

“Well, I didn’t go through it all, naturally. But it looked the same as usual. A ring or something like that might have been missing, but no more.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded. “Now, when the conductor made up the compartment this morning?”

“I had the case with me—in the restaurant car. I always take it with me. I’ve never left it except when I ran out just now.”

“Therefore,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, “that injured innocent, Madame Subayska, or whatever she calls herself, must have been the thief. But what the devil did she do with the things? She was only in here a minute and a half—just time to open the case with a duplicate key and take out the stuff—yes, but what next?”

“Could she have handed them to anyone else?”

“Hardly. I had turned back and was forcing my way along the corridor. If anyone had come out of this compartment I should have seen them.”

“Perhaps she threw them out of the window to someone.”

“An excellent suggestion; only, as it happens, we were passing over the sea at that moment. We were on the bridge.”

“Then she must have hidden them actually in the carriage.”

“Let’s hunt for them.”

With true transatlantic energy Elsie began to look about. Mr. Parker Pyne participated in the search in a somewhat absent fashion. Reproached for not trying, he excused himself.

“I’m thinking that I must send a rather important telegram at Trieste,” he explained.

Elsie received the explanation coldly. Mr. Parker Pyne had fallen heavily in her estimation.

“I’m afraid you’re annoyed with me, Mrs. Jeffries,” he said meekly.

“Well, you’ve not been very successful,” she retorted.

“But, my dear lady, you must remember I am not a detective. Theft and crime are not in my line at all. The human heart is my province.”

“Well, I was a bit unhappy when I got on this train,” said Elsie, “but nothing to what I am now! I could just cry buckets. My lovely, lovely bracelet—and the emerald ring Edward gave me when we were engaged.”

“But surely you are insured against theft?” Mr. Parker Pyne interpolated.

“Am I? I don’t know. Yes, I suppose I am. But it’s the sentiment of the thing, Mr. Pyne.”

The train slackened speed. Mr. Parker Pyne peered out of the window. “Trieste,” he said. “I must send my telegram.”

“Edward!” Elsie’s face lighted up as she saw her husband hurrying to meet her on the platform at Stamboul. For the moment even the loss of her jewellery faded from her mind. She forgot the curious words she had found on the blotter. She forgot everything except that it was a fortnight since she had seen her husband last, and that in spite of being sober and straightlaced he was really a most attractive person.

They were just leaving the station when Elsie felt a friendly tap on the shoulder and turned to see Mr. Parker Pyne. His bland face was beaming good-naturedly.

“Mrs. Jeffries,” he said, “will you come to see me at the Hotel Tokatlian in half an hour? I think I may have some good news for you.”

Elsie looked uncertainly at Edward. Then she made the introduction. “This—er—is my husband—Mr. Parker Pyne.”

“As I believe your wife wired you, her jewels have been stolen,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I have been doing what I can to help her recover them. I think I may have news for her in about half an hour.”

Elsie looked enquiringly at Edward. He replied promptly: “You’d better go, dear. The Tokatlian, you said, Mr. Pyne? Right; I’ll see she makes it.”

It was just a half an hour later that Elsie was shown into Mr. Parker Pyne’s private sitting room. He rose to receive her.

“You’ve been disappointed in me, Mrs. Jeffries,” he said. “Now, don’t deny it. Well, I don’t pretend to be a magician but I do what I can. Take a look inside here.”

He passed along the table a small stout cardboard box. Elsie opened it. Rings, brooches, bracelets, necklace—they were all there.

“Mr. Pyne, how marvellous! How—how too wonderful!”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled modestly. “I am glad not to have failed you, my dear young lady.”

“Oh, Mr. Pyne, you make me feel just mean! Ever since Trieste I’ve been horrid to you. And now—this. But how did you get hold of them? When? Where?”

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head thoughtfully. “It’s a long story,” he said. “You may hear it one day. In fact, you may hear it quite soon.”

“Why can’t I hear it now?”

“There are reasons,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

And Elsie had to depart with her curiosity unsatisfied.

When she had gone, Mr. Parker Pyne took up his hat and stick and went out into the streets of Pera. He walked along smiling to himself, coming at last to a little café, deserted at the moment, which overlooked the Golden Horn. On the other side, the mosques of Stamboul showed slender minarets against the afternoon sky. It was very beautiful. Mr. Pyne sat down and ordered two coffees. They came thick and sweet. He had just begun to sip his when a man slipped into the seat opposite. It was Edward Jeffries.

“I have ordered some coffee for you,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, indicating the little cup.

Edward pushed the coffee aside. He leaned forward across the table. “How did you know?” he asked.

Mr. Parker Pyne sipped his coffee dreamily. “Your wife will have told you about her discovery on the blotter? No? Oh, but she will tell you; it has slipped her mind for the moment.”

He mentioned Elsie’s discovery.

“Very well; that linked up perfectly with the curious incident that happened just before Venice. For some reason or other you were engineering the theft of your wife’s jewels. But why the phrase ‘just before Venice would be the best time?’ There seemed nonsense in that. Why did you not leave it to your—agent—to choose her own time and place?

“And then, suddenly, I saw the point. Your wife’s jewels were stolen before you yourself left London and were replaced by paste duplicates. But that solution did not satisfy you. You were a high-minded, conscientious young man. You have a horror of some servant or other innocent person being suspected. A theft must actually occur—at a place and in a manner which will leave no suspicion attached to anybody of your acquaintance or household.

“Your accomplice is provided with a key to the jewel box and a smoke bomb. At the correct moment she gives the alarm, darts into your wife’s

compartment, unlocks the jewel case and flings the paste duplicates into the sea. She may be suspected and searched, but nothing can be proved against her, since the jewels are not in her possession.

“And now the significance of the place chosen becomes apparent. If the jewels had merely been thrown out by the side of the line, they might have been found. Hence the importance of the one moment when the train is passing over the sea.”

“In the meantime, you make your arrangements for selling the jewellery here. You have only to hand over the stones when the robbery has actually taken place. My wire, however, reached you in time. You obeyed my instructions and deposited the box of jewellery at the Tokatlian to await my arrival, knowing that otherwise I should keep my threat of placing the matter in the hands of the police. You also obeyed my instructions in joining me here.”

Edward Jeffries looked at Mr. Parker Pyne appealingly. He was a good-looking young man, tall and fair, with a round chin and very round eyes. “How can I make you understand?” he said hopelessly. “To you I must seem just a common thief.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “On the contrary, I should say you are almost painfully honest. I am accustomed to the classification of types. You, my dear sir, fall naturally into the category of victims. Now, tell me the whole story.”

“I can tell you in one word—blackmail.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve seen my wife: you realize what a pure, innocent creature she is—without knowledge or thought of evil.”

“Yes, yes.”

“She has the most marvellously pure ideals. If she were to find out about—about anything I had done, she would leave me.”

“I wonder. But that is not the point. What have you done, my young friend? I presume there is some affair with a woman?”

Edward Jeffries nodded.

“Since your marriage—or before?”

“Before—oh, before.”

“Well, well, what happened?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. This is just the cruel part of it. It was at a hotel in the West Indies. There was a very attractive woman—a Mrs. Rossiter—staying there. Her husband was a violent man; he had the most savage fits of temper. One night he threatened her with a revolver. She escaped from him and came to my room. She was half-crazy with terror. She—she asked me to let her stay there till morning. I—what else could I do?”

Mr. Parker Pyne gazed at the young man, and the young man gazed back with conscious rectitude. Mr. Parker Pyne sighed. “In other words, to put it plainly, you were had for a mug, Mr. Jeffries.”

“Really—”

“Yes, yes. A very old trick—but it often comes off successfully with quixotic young men. I suppose, when your approaching marriage was announced, the screw was turned?”

“Yes. I received a letter. If I did not send a certain sum of money, everything would be disclosed to my prospective father-in-law. How I had—had alienated this young woman’s affection from her husband; how she had been seen coming to my room. The husband would bring a suit for divorce. Really, Mr. Pyne, the whole thing made me out the most utter blackguard.”

He wiped his brow in a harassed manner.

“Yes, yes, I know. And so you paid. And from time to time the screw has been put on again.”

“Yes. This was the last straw. Our business has been badly hit by the slump. I simply could not lay my hands on any ready money. I hit upon this plan.” He picked up his cup of cold coffee, looked at it absently, and drank it. “What am I to do now?” he demanded pathetically. “What am I to do, Mr. Pyne?”

“You will be guided by me,” said Parker Pyne firmly. “I will deal with your tormentors. As to your wife, you will go straight back to her and tell her the truth—or at least a portion of it. The only point where you will deviate from the truth is concerning the actual facts in the West Indies. You must conceal from her the fact that you were—well, had for a mug, as I said before.”

“But—”

“My dear Mr. Jeffries, you do not understand women. If a woman has to choose between a mug and a Don Juan, she will choose Don Juan every time. Your wife, Mr. Jeffries, is a charming, innocent, high-minded girl, and the only way she is going to get any kick out of her life with you is to believe that she has reformed a rake.”

Edward Jeffries was staring at him, openmouthed.

“I mean what I say,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “At the present moment your wife is in love with you, but I see signs that she may not remain so if you continue to present to her a picture of such goodness and rectitude that it is almost synonymous with dullness.”

“Go to her, my boy,” said Mr. Parker Pyne kindly. “Confess everything—that is, as many things as you can think of. Then explain that from the moment you met her you gave up all this life. You even stole so that it might not come to her ears. She will forgive you enthusiastically.”

“But when there’s nothing really to forgive—”

“What is truth?” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “In my experience it is usually the thing that upsets the apple cart! It is a fundamental axiom of married life that you must lie to a woman. She likes it! Go and be forgiven, my boy. And live happily ever afterwards. I daresay your wife will keep a wary eye

on you in future whenever a pretty woman comes along—some men would mind that, but I don't think you will."

"I never want to look at any other woman but Elsie," said Mr. Jeffries simply.

"Splendid, my boy," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "But I shouldn't let her know that if I were you. No woman likes to feel she's taken on too soft a job."

Edward Jeffries rose. "You really think—?"

"I know," said Mr. Parker Pyne, with force.

Eight

THE GATE OF BAGHDAD

“The Gate of Baghdad” was first published as “At the Gate of Baghdad” in Nash’s Pall Mall, June 1933.

“Four great gates has the city of Damascus. . . .”

Mr. Parker Pyne repeated Flecker’s lines softly to himself.

“Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster’s Cavern, Fort of Fear, The Portal of Baghdad am I, the Doorway of Diarbekir.”

He was standing in the streets of Damascus and drawn up outside the Oriental Hotel he saw one of the huge six-wheeled Pullmans that was to transport him and eleven other people across the desert to Baghdad on the morrow.

“Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird? Pass out beneath, O Caravan, Doom’s Caravan, Death’s Caravan!”

Something of a contrast now. Formerly the Gate of Bagdad had been the gate of Death. Four hundred miles of desert to traverse by caravan. Long weary months of travel. Now the ubiquitous petrol-fed monsters did the journey in thirty-six hours.

“What were you saying, Mr. Parker Pyne?”

It was the eager voice of Miss Netta Pryce, youngest and most charming of the tourist race. Though encumbered by a stern aunt with the suspicion of a beard and a thirst for Biblical knowledge, Netta managed to enjoy herself in

many frivolous ways of which the elder Miss Pryce might possibly have not approved.

Mr. Parker Pyne repeated Flecker's lines to her.

"How thrilling," said Netta.

Three men in Air Force uniform were standing near and one of them, an admirer of Netta's, struck in.

"There are still thrills to be got out of the journey," he said. "Even nowadays the convoy is occasionally shot up by bandits. Then there's losing yourself—that happens sometimes. And we are sent out to find you. One fellow was lost for five days in the desert. Luckily he had plenty of water with him. Then there are the bumps. Some bumps! One man was killed. It's the truth I'm telling you! He was asleep and his head struck the top of the car and it killed him."

"In the six-wheeler, Mr. O'Rourke?" demanded the elder Miss Pryce.

"No—not in the six-wheeler," admitted the young man.

"But we must do some sightseeing," cried Netta.

Her aunt drew out a guide book.

Netta edged away.

"I know she'll want me to go to some place where St. Paul was lowered out of a window," she whispered. "And I do so want to see the bazaars."

O'Rourke responded promptly.

"Come with me. We'll start down the Street called Straight—"

They drifted off.

Mr. Parker Pyne turned to a quiet man standing beside him, Hensley by name. He belonged to the public works department of Baghdad.

“Damascus is a little disappointing when one sees it for the first time,” he said apologetically. “A little civilized. Trams and modern houses and shops.”

Hensley nodded. He was a man of few words.

“Not got—back of beyond—when you think you have,” he jerked out.

Another man drifted up, a fair young man wearing an old Etonian tie. He had an amiable but slightly vacant face which at the moment looked worried. He and Hensley were in the same department.

“Hello, Smethurst,” said his friend. “Lost anything?”

Captain Smethurst shook his head. He was a young man of somewhat slow intellect.

“Just looking round,” he said vaguely. Then he seemed to rouse himself. “Ought to have a beano tonight. What?”

The two friends went off together. Mr. Parker Pyne bought a local paper printed in French.

He did not find it very interesting. The local news meant nothing to him and nothing of importance seemed to be going on elsewhere. He found a few paragraphs headed Londres.

The first referred to financial matters. The second dealt with the supposed destination of Mr. Samuel Long, the defaulting financier. His defalcations now amounted to the sum of three millions and it was rumoured that he had reached South America.

“Not too bad for a man just turned thirty,” said Mr. Parker Pyne to himself.

“I beg your pardon?”

Parker Pyne turned to confront an Italian General who had been on the same boat with him from Brindisi to Beirut.

Mr. Parker Pyne explained his remark. The Italian General nodded his head several times.

“He is a great criminal, that man. Even in Italy we have suffered. He inspired confidence all over the world. He is a man of breeding, too, they say.”

“Well, he went to Eton and Oxford,” said Mr. Parker Pyne cautiously.

“Will he be caught, do you think?”

“Depends on how much of a start he got. He may be still in England. He may be—anywhere.”

“Here with us?” the General laughed.

“Possibly.” Mr. Parker Pyne remained serious. “For all you know, General, I may be he.”

The General gave him a startled glance. Then his olive-brown face relaxed into a smile of comprehension.

“Oh! That is very good—very good indeed. But you—”

His eyes strayed downwards from Mr. Parker Pyne’s face.

Mr. Parker Pyne interpreted the glance correctly.

“You mustn’t judge by appearances,” he said. “A little additional—er—embonpoint—is easily managed and has a remarkably ageing effect.”

He added dreamily:

“Then there is hair dye, of course, and face stain, and even a change of nationality.”

General Poli withdrew doubtfully. He never knew how far the English were serious.

Mr. Parker Pyne amused himself that evening by going to a cinema. Afterwards he was directed to a “Nightly Palace of Gaieties.” It appeared to him to be neither a palace nor gay. Various ladies danced with a distinct lack of verve. The applause was languid.

Suddenly Mr. Parker Pyne caught sight of Smethurst. The young man was sitting at a table alone. His face was flushed and it occurred to Mr. Parker Pyne that he had already drunk more than was good for him. He went across and joined the young man.

“Disgraceful, the way these girls treat you,” said Captain Smethurst gloomily. “Bought her two drinks—three drinks—lots of drinks. Then she goes off laughing with some dago. Call it a disgrace.”

Mr. Parker Pyne sympathized. He suggested coffee.

“Got some araq coming,” said Smethurst. “Jolly good stuff. You try it.”

Mr. Parker Pyne knew something of the properties of araq. He employed tact. Smethurst, however, shook his head.

“I’m in a bit of a mess,” he said. “Got to cheer myself up. Don’t know what you’d do in my place. Don’t like to go back on a pal, what? I mean to say—and yet—what’s a fellow to do?”

He studied Mr. Parker Pyne as though noticing him for the first time.

“Who are you?” he demanded with the curtness born of his potations. “What do you do?”

“The confidence trick,” said Mr. Parker Pyne gently.

Smethurst gazed at him in lively concern.

“What—you too?”

Mr. Parker Pyne drew from his wallet a cutting. He laid it on the table in front of Smethurst.

“Are you unhappy? (So it ran.) If so, consult Mr. Parker Pyne.”

Smethurst focused on it after some difficulty.

“Well, I’m damned,” he ejaculated. “You mean to say—people come and tell you things?”

“They confide in me—yes.”

“Pack of idiotic women, I suppose.”

“A good many women,” admitted Mr. Parker Pyne. “But men also. What about you, my young friend? You wanted advice just now?”

“Shut your damned head,” said Captain Smethurst. “No business of anybody’s—anybody’s ’cept mine. Where’s that goddammed araq?”

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

He gave up Captain Smethurst as a bad job.

The convoy for Baghdad started at seven o’clock in the morning. There was a party of twelve. Mr. Parker Pyne and General Poli, Miss Pryce and her niece, three Air Force officers, Smethurst and Hensley and an Armenian mother and son by name Pentemian.

The journey started uneventfully. The fruit trees of Damascus were soon left behind. The sky was cloudy and the young driver looked at it doubtfully once or twice. He exchanged remarks with Hensley.

“Been raining a good bit the other side of Rutbah. Hope we shan’t stick.”

They made a halt at midday and square cardboard boxes of lunch were handed round. The two drivers brewed tea which was served in cardboard cups. They drove on again across the flat interminable plain.

Mr. Parker Pyne thought of the slow caravans and the weeks of journeying.

...

Just at sunset they came to the desert fort of Rutbah.

The great gates were unbarred and the six-wheeler drove in through them into the inner courtyard of the fort.

“This feels exciting,” said Netta.

After a wash she was eager for a short walk. Flight-Lieutenant O’Rourke and Mr. Parker Pyne offered themselves as escorts. As they started the manager came up to them and begged them not to go far away as it might be difficult to find their way back after dark.

“We’ll only go a short way,” O’Rourke promised.

Walking was not, indeed, very interesting owing to the sameness of the surroundings.

Once Mr. Parker Pyne bent and picked something up.

“What is it?” asked Netta curiously.

He held it out to her.

“A prehistoric flint, Miss Pryce—a borer.”

“Did they—kill each other with them?”

“No—it had a more peaceful use. But I expect they could have killed with it if they’d wanted to. It’s the wish to kill that counts—the mere instrument doesn’t matter. Something can always be found.”

It was getting dark, and they ran back to the fort.

After a dinner of many courses of the tinned variety they sat and smoked. At twelve o’clock the six-wheeler was to proceed.

The driver looked anxious.

“Some bad patches near here,” he said. “We may stick.” They all climbed into the big car and settled themselves. Miss Pryce was annoyed not to be able to get at one of her suitcases.

“I should like my bedroom slippers,” she said.

“More likely to need your gum boots,” said Smethurst. “If I know the look of things we’ll be stuck in a sea of mud.”

“I haven’t even got a change of stockings,” said Netta.

“That’s all right. You’ll stay put. Only the stronger sex has to get out and heave.”

“Always carry spare socks,” said Hensley, patting his overcoat pocket. “Never know.”

The lights were turned out. The big car started out into the night.

The going was not too good. They were not jolted as they would have been in a touring car, but nevertheless they got a bad bump now and then.

Mr. Parker Pyne had one of the front seats. Across the aisle was the Armenian lady shrouded in wraps and shawls. Her son was behind her. Behind Mr. Parker Pyne were the two Miss Pryces. The General, Smethurst, Hensley and the R.A.F. men were at the back.

The car rushed on through the night. Mr. Parker Pyne found it hard to sleep. His position was cramped. The Armenian lady’s feet stuck out and encroached on his preserve. She, at any rate, was comfortable.

Everyone else seemed to be asleep. Mr. Parker Pyne felt drowsiness stealing over him, when a sudden jolt threw him towards the roof of the car. He heard a drowsy protest from the back of the six-wheeler. “Steady. Want to break our necks?”

Then the drowsiness returned. A few minutes later, his neck sagging uncomfortably, Mr. Parker Pyne slept. . . .

He was awakened suddenly. The six-wheeler had stopped. Some of the men were getting out. Hensley spoke briefly.

“We’re stuck.”

Anxious to see all there was to see, Mr. Parker Pyne stepped gingerly out in the mud. It was not raining now. Indeed there was a moon and by its light the drivers could be seen frantically at work with jacks and stones, striving to raise the wheels. Most of the men were helping. From the windows of the six-wheeler the three women looked out. Miss Pryce and Netta with interest, the Armenian lady with ill-concealed disgust.

At a command from the driver, the male passengers obediently heaved.

“Where’s that Armenian fellow?” demanded O’Rourke. “Keeping his toes warmed and comfortable like a cat? Let’s have him out too.”

“Captain Smethurst too,” observed General Poli. “He is not with us.”

“The blighter’s asleep still. Look at him.”

True enough, Smethurst still sat in his armchair, his head sagging forward and his whole body slumped down.

“I’ll rouse him,” said O’Rourke.

He sprang in through the door. A minute later he reappeared. His voice had changed.

“I say. I think he’s ill—or something. Where’s the doctor?”

Squadron Leader Loftus, the Air Force doctor, a quiet-looking man with greying hair, detached himself from the group at the wheel.

“What’s the matter with him?” he asked.

“I—don’t know.”

The doctor entered the car. O'Rourke and Parker Pyne followed him. He bent over the sagging figure. One look and touch was enough.

"He's dead," he said quietly.

"Dead? But how?" Questions shot out. "Oh! How dreadful!" from Netta.

Loftus turned round in an irritated manner.

"Must have hit his head against the top," he said. "We went over one bad bump."

"Surely that wouldn't kill him? Isn't there anything else?"

"I can't tell you unless I examine him properly," snapped Loftus. He looked around him with a harassed air. The women were pressing closer. The men outside were beginning to crowd in.

Mr. Parker Pyne spoke to the driver. He was a strong athletic young man. He lifted each female passenger in turn, carrying her across the mud and setting her down on dry land. Madame Pentemian and Netta he managed easily, but he staggered under the weight of the hefty Miss Pryce.

The interior of the six-wheeler was left clear for the doctor to make his examination.

The men went back to their efforts to jack up the car. Presently the sun rose over the horizon. It was a glorious day. The mud was drying rapidly, but the car was still stuck. Three jacks had been broken and so far no efforts had been of any avail. The driver started preparing breakfast—opening tins of sausages and boiling tea.

A little way apart Squadron Leader Loftus was giving his verdict.

"There's no mark or wound on him. As I said, he must have hit his head against the top."

"You're satisfied he died naturally?" asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

There was something in his voice that made the doctor look at him quickly.

“There’s only one other possibility.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that someone hit him on the back of the head with something in the nature of a sandbag.” His voice sounded apologetic.

“That’s not very likely,” said Williamson, the other Air Force officer. He was a cherubic-looking youth. “I mean, nobody could do that without our seeing.”

“If we were asleep,” suggested the doctor.

“Fellow couldn’t be sure of that,” pointed out the other.

“Getting up and all that would have roused someone or other.”

“The only way,” said General Poli, “would be for anyone sitting behind him. He could choose his moment and need not even rise from his seat.”

“Who was sitting behind Captain Smethurst?” asked the doctor.

O’Rourke replied readily.

“Hensley, sir—so that’s no good. Hensley was Smethurst’s best pal.”

There was a silence. Then Mr. Parker Pyne’s voice rose with quiet certainty.

“I think,” he said, “that Flight Lieutenant Williamson has something to tell us.”

“I, sir? I—well—”

“Out with it, Williamson,” said O’Rourke.

“It’s nothing, really—nothing at all.”

“Out with it.”

“It’s only a scrap of conversation I overheard—at Rutbah—in the courtyard. I’d got back into the six-wheeler to look for my cigarette case. I was hunting about. Two fellows were just outside talking. One of them was Smethurst. He was saying—”

He paused.

“Come on, man, out with it.”

“Something about not wanting to let a pal down. He sounded very distressed. Then he said: ‘I’ll hold my tongue till Baghdad—but not a minute afterwards. You’ll have to get out quickly.’ ”

“And the other man?”

“I don’t know sir. I swear I don’t. It was dark and he only said a word or two and that I couldn’t catch.”

“Who amongst you knows Smethurst well?”

“I don’t think the words—a pal—could refer to anyone but Hensley,” said O’Rourke slowly. “I knew Smethurst, but very slightly. Williamson is new out—so is Squadron Leader Loftus. I don’t think either of them have ever met him before.”

Both men agreed.

“You, General?”

“I never saw the young man until we crossed the Lebanon in the same car from Beirut.”

“And that Armenian rat?”

“He couldn’t be a pal,” said O’Rourke with decision. “And no Armenian would have the nerve to kill anyone.”

“I have, perhaps, a small additional piece of evidence,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

He repeated the conversation he had had with Smethurst in the café at Damascus.

“He made use of the phrase—‘don’t like to go back on a pal,’ ” said O’Rourke thoughtfully. “And he was worried.”

“Has no one else anything to add?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

The doctor coughed.

“It may have nothing to do with—” he began.

He was encouraged.

“It was just that I heard Smethurst say to Hensley, ‘You can’t deny that there is a leakage in your department.’ ”

“When was this?”

“Just before starting from Damascus yesterday morning. I thought they were just talking shop. I didn’t imagine—” He stopped.

“My friends, this is interesting,” said the General. “Piece by piece you assemble the evidence.”

“You said a sandbag, doctor,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Could a man manufacture such a weapon?”

“Plenty of sand,” said the doctor drily. He took some up in his hand as he spoke.

“If you put some in a sock,” began O’Rourke and hesitated.

Everyone remembered the two short sentences spoken by Hensley the night before.

“Always carry spare socks. Never know.”

There was a silence. Then Mr. Parker Pyne said quietly, “Squadron Leader Loftus. I believe Mr. Hensley’s spare socks are in the pocket of his overcoat which is now in the car.”

Their eyes went for one minute to where a moody figure was pacing to and fro on the horizon. Hensley had held aloof since the discovery of the dead man. His wish for solitude had been respected since it was known that he and the dead man had been friends.

“Will you get them and bring them here?”

The doctor hesitated.

“I don’t like—” he muttered. He looked again at that pacing figure. “Seems a bit low down—”

“You must get them, please,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“The circumstances are unusual. We are marooned here. And we have got to know the truth. If you will fetch those socks I fancy we shall be a step nearer.”

Loftus turned away obediently.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew General Poli a little aside.

“General, I think it was you who sat across the aisle from Captain Smethurst.”

“That is so.”

“Did anyone get up and pass down the car?”

“Only the English lady, Miss Pryce. She went to the wash place at the back.”

“Did she stumble at all?”

“She lurched with the movement of the car, naturally.”

“She was the only person you saw moving about?”

“Yes.”

The General looked at him curiously and said, “Who are you, I wonder? You take command, yet you are not a soldier.”

“I have seen a good deal of life,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You have travelled, eh?”

“No,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I have sat in an office.”

Loftus returned carrying the socks. Mr. Parker Pyne took them from him and examined them. To the inside of one of them wet sand still adhered.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew a deep breath.

“Now I know,” he said.

All their eyes went to the pacing figure on the horizon.

“I should like to look at the body if I may,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

He went with the doctor to where Smethurst’s body had been laid down covered with a tarpaulin.

The doctor removed the cover.

“There’s nothing to see,” he said.

But Mr. Parker Pyne’s eyes were fixed on the dead man’s tie.

“So Smethurst was an old Etonian,” he said.

Loftus looked surprised.

Then Mr. Parker Pyne surprised him still further.

“What do you know of young Williamson?” he asked.

“Nothing at all. I only met him at Beirut. I’d come from Egypt. But why? Surely—?”

“Well, it’s on his evidence we’re going to hang a man, isn’t it?” said Mr. Parker Pyne cheerfully. “One’s got to be careful.”

He still seemed to be interested in the dead man’s tie and collar. He unfastened the studs and removed the collar. Then he uttered an exclamation.

“See that?”

On the back of the collar was a small round bloodstain.

He peered closer down at the uncovered neck.

“This man wasn’t killed by a blow on the head, doctor,” he said briskly. “He was stabbed—at the base of the skull. You can just see the tiny puncture.”

“And I missed it!”

“You’d got your preconceived notion,” said Mr. Parker Pyne apologetically. “A blow on the head. It’s easy enough to miss this. You can hardly see the wound. A quick stab with a small sharp instrument and death would be instantaneous. The victim wouldn’t even cry out.”

“Do you mean a stiletto? You think the General—?”

“Italians and stilettos go together in the popular fancy—Hallo, here comes a car!”

A touring car appeared over the horizon.

“Good,” said O’Rourke as he came up to join them. “The ladies can go on in that.”

“What about our murderer?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You mean Hensley—?”

“No, I don’t mean Hensley,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I happen to know that Hensley’s innocent.”

“You—but why?”

“Well, you see, he had sand in his sock.”

O’Rourke stared.

“I know my boy,” said Mr. Parker Pyne gently, “it doesn’t sound like sense, but it is. Smethurst wasn’t hit on the head, you see, he was stabbed.”

He paused a minute and then went on.

“Just cast your mind back to the conversation I told you about—the conversation we had in the café. You picked out what was, to you, the significant phrase. But it was another phrase that struck me. When I said to him that I did the Confidence Trick he said, ‘What, you too?’ Doesn’t that strike you as rather curious? I don’t know that you’d describe a series of speculations from a Department as a ‘Confidence Trick.’ Confidence Trick is more descriptive of someone like the absconding Mr. Samuel Long, for instance.”

The doctor started. O’Rourke said: “Yes—perhaps. . . .”

“I said in jest that perhaps the absconding Mr. Long was one of our party. Suppose that this is the truth.”

“What—but it’s impossible!”

“Not at all. What do you know of people besides their passports and the accounts they give of themselves. Am I really Mr. Parker Pyne? Is General Poli really an Italian General? And what of the masculine Miss Pryce senior who needs a shave most distinctly.”

“But he—but Smethurst—didn’t know Long?”

“Smethurst is an old Etonian. Long also, was at Eton. Smethurst may have known him although he didn’t tell you so. He may have recognized him amongst us. And if so, what is he to do? He has a simple mind, and he worries over the matter. He decides at last to say nothing until Baghdad is reached. But after that he will hold his tongue no longer.”

“You think one of us is Long,” said O’Rourke, still dazed.

He drew a deep breath.

“It must be the Italian fellow—it must . . . or what about the Armenian?”

“To make up as a foreigner and to get a foreign passport is really much more difficult than to remain English,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Miss Pryce?” said O’Rourke incredulously.

“No,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “This is our man!”

He laid what seemed an almost friendly hand on the shoulder of the man beside him. But there was nothing friendly in his voice, and the fingers were vice-like in their grip.

“Squadron Leader Loftus or Mr. Samuel Long, it doesn’t matter what you call him!”

“But that’s impossible—impossible,” spluttered O’Rourke. “Loftus has been in the service for years.”

“But you’ve never met him before, have you? He was a stranger to all of you. It isn’t the real Loftus naturally.”

The quiet man found his voice.

“Clever of you to guess. How did you, by the way?”

“Your ridiculous statement that Smethurst had been killed by bumping his head. O’Rourke put that idea into your head when we were standing talking in Damascus yesterday. You thought—how simple! You were the only doctor with us—whatever you said would be accepted. You’d got Loftus’s kit. You’d got his instruments. It was easy to select a neat little tool for your purpose. You lean over to speak to him and as you are speaking you drive the little weapon home. You talk a minute or two longer. It is dark in the car. Who will suspect?

“Then comes the discovery of the body. You give your verdict. But it does not go as easily as you thought. Doubts are raised. You fall back on a second line of defence. Williamson repeats the conversation he has overheard Smethurst having with you. It is taken to refer to Hensley and you add a damaging little invention of your own about a leakage in Hensley’s department. And then I make a final test. I mention the sand and the socks. You are holding a handful of sand. I send you to find the socks so that we may know the truth. But by that I did not mean what you thought I meant. I had already examined Hensley’s socks. There was no sand in either of them. You put it there.”

Mr. Samuel Long lit a cigarette. “I give it up,” he said. “My luck’s turned. Well, I had a good run while it lasted. They were getting hot on my trail when I reached Egypt. I came across Loftus. He was going to join up in Baghdad—and he knew none of them there. It was too good a chance to be missed. I bought him. It cost me twenty thousand pounds. What was that to me? Then, by cursed ill luck, I run into Smethurst—an ass if there ever was one! He was my fag at Eton. He had a bit of hero worship for me in those days. He didn’t like the idea of giving me away. I did my best and at last he promised to say nothing till we reached Baghdad. What chance should I have then? None at all. There was only one way—to eliminate him. But I can assure you I am not a murderer by nature. My talents lie in quite another direction.”

His face changed—contracted. He swayed and pitched forward.

O’Rourke bent over him.

“Probably prussic acid—in the cigarette,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “The gambler has lost his last throw.”

He looked around him—at the wide desert. The sun beat down on him. Only yesterday they had left Damascus—by the Gate of Baghdad.

“Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird?”

Nine

THE HOUSE AT SHIRAZ

“The House at Shiraz” was first published in the USA in *Cosmopolitan*, April 1933, and then as “In the House at Shiraz” in Nash’s *Pall Mall*, June 1933.

It was six in the morning when Mr. Parker Pyne left for Persia after a stop in Baghdad.

The passenger space in the little monoplane was limited, and the small width of the seats was not such as to accommodate the bulk of Mr. Parker Pyne with anything like comfort. There were two fellow travellers—a large, florid man whom Mr. Parker Pyne judged to be of a talkative habit and a thin woman with pursed-up lips and a determined air.

“At any rate,” thought Mr. Parker Pyne, “they don’t look as though they would want to consult me professionally.”

Nor did they. The little woman was an American missionary, full of hard work and happiness, and the florid man was employed by an oil company. They had given their fellow traveller a résumé of their lives before the plane started.

“I am merely a tourist, I am afraid,” Mr. Parker Pyne had said deprecatingly. “I am going to Teheran and Ispahan and Shiraz.”

And the sheer music of the names enchanted him so much as he said them that he repeated them. Teheran. Ispahan. Shiraz.

Mr. Parker Pyne looked out at the country below him. It was flat desert. He felt the mystery of these vast, unpopulated regions.

At Kermanshah the machine came down for passport examinations and customs. A bag of Mr. Parker Pyne’s was opened. A certain small cardboard

box was scrutinized with some excitement. Questions were asked. Since Mr. Parker Pyne did not speak or understand Persian, the matter was difficult.

The pilot of the machine strolled up. He was a fair-haired young German, a fine-looking man, with deep-blue eyes and a weatherbeaten face. "Please?" he inquired pleasantly.

Mr. Parker Pyne, who had been indulging in some excellent realistic pantomime without, it seemed, much success, turned to him with relief. "It's bug powder," he said. "Do you think you could explain it to them?"

The pilot looked puzzled. "Please?"

Mr. Parker Pyne repeated his plea in German. The pilot grinned and translated the sentence into Persian. The grave and sad officials were pleased; their sorrowful faces relaxed; they smiled. One even laughed. They found the idea humorous.

The three passengers took their places in the machine again and the flight continued. They swooped down at Hamadan to drop the mails, but the plane did not stop. Mr. Parker Pyne peered down, trying to see if he could distinguish the rock of Behistun, that romantic spot where Darius describes the extent of his empire and conquests in three different languages—Babylonian, Median and Persian.

It was one o'clock when they arrived at Teheran. There were more police formalities. The German pilot had come up and was standing by smiling as Mr. Parker Pyne finished answering a long interrogation which he had not understood.

"What have I said?" he asked of the German.

"That your father's Christian name is Tourist, that your profession is Charles, that the maiden name of your mother is Baghdad, and that you have come from Harriet."

"Does it matter?"

“Not the least in the world. Just answer something; that is all they need.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was disappointed in Teheran. He found it distressingly modern. He said as much the following evening when he happened to run into Herr Schlagal, the pilot, just as he was entering his hotel. On an impulse he asked the other man to dine, and the German accepted.

The Georgian waiter hovered over them and issued his orders. The food arrived.

When they had reached the stage of *la torte*, a somewhat sticky confection of chocolate, the German said:

“So you go to Shiraz?”

“Yes. I shall fly there. Then I shall come back from Shiraz to Ispahan and Teheran by road. Is it you who will fly me to Shiraz tomorrow?”

“Ach, no. I return to Baghdad.”

“You have been long here?”

“Three years. It has only been established three years, our service. So far, we have never had an accident—*unberufen!*” He touched the table.

Thick cups of sweet coffee were brought. The two men smoked.

“My first passengers were two ladies,” said the German reminiscently.
“Two English ladies.”

“Yes?” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“The one she was a young lady very well born, the daughter of one of your ministers, the—how does one say it?—the Lady Esther Carr. She was handsome, very handsome, but mad.”

“Mad?”

“Completely mad. She lives there at Shiraz in a big native house. She wears Eastern dress. She will see no Europeans. Is that a life for a well born lady to live?”

“There have been others,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “There was Lady Hester Stanhope—”

“This one is mad,” said the other abruptly. “You could see it in her eyes. Just so have I seen the eyes of my submarine commander in the war. He is now in an asylum.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was thoughtful. He remembered Lord Micheldever, Lady Esther Carr’s father, well. He had worked under him when the latter was Home Secretary—a big blond man with laughing blue eyes. He had seen Lady Micheldever once—a noted Irish beauty with her black hair and violet-blue eyes. They were both handsome, normal people, but for all that there was insanity in the Carr family. It cropped up every now and then, after missing a generation. It was odd, he thought, that Herr Schlagal should stress the point.

“And the other lady,” he asked idly.

“The other lady—is dead.”

Something in his voice made Mr. Parker Pyne look up sharply.

“I have a heart,” said Herr Schlagal. “I feel. She was, to me, most beautiful, that lady. You know how it is, these things come over you all of a sudden. She was a flower—a flower.” He sighed deeply. “I went to see them once—at the house at Shiraz. The Lady Esther, she asked me to come. My little one, my flower, she was afraid of something, I could see it. When next I came back from Baghdad, I hear that she is dead. Dead!”

He paused and then said thoughtfully: “It might be that the other one killed her. She was mad, I tell you.”

He sighed, and Mr. Parker Pyne ordered two Benedictines.

“The curaçao, it is good,” said the Georgian waiter, and brought them two curaçaos.

Just after noon the following day, Mr. Parker Pyne had his first view of Shiraz. They had flown over mountain ranges with narrow, desolate valleys between, and all arid, parched, dry wilderness. Then suddenly Shiraz came into view—an emerald-green jewel in the heart of the wilderness.

Mr. Parker Pyne enjoyed Shiraz as he had not enjoyed Teheran. The primitive character of the hotel did not appal him, nor the equally primitive character of the streets.

He found himself in the midst of a Persian holiday. The Nan Ruz festival had begun on the previous evening—the fifteen-day period in which the Persians celebrate their New Years. He wandered through the empty bazaars and passed out into the great open stretch of common on the north side of the city. All Shiraz was celebrating.

One day he walked just outside the town. He had been to the tomb of Hafiz the poet, and it was on returning that he saw, and was fascinated by, a house. A house all tiled in blue and rose and yellow, set in a green garden with water and orange trees and roses. It was, he felt, the house of a dream.

That night he was dining with the English consul and he asked about the house.

“Fascinating place, isn’t it? It was built by a former wealthy governor of Luristan, who had made a good thing out of his official position. An Englishwoman’s got it now. You must have heard of her. Lady Esther Carr. Mad as a hatter. Gone completely native. Won’t have anything to do with anything or anyone British.”

“Is she young?”

“Too young to play the fool in this way. She’s about thirty.”

“There was another Englishwoman with her, wasn’t there? A woman who died?”

“Yes; that was about three years ago. Happened the day after I took up my post here, as a matter of fact. Barham, my predecessor, died suddenly, you know.”

“How did she die?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne bluntly.

“Fell from that courtyard or balcony place on the first floor. She was Lady Esther’s maid or companion, I forget which. Anyway, she was carrying the breakfast tray and stepped back over the edge. Very sad; nothing to be done; cracked her skull on the stone below.”

“What was her name?”

“King, I think; or was it Willis? No, that’s the missionary woman. Rather a nice-looking girl.”

“Was Lady Esther upset?”

“Yes—no. I don’t know. She was very, queer; I couldn’t make her out. She’s a very—well, imperious creature. You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean; she rather scared me with her commanding ways and her dark, flashing eyes.”

He laughed half-apologetically, then looked curiously at his companion. Mr. Parker Pyne was apparently staring into space. The match he had just struck to light his cigarette was burning away unheeded in his hand. It burned down to his fingers and he dropped it with an ejaculation of pain. Then he saw the consul’s astonished expression and smiled.

“I beg your pardon,” he said.

“Wool gathering, weren’t you?”

“Three bags full,” said Mr. Parker Pyne enigmatically.

They talked of other matters.

That evening, by the light of a small oil lamp, Mr. Parker Pyne wrote a letter. He hesitated a good deal over its composition. Yet in the end it was

very simple:

Mr. Parker Pyne presents his compliments to Lady Esther Carr and begs to state that he is staying at the Hotel Fars for the next three days should she wish to consult him.

He enclosed a cutting—the famous advertisement

“That ought to do the trick,” said Mr. Parker Pyne as he got gingerly into his rather uncomfortable bed. “Let me see, nearly three years; yes, it ought to do it.”

On the following day about four o’clock the answer came. It was brought by a Persian servant who knew no English.

Lady Esther Carr will be glad if Mr. Parker Pyne will call upon her at nine o’clock this evening.

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled.

It was the same servant who received him that evening. He was taken through the dark garden and up an outside staircase that led round to the back of the house. From there a door was opened and he passed through into the central court or balcony, which was open to the night. A big divan was placed against the wall and on it reclined a striking figure.

Lady Esther was attired in Eastern robes, and it might have been suspected that one reason for her preference lay in the fact that they suited her rich, Oriental style of beauty. Imperious, the consul called her, and indeed imperious she looked. Her chin was held high and her brows were arrogant.

“You are Mr. Parker Pyne? Sit down there.”

Her hand pointed to a heap of cushions. On the third finger there flashed a big emerald carved with the arms of her family. It was an heirloom and must be worth a small fortune, Mr. Parker Pyne reflected.

He lowered himself obediently, though with a little difficulty. For a man of his figure it is not easy to sit on the ground gracefully.

A servant appeared with coffee. Mr. Parker Pyne took his cup and sipped appreciatively.

His hostess had acquired the Oriental habit of infinite leisure. She did not rush into conversation. She, too, sipped her coffee with half-closed eyes. At last she spoke.

“So you help unhappy people,” she said. “At least, that is what your advertisement claims.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you send it to me? Is it your way of—doing business on your travels?”

There was something decidedly offensive in her voice, but Mr. Parker Pyne ignored it. He answered simply, “No. My idea in travelling is to have a complete holiday from business.”

“Then why send it to me?”

“Because I had reason to believe that you—are unhappy.”

There was a moment’s silence. He was very curious. How would she take that? She gave herself a minute to decide that point. Then she laughed.

“I suppose you thought that anyone who leaves the world, who lives as I do, cut off from my race, from my country, must do so because she is unhappy! Sorrow, disappointment—you think something like that drove me into exile? Oh, well, how should you understand? There—in England—I was a fish out of water. Here I am myself. I am an Oriental at heart. I love this seclusion. I daresay you can’t understand that. To you, I must seem”—she hesitated a moment—“mad.”

“You’re not mad,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

There was a good deal of quiet assurance in his voice. She looked at him curiously.

“But they’ve been saying I am, I suppose. Fools! It takes all kinds to make a world. I’m perfectly happy.”

“And yet you told me to come here,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“I will admit I was curious to see you.” She hesitated. “Besides, I never want to go back there—to England—but all the same, sometimes I like to hear what is going on in—”

“In the world you have left?”

She acknowledged the sentence with a nod.

Mr. Parker Pyne began to talk. His voice, mellow and reassuring, began quietly, then rose ever so little as he emphasized this point and that.

He talked of London, of society gossip, of famous men and women, of new restaurants and new nightclubs, of race meetings and shooting parties and country-house scandals. He talked of clothes, of fashions from Paris, of little shops in unfashionable streets where marvellous bargains could be had.

He described theatres and cinemas, he gave film news, he described the building of new garden suburbs, he talked of bulbs and gardening, and he came last to a homely description of London in the evening, with the trams and buses and the hurrying crowds going homeward after the day’s work and of the little homes awaiting them, and of the whole strange intimate pattern of English family life.

It was a very remarkable performance, displaying as it did wide and unusual knowledge and a clever marshalling of the facts. Lady Esther’s head had drooped; the arrogance of her poise had been abandoned. For some time her tears had been quietly falling, and now that he had finished, she abandoned all pretence and wept openly.

Mr. Parker Pyne said nothing. He sat there watching her. His face had the quiet, satisfied expression of one who has conducted an experiment and obtained the desired result.

She raised her head at last. "Well," she said bitterly, "are you satisfied?"

"I think so—now."

"How shall I bear it; how shall I bear it? Never to leave here; never to see—anyone again!" The cry came as though wrung out of her. She caught herself up, flushing. "Well?" she demanded fiercely. "Aren't you going to make the obvious remark? Aren't you going to say, 'If you want to go home so much, why not do so?' "

"No." Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head. "It's not nearly as easy as that for you."

For the first time a little look of fear crept into her eyes.

"Do you know why I can't go?"

"I think so."

"Wrong." She shook her head. "The reason I can't go is a reason you'd never guess."

"I don't guess," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "I observe—and I classify."

She shook her head. "You don't know anything at all."

"I shall have to convince you, I see," said Mr. Parker Pyne pleasantly.

"When you came out here, Lady Esther, you flew, I believe, by the new German Air Service from Baghdad?"

"Yes?"

"You were flown by a young pilot, Herr Schlagal, who afterwards came here to see you."

“Yes.”

A different “yes” in some indescribable way—a softer “yes.”

“And you had a friend, or companion who—died.” A voice like steel now—cold, offesnive.

“My companion.”

“Her name was—?”

“Muriel King.”

“Were you fond of her?”

“What do you mean, fond?” She paused, checked herself. “She was useful to me.”

She said it haughtily and Mr. Parker Pyne was reminded of the consul’s saying: “You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean.”

“Were you sorry when she died?”

“I—naturally! Really, Mr. Pyne, is it necessary to go into all this?” She spoke angrily, and went on without waiting for an answer: “It has been very good of you to come. But I am a little tired. If you will tell me what I owe you—?”

But Mr. Parker Pyne did not move. He showed no signs of taking offence. He went quietly on with his questions. “Since she died, Herr Schlagal has not been to see you. Suppose he were to come, would you receive him?”

“Certainly not.”

“You refuse absolutely?”

“Absolutely. Herr Schlagal will not be admitted.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully. “You could not say anything else.”

The defensive armour of her arrogance broke down a little. She said uncertainly: “I—I don’t know what you mean.”

“Did you know, Lady Esther, that young Schlagal fell in love with Muriel King? He is a sentimental young man. He still treasures her memory.”

“Does he?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“What was she like?”

“What do you mean, what was she like? How do I know?”

“You must have looked at her sometimes,” said Mr. Parker Pyne mildly.

“Oh, that! She was quite a nice-looking young woman.”

“About your own age?”

“Just about.” There was a pause, and then she said:

“Why do you think that—that Schlagal cared for her?”

“Because he told me so. Yes, yes, in the most unmistakable terms. As I say, he is a sentimental young man. He was glad to confide in me. He was very upset at her dying the way she did.”

Lady Esther sprang to her feet. “Do you believe I murdered her?”

Mr. Parker Pyne did not spring to his feet. He was not a springing kind of man.

“No, my dear child,” he said. “I do not believe that you murdered her, and that being so, I think the sooner you stop this playacting and go home, the better.”

“What do you mean, playacting?”

“The truth is, you lost your nerve. Yes, you did. You lost your nerve badly. You thought you’d be accused of murdering your employer.”

The girl made a sudden movement.

Mr. Parker Pyne went on. “You are not Lady Esther Carr. I knew that before I came here, but I’ve tested you to make sure.” His smile broke out, bland and benevolent.

“When I said my little piece just now, I was watching you, and every time you reacted as Muriel King, not as Esther Carr. The cheap shops, the cinemas, the new garden suburbs, going home by bus and tram—you reacted to all those. Country-house gossip, new nightclubs, the chatter of Mayfair, race meetings—none of these meant anything to you.”

His voice became even more persuasive and fatherly. “Sit down and tell me about it. You didn’t murder Lady Esther, but you thought you might be accused of doing so. Just tell me how it all came about.”

She took a long breath; then she sank down once more on the divan and began to speak. Her words came hurriedly, in little bursts.

“I must begin—at the beginning. I—I was afraid of her. She was mad—not quite mad—just a little. She brought me out here with her. Like a fool I was delighted; I thought it was so romantic. Little fool. That’s what I was, a little fool. There was some business about a chauffeur. She was man-mad—absolutely man-mad. He wouldn’t have anything to do with her, and it got out; her friends got to know about it and laughed. And she broke loose from her family and came out here.

“It was all a pose to save her face—solitude in the desert—all that sort of thing. She would have kept it up for a bit, and then gone back. But she got queerer and queerer. And then there was the pilot. She—took a fancy to him. He came here to see me, and she thought—oh well, you can understand. But he must have made it clear to her. . . .

“And then she suddenly turned on me. She was awful, frightening. She said I should never go home again. She said I was in her power. She said I was a

slave. Just that—a slave. She had the power of life and death over me.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded. He saw the situation unfolding. Lady Esther slowly going over the edge of sanity, as others of her family had gone before her, and the frightened girl, ignorant and untravelled, believing everything that was said to her.

“But one day something in me seemed to snap. I stood up to her. I told her that if it came to it I was stronger than she was. I told her I’d throw her down on to the stones below. She was frightened, really frightened. I suppose she’d just thought me a worm. I took a step toward her—I don’t know what she thought I meant to do. She moved backwards; she—she stepped back off the edge!” Muriel King buried her face in her hands.

“And then?” Mr. Parker Pyne prompted gently.

“I lost my head. I thought they’d say I’d pushed her over. I thought nobody would listen to me. I thought I should be thrown into some awful prison out here.” Her lips worked. Mr. Parker Pyne saw clearly enough the unreasoning fear that had possessed her. “And then it came to me—if it were I! I knew that there would be a new British consul who’d never seen either of us. The other one had died.

“I thought I could manage the servants. To them we were two mad Englishwomen. When one was dead, the other carried on. I gave them good presents of money and told them to send for the British consul. He came and I received him as Lady Esther. I had her ring on my finger. He was very nice and arranged everything. Nobody seemed to have the least suspicion.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded thoughtfully. Lady Esther Carr might be mad as a hatter, but she was still Lady Esther Carr.

“And then afterwards,” continued Muriel, “I wished I hadn’t. I saw that I’d been quite mad myself. I was condemned to stay on here playing a part. I didn’t see how I could ever get away. If I confessed the truth now, it would look more than ever as though I’d murdered her. Oh, Mr. Pyne, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

“Do?” Mr. Parker Pyne rose to his feet as briskly as his figure allowed. “My dear child, you will come with me now to the British consul, who is a very amiable and kindly man. There will be certain unpleasant formalities to go through. I don’t promise you that it will be all plain sailing, but you won’t be hanged for murder. By the way, why was the breakfast tray found with the body?”

“I threw it over. I—I thought it would look more like me to have a tray there. Was it silly of me?”

“It was rather a clever touch,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “In fact, it was the one point which made me wonder if you might, perhaps, have done away with Lady Esther—that is, until I saw you. When I saw you, I knew that whatever else you might do in your life, you would never kill anyone.”

“Because I haven’t the nerve, you mean?”

“Your reflexes wouldn’t work that way,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, smiling. “Now, shall we go? There’s an unpleasant job to be faced, but I’ll see you through it, and then—home to Streatham Hill—it is Streatham Hill, isn’t it? Yes, I thought so. I saw your face contract when I mentioned one particular bus number. Are you coming, my dear?”

Muriel King hung back. “They’ll never believe me,” she said nervously. “Her family and all. They wouldn’t believe she could act the way she did.”

“Leave it to me,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I know something of the family history, you see. Come, child, don’t go on playing the coward. Remember, there’s a young man sighing his heart out. We had better arrange that it is in his plane you fly to Baghdad.”

The girl smiled and blushed. “I’m ready,” she said simply. Then, as she moved towards the door, she turned back. “You said you knew I was not Lady Esther Carr before you saw me. How could you possibly tell that?”

“Statistics,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Statistics?”

“Yes. Both Lord and Lady Micheldever had blue eyes. When the consul mentioned that their daughter had flashing dark eyes I knew there was something wrong. Brown-eyed people may produce a blue-eyed child, but not the other way about. A scientific fact, I assure you.”

“I think you’re wonderful!” said Muriel King.

Ten

THE PEARL OF PRICE

“The Pearl of Price” was first published as “The Pearl” in Nash’s Pall Mall, July 1933.

The party had had a long and tiring day. They had started from Amman early in the morning with a temperature of ninety-eight in the shade, and had come at last just as it was growing dark into the camp situated in the heart of that city of fantastic and preposterous red rock which is Petra.

There were seven of them, Mr. Caleb P. Blundell, that stout and prosperous American magnate. His dark and good-looking, if somewhat taciturn, secretary, Jim Hurst. Sir Donald Marvel, M.P., a tired-looking English politician. Doctor Carver, a world-renowned elderly archaeologist. A gallant Frenchman, Colonel Dubosc, on leave from Syria. A Mr. Parker Pyne, not perhaps so plainly labelled with his profession, but breathing an atmosphere of British solidity. And lastly, there was Miss Carol Blundell—pretty, spoiled, and extremely sure of herself as the only woman among half a dozen men.

They dined in the big tent, having selected their tents or caves for sleeping in. They talked of politics in the Near East—the Englishman cautiously, the Frenchman discreetly, the American somewhat fatuously, and the archaeologist and Mr. Parker Pyne not at all. Both of them, it seemed, preferred the rôle of listeners. So also did Jim Hurst.

Then they talked of the city they had come to visit.

“It’s just too romantic for words,” said Carol. “To think of those—what do you call ’em—Nabataeans living here all that while ago, almost before time began!”

“Hardly that,” said Mr. Parker Pyne mildly. “Eh, Doctor Carver?”

“Oh, that’s an affair of a mere two thousand years back, and if racketeers are romantic, then I suppose the Nabataeans are too. They were a pack of wealthy blackguards, I should say, who compelled travellers to use their own caravan routes, and saw to it that all other routes were unsafe. Petra was the storehouse of their racketeering profits.”

“You think they were just robbers?” asked Carol. “Just common thieves?”

“Thieves is a less romantic word, Miss Blundell. A thief suggests a pretty pilferer. A robber suggests a larger canvas.”

“What about a modern financier?” suggested Mr. Parker Pyne with a twinkle.

“That’s one for you, Pop!” said Carol.

“A man who makes money benefits mankind,” said Mr. Blundell sententiously.

“Mankind,” murmured Mr. Parker Pyne, “is so ungrateful.”

“What is honesty?” demanded the Frenchman. “It is a nuance, a convention. In different countries it means different things. An Arab is not ashamed of stealing. He is not ashamed of lying. With him it is from whom he steals or to whom he lies that matters.”

“That is the point of view—yes,” agreed Carver.

“Which shows the superiority of the West over the East,” said Blundell.

“When these poor creatures get education—”

Sir Donald entered languidly into the conversation. “Education is rather rot, you know. Teaches fellows a lot of useless things. And what I mean is, nothing alters what you are.”

“You mean?”

“Well, what I mean to say is, for instance, once a thief, always a thief.”

There was a dead silence for a moment. Then Carol began talking feverishly about mosquitoes, and her father backed her up.

Sir Donald, a little puzzled, murmured to his neighbour, Mr. Parker Pyne: “Seems I dropped a brick, what?”

“Curious,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

Whatever momentary embarrassment had been caused, one person had quite failed to notice it. The archaeologist had sat silent, his eyes dreamy and abstracted. When a pause came, he spoke suddenly and abruptly.

“You know,” he said, “I agree with that—at any rate, from the opposite point of view. A man’s fundamentally honest, or he isn’t. You can’t get away from it.”

“You don’t believe that sudden temptation, for instance, will turn an honest man into a criminal?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Impossible!” said Carver.

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head gently. “I wouldn’t say impossible. You see, there are so many factors to take into account. There’s the breaking point, for instance.”

“What do you call the breaking point?” asked young Hurst, speaking for the first time. He had a deep, rather attractive voice.

“The brain is adjusted to carry so much weight. The thing that precipitates the crisis—that turns an honest man into a dishonest one—may be a mere trifle. That is why most crimes are absurd. The cause, nine times out of ten, is that trifle of overweight—the straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

“It is the psychology you talk there, my friend,” said the Frenchman.

“If a criminal were a psychologist, what a criminal he could be!” said Mr. Parker Pyne. His voice dwelt lovingly on the idea. “When you think that of ten people you meet, at least nine of them can be induced to act in any way you please by applying the right stimulus.”

“Oh, explain that!” cried Carol.

“There’s the bullyable man. Shout loud enough at him—and he obeys. There’s the contradictory man. Bully him the opposite way from the way in which you want him to go. Then there’s the suggestible person, the commonest type of all. Those are the people who have seen a motor, because they have heard a motor horn; who see a postman because they hear the rattle of the letter box; who see a knife in a wound because they are told a man has been stabbed; or who will have heard the pistol if they are told a man has been shot.”

“I guess no one could put that sort of stuff over on me,” said Carol incredulously.

“You’re too smart for that, honey,” said her father.

“It is very true what you say,” said the Frenchman reflectively. “The preconceived idea, it deceives the senses.”

Carol yawned. “I’m going to my cave. I’m tired to death. Abbas Effendi said we had to start early tomorrow. He’s going to take us up to the place of sacrifice—whatever that is.”

“It is where they sacrifice young and beautiful girls,” said Sir Donald.

“Mercy, I hope not! Well, goodnight, all. Oh, I’ve dropped my earring.”

Colonel Dubose picked it up from where it had rolled across the table and returned it to her.

“Are they real?” asked Sir Donald abruptly. Discourteous for the moment, he was staring at the two large solitaire pearls in her ears.

“They’re real all right,” said Carol.

“Cost me eighty thousand dollars,” said her father with relish. “And she screws them in so loosely that they fall off and roll about the table. Want to ruin me, girl?”

“I’d say it wouldn’t ruin you even if you had to buy me a new pair,” said Carol fondly.

“I guess it wouldn’t,” her father acquiesced. “I could buy you three pairs of earrings without noticing it in my bank balance.” He looked proudly around.

“How nice for you!” said Sir Donald.

“Well, gentlemen, I think I’ll turn in now,” said Blundell. “Good night.” Young Hurst went with him.

The other four smiled at one another, as though in sympathy over some thought.

“Well,” drawled Sir Donald, “it’s nice to know he wouldn’t miss the money. Purse-proud hog!” he added viciously.

“They have too much money, these Americans,” said Dubosc.

“It is difficult,” said Mr. Parker Pyne gently, “for a rich man to be appreciated by the poor.”

Dubosc laughed. “Envy and malice?” he suggested. “You are right, Monsieur. We all wish to be rich; to buy the pearl earrings several times over. Except, perhaps, Monsieur here.”

He bowed to Doctor Carver who, as seemed usual with him, was once more far away. He was fiddling with a little object in his hand.

“Eh?” he roused himself. “No, I must admit I don’t cover large pearls. Money is always useful, of course.” His tone put it where it belonged. “But look at this,” he said. “Here is something a hundred times more interesting than pearls.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a cylinder seal of black haematite and it’s got a presentation scene engraved on it—a good introducing a suppliant to a more enthroned god.

The suppliant is carrying a kid by way of an offering, and the august god on the throne has the flies kept off him by a flunkey who wields a palm branch fly whisk. That neat inscription mentions the man as a servant of Hammurabi, so that it must have been made just four thousand years ago.”

He took a lump of Plasticine from his pocket and smeared some on the table, then he oiled it with a little vaseline and pressed the seal upon it, rolling it out. Then, with a penknife, he detached a square of the Plasticine and levered it gently up from the table.

“You see?” he said.

The scene he had described was unrolled before them in the Plasticine, clear and sharply defined.

For a moment the spell of the past was laid upon them all. Then, from outside, the voice of Mr. Blundell was raised unmusically.

“Say, you niggers! Change my baggage out of this darned cave and into a tent! The no-see-ums are biting good and hard. I shan’t get a wink of sleep.”

“No-see-ums?” Sir Donald queried.

“Probably sand flies,” said Doctor Carver.

“I like no-see-ums,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “It’s a much more suggestive name.”

The party started early the following morning, getting under way after various exclamations at the colour and marking of the rocks. The “rosered” city was indeed a freak invented by Nature in her most extravagant and colourful mood. The party proceeded slowly, since Doctor Carver walked with his eyes bent on the ground, occasionally pausing to pick up small objects.

“You can always tell an archaeologist—so,” said Colonel Dubosc, smiling. “He regards never the sky, nor the hills, nor the beauties of nature. He walks with head bent, searching.”

“Yes, but what for?” said Carol. “What are the things you are picking up, Doctor Carver?”

With a slight smile the archaeologist held out a couple of muddy fragments of pottery.

“That rubbish!” cried Carol scornfully.

“Pottery is more interesting than gold,” said Doctor Carver. Carol looked disbelieving.

They came to a sharp bend and passed two or three rockcut tombs. The ascent was somewhat trying. The Bedouin guards went ahead, swinging up the precipitous slopes unconcernedly, without a downward glance at the sheer drop on one side of them.

Carol looked rather pale. One guard leaned down from above and extended a hand. Hurst sprang up in front of her and held out his stick like a rail on the precipitous side. She thanked him with a glance, and a minute later stood safely on a broad path of rock. The others followed slowly. The sun was now high and the heat was beginning to be felt.

At last they reached a broad plateau almost at the top. An easy climb led to the summit of a big square block of rock. Blundell signified to the guide that the party would go up alone. The Bedouins disposed themselves comfortably against the rocks and began to smoke. A few short minutes and the others had reached the summit.

It was a curious, bare place. The view was marvellous, embracing the valley on every side. They stood on a plain rectangular floor, with rock basins cut in the side and a kind of sacrificial altar.

“A heavenly place for sacrifices,” said Carol with enthusiasm. “But my, they must have had a time getting the victims up here!”

“There was originally a kind of zigzag rock road,” explained Doctor Carver. “We shall see traces of it as we go down the other way.”

They were some time longer commenting and talking. Then there was a tiny chink, and Doctor Carver said: "I believe you dropped your earring again, Miss Blundell."

Carol clapped a hand to her ear. "Why, so I have."

Dubosc and Hurst began searching about.

"It must be just here," said the Frenchman. "It can't have rolled away, because there is nowhere for it to roll to. The place is like a square box."

"It can't have rolled into a crack?" queried Carol.

"There's not a crack anywhere," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "You can see for yourself. The place is perfectly smooth. Ah, you have found something, Colonel?"

"Only a little pebble," said Dubosc, smiling and throwing it away.

Gradually a different spirit—a spirit of tension—came over the search. They were not said aloud, but the words "eighty thousand dollars" were present in everybody's mind.

"You are sure you had it, Carol?" snapped her father. "I mean, perhaps you dropped it on the way up."

"I had it just as we stepped on to the plateau here," said Carol. "I know, because Doctor Carver pointed out to me that it was loose and he screwed it up for me. That's so, isn't it, Doctor?"

Doctor Carver assented. It was Sir Donald who voiced the thoughts in everybody's mind.

"This is a rather unpleasant business, Mr. Blundell," he said. "You were telling us last night what the value of these earrings is. One of them alone is worth a small fortune. If this earring is not found, and it does not look as though it will be found, every one of us will be under a certain suspicion."

“And for one, I ask to be searched,” broke in Colonel Dubosc. “I do not ask, I demand it as a right!”

“You search me too,” said Hurst. His voice sounded harsh.

“What does everyone else feel?” asked Sir Donald, looking around.

“Certainly,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“An excellent idea,” said Doctor Carver.

“I’ll be in on this too, gentlemen,” said Mr. Blundell. “I’ve got my reasons, though I don’t want to stress them.”

“Just as you like, of course, Mr. Blundell,” said Sir Donald courteously.

“Carol, my dear, will you go down and wait with the guides?”

Without a word the girl left them. Her face was set and grim. There was a despairing look upon it that caught the attention of one member of the party, at least. He wondered just what it meant.

The search proceeded. It was drastic and thorough—and completely unsatisfactory. One thing was certain. No one was carrying the earring on his person. It was a subdued little troop that negotiated the descent and listened halfheartedly to the guide’s descriptions and information.

Mr. Parker Pyne had just finished dressing for lunch when a figure appeared at the door of his tent.

“Mr. Pyne, may I come in?”

“Certainly, my dear young lady, certainly.”

Carol came in and sat down on the bed. Her face had the same grim look upon it that he had noticed earlier in the day.

“You pretend to straighten out things for people when they are unhappy, don’t you?” she demanded.

“I am on holiday, Miss Blundell. I am not taking any cases.”

“Well, you’re going to take this one,” said the girl calmly. “Look here, Mr. Pyne, I’m just as wretched as anyone could well be.”

“What is troubling you?” he asked. “Is it the business of the earring?”

“That’s just it. You’ve said enough. Jim Hurst didn’t take it, Mr. Pyne. I know he didn’t.”

“I don’t quite follow you, Miss Blundell. Why should anyone assume he had?”

“Because of his record. Jim Hurst was once a thief, Mr. Pyne. He was caught in our house. I—I was sorry for him. He looked so young and desperate—”

“And so good-looking,” thought Mr. Parker Pyne.

“I persuaded Pop to give him a chance to make good. My father will do anything for me. Well, he gave Jim his chance and Jim has made good. Father’s come to rely on him and to trust him with all his business secrets. And in the end he’ll come around altogether, or would have if this hadn’t happened.”

“When you say ‘come around’—?”

“I mean that I want to marry Jim and he wants to marry me.”

“And Sir Donald?”

“Sir Donald is Father’s idea. He’s not mine. Do you think I want to marry a stuffed fish like Sir Donald?”

Without expressing any views as to this description of the young Englishman, Mr. Parker Pyne asked: “And Sir Donald himself?”

“I daresay he thinks I’d be good for his impoverished acres,” said Carol scornfully.

Mr. Parker Pyne considered the situation. "I should like to ask you about two things," he said. "Last night the remark was made 'once a thief, always a thief.' "

The girl nodded.

"I see now the reason for the embarrassment that remark seemed to cause."

"Yes, it was awkward for Jim—and for me and Pop too. I was so afraid Jim's face would show something that I just trotted out the first remarks I could think of."

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked: "Just why did your father insist on being searched today?"

"You didn't get that? I did. Pop had it in his mind that I might think the whole business was a frame-up against Jim. You see, he's crazy for me to marry the Englishman. Well, he wanted to show me that he hadn't done the dirty on Jim."

"Dear me," said Mr. Parker Pyne, "this is all very illuminating. In a general sense, I mean. It hardly helps us in our particular inquiry."

"You're not going to hand in your checks?"

"No, no." He was silent a moment, then he said: "What is it exactly you want me to do, Miss Carol?"

"Prove it wasn't Jim who took that pearl."

"And suppose—excuse me—that it was?"

"If you think so, you're wrong—dead wrong."

"Yes, but have you really considered the case carefully? Don't you think the pearl might prove a sudden temptation to Mr. Hurst. The sale of it would bring in a large sum of money—a foundation on which to speculate, shall we say?—which will make him independent, so that he can marry you with or without your father's consent."

“Jim didn’t do it,” said the girl simply.

This time Mr. Parker Pyne accepted her statement. “Well, I’ll do my best.”

She nodded abruptly and left the tent. Mr. Parker Pyne in his turn sat down on the bed. He gave himself up to thought. Suddenly, he chuckled.

“I’m growing slow-witted,” he said aloud. At lunch he was very cheerful.

The afternoon passed peacefully. Most people slept. When Mr. Parker Pyne came into the big tent at a quarter past four only Doctor Carver was there. He was examining some fragments of pottery.

“Ah!” said Mr. Parker Pyne, drawing up a chair to the table. “Just the man I want to see. Can you let me have that bit of Plasticine you carry about?”

The doctor felt in his pockets and produced a stick of Plasticine, which he offered to Mr. Parker Pyne.

“No,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, waving it away, “that’s not the one I want. I want that lump you had last night. To be frank, it’s not the Plasticine I want. It’s the contents of it.”

There was a pause, and then Doctor Carver said quietly, “I don’t think I quite understand you.”

“I think you do,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I want Miss Blundell’s pearl earring.”

There was a minute’s dead silence. Then Carver slipped his hand into his pocket and took out a shapeless lump of Plasticine.

“Clever of you,” he said. His face was expressionless.

“I wish you’d tell me about it,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. His fingers were busy. With a grunt, he extracted a somewhat smeared pearl earring. “Just curiosity, I know,” he added apologetically. “But I should like to hear about it.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Carver, “if you’ll tell me just how you happened to pitch upon me. You didn’t see anything, did you?”

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head. “I just thought about it,” he said.

“It was really sheer accident, to start with,” said Carver. “I was behind you all this morning and I came across it lying in front of me—it must have fallen from the girl’s ear a moment before. She hadn’t noticed it. Nobody had. I picked it up and put it into my pocket, meaning to return it to her as soon as I caught her up. But I forgot.

“And then, halfway up that climb, I began to think. The jewel meant nothing to that fool of a girl—her father would buy her another without noticing the cost. And it would mean a lot to me. The sale of that pearl would equip an expedition.” His impassive face suddenly twitched and came to life. “Do you know the difficulty there is nowadays in raising subscriptions for digging? No, you don’t. The sale of that pearl would make everything easy. There’s a site I want to dig—up in Baluchistan. There’s a whole chapter of the past there waiting to be discovered. . . .

“What you said last night came into my mind—about a suggestible witness. I thought the girl was that type. As we reached the summit I told her her earring was loose. I pretended to tighten it. What I really did was to press the point of a small pencil into her ear. A few minutes later I dropped a little pebble. She was quite ready to swear then that the earring had been in her ear and had just dropped off. In the meantime I pressed the pearl into a lump of Plasticine in my pocket. That’s my story. Not a very edifying one. Now for your turn.”

“There isn’t much of my story,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “You were the only man who’d picked up things from the ground—that’s what made me think of you. And finding that little pebble was significant. It suggested the trick you’d played. And then—”

“Go on,” said Carver.

“Well, you see, you’d talked about honesty a little too vehemently last night. Protesting overmuch—well, you know what Shakespeare says. It

looked, somehow, as though you were trying to convince yourself. And you were a little too scornful about money.”

The face of the man in front of him looked lined and weary. “Well, that’s that,” he said. “It’s all up with me now. You’ll give the girl back her geegaw, I suppose? Odd thing, the barbaric instinct for ornamentation. You find it going back as far as Palaeolithic times. One of the first instincts of the female sex.”

“I think you misjudge Miss Carol,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “She has brains—and what is more, a heart. I think she will keep this business to herself.”

“Father won’t, though,” said the archaeologist.

“I think he will. You see ‘Pop’ has his own reasons for keeping quiet. There’s no forty-thousand-dollar touch about this earring. A mere fiver would cover its value.”

“You mean—?”

“Yes. The girl doesn’t know. She thinks they are genuine, all right. I had my suspicions last night. Mr. Blundell talked a little too much about all the money he had. When things go wrong and you’re caught in the slump—well, the best thing to do is to put a good face on it and bluff. Mr. Blundell was bluffing.”

Suddenly Doctor Carver grinned. It was an engaging small-boy grin, strange to see on the face of an elderly man.

“Then we’re all poor devils together,” he said.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Parker Pyne and quoted, “ ‘A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind.’ ”

Eleven

DEATH ON THE NILE

“Death on the Nile” was first published in the USA in Cosmopolitan, April 1933, and then in Nash’s Pall Mall, July 1933.

Lady Grayle was nervous. From the moment of coming on board the S.S. Fayoum she complained of everything. She did not like her cabin. She could bear the morning sun, but not the afternoon sun. Pamela Grayle, her niece, obligingly gave up her cabin on the other side. Lady Grayle accepted it grudgingly.

She snapped at Miss MacNaughton, her nurse, for having given her the wrong scarf and for having packed her little pillow instead of leaving it out. She snapped at her husband, Sir George, for having just bought her the wrong string of beads. It was lapis she wanted, not carnelian. George was a fool!

Sir George said anxiously, “Sorry, me dear, sorry. I’ll go back and change ’em. Plenty of time.”

She did not snap at Basil West, her husband’s private secretary, because nobody ever snapped at Basil. His smile disarmed you before you began.

But the worst of it fell assuredly to the dragoman—an imposing and richly dressed personage whom nothing could disturb.

When Lady Grayle caught sight of a stranger in a basket chair and realized that he was a fellow passenger, the vials of her wrath were poured out like water.

“They told me distinctly at the office that we were the only passengers! It was the end of the season and there was no one else going!”

“That right lady,” said Mohammed calmly. “Just you and party and one gentleman, that’s all.”

“But I was told that there would be only ourselves.”

“That quite right, lady.”

“It’s not all right! It was a lie! What is that man doing here?”

“He come later, lady. After you take tickets. He only decide to come this morning.”

“It’s an absolute swindle!”

“That’s all right, lady, him very quiet gentleman, very nice, very quiet.”

“You’re a fool! You know nothing about it. Miss MacNaughton, where are you? Oh, there you are. I’ve repeatedly asked you to stay near me. I might feel faint. Help me to my cabin and give me an aspirin, and don’t let Mohammed come near me. He keeps on saying ‘That’s right, lady,’ till I feel I could scream.”

Miss McNaughton proffered an arm without a word.

She was a tall woman of about thirty-five, handsome in a quiet, dark way. She settled Lady Grayle in the cabin, propped her up with cushions, administered an aspirin and listened to the thin flow of complaint.

Lady Grayle was forty-eight. She had suffered since she was sixteen from the complaint of having too much money. She had married that impoverished baronet, Sir George Grayle, ten years before.

She was a big woman, not bad looking as regarded features, but her face was fretful and lined, and the lavish makeup she applied only accentuated the blemishes of time and temper. Her hair had been in turn platinum-blond and henna-red, and was looking tired in consequence. She was overdressed and wore too much jewellery.

“Tell Sir George,” she finished, while the silent Miss MacNaughton waited with an expressionless face—“tell Sir George that he must get that man off the boat! I must have privacy. All I’ve gone through lately—” She shut her eyes.

“Yes, Lady Grayle,” said Miss MacNaughton, and left the cabin.

The offending last-minute passenger was still sitting in the deck chair. He had his back to Luxor and was staring out across the Nile to where the distant hills showed golden above a line of dark green.

Miss MacNaughton gave him a swift, appraising glance as she passed.

She found Sir George in the lounge. He was holding a string of beads in his hand and looking at it doubtfully.

“Tell me, Miss MacNaughton, do you think these will be all right?”

Miss MacNaughton gave a swift glance at the lapis.

“Very nice indeed,” she said.

“You think Lady Grayle will be pleased—eh?”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t say that, Sir George. You see, nothing would please her. That’s the real truth of it. By the way, she sent me with a message to you. She wants you to get rid of this extra passenger.”

Sir George’s jaw dropped. “How can I? What could I say to the fellow?”

“Of course you can’t.” Elsie MacNaughton’s voice was brisk and kindly. “Just say there was nothing to be done.”

She added encouragingly, “It will be all right.”

“You think it will, eh?” His face was ludicrously pathetic.

Elsie MacNaughton’s voice was still kinder as she said: “You really must not take these things to heart, Sir George. It’s just health, you know. Don’t

take it seriously.”

“You think she’s really bad, nurse?”

A shadow crossed the nurse’s face. There was something odd in her voice as she answered: “Yes, I—I don’t quite like her condition. But please don’t worry, Sir George. You mustn’t. You really mustn’t.” She gave him a friendly smile and went out.

Pamela came in, very languid and cool in her white.

“Hallo, Nunks.”

“Hallo, Pam, my dear.”

“What have you got there? Oh, nice!”

“Well, I’m so glad you think so. Do you think your aunt will think so, too?”

“She’s incapable of liking anything. I can’t think why you married the woman, Nunks.”

Sir George was silent. A confused panorama of unsuccessful racing, pressing creditors and a handsome if domineering woman rose before his mental vision.

“Poor old dear,” said Pamela. “I suppose you had to do it. But she does give us both rather hell, doesn’t she?”

“Since she’s been ill—” began Sir George.

Pamela interrupted him.

“She’s not ill! Not really. She can always do anything she wants to. Why, while you were up at Assouan she was as merry as a—a cricket. I bet you Miss MacNaughton knows she’s a fraud.”

“I don’t know what we’d do without Miss MacNaughton,” said Sir George with a sigh.

“She’s an efficient creature,” admitted Pamela. “I don’t exactly dote on her as you do, though, Nunks. Oh, you do! Don’t contradict. You think she’s wonderful. So she is, in a way. But she’s a dark horse. I never know what she’s thinking. Still, she manages the old cat quite well.”

“Look here, Pam, you mustn’t speak of your aunt like that. Dash it all, she’s very good to you.”

“Yes, she pays all our bills, doesn’t she? It’s a hell of a life, though.”

Sir George passed on to a less painful subject. “What are we to do about this fellow who’s coming on the trip? Your aunt wants the boat to herself.”

“Well, she can’t have it,” said Pamela coolly. “The man’s quite presentable. His name’s Parker Pyne. I should think he was a civil servant out of the Records Department—if there is such a thing. Funny thing is, I seem to have heard the name somewhere. Basil!” The secretary had just entered. “Where have I seen the name Parker Pyne?”

“Front page of The Times Agony column,” replied the young man promptly. “ ‘Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne.’ ”

“Never! How frightfully amusing! Let’s tell him all our troubles all the way to Cairo.”

“I haven’t any,” said Basil West simply. “We’re going to glide down the golden Nile, and see temples”—he looked quickly at Sir George, who had picked up a paper—“together.”

The last word was only just breathed, but Pamela caught it. Her eyes met his.

“You’re right, Basil,” she said lightly. “It’s good to be alive.”

Sir George got up and went out. Pamela’s face clouded over.

“What’s the matter, my sweet?”

“My detested aunt by marriage—”

“Don’t worry,” said Basil quickly. “What does it matter what she gets into her head? Don’t contradict her. You see,” he laughed, “it’s good camouflage.”

The benevolent figure of Mr. Parker Pyne entered the lounge. Behind him came the picturesque figure of Mohammed, prepared to say his piece.

“Lady, gentlemen, we start now. In a few minutes we pass temples of Karnak right-hand side. I tell you story now about little boy who went to buy a roasted lamb for his father. . . .”

Mr. Parker Pyne mopped his forehead. He had just returned from a visit to the Temple of Dendera. Riding on a donkey was, he felt, an exercise ill suited to his figure. He was proceeding to remove his collar when a note propped up on the dressing table caught his attention. He opened it. It ran as follows:

Dear Sir,—I should be obliged if you should not visit the Temple of Abydos, but would remain on the boat, as I wish to consult you.

Yours truly,

Ariadne Grayle

A smile creased Mr. Parker Pyne’s large, bland face. He reached for a sheet of paper and unscrewed his fountain pen.

Dear Lady Grayle (he wrote), I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am at present on holiday and am not doing any professional business.

He signed his name and dispatched the letter by a steward. As he completed his change of toilet, another note was brought to him.

Dear Mr. Parker Pyne,—I appreciate the fact that you are on holiday, but I am prepared to pay a fee of a hundred pounds for a consultation.

Yours truly,

Ariadne Grayle

Mr. Parker Pyne's eyebrows rose. He tapped his teeth thoughtfully with his fountain pen. He wanted to see Abydos, but a hundred pounds was a hundred pounds. And Egypt had been even more wickedly expensive than he had imagined.

Dear Lady Grayle (he wrote),—I shall not visit the Temple of Abydos.

Yours faithfully,

J. Parker Pyne

Mr. Parker Pyne's refusal to leave the boat was a source of great grief to Mohammed.

"Very nice temple. All my gentlemen like see that temple. I get you carriage. I get you chair and sailors carry you."

Mr. Parker Pyne refused all these tempting offers.

The others set off.

Mr. Parker Pyne waited on deck. Presently the door of Lady Grayle's cabin opened and the lady herself trailed out on deck.

"Such a hot afternoon," she observed graciously. "I see you have stayed behind, Mr. Pyne. Very wise of you. Shall we have some tea together in the lounge?"

Mr. Parker Pyne rose promptly and followed her. It cannot be denied that he was curious.

It seemed as though Lady Grayle felt some difficulty in coming to the point. She fluttered from this subject to that. But finally she spoke in an altered voice.

“Mr. Pyne, what I am about to tell you is in the strictest confidence! You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Naturally.”

She paused, took a deep breath. Mr. Parker Pyne waited.

“I want to know whether or not my husband is poisoning me.”

Whatever Mr. Parker Pyne had expected, it was not this. He showed his astonishment plainly. “That is a very serious accusation to make, Lady Grayle.”

“Well, I’m not a fool and I wasn’t born yesterday. I’ve had my suspicions for some time. Whenever George goes away I get better. My food doesn’t disagree with me and I feel a different woman. There must be some reason for that.”

“What you say is very serious, Lady Grayle. You must remember I am not a detective. I am, if you like to put it that way, a heart specialist—”

She interrupted him. “Eh—and don’t you think it worries me, all this? It’s not a policeman I want—I can look after myself, thank you—it’s certainty I want. I’ve got to know. I’m not a wicked woman, Mr. Pyne. I act fairly by those who act fairly by me. A bargain’s a bargain. I’ve kept my side of it. I’ve paid my husband’s debts and I’ve not stinted him in money.”

Mr. Parker Pyne had a fleeting pang of pity for Sir George. “And as for the girl she’s had clothes and parties and this, that and the other. Common gratitude is all I ask.”

“Gratitude is not a thing that can be produced to order, Lady Grayle.”

“Nonsense!” said Lady Grayle. She went on: “Well, there it is! Find out the truth for me! Once I know—”

He looked at her curiously. “Once you know, what then, Lady Grayle?”

“That’s my business.” Her lips closed sharply.

Mr. Parker Pyne hesitated a minute, then he said: "You will excuse me, Lady Grayle, but I have the impression that you are not being entirely frank with me."

"That's absurd. I've told you exactly what I want you to find out."

"Yes, but not the reason why?"

Their eyes met. Hers fell first.

"I should think the reason was self-evident," she said.

"No, because I am in doubt upon one point."

"What is that?"

"Do you want your suspicions proved right or wrong?"

"Really, Mr. Pyne!" The lady rose to her feet, quivering with indignation.

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded his head gently. "Yes, yes," he said. "But that doesn't answer my question, you know."

"Oh!" Words seemed to fail her. She swept out of the room.

Left alone, Mr. Parker Pyne became very thoughtful. He was so deep in his own thoughts that he started perceptibly when someone came in and sat down opposite him. It was Miss MacNaughton.

"Surely you're all back very soon," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"The others aren't back. I said I had a headache and came back alone." She hesitated. "Where is Lady Grayle?"

"I should imagine lying down in her cabin."

"Oh, then that's all right. I don't want her to know I've come back."

"You didn't come on her account then?"

Miss MacNaughton shook her head. “No, I came back to see you.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was surprised. He would have said offhand that Miss MacNaughton was eminently capable of looking after troubles herself without seeking outside advice. It seemed that he was wrong.

“I’ve watched you since we all came on board. I think you’re a person of wide experience and good judgement. And I want advice very badly.”

“And yet—excuse me, Miss MacNaughton—but you’re not the type that usually seeks advice. I should say that you were a person who was quite content to rely on her own judgement.”

“Normally, yes. But I am in a very peculiar position.”

She hesitated a moment. “I do not usually talk about my cases. But in this instance I think it is necessary. Mr. Pyne, when I left England with Lady Grayle, she was a straightforward case. In plain language, there was nothing the matter with her. That’s not quite true, perhaps. Too much leisure and too much money do produce a definite pathological condition. Having a few floors to scrub every day and five or six children to look after would have made Lady Grayle a perfectly healthy and a much happier woman.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded.

“As a hospital nurse, one sees a lot of these nervous cases. Lady Grayle enjoyed her bad health. It was my part not to minimize her sufferings, to be as tactful as I could—and to enjoy the trip myself as much as possible.”

“Very sensible,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“But Mr. Pyne, things are not as they were. The suffering that Lady Grayle complains of now is real and not imagined.”

“You mean?”

“I have come to suspect that Lady Grayle is being poisoned.”

“Since when have you suspected this?”

“For the past three weeks.”

“Do you suspect—any particular person?”

Her eyes dropped. For the first time her voice lacked sincerity. “No.”

“I put it to you, Miss MacNaughton, that you do suspect one particular person, and that that person is Sir George Grayle.”

“Oh, no, no, I can’t believe it of him! He is so pathetic, so childlike. He couldn’t be a cold-blooded poisoner.” Her voice had an anguished note in it.

“And yet you have noticed that whenever Sir George is absent his wife is better and that her periods of illness correspond with his return.”

She did not answer.

“What poison do you suspect? Arsenic?”

“Something of that kind. Arsenic or antimony.”

“And what steps have you taken?”

“I have done my utmost to supervise what Lady Grayle eats and drinks.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded. “Do you think Lady Grayle has any suspicion herself?” he asked casually.

“Oh, no, I’m sure she hasn’t.”

“There you are wrong,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Lady Grayle does suspect.”

Miss MacNaughton showed her astonishment.

“Lady Grayle is more capable of keeping a secret than you imagine,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “She is a woman who knows how to keep her own counsel very well.”

“That surprises me very much,” said Miss MacNaughton slowly.

“I should like to ask you one more question, Miss MacNaughton. Do you think Lady Grayle likes you?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

They were interrupted. Mohammed came in, his face beaming, his robes flowing behind him.

“Lady, she hear you come back; she ask for you. She say why you not come to her?”

Elsie MacNaughton rose hurriedly. Mr. Parker Pyne rose also.

“Would a consultation early tomorrow morning suit you?” he asked.

“Yes, that would be the best time. Lady Grayle sleeps late. In the meantime, I shall be very careful.”

“I think Lady Grayle will be careful too.”

Miss MacNaughton disappeared.

Mr. Parker Pyne did not see Lady Grayle till just before dinner. She was sitting smoking a cigarette and burning what seemed to be a letter. She took no notice at all of him, by which he gathered that she was still offended.

After dinner he played bridge with Sir George, Pamela and Basil. Everyone seemed a little distraught, and the bridge game broke up early.

It was some hours later when Mr. Parker Pyne was roused. It was Mohammed who came to him.

“Old lady, she very ill. Nurse, she very frightened. I try to get doctor.”

Mr. Parker Pyne hurried on some clothes. He arrived at the doorway of Lady Grayle’s cabin at the same time as Basil West. Sir George and Pamela were inside. Elsie MacNaughton was working desperately over her patient. As Mr. Parker Pyne arrived, a final convulsion seized the poor lady. Her arched body writhed and stiffened. Then she fell back on her pillows.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew Pamela gently outside.

“How awful!” the girl was half-sobbing. “How awful! Is she, is she—?”

“Dead? Yes, I am afraid it is all over.”

He put her into Basil’s keeping. Sir George came out of the cabin, looking dazed.

“I never thought she was really ill,” he was muttering. “Never thought it for a moment.”

Mr. Parker Pyne pushed past him and entered the cabin.

Elsie MacNaughton’s face was white and drawn. “They have sent for a doctor?” she asked.

“Yes.” Then he said: “Strychnine?”

“Yes. Those convulsions are unmistakable. Oh, I can’t believe it!” She sank into a chair, weeping. He patted her shoulder.

Then an idea seemed to strike him. He left the cabin hurriedly and went to the lounge. There was a little scrap of paper left unburnt in an ashtray. Just a few words were distinguishable:

“Now, that’s interesting,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

Mr. Parker Pyne sat in the room of a prominent Cairo official. “So that’s the evidence,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yes, pretty complete. Man must have been a damned fool.”

“I shouldn’t call Sir George a brainy man.”

“All the same!” The other recapitulated: “Lady Grayle wants a cup of Bovril. The nurse makes it for her. Then she must have sherry in it. Sir George produces the sherry. Two hours later, Lady Grayle dies with

unmistakable signs of strychnine poisoning. A packet of strychnine is found in Sir George's cabin and another packet actually in the pocket of his dinner jacket."

"Very thorough," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Where did the strychnine come from, by the way?"

"There's a little doubt over that. The nurse had some—in case Lady Grayle's heart troubled her—but she's contradicted herself once or twice. First she said her supply was intact, and now she says it isn't."

"Very unlike her not to be sure," was Mr. Parker Pyne's comment.

"They were in it together, in my opinion. They've got a weakness for each other, those two."

"Possibly; but if Miss MacNaughton had been planning murder, she'd have done it a good deal better. She's an efficient young woman."

"Well, there it is. In my opinion, Sir George is in for it. He hasn't a dog's chance."

"Well, well," said Mr. Parker Pyne, "I must see what I can do."

He sought out the pretty niece.

Pamela was white and indignant. "Nunks never did such a thing—never—never—never!"

"Then who did?" said Mr. Parker Pyne placidly.

Pamela came nearer. "Do you know what I think? She did it herself. She's been frightfully queer lately. She used to imagine things."

"What things?"

"Queer things. Basil, for instance. She was always hinting that Basil was in love with her. And Basil and I are—we are—"

“I realize that,” said Mr. Parker Pyne, smiling.

“All that about Basil was pure imagination. I think she had a down on poor little Nunks, and I think she made up that story and told it to you, and then put the strychnine in his cabin and in his pocket and poisoned herself. People have done things like that, haven’t they?”

“They have,” admitted Mr. Parker Pyne. “But I don’t think that Lady Grayle did. She wasn’t, if you’ll allow me to say so, the type.”

“But the delusions?”

“Yes, I’d like to ask Mr. West about that.”

He found the young man in his room. Basil answered his questions readily enough.

“I don’t want to sound fatuous, but she took a fancy to me. That’s why I daren’t let her know about me and Pamela. She’d have had Sir George fire me.”

“You think Miss Grayle’s theory a likely one?”

“Well, it’s possible, I suppose.” The young man was doubtful.

“But not good enough,” said Mr. Parker Pyne quietly. “No, we must find something better.” He became lost in meditation for a minute or two. “A confession would be best,” he said briskly. He unscrewed his fountain pen and produced a sheet of paper. “Just write it out, will you?”

Basil West stared at him in amazement. “Me? What on earth do you mean?”

“My dear young man”—Mr. Parker Pyne sounded almost paternal—“I know all about it. How you made love to the good lady. How she had scruples. How you fell in love with the pretty, penniless niece. How you arranged your plot. Slow poisoning. It might pass for natural death from gastroenteritis—if not, it would be laid to Sir George’s doing, since you were careful to let the attacks coincide with his presence.

“Then your discovery that the lady was suspicious and had talked to me about the matter. Quick action! You abstracted some strychnine from Miss MacNaughton’s store. Planted some of it in Sir George’s cabin, and some in his pocket, and put sufficient into a cachet which you enclosed with a note to the lady, telling her it was a “cachet of dreams.”

“A romantic idea. She’d take it as soon as the nurse had left her, and no one would know anything about it. But you made one mistake, my young man. It is useless asking a lady to burn letters. They never do. I’ve got all that pretty correspondence, including the one about the cachet.”

Basil West had turned green. All his good looks had vanished. He looked like a trapped rat.

“Damn you,” he snarled. “So you know all about it. You damned interfering Nosey Parker.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was saved from physical violence by the appearance of the witnesses he had thoughtfully arranged to have listening outside the half-closed door.

Mr. Parker Pyne was again discussing the case with his friend the high official.

“And I hadn’t a shred of evidence! Only an almost indecipherable fragment, with “Burn this!” on it. I deduced the whole story and tried it on him. It worked. I’d stumbled on the truth. The letters did it. Lady Grayle had burned every scrap he wrote, but he didn’t know that.

“She was really a very unusual woman. I was puzzled when she came to me. What she wanted was for me to tell her that her husband was poisoning her. In that case, she meant to go off with young West. But she wanted to act fairly. Curious character.”

“That poor little girl is going to suffer,” said the other.

“She’ll get over it,” said Mr. Parker Pyne callously. “She’s young. I’m anxious that Sir George should get a little enjoyment before it’s too late.

He's been treated like a worm for ten years. Now, Elsie MacNaughton will be very kind to him."

He beamed. Then he sighed. "I am thinking of going incognito to Greece. I really must have a holiday!"

Twelve

THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

“The Oracle at Delphi” was first published in the USA in Cosmopolitan, April 1933, and then in Nash’s Pall Mall, July 1933.

Mrs. Willard J. Peters did not really care for Greece. And of Delphi she had, in her secret heart, no opinion at all.

Mrs. Peters’ spiritual homes were in Paris, London and the Riviera. She was a woman who enjoyed hotel life, but her idea of a hotel bedroom was a soft-pile carpet, a luxurious bed, a profusion of different arrangements of electric light, including a shaded bedside lamp, plenty of hot and cold water and a telephone beside the bed, by means of which you could order tea, meals, mineral waters, cocktails and speak to your friends.

In the hotel at Delphi there were none of these things. There was a marvellous view from the windows, the bed was clean and so was the whitewashed room. There was a chair, a washstand and a chest of drawers. Baths took place by arrangement and were occasionally disappointing as regarded hot water.

It would, she supposed, be nice to say that you had been to Delphi, and Mrs. Peters had tried hard to take an interest in Ancient Greece, but she found it difficult. Their statuary seemed so unfinished; so lacking in heads and arms and legs. Secretly, she much preferred the handsome marble angel complete with wings which was erected on the late Mr. Willard Peters’ tomb.

But all these secret opinions she kept carefully to herself, for fear her son Willard should despise her. It was for Willard’s sake that she was here, in this chilly and uncomfortable room, with a sulky maid and a disgusted chauffeur in the offing.

For Willard (until recently called Junior—a title which he hated) was Mrs. Peters' eighteen-year-old son, and she worshipped him to distraction. It was Willard who had this strange passion for bygone art. It was Willard, thin, pale, spectacled and dyspeptic, who had dragged his adoring mother on this tour through Greece.

They had been to Olympia, which Mrs. Peters thought a sad mess. She had enjoyed the Parthenon, but she considered Athens a hopeless city. And a visit to Corinth and Mycenae had been agony to both her and the chauffeur.

Delphi, Mrs. Peters thought unhappily, was the last straw. Absolutely nothing to do but walk along the road and look at the ruins. Willard spent long hours on his knees deciphering Greek inscriptions, saying, "Mother, just listen to this! Isn't it splendid?" And then he would read out something that seemed to Mrs. Peters the quintessence of dullness.

This morning Willard had started early to see some Byzantine mosaics. Mrs. Peters, feeling instinctively that Byzantine mosaics would leave her cold (in the literal as well as the spiritual sense), had excused herself.

"I understand, Mother," Willard had said. "You want to be alone just to sit in the theatre or up in the stadium and look down over it and let it sink in."

"That's right, pet," said Mrs. Peters.

"I knew this place would get you," said Willard exultantly and departed.

Now, with a sigh, Mrs. Peters prepared to rise and breakfast.

She came into the dining room to find it empty save for four people. A mother and daughter, dressed in what seemed to Mrs. Peters a most peculiar style (not recognizing the peplum as such), who were discoursing on the art of self-expression in dancing; a plump, middle-aged gentleman who had rescued a suitcase for her when she got off the train and whose name was Thompson; and a newcomer, a middle-aged gentleman with a bald head who had arrived on the preceding evening.

This personage was the last left in the breakfast room, and Mrs. Peters soon fell into conversation with him. She was a friendly woman and liked someone to talk to. Mr. Thompson had been distinctly discouraging in manner (British reserve, Mrs. Peters called it), and the mother and daughter had been very superior and highbrow, though the girl had got on rather well with Willard.

Mrs. Peters found the newcomer a very pleasant person. He was informative without being highbrow. He told her several interesting, friendly little details about the Greeks, which made her feel much more as though they were real people and not just tiresome history out of a book.

Mrs. Peters told her new friend all about Willard and what a clever boy he was, and how Culture might be said to be his middle name. There was something about this benevolent and bland personage which made him easy to talk to.

What he himself did and what his name was, Mrs. Peters did not learn. Beyond the fact that he had been travelling and that he was having a complete rest from business (what business?) he was not communicative about himself.

Altogether, the day passed more quickly than might have been anticipated. The mother and daughter and Mr. Thompson continued to be unsociable. They encountered the latter coming out of the museum, and he immediately turned in the opposite direction.

Mrs. Peters' new friend looked after him with a little frown.

"Now I wonder who that fellow is!" he said.

Mrs. Peters supplied him with the other's name, but could do no more.

"Thompson—Thompson. No, I don't think I've met him before and yet somehow or other his face seems familiar. But I can't place him."

In the afternoon Mrs. Peters enjoyed a quiet nap in a shady spot. The book she took with her to read was not the excellent one on Grecian Art

recommended to her by her son but was, on the contrary, entitled *The River Launch Mystery*. It had four murders in it, three abductions, and a large and varied gang of dangerous criminals. Mrs. Peters found herself both invigorated and soothed by the perusal of it.

It was four o'clock when she returned to the hotel. Willard, she felt sure, would be back by this time. So far was she from any presentiment of evil that she almost forgot to open a note which the proprietor said had been left for her by a strange man during the afternoon.

It was an extremely dirty note. Idly she ripped it open. As she read the first few lines her face blanched and she put out a hand to steady herself. The handwriting was foreign but the language employed was English.

Lady (it began),—This to hand to inform you that your son is being held captive by us in place of great security. No harm shall happen to honoured young gentleman if you obey orders of yours truly. We demand for him ransom of ten thousand English pounds sterling. If you speak of this to hotel proprietor or police or any such person your son will be killed. This is given you to reflect. Tomorrow directions in way of paying money will be given. If not obeyed the honoured young gentleman's ears will be cut off and sent you. And following day if still not obeyed he will be killed. Again this is not idle threat. Let the Kyria reflect again—above all—be silent.

Demetrius the Black Browed

It were idle to describe the poor lady's state of mind. Preposterous and childishly worded as the demand was, it yet brought home to her a grim atmosphere of peril. Willard, her boy, her pet, her delicate, serious Willard.

She would go at once to the police; she would rouse the neighbourhood. But perhaps, if she did—she shivered.

Then, rousing herself, she went out of her room in search of the hotel proprietor—the sole person in the hotel who could speak English.

"It is getting late," she said. "My son has not returned yet."

The pleasant little man beamed at her. “True. Monsieur dismissed the mules. He wished to return on foot. He should have been here by now, but doubtless he has lingered on the way.” He smiled happily.

“Tell me,” said Mrs. Peters abruptly, “have you any bad characters in the neighbourhood?”

Bad characters was a term not embraced by the little man’s knowledge of English. Mrs. Peters made her meaning plainer. She received in reply an assurance that all around Delphi were very good, very quiet people—all well disposed towards foreigners.

Words trembled on her lips, but she forced them back. That sinister threat tied her tongue. It might be the merest bluff. But suppose it wasn’t? A friend of hers in America had had a child kidnapped, and on her informing the police, the child had been killed. Such things did happen.

She was nearly frantic. What was she to do? Ten thousand pounds—what was that?—between forty or fifty thousand dollars! What was that to her in comparison with Willard’s safety? But how could she obtain such a sum? There were endless difficulties just now as regarded money and the drawing of cash. A letter of credit for a few hundred pounds was all she had with her.

Would the bandits understand this? Would they be reasonable? Would they wait?

When her maid came to her, she dismissed the girl fiercely. A bell sounded for dinner, and the poor lady was driven to the dining room. She ate mechanically. She saw no one. The room might have been empty as far as she was concerned.

With the arrival of fruit, a note was placed before her. She winced, but the handwriting was entirely different from that which she had feared to see—a neat, clerkly English hand. She opened it without much interest, but she found its contents intriguing:

At Delphi you can no longer consult the oracle (so it ran), but you can consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Below that there was a cutting of an advertisement pinned to the paper, and at the bottom of the sheet a passport photograph was attached. It was the photograph of her baldheaded friend of the morning.

Mrs. Peters read the printed cutting twice.

Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Happy? Happy? Had anyone ever been so unhappy? It was like an answer to prayer.

Hastily she scribbled on a loose sheet of paper she happened to have in her bag:

Please help me. Will you meet me outside the hotel in ten minutes?

She enclosed it in an envelope and directed the waiter to take it to the gentleman at the table by the window. Ten minutes later, enveloped in a fur coat, for the night was chilly, Mrs. Peters went out of the hotel and strolled slowly along the road to the ruins. Mr. Parker Pyne was waiting for her.

“It’s just the mercy of heaven you’re here,” said Mrs. Peters breathlessly. “But how did you guess the terrible trouble I’m in. That’s what I want to know.”

“The human countenance, my dear madam,” said Mr. Parker Pyne gently. “I knew at once that something had happened, but what it is I am waiting for you to tell me.”

Out it came in a flood. She handed him the letter, which he read by the light of his pocket torch.

“H’m,” he said. “A remarkable document. A most remarkable document. It has certain points—”

But Mrs. Peters was in no mood to listen to a discussion of the finer points of the letter. What was she to do about Willard? Her own dear, delicate Willard.

Mr. Parker Pyne was soothing. He painted an attractive picture of Greek bandit life. They would be especially careful of their captive, since he represented a potential gold mine. Gradually he calmed her down.

“But what am I to do?” wailed Mrs. Peters.

“Wait until tomorrow,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “That is, unless you prefer to go straight to the police.”

Mrs. Peters interrupted him with a shriek of terror. Her darling Willard would be murdered out of hand!

“You think I’ll get Willard back safe and sound?”

“There is no doubt of that,” said Mr. Parker Pyne soothingly. “The only question is whether you can get him back without paying ten thousand pounds.”

“All I want is my boy.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Parker Pyne soothingly. “Who brought the letter, by the way?”

“A man the landlord didn’t know. A stranger.”

“Ah! There are possibilities there. The man who brings the letter tomorrow might be followed. What are you telling the people at the hotel about your son’s absence?”

“I haven’t thought.”

“I wonder, now.” Mr. Parker Pyne reflected. “I think you might quite naturally express alarm and concern at his absence. A search party could be sent out.”

“You don’t think these fiends—?” She choked.

“No, no. So long as there is no word of the kidnapping or the ransom, they cannot turn nasty. After all, you can’t be expected to take your son’s disappearance with no fuss at all.”

“Can I leave it all to you?”

“That is my business,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

They started back towards the hotel again but almost ran into a burly figure.

“Who was that?” asked Mr. Parker Pyne sharply.

“I think it was Mr. Thompson.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

“Thompson, was it? Thompson—hm.”

Mrs. Peters felt as she went to bed that Mr. Parker Pyne’s idea about the letter was a good one. Whoever brought it must be in touch with the bandits. She felt consoled, and fell asleep much sooner than she could ever have believed possible.

When she was dressing on the following morning she suddenly noticed something lying on the floor by the window. She picked it up—and her heart missed a beat. The same dirty, cheap envelope; the same hated characters. She tore it open.

Good morning lady. Have you made reflections? Your son is well and unharmed—so far. But we must have the money. It may not be easy for you to get this sum, but it has been told us that you have with you a necklace of diamonds. Very fine stones. We will be satisfied with that, instead. Listen, this is what you must do. You, or anyone you choose to send must take this necklace and bring it to the Stadium. From there go up to where there is a tree by a big rock. Eyes will watch and see that only one person comes. Then your son will be exchanged for necklace. The time must be tomorrow

six o'clock in the morning just after sunrise. If you put police on us afterwards we shoot your son as your car drives to station.

This is our last word, lady. If no necklace tomorrow morning your son's ears sent you. Next day he die.

With salutations, lady,

Demetrius

Mrs. Peters hurried to find Mr. Parker Pyne. He read the letter attentively.

"Is this true," he asked, "about a diamond necklace?"

"Absolutely. A hundred thousand dollars my husband paid for it."

"Our well-informed thieves," murmured Mr. Parker Pyne.

"What's that you say?"

"I was just considering certain aspects of the affair."

"My word, Mr. Pyne, we haven't got time for aspects. I've got to get my boy back."

"But you are a woman of spirit, Mrs. Peters. Do you enjoy being bullied and cheated out of ten thousand dollars? Do you enjoy giving up your diamonds meekly to a set of ruffians?"

"Well, of course, if you put it like that!" The woman of spirit in Mrs. Peters wrestled with the mother. "How I'd like to get even with them—the cowardly brutes! The very minute I get my boy back, Mr. Pyne, I shall set the whole police of the neighbourhood on them, and, if necessary, I shall hire an armoured car to take Willard and myself to the railway station!" Mrs. Peters was flushed and vindictive.

"Ye—es," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "You see, my dear madam, I'm afraid they will be prepared for that move on your part. They know that once Willard is restored to you nothing will keep you from setting the whole

neighbourhood on the alert. Which leads one to suppose that they have prepared for that move.”

“Well, what do you want to do?”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. “I want to try a little plan of my own.” He looked around the dining room. It was empty and the doors at both ends were closed. “Mrs. Peters, there is a man I know in Athens—a jeweller. He specializes in good artificial diamonds—first-class stuff.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I’ll get him by telephone. He can get here this afternoon, bringing a good selection of stones with him.”

“You mean?”

“He’ll extract the real diamonds and replace them with paste replicas.”

“Why, if that isn’t the cutest thing I’ve ever heard of!” Mrs. Peters gazed at him with admiration.

“Sh! Not so loud. Will you do something for me?”

“Surely.”

“See that nobody comes within earshot of the telephone.”

Mrs. Peters nodded.

The telephone was in the manager’s office. He vacated it obligingly, after having helped Mr. Parker Pyne to obtain the number. When he emerged, he found Mrs. Peters outside.

“I’m just waiting for Mr. Parker Pyne,” she said. “We’re going for a walk.”

“Oh, yes, madam.”

Mr. Thompson was also in the hall. He came towards them and engaged the manager in conversation.

Were there any villas to be let in Delphi? No? But surely there was one above the hotel?

“That belongs to a Greek gentleman, monsieur. He does not let it.”

“And are there no other villas?”

“There is one belonging to an American lady. That is the other side of the village. It is shut up now. And there is one belonging to an English gentleman, an artist—that is on the cliff edge looking down to Itéa.”

Mrs. Peters broke in. Nature had given her a loud voice and she purposely made it louder. “Why,” she said, “I’d just adore to have a villa here! So unspoilt and natural. I’m simply crazy about the place, aren’t you, Mr. Thompson? But of course you must be if you want a villa. Is it your first visit here? You don’t say so.”

She ran on determinedly till Mr. Parker Pyne emerged from the office. He gave her just the faintest smile of approval.

Mr. Thompson walked slowly down the steps and out into the road where he joined the highbrow mother and daughter, who seemed to be feeling the wind cold on their exposed arms.

All went well. The jeweller arrived just before dinner with a car full of other tourists. Mrs. Peters took her necklace to his room. He grunted approval. Then he spoke in French.

“madame peut être tranquille. Je réussirai.” He extracted some tools from his little bag and began work.

At eleven o’clock Mr. Parker Pyne tapped on Mrs. Peters’ door. “Here you are!”

He handed her a little chamois bag. She glanced inside.

“My diamonds!”

“Hush! Here is the necklace with the paste replacing the diamonds. Pretty good, don’t you think?”

“Simply wonderful.”

“Aristopoulous is a clever fellow.”

“You don’t think they’ll suspect?”

“How should they? They know you have the necklace with you. You hand it over. How can they suspect the trick?”

“Well, I think it’s wonderful,” Mrs. Peters reiterated, handing the necklace back to him. “Will you take it to them? Or is that asking too much of you?”

“Certainly I will take it. Just give me the letter, so that I have the directions clear. Thank you. Now, good night and bon courage. Your boy will be with you tomorrow for breakfast.”

“Oh, if only that’s true!”

“Now, don’t worry. Leave everything in my hands.”

Mrs. Peters did not spend a good night. When she slept, she had terrible dreams. Dreams where armed bandits in armoured cars fired off a fusillade at Willard, who was running down the mountain in his pyjamas.

She was thankful to wake. At last came the first glimmer of dawn. Mrs. Peters got up and dressed. She sat—waiting.

At seven o’clock there came a tap on the door. Her throat was so dry she could hardly speak.

“Come in,” she said.

The door opened and Mr. Thompson entered. She stared at him. Words failed her. She had a sinister presentiment of disaster. And yet his voice when he spoke was completely natural and matter-of-fact. It was a rich, bland voice.

“Good morning, Mrs. Peters,” he said.

“How dare you sir! How dare you—”

“You must excuse my unconventional visit at so early an hour,” said Mr. Thompson. “But you see, I have a matter of business to transact.”

Mrs. Peter leaned forward with accusing eyes. “So it was you who kidnapped my boy! It wasn’t bandits at all!”

“It certainly wasn’t bandits. Most unconvincingly done, that part of it, I thought. Inartistic, to say the least of it.”

Mrs. Peters was a woman of a single idea. “Where’s my boy?” she demanded, with the eyes of an angry tigress.

“As a matter of fact,” said Mr. Thompson, “he’s just outside the door.”

“Willard!”

The door was flung open. Willard, sallow and spectacled and distinctly unshaven, was clasped to his mother’s heart. Mr. Thompson stood looking benignly on.

“All the same,” said Mrs. Peters, suddenly recovering herself and turning on him, “I’ll have the law on you for this. Yes, I will.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Mother,” said Willard. “This gentleman rescued me.”

“Where were you?”

“In a house on the cliff point. Just a mile from here.”

“And allow me, Mrs. Peters,” said Mr. Thompson, “to restore your property.”

He handed her a small packet loosely wrapped in tissue paper. The paper fell away and revealed the diamond necklace.

“You need not treasure that other little bag of stones, Mrs. Peters,” said Mr. Thompson, smiling. “The real stones are still in the necklace. The chamois bag contains some excellent imitation stones. As your friend said, Aristopoulous is quite a genius.”

“I just don’t understand a word of all this,” said Mrs. Peters faintly.

“You must look at the case from my point of view,” said Mr. Thompson. “My attention was caught by the use of a certain name. I took the liberty of following you and your fat friend out of doors and I listened—I admit it frankly—to your exceedingly interesting conversation. I found it remarkably suggestive, so much so that I took the manager into my confidence. He took a note of the number to which your plausible friend telephoned and he also arranged that a waiter should listen to your conversation in the dining room this morning.

“The whole scheme worked very clearly. You were being made the victim of a couple of clever jewel thieves. They know all about your diamond necklace; they follow you here; they kidnap your son, and write the rather comic ‘bandit’ letter, and they arrange that you shall confide in the chief instigator of the plot.

“After that, all is simple. The good gentleman hands you a bag of imitation diamonds and—clears out with his pal. This morning, when your son did not appear, you would be frantic. The absence of your friend would lead you to believe that he had been kidnapped too. I gather that they had arranged for someone to go to the villa tomorrow. That person would have discovered your son, and by the time you and he had put your heads together you might have got an inkling of the plot. But by that time the villains would have got an excellent start.”

“And now?”

“Oh, now they are safely under lock and key. I arranged for that.”

“The villain,” said Mrs. Peters, wrathfully remembering her own trustful confidences. “The oily, plausible villain.”

“Not at all a nice fellow,” agreed Mr. Thompson.

“It beats me how you got on to it,” said Willard admiringly. “Pretty smart of you.”

The other shook his head deprecatingly. “No, no,” he said. “When you are travelling incognito and hear your own name being taken in vain—”

Mrs. Peters stared at him. “Who are you?” she demanded abruptly.

“I am Mr. Parker Pyne,” explained that gentleman.

Thirteen

PROBLEM AT POLLENSA BAY

“Problem at Pollensa Bay” was first published in Strand Magazine, November 1935, and then in the USA as “Siren Business” in Liberty, 5 September 1936.

The steamer from Barcelona to Majorca landed Mr. Parker Pyne at Palma in the early hours of the morning—and straightaway he met with disillusionment. The hotels were full! The best that could be done for him was an airless cupboard overlooking an inner court in a hotel in the centre of the town—and with that Mr. Parker Pyne was not prepared to put up. The proprietor of the hotel was indifferent to his disappointment.

“What will you?” he observed with a shrug.

Palma was popular now! The exchange was favourable! Everyone—the English, the Americans—they all came to Majorca in the winter. The whole place was crowded. It was doubtful if the English gentleman would be able to get in anywhere—except perhaps at Formentor where the prices were so ruinous that even foreigners blanched at them.

Mr. Parker Pyne partook of some coffee and a roll and went out to view the cathedral, but found himself in no mood for appreciating the beauties of architecture.

He next had a conference with a friendly taxi driver in inadequate French interlarded with native Spanish, and they discussed the merits and possibilities of Soller, Alcudia, Pollensa and Formentor—where there were fine hotels but very expensive.

Mr. Parker Pyne was goaded to inquire how expensive.

They asked, said the taxi driver, an amount that it would be absurd and ridiculous to pay—was it not well known that the English came here because prices were cheap and reasonable?

Mr. Parker Pyne said that that was quite so, but all the same what sums did they charge at Formentor?

A price incredible!

Perfectly—but WHAT PRICE EXACTLY?

The driver consented at last to reply in terms of figures.

Fresh from the exactions of hotels in Jerusalem and Egypt, the figure did not stagger Mr. Parker Pyne unduly.

A bargain was struck, Mr. Parker Pyne's suitcases were loaded on the taxi in a somewhat haphazard manner, and they started off to drive round the island, trying cheaper hostelry en route but with the final objective of Formentor.

But they never reached that final abode of plutocracy, for after they had passed through the narrow streets of Pollensa and were following the curved line of the seashore, they came to the Hotel Pino d'Oro—a small hotel standing on the edge of the sea looking out over a view that in the misty haze of a fine morning had the exquisite vagueness of a Japanese print. At once Mr. Parker Pyne knew that this, and this only, was what he was looking for. He stopped the taxi, passed through the painted gate with the hope that he would find a resting place.

The elderly couple to whom the hotel belonged knew no English or French. Nevertheless the matter was concluded satisfactorily. Mr. Parker Pyne was allotted a room overlooking the sea, the suitcases were unloaded, the driver congratulated his passenger upon avoiding the monstrous exigencies of "these new hotels," received his fare and departed with a cheerful Spanish salutation.

Mr. Parker Pyne glanced at his watch and perceiving that it was, even now, but a quarter to ten, he went out onto the small terrace now bathed in a dazzling morning light and ordered, for the second time that morning, coffee and rolls.

There were four tables there, his own, one from which breakfast was being cleared away and two occupied ones. At the one nearest him sat a family of father and mother and two elderly daughters—Germans. Beyond them, at the corner of the terrace, sat what were clearly an English mother and son.

The woman was about fifty-five. She had grey hair of a pretty tone—was sensibly but not fashionably dressed in a tweed coat and skirt—and had that comfortable self-possession which marks an Englishwoman used to much travelling abroad.

The young man who sat opposite her might have been twenty-five and he too was typical of his class and age. He was neither good-looking nor plain, tall nor short. He was clearly on the best of terms with his mother—they made little jokes together—and he was assiduous in passing her things.

As they talked, her eye met that of Mr. Parker Pyne. It passed over him with well-bred nonchalance, but he knew that he had been assimilated and labelled.

He had been recognized as English and doubtless, in due course, some pleasant noncommittal remark would be addressed to him.

Mr. Parker Pyne had no particular objection. His own countrymen and women abroad were inclined to bore him slightly, but he was quite willing to pass the time of day in an amiable manner. In a small hotel it caused constraint if one did not do so. This particular woman, he felt sure, had excellent “hotel manners,” as he put it.

The English boy rose from his seat, made some laughing remark and passed into the hotel. The woman took her letters and bag and settled herself in a chair facing the sea. She unfolded a copy of the Continental Daily Mail. Her back was to Mr. Parker Pyne.

As he drank the last drop of his coffee, Mr. Parker Pyne glanced in her direction, and instantly he stiffened. He was alarmed—alarmed for the peaceful continuance of his holiday! That back was horribly expressive. In his time he had classified many such backs. Its rigidity—the tenseness of its poise—without seeing her face he knew well enough that the eyes were bright with unshed tears—that the woman was keeping herself in hand by a rigid effort.

Moving warily, like a much-hunted animal, Mr. Parker Pyne retreated into the hotel. Not half an hour before he had been invited to sign his name in the book lying on the desk. There it was—a neat signature—C. Parker Pyne, London.

A few lines above Mr. Parker Pyne noticed the entries: Mrs. R. Chester, Mr. Basil Chester—Holm Park, Devon.

Seizing a pen, Mr. Parker Pyne wrote rapidly over his signature. It now read (with difficulty) Christopher Pyne.

If Mrs. R. Chester was unhappy in Pollensa Bay, it was not going to be made easy for her to consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Already it had been a source of abiding wonder to that gentleman that so many people he had come across abroad should know his name and have noted his advertisements. In England many thousands of people read the Times every day and could have answered quite truthfully that they had never heard such a name in their lives. Abroad, he reflected, they read their newspapers more thoroughly. No item, not even the advertisement columns, escaped them.

Already his holidays had been interrupted on several occasions. He had dealt with a whole series of problems from murder to attempted blackmail. He was determined in Majorca to have peace. He felt instinctively that a distressed mother might trouble that peace considerably.

Mr. Parker Pyne settled down at the Pino d'Oro very happily. There was a larger hotel not far off, the Mariposa, where a good many English people stayed. There was also quite an artist colony living all round. You could

walk along by the sea to the fishing village where there was a cocktail bar where people met—there were a few shops. It was all very peaceful and pleasant. Girls strolled about in trousers with brightly coloured handkerchiefs tied round the upper halves of their bodies. Young men in berets with rather long hair held forth in “Mac’s Bar” on such subjects as plastic values and abstraction in art.

On the day after Mr. Parker Pyne’s arrival, Mrs. Chester made a few conventional remarks to him on the subject of the view and the likelihood of the weather keeping fine. She then chatted a little with the German lady about knitting, and had a few pleasant words about the sadness of the political situation with two Danish gentlemen who spent their time rising at dawn and walking for eleven hours.

Mr. Parker Pyne found Basil Chester a most likeable young man. He called Mr. Parker Pyne “sir” and listened most politely to anything the older man said. Sometimes the three English people had coffee together after dinner in the evening. After the third day, Basil left the party after ten minutes or so and Mr. Parker Pyne was left *tete-a-tete* with Mrs. Chester.

They talked about flowers and the growing of them, of the lamentable state of the English pound and of how expensive France had become, and of the difficulty of getting good afternoon tea.

Every evening when her son departed, Mr. Parker Pyne saw the quickly concealed tremor of her lips, but immediately she recovered and discoursed pleasantly on the above-mentioned subjects.

Little by little she began to talk of Basil—of how well he had done at school—“he was in the First XI, you know”—of how everyone liked him, of how proud his father would have been of the boy had he lived, of how thankful she had been that Basil had never been “wild.” “Of course I always urge him to be with young people, but he really seems to prefer being with me.”

She said it with a kind of nice modest pleasure in the fact.

But for once Mr. Parker Pyne did not make the usual tactful response he could usually achieve so easily. He said instead:

“Oh! well, there seem to be plenty of young people here—not in the hotel, but round about.”

At that, he noticed, Mrs. Chester stiffened. She said: Of course there were a lot of artists. Perhaps she was very old-fashioned—real art, of course, was different, but a lot of young people just made that sort of thing an excuse for lounging about and doing nothing—and the girls drank a lot too much.

On the following day Basil said to Mr. Parker Pyne:

“I’m awfully glad you turned up here, sir—especially for my mother’s sake. She likes having you to talk to in the evenings.”

“What did you do when you were first here?”

“As a matter of fact we used to play piquet.”

“I see.”

“Of course one gets rather tired of piquet. As a matter of fact I’ve got some friends here—frightfully cheery crowd. I don’t really think my mother approves of them—” He laughed as though he felt this ought to be amusing. “The mater’s very old-fashioned . . . Even girls in trousers shock her!”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“What I tell her is—one’s got to move with the times . . . The girls at home round us are frightfully dull. . . .”

“I see,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

All this interested him well enough. He was a spectator of a miniature drama, but he was not called upon to take part in it.

And then the worst—from Mr. Parker Pyne’s point of view—happened. A gushing lady of his acquaintance came to stay at the Mariposa. They met in

the tea shop in the presence of Mrs. Chester.

The newcomer screamed:

“Why—if it isn’t Mr. Parker Pyne—the one and only Mr. Parker Pyne! And Adela Chester! Do you know each other? Oh, you do? You’re staying at the same hotel? He’s the one and only original wizard, Adela—the marvel of the century—all your troubles smoothed out while you wait! Didn’t you know? You must have heard about him? Haven’t you read his advertisements? ‘Are you in trouble? Consult Mr. Parker Pyne.’ There’s just nothing he can’t do. Husbands and wives flying at each other’s throats and he brings ’em together—if you’ve lost interest in life he gives you the most thrilling adventures. As I say the man’s just a wizard!”

It went on a good deal longer—Mr. Parker Pyne at intervals making modest disclaimers. He disliked the look that Mrs. Chester turned upon him. He disliked even more seeing her return along the beach in close confabulation with the garrulous singer of his praises.

The climax came quicker than he expected. That evening, after coffee, Mrs. Chester said abruptly.

“Will you come into the little salon, Mr. Pyne? There is something I want to say to you.”

He could but bow and submit.

Mrs. Chester’s self-control had been wearing thin—as the door of the little salon closed behind them, it snapped. She sat down and burst into tears.

“My boy, Mr. Parker Pyne. You must save him. We must save him. It’s breaking my heart!”

“My dear lady, as a mere outsider—”

“Nina Wycherley says you can do anything. She said I was to have the utmost confidence in you. She advised me to tell you everything—and that you’d put the whole thing right.”

Inwardly Mr. Parker Pyne cursed the obtrusive Mrs. Wycherley.

Resigning himself he said:

“Well, let us thrash the matter out. A girl, I suppose?”

“Did he tell you about her?”

“Only indirectly.”

Words poured in a vehement stream from Mrs. Chester. “The girl was dreadful. She drank, she swore—she wore no clothes to speak of. Her sister lived out here—was married to an artist—a Dutchman. The whole set was most undesirable. Half of them were living together without being married. Basil was completely changed. He had always been so quiet, so interested in serious subjects. He had thought at one time of taking up archaeology—”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Nature will have her revenge.”

“What do you mean?”

“It isn’t healthy for a young man to be interested in serious subjects. He ought to be making an idiot of himself over one girl after another.”

“Please be serious, Mr. Pyne.”

“I’m perfectly serious. Is the young lady, by any chance, the one who had tea with you yesterday?”

He had noticed her—her grey flannel trousers—the scarlet handkerchief tied loosely around her breast—the vermillion mouth and the fact that she had chosen a cocktail in preference to tea.

“You saw her? Terrible! Not the kind of girl Basil has ever admired.”

“You haven’t given him much chance to admire a girl, have you?”

“I?”

“He’s been too fond of your company! Bad! However, I daresay he’ll get over this—if you don’t precipitate matters.”

“You don’t understand. He wants to marry this girl—Betty Gregg—they’re engaged.”

“It’s gone as far as that?”

“Yes. Mr. Parker Pyne, you must do something. You must get my boy out of this disastrous marriage! His whole life will be ruined.”

“Nobody’s life can be ruined except by themselves.”

“Basil’s will be,” said Mrs. Chester positively.

“I’m not worrying about Basil.”

“You’re not worrying about the girl?”

“No, I’m worrying about you. You’ve been squandering your birthright.”

Mrs. Chester looked at him, slightly taken aback.

“What are the years from twenty to forty? Fettered and bound by personal and emotional relationships. That’s bound to be. That’s living. But later there’s a new stage. You can think, observe life, discover something about other people and the truth about yourself. Life becomes real—significant. You see it as a whole. Not just one scene—the scene you, as an actor, are playing. No man or woman is actually himself (or herself) till after forty-five. That’s when individuality has a chance.”

Mrs. Chester said:

“I’ve been wrapped up in Basil. He’s been everything to me.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have been. That’s what you’re paying for now. Love him as much as you like—but you’re Adela Chester, remember, a person—not just Basil’s mother.”

“It will break my heart if Basil’s life is ruined,” said Basil’s mother.

He looked at the delicate lines of her face, the wistful droop of her mouth. She was, somehow, a lovable woman. He did not want her to be hurt. He said:

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He found Basil Chester only too ready to talk, eager to urge his point of view.

“This business is being just hellish. Mother’s hopeless—prejudiced, narrow-minded. If only she’d let herself, she’d see how fine Betty is.”

“And Betty?”

He sighed.

“Betty’s being damned difficult! If she’d just conform a bit—I mean leave off the lipstick for a day—it might make all the difference. She seems to go out of her way to be—well—modern—when Mother’s about.”

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled.

“Betty and Mother are two of the dearest people in the world, I should have thought they would have taken to each other like hot cakes.”

“You have a lot to learn, young man,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“I wish you’d come along and see Betty and have a good talk about it all.”

Mr. Parker Pyne accepted the invitation readily.

Betty and her sister and her husband lived in a small dilapidated villa a little way back from the sea. Their life was of a refreshing simplicity. Their furniture comprised three chairs, a table and beds. There was a cupboard in the wall that held the bare requirements of cups and plates. Hans was an excitable young man with wild blond hair that stood up all over his head. He spoke very odd English with incredible rapidity, walking up and down

as he did so. Stella, his wife, was small and fair. Betty Gregg had red hair and freckles and a mischievous eye. She was, he noticed, not nearly so made-up as she had been the previous day at the Pino d'Oro.

She gave him a cocktail and said with a twinkle:

“You’re in on the big bust-up?”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded.

“And whose side are you on, big boy? The young lovers—or the disapproving dame?”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Certainly.”

“Have you been very tactful over all this?”

“Not at all,” said Miss Gregg frankly. “But the old cat put my back up.” (She glanced round to make sure that Basil was out of earshot) “That woman just makes me feel mad. She’s kept Basil tied to her apron strings all these years—that sort of thing makes a man look a fool. Basil isn’t a fool really. Then she’s so terribly pukka sahib.”

“That’s not really such a bad thing. It’s merely ‘unfashionable’ just at present.”

Betty Gregg gave a sudden twinkle.

“You mean it’s like putting Chippendale chairs in the attic in Victorian days? Later you get them down again and say, ‘Aren’t they marvellous?’ ”

“Something of the kind.”

Betty Gregg considered.

“Perhaps you’re right. I’ll be honest. It was Basil who put my back up—being so anxious about what impression I’d make on his mother. It drove

me to extremes. Even now I believe he might give me up—if his mother worked on him good and hard.”

“He might,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “If she went about it the right way.”

“Are you going to tell her the right way? She won’t think of it herself, you know. She’ll just go on disapproving and that won’t do the trick. But if you prompted her—”

She bit her lip—raised frank blue eyes to his.

“I’ve heard about you, Mr. Parker Pyne. You’re supposed to know something about human nature.

Do you think Basil and I could make a go of it—or not?”

“I should like an answer to three questions.”

“Suitability test? All right, go ahead.”

“Do you sleep with your window open or shut?”

“Open. I like lots of air.”

“Do you and Basil enjoy the same kind of food?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like going to bed early or late?”

“Really, under the rose, early. At half past ten I yawn—and I secretly feel rather hearty in the mornings—but of course I daren’t admit it.”

“You ought to suit each other very well,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Rather a superficial test.”

“Not at all. I have known seven marriages at least, entirely wrecked, because the husband liked sitting up till midnight and the wife fell asleep at

half past nine and vice versa.”

“It’s a pity,” said Betty, “that everybody can’t be happy. Basil and I, and his mother giving us her blessing.”

Mr. Parker Pyne coughed.

“I think,” he said, “that that could possibly be managed.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“Now I wonder,” she said, “if you’re double-crossing me?”

Mr. Parker Pyne’s face told nothing.

To Mrs. Chester he was soothing, but vague. An engagement was not marriage. He himself was going to Soller for a week. He suggested that her line of action should be noncommittal. Let her appear to acquiesce.

He spent a very enjoyable week at Soller.

On his return he found that a totally unexpected development had arisen.

As he entered the Pino d’Oro the first thing he saw was Mrs. Chester and Betty Gregg having tea together. Basil was not there. Mrs. Chester looked haggard. Betty, too, was looking off colour. She was hardly made-up at all, and her eyelids looked as though she had been crying.

They greeted him in a friendly fashion, but neither of them mentioned Basil.

Suddenly he heard the girl beside him draw in her breath sharply as though something had hurt her. Mr. Parker Pyne turned his head.

Basil Chester was coming up the steps from the sea front. With him was a girl so exotically beautiful that it quite took your breath away. She was dark and her figure was marvellous. No one could fail to notice the fact since she wore nothing but a single garment of pale blue crêpe. She was heavily made-up with ochre powder and an orange scarlet mouth—but the unguents

only displayed her remarkable beauty in a more pronounced fashion. As for young Basil, he seemed unable to take his eyes from her face.

“You’re very late, Basil,” said his mother. “You were to have taken Betty to Mac’s.”

“My fault,” drawled the beautiful unknown. “We just drifted.” She turned to Basil. “Angel—get me something with a kick in it!”

She tossed off her shoe and stretched out her manicured toenails which were done emerald green to match her fingernails.

She paid no attention to the two women, but she leaned a little towards Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Terrible island this,” she said. “I was just dying with boredom before I met Basil. He is rather a pet!”

“Mr. Parker Pyne—Miss Ramona,” said Mrs. Chester.

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a lazy smile.

“I guess I’ll call you Parker almost at once,” she murmured. “My name’s Dolores.”

Basil returned with the drinks. Miss Ramona divided her conversation (what there was of it—it was mostly glances) between Basil and Mr. Parker Pyne. Of the two women she took no notice whatever. Betty attempted once or twice to join in the conversation but the other girl merely stared at her and yawned.

Suddenly Dolores rose.

“Guess I’ll be going along now. I’m at the other hotel. Anyone coming to see me home?”

Basil sprang up.

“I’ll come with you.”

Mrs. Chester said: "Basil, my dear—"

"I'll be back presently, Mother."

"Isn't he the mother's boy?" Miss Ramona asked of the world at large. "Just toots round after her, don't you?"

Basil flushed and looked awkward. Miss Ramona gave a nod in Mrs. Chester's direction, a dazzling smile to Mr. Parker Pyne and she and Basil moved off together.

After they had gone there was rather an awkward silence. Mr. Parker Pyne did not like to speak first. Betty Gregg was twisting her fingers and looking out to sea. Mrs. Chester looked flushed and angry.

Betty said: "Well, what do you think of our new acquisition in Pollensa Bay?" Her voice was not quite steady.

Mr. Parker Pyne said cautiously:

"A little—er—exotic."

"Exotic?" Betty gave a short bitter laugh.

Mrs. Chester said: "She's terrible—terrible. Basil must be quite mad."

Betty said sharply: "Basil's all right."

"Her toenails," said Mrs. Chester with a shiver of nausea.

Betty rose suddenly.

"I think, Mrs. Chester, I'll go home and not stay to dinner after all."

"Oh, my dear—Basil will be so disappointed."

"Will he?" asked Betty with a short laugh. "Anyway, I think I will. I've got rather a headache."

She smiled at them both and went off. Mrs. Chester turned to Mr. Parker Pyne.

“I wish we had never come to this place—never!”

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

“You shouldn’t have gone away,” said Mrs. Chester. “If you’d been here this wouldn’t have happened.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was stung to respond.

“My dear lady, I can assure you that when it comes to a question of a beautiful young woman, I should have no influence over your son whatever. He—er—seems to be of a very susceptible nature.”

“He never used to be,” said Mrs. Chester tearfully.

“Well,” said Mr. Parker Pyne with an attempt at cheerfulness, “this new attraction seems to have broken the back of his infatuation for Miss Gregg. That must be some satisfaction to you.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Mrs. Chester. “Betty is a dear child and devoted to Basil. She is behaving extremely well over this. I think my boy must be mad.”

Mr. Parker Pyne received this startling change of face without wincing. He had met inconsistency in women before. He said mildly:

“Not exactly mad—just bewitched.”

“The creature’s a Dago. She’s impossible.”

“But extremely good-looking.”

Mrs. Chester snorted.

Basil ran up the steps from the sea front.

“Hullo, Mater, here I am. Where’s Betty?”

“Betty’s gone home with a headache. I don’t wonder.”

“Sulking, you mean.”

“I consider, Basil, that you are being extremely unkind to Betty.”

“For God’s sake, Mother, don’t jaw. If Betty is going to make this fuss every time I speak to another girl a nice sort of life we’ll lead together.”

“You are engaged.”

“Oh, we’re engaged all right. That doesn’t mean that we’re not going to have any friends of our own. Nowadays people have to lead their own lives and try to cut out jealousy.”

He paused.

“Look here, if Betty isn’t going to dine with us—I think I’ll go back to the Mariposa. They did ask me to dine. . . .”

“Oh, Basil—”

The boy gave her an exasperated look, then ran off down the steps.

Mrs. Chester looked eloquently at Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You see,” she said.

He saw.

Matters came to a head a couple of days later. Betty and Basil were to have gone for a long walk, taking a picnic lunch with them. Betty arrived at the Pino d’Oro to find that Basil had forgotten the plan and gone over to Formentor for the day with Dolores Ramona’s party.

Beyond a tightening of the lips the girl made no sign. Presently, however, she got up and stood in front of Mrs. Chester (the two women were alone

on the terrace).

“It’s quite all right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. But I think—all the same—that we’d better call the whole thing off.”

She slipped from her finger the signet ring that Basil had given her—he would buy the real engagement ring later.

“Will you give him back this Mrs. Chester? And tell him it’s all right—not to worry. . . .”

“Betty dear, don’t! He does love you—really.”

“It looks like it, doesn’t it?” said the girl with a short laugh. “No—I’ve got some pride. Tell him everything’s all right and that I—I wish him luck.”

When Basil returned at sunset he was greeted by a storm.

He flushed a little at the sight of his ring.

“So that’s how she feels, is it? Well, I daresay it’s the best thing.”

“Basil!”

“Well, frankly, Mother, we don’t seem to have been hitting it off lately.”

“Whose fault was that?”

“I don’t see that it was mine particularly. Jealousy’s beastly and I really don’t see why you should get all worked up about it. You begged me yourself not to marry Betty.”

“That was before I knew her. Basil—my dear—you’re not thinking of marrying this other creature.”

Basil Chester said soberly:

“I’d marry her like a shot if she’d have me—but I’m afraid she won’t.”

Cold chills went down Mrs. Chester's spine. She sought and found Mr. Parker Pyne, placidly reading a book in a sheltered corner.

"You must do something! You must do something! My boy's life will be ruined."

Mr. Parker Pyne was getting a little tired of Basil Chester's life being ruined.

"What can I do?"

"Go and see this terrible creature. If necessary buy her off."

"That may come very expensive."

"I don't care."

"It seems a pity. Still there are, possibly, other ways."

She looked a question. He shook his head.

"I'll make no promises—but I'll see what I can do. I have handled that kind before. By the way, not a word to Basil—that would be fatal."

"Of course not."

Mr. Parker Pyne returned from the Mariposa at midnight. Mrs. Chester was sitting up for him.

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

His eyes twinkled.

"The Señorita Dolores Ramona will leave Pollensa tomorrow morning and the island tomorrow night."

"Oh, Mr. Parker Pyne! How did you manage it?"

“It won’t cost a cent,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. Again his eyes twinkled. “I rather fancied I might have a hold over her—and I was right.”

“You are wonderful. Nina Wycherley was quite right. You must let me know—er—your fees—”

Mr. Parker Pyne held up a well-manicured hand.

“Not a penny. It has been a pleasure. I hope all will go well. Of course the boy will be very upset at first when he finds she’s disappeared and left no address. Just go easy with him for a week or two.”

“If only Betty will forgive him—”

“She’ll forgive him all right. They’re a nice couple. By the way, I’m leaving tomorrow, too.”

“Oh, Mr. Parker Pyne, we shall miss you.”

“Perhaps it’s just as well I should go before that boy of yours gets infatuated with yet a third girl.”

Mr. Parker Pyne leaned over the rail of the steamer and looked at the lights of Palma. Beside him stood Dolores Ramona. He was saying appreciatively:

“A very nice piece of work, Madeleine. I’m glad I wired you to come out. It’s odd when you’re such a quiet, stay-at-home girl really.”

Madeleine de Sara, alias Dolores Ramona, alias Maggie Sayers, said primly: “I’m glad you’re pleased, Mr. Parker Pyne. It’s been a nice little change. I think I’ll go below now and get to bed before the boat starts. I’m such a bad sailor.”

A few minutes later a hand fell on Mr. Parker Pyne’s shoulder. He turned to see Basil Chester.

“Had to come and see you off, Mr. Parker Pyne, and give you Betty’s love and her and my best thanks. It was a grand stunt of yours. Betty and Mother

are as thick as thieves. Seemed a shame to deceive the old darling—but she was being difficult. Anyway it's all right now. I must just be careful to keep up the annoyance stuff a couple of days longer. We're no end grateful to you, Betty and I."

"I wish you every happiness," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"Thanks."

There was a pause, then Basil said with somewhat overdone carelessness:

"Is Miss—Miss de Sara—anywhere about? I'd like to thank her, too."

Mr. Parker Pyne shot a keen glance at him.

He said:

"I'm afraid Miss de Sara's gone to bed."

"Oh, too bad—well, perhaps I'll see her in London sometime."

"As a matter of fact she is going to America on business for me almost at once."

"Oh!" Basil's tone was blank. "Well," he said. "I'll be getting along. . . ."

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. On his way to his cabin he tapped on the door of Madeleine's.

"How are you, my dear? All right? Our young friend has been along. The usual slight attack of Madeleinitis. He'll get over it in a day or two, but you are rather distracting."

Fourteen

THE REGATTA MYSTERY

“The Regatta Mystery” was first published as “Poirot and the Regatta Mystery” in the USA in the Chicago Tribune, 3 May 1936, and then in Strand Magazine, June 1936. It first appeared in its current form in the American book The Regatta Mystery and Other Stories, published by Dodd, Mead, June 1939.

Mr. Isaac Pointz removed a cigar from his lips and said approvingly:

“Pretty little place.”

Having thus set the seal of his approval upon Dartmouth harbour, he replaced the cigar and looked about him with the air of a man pleased with himself, his appearance, his surroundings and life generally.

As regards the first of these, Mr. Isaac Pointz was a man of fifty-eight, in good health and condition with perhaps a slight tendency to liver. He was not exactly stout, but comfortable-looking, and a yachting costume, which he wore at the moment, is not the most kindly of attires for a middle-aged man with a tendency to embonpoint. Mr. Pointz was very well turned out—correct to every crease and button—his dark and slightly Oriental face beaming out under the peak of his yachting cap. As regards his surroundings, these may have been taken to mean his companions—his partner Mr. Leo Stein, Sir George and Lady Marroway, an American business acquaintance Mr. Samuel Leathern and his schoolgirl daughter Eve, Mrs. Rustington and Evan Llewellyn.

The party had just come ashore from Mr. Pointz’ yacht—the Merrimaid. In the morning they had watched the yacht racing and they had now come ashore to join for a while in the fun of the fair—Coconut shies, Fat Ladies, the Human Spider and the Merry-go-round. It is hardly to be doubted that these delights were relished most by Eve Leathern. When Mr. Pointz finally

suggested that it was time to adjourn to the Royal George for dinner hers was the only dissentient voice.

“Oh, Mr. Pointz—I did so want to have my fortune told by the Real Gypsy in the Caravan.”

Mr. Pointz had doubts of the essential Realness of the Gypsy in question but he gave indulgent assent.

“Eve’s just crazy about the fair,” said her father apologetically. “But don’t you pay any attention if you want to be getting along.”

“Plenty of time,” said Mr. Pointz benignantly. “Let the little lady enjoy herself. I’ll take you on at darts, Leo.”

“Twenty-five and over wins a prize,” chanted the man in charge of the darts in a high nasal voice.

“Bet you a fiver my total score beats yours,” said Pointz.

“Done,” said Stein with alacrity.

The two men were soon wholeheartedly engaged in their battle.

Lady Marroway murmured to Evan Llewellyn:

“Eve is not the only child in the party.”

Llewellyn smiled assent but somewhat absently.

He had been absentminded all that day. Once or twice his answers had been wide of the point.

Pamela Marroway drew away from him and said to her husband:

“That young man has something on his mind.”

Sir George murmured:

“Or someone?”

And his glance swept quickly over Janet Rustington.

Lady Marroway frowned a little. She was a tall woman exquisitely groomed. The scarlet of her fingernails was matched by the dark red coral studs in her ears. Her eyes were dark and watchful. Sir George affected a careless “hearty English gentleman” manner—but his bright blue eyes held the same watchful look as his wife’s.

Isaac Pointz and Leo Stein were Hatton Garden diamond merchants. Sir George and Lady Marroway came from a different world—the world of Antibes and Juan les Pins—of golf at St. Jean-de-Luz—of bathing from the rocks at Madeira in the winter.

In outward seeming they were as the lilies that toiled not, neither did they spin. But perhaps this was not quite true. There are diverse ways of toiling and also of spinning.

“Here’s the kid back again,” said Evan Llewellyn to Mrs. Rustington.

He was a dark young man—there was a faintly hungry wolfish look about him which some women found attractive.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs. Rustington found him so. She did not wear her heart on her sleeve. She had married young—and the marriage had ended in disaster in less than a year. Since that time it was difficult to know what Janet Rustington thought of anyone or anything—her manner was always the same—charming but completely aloof.

Eve Leathern came dancing up to them, her lank fair hair bobbing excitedly. She was fifteen—an awkward child—but full of vitality.

“I’m going to be married by the time I’m seventeen,” she exclaimed breathlessly. “To a very rich man and we’re going to have six children and Tuesdays and Thursdays are my lucky days and I ought always to wear green or blue and an emerald is my lucky stone and—”

“Why, pet, I think we ought to be getting along,” said her father.

Mr. Leathern was a tall, fair, dyspeptic-looking man with a somewhat mournful expression.

Mr. Pointz and Mr. Stein were turning away from the darts. Mr. Pointz was chuckling and Mr. Stein was looking somewhat rueful.

“It’s all a matter of luck,” he was saying.

Mr. Pointz slapped his pocket cheerfully.

“Took a fiver off you all right. Skill, my boy, skill. My old Dad was a first class darts player. Well, folks, let’s be getting along. Had your fortune told, Eve? Did they tell you to beware of a dark man?”

“A dark woman,” corrected Eve. “She’s got a cast in her eye and she’ll be real mean to me if I give her a chance. And I’m to be married by the time I’m seventeen. . . .”

She ran on happily as the party steered its way to the Royal George.

Dinner had been ordered beforehand by the forethought of Mr. Pointz and a bowing waiter led them upstairs and into a private room on the first floor. Here a round table was ready laid. The big bulging bow window opened on the harbour square and was open. The noise of the fair came up to them, and the raucous squeal of three roundabouts each blaring a different tune.

“Best shut that if we’re to hear ourselves speak,” observed Mr. Pointz drily, and suited the action to the word.

They took their seats round the table and Mr. Pointz beamed affectionately at his guests. He felt he was doing them well and he liked to do people well. His eyes rested on one after another. Lady Marroway—fine woman—not quite the goods, of course, he knew that—he was perfectly well aware that what he had called all his life the *crème de la crème* would have very little to do with the Marroways—but then the *crème de la crème* were supremely unaware of his own existence. Anyway, Lady Marroway was a damned

smart-looking woman—and he didn't mind if she did rook him at Bridge. Didn't enjoy it quite so much from Sir George. Fishy eye the fellow had. Brazenly on the make. But he wouldn't make too much out of Isaac Pointz. He'd see to that all right.

Old Leathern wasn't a bad fellow—longwinded, of course, like most Americans—fond of telling endless long stories. And he had that disconcerting habit of requiring precise information. What was the population of Dartmouth? In what year had the Naval College been built? And so on. Expected his host to be a kind of walking Baedeker. Eve was a nice cheery kid—he enjoyed chaffing her. Voice rather like a corncake, but she had all her wits about her. A bright kid.

Young Llewellyn—he seemed a bit quiet. Looked as though he had something on his mind. Hard up, probably. These writing fellows usually were. Looked as though he might be keen on Janet Rustington. A nice woman—attractive and clever, too. But she didn't ram her writing down your throat. Highbrow sort of stuff she wrote but you'd never think it to hear her talk. And old Leo! He wasn't getting younger or thinner. And blissfully unaware that his partner was at that moment thinking precisely the same thing about him, Mr. Pointz corrected Mr. Leathern as to pilchards being connected with Devon and not Cornwall, and prepared to enjoy his dinner.

“Mr. Pointz,” said Eve when plates of hot mackerel had been set before them and the waiters had left the room.

“Yes, young lady.”

“Have you got that big diamond with you right now? The one you showed us last night and said you always took about with you?”

Mr. Pointz chuckled.

“That's right. My mascot, I call it. Yes, I've got it with me all right.”

“I think that's awfully dangerous. Somebody might get it away from you in the crowd at the fair.”

“Not they,” said Mr. Pointz. “I’ll take good care of that.”

“But they might,” insisted Eve. “You’ve got gangsters in England as well as we have, haven’t you?”

“They won’t get the Morning Star,” said Mr. Pointz. “To begin with it’s in a special inner pocket. And anyway—old Pointz knows what he’s about. Nobody’s going to steal the Morning Star.”

Eve laughed.

“Ugh-huh—bet I could steal it!”

“I bet you couldn’t.” Mr. Pointz twinkled back at her.

“Well, I bet I could. I was thinking about it last night in bed—after you’d handed it round the table, for us all to look at. I thought of a real cute way to steal it.”

“And what’s that?”

Eve put her head on one side, her fair hair wagged excitedly. “I’m not telling you—now. What do you bet I couldn’t?”

Memories of Mr. Pointz’s youth rose in his mind.

“Half a dozen pairs of gloves,” he said.

“Gloves,” cried Eve disgustedly. “Who wears gloves?”

“Well—do you wear nylon stockings?”

“Do I not? My best pair ran this morning.”

“Very well, then. Half a dozen pairs of the finest nylon stockings—”

“Oo-er,” said Eve blissfully. “And what about you?”

“Well, I need a new tobacco pouch.”

“Right. That’s a deal. Not that you’ll get your tobacco pouch. Now I’ll tell you what you’ve got to do. You must hand it round like you did last night —”

She broke off as two waiters entered to remove the plates. When they were starting on the next course of chicken, Mr. Pointz said:

“Remember this, young woman, if this is to represent a real theft, I should send for the police and you’d be searched.”

“That’s quite OK by me. You needn’t be quite so lifelike as to bring the police into it. But Lady Marroway or Mrs. Rustington can do all the searching you like.”

“Well, that’s that then,” said Mr. Pointz. “What are you setting up to be? A first class jewel thief?”

“I might take to it as a career—if it really paid.”

“If you got away with the Morning Star it would pay you. Even after recutting that stone would be worth over thirty thousand pounds.”

“My!” said Eve, impressed. “What’s that in dollars?”

Lady Marroway uttered an exclamation.

“And you carry such a stone about with you?” she said reproachfully. “Thirty thousand pounds.” Her darkened eyelashes quivered.

Mrs. Rustington said softly: “It’s a lot of money . . . And then there’s the fascination of the stone itself . . . It’s beautiful.”

“Just a piece of carbon,” said Evan Llewellyn.

“I’ve always understood it’s the ‘fence’ that’s the difficulty in jewel robberies,” said Sir George. “He takes the lion’s share—eh, what?”

“Come on,” said Eve excitedly. “Let’s start. Take the diamond out and say what you said last night.”

Mr. Leathern said in his deep melancholy voice, "I do apologize for my offspring. She gets kinder worked up—"

"That'll do, Pops," said Eve. "Now then, Mr. Pointz—"

Smiling, Mr. Pointz fumbled in an inner pocket. He drew something out. It lay on the palm of his hand, blinking in the light.

"A diamond. . . ."

Rather stiffly, Mr. Pointz repeated as far as he could remember his speech of the previous evening on the Merrimaid.

"Perhaps you ladies and gentlemen would like to have a look at this? It's an unusually beautiful stone. I call it the Morning Star and it's by way of being my mascot—goes about with me anywhere. Like to see it?"

He handed it to Lady Marroway, who took it, exclaimed at its beauty and passed it to Mr. Leathern who said, "Pretty good—yes, pretty good," in a somewhat artificial manner and in his turn passed it to Llewellyn.

The waiters coming in at that moment, there was a slight hitch in the proceedings. When they had gone again, Evan said, "Very fine stone," and passed it to Leo Stein who did not trouble to make any comment but handed it quickly on to Eve.

"How perfectly lovely," cried Eve in a high affected voice.

"Oh!" She gave a cry of consternation as it slipped from her hand. "I've dropped it."

She pushed back her chair and got down to grope under the table. Sir George at her right, bent also. A glass got swept off the table in the confusion. Stein, Llewellyn and Mrs. Rustington all helped in the search. Finally Lady Marroway joined in.

Only Mr. Pointz took no part in the proceedings. He remained in his seat sipping his wine and smiling sardonically.

“Oh, dear,” said Eve, still in her artificial manner, “How dreadful! Where can it have rolled to? I can’t find it anywhere.”

One by one the assistant searchers rose to their feet.

“It’s disappeared all right, Pointz,” said Sir George smiling.

“Very nicely done,” said Mr. Pointz, nodding approval. “You’d make a very good actress, Eve. Now the question is, have you hidden it somewhere or have you got it on you?”

“Search me,” said Eve dramatically.

Mr. Pointz’ eye sought out a large screen in the corner of the room.

He nodded towards it and then looked at Lady Marroway and Mrs. Rustington.

“If you ladies will be so good—”

“Why, certainly,” said Lady Marroway, smiling.

The two women rose.

Lady Marroway said, “Don’t be afraid, Mr. Pointz. We’ll vet her properly.”

The three went behind the screen.

The room was hot. Evan Llewellyn flung open the window. A news vendor was passing. Evan threw down a coin and the man threw up a paper.

Llewellyn unfolded it.

“Hungarian situation’s none too good,” he said.

“That the local rag?” asked Sir George. “There’s a horse I’m interested in ought to have run at Haldon today—Natty Boy.”

“Leo,” said Mr. Pointz. “Lock the door. We don’t want those damned waiters popping in and out till this business is over.”

“Natty Boy won three to one,” said Evan.

“Rotten odds,” said Sir George.

“Mostly Regatta news,” said Evan, glancing over the sheet.

The three young women came out from the screen.

“Not a sign of it,” said Janet Rustington.

“You can take it from me she hasn’t got it on her,” said Lady Marroway.

Mr. Pointz thought he would be quite ready to take it from her. There was a grim tone in her voice and he felt no doubt that the search had been thorough.

“Say, Eve, you haven’t swallowed it?” asked Mr. Leathern anxiously.
“Because maybe that wouldn’t be too good for you.”

“I’d have seen her do that,” said Leo Stein quietly. “I was watching her. She didn’t put anything in her mouth.”

“I couldn’t swallow a great thing all points like that,” said Eve. She put her hands on her hips and looked at Mr. Pointz. “What about it, big boy?” she asked.

“You stand over there where you are and don’t move,” said that gentleman.

Among them, the men stripped the table and turned it upside down. Mr. Pointz examined every inch of it. Then he transferred his attention to the chair on which Eve had been sitting and those on either side of her.

The thoroughness of the search left nothing to be desired. The other four men joined in and the women also. Eve Leathern stood by the wall near the screen and laughed with intense enjoyment.

Five minutes later Mr. Pointz rose with a slight groan from his knees and dusted his trousers sadly. His pristine freshness was somewhat impaired.

“Eve,” he said. “I take off my hat to you. You’re the finest thing in jewel thieves I’ve ever come across. What you’ve done with that stone beats me. As far as I can see it must be in the room as it isn’t on you. I give you best.”

“Are the stockings mine?” demanded Eve.

“They’re yours, young lady.”

“Eve, my child, where can you have hidden it?” demanded Mrs. Rustington curiously.

Eve pranced forward.

“I’ll show you. You’ll all be just mad with yourselves.”

She went across to the side table where the things from the dinner table had been roughly stacked. She picked up her little black evening bag—

“Right under your eyes. Right. . . .”

Her voice, gay and triumphant, trailed off suddenly.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh . . .”

“What’s the matter, honey?” said her father.

Eve whispered: “It’s gone . . . it’s gone . . .”

“What’s all this?” asked Pointz, coming forward.

Eve turned to him impetuously.

“It was like this. This pochette of mine has a big paste stone in the middle of the clasp. It fell out last night and just when you were showing that diamond round I noticed that it was much the same size. And so I thought in the night what a good idea for a robbery it would be to wedge your

diamond into the gap with a bit of plasticine. I felt sure nobody would ever spot it. That's what I did tonight. First I dropped it—then went down after it with the bag in my hand, stuck it into the gap with a bit of plasticine which I had handy, put my bag on the table and went on pretending to look for the diamond. I thought it would be like the Purloined Letter—you know—lying there in full view under all your noses—and just looking like a common bit of rhinestone. And it was a good plan—none of you did notice.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Stein.

“What did you say?”

Mr. Pointz took the bag, looked at the empty hole with a fragment of plasticine still adhering to it and said slowly: “It may have fallen out. We'd better look again.”

The search was repeated, but this time it was a curiously silent business. An atmosphere of tension pervaded the room.

Finally everyone in turn gave it up. They stood looking at each other.

“It's not in this room,” said Stein.

“And nobody's left the room,” said Sir George significantly.

There was a moment's pause. Eve burst into tears.

Her father patted her on the shoulder.

“There, there,” he said awkwardly.

Sir George turned to Leo Stein.

“Mr. Stein,” he said. “Just now you murmured something under your breath. When I asked you to repeat it, you said it was nothing. But as a matter of fact I heard what you said. Miss Eve had just said that none of us noticed the place where she had put the diamond. The words you murmured were: ‘I wonder.’ What we have to face is the probability that one person did notice—that that person is in this room now. I suggest that the only fair

and honourable thing is for every one present to submit to a search. The diamond cannot have left the room.”

When Sir George played the part of the old English gentleman, none could play it better. His voice rang with sincerity and indignation.

“Bit unpleasant, all this,” said Mr. Pointz unhappily.

“It’s all my fault,” sobbed Eve. “I didn’t mean—”

“Buck up, kiddo,” said Mr. Stein kindly. “Nobody’s blaming you.”

Mr. Leathern said in his slow pedantic manner:

“Why, certainly, I think that Sir George’s suggestion will meet with the fullest approval from all of us. It does from me.”

“I agree,” said Evan Llewellyn.

Mrs. Rustington looked at Lady Marroway who nodded a brief assent. The two of them went back behind the screen and the sobbing Eve accompanied them.

A waiter knocked on the door and was told to go away.

Five minutes later eight people looked at each other incredulously.

The Morning Star had vanished into space. . . .

Mr. Parker Pyne looked thoughtfully at the dark agitated face of the young man opposite him.

“Of course,” he said. “You’re Welsh, Mr. Llewellyn.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

Mr. Parker Pyne waved a large, well-cared-for hand.

“Nothing at all, I admit. I am interested in the classification of emotional reactions as exemplified by certain racial types. That is all. Let us return to the consideration of your particular problem.”

“I don’t really know why I came to you,” said Evan Llewellyn. His hands twitched nervously, and his dark face had a haggard look. He did not look at Mr. Parker Pyne and that gentleman’s scrutiny seemed to make him uncomfortable. “I don’t know why I came to you,” he repeated. “But where the Hell can I go? And what the Hell can I do? It’s the powerlessness of not being able to do anything at all that gets me . . . I saw your advertisement and I remembered that a chap had once spoken of you and said that you got results . . . And—well—I came! I suppose I was a fool. It’s the sort of position nobody can do anything about.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I am the proper person to come to. I am a specialist in unhappiness. This business has obviously caused you a good deal of pain. You are sure the facts are exactly as you have told me?”

“I don’t think I’ve left out anything. Pointz brought out the diamond and passed it around—that wretched American child stuck it on her ridiculous bag and when we came to look at the bag, the diamond was gone. It wasn’t on anyone—old Pointz himself even was searched—he suggested it himself—and I’ll swear it was nowhere in that room! And nobody left the room—”

“No waiters, for instance?” suggested Mr. Parker Pyne.

Llewellyn shook his head.

“They went out before the girl began messing about with the diamond, and afterwards Pointz locked the door so as to keep them out. No, it lies between one of us.”

“It would certainly seem so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

“That damned evening paper,” said Evan Llewellyn bitterly. “I saw it come into their minds—that that was the only way—”

“Just tell me again exactly what occurred.”

“It was perfectly simple. I threw open the window, whistled to the man, threw down a copper and he tossed me up the paper. And there it is, you see—the only possible way the diamond could have left the room—thrown by me to an accomplice waiting in the street below.”

“Not the only possible way,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“What other way can you suggest?”

“If you didn’t throw it out, there must have been some other way.”

“Oh, I see. I hoped you meant something more definite than that. Well, I can only say that I didn’t throw it out. I can’t expect you to believe me—or anyone else.”

“Oh, yes, I believe you,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You do? Why?”

“Not a criminal type,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Not, that is, the particular criminal type that steals jewellery. There are crimes, of course, that you might commit—but we won’t enter into that subject. At any rate I do not see you as the purloiner of the Morning Star.”

“Everyone else does though,” said Llewellyn bitterly.

“I see,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“They looked at me in a queer sort of way at the time. Marroway picked up the paper and just glanced over at the window. He didn’t say anything. But Pointz cottoned on to it quick enough! I could see what they thought. There hasn’t been any open accusation, that’s the devil of it.”

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded sympathetically.

“It is worse than that,” he said.

“Yes. It’s just suspicion. I’ve had a fellow round asking questions—routine inquiries, he called it. One of the new dress-shirted lot of police, I suppose.

Very tactful—nothing at all hinted. Just interested in the fact that I'd been hard up and was suddenly cutting a bit of a splash."

"And were you?"

"Yes—some luck with a horse or two. Unluckily my bets were made on the course—there's nothing to show that that's how the money came in. They can't disprove it, of course—but that's just the sort of easy lie a fellow would invent if he didn't want to show where the money came from."

"I agree. Still they will have to have a good deal more than that to go upon."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of actually being arrested and charged with the theft. In a way that would be easier—one would know, where one was. It's the ghastly fact that all those people believe I took it."

"One person in particular?"

"What do you mean?"

"A suggestion—nothing more—" Again Mr. Parker Pyne waved his comfortable-looking hand. "There was one person in particular, wasn't there? Shall we say Mrs. Rustington?"

Llewellyn's dark face flushed.

"Why pitch on her?"

"Oh, my dear sir—there is obviously someone whose opinion matters to you greatly—probably a lady. What ladies were there? An American flapper? Lady Marroway? But you would probably rise not fall in Lady Marroway's estimation if you had brought off such a coup. I know something of the lady. Clearly then, Mrs. Rustington."

Llewellyn said with something of an effort,

"She—she's had rather an unfortunate experience. Her husband was a down and out rotter. It's made her unwilling to trust anyone. She—if she thinks

—”

He found it difficult to go on.

“Quite so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I see the matter is important. It must be cleared up.”

Evan gave a short laugh.

“That’s easy to say.”

“And quite easy to do,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes—the problem is so clear cut. So many possibilities are ruled out. The answer must really be extremely simple. Indeed already I have a kind of glimmering—”

Llewellyn stared at him incredulously.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew a pad of paper towards him and picked up a pen.

“Perhaps you would give me a brief description of the party.”

“Haven’t I already done so?”

“Their personal appearance—colour of hair and so on.”

“But, Mr. Parker Pyne, what can that have to do with it?”

“A good deal, young man, a good deal. Classification and so on.”

Somewhat unbelievably, Evan described the personal appearance of the members of the yachting party.

Mr. Parker Pyne made a note or two, pushed away the pad and said:

“Excellent. By the way, did you say a wine glass was broken?”

Evan stared again.

“Yes, it was knocked off the table and then it got stepped on.”

“Nasty thing, splinters of glass,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Whose wine glass was it?”

“I think it was the child’s—Eve.”

“Ah!—and who sat next to her on that side?”

“Sir George Marroway.”

“You didn’t see which of them knocked it off the table?”

“Afraid I didn’t. Does it matter?”

“Not really. No. That was a superfluous question. Well”—he stood up —“good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Will you call again in three days’ time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then.”

“Are you joking, Mr. Parker Pyne?”

“I never joke on professional matters, my dear sir. It would occasion distrust in my clients. Shall we say Friday at eleven thirty? Thank you.”

Even entered Mr. Parker Pyne’s office on the Friday morning in a considerable turmoil. Hope and scepticism fought for mastery.

Mr. Parker Pyne rose to meet him with a beaming smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Sit down. Have a cigarette?”

Llewellyn waved aside the proffered box.

“Well?” he said.

“Very well indeed,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “The police arrested the gang last night.”

“The gang? What gang?”

“The Amalfi gang. I thought of them at once when you told me your story. I recognized their methods and once you had described the guests, well, there was no doubt at all in my mind.”

“Who are the Amalfi gang?”

“Father, son and daughter-in-law—that is if Pietro and Maria are really married—which some doubt.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple. The name is Italian and no doubt the origin is Italian, but old Amalfi was born in America. His methods are usually the same. He impersonates a real business man, introduces himself to some prominent figure in the jewel business in some European country and then plays his little trick. In this case he was deliberately on the track of the Morning Star. Pointz’ idiosyncrasy was well known in the trade. Maria Amalfi played the part of his daughter (amazing creature, twenty-seven at least, and nearly always plays a part of sixteen).”

“Not Eve!” gasped Llewellyn.

“Exactly. The third member of the gang got himself taken on as an extra waiter at the Royal George—it was holiday time, remember, and they would need extra staff. He may even have bribed a regular man to stay away. The scene is set. Eve challenges old Pointz and he takes on the bet. He passes round the diamond as he had done the night before. The waiters enter the room and Leathern retains the stone until they have left the room. When they do leave, the diamond leaves also, neatly attached with a morsel of chewing gum to the underside of the plate that Pietro bears away. So simple!”

“But I saw it after that.”

“No, no, you saw a paste replica, good enough to deceive a casual glance. Stein, you told me, hardly looked at it. Eve drops it, sweeps off a glass too

and steps firmly on stone and glass together. Miraculous disappearance of diamond. Both Eve and Leathern can submit to as much searching as anyone pleases.”

“Well—I’m—” Evan shook his head, at a loss for words.

“You say you recognized the gang from my description. Had they worked this trick before?”

“Not exactly—but it was their kind of business. Naturally my attention was at once directed to the girl Eve.”

“Why? I didn’t suspect her—nobody did. She seemed such a—such a child.”

“That is the peculiar genius of Maria Amalfi. She is more like a child than any child could possibly be! And then the plasticine! This bet was supposed to have arisen quite spontaneously—yet the little lady had some plasticine with her all handy. That spoke of premeditation. My suspicions fastened on her at once.”

Llewellyn rose to his feet.

“Well, Mr. Parker Pyne, I’m no end obliged to you.”

“Classification,” murmured Mr. Parker Pyne. “The classification of criminal types—it interests me.”

“You’ll let me know how much—er—”

“My fee will be quite moderate,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “It will not make too big a hole in the—er—horse racing profits. All the same, young man, I should, I think, leave the horses alone in future. Very uncertain animal, the horse.”

“That’s all right,” said Evan.

He shook Mr. Parker Pyne by the hand and strode from the office.

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of Janet Rustington's flat.

He felt in a mood to carry all before him.

The Mysterious Mr. Quin (1930)

By Agatha Christie

One

THE COMING OF MR. QUIN

“The Coming of Mr. Quin” was first published as “The Passing of Mr. Quinn” in Grand Magazine, March 1923.

It was New Year’s Eve.

The elder members of the house party at Royston were assembled in the big hall.

Mr. Satterthwaite was glad that the young people had gone to bed. He was not fond of young people in herds. He thought them uninteresting and crude. They lacked subtlety and as life went on he had become increasingly fond of subtleties.

Mr. Satterthwaite was sixty-two—a little bent, dried-up man with a peering face oddly elflike, and an intense and inordinate interest in other people’s lives. All his life, so to speak, he had sat in the front row of the stalls watching various dramas of human nature unfold before him. His role had always been that of the onlooker. Only now, with old age holding him in its clutch, he found himself increasingly critical of the drama submitted to him. He demanded now something a little out of the common.

There was no doubt that he had a flair for these things. He knew instinctively when the elements of drama were at hand. Like a war horse, he sniffed the scent. Since his arrival at Royston this afternoon, that strange inner sense of his had stirred and bid him be ready. Something interesting was happening or going to happen.

The house party was not a large one. There was Tom Evesham, their genial good-humoured host, and his serious political wife who had been before her marriage Lady Laura Keene. There was Sir Richard Conway, soldier,

traveller and sportsman, there were six or seven young people whose names Mr. Satterthwaite had not grasped and there were the Portals.

It was the Portals who interested Mr. Satterthwaite.

He had never met Alex Portal before, but he knew all about him. Had known his father and his grandfather. Alex Portal ran pretty true to type. He was a man of close on forty, fair-haired, and blue-eyed like all the Portals, fond of sport, good at games, devoid of imagination. Nothing unusual about Alex Portal. The usual good sound English stock.

But his wife was different. She was, Mr. Satterthwaite knew, an Australian. Portal had been out in Australia two years ago, had met her out there and had married her and brought her home. She had never been to England previous to her marriage. All the same, she wasn't at all like any other Australian woman Mr. Satterthwaite had met.

He observed her now, covertly. Interesting woman—very. So still, and yet so—alive. Alive! That was just it! Not exactly beautiful—no, you wouldn't call her beautiful, but there was a kind of calamitous magic about her that you couldn't miss—that no man could miss. The masculine side of Mr. Satterthwaite spoke there, but the feminine side (for Mr. Satterthwaite had a large share of femininity) was equally interested in another question. Why did Mrs. Portal dye her hair?

No other man would probably have known that she dyed her hair, but Mr. Satterthwaite knew. He knew all those things. And it puzzled him. Many dark women dye their hair blonde; he had never before come across a fair woman who dyed her hair black.

Everything about her intrigued him. In a queer intuitive way, he felt certain that she was either very happy or very unhappy—but he didn't know which, and it annoyed him not to know. Furthermore there was the curious effect she had upon her husband.

“He adores her,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, “but sometimes he's—yes, afraid of her! That's very interesting. That's uncommonly interesting.”

Portal drank too much. That was certain. And he had a curious way of watching his wife when she wasn't looking.

"Nerves," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "The fellow's all nerves. She knows it too, but she won't do anything about it."

He felt very curious about the pair of them. Something was going on that he couldn't fathom.

He was roused from his meditations on the subject by the solemn chiming of the big clock in the corner.

"Twelve o'clock," said Evesham. "New Year's Day. Happy New Year—everybody. As a matter of fact that clock's five minutes fast . . . I don't know why the children wouldn't wait up and see the New Year in?"

"I don't suppose for a minute they've really gone to bed," said his wife placidly. "They're probably putting hairbrushes or something in our beds. That sort of thing does so amuse them. I can't think why. We should never have been allowed to do such a thing in my young days."

"Autre temps, autres mœurs," said Conway, smiling.

He was a tall soldierly looking man. Both he and Evesham were much of the same type—honest upright kindly men with no great pretensions to brains.

"In my young days we all joined hands in a circle and sang 'Auld Lang Syne,' " continued Lady Laura. " 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot'—so touching, I always think the words are."

Evesham moved uneasily.

"Oh! drop it, Laura," he muttered. "Not here."

He strode across the wide hall where they were sitting, and switched on an extra light.

“Very stupid of me,” said Lady Laura, sotto voce. “Reminds him of poor Mr. Capel, of course. My dear, is the fire too hot for you?”

Eleanor Portal made a brusque movement.

“Thank you. I’ll move my chair back a little.”

What a lovely voice she had—one of those low murmuring echoing voices that stay in your memory, thought Mr. Satterthwaite. Her face was in shadow now. What a pity.

From her place in the shadow she spoke again.

“Mr.—Capel?”

“Yes. The man who originally owned this house. He shot himself you know—oh! very well, Tom dear, I won’t speak of it unless you like. It was a great shock for Tom, of course, because he was here when it happened. So were you, weren’t you, Sir Richard?”

“Yes, Lady Laura.”

An old grandfather clock in the corner groaned, wheezed, snorted asthmatically, and then struck twelve.

“Happy New Year, Tom,” grunted Evesham perfunctorily.

Lady Laura wound up her knitting with some deliberation.

“Well, we’ve seen the New Year in,” she observed, and added, looking towards Mrs. Portal, “What do you think, my dear?”

Eleanor Portal rose quickly to her feet.

“Bed, by all means,” she said lightly.

“She’s very pale,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite, as he too rose, and began busying himself with candlesticks. “She’s not usually as pale as that.”

He lighted her candle and handed it to her with a funny little old-fashioned bow. She took it from him with a word of acknowledgment and went slowly up the stairs.

Suddenly a very odd impulse swept over Mr. Satterthwaite. He wanted to go after her—to reassure her—he had the strangest feeling that she was in danger of some kind. The impulse died down, and he felt ashamed. He was getting nervy too.

She hadn't looked at her husband as she went up the stairs, but now she turned her head over her shoulder and gave him a long searching glance which had a queer intensity in it. It affected Mr. Satterthwaite very oddly.

He found himself saying goodnight to his hostess in quite a flustered manner.

"I'm sure I hope it will be a happy New Year," Lady Laura was saying. "But the political situation seems to me to be fraught with grave uncertainty."

"I'm sure it is," said Mr. Satterthwaite earnestly. "I'm sure it is."

"I only hope," continued Lady Laura, without the least change of manner, "that it will be a dark man who first crosses the threshold. You know that superstition, I suppose, Mr. Satterthwaite? No? You surprise me. To bring luck to the house it must be a dark man who first steps over the door step on New Year's Day. Dear me, I hope I shan't find anything very unpleasant in my bed. I never trust the children. They have such very high spirits."

Shaking her head in sad foreboding, Lady Laura moved majestically up the staircase.

With the departure of the women, chairs were pulled in closer round the blazing logs on the big open hearth.

"Say when," said Evesham, hospitably, as he held up the whisky decanter.

When everybody had said when, the talk reverted to the subject which had been tabooed before.

“You knew Derek Capel, didn’t you, Satterthwaite?” asked Conway.

“Slightly—yes.”

“And you, Portal?”

“No, I never met him.”

So fiercely and defensively did he say it, that Mr. Satterthwaite looked up in surprise.

“I always hate it when Laura brings up the subject,” said Evesham slowly. “After the tragedy, you know, this place was sold to a big manufacturer fellow. He cleared out after a year—didn’t suit him or something. A lot of tommyrot was talked about the place being haunted of course, and it gave the house a bad name. Then, when Laura got me to stand for West Kidleby, of course it meant living up in these parts, and it wasn’t so easy to find a suitable house. Royston was going cheap, and—well, in the end I bought it. Ghosts are all tommyrot, but all the same one doesn’t exactly care to be reminded that you’re living in a house where one of your own friends shot himself. Poor old Derek—we shall never know why he did it.”

“He won’t be the first or the last fellow who’s shot himself without being able to give a reason,” said Alex Portal heavily.

He rose and poured himself out another drink, splashing the whisky in with a liberal hand.

“There’s something very wrong with him,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, to himself. “Very wrong indeed. I wish I knew what it was all about.”

“Gad!” said Conway. “Listen to the wind. It’s a wild night.”

“A good night for ghosts to walk,” said Portal with a reckless laugh. “All the devils in Hell are abroad tonight.”

“According to Lady Laura, even the blackest of them would bring us luck,” observed Conway, with a laugh. “Hark to that!”

The wind rose in another terrific wail, and as it died away there came three loud knocks on the big nailed doorway.

Everyone started.

“Who on earth can that be at this time of night?” cried Evesham.

They stared at each other.

“I will open it,” said Evesham. “The servants have gone to bed.”

He strode across to the door, fumbled a little over the heavy bars, and finally flung it open. An icy blast of wind came sweeping into the hall.

Framed in the doorway stood a man’s figure, tall and slender. To Mr. Satterthwaite, watching, he appeared by some curious effect of the stained glass above the door, to be dressed in every colour of the rainbow. Then, as he stepped forward, he showed himself to be a thin dark man dressed in motoring clothes.

“I must really apologize for this intrusion,” said the stranger, in a pleasant level voice. “But my car broke down. Nothing much, my chauffeur is putting it to rights, but it will take half an hour or so, and it is so confoundingly cold outside—”

He broke off, and Evesham took up the thread quickly.

“I should think it was. Come in and have a drink. We can’t give you any assistance about the car, can we?”

“No, thanks. My man knows what to do. By the way, my name is Quin—Harley Quin.”

“Sit down, Mr. Quin,” said Evesham. “Sir Richard Conway, Mr. Satterthwaite. My name is Evesham.”

Mr. Quin acknowledged the introductions, and dropped into the chair that Evesham had hospitably pulled forward. As he sat, some effect of the firelight threw a bar of shadow across his face which gave almost the impression of a mask.

Evesham threw a couple more logs on the fire.

“A drink?”

“Thanks.”

Evesham brought it to him and asked as he did so:

“So you know this part of the world well, Mr. Quin?”

“I passed through it some years ago.”

“Really?”

“Yes. This house belonged then to a man called Capel.”

“Ah! yes,” said Evesham. “Poor Derek Capel. You knew him?”

“Yes, I knew him.”

Evesham’s manner underwent a faint change, almost imperceptible to one who had not studied the English character. Before, it had contained a subtle reserve, now this was laid aside. Mr. Quin had known Derek Capel. He was the friend of a friend, and, as such, was vouched for and fully accredited.

“Astounding affair, that,” he said confidentially. “We were just talking about it. I can tell you, it went against the grain, buying this place. If there had been anything else suitable, but there wasn’t you see. I was in the house the night he shot himself—so was Conway, and upon my word, I’ve always expected his ghost to walk.”

“A very inexplicable business,” said Mr. Quin, slowly and deliberately, and he paused with the air of an actor who has just spoken an important cue.

“You may well say inexplicable,” burst in Conway. “The thing’s a black mystery—always will be.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Quin, noncommittally. “Yes, Sir Richard, you were saying?”

“Astounding—that’s what it was. Here’s a man in the prime of life, gay, lighthearted, without a care in the world. Five or six old pals staying with him. Top of his spirits at dinner, full of plans for the future. And from the dinner table he goes straight upstairs to his room, takes a revolver from a drawer and shoots himself. Why? Nobody ever knew. Nobody ever will know.”

“Isn’t that rather a sweeping statement, Sir Richard?” asked Mr. Quin, smiling.

Conway stared at him.

“What d’you mean? I don’t understand.”

“A problem is not necessarily unsolvable because it has remained unsolved.”

“Oh! Come, man, if nothing came out at the time, it’s not likely to come out now—ten years afterwards?”

Mr. Quin shook his head gently.

“I disagree with you. The evidence of history is against you. The contemporary historian never writes such a true history as the historian of a later generation. It is a question of getting the true perspective, of seeing things in proportion. If you like to call it so, it is, like everything else, a question of relativity.”

Alex Portal leant forward, his face twitching painfully.

“You are right, Mr. Quin,” he cried, “you are right. Time does not dispose of a question—it only presents it anew in a different guise.”

Evesham was smiling tolerantly.

“Then you mean to say, Mr. Quin, that if we were to hold, let us say, a Court of Inquiry tonight, into the circumstances of Derek Capel’s death, we are as likely to arrive at the truth as we should have been at the time?”

“More likely, Mr. Evesham. The personal equation has largely dropped out, and you will remember facts as facts without seeking to put your own interpretation upon them.”

Evesham frowned doubtfully.

“One must have a starting point, of course,” said Mr. Quin in his quiet level voice. “A starting point is usually a theory. One of you must have a theory, I am sure. How about you, Sir Richard?”

Conway frowned thoughtfully.

“Well, of course,” he said apologetically, “we thought—naturally we all thought—that there must be a woman in it somewhere. It’s usually either that or money, isn’t it? And it certainly wasn’t money. No trouble of that description. So—what else could it have been?”

Mr. Satterthwaite started. He had leant forward to contribute a small remark of his own and in the act of doing so, he had caught sight of a woman’s figure crouched against the balustrade of the gallery above. She was huddled down against it, invisible from everywhere but where he himself sat, and she was evidently listening with strained attention to what was going on below. So immovable was she that he hardly believed the evidence of his own eyes.

But he recognized the pattern of the dress easily enough—an old-world brocade. It was Eleanor Portal.

And suddenly all the events of the night seemed to fall into pattern—Mr. Quin’s arrival, no fortuitous chance, but the appearance of an actor when his cue was given. There was a drama being played in the big hall at Royston tonight—a drama none the less real in that one of the actors was

dead. Oh! yes, Derek Capel had a part in the play. Mr. Satterthwaite was sure of that.

And, again suddenly, a new illumination came to him. This was Mr. Quin's doing. It was he who was staging the play—was giving the actors their cues. He was at the heart of the mystery pulling the strings, making the puppets work. He knew everything, even to the presence of the woman crouched against the woodwork upstairs. Yes, he knew.

Sitting well back in his chair, secure in his role of audience, Mr. Satterthwaite watched the drama unfold before his eyes. Quietly and naturally, Mr. Quin was pulling the strings, setting his puppets in motion.

“A woman—yes,” he murmured thoughtfully. “There was no mention of any woman at dinner?”

“Why, of course,” cried Evesham. “He announced his engagement. That's just what made it seem so absolutely mad. Very bucked about it he was. Said it wasn't to be announced just yet—but gave us the hint that he was in the running for the Benedick stakes.”

“Of course we all guessed who the lady was,” said Conway. “Marjorie Dilke. Nice girl.”

It seemed to be Mr. Quin's turn to speak, but he did not do so, and something about his silence seemed oddly provocative. It was as though he challenged the last statement. It had the effect of putting Conway in a defensive position.

“Who else could it have been? Eh, Evesham?”

“I don't know,” said Tom Evesham slowly. “What did he say exactly now? Something about being in the running for the Benedick stakes—that he couldn't tell us the lady's name till he had her permission—it wasn't to be announced yet. He said, I remember, that he was a damned lucky fellow. That he wanted his two old friends to know that by that time next year he'd be a happy married man. Of course, we assumed it was Marjorie. They were great friends and he'd been about with her a lot.”

“The only thing—” began Conway and stopped.

“What were you going to say, Dick?”

“Well, I mean, it was odd in a way, if it were Marjorie, that the engagement shouldn’t be announced at once. I mean, why the secrecy? Sounds more as though it were a married woman—you know, someone whose husband had just died, or who was divorcing him.”

“That’s true,” said Evesham. “If that were the case, of course, the engagement couldn’t be announced at once. And you know, thinking back about it, I don’t believe he had been seeing much of Marjorie. All that was the year before. I remember thinking things seemed to have cooled off between them.”

“Curious,” said Mr. Quin.

“Yes—looked almost as though someone had come between them.”

“Another woman,” said Conway thoughtfully.

“By jove,” said Evesham. “You know, there was something almost indecently hilarious about old Derek that night. He looked almost drunk with happiness. And yet—I can’t quite explain what I mean—but he looked oddly defiant too.”

“Like a man defying Fate,” said Alex Portal heavily.

Was it of Derek Capel he was speaking—or was it of himself? Mr. Satterthwaite, looking at him, inclined to the latter view. Yes, that was what Alex Portal represented—a man defying Fate.

His imagination, muddled by drink, responded suddenly to that note in the story which recalled his own secret preoccupation.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked up. She was still there. Watching, listening—still motionless, frozen—like a dead woman.

“Perfectly true,” said Conway. “Capel was excited—curiously so. I’d describe him as a man who had staked heavily and won against well-nigh overwhelming odds.”

“Getting up courage, perhaps, for what he’s made up his mind to do?” suggested Portal.

And as though moved by an association of ideas, he got up and helped himself to another drink.

“Not a bit of it,” said Evesham sharply. “I’d almost swear nothing of that kind was in his mind. Conway’s right. A successful gambler who has brought off a long shot and can hardly believe in his own good fortune. That was the attitude.”

Conway gave a gesture of discouragement.

“And yet,” he said. “Ten minutes later—”

They sat in silence. Evesham brought his hand down with a bang on the table.

“Something must have happened in that ten minutes,” he cried. “It must! But what? Let’s go over it carefully. We were all talking. In the middle of it Capel got up suddenly and left the room—”

“Why?” said Mr. Quin.

The interruption seemed to disconcert Evesham.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I only said: Why?” said Mr. Quin.

Evesham frowned in an effort of memory.

“It didn’t seem vital—at the time—Oh! of course—the Post. Don’t you remember that jangling bell, and how excited we were. We’d been snowed up for three days, remember. Biggest snowstorm for years and years. All the

roads were impassable. No newspapers, no letters. Capel went out to see if something had come through at last, and got a great pile of things.

Newspapers and letters. He opened the paper to see if there was any news, and then went upstairs with his letters. Three minutes afterwards, we heard a shot . . . Inexplicable—absolutely inexplicable.”

“That’s not inexplicable,” said Portal. “Of course the fellow got some unexpected news in a letter. Obvious, I should have said.”

“Oh! Don’t think we missed anything so obvious as that. It was one of the Coroner’s first questions. But Capel never opened one of his letters. The whole pile lay unopened on his dressing table.”

Portal looked crestfallen.

“You’re sure he didn’t open just one of them? He might have destroyed it after reading it?”

“No, I’m quite positive. Of course, that would have been the natural solution. No, every one of the letters was unopened. Nothing burnt—nothing torn up—There was no fire in the room.”

Portal shook his head.

“Extraordinary.”

“It was a ghastly business altogether,” said Evesham in a low voice.

“Conway and I went up when we heard the shot, and found him—It gave me a shock, I can tell you.”

“Nothing to be done but telephone for the police, I suppose?” said Mr. Quin.

“Royston wasn’t on the telephone then. I had it put in when I bought the place. No, luckily enough, the local constable happened to be in the kitchen at the time. One of the dogs—you remember poor old Rover, Conway?—had strayed the day before. A passing carter had found it half buried in a snowdrift and had taken it to the police station. They recognized it as

Capel's, and a dog he was particularly fond of, and the constable came up with it. He'd just arrived a minute before the shot was fired. It saved us some trouble."

"Gad, that was a snowstorm," said Conway reminiscently. "About this time of year, wasn't it? Early January."

"February, I think. Let me see, we went abroad soon afterwards."

"I'm pretty sure it was January. My hunter Ned—you remember Ned?—lamed himself the end of January. That was just after this business."

"It must have been quite the end of January then. Funny how difficult it is to recall dates after a lapse of years."

"One of the most difficult things in the world," said Mr. Quin, conversationally. "Unless you can find a landmark in some big public event—an assassination of a crowned head, or a big murder trial."

"Why, of course," cried Conway, "it was just before the Appleton case."

"Just after, wasn't it?"

"No, no, don't you remember—Capel knew the Appletons—he'd stayed with the old man the previous Spring—just a week before he died. He was talking of him one night—what an old curmudgeon he was, and how awful it must have been for a young and beautiful woman like Mrs. Appleton to be tied to him. There was no suspicion then that she had done away with him."

"By jove, you're right. I remember reading the paragraph in the paper saying an exhumation order had been granted. It would have been that same day—I remember only seeing it with half my mind, you know, the other half wondering about poor old Derek lying dead upstairs."

"A common, but very curious phenomenon, that," observed Mr. Quin. "In moments of great stress, the mind focuses itself upon some quite unimportant matter which is remembered long afterwards with the utmost

fidelity, driven in, as it were, by the mental stress of the moment. It may be some quite irrelevant detail, like the pattern of a wallpaper, but it will never be forgotten.”

“Rather extraordinary, your saying that, Mr. Quin,” said Conway. “Just as you were speaking, I suddenly felt myself back in Derek Capel’s room—with Derek lying dead on the floor—I saw as plainly as possible the big tree outside the window, and the shadow it threw upon the snow outside. Yes, the moonlight, the snow, and the shadow of the tree—I can see them again this minute. By Gad, I believe I could draw them, and yet I never realized I was looking at them at the time.”

“His room was the big one over the porch, was it not?” asked Mr. Quin.

“Yes, and the tree was the big beech, just at the angle of the drive.”

Mr. Quin nodded, as though satisfied. Mr. Satterthwaite was curiously thrilled. He was convinced that every word, every inflection of Mr. Quin’s voice, was pregnant with purpose. He was driving at something—exactly what Mr. Satterthwaite did not know, but he was quite convinced as to whose was the master hand.

There was a momentary pause, and then Evesham reverted to the preceding topic.

“That Appleton case, I remember it very well now. What a sensation it made. She got off, didn’t she? Pretty woman, very fair—remarkably fair.”

Almost against his will, Mr. Satterthwaite’s eyes sought the kneeling figure up above. Was it his fancy, or did he see it shrink a little as though at a blow. Did he see a hand slide upwards to the table cloth—and then pause.

There was a crash of falling glass. Alex Portal, helping himself to whisky, had let the decanter slip.

“I say—sir, damn sorry. Can’t think what came over me.”

Evesham cut short his apologies.

“Quite all right. Quite all right, my dear fellow. Curious—That smash reminded me. That’s what she did, didn’t she? Mrs. Appleton? Smashed the port decanter?”

“Yes. Old Appleton had his glass of port—only one—each night. The day after his death, one of the servants saw her take the decanter out and smash it deliberately. That set them talking, of course. They all knew she had been perfectly wretched with him. Rumour grew and grew, and in the end, months later, some of his relatives applied for an exhumation order. And sure enough, the old fellow had been poisoned. Arsenic, wasn’t it?”

“No—strychnine, I think. It doesn’t much matter. Well, of course, there it was. Only one person was likely to have done it. Mrs. Appleton stood her trial. She was acquitted more through lack of evidence against her than from any overwhelming proof of innocence. In other words, she was lucky. Yes, I don’t suppose there’s much doubt she did it right enough. What happened to her afterwards?”

“Went out to Canada, I believe. Or was it Australia? She had an uncle or something of the sort out there who offered her a home. Best thing she could do under the circumstances.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was fascinated by Alex Portal’s right hand as it clasped his glass. How tightly he was gripping it.

“You’ll smash that in a minute or two, if you’re not careful,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite. “Dear me, how interesting all this is.”

Evesham rose and helped himself to a drink.

“Well, we’re not much nearer to knowing why poor Derek Capel shot himself,” he remarked. “The Court of Inquiry hasn’t been a great success, has it, Mr. Quin?”

Mr. Quin laughed. . . .

It was a strange laugh, mocking—yet sad. It made everyone jump.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “You are still living in the past, Mr. Evesham. You are still hampered by your preconceived notion. But I—the man from outside, the stranger passing by, see only—facts!”

“Facts?”

“Yes—facts.”

“What do you mean?” said Evesham.

“I see a clear sequence of facts, outlined by yourselves but of which you have not seen the significance. Let us go back ten years and look at what we see—untrammelled by ideas or sentiment.”

Mr. Quin had risen. He looked very tall. The fire leaped fitfully behind him. He spoke in a low compelling voice.

“You are at dinner. Derek Capel announces his engagement. You think then it was to Marjorie Dilke. You are not so sure now. He has the restlessly excited manner of a man who has successfully defied Fate—who, in your own words, has pulled off a big coup against overwhelming odds. Then comes the clanging of the bell. He goes out to get the long overdue mail. He doesn’t open his letters, but you mention yourselves that he opened the paper to glance at the news. It is ten years ago—so we cannot know what the news was that day—a far-off earthquake, a near at hand political crisis? The only thing we do know about the contents of that paper is that it contained one small paragraph—a paragraph stating that the Home Office had given permission to exhume the body of Mr. Appleton three days ago.”

“What?”

Mr. Quin went on.

“Derek Capel goes up to his room, and there he sees something out of the window. Sir Richard Conway has told us that the curtain was not drawn across it and further that it gave on to the drive. What did he see? What could he have seen that forced him to take his life?”

“What do you mean? What did he see?”

“I think,” said Mr. Quinn, “that he saw a policeman. A policeman who had come about a dog—But Derek Capel didn’t know that—he just saw—a policeman.”

There was a long silence—as though it took some time to drive the inference home.

“My God!” whispered Evesham at last. “You can’t mean that? Appleton? But he wasn’t there at the time Appleton died. The old man was alone with his wife—”

“But he may have been there a week earlier. Strychnine is not very soluble unless it is in the form of hydrochloride. The greater part of it, put into the port, would be taken in the last glass, perhaps a week after he left.”

Portal sprung forward. His voice was hoarse, his eyes bloodshot.

“Why did she break the decanter?” he cried. “Why did she break the decanter? Tell me that!”

For the first time that evening, Mr. Quin addressed himself to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“You have a wide experience of life, Mr. Satterthwaite. Perhaps you can tell us that.”

Mr. Satterthwaite’s voice trembled a little. His cue had come at last. He was to speak some of the most important lines in the play. He was an actor now—not a looker-on.

“As I see it,” he murmured modestly, “she—cared for Derek Capel. She was, I think, a good woman—and she had sent him away. When her husband—died, she suspected the truth. And so, to save the man she loved, she tried to destroy the evidence against him. Later, I think, he persuaded her that her suspicions were unfounded, and she consented to marry him. But even then, she hung back—women, I fancy, have a lot of instinct.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had spoken his part.

Suddenly a long trembling sigh filled the air.

“My God!” cried Evesham, starting, “what was that?”

Mr. Satterthwaite could have told him that it was Eleanor Portal in the gallery above, but he was too artistic to spoil a good effect.

Mr. Quin was smiling.

“My car will be ready by now. Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Evesham. I have, I hope, done something for my friend.”

They stared at him in blank amazement.

“That aspect of the matter has not struck you? He loved this woman, you know. Loved her enough to commit murder for her sake. When retribution overtook him, as he mistakenly thought, he took his own life. But unwittingly, he left her to face the music.”

“She was acquitted,” muttered Evesham.

“Because the case against her could not be proved. I fancy—it may be only a fancy—that she is still—facing the music.”

Portal had sunk into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

Quin turned to Satterthwaite.

“Goodbye, Mr. Satterthwaite. You are interested in the drama, are you not?”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded—surprised.

“I must recommend the Harlequinade to your attention. It is dying out nowadays—but it repays attention, I assure you. Its symbolism is a little difficult to follow—but the immortals are always immortal, you know. I wish you all goodnight.”

They saw him stride out into the dark. As before, the coloured glass gave the effect of motley. . . .

Mr. Satterthwaite went upstairs. He went to draw down his window, for the air was cold. The figure of Mr. Quin moved down the drive, and from a side door came a woman's figure, running. For a moment they spoke together, then she retraced her steps to the house. She passed just below the window, and Mr. Satterthwaite was struck anew by the vitality of her face. She moved now like a woman in a happy dream.

"Eleanor!"

Alex Portal had joined her.

"Eleanor, forgive me—forgive me—You told me the truth, but God forgive me—I did not quite believe. . . ."

Mr. Satterthwaite was intensely interested in other people's affairs, but he was also a gentleman. It was borne in upon him that he must shut the window. He did so.

But he shut it very slowly.

He heard her voice, exquisite and indescribable.

"I know—I know. You have been in hell. So was I once. Loving—yet alternately believing and suspecting—thrusting aside one's doubts and having them spring up again with leering faces . . . I know, Alex, I know . . . But there is a worse hell than that, the hell I have lived in with you. I have seen your doubt—your fear of me . . . poisoning all our love. That man—that chance passerby, saved me. I could bear it no longer, you understand. Tonight—tonight I was going to kill myself . . . Alex . . . Alex. . . ."

Two

THE SHADOW ON THE GLASS

“The Shadow on the Glass” was first published in Grand Magazine, October 1923.

Listen to this,” said Lady Cynthia Drage.

She read aloud from the journal she held in her hand.

“Mr. and Mrs. Unkerton are entertaining a party at Greenways House this week. Amongst the guests are Lady Cynthia Drage, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Scott, Major Porter, D.S.O., Mrs. Staverton, Captain Allenson and Mr. Satterthwaite.”

“It’s as well,” remarked Lady Cynthia, casting away the paper, “to know what we’re in for. But they have made a mess of things!”

Her companion, that same Mr. Satterthwaite whose name figured at the end of the list of guests, looked at her interrogatively. It had been said that if Mr. Satterthwaite were found at the houses of those rich who had newly arrived, it was a sign either that the cooking was unusually good, or that a drama of human life was to be enacted there. Mr. Satterthwaite was abnormally interested in the comedies and tragedies of his fellow men.

Lady Cynthia, who was a middle-aged woman, with a hard face and a liberal allowance of makeup, tapped him smartly with the newest thing in parasols which lay rakishly across her knee.

“Don’t pretend you don’t understand me. You do perfectly. What’s more I believe you’re here on purpose to see the fur fly!”

Mr. Satterthwaite protested vigorously. He didn’t know what she was talking about.

“I’m talking about Richard Scott. Do you pretend you’ve never heard of him?”

“No, of course not. He’s the Big Game man, isn’t he?”

“That’s it—‘Great big bears and tigers, etc.’ as the song says. Of course, he’s a great lion himself just now—the Unkertons would naturally be mad to get hold of him—and the bride! A charming child—oh! quite a charming child—but so naïve, only twenty, you know, and he must be at least forty-five.”

“Mrs. Scott seems to be very charming,” said Mr. Satterthwaite sedately.

“Yes, poor child.”

“Why poor child?”

Lady Cynthia cast him a look of reproach, and went on approaching the point at issue in her own manner.

“Porter’s all right—a dull dog, though—another of these African hunters, all sunburnt and silent. Second fiddle to Richard Scott and always has been—lifelong friends and all that sort of thing. When I come to think of it, I believe they were together on that trip—”

“Which trip?”

“The trip. The Mrs. Staverton trip. You’ll be saying next you’ve never heard of Mrs. Staverton.”

“I have heard of Mrs. Staverton,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, almost with unwillingness.

And he and Lady Cynthia exchanged glances.

“It’s so exactly like the Unkertons,” wailed the latter, “they are absolutely hopeless—socially, I mean. The idea of asking those two together! Of course they’d heard that Mrs. Staverton was a sportswoman and a traveller and all that, and about her book. People like the Unkertons don’t even begin

to realize what pitfalls there are! I've been running them, myself, for the last year, and what I've gone through nobody knows. One has to be constantly at their elbow. "Don't do that! You can't do this!" Thank goodness, I'm through with it now. Not that we've quarrelled—oh! no, I never quarrel, but somebody else can take on the job. As I've always said, I can put up with vulgarity, but I can't stand meanness!"

After this somewhat cryptic utterance, Lady Cynthia was silent for a moment, ruminating on the Unkertons' meanness as displayed to herself.

"If I'd still been running the show for them," she went on presently, "I should have said quite firmly and plainly: 'You can't ask Mrs. Staverton with the Richard Scotts. She and he were once—' "

She stopped eloquently.

"But were they once?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

"My dear man! It's well known. That trip into the Interior! I'm surprised the woman had the face to accept the invitation."

"Perhaps she didn't know the others were coming?" suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Perhaps she did. That's far more likely."

"You think—?"

"She's what I call a dangerous woman—the sort of woman who'd stick at nothing. I wouldn't be in Richard Scott's shoes this weekend."

"And his wife knows nothing, you think?"

"I'm certain of it. But I suppose some kind friend will enlighten her sooner or later. Here's Jimmy Allenson. Such a nice boy. He saved my life in Egypt last winter—I was so bored, you know. Hullo, Jimmy, come here at once."

Captain Allenson obeyed, dropping down on the turf beside her. He was a handsome young fellow of thirty, with white teeth and an infectious smile.

“I’m glad somebody wants me,” he observed. “The Scotts are doing the turtle dove stunt, two required, not three, Porter’s devouring the Field, and I’ve been in mortal danger of being entertained by my hostess.”

He laughed. Lady Cynthia laughed with him. Mr. Satterthwaite, who was in some ways a little old-fashioned, so much so that he seldom made fun of his host and hostess until after he had left their house, remained grave.

“Poor Jimmy,” said Lady Cynthia.

“Mine not to reason why, mine but to swiftly fly. I had a narrow escape of being told the family ghost story.”

“An Unkerton ghost,” said Lady Cynthia. “How screaming.”

“Not an Unkerton ghost,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “A Greenways ghost. They bought it with the house.”

“Of course,” said Lady Cynthia. “I remember now. But it doesn’t clank chains, does it? It’s only something to do with a window.”

Jimmy Allenson looked up quickly.

“A window?”

But for the moment Mr. Satterthwaite did not answer. He was looking over Jimmy’s head at three figures approaching from the direction of the house—a slim girl between two men. There was a superficial resemblance between the men, both were tall and dark with bronzed faces and quick eyes, but looked at more closely the resemblance vanished. Richard Scott, hunter and explorer, was a man of extraordinarily vivid personality. He had a manner that radiated magnetism. John Porter, his friend and fellow hunter, was a man of squarer build with an impassive, rather wooden face, and very thoughtful grey eyes. He was a quiet man, content always to play second fiddle to his friend.

And between these two walked Moira Scott who, until three months ago, had been Moira O’Connell. A slender figure, big wistful brown eyes, and

golden red hair that stood out round her small face like a saint's halo.

"That child mustn't be hurt," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "It would be abominable that a child like that should be hurt."

Lady Cynthia greeted the newcomers with a wave of the latest thing in parasols.

"Sit down, and don't interrupt," she said. "Mr. Satterthwaite is telling us a ghost story."

"I love ghost stories," said Moira Scott. She dropped down on the grass.

"The ghost of Greenways House?" asked Richard Scott.

"Yes. You know about it?"

Scott nodded.

"I used to stay here in the old days," he explained. "Before the Elliots had to sell up. The Watching Cavalier, that's it, isn't it?"

"The Watching Cavalier," said his wife softly. "I like that. It sounds interesting. Please go on."

But Mr. Satterthwaite seemed somewhat loath to do so. He assured her that it was not really interesting at all.

"Now you've done it, Satterthwaite," said Richard Scott sardonically. "That hint of reluctance clinches it."

In response to popular clamour, Mr. Satterthwaite was forced to speak.

"It's really very uninteresting," he said apologetically. "I believe the original story centres round a Cavalier ancestor of the Elliot family. His wife had a Roundhead lover. The husband was killed by the lover in an upstairs room, and the guilty pair fled, but as they fled, they looked back at the house, and saw the face of the dead husband at the window, watching them. That is the legend, but the ghost story is only concerned with a pane

of glass in the window of that particular room on which is an irregular stain, almost imperceptible from near at hand, but which from far away certainly gives the effect of a man's face looking out."

"Which window is it?" asked Mrs. Scott, looking up at the house.

"You can't see it from here," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "It is round the other side but was boarded up from the inside some years ago—forty years ago, I think, to be accurate."

"What did they do that for? I thought you said the ghost didn't walk."

"It doesn't," Mr. Satterthwaite assured her. "I suppose—well, I suppose there grew to be a superstitious feeling about it, that's all."

Then, deftly enough, he succeeded in turning the conversation. Jimmy Allenson was perfectly ready to hold forth upon Egyptian sand diviners.

"Frauds, most of them. Ready enough to tell you vague things about the past, but won't commit themselves as to the future."

"I should have thought it was usually the other way about," remarked John Porter.

"It's illegal to tell the future in this country, isn't it?" said Richard Scott. "Moirra persuaded a gypsy into telling her fortune, but the woman gave her her shilling back, and said there was nothing doing, or words to that effect."

"Perhaps she saw something so frightful that she didn't like to tell it me," said Moira.

"Don't pile on the agony, Mrs. Scott," said Allenson lightly. "I, for one, refuse to believe that an unlucky fate is hanging over you."

"I wonder," thought Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "I wonder. . . ."

Then he looked up sharply. Two women were coming from the house, a short stout woman with black hair, inappropriately dressed in jade green, and a tall slim figure in creamy white. The first woman was his hostess,

Mrs. Unkerton, the second was a woman he had often heard of, but never met.

“Here’s Mrs. Staverton,” announced Mrs. Unkerton, in a tone of great satisfaction. “All friends here, I think.”

“These people have an uncanny gift for saying just the most awful things they can,” murmured Lady Cynthia, but Mr. Satterthwaite was not listening. He was watching Mrs. Staverton.

Very easy—very natural. Her careless “Hello! Richard, ages since we met. Sorry I couldn’t come to the wedding. Is this your wife? You must be tired of meeting all your husband’s weather-beaten old friends.” Moira’s response—suitable, rather shy. The elder woman’s swift appraising glance that went on lightly to another old friend.

“Hullo, John!” The same easy tone, but with a subtle difference in it—a warming quality that had been absent before.

And then that sudden smile. It transformed her. Lady Cynthia had been quite right. A dangerous woman! Very fair—deep blue eyes—not the traditional colouring of the siren—a face almost haggard in repose. A woman with a slow dragging voice and a sudden dazzling smile.

Iris Staverton sat down. She became naturally and inevitably the centre of the group. So you felt it would always be.

Mr. Satterthwaite was recalled from his thoughts by Major Porter’s suggesting a stroll. Mr. Satterthwaite, who was not as a general rule much given to strolling, acquiesced. The two men sauntered off together across the lawn.

“Very interesting story of yours just now,” said the Major.

“I will show you the window,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He led the way round to the west side of the house. Here there was a small formal garden—the Privy Garden, it was always called, and there was some

point in the name, for it was surrounded by high holly hedges, and even the entrance to it ran zigzag between the same high prickly hedges.

Once inside, it was very charming with an old-world charm of formal flower beds, flagged paths and a low stone seat, exquisitely carved. When they had reached the centre of the garden, Mr. Satterthwaite turned and pointed up at the house. The length of Greenways House ran north and south. In this narrow west wall there was only one window, a window on the first floor, almost overgrown by ivy, with grimy panes, and which you could just see was boarded up on the inside.

“There you are,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Craning his neck a little, Porter looked up.

“H’m I can see a kind of discolouration on one of the panes, nothing more.”

“We’re too near,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “There’s a clearing higher up in the woods where you get a really good view.”

He led the way out of the Privy Garden, and turning sharply to the left, struck into the woods. A certain enthusiasm of showmanship possessed him, and he hardly noticed that the man at his side was absent and inattentive.

“They had, of course, to make another window, when they boarded up this one,” he explained. “The new one faces south overlooking the lawn where we were sitting just now. I rather fancy the Scotts have the room in question. That is why I didn’t want to pursue the subject. Mrs. Scott might have felt nervous if she had realized that she was sleeping in what might be called the haunted room.”

“Yes. I see,” said Porter.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him sharply, and realized that the other had not heard a word of what he was saying.

“Very interesting,” said Porter. He slashed with his stick at some tall foxgloves, and, frowning, he said: “She ought not to have come. She ought never to have come.”

People often spoke after this fashion to Mr. Satterthwaite. He seemed to matter so little, to have so negative a personality. He was merely a glorified listener.

“No,” said Porter, “she ought never to have come.”

Mr. Satterthwaite knew instinctively that it was not of Mrs. Scott he spoke.

“You think not?” he asked.

Porter shook his head as though in foreboding.

“I was on that trip,” he said abruptly. “The three of us went. Scott and I and Iris. She’s a wonderful woman—and a damned fine shot.” He paused.

“What made them ask her?” he finished abruptly.

Mr. Satterthwaite shrugged his shoulders.

“Ignorance,” he said.

“There’s going to be trouble,” said the other. “We must stand by—and do what we can.”

“But surely Mrs. Staverton—?”

“I’m talking of Scott.” He paused. “You see—there’s Mrs. Scott to consider.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had been considering her all along, but he did not think it necessary to say so, since the other man had so clearly forgotten her until this minute.

“How did Scott meet his wife?” he asked.

“Last winter, in Cairo. A quick business. They were engaged in three weeks, and married in six.”

“She seems to me very charming.”

“She is, no doubt about it. And he adores her—but that will make no difference.” And again Major Porter repeated to himself, using the pronoun that meant to him one person only: “Hang it all, she shouldn’t have come. . . .”

Just then they stepped out upon a high grassy knoll at some little distance from the house. With again something of the pride of the showman, Mr. Satterthwaite stretched out his arm.

“Look,” he said.

It was fast growing dusk. The window could still be plainly descried, and apparently pressed against one of the panes was a man’s face surmounted by a plumed Cavalier’s hat.

“Very curious,” said Porter. “Really very curious. What will happen when that pane of glass gets smashed some day?”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

“That is one of the most interesting parts of the story. That pane of glass has been replaced to my certain knowledge at least eleven times, perhaps oftener. The last time was twelve years ago when the then owner of the house determined to destroy the myth. But it’s always the same. The stain reappears—not all at once, the discolouration spreads gradually. It takes a month or two as a rule.”

For the first time, Porter showed signs of real interest. He gave a sudden quick shiver.

“Damned odd, these things. No accounting for them. What’s the real reason of having the room boarded up inside?”

“Well, an idea got about that the room was—unlucky. The Eveshams were in it just before the divorce. Then Stanley and his wife were staying here, and had that room when he ran off with his chorus girl.”

Porter raised his eyebrows.

“I see. Danger, not to life, but to morals.”

“And now,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, “the Scotts have it . . . I wonder. . . .”

They retraced their steps in silence to the house. Walking almost noiselessly on the soft turf, each absorbed in his own thoughts, they became unwittingly eavesdroppers.

They were rounding the corner of the holly hedge when they heard Iris Staverton’s voice raised fierce and clear from the depths of the Privy Garden.

“You shall be sorry—sorry—for this!”

Scott’s voice answered low and uncertain, so that the words could not be distinguished, and then the woman’s voice rose again, speaking words that they were to remember later.

“Jealousy—it drives one to the Devil—it is the Devil! It can drive one to black murder. Be careful, Richard, for God’s sake, be careful!”

And then on that she had come out of the Privy Garden ahead of them, and on round the corner of the house without seeing them, walking swiftly, almost running, like a woman hag-ridden and pursued.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought again of Lady Cynthia’s words. A dangerous woman. For the first time, he had a premonition of tragedy, coming swift and inexorable, not to be gainsaid.

Yet that evening he felt ashamed of his fears. Everything seemed normal and pleasant. Mrs. Staverton, with her easy insouciance, showed no sign of strain. Moira Scott was her charming, unaffected self. The two women

appeared to be getting on very well. Richard Scott himself seemed to be in boisterous spirits.

The most worried looking person was stout Mrs. Unkerton. She confided at length in Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Think it silly or not, as you like, there’s something giving me the creeps. And I’ll tell you frankly, I’ve sent for the glazier unbeknown to Ned.”

“The glazier?”

“To put a new pane of glass in that window. It’s all very well. Ned’s proud of it—says it gives the house a tone. I don’t like it. I tell you flat. We’ll have a nice plain modern pane of glass, with no nasty stories attached to it.”

“You forget,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “or perhaps you don’t know. The stain comes back.”

“That’s as it may be,” said Mrs. Unkerton. “All I can say is if it does, it’s against nature!”

Mr. Satterthwaite raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

“And what if it does?” pursued Mrs. Unkerton defiantly. “We’re not so bankrupt, Ned and I, that we can’t afford a new pane of glass every month—or every week if need be for the matter of that.”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not meet the challenge. He had seen too many things crumple and fall before the power of money to believe that even a Cavalier ghost could put up a successful fight. Nevertheless, he was interested by Mrs. Unkerton’s manifest uneasiness. Even she was not exempt from the tension in the atmosphere—only she attributed it to an attenuated ghost story, not to the clash of personalities amongst her guests.

Mr. Satterthwaite was fated to hear yet another scrap of conversation which threw light upon the situation. He was going up the wide staircase to bed, John Porter and Mrs. Staverton were sitting together in an alcove of the big hall. She was speaking with a faint irritation in her golden voice.

“I hadn’t the least idea the Scotts were going to be here. I daresay, if I had known, I shouldn’t have come, but I can assure you, my dear John, that now I am here, I’m not going to run away—”

Mr. Satterthwaite passed on up the staircase out of earshot. He thought to himself: “I wonder now—How much of that is true? Did she know? I wonder—what’s going to come of it?”

He shook his head.

In the clear light of the morning he felt that he had perhaps been a little melodramatic in his imaginings of the evening before. A moment of strain—yes, certainly—inevitable under the circumstances—but nothing more. People adjusted themselves. His fancy that some great catastrophe was pending was nerves—pure nerves—or possibly liver. Yes, that was it, liver. He was due at Carlsbad in another fortnight.

On his own account he proposed a little stroll that evening just as it was growing dusk. He suggested to Major Porter that they should go up to the clearing and see if Mrs. Unkerton had been as good as her word, and had a new pane of glass put in. To himself, he said: “Exercise, that’s what I need. Exercise.”

The two men walked slowly through the woods. Porter, as usual, was taciturn.

“I can’t help feeling,” said Mr. Satterthwaite loquaciously, “that we were a little foolish in our imaginings yesterday. Expecting—er—trouble, you know. After all, people have to behave themselves—swallow their feelings and that sort of thing.”

“Perhaps,” said Porter. After a minute or two he added: “Civilized people.”

“You mean—?”

“People who’ve lived outside civilization a good deal sometimes go back. Revert. Whatever you call it.”

They emerged on to the grassy knoll. Mr. Satterthwaite was breathing rather fast. He never enjoyed going uphill.

He looked towards the window. The face was still there, more lifelike than ever.

“Our hostess has repented, I see.”

Porter threw it only a cursory glance.

“Unkerton cut up rough, I expect,” he said indifferently. “He’s the sort of man who is willing to be proud of another family’s ghost, and who isn’t going to run the risk of having it driven away when he’s paid spot cash for it.”

He was silent a minute or two, staring, not at the house, but at the thick undergrowth by which they were surrounded.

“Has it ever struck you,” he said, “that civilization’s damned dangerous?”

“Dangerous?” Such a revolutionary remark shocked Mr. Satterthwaite to the core.

“Yes. There are no safety valves, you see.”

He turned abruptly, and they descended the path by which they had come.

“I really am quite at a loss to understand you,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, pattering along with nimble steps to keep up with the other’s strides.

“Reasonable people—”

Porter laughed. A short disconcerting laugh. Then he looked at the correct little gentleman by his side.

“You think it’s all bunkum on my part, Mr. Satterthwaite? But there are people, you know, who can tell you when a storm’s coming. They feel it beforehand in the air. And other people can foretell trouble. There’s trouble coming now, Mr. Satterthwaite, big trouble. It may come any minute. It may —”

He stopped dead, clutching Mr. Satterthwaite's arm. And in that tense minute of silence it came—the sound of two shots and following them a cry—a cry in a woman's voice.

“My god!” cried Porter, “it's come.”

He raced down the path, Mr. Satterthwaite panting behind him. In a minute they came out on to the lawn, close by the hedge of the Privy Garden. At the same time, Richard Scott and Mr. Unkerton came round the opposite corner of the house. They halted, facing each other, to left and right of the entrance to the Privy Garden.

“It—it came from in there,” said Unkerton, pointing with a flabby hand.

“We must see,” said Porter. He led the way into the enclosure. As he rounded the last bend of the holly hedge, he stopped dead. Mr. Satterthwaite peered over his shoulder. A loud cry burst from Richard Scott.

There were three people in the Privy Garden. Two of them lay on the grass near the stone seat, a man and a woman. The third was Mrs. Staverton. She was standing quite close to them by the holly hedge, gazing with horror-stricken eyes, and holding something in her right hand.

“Iris,” cried Porter. “Iris. For God's sake! What's that you've got in your hand?”

She looked down at it then—with a kind of wonder, an unbelievable indifference.

“It's a pistol,” she said wonderingly. And then—after what seemed an interminable time, but was in reality only a few seconds, “I—picked it up.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had gone forward to where Unkerton and Scott were kneeling on the turf.

“A doctor,” the latter was murmuring. “We must have a doctor.”

But it was too late for any doctor. Jimmy Allenson who had complained that the sand diviners hedged about the future, and Moira Scott to whom the

gypsy had returned a shilling, lay there in the last great stillness.

It was Richard Scott who completed a brief examination. The iron nerve of the man showed in this crisis. After the first cry of agony, he was himself again.

He laid his wife gently down again.

“Shot from behind,” he said briefly. “The bullet has passed right through her.”

Then he handled Jimmy Allenson. The wound here was in the breast and the bullet was lodged in the body.

John Porter came towards them.

“Nothing should be touched,” he said sternly. “The police must see it all exactly as it is now.”

“The police,” said Richard Scott. His eyes lit up with a sudden flame as he looked at the woman standing by the holly hedge. He made a step in that direction, but at the same time John Porter also moved, so as to bar his way. For a moment it seemed as though there was a duel of eyes between the two friends.

Porter very quietly shook his head.

“No, Richard,” he said. “It looks like it—but you’re wrong.”

Richard Scott spoke with difficulty, moistening his dry lips.

“Then why—has she got that in her hand?”

And again Iris Staverton said in the same lifeless tone: “I—picked it up.”

“The police,” said Unkerton rising. “We must send for the police—at once. You will telephone perhaps, Scott? Someone should stay here—yes, I am sure someone should stay here.”

In his quiet gentlemanly manner, Mr. Satterthwaite offered to do so. His host accepted the offer with manifest relief.

“The ladies,” he explained. “I must break the news to the ladies, Lady Cynthia and my dear wife.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stayed in the Privy Garden looking down on the body of that which had once been Moira Scott.

“Poor child,” he said to himself. “Poor child. . . .”

He quoted to himself the tag about the evil men do living after them. For was not Richard Scott in a way responsible for his innocent wife’s death? They would hang Iris Staverton, he supposed, not that he liked to think of it, but was not it at least a part of the blame he laid at the man’s door? The evil that men do—

And the girl, the innocent girl, had paid.

He looked down at her with a very deep pity. Her small face, so white and wistful, a half smile on the lips still. The ruffled golden hair, the delicate ear. There was a spot of blood on the lobe of it. With an inner feeling of being something of a detective, Mr. Satterthwaite deduced an earring, torn away in her fall. He craned his neck forward. Yes, he was right, there was a small pearl drop hanging from the other ear.

Poor child, poor child.

“And now, sir,” said Inspector Winkfield.

They were in the library. The Inspector, a shrewd-looking forceful man of forty odd, was concluding his investigations. He had questioned most of the guests, and had by now pretty well made up his mind on the case. He was listening to what Major Porter and Mr. Satterthwaite had to say. Mr. Unkerton sat heavily in a chair, staring with protruding eyes at the opposite wall.

“As I understand it, gentlemen,” said the Inspector, “you’d been for a walk. You were returning to the house by a path that winds round the left side of what they call the Privy Garden. Is that correct?”

“Quite correct, Inspector.”

“You heard two shots, and a woman’s scream?”

“Yes.”

“You then ran as fast as you could, emerged from the woods and made your way to the entrance of the Privy Garden. If anybody had left that garden, they could only do so by one entrance. The holly bushes are impassable. If anyone had run out of the garden and turned to the right, he would have been met by Mr. Unkerton and Mr. Scott. If he had turned to the left, he could not have done so without being seen by you. Is that right?”

“That is so,” said Major Porter. His face was very white.

“That seems to settle it,” said the Inspector. “Mr. and Mrs. Unkerton and Lady Cynthia Drage were sitting on the lawn, Mr. Scott was in the Billiard Room which opens on to that lawn. At ten minutes past six, Mrs. Staverton came out of the house, spoke a word or two to those sitting there, and went round the corner of the house towards the Privy Garden. Two minutes later the shots were heard. Mr. Scott rushed out of the house and together with Mr. Unkerton ran to the Privy Garden. At the same time you and Mr.—er—Satterthwaite arrived from the opposite direction. Mrs. Staverton was in the Privy Garden with a pistol in her hand from which two shots had been fired. As I see it, she shot the lady first from behind as she was sitting on the bench. Then Captain Allenson sprang up and went for her, and she shot him in the chest as he came towards her. I understand that there had been a—er—previous attachment between her and Mr. Richard Scott—”

“That’s a damned lie,” said Porter.

His voice rang out hoarse and defiant. The Inspector said nothing, merely shook his head.

“What is her own story?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“She says that she went into the Privy Garden to be quiet for a little. Just before she rounded the last hedge, she heard the shots. She came round the corner, saw the pistol lying at her feet, and picked it up. No one passed her, and she saw no one in the garden but the two victims.” The Inspector gave an eloquent pause. “That’s what she says—and although I cautioned her, she insisted on making a statement.”

“If she said that,” said Major Porter, and his face was still deadly white, “she was speaking the truth. I know Iris Staverton.”

“Well, sir,” said the Inspector, “there’ll be plenty of time to go into all that later. In the meantime, I’ve got my duty to do.”

With an abrupt movement, Porter turned to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“You! Can’t you help? Can’t you do something?”

Mr. Satterthwaite could not help feeling immensely flattered. He had been appealed to, he, most insignificant of men, and by a man like John Porter.

He was just about to flutter out a regretful reply, when the butler, Thompson, entered, with a card upon a salver which he took to his master with an apologetic cough. Mr. Unkerton was still sitting huddled up in a chair, taking no part in the proceedings.

“I told the gentleman you would probably not be able to see him, sir,” said Thompson. “But he insisted that he had an appointment and that it was most urgent.”

Unkerton took the card.

“Mr. Harley Quin,” he read. “I remember, he was to see me about a picture. I did make an appointment, but as things are—”

But Mr. Satterthwaite had started forward.

“Mr. Harley Quin, did you say?” he cried. “How extraordinary, how very extraordinary. Major Porter, you asked me if I could help you. I think I can. This Mr. Quin is a friend—or I should say, an acquaintance of mine. He is a most remarkable man.”

“One of these amateur solvers of crime, I suppose,” remarked the Inspector disparagingly.

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “He is not that kind of man at all. But he has a power—an almost uncanny power—of showing you what you have seen with your own eyes, of making clear to you what you have heard with your own ears. Let us, at any rate, give him an outline of the case, and hear what he has to say.”

Mr. Unkerton glanced at the Inspector, who merely snorted and looked at the ceiling. Then the former gave a short nod to Thompson, who left the room and returned ushering in a tall, slim stranger.

“Mr. Unkerton?” The stranger shook him by the hand. “I am sorry to intrude upon you at such a time. We must leave our little picture chat until another time. Ah! my friend, Mr. Satterthwaite. Still as fond of the drama as ever?”

A faint smile played for a minute round the stranger’s lips as he said these last words.

“Mr. Quin,” said Mr. Satterthwaite impressively, “we have a drama here, we are in the midst of one, I should like, and my friend, Major Porter, would like, to have your opinion of it.”

Mr. Quin sat down. The red-shaded lamp threw a broad band of coloured light over the checked pattern of his overcoat, and left his face in shadow almost as though he wore a mask.

Succinctly, Mr. Satterthwaite recited the main points of the tragedy. Then he paused, breathlessly awaiting the words of the oracle.

But Mr. Quin merely shook his head.

“A sad story,” he said. “A very sad and shocking tragedy. The lack of motive makes it very intriguing.”

Unkerton stared at him.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “Mrs. Staverton was heard to threaten Richard Scott. She was bitterly jealous of his wife. Jealousy—”

“I agree,” said Mr. Quin. “Jealousy or Demoniac Possession. It’s all the same. But you misunderstand me. I was not referring to the murder of Mrs. Scott, but to that of Captain Allenson.”

“You’re right,” cried Porter, springing forward. “There’s a flaw there. If Iris had ever contemplated shooting Mrs. Scott, she’d have got her alone somewhere. No, we’re on the wrong tack. And I think I see another solution. Only those three people went into the Privy Garden. That is indisputable and I don’t intend to dispute it. But I reconstruct the tragedy differently. Supposing Jimmy Allenson shoots first Mrs. Scott and then himself. That’s possible, isn’t it? He flings the pistol from him as he falls—Mrs. Staverton finds it lying on the ground and picks it up just as she said. How’s that?”

The Inspector shook his head.

“Won’t wash, Major Porter. If Captain Allenson had fired that shot close to his body, the cloth would have been singed.”

“He might have held the pistol at arm’s length.”

“Why should he? No sense in it. Besides, there’s no motive.”

“Might have gone off his head suddenly,” muttered Porter, but without any great conviction. He fell to silence again, suddenly rousing himself to say defiantly: “Well, Mr. Quin?”

The latter shook his head.

“I’m not a magician. I’m not even a criminologist. But I will tell you one thing—I believe in the value of impressions. In any time of crisis, there is

always one moment that stands out from all the others, one picture that remains when all else has faded. Mr. Satterthwaite is, I think, likely to have been the most unprejudiced observer of those present. Will you cast your mind back, Mr. Satterthwaite, and tell us the moment that made the strongest impression on you? Was it when you heard the shots? Was it when you first saw the dead bodies? Was it when you first observed the pistol in Mrs. Staverton's hand? Clear your mind of any preconceived standard of values, and tell us."

Mr. Satterthwaite fixed his eyes on Mr. Quin's face, rather as a schoolboy might repeat a lesson of which he was not sure.

"No," he said slowly. "It was not any of those. The moment that I shall always remember was when I stood alone by the bodies—afterwards—looking down on Mrs. Scott. She was lying on her side. Her hair was ruffled. There was a spot of blood on her little ear."

And instantly, as he said it, he felt that he had said a terrific, a significant thing.

"Blood on her ear? Yes, I remember," said Unkerton slowly.

"Her earring must have been torn out when she fell," explained Mr. Satterthwaite.

But it sounded a little improbable as he said it.

"She was lying on her left side," said Porter. "I suppose it was that ear?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite quickly. "It was her right ear."

The Inspector coughed.

"I found this in the grass," he vouchsafed. He held up a loop of gold wire.

"But my God, man," cried Porter. "The thing can't have been wrenched to pieces by a mere fall. It's more as though it had been shot away by a bullet."

“So it was,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite. “It was a bullet. It must have been.”

“There were only two shots,” said the Inspector. “A shot can’t have grazed her ear and shot her in the back as well. And if one shot carried away the earring, and the second shot killed her, it can’t have killed Captain Allenson as well—not unless he was standing close in front of her—very close—facing her as it might be. Oh! no, not even then, unless, that is—”

“Unless she was in his arms, you were going to say,” said Mr. Quin, with a queer little smile. “Well, why not?”

Everyone stared at each other. The idea was so vitally strange to them—Allenson and Mrs. Scott—Mr. Unkerton voiced the same feeling.

“But they hardly knew each other,” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. “They might have known each other better than we thought. Lady Cynthia said he saved her from being bored in Egypt last winter, and you”—he turned to Porter—“you told me that Richard Scott met his wife in Cairo last winter. They might have known each other very well indeed out there. . . .”

“They didn’t seem to be together much,” said Unkerton.

“No—they rather avoided each other. It was almost unnatural, now I come to think of it—”

They all looked at Mr. Quin, as if a little startled at the conclusions at which they had arrived so unexpectedly.

Mr. Quin rose to his feet.

“You see,” he said, “what Mr. Satterthwaite’s impression has done for us.” He turned to Unkerton. “It is your turn now.”

“Eh? I don’t understand you.”

“You were very thoughtful when I came into this room. I should like to know exactly what thought it was that obsessed you. Never mind if it has

nothing to do with the tragedy. Never mind if it seems to you—superstitious—” Mr. Unkerton started, ever so slightly. “Tell us.”

“I don’t mind telling you,” said Unkerton. “Though it’s nothing to do with the business, and you’ll probably laugh at me into the bargain. I was wishing that my Missus had left well alone and not replaced that pane of glass in the haunted window. I feel as though doing that has maybe brought a curse upon us.”

He was unable to understand why the two men opposite him stared so.

“But she hasn’t replaced it yet,” said Mr. Satterthwaite at last.

“Yes, she has. Man came first thing this morning.”

“My God!” said Porter, “I begin to understand. That room, it’s panelled, I supposed, not papered?”

“Yes, but what does that—?”

But Porter had swung out of the room. The others followed him. He went straight upstairs to the Scotts’ bedroom. It was a charming room, panelled in cream with two windows facing south. Porter felt with his hands along the panels on the western wall.

“There’s a spring somewhere—must be. Ah!” There was a click, and a section of the panelling rolled back. It disclosed the grimy panes of the haunted window. One pane of glass was clean and new. Porter stooped quickly and picked up something. He held it out on the palm of his hand. It was a fragment of ostrich feather. Then he looked at Mr. Quin. Mr. Quin nodded.

He went across to the hat cupboard in the bedroom. There were several hats in it—the dead woman’s hats. He took out one with a large brim and curling feathers—an elaborate Ascot hat.

Mr. Quin began speaking in a gentle, reflective voice.

“Let us suppose,” said Mr. Quin, “a man who is by nature intensely jealous. A man who has stayed here in bygone years and knows the secret of the spring in the panelling. To amuse himself he opens it one day, and looks out over the Privy Garden. There, secure as they think from being overlooked, he sees his wife and another man. There can be no possible doubt in his mind as to the relations between them. He is mad with rage. What shall he do? An idea comes to him. He goes to the cupboard and puts on the hat with the brim and feathers. It is growing dusk, and he remembers the story of the stain on the glass. Anyone looking up at the window will see as they think the Watching Cavalier. Thus secure he watches them, and at the moment they are clasped in each other’s arms, he shoots. He is a good shot—a wonderful shot. As they fall, he fires once more—that shot carries away the earring. He flings the pistol out of the window into the Privy Garden, rushes downstairs and out through the billiard room.”

Porter took a step towards him.

“But he let her be accused!” he cried. “He stood by and let her be accused. Why? Why?”

“I think I know why,” said Mr. Quin. “I should guess—it’s only guesswork on my part, mind—that Richard Scott was once madly in love with Iris Staverton—so madly that even meeting her years afterwards stirred up the embers of jealousy again. I should say that Iris Staverton once fancied that she might love him, that she went on a hunting trip with him and another—and that she came back in love with the better man.”

“The better man,” muttered Porter, dazed. “You mean—?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin, with a faint smile. “I mean you.” He paused a minute, and then said: “If I were you—I should go to her now.”

“I will,” said Porter.

He turned and left the room.

Three

AT THE “BELLS AND MOTLEY”

“At the ‘Bells and Motley’ ” was first published as “A Man of Magic” in Grand Magazine, November 1925.

Mr. Satterthwaite was annoyed. Altogether it had been an unfortunate day. They had started late, there had been two punctures already, finally they had taken the wrong turning and lost themselves amidst the wilds of Salisbury Plain. Now it was close on eight o’clock, they were still a matter of forty miles from Marswick Manor whither they were bound, and a third puncture had supervened to render matters still more trying.

Mr. Satterthwaite, looking like some small bird whose plumage had been ruffled, walked up and down in front of the village garage whilst his chauffeur conversed in hoarse undertones with the local expert.

“Half an hour at least,” said that worthy pronouncing judgment.

“And lucky at that,” supplemented Masters, the chauffeur. “More like three quarters if you ask me.”

“What is this—place, anyway?” demanded Mr. Satterthwaite fretfully. Being a little gentleman considerate of the feelings of others, he substituted the word “place” for “God-forsaken hole” which had first risen to his lips.

“Kirtlington Mallet.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was not much wiser, and yet a faint familiarity seemed to linger round the name. He looked round him disparagingly. Kirtlington Mallet seemed to consist of one straggling street, the garage and the post office on one side of it balanced by three indeterminate shops on the other side. Farther down the road, however, Mr. Satterthwaite perceived

something that creaked and swung in the wind, and his spirits rose ever so slightly.

“There’s an Inn here, I see,” he remarked.

“ ‘Bells and Motley,’ ” said the garage man. “That’s it—yonder.”

“If I might make a suggestion, sir,” said Masters, “why not try it? They would be able to give you some sort of a meal, no doubt—not, of course, what you are accustomed to.” He paused apologetically, for Mr. Satterthwaite was accustomed to the best cooking of continental chefs, and had in his own service a cordon bleu to whom he paid a fabulous salary.

“We shan’t be able to take the road again for another three quarters of an hour, sir. I’m sure of that. And it’s already past eight o’clock. You could ring up Sir George Foster, sir, from the Inn, and acquaint him with the cause of our delay.”

“You seem to think you can arrange everything, Masters,” said Mr. Satterthwaite snappily.

Masters, who did think so, maintained a respectful silence.

Mr. Satterthwaite, in spite of his earnest wish to discountenance any suggestion that might possibly be made to him—he was in that mood—nevertheless looked down the road towards the creaking Inn sign with faint inward approval. He was a man of birdlike appetite, an epicure, but even such men can be hungry.

“The ‘Bells and Motley,’ ” he said thoughtfully. “That’s an odd name for an Inn. I don’t know that I ever heard it before.”

“There’s odd folks come to it by all account,” said the local man.

He was bending over the wheel, and his voice came muffled and indistinct.

“Odd folks?” queried Mr. Satterthwaite. “Now what do you mean by that?”

The other hardly seemed to know what he meant.

“Folks that come and go. That kind,” he said vaguely.

Mr. Satterthwaite reflected that people who come to an Inn are almost of necessity those who “come and go.” The definition seemed to him to lack precision. But nevertheless his curiosity was stimulated. Somehow or other he had got to put in three quarters of an hour. The “Bells and Motley” would be as good as anywhere else.

With his usual small mincing steps he walked away down the road. From afar there came a rumble of thunder. The mechanic looked up and spoke to Masters.

“There’s a storm coming over. Thought I could feel it in the air.”

“Crikey,” said Masters. “And forty miles to go.”

“Ah!” said the other. “There’s no need to be hurrying over this job. You’ll not be wanting to take the road till the storm’s passed over. That little boss of yours doesn’t look as though he’d relish being out in thunder and lightning.”

“Hope they’ll do him well at that place,” muttered the chauffeur. “I’ll be pushing along there for a bite myself presently.”

“Billy Jones is all right,” said the garage man. “Keeps a good table.”

Mr. William Jones, a big burly man of fifty and landlord of the “Bells and Motley,” was at this minute beaming ingratiatingly down on little Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Can do you a nice steak, sir—and fried potatoes, and as good a cheese as any gentleman could wish for. This way, sir, in the coffee-room. We’re not very full at present, the last of the fishing gentlemen just gone. A little later we’ll be full again for the hunting. Only one gentleman here at present, name of Quin—”

Mr. Satterthwaite stopped dead.

“Quin?” he said excitedly. “Did you say Quin?”

“That’s the name, sir. Friend of yours perhaps?”

“Yes, indeed. Oh! yes, most certainly.” Twittering with excitement, Mr. Satterthwaite hardly realized that the world might contain more than one man of that name. He had no doubts at all. In an odd way, the information fitted in with what the man at the garage had said. “Folks that come and go . . .” a very apt description of Mr. Quin. And the name of the Inn, too, seemed a peculiarly fitting and appropriate one.

“Dear me, dear me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “What a very odd thing. That we should meet like this! Mr. Harley Quin, is it not?”

“That’s right, sir. This is the coffee room, sir. Ah! here is the gentleman.”

Tall, dark, smiling, the familiar figure of Mr. Quin rose from the table at which he was sitting, and the well-remembered voice spoke.

“Ah! Mr. Satterthwaite, we meet again. An unexpected meeting!”

Mr. Satterthwaite was shaking him warmly by the hand.

“Delighted. Delighted, I’m sure. A lucky breakdown for me. My car, you know. And you are staying here? For long?”

“One night only.”

“Then I am indeed fortunate.”

Mr. Satterthwaite sat down opposite his friend with a little sigh of satisfaction, and regarded the dark, smiling face opposite him with a pleasurable expectancy.

The other man shook his head gently.

“I assure you,” he said, “that I have not a bowl of goldfish or a rabbit to produce from my sleeve.”

“Too bad,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite, a little taken aback. “Yes, I must confess—I do rather adopt that attitude towards you. A man of magic. Ha, ha. That

is how I regard you. A man of magic.”

“And yet,” said Mr. Quin, “it is you who do the conjuring tricks, not I.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Satterthwaite eagerly. “But I cannot do them without you. I lack—shall we say—inspiration?”

Mr. Quin smilingly shook his head.

“That is too big a word. I speak the cue, that is all.”

The landlord came in at that minute with bread and a slab of yellow butter. As he set the things on the table there was a vivid flash of lightning, and a clap of thunder almost overhead.

“A wild night, gentlemen.”

“On such a night—” began Mr. Satterthwaite, and stopped.

“Funny now,” said the landlord, unconscious of the question, “if those weren’t just the words I was going to use myself. It was just such a night as this when Captain Harwell brought his bride home, the very day before he disappeared forever.”

“Ah!” cried Mr. Satterthwaite suddenly. “Of course!”

He had got the clue. He knew now why the name Kirtlington Mallet was familiar. Three months before he had read every detail of the astonishing disappearance of Captain Richard Harwell. Like other newspaper readers all over Great Britain he had puzzled over the details of the disappearance, and, also like every other Briton, had evolved his own theories.

“Of course,” he repeated. “It was at Kirtlington Mallet it happened.”

“It was at this house he stayed for the hunting last winter,” said the landlord. “Oh! I knew him well. A main handsome young gentleman and not one that you’d think had a care on his mind. He was done away with—that’s my belief. Many’s the time I’ve seen them come riding home together—he and Miss Le Couteau, and all the village saying there’d be a match

come of it—and sure enough, so it did. A very beautiful young lady, and well thought of, for all she was a Canadian and a stranger. Ah! there's some dark mystery there. We'll never know the rights of it. It broke her heart, it did, sure enough. You've heard as she's sold the place up and gone abroad, couldn't bear to go on here with everyone staring and pointing after her—through no fault of her own, poor young dear! A black mystery, that's what it is."

He shook his head, then suddenly recollecting his duties, hurried from the room.

"A black mystery," said Mr. Quin softly.

His voice was provocative in Mr. Satterthwaite's ears.

"Are you pretending that we can solve the mystery where Scotland Yard failed?" he asked sharply.

The other made a characteristic gesture.

"Why not? Time has passed. Three months. That makes a difference."

"That is a curious idea of yours," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "That one sees things better afterwards than at the time."

"The longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion. One sees them in their true relationship to one another."

There was a silence which lasted for some minutes.

"I am not sure," said Mr. Satterthwaite, in a hesitating voice, "that I remember the facts clearly by now."

"I think you do," said Mr. Quin quietly.

It was all the encouragement Mr. Satterthwaite needed. His general role in life was that of listener and looker-on. Only in the company of Mr. Quin was the position reversed. There Mr. Quin was the appreciative listener, and Mr. Satterthwaite took the centre of the stage.

“It was just over a year ago,” he said, “that Ashley Grange passed into the possession of Miss Eleanor Le Couteau. It is a beautiful old house, but it had been neglected and allowed to remain empty for many years. It could not have found a better chatelaine. Miss Le Couteau was a French Canadian, her forebears were émigrés from the French Revolution, and had handed down to her a collection of almost priceless French relics and antiques. She was a buyer and a collector also, with a very fine and discriminating taste. So much so, that when she decided to sell Ashley Grange and everything it contained after the tragedy, Mr. Cyrus G. Bradburn, the American millionaire, made no bones about paying the fancy price of sixty thousand pounds for the Grange as it stood.”

Mr. Satterthwaite paused.

“I mention these things,” he said apologetically, “not because they are relevant to the story—strictly speaking, they are not—but to convey an atmosphere, the atmosphere of young Mrs. Harwell.”

Mr. Quin nodded.

“Atmosphere is always valuable,” he said gravely.

“So we get a picture of this girl,” continued the other. “Just twenty-three, dark, beautiful, accomplished, nothing crude and unfinished about her. And rich—we must not forget that. She was an orphan. A Mrs. St. Clair, a lady of unimpeachable breeding and social standing, lived with her as duenna. But Eleanor Le Couteau had complete control of her own fortune. And fortune hunters are never hard to seek. At least a dozen impecunious young men were to be found dangling round her on all occasions, in the hunting field, in the ballroom, wherever she went. Young Lord Leccan, the most eligible parti in the country, is reported to have asked her to marry him, but she remained heart-free. That is, until the coming of Captain Richard Harwell.

“Captain Harwell had put up at the local Inn for the hunting. He was a dashing rider to hounds. A handsome, laughing daredevil of a fellow. You remember the old saying, Mr. Quin? “Happy the wooing that’s not long

doing.” The adage was carried out at least in part. At the end of two months, Richard Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau were engaged.

“The marriage followed three months afterwards. The happy pair went abroad for a two weeks’ honeymoon, and then returned to take up their residence at Ashley Grange. The landlord has just told us that it was on a night of storm such as this that they returned to their home. An omen, I wonder? Who can tell? Be that as it may, the following morning very early—about half-past seven, Captain Harwell was seen walking in the garden by one of the gardeners, John Mathias. He was bareheaded, and was whistling. We have a picture there, a picture of light-heartedness, of careless happiness. And yet from that minute, as far as we know, no one ever set eyes on Captain Richard Harwell again.”

Mr. Satterthwaite paused, pleasantly conscious of a dramatic moment. The admiring glance of Mr. Quin gave him the tribute he needed, and he went on.

“The disappearance was remarkable—unaccountable. It was not till the following day that the distracted wife called in the police. As you know, they have not succeeded in solving the mystery.”

“There have, I suppose, been theories?” asked Mr. Quin.

“Oh! theories, I grant you. Theory No. 1, that Captain Harwell had been murdered, done away with. But if so, where was the body? It could hardly have been spirited away. And besides, what motive was there? As far as was known, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world.”

He paused abruptly, as though uncertain. Mr. Quin leaned forward.

“You are thinking,” he said softly, “of young Stephen Grant.”

“I am,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite. “Stephen Grant, if I remember rightly, had been in charge of Captain Harwell’s horses, and had been discharged by his master for some trifling offence. On the morning after the homecoming, very early, Stephen Grant was seen in the vicinity of Ashley Grange, and could give no good account of his presence there. He was detained by the

police as being concerned in the disappearance of Captain Harwell, but nothing could be proved against him, and he was eventually discharged. It is true that he might be supposed to bear a grudge against Captain Harwell for his summary dismissal, but the motive was undeniably of the flimsiest. I suppose the police felt they must do something. You see, as I said just now, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world.”

“As far as was known,” said Mr. Quin reflectively.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded appreciatively.

“We are coming to that. What, after all, was known of Captain Harwell? When the police came to look into his antecedents they were confronted with a singular paucity of material. Who was Richard Harwell? Where did he come from? He had appeared, literally out of the blue as it seemed. He was a magnificent rider, and apparently well off. Nobody in Kirtlington Mallet had bothered to inquire further. Miss Le Couteau had had no parents or guardians to make inquiries into the prospects and standing of her fiancé. She was her own mistress. The police theory at this point was clear enough. A rich girl and an impudent impostor. The old story!

“But it was not quite that. True, Miss Le Couteau had no parents or guardians, but she had an excellent firm of solicitors in London who acted for her. Their evidence made the mystery deeper. Eleanor Le Couteau had wished to settle a sum outright upon her prospective husband, but he had refused. He himself was well off, he declared. It was proved conclusively that Harwell never had a penny of his wife’s money. Her fortune was absolutely intact.

“He was, therefore, no common swindler, but was his object a refinement of the art? Did he propose blackmail at some future date if Eleanor Harwell should wish to marry some other man? I will admit that something of that kind seemed to me the most likely solution. It had always seemed so to me—until tonight.”

Mr. Quin leaned forward, prompting him.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight. I am not satisfied with that. How did he manage to disappear so suddenly and completely—at that hour in the morning, with every labourer bestirring himself and tramping to work? Bareheaded, too.”

“There is no doubt about the latter point—since the gardener saw him?”

“Yes—the gardener—John Mathias. Was there anything there, I wonder?”

“The police would not overlook him,” said Mr. Quin.

“They questioned him closely. He never wavered in his statement. His wife bore him out. He left his cottage at seven to attend to the greenhouses, he returned at twenty minutes to eight. The servants in the house heard the front door slam at about a quarter after seven. That fixes the time when Captain Harwell left the house. Ah! yes, I know what you are thinking.”

“Do you, I wonder?” said Mr. Quin.

“I fancy so. Time enough for Mathias to have made away with his master. But why, man, why? And if so, where did he hide the body?”

The landlord came in bearing a tray.

“Sorry to have kept you so long, gentlemen.”

He set upon the table a mammoth steak and beside it a dish filled to overflowing with crisp brown potatoes. The odour from the dishes was pleasant to Mr. Satterthwaite’s nostrils. He felt gracious.

“This looks excellent,” he said. “Most excellent. We have been discussing the disappearance of Captain Harwell. What became of the gardener, Mathias?”

“Took a place in Essex, I believe. Didn’t care to stay hereabouts. There were some as looked askance at him, you understand. Not that I ever believe he had anything to do with it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite helped himself to steak. Mr. Quin followed suit. The landlord seemed disposed to linger and chat. Mr. Satterthwaite had no

objection, on the contrary.

“This Mathias now,” he said. “What kind of a man was he?”

“Middle-aged chap, must have been a powerful fellow once but bent and crippled with rheumatism. He had that mortal bad, was laid up many a time with it, unable to do any work. For my part, I think it was sheer kindness on Miss Eleanor’s part to keep him on. He’d outgrown his usefulness as a gardener, though his wife managed to make herself useful up at the house. Been a cook she had, and always willing to lend a hand.”

“What sort of a woman was she?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite, quickly.

The landlord’s answer disappointed him.

“A plain body. Middle-aged, and dourlike in manner. Deaf, too. Not that I ever knew much of them. They’d only been here a month, you understand, when the thing happened. They say he’d been a rare good gardener in his time, though. Wonderful testimonials Miss Eleanor had with him.”

“Was she interested in gardening?” asked Mr. Quin, softly.

“No, sir, I couldn’t say that she was, not like some of the ladies round here who pay good money to gardeners and spend the whole of their time grubbing about on their knees as well. Foolishness I call it. You see, Miss Le Couteau wasn’t here very much except in the winter for hunting. The rest of the time she was up in London and away in those foreign seaside places where they say the French ladies don’t so much as put a toe into the water for fear of spoiling their costumes, or so I’ve heard.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

“There was no—er—woman of any kind mixed up with Captain Harwell?” he asked.

Though his first theory was disposed of, he nevertheless clung to his idea.

Mr. William Jones shook his head.

“Nothing of that sort. Never a whisper of it. No, it’s a dark mystery, that’s what it is.”

“And your theory? What do you yourself think?” persisted Mr. Satterthwaite.

“What do I think?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t know what to think. It’s my belief as how he was done in, but who by I can’t say. I’ll fetch you gentlemen the cheese.”

He stumped from the room bearing empty dishes. The storm, which had been quietening down, suddenly broke out with redoubled vigour. A flash of forked lightning and a great clap of thunder close upon each other made little Mr. Satterthwaite jump, and before the last echoes of the thunder had died away, a girl came into the room carrying the advertised cheese.

She was tall and dark, and handsome in a sullen fashion of her own. Her likeness to the landlord of the “Bells and Motley” was apparent enough to proclaim her his daughter.

“Good evening, Mary,” said Mr. Quin. “A stormy night.”

She nodded.

“I hate these stormy nights,” she muttered.

“You are afraid of thunder, perhaps?” said Mr. Satterthwaite kindly.

“Afraid of thunder? Not me! There’s little that I’m afraid of. No, but the storm sets them off. Talking, talking, the same thing over and over again, like a lot of parrots. Father begins it. ‘It reminds me, this does, of the night poor Captain Harwell . . .’ And so on, and so on.” She turned on Mr. Quin. “You’ve heard how he goes on. What’s the sense of it? Can’t anyone let past things be?”

“A thing is only past when it is done with,” said Mr. Quin.

“Isn’t this done with? Suppose he wanted to disappear? These fine gentlemen do sometimes.”

“You think he disappeared of his own free will?”

“Why not? It would make better sense than to suppose a kind-hearted creature like Stephen Grant murdered him. What should be murder him for, I should like to know? Stephen had had a drop too much one day and spoke to him saucylike, and got the sack for it. But what of it? He got another place just as good. Is that a reason to murder a man in cold blood?”

“But surely,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “the police were quite satisfied of his innocence?”

“The police! What do the police matter? When Stephen comes into the bar of an evening, every man looks at him queerlike. They don’t really believe he murdered Harwell, but they’re not sure, and so they look at him sideways and edge away. Nice life for a man, to see people shrink away from you, as though you were something different from the rest of folks. Why won’t Father hear of our getting married, Stephen and I? ‘You can take your pigs to a better market, my girl. I’ve nothing against Stephen, but—well, we don’t know, do we?’ ”

She stopped, her breast heaving with the violence of her resentment.

“It’s cruel, cruel, that’s what it is,” she burst out. “Stephen, that wouldn’t hurt a fly! And all through life there’ll be people who’ll think he did. It’s turning him queer and bitter like. I don’t wonder, I’m sure. And the more he’s like that, the more people think there must have been something in it.”

Again she stopped. Her eyes were fixed on Mr. Quin’s face, as though something in it was drawing this outburst from her.

“Can nothing be done?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He was genuinely distressed. The thing was, he saw, inevitable. The very vagueness and unsatisfactoriness of the evidence against Stephen Grant made it the more difficult for him to disprove the accusation.

The girl whirled round on him.

“Nothing but the truth can help him,” she cried. “If Captain Harwell were to be found, if he was to come back. If the true rights of it were only known —”

She broke off with something very like a sob, and hurried quickly from the room.

“A fine-looking girl,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “A sad case altogether. I wish—I very much wish that something could be done about it.”

His kind heart was troubled.

“We are doing what we can,” said Mr. Quin. “There is still nearly half an hour before your car can be ready.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him.

“You think we can come at the truth just by—talking it over like this?”

“You have seen much of life,” said Mr. Quin gravely. “More than most people.”

“Life has passed me by,” said Mr. Satterthwaite bitterly.

“But in so doing has sharpened your vision. Where others are blind you can see.”

“It is true,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I am a great observer.”

He plumed himself complacently. The moment of bitterness was passed.

“I look at it like this,” he said after a minute or two. “To get at the cause for a thing, we must study the effect.”

“Very good,” said Mr. Quin approvingly.

“The effect in this case is that Miss Le Couteau—Mrs. Harwell, I mean, is a wife and yet not a wife. She is not free—she cannot marry again. And look at it as we will, we see Richard Harwell as a sinister figure, a man from nowhere with a mysterious past.”

“I agree,” said Mr. Quin. “You see what all are bound to see, what cannot be missed, Captain Harwell in the limelight, a suspicious figure.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him doubtfully. The words seemed somehow to suggest a faintly different picture to his mind.

“We have studied the effect,” he said. “Or call it the result. We can now pass—”

Mr. Quin interrupted him.

“You have not touched on the result on the strictly material side.”

“You are right,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, after a moment or two for consideration. “One should do the thing thoroughly. Let us say then that the result of the tragedy is that Mrs. Harwell is a wife and not a wife, unable to marry again, that Mr. Cyrus Bradburn has been able to buy Ashley Grange and its contents for—sixty thousand pounds, was it?—and that somebody in Essex has been able to secure John Mathias as a gardener! For all that we do not suspect ‘somebody in Essex’ or Mr. Cyrus Bradburn of having engineered the disappearance of Captain Harwell.”

“You are sarcastic,” said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked sharply at him.

“But surely you agree—?”

“Oh! I agree,” said Mr. Quin. “The idea is absurd. What next?”

“Let us imagine ourselves back on the fatal day. The disappearance has taken place, let us say, this very morning.”

“No, no,” said Mr. Quin, smiling. “Since, in our imagination, at least, we have power over time, let us turn it the other way. Let us say the disappearance of Captain Harwell took place a hundred years ago. That we, in the year two thousand twenty-five are looking back.”

“You are a strange man,” said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. “You believe in the past, not the present. Why?”

“You used, not long ago, the word atmosphere. There is no atmosphere in the present.”

“That is true, perhaps,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. “Yes, it is true. The present is apt to be—parochial.”

“A good word,” said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite gave a funny little bow.

“You are too kind,” he said.

“Let us take—not this present year, that would be too difficult, but say—last year,” continued the other. “Sum it up for me, you who have the gift of the neat phrase.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought for a minute. He was jealous of his reputation.

“A hundred years ago we have the age of powder and patches,” he said. “Shall we say that 1924 was the age of Crossword Puzzles and Cat Burglars?”

“Very good,” approved Mr. Quin. “You mean that nationally, not internationally, I presume?”

“As to Crossword Puzzles, I must confess that I do not know,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “But the Cat Burglar had a great innings on the Continent. You remember that series of famous thefts from French chateaux? It is surmised that one man alone could not have done it. The most miraculous feats were performed to gain admission. There was a theory that a troupe of acrobats were concerned—the Clondinis. I once saw their performance—

truly masterly. A mother, son and daughter. They vanished from the stage in a rather mysterious fashion. But we are wandering from our subject.”

“Not very far,” said Mr. Quin. “Only across the Channel.”

“Where the French ladies will not wet their toes, according to our worthy host,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, laughing.

There was a pause. It seemed somehow significant.

“Why did he disappear?” cried Mr. Satterthwaite. “Why? Why? It is incredible, a kind of conjuring trick.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin. “A conjuring trick. That describes it exactly. Atmosphere again, you see. And wherein does the essence of a conjuring trick lie?”

“The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,” quoted Mr. Satterthwaite glibly.

“That is everything, is it not? To deceive the eye? Sometimes by the quickness of the hand, sometimes—by other means. There are many devices, the pistol shot, the waving of a red handkerchief, something that seems important, but in reality is not. The eye is diverted from the real business, it is caught by the spectacular action that means nothing—nothing at all.”

Mr. Satterthwaite leant forward, his eyes shining.

“There is something in that. It is an idea.”

He went on softly. “The pistol shot. What was the pistol shot in the conjuring trick we were discussing? What is the spectacular moment that holds the imagination?”

He drew in his breath sharply.

“The disappearance,” breathed Mr. Satterthwaite. “Take that away, and it leaves nothing.”

“Nothing? Suppose things took the same course without that dramatic gesture?”

“You mean—supposing Miss Le Couteau were still to sell Ashley Grange and leave—for no reason?”

“Well.”

“Well, why not? It would have aroused talk, I suppose, there would have been a lot of interest displayed in the value of the contents in—Ah! wait!”

He was silent a minute, then burst out.

“You are right, there is too much limelight, the limelight on Captain Harwell. And because of that, she has been in shadow. Miss Le Couteau! Everyone asking, “Who was Captain Harwell? Where did he come from?” But because she is the injured party, no one makes inquiries about her. Was she really a French Canadian? Were those wonderful heirlooms really handed down to her? You were right when you said just now that we had not wandered far from our subject—only across the Channel. Those so-called heirlooms were stolen from the French chateaux, most of them valuable objets d’art, and in consequence difficult to dispose of. She buys the house—for a mere song, probably. Settles down there and pays a good sum to an irreproachable English woman to chaperone her. Then he comes. The plot is laid beforehand. The marriage, the disappearance and the nine days’ wonder! What more natural than that a brokenhearted woman should want to sell everything that reminds her of her past happiness. The American is a connoisseur, the things are genuine and beautiful, some of them beyond price. He makes an offer, she accepts it. She leaves the neighbourhood, a sad and tragic figure. The great coup has come off. The eye of the public has been deceived by the quickness of the hand and the spectacular nature of the trick.”

Mr. Satterthwaite paused, flushed with triumph.

“But for you, I should never have seen it,” he said with sudden humility.

“You have a most curious effect upon me. One says things so often without even seeing what they really mean. You have the knack of showing one. But

it is still not quite clear to me. It must have been most difficult for Harwell to disappear as he did. After all, the police all over England were looking for him.”

“It would have been simplest to remain hidden at the Grange,” mused Mr. Satterthwaite. “If it could be managed.”

“He was, I think, very near the Grange,” said Mr. Quin.

His look of significance was not lost on Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Mathias’ cottage?” he exclaimed. “But the police must have searched it?”

“Repeatedly, I should imagine,” said Mr. Quin.

“Mathias,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, frowning.

“And Mrs. Mathias,” said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite stared hard at him.

“If that gang was really the Clondinis,” he said dreamily, “there were three of them in it. The two young ones were Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau. The mother now, was she Mrs. Mathias? But in that case. . . .”

“Mathias suffered from rheumatism, did he not?” said Mr. Quin innocently.

“Oh!” cried Mr. Satterthwaite. “I have it. But could it be done? I believe it could. Listen. Mathias was there a month. During that time, Harwell and Eleanor were away for a fortnight on a honeymoon. For the fortnight before the wedding, they were supposedly in town. A clever man could have doubled the parts of Harwell and Mathias. When Harwell was at Kirtlington Mallet, Mathias was conveniently laid up with rheumatism, with Mrs. Mathias to sustain the fiction. Her part was very necessary. Without her, someone might have suspected the truth. As you say, Harwell was hidden in Mathias’ cottage. He was Mathias. When at last the plans matured, and Ashley Grange was sold, he and his wife gave out they were taking a place in Essex. Exit John Mathias and his wife—forever.”

There was a knock at the coffee-room door, and Masters entered. "The car is at the door, sir," he said.

Mr. Satterthwaite rose. So did Mr. Quin, who went across to the window, pulling the curtains. A beam of moonlight streamed into the room.

"The storm is over," he said.

Mr. Satterthwaite was pulling on his gloves.

"The Commissioner is dining with me next week," he said importantly. "I shall put my theory—ah!—before him."

"It will be easily proved or disproved," said Mr. Quin. "A comparison of the objects at Ashley Grange with a list supplied by the French police—!"

"Just so," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Rather hard luck on Mr. Bradburn, but—well—"

"He can, I believe, stand the loss," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite held out his hand.

"Goodbye," he said. "I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated this unexpected meeting. You are leaving here tomorrow, I think you said?"

"Possibly tonight. My business here is done . . . I come and go, you know."

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered hearing those same words earlier in the evening. Rather curious.

He went out to the car and the waiting Masters. From the open door into the bar the landlord's voice floated out, rich and complacent.

"A dark mystery," he was saying. "A dark mystery, that's what it is."

But he did not use the word "dark." The word he used suggested quite a different colour. Mr. William Jones was a man of discrimination who suited

his adjectives to his company. The company in the bar liked their adjectives full flavoured.

Mr. Satterthwaite reclined luxuriously in the comfortable limousine. His breast was swelled with triumph. He saw the girl Mary come out on the steps and stand under the creaking Inn sign.

“She little knows,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “She little knows what I am going to do!”

The sign of the “Bells and Motley” swayed gently in the wind.

Four

THE SIGN IN THE SKY

“The Sign in the Sky” was first published in the USA in The Police Magazine, June 1925, and then as “A Sign in the Sky” in Grand Magazine, July 1925.

The Judge was finishing his charge to the jury.

“Now, gentlemen, I have almost finished what I want to say to you. There is evidence for you to consider as to whether this case is plainly made out against this man so that you may say he is guilty of the murder of Vivien Barnaby. You have had the evidence of the servants as to the time the shot was fired. They have one and all agreed upon it. You have had the evidence of the letter written to the defendant by Vivien Barnaby on the morning of that same day, Friday, September 13th—a letter which the defence has not attempted to deny. You have had evidence that the prisoner first denied having been at Deering Hill, and later, after evidence had been given by the police, admitted he had. You will draw your own conclusions from that denial. This is not a case of direct evidence. You will have to come to your own conclusions on the subject of motive—of means, of opportunity. The contention of the defence is that some person unknown entered the music room after the defendant had left it, and shot Vivien Barnaby with the gun which, by strange forgetfulness, the defendant had left behind him. You have heard the defendant’s story of the reason it took him half an hour to get home. If you disbelieve the defendant’s story and are satisfied, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the defendant did, upon Friday, September 13th, discharge his gun at close quarters to Vivien Barnaby’s head with intent to kill her, then, gentlemen, your verdict must be Guilty. If, on the other hand, you have any reasonable doubt, it is your duty to acquit the prisoner. I will now ask you to retire to your room and consider and let me know when you have arrived at a conclusion.”

The jury were absent a little under half an hour. They returned the verdict that to everyone had seemed a foregone conclusion, the verdict of “Guilty.”

Mr. Satterthwaite left the court after hearing the verdict, with a thoughtful frown on his face.

A mere murder trial as such did not attract him. He was of too fastidious a temperament to find interest in the sordid details of the average crime. But the Wylde case had been different. Young Martin Wylde was what is termed a gentleman—and the victim, Sir George Barnaby’s young wife, had been personally known to the elderly gentleman.

He was thinking of all this as he walked up Holborn, and then plunged into a tangle of mean streets leading in the direction of Soho. In one of these streets there was a small restaurant, known only to the few, of whom Mr. Satterthwaite was one. It was not cheap—it was, on the contrary, exceedingly expensive, since it catered exclusively for the palate of the jaded gourmet. It was quiet—no strains of jazz were allowed to disturb the hushed atmosphere—it was rather dark, waiters appeared soft-footed out of the twilight, bearing silver dishes with the air of participating in some holy rite. The name of the restaurant was Arlecchino.

Still thoughtful, Mr. Satterthwaite turned into the Arlecchino and made for his favourite table in a recess in the far corner. Owing to the twilight before mentioned, it was not until he was quite close to it that he saw it was already occupied by a tall dark man who sat with his face in shadow, and with a play of colour from a stained window turning his sober garb into a kind of riotous motley.

Mr. Satterthwaite would have turned back, but just at that moment the stranger moved slightly and the other recognized him.

“God bless my soul,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, who was given to old-fashioned expressions. “Why, it’s Mr. Quin!”

Three times before he had met Mr. Quin, and each time the meeting had resulted in something a little out of the ordinary. A strange person, this Mr.

Quin, with a knack of showing you the things you had known all along in a totally different light.

At once Mr. Satterthwaite felt excited—pleasurably excited. His role was that of the looker-on, and he knew it, but sometimes when in the company of Mr. Quin he had the illusion of being an actor—and the principal actor at that.

“This is very pleasant,” he said, beaming all over his dried-up little face. “Very pleasant indeed. You’ve no objection to my joining you, I hope?”

“I shall be delighted,” said Mr. Quin. “As you see, I have not yet begun my meal.”

A deferential head waiter hovered up out of the shadows. Mr. Satterthwaite, as befitted a man with a seasoned palate, gave his whole mind to the task of selection. In a few minutes, the head waiter, a slight smile of approbation on his lips, retired, and a young satellite began his ministrations. Mr. Satterthwaite turned to Mr. Quin.

“I have just come from the Old Bailey,” he began. “A sad business, I thought.”

“He was found guilty?” said Mr. Quin.

“Yes, the jury were out only half an hour.”

Mr. Quin bowed his head.

“An inevitable result—on the evidence,” he said.

“And yet,” began Mr. Satterthwaite—and stopped.

Mr. Quin finished the sentence for him.

“And yet your sympathies were with the accused? Is that what you were going to say?”

“I suppose it was. Martin Wylde is a nice-looking young fellow—one can hardly believe it of him. All the same, there have been a good many nice-looking young fellows lately who have turned out to be murderers of a particularly cold-blooded and repellent type.”

“Too many,” said Mr. Quin quietly.

“I beg your pardon?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, slightly startled.

“Too many for Martin Wylde. There has been a tendency from the beginning to regard this as just one more of a series of the same type of crime—a man seeking to free himself from one woman in order to marry another.”

“Well,” said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully. “On the evidence—”

“Ah!” said Mr. Quin quickly. “I am afraid I have not followed all the evidence.”

Mr. Satterthwaite’s self-confidence came back to him with a rush. He felt a sudden sense of power. He was tempted to be consciously dramatic.

“Let me try and show it to you. I have met the Barnabys, you understand. I know the peculiar circumstances. With me, you will come behind the scenes—you will see the thing from inside.”

Mr. Quin leant forward with his quick encouraging smile.

“If anyone can show me that, it will be Mr. Satterthwaite,” he murmured.

Mr. Satterthwaite gripped the table with both hands. He was uplifted, carried out of himself. For the moment, he was an artist pure and simple—an artist whose medium was words.

Swiftly, with a dozen broad strokes, he etched in the picture of life at Deering Hill. Sir George Barnaby, elderly, obese, purse-proud. A man perpetually fussing over the little things of life. A man who wound up his clocks every Friday afternoon, and who paid his own housekeeping books

every Tuesday morning, and who always saw to the locking of his own front door every night. A careful man.

And from Sir George he went on to Lady Barnaby. Here his touch was gentler, but none the less sure. He had seen her but once, but his impression of her was definite and lasting. A vivid defiant creature—pitifully young. A trapped child, that was how he described her.

“She hated him, you understand? She had married him before she knew what she was doing. And now—”

She was desperate—that was how he put it. Turning this way and that. She had no money of her own, she was entirely dependent on this elderly husband. But all the same she was a creature at bay—still unsure of her own powers, with a beauty that was as yet more promise than actuality. And she was greedy. Mr. Satterthwaite affirmed that definitely. Side by side with defiance there ran a greedy streak—a clasping and a clutching at life.

“I never met Martin Wylde,” continued Mr. Satterthwaite. “But I heard of him. He lived less than a mile away. Farming, that was his line. And she took an interest in farming—or pretended to. If you ask me, it was pretending. I think that she saw in him her only way of escape—and she grabbed at him, greedily, like a child might have done. Well, there could only be one end to that. We know what that end was, because the letters were read out in court. He kept her letters—she didn’t keep his, but from the text of hers one can see that he was cooling off. He admits as much. There was the other girl. She also lived in the village of Deering Vale. Her father was the doctor there. You saw her in court, perhaps? No, I remember, you were not there, you said. I shall have to describe her to you. A fair girl—very fair. Gentle. Perhaps—yes, perhaps a tiny bit stupid. But very restful, you know. And loyal. Above all, loyal.”

He looked at Mr. Quin for encouragement, and Mr. Quin gave it him by a slow appreciative smile. Mr. Satterthwaite went on.

“You heard that last letter read—you must have seen it, in the papers, I mean. The one written on the morning of Friday, September 13th. It was full of desperate reproaches and vague threats, and it ended by begging

Martin Wylde to come to Deering Hill that same evening at six o'clock. 'I will leave the side door open for you, so that no one need know you have been here. I shall be in the music room.' It was sent by hand."

Mr. Satterthwaite paused for a minute or two.

"When he was first arrested, you remember, Martin Wylde denied that he had been to the house at all that evening. His statement was that he had taken his gun and gone out shooting in the woods. But when the police brought forward their evidence, that statement broke down. They had found his fingerprints, you remember, both on the wood of the side door and on one of the two cocktail glasses on the table in the music room. He admitted then that he had come to see Lady Barnaby, that they had had a stormy interview, but that it had ended in his having managed to soothe her down. He swore that he left his gun outside leaning against the wall near the door, and that he left Lady Barnaby alive and well, the time being then a minute or two after a quarter past six. He went straight home, he says. But evidence was called to show that he did not reach his farm until a quarter to seven, and as I have just mentioned, it is barely a mile away. It would not take half an hour to get there. He forgot all about his gun, he declares. Not a very likely statement—and yet—"

"And yet?" queried Mr. Quin.

"Well," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly, it's a possible one, isn't it? Counsel ridiculed the supposition, of course, but I think he was wrong. You see, I've known a good many young men, and these emotional scenes upset them very much—especially the dark, nervous type like Martin Wylde. Women now, can go through a scene like that and feel positively better for it afterwards, with all their wits about them. It acts like a safety valve for them, steadies their nerves down and all that. But I can see Martin Wylde going away with his head in a whirl, sick and miserable, and without a thought of the gun he had left leaning up against the wall."

He was silent for some minutes before he went on.

"Not that it matters. For the next part is only too clear, unfortunately. It was exactly twenty minutes past six when the shot was heard. All the servants

heard it, the cook, the kitchen maid, the butler, the housemaid and Lady Barnaby's own maid. They came rushing to the music room. She was lying huddled over the arm of her chair. The gun had been discharged close to the back of her head, so that the shot hadn't a chance to scatter. At least two of them penetrated the brain."

He paused again and Mr. Quin asked casually:

"The servants gave evidence, I suppose?"

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

"Yes. The butler got there a second or two before the others, but their evidence was practically a repetition of each other's."

"So they all gave evidence," said Mr. Quin musingly. "There were no exceptions?"

"Now I remember it," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "the housemaid was only called at the inquest. She's gone to Canada since, I believe."

"I see," said Mr. Quin.

There was a silence, and somehow the air of the little restaurant seemed to be charged with an uneasy feeling. Mr. Satterthwaite felt suddenly as though he were on the defensive.

"Why shouldn't she?" he said abruptly.

"Why should she?" said Mr. Quin with a very slight shrug of the shoulders.

Somehow, the question annoyed Mr. Satterthwaite. He wanted to shy away from it—to get back on familiar ground.

"There couldn't be much doubt who fired the shot. As a matter of fact the servants seemed to have lost their heads a bit. There was no one in the house to take charge. It was some minutes before anyone thought of ringing up the police, and when they did so they found that the telephone was out of order."

“Oh!” said Mr. Quin. “The telephone was out of order.”

“It was,” said Mr. Satterthwaite—and was struck suddenly by the feeling that he had said something tremendously important. “It might, of course, have been done on purpose,” he said slowly. “But there seems no point in that. Death was practically instantaneous.”

Mr. Quin said nothing, and Mr. Satterthwaite felt that his explanation was unsatisfactory.

“There was absolutely no one to suspect but young Wylde,” he went on. “By his own account, even, he was only out of the house three minutes before the shot was fired. And who else could have fired it? Sir George was at a bridge party a few houses away. He left there at half-past six and was met just outside the gate by a servant bringing him the news. The last rubber finished at half-past six exactly—no doubt about that. Then there was Sir George’s secretary, Henry Thompson. He was in London that day, and actually at a business meeting at the moment the shot was fired. Finally, there is Sylvia Dale, who after all, had a perfectly good motive, impossible as it seems that she should have had anything to do with such a crime. She was at the station of Deering Vale seeing a friend off by the 6:28 train. That lets her out. Then the servants. What earthly motive could any one of them have? Besides they all arrived on the spot practically simultaneously. No, it must have been Martin Wylde.”

But he said it in a dissatisfied kind of voice.

They went on with their lunch. Mr. Quin was not in a talkative mood, and Mr. Satterthwaite had said all he had to say. But the silence was not a barren one. It was filled with the growing dissatisfaction of Mr. Satterthwaite, heightened and fostered in some strange way by the mere acquiescence of the other man.

Mr. Satterthwaite suddenly put down his knife and fork with a clatter.

“Supposing that that young man is really innocent,” he said. “He’s going to be hanged.”

He looked very startled and upset about it. And still Mr. Quin said nothing.

“It’s not as though—” began Mr. Satterthwaite, and stopped. “Why shouldn’t the woman go to Canada?” he ended inconsequently.

Mr. Quin shook his head.

“I don’t even know what part of Canada she went to,” continued Mr. Satterthwaite peevishly.

“Could you find out?” suggested the other.

“I suppose I could. The butler, now. He’d know. Or possibly Thompson, the secretary.”

He paused again. When he resumed speech, his voice sounded almost pleading.

“It’s not as though it were anything to do with me?”

“That a young man is going to be hanged in a little over three weeks?”

“Well, yes—if you put it that way, I suppose. Yes, I see what you mean. Life and death. And that poor girl, too. It’s not that I’m hardheaded—but, after all—what good will it do? Isn’t the whole thing rather fantastic? Even if I found out where the woman’s gone in Canada—why, it would probably mean that I should have to go out there myself.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked seriously upset.

“And I was thinking of going to the Riviera next week,” he said pathetically.

And his glance towards Mr. Quin said as plainly as it could be said, “Do let me off, won’t you?”

“You have never been to Canada?”

“Never.”

“A very interesting country.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him undecidedly.

“You think I ought to go?”

Mr. Quin leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigarette. Between puffs of smoke, he spoke deliberately.

“You are, I believe, a rich man, Mr. Satterthwaite. Not a millionaire, but a man able to indulge a hobby without counting the expense. You have looked on at the dramas of other people. Have you never contemplated stepping in and playing a part? Have you never seen yourself for a minute as the arbiter of other people’s destinies—standing in the centre of the stage with life and death in your hands?”

Mr. Satterthwaite leant forward. The old eagerness surged over him.

“You mean—if I go on this wild-goose chase to Canada—?”

Mr. Quin smiled.

“Oh! it was your suggestion, going to Canada, not mine,” he said lightly.

“You can’t put me off like that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite earnestly.

“Whenever I have come across you—” He stopped.

“Well?”

“There is something about you I do not understand. Perhaps I never shall. The last time I met you—”

“On Midsummer’s Eve.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was startled, as though the words held a clue that he did not quite understand.

“Was it Midsummer’s Eve?” he asked confusedly.

“Yes. But let us not dwell on that. It is unimportant, is it not?”

“Since you say so,” said Mr. Satterthwaite courteously. He felt that elusive clue slipping through his fingers. “When I come back from Canada”—he paused a little awkwardly—“I—I—should much like to see you again.”

“I am afraid I have no fixed address for the moment,” said Mr. Quin regretfully. “But I often come to this place. If you also frequent it, we shall no doubt meet before very long.”

They parted pleasantly.

Mr. Satterthwaite was very excited. He hurried round to Cook’s and inquired about boat sailings. Then he rang up Deering Hill. The voice of a butler, suave and deferential, answered him.

“My name is Satterthwaite. I am speaking for a—er—firm of solicitors. I wished to make a few inquiries about a young woman who was recently housemaid in your establishment.”

“Would that be Louisa, sir? Louisa Bullard?”

“That is the name,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, very pleased to be told it.

“I regret she is not in this country, sir. She went to Canada six months ago.”

“Can you give me her present address?”

The butler was afraid he couldn’t. It was a place in the mountains she had gone to—a Scotch name—ah! Banff, that was it. Some of the other young women in the house had been expecting to hear from her, but she had never written or given them any address.

Mr. Satterthwaite thanked him and rang off. He was still undaunted, The adventurous spirit was strong in his breast. He would go to Banff. If this Louisa Bullard was there, he would track her down somehow or other.

To his own surprise, he enjoyed the trip greatly. It was many years since he had taken a long sea voyage. The Riviera, Le Touquet and Deauville, and

Scotland had been his usual round. The feeling that he was setting off on an impossible mission added a secret zest to his journey. What an utter fool these fellow travellers of his would think him did they but know the object of his quest! But then—they were not acquainted with Mr. Quin.

In Banff he found his objective easily attained. Louisa Bullard was employed in the large Hotel there. Twelve hours after his arrival he was standing face to face with her.

She was a woman of about thirty-five, anaemic looking, but with a strong frame. She had pale brown hair inclined to curl, and a pair of honest brown eyes. She was, he thought, slightly stupid, but very trustworthy.

She accepted quite readily his statement that he had been asked to collect a few further facts from her about the tragedy at Deering Hill.

“I saw in the paper that Mr. Martin Wylde had been convicted, sir. Very sad, it is, too.”

She seemed, however, to have no doubt as to his guilt.

“A nice young gentleman gone wrong. But though I wouldn’t speak ill of the dead, it was her ladyship what led him on. Wouldn’t leave him alone, she wouldn’t. Well, they’ve both got their punishment. There’s a text used to hang on my wall when I was a child, ‘God is not mocked,’ and it’s very true. I knew something was going to happen that very evening—and sure enough it did.”

“How was that?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I was in my room, sir, changing my dress, and I happened to glance out of the window. There was a train going along, and the white smoke of it rose up in the air, and if you’ll believe me it formed itself into the sign of a gigantic hand. A great white hand against the crimson of the sky. The fingers were crooked like, as though they were reaching out for something. It fair gave me a turn. ‘Did you ever now?’ I said to myself. ‘That’s a sign of something coming’—and sure enough at that very minute I heard the shot. ‘It’s come,’ I said to myself, and I rushed downstairs and joined Carrie

and the others who were in the hall, and we went into the music room and there she was, shot through the head—and the blood and everything. Horrible! I spoke up, I did, and told Sir George how I'd seen the sign beforehand, but he didn't seem to think much of it. An unlucky day, that was, I'd felt it in my bones from early in the morning. Friday, and the 13th—what could you expect?"

She rambled on. Mr. Satterthwaite was patient. Again and again he took her back to the crime, questioning her closely. In the end he was forced to confess defeat. Louisa Bullard had told all she knew, and her story was perfectly simple and straightforward.

Yet he did discover one fact of importance. The post in question had been suggested to her by Mr. Thompson, Sir George's secretary. The wages attached were so large that she was tempted, and accepted the job, although it involved her leaving England very hurriedly. A Mr. Denman had made all the arrangements this end and had also warned her not to write to her fellow servants in England, as this might "get her into trouble with the immigration authorities," which statement she had accepted in blind faith.

The amount of wages, casually mentioned by her, was indeed so large that Mr. Satterthwaite was startled. After some hesitation he made up his mind to approach this Mr. Denman.

He found very little difficulty in inducing Mr. Denman to tell all he knew. The latter had come across Thompson in London and Thompson had done him a good turn. The secretary had written to him in September saying that for personal reasons Sir George was anxious to get this girl out of England. Could he find her a job? A sum of money had been sent to raise the wages to a high figure.

"Usual trouble, I guess," said Mr. Denman, leaning back nonchalantly in his chair. "Seems a nice quiet girl, too."

Mr. Satterthwaite did not agree that this was the usual trouble. Louisa Bullard, he was sure, was not a cast-off fancy of Sir George Barnaby's. For some reason it had been vital to get her out of England. But why? And who was at the bottom of it? Sir George himself, working through Thompson?

Or the latter working on his own initiative, and dragging in his employer's name?

Still pondering over these questions, Mr. Satterthwaite made the return journey. He was cast down and despondent. His journey had done no good.

Smarting under a sense of failure, he made his way to the Arlecchino the day after his return. He hardly expected to be successful the first time, but to his satisfaction the familiar figure was sitting at the table in the recess, and the dark face of Mr. Harley Quin smiled a welcome.

"Well," said Mr. Satterthwaite as he helped himself to a pat of butter, "you sent me on a nice wild-goose chase."

Mr. Quin raised his eyebrows.

"I sent you?" he objected. "It was your own idea entirely."

"Whosever idea it was, it's not succeeded. Louisa Bullard has nothing to tell."

Thereupon Mr. Satterthwaite related the details of his conversation with the housemaid and then went on to his interview with Mr. Denman. Mr. Quin listened in silence.

"In one sense, I was justified," continued Mr. Satterthwaite. "She was deliberately got out of the way. But why? I can't see it."

"No?" said Mr. Quin, and his voice was, as ever, provocative.

Mr. Satterthwaite flushed.

"I daresay you think I might have questioned her more adroitly. I can assure you that I took her over the story again and again. It was not my fault that I did not get what we want."

"Are you sure," said Mr. Quin, "that you did not get what you want?"

Mr. Satterthwaite looked up at him in astonishment, and met that sad, mocking gaze he knew so well.

The little man shook his head, slightly bewildered.

There was a silence, and then Mr. Quin said, with a total change of manner:

“You gave me a wonderful picture the other day of the people in this business. In a few words you made them stand out as clearly as though they were etched. I wish you would do something of that kind for the place—you left that in shadow.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was flattered.

“The place? Deering Hill? Well, it’s a very ordinary sort of house nowadays. Red brick, you know, and bay windows. Quite hideous outside, but very comfortable inside. Not a very large house. About two acres of ground. They’re all much the same, those houses round the links. Built for rich men to live in. The inside of the house is reminiscent of a hotel—the bedrooms are like hotel suites. Baths and hot and cold basins in all the bedrooms and a good many gilded electric-light fittings. All wonderfully comfortable, but not very countrylike. You can tell that Deering Vale is only nineteen miles from London.”

Mr. Quin listened attentively.

“The train service is bad, I have heard,” he remarked.

“Oh! I don’t know about that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, warming to his subject. “I was down there for a bit last summer. I found it quite convenient for town. Of course the trains only go every hour. Forty-eight minutes past the hour from Waterloo—up to 10:48.”

“And how long does it take to Deering Vale?”

“Just about three-quarters of an hour. Twenty-eight minutes past the hour at Deering Vale.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Quin with a gesture of vexation. “I should have remembered. Miss Dale saw someone off by the 6:28 that evening, didn’t she?”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not reply for a minute or two. His mind had gone back with a rush to his unsolved problem. Presently he said:

“I wish you would tell me what you meant just now when you asked me if I was sure I had not got what I wanted?”

It sounded rather complicated, put that way, but Mr. Quin made no pretence of not understanding.

“I just wondered if you weren’t being a little too exacting. After all, you found out that Louisa Bullard was deliberately got out of the country. That being so, there must be a reason. And the reason must lie in what she said to you.”

“Well,” said Mr. Satterthwaite argumentatively. “What did she say? If she’d given evidence at the trial, what could she have said?”

“She might have told what she saw,” said Mr. Quin.

“What did she see?”

“A sign in the sky.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him.

“Are you thinking of that nonsense? That superstitious notion of its being the hand of God?”

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Quin, “for all you and I know it may have been the hand of God, you know.”

The other was clearly puzzled at the gravity of his manner.

“Nonsense,” he said. “She said herself it was the smoke of the train.”

“An up train or a down train, I wonder?” murmured Mr. Quin.

“Hardly an up train. They go at ten minutes to the hour. It must have been a down train—the 6:28—no, that won’t do. She said the shot came immediately afterwards, and we know the shot was fired at twenty minutes past six. The train couldn’t have been ten minutes early.”

“Hardly, on that line,” agreed Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite was staring ahead of him.

“Perhaps a goods train,” he murmured. “But surely, if so—”

“There would have been no need to get her out of England. I agree,” said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite gazed at him, fascinated.

“The 6:28,” he said slowly. “But if so, if the shot was fired then, why did everyone say it was earlier?”

“Obvious,” said Mr. Quin. “The clocks must have been wrong.”

“All of them?” said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully. “That’s a pretty tall coincidence, you know.”

“I wasn’t thinking of it as a coincidence,” said the other. “I was thinking it was Friday.”

“Friday?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“You did tell me, you know, that Sir George always wound the clocks on a Friday afternoon,” said Mr. Quin apologetically.

“He put them back ten minutes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, almost in a whisper, so awed was he by the discoveries he was making. “Then he went out to bridge. I think he must have opened the note from his wife to Martin Wylde that morning—yes, decidedly he opened it. He left his bridge party at 6:30, found Martin’s gun standing by the side door, and went in and shot

her from behind. Then he went out again, threw the gun into the bushes where it was found later, and was apparently just coming out of the neighbour's gate when someone came running to fetch him. But the telephone—what about the telephone? Ah! yes, I see. He disconnected it so that a summons could not be sent to the police that way—they might have noted the time it was received. And Wylde's story works out now. The real time he left was five and twenty minutes past six. Walking slowly, he would reach home about a quarter to seven. Yes, I see it all. Louisa was the only danger with her endless talk about her superstitious fancies. Someone might realize the significance of the train and then—goodbye to that excellent alibi."

"Wonderful," commented Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite turned to him, flushed with success.

"The only thing is—how to proceed now?"

"I should suggest Sylvia Dale," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked doubtful.

"I mentioned to you," he said, "she seemed to me a little—er—stupid."

"She has a father and brothers who will take the necessary steps."

"That is true," said Mr. Satterthwaite, relieved.

A very short time afterwards he was sitting with the girl telling her the story. She listened attentively. She put no questions to him but when he had done she rose.

"I must have a taxi—at once."

"My dear child, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to Sir George Barnaby."

"Impossible. Absolutely the wrong procedure. Allow me to—"

He twittered on by her side. But he produced no impression. Sylvia Dale was intent on her own plans. She allowed him to go with her in the taxi, but to all his remonstrances she addressed a deaf ear. She left him in the taxi while she went into Sir George's city office.

It was half an hour later when she came out. She looked exhausted, her fair beauty drooping like a waterless flower. Mr. Satterthwaite received her with concern.

"I've won," she murmured, as she leant back with half-closed eyes.

"What?" He was startled. "What did you do? What did you say?"

She sat up a little.

"I told him that Louisa Bullard had been to the police with her story. I told him that the police had made inquiries and that he had been seen going into his own grounds and out again a few minutes after half-past six. I told him that the game was up. He—he went to pieces. I told him that there was still time for him to get away, that the police weren't coming for another hour to arrest him. I told him that if he'd sign a confession that he'd killed Vivien I'd do nothing, but that if he didn't I'd scream and tell the whole building the truth. He was so panicky that he didn't know what he was doing. He signed the paper without realizing what he was doing."

She thrust it into his hands.

"Take it—take it. You know what to do with it so that they'll set Martin free."

"He actually signed it," cried Mr. Satterthwaite, amazed.

"He is a little stupid, you know," said Sylvia Dale. "So am I," she added as an afterthought. "That's why I know how stupid people behave. We get rattled, you know, and then we do the wrong thing and are sorry afterwards."

She shivered and Mr. Satterthwaite patted her hand.

“You need something to pull you together,” he said. “Come, we are close to a very favourite resort of mine—the Arlecchino. Have you ever been there?”

She shook her head.

Mr. Satterthwaite stopped the taxi and took the girl into the little restaurant. He made his way to the table in the recess, his heart beating hopefully. But the table was empty.

Sylvia Dale saw the disappointment in his face.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “That is, I half expected to see a friend of mine here. It doesn’t matter. Some day, I expect, I shall see him again. . . .”

Five

THE SOUL OF THE CROUPIER

“The Soul of the Croupier” was first published in the USA in Flynn’s Weekly, 13 November 1926, and then as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 2: The Soul of the Croupier” in Storyteller magazine, January 1927.

Mr. Satterthwaite was enjoying the sunshine on the terrace at Monte Carlo.

Every year regularly on the second Sunday in January, Mr. Satterthwaite left England for the Riviera. He was far more punctual than any swallow. In the month of April he returned to England, May and June he spent in London, and had never been known to miss Ascot. He left town after the Eton and Harrow match, paying a few country house visits before repairing to Deauville or Le Touquet. Shooting parties occupied most of September and October, and he usually spent a couple of months in town to wind up the year. He knew everybody and it may safely be said that everybody knew him.

This morning he was frowning. The blue of the sea was admirable, the gardens were, as always, a delight, but the people disappointed him—he thought them an ill-dressed, shoddy crowd. Some, of course, were gamblers, doomed souls who could not keep away. Those Mr. Satterthwaite tolerated. They were a necessary background. But he missed the usual leaven of the élite—his own people.

“It’s the exchange,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gloomily. “All sorts of people come here now who could never have afforded it before. And then, of course, I’m getting old . . . All the young people—the people coming on—they go to these Swiss places.”

But there were others that he missed, the well-dressed Barons and Counts of foreign diplomacy, the Grand Dukes and the Royal Princes. The only Royal Prince he had seen so far was working a lift in one of the less well-known

hotels. He missed, too, the beautiful and expensive ladies. There was still a few of them, but not nearly as many as there used to be.

Mr. Satterthwaite was an earnest student of the drama called Life, but he liked his material to be highly coloured. He felt discouragement sweep over him. Values were changing—and he—was too old to change.

It was at that moment that he observed the Countess Czarnova coming towards him.

Mr. Satterthwaite had seen the Countess at Monte Carlo for many seasons now. The first time he had seen her she had been in the company of a Grand Duke. On the next occasion she was with an Austrian Baron. In successive years her friends had been of Hebraic extraction, sallow men with hooked noses, wearing rather flamboyant jewellery. For the last year or two she was much seen with very young men, almost boys.

She was walking with a very young man now. Mr. Satterthwaite happened to know him, and he was sorry. Franklin Rudge was a young American, a typical product of one of the Middle West States, eager to register impression, crude, but loveable, a curious mixture of native shrewdness and idealism. He was in Monte Carlo with a party of other young Americans of both sexes, all much of the same type. It was their first glimpse of the Old World and they were outspoken in criticism and in appreciation.

On the whole they disliked the English people in the hotel, and the English people disliked them. Mr. Satterthwaite, who prided himself on being a cosmopolitan, rather liked them. Their directness and vigour appealed to him, though their occasional solecisms made him shudder.

It occurred to him that the Countess Czarnova was a most unsuitable friend for young Franklin Rudge.

He took off his hat politely as they came abreast of him, and the Countess gave him a charming bow and smile.

She was a very tall woman, superbly made. Her hair was black, so were her eyes, and her eyelashes and eyebrows were more superbly black than any

Nature had ever fashioned.

Mr. Satterthwaite, who knew far more of feminine secrets than it is good for any man to know, rendered immediate homage to the art with which she was made up. Her complexion appeared to be flawless, of a uniform creamy white.

The very faint bistre shadows under her eyes were most effective. Her mouth was neither crimson nor scarlet, but a subdued wine colour. She was dressed in a very daring creation of black and white and carried a parasol of the shade of pinky red which is most helpful to the complexion.

Franklin Rudge was looking happy and important.

“There goes a young fool,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “But I suppose it’s no business of mine and anyway he wouldn’t listen to me. Well, well, I’ve bought experience myself in my time.”

But he still felt rather worried, because there was a very attractive little American girl in the party, and he was sure that she would not like Franklin Rudge’s friendship with the Countess at all.

He was just about to retrace his steps in the opposite direction when he caught sight of the girl in question coming up one of the paths towards him. She wore a well-cut tailor-made “suit” with a white muslin shirt waist, she had on good, sensible walking shoes, and carried a guidebook. There are some Americans who pass through Paris and emerge clothed as the Queen of Sheba, but Elizabeth Martin was not one of them. She was “doing Europe” in a stern, conscientious spirit. She had high ideas of culture and art and she was anxious to get as much as possible for her limited store of money.

It is doubtful if Mr. Satterthwaite thought of her as either cultured or artistic. To him she merely appeared very young.

“Good morning, Mr. Satterthwaite,” said Elizabeth. “Have you seen Franklin—Mr. Rudge—anywhere about?”

“I saw him just a few minutes ago.”

“With his friend the Countess, I suppose,” said the girl sharply.

“Er—with the Countess, yes,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite.

“That Countess of his doesn’t cut any ice with me,” said the girl in a rather high, shrill voice. “Franklin’s just crazy about her. Why I can’t think.”

“She’s got a very charming manner, I believe,” said Mr. Satterthwaite cautiously.

“Do you know her?”

“Slightly.”

“I’m right down worried about Franklin,” said Miss Martin. “That boy’s got a lot of sense as a rule. You’d never think he’d fall for this sort of siren stuff. And he won’t hear a thing, he gets madder than a hornet if anyone tries to say a word to him. Tell me, anyway—is she a real Countess?”

“I shouldn’t like to say,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “She may be.”

“That’s the real Ha-Ha English manner,” said Elizabeth with signs of displeasure. “All I can say is that in Sargon Springs—that’s our home town, Mr. Satterthwaite—that Countess would look a mighty queer bird.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought it possible. He forebore to point out that they were not in Sargon Springs but in the principality of Monaco, where the Countess happened to synchronize with her environment a great deal better than Miss Martin did.

He made no answer and Elizabeth went on towards the Casino. Mr. Satterthwaite sat on a seat in the sun, and was presently joined by Franklin Rudge.

Rudge was full of enthusiasm.

“I’m enjoying myself,” he announced with naïve enthusiasm. “Yes, sir! This is what I call seeing life—rather a different kind of life from what we have in the States.”

The elder man turned a thoughtful face to him.

“Life is lived very much the same everywhere,” he said rather wearily. “It wears different clothes—that’s all.”

Franklin Rudge stared.

“I don’t get you.”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “That’s because you’ve got a long way to travel yet. But I apologize. No elderly man should permit himself to get into the habit of preaching.”

“Oh! that’s all right.” Rudge laughed, displaying the beautiful teeth of all his countrymen. “I don’t say, mind you, that I’m not disappointed in the Casino. I thought the gambling would be different—something much more feverish. It seems just rather dull and sordid to me.”

“Gambling is life and death to the gambler, but it has no great spectacular value,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “It is more exciting to read about than to see.”

The young man nodded his agreement.

“You’re by way of being rather a big bug socially, aren’t you?” he asked with a diffident candour that made it impossible to take offence. “I mean, you know all the Duchesses and Earls and Countesses and things.”

“A good many of them,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “And also the Jews and the Portuguese and the Greeks and the Argentines.”

“Eh?” said Mr. Rudge.

“I was just explaining,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that I move in English society.”

Franklin Rudge meditated for a moment or two.

“You know the Countess Czarnova, don’t you?” he said at length.

“Slightly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, making the same answer he had made to Elizabeth.

“Now there’s a woman whom it’s been very interesting to meet. One’s inclined to think that the aristocracy of Europe is played out and effete. That may be true of the men, but the women are different. Isn’t it a pleasure to meet an exquisite creature like the Countess? Witty, charming, intelligent, generations of civilization behind her, an aristocrat to her fingertips!”

“Is she?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Well, isn’t she? You know what her family are?”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I’m afraid I know very little about her.”

“She was a Radzynski,” explained Franklin Rudge. “One of the oldest families in Hungary. She’s had the most extraordinary life. You know that great rope of pearls she wears?”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“That was given her by the King of Bosnia. She smuggled some secret papers out of the kingdom for him.”

“I heard,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that the pearls had been given her by the King of Bosnia.”

The fact was indeed a matter of common gossip, it being reported that the lady had been a *chère amie* of His Majesty’s in days gone by.

“Now I’ll tell you something more.”

Mr. Satterthwaite listened, and the more he listened the more he admired the fertile imagination of the Countess Czarnova. No vulgar “siren stuff” (as Elizabeth Martin had put it) for her. The young man was shrewd enough in

that way, clean living and idealistic. No, the Countess moved austere through a labyrinth of diplomatic intrigues. She had enemies, detractors—naturally! It was a glimpse, so the young American was made to feel, into the life of the old regime with the Countess as the central figure, aloof, aristocratic, the friend of counsellors and princes, a figure to inspire romantic devotion.

“And she’s had any amount to contend against,” ended the young man warmly. “It’s an extraordinary thing but she’s never found a woman who would be a real friend to her. Women have been against her all her life.”

“Probably,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Don’t you call it a scandalous thing?” demanded Rudge hotly.

“N—no,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. “I don’t know that I do. Women have got their own standards, you know. It’s no good our mixing ourselves up in their affairs. They must run their own show.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Rudge earnestly. “It’s one of the worst things in the world today, the unkindness of woman to woman. You know Elizabeth Martin? Now she agrees with me in theory absolutely. We’ve often discussed it together. She’s only a kid, but her ideas are all right. But the moment it comes to a practical test—why, she’s as bad as any of them. Got a real down on the Countess without knowing a darned thing about her, and won’t listen when I try to tell her things. It’s all wrong, Mr. Satterthwaite. I believe in democracy—and—what’s that but brotherhood between men and sisterhood between women?”

He paused earnestly. Mr. Satterthwaite tried to think of any circumstances in which a sisterly feeling might arise between the Countess and Elizabeth Martin and failed.

“Now the Countess, on the other hand,” went on Rudge, “admires Elizabeth immensely, and thinks her charming in every way. Now what does that show?”

“It shows,” said Mr. Satterthwaite dryly, “that the Countess has lived a considerable time longer than Miss Martin has.”

Franklin Rudge went off unexpectedly at a tangent.

“Do you know how old she is? She told me. Rather sporting of her. I should have guessed her to be twenty-nine, but she told me of her own accord that she was thirty-five. She doesn’t look it, does she?” Mr. Satterthwaite, whose private estimate of the lady’s age was between forty-five and forty-nine, merely raised his eyebrows.

“I should caution you against believing all you are told at Monte Carlo,” he murmured.

He had enough experience to know the futility of arguing with the lad. Franklin Rudge was at a pitch of white-hot chivalry when he would have disbelieved any statement that was not backed with authoritative proof.

“Here is the Countess,” said the boy, rising.

She came up to them with the languid grace that so became her. Presently they all three sat down together. She was very charming to Mr. Satterthwaite, but in rather an aloof manner. She deferred to him prettily, asking his opinion, and treating him as an authority on the Riviera.

The whole thing was cleverly managed. Very few minutes had elapsed before Franklin Rudge found himself gracefully but unmistakably dismissed, and the Countess and Mr. Satterthwaite were left tête-à-tête.

She put down her parasol and began drawing patterns with it in the dust.

“You are interested in the nice American boy, Mr. Satterthwaite, are you not?”

Her voice was low with a caressing note in it.

“He’s a nice young fellow,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, noncommittally.

“I find him sympathetic, yes,” said the Countess reflectively. “I have told him much of my life.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Details such as I have told to few others,” she continued dreamily. “I have had an extraordinary life, Mr. Satterthwaite. Few would credit the amazing things that have happened to me.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was shrewd enough to penetrate her meaning. After all, the stories that she had told to Franklin Rudge might be the truth. It was extremely unlikely, and in the last degree improbable, but it was possible . . . No one could definitely say: “That is not so—”

He did not reply, and the Countess continued to look out dreamily across the bay.

And suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite had a strange and new impression of her. He saw her no longer as a harpy, but as a desperate creature at bay, fighting tooth and nail. He stole a sideways glance at her. The parasol was down, he could see the little haggard lines at the corners of her eyes. In one temple a pulse was beating.

It flowed through him again and again—that increasing certitude. She was a creature desperate and driven. She would be merciless to him or to anyone who stood between her and Franklin Rudge. But he still felt he hadn’t got the hang of the situation. Clearly she had plenty of money. She was always beautifully dressed, and her jewels were marvellous. There could be no real urgency of that kind. Was it love? Women of her age did, he well knew, fall in love with boys. It might be that. There was, he felt sure, something out of the common about the situation.

Her tête-à-tête with him was, he recognized, a throwing down of the gauntlet. She had singled him out as her chief enemy. He felt sure that she hoped to goad him into speaking slightly of her to Franklin Rudge. Mr. Satterthwaite smiled to himself. He was too old a bird for that. He knew when it was wise to hold one’s tongue.

He watched her that night in the Cercle Privé, as she tried her fortunes at roulette.

Again and again she staked, only to see her stake swept away. She bore her losses well, with the stoical sang froid of the old habitué. She staked en plein once or twice, put the maximum on red, won a little on the middle dozen and then lost it again, finally she backed manque six times and lost every time. Then with a little graceful shrug of the shoulders she turned away.

She was looking unusually striking in a dress of gold tissue with an underlying note of green. The famous Bosnian pearls were looped round her neck and long pearl earrings hung from her ears.

Mr. Satterthwaite heard two men near him appraise her.

“The Czarnova,” said one, “she wears well, does she not? The Crown jewels of Bosnia look fine on her.”

The other, a small Jewish-looking man, stared curiously after her.

“So those are the pearls of Bosnia, are they?” he asked. “En vérité. That is odd.”

He chuckled softly to himself.

Mr. Satterthwaite missed hearing more, for at the moment he turned his head and was overjoyed to recognize an old friend.

“My dear Mr. Quin.” He shook him warmly by the hand. “The last place I should ever have dreamed of seeing you.”

Mr. Quin smiled, his dark attractive face lighting up.

“It should not surprise you,” he said. “It is Carnival time. I am often here in Carnival time.”

“Really? Well, this is a great pleasure. Are you anxious to remain in the rooms? I find them rather warm.”

“It will be pleasanter outside,” agreed the other. “We will walk in the gardens.”

The air outside was sharp, but not chill. Both men drew deep breaths.

“That is better,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Much better,” agreed Mr. Quin. “And we can talk freely. I am sure that there is much that you want to tell me.”

“There is indeed.”

Speaking eagerly, Mr. Satterthwaite unfolded his perplexities. As usual he took pride in his power of conveying atmosphere. The Countess, young Franklin, uncompromising Elizabeth—he sketched them all in with a deft touch.

“You have changed since I first knew you,” said Mr. Quin, smiling, when the recital was over.

“In what way?”

“You were content then to look on at the drama that life offered. Now—you want to take part—to act.”

“It is true,” confessed Mr. Satterthwaite. “But in this case I do not know what to do. It is all very perplexing. Perhaps—” He hesitated. “Perhaps you will help me?”

“With pleasure,” said Mr. Quin. “We will see what we can do.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had an odd sense of comfort and reliance.

The following day he introduced Franklin Rudge and Elizabeth Martin to his friend Mr. Harley Quin. He was pleased to see that they got on together. The Countess was not mentioned, but at lunch time he heard news that aroused his attention.

“Mirabelle is arriving in Monte this evening,” he confided excitedly to Mr. Quin.

“The Parisian stage favourite?”

“Yes. I daresay you know—it’s common property—she is the King of Bosnia’s latest craze. He has showered jewels on her, I believe. They say she is the most exacting and extravagant woman in Paris.”

“It should be interesting to see her and the Countess Czarnova meet tonight.”

“Exactly what I thought.”

Mirabelle was a tall, thin creature with a wonderful head of dyed fair hair. Her complexion was a pale mauve with orange lips. She was amazingly chic. She was dressed in something that looked like a glorified bird of paradise, and she wore chains of jewels hanging down her bare back. A heavy bracelet set with immense diamonds clasped her left ankle.

She created a sensation when she appeared in the Casino.

“Your friend the Countess will have a difficulty in outdoing this,” murmured Mr. Quin in Mr. Satterthwaite’s ear.

The latter nodded. He was curious to see how the Countess comported herself.

She came late, and a low murmur ran round as she walked unconcernedly to one of the centre roulette tables.

She was dressed in white—a mere straight slip of marocain such as a débutante might have worn and her gleaming white neck and arms were unadorned. She wore not a single jewel.

“It is clever, that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite with instant approval. “She disdains rivalry and turns the tables on her adversary.”

He himself walked over and stood by the table. From time to time he amused himself by placing a stake. Sometimes he won, more often he lost.

There was a terrific run on the last dozen. The numbers 31 and 34 turned up again and again. Stakes flocked to the bottom of the cloth.

With a smile Mr. Satterthwaite made his last stake for the evening, and placed the maximum on Number 5.

The Countess in her turn leant forward and placed the maximum on Number 6.

“Faites vos jeux,” called the croupier hoarsely. “Rien ne va plus. Plus rien.”

The ball span, humming merrily. Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: “This means something different to each of us. Agonies of hope and despair, boredom, idle amusement, life and death.”

Click!

The croupier bent forward to see.

“Numéro cinq, rouge, impair et manque.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had won!

The croupier, having raked in the other stakes, pushed forward Mr. Satterthwaite's winnings. He put out his hand to take them. The Countess did the same. The croupier looked from one to the other of them.

“A madame,” he said brusquely.

The Countess picked up the money. Mr. Satterthwaite drew back. He remained a gentleman. The Countess looked him full in the face and he returned her glance. One or two of the people round pointed out to the croupier that he had made a mistake, but the man shook his head impatiently. He had decided. That was the end. He raised his raucous cry:

“Faites vos jeux, Messieurs et Mesdames.”

Mr. Satterthwaite rejoined Mr. Quin. Beneath his impeccable demeanour, he was feeling extremely indignant. Mr. Quin listened sympathetically.

“Too bad,” he said, “but these things happen.”

“We are to meet your friend Franklin Rudge later. I am giving a little supper party.”

The three met at midnight, and Mr. Quin explained his plan.

“It is what is called a ‘Hedges and Highways’ party,” he explained. “We choose our meeting place, then each one goes out and is bound in honour to invite the first person he meets.”

Franklin Rudge was amused by the idea.

“Say, what happens if they won’t accept?”

“You must use your utmost powers of persuasion.”

“Good. And where’s the meeting place?”

“A somewhat Bohemian café—where one can take strange guests. It is called Le Caveau.”

He explained its whereabouts, and the three parted. Mr. Satterthwaite was so fortunate as to run straight into Elizabeth Martin and he claimed her joyfully. They reached Le Caveau and descended into a kind of cellar where they found a table spread for supper and lit by old-fashioned candles in candlesticks.

“We are the first,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Ah! here comes Franklin—”

He stopped abruptly. With Franklin was the Countess. It was an awkward moment. Elizabeth displayed less graciousness than she might have done. The Countess, as a woman of the world, retained the honours.

Last of all came Mr. Quin. With him was a small, dark man, neatly dressed, whose face seemed familiar to Mr. Satterthwaite. A moment later he

recognized him. It was the croupier who earlier in the evening had made such a lamentable mistake.

“Let me introduce you to the company, M. Pierre Vaucher,” said Mr. Quin.

The little man seemed confused. Mr. Quin performed the necessary introductions easily and lightly. Supper was brought—an excellent supper. Wine came—very excellent wine. Some of the frigidity went out of the atmosphere. The Countess was very silent, so was Elizabeth. Franklin Rudge became talkative. He told various stories—not humorous stories, but serious ones. And quietly and assiduously Mr. Quin passed round the wine.

“I’ll tell you—and this is a true story—about a man who made good,” said Franklin Rudge impressively.

For one coming from a Prohibition country he had shown no lack of appreciation of champagne.

He told his story—perhaps at somewhat unnecessary length. It was, like many true stories, greatly inferior to fiction.

As he uttered the last word, Pierre Vaucher, opposite him, seemed to wake up. He also had done justice to the champagne. He leaned forward across the table.

“I, too, will tell you a story,” he said thickly. “But mine is the story of a man who did not make good. It is the story of a man who went, not up, but down the hill. And, like yours, it is a true story.”

“Pray tell it to us, monsieur,” said Mr. Satterthwaite courteously.

Pierre Vaucher leant back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

“It is in Paris that the story begins. There was a man there, a working jeweller. He was young and lighthearted and industrious in his profession. They said there was a future before him. A good marriage was already arranged for him, the bride not too bad-looking, the dowry most satisfactory. And then, what do you think? One morning he sees a girl. Such

a miserable little wisp of a girl, messieurs. Beautiful? Yes, perhaps, if she were not half starved. But anyway, for this young man, she has a magic that he cannot resist. She has been struggling to find work, she is virtuous—or at least that is what she tells him. I do not know if it is true.”

The Countess’s voice came suddenly out of the semidarkness.

“Why should it not be true? There are many like that.”

“Well, as I say, the young man believed her. And he married her—an act of folly! His family would have no more to say to him. He had outraged their feelings. He married—I will call her Jeanne—it was a good action. He told her so. He felt that she should be very grateful to him. He had sacrificed much for her sake.”

“A charming beginning for the poor girl,” observed the Countess sarcastically.

“He loved her, yes, but from the beginning she maddened him. She had moods—tantrums—she would be cold to him one day, passionate the next. At last he saw the truth. She had never loved him. She had married him so as to keep body and soul together. That truth hurt him, it hurt him horribly, but he tried his utmost to let nothing appear on the surface. And he still felt he deserved gratitude and obedience to his wishes. They quarrelled. She reproached him—Mon Dieu, what did she not reproach him with?

“You can see the next step, can you not? The thing that was bound to come. She left him. For two years he was alone, working in his little shop with no news of her. He had one friend—absinthe. The business did not prosper so well.

“And then one day he came into the shop to find her sitting there. She was beautifully dressed. She had rings on her hands. He stood considering her. His heart was beating—but beating! He was at a loss what to do. He would have liked to have beaten her, to have clasped her in his arms, to have thrown her down on the floor and trampled on her, to have thrown himself at her feet. He did none of those things. He took up his pincers and went on with his work. ‘Madame desires?’ he asked formally.

“That upset her. She did not look for that, see you. ‘Pierre,’ she said, ‘I have come back.’ He laid aside his pincers and looked at her. ‘You wish to be forgiven?’ he said. ‘You want me to take you back? You are sincerely repentant?’ ‘Do you want me back?’ she murmured. Oh! very softly she said it.

“He knew she was laying a trap for him. He longed to seize her in his arms, but he was too clever for that. He pretended indifference.

“ ‘I am a Christian man,’ he said. ‘I try to do what the Church directs.’ ‘Ah!’ he thought, ‘I will humble her, humble her to her knees.’

“But Jeanne, that is what I will call her, flung back her head and laughed. Evil laughter it was. ‘I mock myself at you, little Pierre,’ she said. ‘Look at these rich clothes, these rings and bracelets. I came to show myself to you. I thought I would make you take me in your arms and when you did so, then—then I would spit in your face and tell you how I hated you!’

“And on that she went out of the shop. Can you believe, messieurs, that a woman could be as evil as all that—to come back only to torment me?”

“No,” said the Countess. “I would not believe it, and any man who was not a fool would not believe it either. But all men are blind fools.”

Pierre Vaucher took no notice of her. He went on.

“And so that young man of whom I tell you sank lower and lower. He drank more absinthe. The little shop was sold over his head. He became of the dregs, of the gutter. Then came the war. Ah! it was good, the war. It took that man out of the gutter and taught him to be a brute beast no longer. It drilled him—and sobered him. He endured cold and pain and the fear of death—but he did not die and when the war ended, he was a man again.

“It was then, messieurs, that he came South. His lungs had been affected by the gas, they said he must find work in the South. I will not weary you with all the things he did. Suffice it to say that he ended up as a croupier, and there—there in the Casino one evening, he saw her again—the woman who had ruined his life. She did not recognize him, but he recognized her. She

appeared to be rich and to lack for nothing—but messieurs, the eyes of a croupier are sharp. There came an evening when she placed her last stake in the world on the table. Ask me not how I know—I do know—one feels these things. Others might not believe. She still had rich clothes—why not pawn them, one would say? But to do that—pah! your credit is gone at once. Her jewels? Ah no! Was I not a jeweller in my time? Long ago the real jewels have gone. The pearls of a King are sold one by one, are replaced with false. And meantime one must eat and pay one's hotel bill. Yes, and the rich men—well, they have seen one about for many years. Bah! they say—she is over fifty. A younger chicken for my money.”

A long shuddering sigh came out of the windows where the Countess leant back.

“Yes. It was a great moment, that. Two nights I have watched her. Lose, lose, and lose again. And now the end. She put all on one number. Beside her, an English milord stakes the maximum also—on the next number. The ball rolls . . . The moment has come, she has lost. . . .

“Her eyes meet mine. What do I do? I jeopardize my place in the Casino. I rob the English milord. “A Madame” I say, and pay over the money.”

“Ah!” There was a crash, as the Countess sprang to her feet and leant across the table, sweeping her glass on to the floor.

“Why?” she cried. “That’s what I want to know, why did you do it?”

There was a long pause, a pause that seemed interminable, and still those two facing each other across the table looked and looked . . . It was like a duel.

A mean little smile crept across Pierre Vaucher’s face. He raised his hands.

“Madame,” he said, “there is such a thing as pity. . . .”

“Ah!”

She sank down again.

“I see.”

She was calm, smiling, herself again.

“An interesting story, M. Vaucher, is it not? Permit me to give you a light for your cigarette.”

She deftly rolled up a spill, and lighted it at the candle and held it towards him. He leaned forward till the flame caught the tip of the cigarette he held between his lips.

Then she rose unexpectedly to her feet.

“And now I must leave you all. Please—I need no one to escort me.”

Before one could realize it she was gone. Mr. Satterthwaite would have hurried out after her, but he was arrested by a startled oath from the Frenchman.

“A thousand thunders!”

He was staring at the half-burned spill which the Countess had dropped on the table. He unrolled it.

“Mon Dieu!” he muttered. “A fifty thousand franc bank note. You understand? Her winnings tonight. All that she had in the world. And she lighted my cigarette with it! Because she was too proud to accept—pity. Ah! proud, she was always proud as the Devil. She is unique—wonderful.”

He sprang up from his seat and darted out. Mr. Satterthwaite and Mr. Quin had also risen. The waiter approached Franklin Rudge.

“La note, monsieur,” he observed unemotionally.

Mr. Quin rescued it from him quickly.

“I feel kind of lonesome, Elizabeth,” remarked Franklin Rudge. “These foreigners—they beat the band! I don’t understand them. What’s it all mean, anyhow?”

He looked across at her.

“Gee, it’s good to look at anything so hundred per cent American as you.” His voice took on the plaintive note of a small child. “These foreigners are so odd.”

They thanked Mr. Quin and went out into the night together. Mr. Quin picked up his change and smiled across at Mr. Satterthwaite, who was preening himself like a contented bird.

“Well,” said the latter. “That’s all gone off splendidly. Our pair of love birds will be all right now.”

“Which ones?” asked Mr. Quin.

“Oh!” said Mr. Satterthwaite, taken aback. “Oh! yes, well, I suppose you are right, allowing for the Latin point of view and all that—”

He looked dubious.

Mr. Quin smiled, and a stained glass panel behind him invested him for just a moment in a motley garment of coloured light.

Six

THE MAN FROM THE SEA

“The Man from the Sea” was first published in *Britannia & Eve*, October 1929.

Mr. Satterthwaite was feeling old. That might not have been surprising since in the estimation of many people he was old. Careless youths said to their partners: “Old Satterthwaite? Oh! he must be a hundred—or at any rate about eighty.” And even the kindest of girls said indulgently, “Oh! Satterthwaite. Yes, he’s quite old. He must be sixty.” Which was almost worse, since he was sixty-nine.

In his own view, however, he was not old. Sixty-nine was an interesting age—an age of infinite possibilities—an age when at last the experience of a lifetime was beginning to tell. But to feel old—that was different, a tired discouraged state of mind when one was inclined to ask oneself depressing questions. What was he after all? A little dried-up elderly man, with neither chick nor child, with no human belongings, only a valuable Art collection which seemed at the moment strangely unsatisfying. No one to care whether he lived or died. . . .

At this point in his meditations Mr. Satterthwaite pulled himself up short. What he was thinking was morbid and unprofitable. He knew well enough, who better, that the chances were that a wife would have hated him or alternatively that he would have hated her, that children would have been a constant source of worry and anxiety, and that demands upon his time and affection would have worried him considerably.

“To be safe and comfortable,” said Mr. Satterthwaite firmly—that was the thing.

The last thought reminded him of a letter he had received that morning. He drew it from his pocket and reread it, savouring its contents pleasurably. To

begin with, it was from a Duchess, and Mr. Satterthwaite liked hearing from Duchesses. It is true that the letter began by demanding a large subscription for charity and but for that would probably never have been written, but the terms in which it was couched were so agreeable that Mr. Satterthwaite was able to gloss over the first fact.

So you've deserted the Riviera, wrote the Duchess. What is this island of yours like? Cheap? Cannotti put up his prices shamefully this year, and I shan't go to the Riviera again. I might try your island next year if you report favourably, though I should hate five days on a boat. Still anywhere you recommend is sure to be pretty comfortable—too much so. You'll get to be one of those people who do nothing but coddle themselves and think of their comfort. There's only one thing that will save you, Satterthwaite, and that is your inordinate interest in other people's affairs. . . .

As Mr. Satterthwaite folded the letter, a vision came up vividly before him of the Duchess. Her meanness, her unexpected and alarming kindness, her caustic tongue, her indomitable spirit.

Spirit! Everyone needed spirit. He drew out another letter with a German stamp upon it—written by a young singer in whom he had interested himself. It was a grateful affectionate letter.

“How can I thank you, dear Mr. Satterthwaite? It seems too wonderful to think that in a few days I shall be singing *Isolde*. . . .”

A pity that she had to make her *début* as *Isolde*. A charming, hardworking child, Olga, with a beautiful voice but no temperament. He hummed to himself. “Nay order him! Pray understand it! I command it. I, *Isolde*.” No, the child hadn't got it in her—the spirit—the indomitable will—all expressed in that final “*Ich Isoldé!*”

Well, at any rate he had done something for somebody. This island depressed him—why, oh! why had he deserted the Riviera which he knew so well and where he was so well known? Nobody here took any interest in him. Nobody seemed to realize that here was the Mr. Satterthwaite—the

friend of Duchesses and Countesses and singers and writers. No one in the island was of any social importance or of any artistic importance either. Most people had been there seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years running and valued themselves and were valued accordingly.

With a deep sigh Mr. Satterthwaite proceeded down from the Hotel to the small straggling harbour below. His way lay between an avenue of bougainvillaea—a vivid mass of flaunting scarlet, that made him feel older and greyer than ever.

“I’m getting old,” he murmured. “I’m getting old and tired.”

He was glad when he had passed the bougainvillaea and was walking down the white street with the blue sea at the end of it. A disreputable dog was standing in the middle of the road, yawning and stretching himself in the sun. Having prolonged his stretch to the utmost limits of ecstasy, he sat down and treated himself to a really good scratch. He then rose, shook himself, and looked round for any other good things that life might have to offer.

There was a dump of rubbish by the side of the road and to this he went sniffing in pleasurable anticipation. True enough, his nose had not deceived him! A smell of such rich putrescence that surpassed even his anticipations! He sniffed with growing appreciation, then suddenly abandoning himself, he lay on his back and rolled frenziedly on the delicious dump. Clearly the world this morning was a dog paradise!

Tiring at last, he regained his feet and strolled out once more into the middle of the road. And then, without the least warning, a ramshackle car careered wildly round the corner, caught him full square and passed on unheeding.

The dog rose to his feet, stood a minute regarding Mr. Satterthwaite, a vague dumb reproach in his eyes, then fell over. Mr. Satterthwaite went up to him and bent down. The dog was dead. He went on his way, wondering at the sadness and cruelty of life. What a queer dumb look of reproach had been in the dog’s eyes. “Oh! World,” they seemed to say. “Oh! Wonderful World in which I have trusted. Why have you done this to me?”

Mr. Satterthwaite went on, past the palm trees and the straggling white houses, past the black lava beach where the surf thundered and where once, long ago, a well-known English swimmer had been carried out to sea and drowned, past the rock pools where children and elderly ladies bobbed up and down and called it bathing, along the steep road that winds upwards to the top of the cliff. For there on the edge of the cliff was a house, appropriately named La Paz. A white house with faded green shutters tightly closed, a tangled beautiful garden, and a walk between cypress trees that led to a plateau on the edge of the cliff where you looked down—down—down—to the deep blue sea below.

It was to this spot that Mr. Satterthwaite was bound. He had developed a great love for the garden of La Paz. He had never entered the villa. It seemed always to be empty. Manuel, the Spanish gardener, wished one good morning with a flourish and gallantly presented ladies with a bouquet and gentlemen with a single flower as a buttonhole, his dark face wreathed in smiles.

Sometimes Mr. Satterthwaite made up stories in his own mind about the owner of the villa. His favourite was a Spanish dancer, once world famed for her beauty, who hid herself here so that the world should never know that she was no longer beautiful.

He pictured her coming out of the house at dusk and walking through the garden. Sometimes he was tempted to ask Manuel for the truth, but he resisted the temptation. He preferred his fancies.

After exchanging a few words with Manuel and graciously accepting an orange rosebud, Mr. Satterthwaite passed on down the cypress walk to the sea. It was rather wonderful sitting there—on the edge of nothing—with that sheer drop below one. It made him think of Tristan and Isolde, of the beginning of the third act with Tristan and Kurwenal—that lonely waiting and of Isolde rushing up from the sea and Tristan dying in her arms. (No, little Olga would never make an Isolde. Isolde of Cornwall, that Royal hater and Royal lover . . .) He shivered. He felt old, chilly, alone . . . What had he had out of life? Nothing—nothing. Not as much as that dog in the street. . . .

It was an unexpected sound that roused him from his reverie. Footsteps coming along the cypress walk were inaudible, the first he knew of somebody's presence was the English monosyllable "Damn."

He looked round to find a young man staring at him in obvious surprise and disappointment. Mr. Satterthwaite recognized him at once as an arrival of the day before who had more or less intrigued him. Mr. Satterthwaite called him a young man—because in comparison to most of the diehards in the Hotel he was a young man, but he would certainly never see forty again and was probably drawing appreciably near to his half century. Yet in spite of that, the term young man fitted him—Mr. Satterthwaite was usually right about such things—there was an impression of immaturity about him. As there is a touch of puppyhood about many a full-grown dog so it was with the stranger.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought: "This chap has really never grown up—not properly, that is."

And yet there was nothing Peter Pannish about him. He was sleek—almost plump, he had the air of one who has always done himself exceedingly well in the material sense and denied himself no pleasure or satisfaction. He had brown eyes—rather round—fair hair turning grey—a little moustache and rather florid face.

The thing that puzzled Mr. Satterthwaite was what had brought him to the island. He could imagine him shooting things, hunting things, playing polo or golf or tennis, making love to pretty women. But in the Island there was nothing to hunt or shoot, no games except Golf-Croquet, and the nearest approach to a pretty woman was represented by elderly Miss Baba Kindersley. There were, of course, artists, to whom the beauty of the scenery made appeal, but Mr. Satterthwaite was quite certain that the young man was not an artist. He was clearly marked with the stamp of the Philistine.

While he was resolving these things in his mind, the other spoke, realizing somewhat belatedly that his single ejaculation so far might be open to criticism.

“I beg your pardon,” he said with some embarrassment. “As a matter of fact, I was—well, startled. I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

He smiled disarmingly. He had a charming smile—friendly—appealing.

“It is rather a lonely spot,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite, as he moved politely a little further up the bench. The other accepted the mute invitation and sat down.

“I don’t know about lonely,” he said. “There always seems to be someone here.”

There was a tinge of latent resentment in his voice. Mr. Satterthwaite wondered why. He read the other as a friendly soul. Why this insistence on solitude? A rendezvous, perhaps? No—not that. He looked again with carefully veiled scrutiny at his companion. Where had he seen that particular expression before quite lately? That look of dumb bewildered resentment.

“You’ve been up here before then?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, more for the sake of saying something than for anything else.

“I was up here last night—after dinner.”

“Really? I thought the gates were always locked.”

There was a moment’s pause and then, almost sullenly, the young man said:

“I climbed over the wall.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him with real attention now. He had a sleuthlike habit of mind and he was aware that his companion had only arrived on the preceding afternoon. He had had little time to discover the beauty of the villa by daylight and he had so far spoken to nobody. Yet after dark he had made straight for La Paz. Why? Almost involuntarily Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head to look at the green-shuttered villa, but it was as ever serenely lifeless, close shuttered. No, the solution of the mystery was not there.

“And you actually found someone here then?”

The other nodded.

“Yes. Must have been from the other Hotel. He had on fancy dress.”

“Fancy dress?”

“Yes. A kind of Harlequin rig.”

“What?”

The query fairly burst from Mr. Satterthwaite’s lips. His companion turned to stare at him in surprise.

“They often do have fancy dress shows at the Hotels, I suppose?”

“Oh! quite,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Quite, quite, quite.”

He paused breathlessly, then added:

“You must excuse my excitement. Do you happen to know anything about catalysis?”

The young man stared at him.

“Never heard of it. What is it?”

Mr. Satterthwaite quoted gravely: “A chemical reaction depending for its success on the presence of a certain substance which itself remains unchanged.”

“Oh,” said the young man uncertainly.

“I have a certain friend—his name is Mr. Quin, and he can best be described in the terms of catalysis. His presence is a sign that things are going to happen, because when he is there strange revelations come to light, discoveries are made. And yet—he himself takes no part in the proceedings. I have a feeling that it was my friend you met here last night.”

“He’s a very sudden sort of chap then. He gave me quite a shock. One minute he wasn’t there and the next minute he was! Almost as though he came up out of the sea.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked along the little plateau and down the sheer drop below.

“That’s nonsense, of course,” said the other. “But it’s the feeling he gave me. Of course, really, there isn’t the foothold for a fly.” He looked over the edge. “A straight clear drop. If you went over—well, that would be the end right enough.”

“An ideal spot for a murder, in fact,” said Mr. Satterthwaite pleasantly.

The other stared at him, almost as though for the moment he did not follow. Then he said vaguely: “Oh! yes—of course. . . .”

He sat there, making little dabs at the ground with his stick and frowning. Suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite got the resemblance he had been seeking. That dumb bewildered questioning. So had the dog looked who was run over. His eyes and this young man’s eyes asked the same pathetic question with the same reproach. “Oh! world that I have trusted—what have you done to me?”

He saw other points of resemblance between the two, the same pleasure-loving easy-going existence, the same joyous abandon to the delights of life, the same absence of intellectual questioning. Enough for both to live in the moment—the world was a good place, a place of carnal delights—sun, sea, sky—a discreet garbage heap. And then—what? A car had hit the dog. What had hit the man?

The subject of these cogitations broke in at this point, speaking, however, more to himself than to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“One wonders,” he said, “what it’s All For?”

Familiar words—words that usually brought a smile to Mr. Satterthwaite’s lips, with their unconscious betrayal of the innate egoism of humanity

which insists on regarding every manifestation of life as directly designed for its delight or its torment. He did not answer and presently the stranger said with a slight, rather apologetic laugh:

“I’ve heard it said that every man should build a house, plant a tree and have a son.” He paused and then added: “I believe I planted an acorn once. . .”

Mr. Satterthwaite stirred slightly. His curiosity was aroused—that everpresent interest in the affairs of other people of which the Duchess had accused him was roused. It was not difficult. Mr. Satterthwaite had a very feminine side to his nature, he was as good a listener as any woman, and he knew the right moment to put in a prompting word. Presently he was hearing the whole story.

Anthony Cosden, that was the stranger’s name, and his life had been much as Mr. Satterthwaite had imagined it. He was a bad hand at telling a story but his listener supplied the gaps easily enough. A very ordinary life—an average income, a little soldiering, a good deal of sport whenever sport offered, plenty of friends, plenty of pleasant things to do, a sufficiency of women. The kind of life that practically inhibits thought of any description and substitutes sensation. To speak frankly, an animal’s life. “But there are worse things than that,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite from the depths of his experience. “Oh! many worse things than that . . .” This world had seemed a very good place to Anthony Cosden. He had grumbled because everyone always grumbled but it had never been a serious grumble. And then—this.

He came to it at last—rather vaguely and incoherently. Hadn’t felt quite the thing—nothing much. Saw his doctor, and the doctor had persuaded him to go to a Harley Street man. And then—the incredible truth. They’d tried to hedge about it—spoke of great care—a quiet life, but they hadn’t been able to disguise that that was all eyewash—letting him down lightly. It boiled down to this—six months. That’s what they gave him. Six months.

He turned those bewildered brown eyes on Mr. Satterthwaite. It was, of course, rather a shock to a fellow. One didn’t—one didn’t somehow, know what do do.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded gravely and understandingly.

It was a bit difficult to take in all at once, Anthony Cosden went on. How to put in the time. Rather a rotten business waiting about to get pipped. He didn't feel really ill—not yet. Though that might come later, so the specialist had said—in fact, it was bound to. It seemed such nonsense to be going to die when one didn't in the least want to. The best thing, he had thought, would be to carry on as usual. But somehow that hadn't worked.

Here Mr. Satterthwaite interrupted him. Wasn't there, he hinted delicately, any woman?

But apparently there wasn't. There were women, of course, but not that kind. His crowd was a very cheery crowd. They didn't, so he implied, like corpses. He didn't wish to make a kind of walking funeral of himself. It would have been embarrassing for everybody. So he had come abroad.

“You came to see these islands? But why?” Mr. Satterthwaite was hunting for something, something intangible but delicate that eluded him and yet which he was sure was there. “You've been here before, perhaps?”

“Yes.” He admitted it almost unwillingly. “Years ago when I was a youngster.”

And suddenly, almost unconsciously so it seemed, he shot a quick glance backward over his shoulder in the direction of the villa.

“I remembered this place,” he said, nodding at the sea. “One step to eternity!”

“And that is why you came up here last night,” finished Mr. Satterthwaite calmly.

Anthony Cosden shot him a dismayed glance.

“Oh! I say—really—” he protested.

“Last night you found someone here. This afternoon you have found me. Your life has been saved—twice.”

“You may put it that way if you like—but damn it all, it’s my life. I’ve a right to do what I like with it.”

“That is a cliché,” said Mr. Satterthwaite wearily.

“Of course I see your point, said Anthony Cosden generously. “Naturally you’ve got to say what you can. I’d try to dissuade a fellow myself, even though I knew deep down that he was right. And you know that I’m right. A clean quick end is better than a lingering one—causing trouble and expense and bother to all. In any case it’s not as though I had anyone in the world belonging to me. . . .”

“If you had—?” said Mr. Satterthwaite sharply.

Cosden drew a deep breath.

“I don’t know. Even then, I think, this way would be best. But anyway—I haven’t. . . .”

He stopped abruptly. Mr. Satterthwaite eyed him curiously. Incurably romantic, he suggested again that there was, somewhere, some woman. But Cosden negatived it. He oughtn’t, he said, to complain. He had had, on the whole, a very good life. It was a pity it was going to be over so soon, that was all. But at any rate he had had, he supposed, everything worth having. Except a son. He would have liked a son. He would like to know now that he had a son living after him. Still, he reiterated the fact, he had had a very good life—

It was at this point that Mr. Satterthwaite lost patience. Nobody, he pointed out, who was still in the larval stage, could claim to know anything of life at all. Since the words larval stage clearly meant nothing at all to Cosden, he proceeded to make his meaning clearer.

“You have not begun to live yet. You are still at the beginning of life.”

Cosden laughed.

“Why, my hair’s grey. I’m forty—”

Mr. Satterthwaite interrupted him.

“That has nothing to do with it. Life is a compound of physical and mental experiences. I, for instance, am sixty-nine, and I am really sixty-nine. I have known, either at first or second hand, nearly all the experiences life has to offer. You are like a man who talks of a full year and has seen nothing but snow and ice! The flowers of Spring, the languorous days of Summer, the falling leaves of Autumn—he knows nothing of them—not even that there are such things. And you are going to turn your back on even this opportunity of knowing them.”

“You seem to forget,” said Anthony Cosden dryly, “that, in any case, I have only six months.”

“Time, like everything else, is relative,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “That six months might be the longest and most varied experience of your whole life.”

Cosden looked unconvinced.

“In my place,” he said, “you would do the same.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

“No,” he said simply. “In the first place, I doubt if I should have the courage. It needs courage and I am not at all a brave individual. And in the second place—”

“Well?”

“I always want to know what is going to happen tomorrow.”

Cosden rose suddenly with a laugh.

“Well, sir, you’ve been very good in letting me talk to you. I hardly know why—anyway, there it is. I’ve said a lot too much. Forget it.”

“And tomorrow, when an accident is reported, I am to leave it at that? To make no suggestion of suicide?”

“That’s as you like. I’m glad you realize one thing—that you can’t prevent me.”

“My dear young man,” said Mr. Satterthwaite placidly, “I can hardly attach myself to you like the proverbial limpet. Sooner or later you would give me the slip and accomplish your purpose. But you are frustrated at any rate for this afternoon. You would hardly like to go to your death leaving me under the possible imputation of having pushed you over.”

“That is true,” said Cosden. “If you insist on remaining here—”

“I do,” said Mr. Satterthwaite firmly.

Cosden laughed good-humouredly.

“Then the plan must be deferred for the moment. In which case I will go back to the hotel. See you later perhaps.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was left looking at the sea.

“And now,” he said to himself softly, “what next? There must be a next. I wonder. . . .”

He got up. For a while he stood at the edge of the plateau looking down on the dancing water beneath. But he found no inspiration there, and turning slowly he walked back along the path between the cypresses and into the quiet garden. He looked at the shuttered, peaceful house and he wondered, as he had often wondered before, who had lived there and what had taken place within those placid walls. On a sudden impulse he walked up some crumbling stone steps and laid a hand on one of the faded green shutters.

To his surprise it swung back at his touch. He hesitated a moment, then pushed it boldly open. The next minute he stepped back with a little exclamation of dismay. A woman stood in the window facing him. She wore black and had a black lace mantilla draped over her head.

Mr. Satterthwaite floundered wildly in Italian interspersed with German—the nearest he could get in the hurry of the moment to Spanish. He was

desolated and ashamed, he explained haltingly. The Signora must forgive. He thereupon retreated hastily, the woman not having spoken one word.

He was halfway across the courtyard when she spoke—two sharp words like a pistol crack.

“Come back!”

It was a barked-out command such as might have been addressed to a dog, yet so absolute was the authority it conveyed, that Mr. Satterthwaite had swung round hurriedly and trotted back to the window almost automatically before it occurred to him to feel any resentment. He obeyed like a dog. The woman was still standing motionless at the window. She looked him up and down appraising him with perfect calmness.

“You are English,” she said. “I thought so.”

Mr. Satterthwaite started off on a second apology.

“If I had known you were English,” he said, “I could have expressed myself better just now. I offer my most sincere apologies for my rudeness in trying the shutter. I am afraid I can plead no excuse save curiosity. I had a great wish to see what the inside of this charming house was like.”

She laughed suddenly, a deep, rich laugh.

“If you really want to see it,” she said, “you had better come in.”

She stood aside, and Mr. Satterthwaite, feeling pleasurably excited, stepped into the room. It was dark, since the shutters of the other windows were closed, but he could see that it was scantily and rather shabbily furnished and that the dust lay thick everywhere.

“Not here,” she said. “I do not use this room.”

She led the way and he followed her, out of the room across a passage and into a room the other side. Here the windows gave on the sea and the sun streamed in. The furniture, like that of the other room, was poor in quality,

but there were some worn rugs that had been good in their time, a large screen of Spanish leather and bowls of fresh flowers.

“You will have tea with me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite’s hostess. She added reassuringly: “It is perfectly good tea and will be made with boiling water.”

She went out of the door and called out something in Spanish, then she returned and sat down on a sofa opposite her guest. For the first time, Mr. Satterthwaite was able to study her appearance.

The first effect she had upon him was to make him feel even more grey and shrivelled and elderly than usual by contrast with her own forceful personality. She was a tall woman, very sunburnt, dark and handsome though no longer young. When she was in the room the sun seemed to be shining twice as brightly as when she was out of it, and presently a curious feeling of warmth and aliveness began to steal over Mr. Satterthwaite. It was as though he stretched out thin, shrivelled hands to a reassuring flame. He thought, “She’s so much vitality herself that she’s got a lot left over for other people.”

He recalled the command in her voice when she had stopped him, and wished that his protégée, Olga, could be imbued with a little of that force. He thought: “What an Isolde she’d make! And yet she probably hasn’t got the ghost of a singing voice. Life is badly arranged.” He was, all the same, a little afraid of her. He did not like domineering women.

She had clearly been considering him as she sat with her chin in her hands, making no pretence about it. At last she nodded as though she had made up her mind.

“I am glad you came,” she said at last. “I needed someone very badly to talk to this afternoon. And you are used to that, aren’t you?”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“I meant people tell you things. You knew what I meant! Why pretend?”

“Well—perhaps—”

She swept on, regardless of anything he had been going to say.

“One could say anything to you. That is because you are half a woman. You know what we feel—what we think—the queer, queer things we do.”

Her voice died away. Tea was brought by a large, smiling Spanish girl. It was good tea—China—Mr. Satterthwaite sipped it appreciatively.

“You live here?” he inquired conversationally.

“Yes.”

“But not altogether. The house is usually shut up, is it not? At least so I have been told.”

“I am here a good deal, more than anyone knows. I only use these rooms.”

“You have had the house long?”

“It has belonged to me for twenty-two years—and I lived here for a year before that.”

Mr. Satterthwaite said rather inanely (or so he felt): “That is a very long time.”

“The year? Or the twenty-two years?”

His interest stirred, Mr. Satterthwaite said gravely: “That depends.”

She nodded.

“Yes, it depends. They are two separate periods. They have nothing to do with each other. Which is long? Which is short? Even now I cannot say.”

She was silent for a minute, brooding. Then she said with a little smile:

“It is such a long time since I have talked with anyone—such a long time! I do not apologize. You came to my shutter. You wished to look through my window. And that is what you are always doing, is it not? Pushing aside the

shutter and looking through the window into the truth of people's lives. If they will let you. And often if they will not let you! It would be difficult to hide anything from you. You would guess—and guess right.”

Mr. Satterthwaite had an odd impulse to be perfectly sincere.

“I am sixty-nine,” he said. “Everything I know of life I know at second hand. Sometimes that is very bitter to me. And yet, because of it, I know a good deal.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“I know. Life is very strange. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be that—always a looker-on.”

Her tone was wondering. Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

“No, you would not know. Your place is in the centre of the stage. You will always be the Prima Donna.”

“What a curious thing to say.”

“But I am right. Things have happened to you—will always happen to you. Sometimes, I think, there have been tragic things. Is that so?”

Her eyes narrowed. She looked across at him.

“If you are here long, somebody will tell you of the English swimmer who was drowned at the foot of this cliff. They will tell you how young and strong he was, how handsome, and they will tell you that his young wife looked down from the top of the cliff and saw him drowning.”

“Yes, I have already heard that story.”

“That man was my husband. This was his villa. He brought me out here with him when I was eighteen, and a year later he died—driven by the surf on the black rocks, cut and bruised and mutilated, battered to death.”

Mr. Satterthwaite gave a shocked exclamation. She leant forward, her burning eyes focused on his face.

“You spoke of tragedy. Can you imagine a greater tragedy than that? For a young wife, only a year married, to stand helpless while the man she loved fought for his life—and lost it—horribly.”

“Terrible,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He spoke with real emotion. “Terrible. I agree with you. Nothing in life could be so dreadful.”

Suddenly she laughed. Her head went back.

“You are wrong,” she said. “There is something more terrible. And that is for a young wife to stand there and hope and long for her husband to drown. . . .”

“But good God,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite, “you don’t mean—?”

“Yes, I do. That’s what it was really. I knelt there—knelt down on the cliff and prayed. The Spanish servants thought I was praying for his life to be saved. I wasn’t. I was praying that I might wish him to be spared. I was saying one thing over and over again, ‘God, help me not to wish him dead. God, help me not to wish him dead.’ But it wasn’t any good. All the time I hoped—hoped—and my hope came true.”

She was silent for a minute or two and then she said very gently in quite a different voice:

“That is a terrible thing, isn’t it? It’s the sort of thing one can’t forget. I was terribly happy when I knew he was really dead and couldn’t come back to torture me any more.”

“My child,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, shocked.

“I know. I was too young to have that happen to me. Those things should happen to one when one is older—when one is more prepared for—for beastliness. Nobody knew, you know, what he was really like. I thought he was wonderful when I first met him and was so happy and proud when he

asked me to marry him. But things went wrong almost at once. He was angry with me—nothing I could do pleased him—and yet I tried so hard. And then he began to like hurting me. And above all to terrify me. That's what he enjoyed most. He thought out all sorts of things . . . dreadful things. I won't tell you. I suppose, really, he must have been a little mad. I was alone here, in his power, and cruelty began to be his hobby." Her eyes widened and darkened. "The worst was my baby. I was going to have a baby. Because of some of the things he did to me—it was born dead. My little baby. I nearly died, too—but I didn't. I wish I had."

Mr. Satterthwaite made an inarticulate sound.

"And then I was delivered—in the way I've told you. Some girls who were staying at the hotel dared him. That's how it happened. All the Spaniards told him it was madness to risk the sea just there. But he was very vain—he wanted to show off. And I—I saw him drown—and was glad. God oughtn't to let such things happen."

Mr. Satterthwaite stretched out his little dry hand and took hers. She squeezed it hard as a child might have done. The maturity had fallen away from her face. He saw her without difficulty as she had been at nineteen.

"At first it seemed too good to be true. The house was mine and I could live in it. And no one could hurt me any more! I was an orphan, you know, I had no near relations, no one to care what became of me. That simplified things. I lived on here—in this villa—and it seemed like Heaven. Yes, like Heaven. I've never been so happy since, and never shall again. Just to wake up and know that everything was all right—no pain, no terror, no wondering what he was going to do to me next. Yes, it was Heaven."

She paused a long time, and Mr. Satterthwaite said at last:

"And then?"

"I suppose human beings aren't ever satisfied. At first, just being free was enough. But after a while I began to get—well, lonely, I suppose. I began to think about my baby that died. If only I had had my baby! I wanted it as a

baby, and also as a plaything. I wanted dreadfully something or someone to play with. It sounds silly and childish, but there it was.”

“I understand,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gravely.

“It’s difficult to explain the next bit. It just—well, happened, you see. There was a young Englishman staying at the hotel. He strayed in the garden by mistake. I was wearing Spanish dress and he took me for a Spanish girl. I thought it would be rather fun to pretend I was one, so I played up. His Spanish was very bad but he could just manage a little. I told him the villa belonged to an English lady who was away. I said she had taught me a little English and I pretended to speak broken English. It was such fun—such fun—even now I can remember what fun it was. He began to make love to me. We agreed to pretend that the villa was our home, that we were just married and coming to live there. I suggested that we should try one of the shutters—the one you tried this evening. It was open and inside the room was dusty and uncared for. We crept in. It was exciting and wonderful. We pretended it was our own house.”

She broke off suddenly, looked appealingly at Mr. Satterthwaite.

“It all seemed lovely—like a fairy tale. And the lovely thing about it, to me, was that it wasn’t true. It wasn’t real.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded. He saw her, perhaps more clearly than she saw herself—that frightened, lonely child entranced with her make believe that was so safe because it wasn’t real.

“He was, I suppose, a very ordinary young man. Out for adventure, but quite sweet about it. We went on pretending.”

She stopped, looked at Mr. Satterthwaite and said again:

“You understand? We went on pretending. . . .”

She went on again in a minute.

“He came up again the next morning to the villa. I saw him from my bedroom through the shutter. Of course he didn’t dream I was inside. He still thought I was a little Spanish peasant girl. He stood there looking about him. He’d asked me to meet him. I’d said I would but I never meant to.

“He just stood there looking worried. I think he was worried about me. It was nice of him to be worried about me. He was nice. . . .”

She paused again.

“The next day he left. I’ve never seen him again.

“My baby was born nine months later. I was wonderfully happy all the time. To be able to have a baby so peacefully, with no one to hurt you or make you miserable. I wished I’d remembered to ask my English boy his Christian name. I would have called the baby after him. It seemed unkind not to. It seemed rather unfair. He’d given me the thing I wanted most in the world, and he would never even know about it! But of course I told myself that he wouldn’t look at it that way—that to know would probably only worry and annoy him. I had been just a passing amusement for him, that was all.”

“And the baby?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“He was splendid. I called him John. Splendid. I wish you could see him now. He’s twenty. He’s going to be a mining engineer. He’s been the best and dearest son in the world to me. I told him his father had died before he was born.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at her. A curious story. And somehow, a story that was not completely told. There was, he felt sure, something else.

“Twenty years is a long time,” he said thoughtfully. “You’ve never contemplated marrying again?”

She shook her head. A slow, burning blush spread over her tanned cheeks.

“The child was enough for you—always?”

She looked at him. Her eyes were softer than he had yet seen them.

“Such queer things happen!” she murmured. “Such queer things . . . You wouldn’t believe them—no, I’m wrong, you might, perhaps. I didn’t love John’s father, not at the time. I don’t think I even knew what love was. I assumed, as a matter of course, that the child would be like me. But he wasn’t. He mightn’t have been my child at all. He was like his father—he was like no one but his father. I learnt to know that man—through his child. Through the child, I learnt to love him. I love him now. I always shall love him. You may say that it’s imagination, that I’ve built up an ideal, but it isn’t so. I love the man, the real, human man. I’d know him if I saw him tomorrow—even though it’s over twenty years since we met. Loving him has made me into a woman. I love him as a woman loves a man. For twenty years I’ve lived loving him. I shall die loving him.”

She stopped abruptly—then challenged her listener.

“Do you think I’m mad—to say these strange things?”

“Oh! my dear,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He took her hand again.

“You do understand?”

“I think I do. But there’s something more, isn’t there? Something that you haven’t yet told me?”

Her brow clouded over.

“Yes, there’s something. It was clever of you to guess. I knew at once you weren’t the sort one can hide things from. But I don’t want to tell you—and the reason I don’t want to tell you is because it’s best for you not to know.”

He looked at her. Her eyes met his bravely and defiantly.

He said to himself: “This is the test. All the clues are in my hand. I ought to be able to know. If I reason rightly I shall know.”

There was a pause, then he said slowly:

“Something’s gone wrong.” He saw her eyelids give the faintest quiver and knew himself to be on the right track.

“Something’s gone wrong—suddenly—after all these years.” He felt himself groping—groping—in the dark recesses of her mind where she was trying to hide her secret from him.

“The boy—it’s got to do with him. You wouldn’t mind about anything else.”

He heard the very faint gasp she gave and knew he had probed correctly. A cruel business but necessary. It was her will against his. She had got a dominant, ruthless will, but he too had a will hidden beneath his meek manners. And he had behind him the Heaven-sent assurance of a man who is doing his proper job. He felt a passing contemptuous pity for men whose business it was to track down such crudities as crime. This detective business of the mind, this assembling of clues, this delving for the truth, this wild joy as one drew nearer to the goal . . . Her very passion to keep the truth from him helped her. He felt her stiffen defiantly as he drew nearer and nearer.

“It is better for me not to know, you say. Better for me? But you are not a very considerate woman. You would not shrink from putting a stranger to a little temporary inconvenience. It is more than that, then? If you tell me you make me an accomplice before the fact. That sounds like crime. Fantastic! I could not associate crime with you. Or only one sort of crime. A crime against yourself.”

Her lids drooped in spite of herself, veiled her eyes. He leaned forward and caught her wrist.

“It is that, then! You are thinking of taking your life.”

She gave a low cry.

“How did you know? How did you know?”

“But why? You are not tired of life. I never saw a woman less tired of it—more radiantly alive.”

She got up, went to the window, pushing back a strand of her dark hair as she did so.

“Since you have guessed so much I might as well tell you the truth. I should not have let you in this evening. I might have known that you would see too much. You are that kind of man. You were right about the cause. It’s the boy. He knows nothing. But last time he was home, he spoke tragically of a friend of his, and I discovered something. If he finds out that he is illegitimate it will break his heart. He is proud—horribly proud! There is a girl. Oh! I won’t go into details. But he is coming very soon—and he wants to know all about his father—he wants details. The girl’s parents, naturally, want to know. When he discovers the truth, he will break with her, exile himself, ruin his life. Oh! I know the things you would say. He is young, foolish, wrongheaded to take it like that! All true, perhaps. But does it matter what people ought to be? They are what they are. It will break his heart . . . But if, before he comes, there has been an accident, everything will be swallowed up in grief for me. He will look through my papers, find nothing, and be annoyed that I told him so little. But he will not suspect the truth. It is the best way. One must pay for happiness, and I have had so much—oh! so much happiness. And in reality the price will be easy, too. A little courage—to take the leap—perhaps a moment or so of anguish.”

“But, my dear child—”

“Don’t argue with me.” She flared round on him. “I won’t listen to conventional arguments. My life is my own. Up to now, it has been needed—for John. But he needs it no longer. He wants a mate—a companion—he will turn to her all the more willingly because I am no longer there. My life is useless, but my death will be of use. And I have the right to do what I like with my own life.”

“Are you sure?”

The sternness of his tone surprised her. She stammered slightly.

“If it is no good to anyone—and I am the best judge of that—”

He interrupted her again.

“Not necessarily.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen. I will put a case to you. A man comes to a certain place—to commit suicide, shall we say? But by chance he finds another man there, so he fails in his purpose and goes away—to live. The second man has saved the first man’s life, not by being necessary to him or prominent in his life, but just by the mere physical fact of having been in a certain place at a certain moment. You take your life today and perhaps, some five, six, seven years hence, someone will go to death or disaster simply for lack of your presence in a given spot or place. It may be a runaway horse coming down a street that swerved aside at sight of you and so fails to trample a child that is playing in the gutter. That child may live to grow up and be a great musician, or discover a cure for cancer. Or it may be less melodramatic than that. He may just grow up to ordinary everyday happiness. . . .”

She stared at him.

“You are a strange man. These things you say—I have never thought of them. . . .”

“You say your life is your own,” went on Mr. Satterthwaite. “But can you dare to ignore the chance that you are taking part in a gigantic drama under the orders of a divine Producer? Your cue may not come till the end of the play—it may be totally unimportant, a mere walking-on part, but upon it may hang the issues of the play if you do not give the cue to another player. The whole edifice may crumble. You as you, may not matter to anyone in the world, but you as a person in a particular place may matter unimaginably.”

She sat down, still staring.

“What do you want me to do?” she said simply.

It was Mr. Satterthwaite's moment of triumph. He issued orders.

"I want you at least to promise me one thing—to do nothing rash for twenty-four hours."

She was silent for a moment or two and then she said: "I promise."

"There is one other thing—a favour."

"Yes?"

"Leave the shutter of the room I came in by unfastened, and keep vigil there tonight."

She looked at him curiously, but nodded assent.

"And now," said Mr. Satterthwaite, slightly conscious of anticlimax, "I really must be going. God bless you, my dear."

He made a rather embarrassed exit. The stalwart Spanish girl met him in the passage and opened a side door for him, staring curiously at him the while.

It was just growing dark as he reached the hotel. There was a solitary figure sitting on the terrace. Mr. Satterthwaite made straight for it. He was excited and his heart was beating quite fast. He felt that tremendous issues lay in his hands. One false move—

But he tried to conceal his agitation and to speak naturally and casually to Anthony Cosden.

"A warm evening," he observed. "I quite lost count of time sitting up there on the cliff."

"Have you been up there all this time?"

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded. The swing door into the hotel opened to let someone through, and a beam of light fell suddenly on the other's face, illuminating its look of dull suffering, of uncomprehending dumb endurance.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: "It's worse for him than it would be for me. Imagination, conjecture, speculation—they can do a lot for you. You can, as it were, ring the changes upon pain. The uncomprehending blind suffering of an animal—that's terrible. . . ."

Cosden spoke suddenly in a harsh voice.

"I'm going for a stroll after dinner. You—you understand? The third time's lucky. For God's sake don't interfere. I know your interference will be well-meaning and all that—but take it from me, it's useless."

Mr. Satterthwaite drew himself up.

"I never interfere," he said, thereby giving the lie to the whole purpose and object of his existence.

"I know what you think—" went on Cosden, but he was interrupted.

"You must excuse me, but there I beg to differ from you," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Nobody knows what another person is thinking. They may imagine they do, but they are nearly always wrong."

"Well, perhaps that's so." Cosden was doubtful, slightly taken aback.

"Thought is yours only," said his companion. "Nobody can alter or influence the use you mean to make of it. Let us talk of a less painful subject. That old villa, for instance. It has a curious charm, withdrawn, sheltered from the world, shielding heaven knows what mystery. It tempted me to do a doubtful action. I tried one of the shutters."

"You did?" Cosden turned his head sharply. "But it was fastened, of course?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "It was open." He added gently: "The third shutter from the end."

"Why," Cosden burst out, "that was the one—"

He broke off suddenly, but Mr. Satterthwaite had seen the light that had sprung up in his eyes. He rose—satisfied.

Some slight tinge of anxiety still remained with him. Using his favourite metaphor of a drama, he hoped that he had spoken his few lines correctly. For they were very important lines.

But thinking it over, his artistic judgment was satisfied. On his way up to the cliff, Cosden would try that shutter. It was not in human nature to resist. A memory of twenty odd years ago had brought him to this spot, the same memory would take him to the shutter. And afterwards?

“I shall know in the morning,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and proceeded to change methodically for his evening meal.

It was somewhere round ten o’clock that Mr. Satterthwaite set foot once more in the garden of La Paz. Manuel bade him a smiling “Good morning,” and handed him a single rosebud which Mr. Satterthwaite put carefully into his buttonhole. Then he went on to the house. He stood there for some minutes looking up at the peaceful white walls, the trailing orange creeper, and the faded green shutters. So silent, so peaceful. Had the whole thing been a dream?

But at that moment one of the windows opened and the lady who occupied Mr. Satterthwaite’s thoughts came out. She came straight to him with a buoyant swaying walk, like someone carried on a great wave of exultation. Her eyes were shining, her colour high. She looked like a figure of joy on a frieze. There was no hesitation about her, no doubts or tremors. Straight to Mr. Satterthwaite she came, put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him—not once but many times. Large, dark, red roses, very velvety—that is how he thought of it afterwards. Sunshine, summer, birds singing—that was the atmosphere into which he felt himself caught up. Warmth, joy and tremendous vigour.

“I’m so happy,” she said. “You darling! How did you know? How could you know? You’re like the good magician in the fairy tales.”

She paused, a sort of breathlessness of happiness upon her.

“We’re going over today—to the Consul—to get married. When John comes, his father will be there. We’ll tell him there was some misunderstanding in the past. Oh! he won’t ask questions. Oh! I’m so happy—so happy—so happy.”

Happiness did indeed surge from her like a tide. It lapped round Mr. Satterthwaite in a warm exhilarating flood.

“It’s so wonderful to Anthony to find he has a son. I never dreamt he’d mind or care.” She looked confidently into Mr. Satterthwaite’s eyes. “Isn’t it strange how things come right and end all beautifully?”

He had his clearest vision of her yet. A child—still a child—with her love of make-believe—her fairy tales that ended beautifully with two people “living happily ever afterwards.”

He said gently:

“If you bring this man of yours happiness in these last months, you will indeed have done a very beautiful thing.”

Her eyes opened wide—surprised.

“Oh!” she said. “You don’t think I’d let him die, do you? After all these years—when he’s come to me. I’ve known lots of people whom doctors have given up and who are alive today. Die? Of course he’s not going to die!”

He looked at her—her strength, her beauty, her vitality—her indomitable courage and will. He, too, had known doctors to be mistaken . . . The personal factor—you never knew how much and how little it counted.

She said again, with scorn and amusement in her voice:

“You don’t think I’d let him die, do you?”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite at last very gently. “Somehow, my dear, I don’t think you will. . . .”

Then at last he walked down the cypress path to the bench overlooking the sea and found there the person he was expecting to see. Mr. Quin rose and greeted him—the same as ever, dark, saturnine, smiling and sad.

“You expected me?” he asked.

And Mr. Satterthwaite answered: “Yes, I expected you.”

They sat together on the bench.

“I have an idea that you have been playing Providence once more, to judge by your expression,” said Mr. Quin presently.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him reproachfully.

“As if you didn’t know all about it.”

“You always accuse me of omniscience,” said Mr. Quin, smiling.

“If you know nothing, why were you here the night before last—waiting?” countered Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Oh, that—?”

“Yes, that.”

“I had a—commission to perform.”

“For whom?”

“You have sometimes fancifully named me an advocate for the dead.”

“The dead?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, a little puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

Mr. Quin pointed a long, lean finger down at the blue depths below.

“A man was drowned down there twenty-two years ago.”

“I know—but I don’t see—”

“Supposing that, after all, that man loved his young wife. Love can make devils of men as well as angels. She had a girlish adoration for him, but he could never touch the womanhood in her—and that drove him mad. He tortured her because he loved her. Such things happen. You know that as well as I do.”

“Yes,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite, “I have seen such things—but rarely—very rarely. . . .”

“And you have also seen, more commonly, that there is such a thing as remorse—the desire to make amends—at all costs to make amends.”

“Yes, but death came too soon. . . .”

“Death!” There was contempt in Mr. Quin’s voice. “You believe in a life after death, do you not? And who are you to say that the same wishes, the same desires, may not operate in that other life? If the desire is strong enough—a messenger may be found.”

His voice tailed away.

Mr. Satterthwaite got up, trembling a little.

“I must get back to the hotel,” he said. “If you are going that way.”

But Mr. Quin shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I shall go back the way I came.”

When Mr. Satterthwaite looked back over his shoulder, he saw his friend walking towards the edge of the cliff.

Seven

THE VOICE IN THE DARK

“The Voice in the Dark” was first published in the USA in Flynn’s Weekly, 4 December 1926, and then as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 4” in Storyteller magazine, March 1927.

I am a little worried about Margery,” said Lady Stranleigh.

“My girl, you know,” she added.

She sighed pensively.

“It makes one feel terribly old to have a grown-up daughter.”

Mr. Satterthwaite, who was the recipient of these confidences, rose to the occasion gallantly.

“No one could believe it possible,” he declared with a little bow.

“Flatterer,” said Lady Stranleigh, but she said it vaguely and it was clear that her mind was elsewhere.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at the slender white-clad figure in some admiration. The Cannes sunshine was searching, but Lady Stranleigh came through the test very well. At a distance the youthful effect was really extraordinary. One almost wondered if she were grown-up or not. Mr. Satterthwaite, who knew everything, knew that it was perfectly possible for Lady Stranleigh to have grown-up grandchildren. She represented the extreme triumph of art over nature. Her figure was marvellous, her complexion was marvellous. She had enriched many beauty parlours and certainly the results were astounding.

Lady Stranleigh lit a cigarette, crossed her beautiful legs encased in the finest of nude silk stockings and murmured: “Yes, I really am rather worried

about Margery.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “what is the trouble?”

Lady Stranleigh turned her beautiful blue eyes upon him.

“You have never met her, have you? She is Charles’ daughter,” she added helpfully.

If entries in ‘Who’s Who’ were strictly truthful, the entries concerning Lady Stranleigh might have ended as follows: hobbies: getting married. She had floated through life shedding husbands as she went. She had lost three by divorce and one by death.

“If she had been Rudolph’s child I could have understood it,” mused Lady Stranleigh. “You remember Rudolf? He was always temperamental. Six months after we married I had to apply for those queer things—what do they call them? Conjugal what nots, you know what I mean. Thank goodness it is all much simpler nowadays. I remember I had to write him the silliest kind of letter—my lawyer practically dictated it to me. Asking him to come back, you know, and that I would do all I could, etc., etc., but you never could count on Rudolf, he was so temperamental. He came rushing home at once, which was quite the wrong thing to do, and not at all what the lawyers meant.”

She sighed.

“About Margery?” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite, tactfully leading her back to the subject under discussion.

“Of course. I was just going to tell you, wasn’t I? Margery has been seeing things, or hearing them. Ghosts, you know, and all that. I should never have thought that Margery could be so imaginative. She is a dear good girl, always has been, but just a shade—dull.”

“Impossible,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite with a confused idea of being complimentary.

“In fact, very dull,” said Lady Stranleigh. “Doesn’t care for dancing, or cocktails or any of the things a young girl ought to care about. She much prefers staying at home to hunt instead of coming out here with me.”

“Dear, dear,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “she wouldn’t come out with you, you say?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly press her. Daughters have a depressing effect upon one, I find.”

Mr. Satterthwaite tried to think of Lady Stranleigh accompanied by a serious-minded daughter and failed.

“I can’t help wondering if Margery is going off her head,” continued Margery’s mother in a cheerful voice. “Hearing voices is a very bad sign, so they tell me. It is not as though Abbot’s Mede were haunted. The old building was burnt to the ground in 1836, and they put up a kind of early Victorian château which simply cannot be haunted. It is much too ugly and commonplace.”

Mr. Satterthwaite coughed. He was wondering why he was being told all this.

“I thought perhaps,” said Lady Stranleigh, smiling brilliantly upon him, “that you might be able to help me.”

“I?”

“Yes. You are going back to England tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“I am. Yes, that is so,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite cautiously.

“And you know all these psychological research people. Of course you do, you know everybody.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled a little. It was one of his weaknesses to know everybody.

“So what can be simpler?” continued Lady Stranleigh. “I never get on with that sort of person. You know—earnest men with beards and usually spectacles. They bore me terribly and I am quite at my worst with them.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was rather taken aback. Lady Stranleigh continued to smile at him brilliantly.

“So that is all settled, isn’t it?” she said brightly. “You will go down to Abbot’s Mede and see Margery, and make all the arrangements. I shall be terribly grateful to you. Of course if Margery is really going off her head, I will come home. Ah! Here is Bimbo.”

Her smile from being brilliant became dazzling.

A young man in white tennis flannels was approaching them. He was about twenty-five years of age and extremely good-looking.

The young man said simply:

“I have been looking for you everywhere, Babs.”

“What has the tennis been like?”

“Septic.”

Lady Stranleigh rose. She turned her head over her shoulder and murmured in dulcer tones to Mr. Satterthwaite: “It is simply marvellous of you to help me. I shall never forget it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked after the retreating couple.

“I wonder,” he mused to himself, “If Bimbo is going to be No. 5.”

The conductor of the Train de Luxe was pointing out to Mr. Satterthwaite where an accident on the line had occurred a few years previously. As he finished his spirited narrative, the other looked up and saw a well-known face smiling at him over the conductor’s shoulder.

“My dear Mr. Quin,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

His little withered face broke into smiles.

“What a coincidence! That we should both be returning to England on the same train. You are going there, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin. “I have business there of rather an important nature. Are you taking the first service of dinner?”

“I always do so. Of course, it is an absurd time—half-past six, but one runs less risk with the cooking.”

Mr. Quin nodded comprehendingly.

“I also,” he said. “We might perhaps arrange to sit together.”

Half-past six found Mr. Quin and Mr. Satterthwaite established opposite each other at a small table in the dining car. Mr. Satterthwaite gave due attention to the wine list and then turned to his companion.

“I have not seen you since—ah, yes not since Corsica. You left very suddenly that day.”

Mr. Quin shrugged his shoulders.

“Not more so than usual. I come and go, you know. I come and go.”

The words seemed to awake some echo of remembrance in Mr. Satterthwaite’s mind. A little shiver passed down his spine—not a disagreeable sensation, quite the contrary. He was conscious of a pleasurable sense of anticipation.

Mr. Quin was holding up a bottle of red wine, examining the label on it. The bottle was between him and the light but for a minute or two a red glow enveloped his person.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt again that sudden stir of excitement.

“I too have a kind of mission in England,” he remarked, smiling broadly at the remembrance. “You know Lady Stranleigh perhaps?”

Mr. Quin shook his head.

“It is an old title,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “a very old title. One of the few that can descend in the female line. She is a Baroness in her own right. Rather a romantic history really.”

Mr. Quin settled himself more comfortably in his chair. A waiter, flying down the swinging car, deposited cups of soup before them as if by a miracle. Mr. Quin sipped it cautiously.

“You are about to give me one of those wonderful descriptive portraits of yours,” he murmured, “that is so, is it not?”

Mr. Satterthwaite beamed on him.

“She is really a marvellous woman,” he said. “Sixty, you know—yes, I should say at least sixty. I knew them as girls, she and her sister. Beatrice, that was the name of the elder one. Beatrice and Barbara. I remember them as the Barron girls. Both good-looking and in those days very hard up. But that was a great many years ago—why, dear me, I was a young man myself then.” Mr. Satterthwaite sighed. “There were several lives then between them and the title. Old Lord Stranleigh was a first cousin once removed, I think. Lady Stranleigh’s life has been quite a romantic affair. Three unexpected deaths—two of the old man’s brothers and a nephew. Then there was the ‘Uralia.’ You remember the wreck of the ‘Uralia?’ She went down off the coast of New Zealand. The Barron girls were on board. Beatrice was drowned. This one, Barbara, was amongst the few survivors. Six months later, old Stranleigh died and she succeeded to the title and came into a considerable fortune. Since then she has lived for one thing only—herself! She has always been the same, beautiful, unscrupulous, completely callous, interested solely in herself. She has had four husbands, and I have no doubt could get a fifth in a minute.”

He went on to describe the mission with which he had been entrusted by Lady Stranleigh.

“I thought of running down to Abbot’s Mede to see the young lady,” he explained. “I—I feel that something ought to be done about the matter. It is

impossible to think of Lady Stranleigh as an ordinary mother.” He stopped, looking across the table at Mr. Quin.

“I wish you would come with me,” he said wistfully. “Would it not be possible?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Mr. Quin. “But let me see, Abbot’s Mede is in Wiltshire, is it not?”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“I thought as much. As it happens, I shall be staying not far from Abbot’s Mede, at a place you and I both know.” He smiled. “You remember that little inn, the ‘Bells and Motley’?”

“Of course,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite; “you will be there?”

Mr. Quin nodded. “For a week or ten days. Possibly longer. If you will come and look me up one day, I shall be delighted to see you.”

And somehow or other Mr. Satterthwaite felt strangely comforted by the assurance.

“My dear Miss—er—Margery,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I assure you that I should not dream of laughing at you.”

Margery Gale frowned a little. They were sitting in the large comfortable hall of Abbot’s Mede. Margery Gale was a big squarely built girl. She bore no resemblance to her mother, but took entirely after her father’s side of the family, a line of hard-riding country squires. She looked fresh and wholesome and the picture of sanity. Nevertheless, Mr. Satterthwaite was reflecting to himself that the Barrons as a family were all inclined to mental instability. Margery might have inherited her physical appearance from her father and at the same time have inherited some mental kink from her mother’s side of the family.

“I wish,” said Margery, “that I could get rid of that Casson woman. I don’t believe in spiritualism, and I don’t like it. She is one of these silly women

that run a craze to death. She is always bothering me to have a medium down here.”

Mr. Satterthwaite coughed, fidgeted a little in his chair and then said in a judicial manner:

“Let me be quite sure that I have all the facts. The first of the—er—phenomena occurred two months ago, I understand?”

“About that,” agreed the girl. “Sometimes it was a whisper and sometimes it was quite a clear voice but it always said much the same thing.”

“Which was?”

“Give back what is not yours. Give back what you have stolen. On each occasion I switched on the light, but the room was quite empty and there was no one there. In the end I got so nervous that I got Clayton, mother’s maid, to sleep on the sofa in my room.”

“And the voice came just the same?”

“Yes—and this is what frightens me—Clayton did not hear it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite reflected for a minute or two.

“Did it come loudly or softly that evening?”

“It was almost a whisper,” admitted Margery. “If Clayton was sound asleep I suppose she would not really have heard it. She wanted me to see a doctor.” The girl laughed bitterly.

“But since last night even Clayton believes,” she continued.

“What happened last night?”

“I am just going to tell you. I have told no one as yet. I had been out hunting yesterday and we had had a long run. I was dead tired, and slept very heavily. I dreamt—a horrible dream—that I had fallen over some iron railings and that one of the spikes was entering slowly into my throat. I

woke to find that it was true—there was some sharp point pressing into the side of my neck, and at the same time a voice was murmuring softly: ‘You have stolen what is mine. This is death.’

“I screamed,” continued Margery, “and clutched at the air, but there was nothing there. Clayton heard me scream from the room next door where she was sleeping. She came rushing in, and she distinctly felt something brushing past her in the darkness, but she says that whatever that something was, it was not anything human.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at her. The girl was obviously very shaken and upset. He noticed on the left side of her throat a small square of sticking plaster. She caught the direction of his gaze and nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “it was not imagination, you see.”

Mr. Satterthwaite put a question almost apologetically, it sounded so melodramatic.

“You don’t know of anyone—er—who has a grudge against you?” he asked.

“Of course not,” said Margery. “What an idea!”

Mr. Satterthwaite started on another line of attack.

“What visitors have you had during the last two months?”

“You don’t mean just people for weekends, I suppose? Marcia Keane has been with me all along. She is my best friend, and just as keen on horses as I am. Then my cousin Roley Vavasour has been here a good deal.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded. He suggested that he should see Clayton, the maid.

“She has been with you a long time, I suppose?” he asked.

“Donkey’s years,” said Margery. “She was Mother’s and Aunt Beatrice’s maid when they were girls. That is why Mother has kept her on, I suppose,

although she has got a French maid for herself. Clayton does sewing and pottering little odd jobs.”

She took him upstairs and presently Clayton came to them. She was a tall, thin, old woman, with grey hair neatly parted, and she looked the acme of respectability.

“No, sir,” she said in answer to Mr. Satterthwaite’s inquiries. “I have never heard anything of the house being haunted. To tell you the truth, sir, I thought it was all Miss Margery’s imagination until last night. But I actually felt something—brushing by me in the darkness. And I can tell you this, sir, it was not anything human. And then there is that wound in Miss Margery’s neck. She didn’t do that herself, poor lamb.”

But her words were suggestive to Mr. Satterthwaite. Was it possible that Margery could have inflicted that wound herself? He had heard of strange cases where girls apparently just as sane and well-balanced as Margery had done the most amazing things.

“It will soon heal up,” said Clayton. “It’s not like this scar of mine.”

She pointed to a mark on her own forehead.

“That was done forty years ago, sir; I still bear the mark of it.”

“It was the time the ‘Uralia’ went down,” put in Margery. “Clayton was hit on the head by a spar, weren’t you, Clayton?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“What do you think yourself, Clayton,” asked Mr. Satterthwaite, “what do you think was the meaning of this attack on Miss Margery?”

“I really should not like to say, sir.”

Mr. Satterthwaite read this correctly as the reserve of the well-trained servant.

“What do you really think, Clayton?” he said persuasively.

“I think, sir, that something very wicked must have been done in this house, and that until that is wiped out there won’t be any peace.”

The woman spoke gravely, and her faded blue eyes met his steadily.

Mr. Satterthwaite went downstairs rather disappointed. Clayton evidently held the orthodox view, a deliberate “haunting” as a consequence of some evil deed in the past. Mr. Satterthwaite himself was not so easily satisfied. The phenomena had only taken place in the last two months. Had only taken place since Marcia Keane and Roley Vavasour had been there. He must find out something about these two. It was possible that the whole thing was a practical joke. But he shook his head, dissatisfied with that solution. The thing was more sinister than that. The post had just come in and Margery was opening and reading her letters. Suddenly she gave an exclamation.

“Mother is too absurd,” she said. “Do read this.” She handed the letter to Mr. Satterthwaite.

It was an epistle typical of Lady Stranleigh.

Darling Margery (she wrote),

I am so glad you have that nice little Mr. Satterthwaite there. He is awfully clever and knows all the big-wig spook people. You must have them all down and investigate things thoroughly. I am sure you will have a perfectly marvellous time, and I only wish I could be there, but I have really been quite ill the last few days. The hotels are so careless about the food they give one. The doctor says it is some kind of food poisoning. I was really very ill.

Sweet of you to send me the chocolates, darling, but surely just a wee bit silly, wasn’t it? I mean, there’s such wonderful confectionery out here.

Bye-bye, darling, and have a lovely time laying the family ghosts. Bimbo says my tennis is coming on marvellously. Oceans of love.

Yours,

Barbara.

“Mother always wants me to call her Barbara,” said Margery. “Simply silly, I think.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled a little. He realized that the stolid conservatism of her daughter must on occasions be very trying to Lady Stranleigh. The contents of her letter struck him in a way in which obviously they did not strike Margery.

“Did you send your mother a box of chocolates?” he asked.

Margery shook her head. “No, I didn’t, it must have been someone else.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked grave. Two things struck him as of significance. Lady Stranleigh had received a gift of a box of chocolates and she was suffering from a severe attack of poisoning. Apparently she had not connected these two things. Was there a connection? He himself was inclined to think there was.

A tall dark girl lounged out of the morning room and joined them.

She was introduced to Mr. Satterthwaite as Marcia Keane. She smiled on the little man in an easy good-humoured fashion.

“Have you come down to hunt Margery’s pet ghost?” she asked in a drawling voice. “We all rot her about that ghost. Hello, here’s Roley.”

A car had just drawn up at the front door. Out of it tumbled a tall young man with fair hair and an eager boyish manner.

“Hello, Margery,” he cried. “Hello, Marcia! I have brought down reinforcements.” He turned to the two women who were just entering the hall. Mr. Satterthwaite recognized in the first one of the two the Mrs. Casson of whom Margery had spoken just now.

“You must forgive me, Margery, dear,” she drawled, smiling broadly. “Mr. Vavasour told us that it would be quite all right. It was really his idea that I should bring down Mrs. Lloyd with me.”

She indicated her companion with a slight gesture of the hand.

“This is Mrs. Lloyd,” she said in a tone of triumph. “Simply the most wonderful medium that ever existed.”

Mrs. Lloyd uttered no modest protest, she bowed and remained with her hands crossed in front of her. She was a highly coloured young woman of commonplace appearance. Her clothes were unfashionable but rather ornate. She wore a chain of moonstones and several rings.

Margery Gale, as Mr. Satterthwaite could see, was not too pleased at this intrusion. She threw an angry look at Roley Vavasour, who seemed quite unconscious of the offence he had caused.

“Lunch is ready, I think,” said Margery.

“Good,” said Mrs. Casson. “We will hold a séance immediately afterwards. Have you got some fruit for Mrs. Lloyd? She never eats a solid meal before a séance.”

They all went into the dining room. The medium ate two bananas and an apple, and replied cautiously and briefly to the various polite remarks which Margery addressed to her from time to time. Just before they rose from the table, she flung back her head suddenly and sniffed the air.

“There is something very wrong in this house. I feel it.”

“Isn’t she wonderful?” said Mrs. Casson in a low delighted voice.

“Oh! undoubtedly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite dryly.

The séance was held in the library. The hostess was, as Mr. Satterthwaite could see, very unwilling, only the obvious delight of her guests in the proceedings reconciled her to the ordeal.

The arrangements were made with a good deal of care by Mrs. Casson, who was evidently well up in those matters, the chairs were set round in a circle, the curtains were drawn, and presently the medium announced herself ready to begin.

“Six people,” she said, looking round the room. “That is bad. We must have an uneven number, Seven is ideal. I get my best results out of a circle of seven.”

“One of the servants,” suggested Roley. He rose. “I will rout out the butler.”

“Let’s have Clayton,” said Margery.

Mr. Satterthwaite saw a look of annoyance pass over Roley Vavasour’s good-looking face.

“But why Clayton?” he demanded.

“You don’t like Clayton,” said Margery slowly.

Roley shrugged his shoulders. “Clayton doesn’t like me,” he said whimsically. “In fact she hates me like poison.” He waited a minute or two, but Margery did not give way. “All right,” he said, “have her down.”

The circle was formed.

There was a period of silence broken by the usual coughs and fidgetings. Presently a succession of raps were heard and then the voice of the medium’s control, a Red Indian called Cherokee.

“Indian Brave says you Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Someone here very anxious speak. Someone here very anxious give message to young lady. I go now. The spirit say what she come to say.”

A pause and then a new voice, that of a woman, said softly:

“Is Margery here?”

Roley Vavasour took it upon himself to answer.

“Yes,” he said, “she is. Who is that speaking?”

“I am Beatrice.”

“Beatrice? Who is Beatrice?”

To everyone’s annoyance the voice of the Red Indian Cherokee was heard once more.

“I have message for all of you people. Life here very bright and beautiful. We all work very hard. Help those who have not yet passed over.”

Again a silence and then the woman’s voice was heard once more.

“This is Beatrice speaking.”

“Beatrice who?”

“Beatrice Barron.”

Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward. He was very excited.

“Beatrice Barron who was drowned in the ‘Uralia’?”

“Yes, that is right. I remember the ‘Uralia.’ I have a message—for this house—Give back what is not yours.”

“I don’t understand,” said Margery helplessly. “I—oh, are you really Aunt Beatrice?”

“Yes, I am your aunt.”

“Of course she is,” said Mrs. Casson reproachfully. “How can you be so suspicious? The spirits don’t like it.”

And suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite thought of a very simple test. His voice quivered as he spoke.

“Do you remember Mr. Bottacetti?” he asked.

Immediately there came a ripple of laughter.

“Poor old Boatsupsetty. Of course.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was dumbfounded. The test had succeeded. It was an incident of over forty years ago which had happened when he and the Barron girls had found themselves at the same seaside resort. A young Italian acquaintance of theirs had gone out in a boat and capsized, and Beatrice Barron had jestingly named him Boatsupsetty. It seemed impossible that anyone in the room could know of this incident except himself.

The medium stirred and groaned.

“She is coming out,” said Mrs. Casson. “That is all we will get out of her today, I am afraid.”

The daylight shone once more on the room full of people, two of whom at least were badly scared.

Mr. Satterthwaite saw by Margery’s white face that she was deeply perturbed. When they had got rid of Mrs. Casson and the medium, he sought a private interview with his hostess.

“I want to ask you one or two questions, Miss Margery. If you and your mother were to die who succeeds to the title and estates?”

“Roley Vavasour, I suppose. His mother was Mother’s first cousin.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“He seems to have been here a lot this winter,” he said gently. “You will forgive me asking—but is he—fond of you?”

“He asked me to marry him three weeks ago,” said Margery quietly. “I said No.”

“Please forgive me, but are you engaged to anyone else?”

He saw the colour sweep over her face.

“I am,” she said emphatically. “I am going to marry Noel Barton. Mother laughs and says it is absurd. She seems to think it is ridiculous to be engaged to a curate. Why, I should like to know! There are curates and curates! You should see Noel on a horse.”

“Oh, quite so,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Oh, undoubtedly.”

A footman entered with a telegram on a salver. Margery tore it open. “Mother is arriving home tomorrow,” she said. “Bother. I wish to goodness she would stay away.”

Mr. Satterthwaite made no comment on this filial sentiment. Perhaps he thought it justified. “In that case,” he murmured, “I think I am returning to London.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was not quite pleased with himself. He felt that he had left this particular problem in an unfinished state. True that, on Lady Stranleigh’s return, his responsibility was ended, yet he felt assured that he had not heard the last of the Abbot’s Mede mystery.

But the next development when it came was so serious in its character that it found him totally unprepared. He learnt of it in the pages of his morning paper. “Baroness Dies in her Bath,” as the Daily Megaphone had it. The other papers were more restrained and delicate in their language, but the fact was the same. Lady Stranleigh had been found dead in her bath and her death was due to drowning. She had, it was assumed, lost consciousness, and whilst in that state her head had slipped below the water.

But Mr. Satterthwaite was not satisfied with that explanation. Calling for his valet he made his toilet with less than his usual care, and ten minutes later his big Rolls-Royce was carrying him out of London as fast as it could travel.

But strangely enough it was not for Abbot’s Mede he was bound, but for a small inn some fifteen miles distant which bore the rather unusual name of the “Bells and Motley.” It was with great relief that he heard that Mr. Harley

Quin was still staying there. In another minute he was face to face with his friend.

Mr. Satterthwaite clasped him by the hand and began to speak at once in an agitated manner.

“I am terribly upset. You must help me. Already I have a dreadful feeling that it may be too late—that that nice girl may be the next to go, for she is a nice girl, nice through and through.”

“If you will tell me,” said Mr. Quin, smiling, “what it is all about?”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him reproachfully.

“You know. I am perfectly certain that you know. But I will tell you.”

He poured out the story of his stay at Abbot’s Mede and, as always with Mr. Quin, he found himself taking pleasure in his narrative. He was eloquent and subtle and meticulous as to detail.

“So you see,” he ended, “there must be an explanation.”

He looked hopefully at Mr. Quin as a dog looks at his master.

“But it is you who must solve the problem, not I,” said Mr. Quin. “I do not know these people. You do.”

“I knew the Barron girls forty years ago,” said Mr. Satterthwaite with pride.

Mr. Quin nodded and looked sympathetic, so much so that the other went on dreamily.

“That time at Brighton now, Bottacetti-Boatsupsetty, quite a silly joke but how we laughed. Dear, dear, I was young then. Did a lot of foolish things. I remember the maid they had with them. Alice, her name was, a little bit of a thing—very ingenuous. I kissed her in the passage of the hotel, I remember, and one of the girls nearly caught me doing it. Dear, dear, how long ago that all was.”

He shook his head again and sighed. Then he looked at Mr. Quin.

“So you can’t help me?” he said wistfully. “On other occasions—”

“On other occasions you have proved successful owing entirely to your own efforts,” said Mr. Quin gravely. “I think it will be the same this time. If I were you, I should go to Abbot’s Mede now.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “as a matter of fact that is what I thought of doing. I can’t persuade you to come with me?”

Mr. Quin shook his head.

“No,” he said, “my work here is done. I am leaving almost immediately.”

At Abbot’s Mede, Mr. Satterthwaite was taken at once to Margery Gale. She was sitting dry-eyed at a desk in the morning room on which were strewn various papers. Something in her greeting touched him. She seemed so very pleased to see him.

“Roley and Maria have just left. Mr. Satterthwaite, it is not as the doctors think. I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that Mother was pushed under the water and held there. She was murdered, and whoever murdered her wants to murder me too. I am sure of that. That is why—” she indicated the document in front of her.

“I have been making my will,” she explained. “A lot of the money and some of the property does not go with the title, and there is my father’s money as well. I am leaving everything I can to Noel. I know he will make a good use of it and I do not trust Roley, he has always been out for what he can get. Will you sign it as a witness?”

“My dear young lady,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “you should sign a will in the presence of two witnesses and they should then sign themselves at the same time.”

Margery brushed aside this legal pronouncement.

“I don’t see that it matters in the least,” she declared. “Clayton saw me sign and then she signed her name. I was going to ring for the butler, but you will do instead.”

Mr. Satterthwaite uttered no fresh protest, he unscrewed his fountain pen and then, as he was about to append his signature, he paused suddenly. The name, written just above his own, recalled a flow of memories. Alice Clayton.

Something seemed to be struggling very hard to get through to him. Alice Clayton, there was some significance about that. Something to do with Mr. Quin was mixed up with it. Something he had said to Mr. Quin only a very short time ago.

Ah, he had it now. Alice Clayton, that was her name. The little bit of a thing. People changed—yes, but not like that. And the Alice Clayton he knew had had brown eyes. The room seemed whirling round him. He felt for a chair and presently, as though from a great distance, he heard Margery’s voice speaking to him anxiously. “Are you ill? Oh, what is it? I am sure you are ill.”

He was himself again. He took her hand.

“My dear, I see it all now. You must prepare yourself for a great shock. The woman upstairs whom you call Clayton is not Clayton at all. The real Alice Clayton was drowned on the ‘Uralia.’ ”

Margery was staring at him. “Who—who is she then?”

“I am not mistaken, I cannot be mistaken. The woman you call Clayton is your mother’s sister, Beatrice Barron. You remember telling me that she was struck on the head by a spar? I should imagine that that blow destroyed her memory, and that being the case, your mother saw the chance—”

“Of pinching the title, you mean?” asked Margery bitterly. “Yes, she would do that. It seems dreadful to say that now she is dead, but she was like that.”

“Beatrice was the elder sister,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “By your uncle’s death she would inherit everything and your mother would get nothing. Your mother claimed the wounded girl as her maid, not as her sister. The girl recovered from the blow and believed, of course, what was told her, that she was Alice Clayton, your mother’s maid. I should imagine that just lately her memory had begun to return, but that the blow on the head, given all these years ago, has at last caused mischief on the brain.”

Margery was looking at him with eyes of horror.

“She killed Mother and she wanted to kill me,” she breathed.

“It seems so,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “In her brain there was just one muddled idea—that her inheritance had been stolen and was being kept from her by you and your mother.”

“But—but Clayton is so old.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was silent for a minute as a vision rose up before him—the faded old woman with grey hair, and the radiant golden-haired creature sitting in the sunshine at Cannes. Sisters! Could it really be so? He remembered the Barron girls and their likeness to each other. Just because two lives had developed on different tracks—

He shook his head sharply, obsessed by the wonder and pity of life. . . .

He turned to Margery and said gently: “We had better go upstairs and see her.”

They found Clayton sitting in the little workroom where she sewed. She did not turn her head as they came in for a reason that Mr. Satterthwaite soon found out.

“Heart failure,” he murmured, as he touched the cold rigid shoulder.

“Perhaps it is best that way.”

Eight

THE FACE OF HELEN

“The Face of Helen” was first published as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 5” in *The Storyteller*, April 1927.

Mr. Satterthwaite was at the Opera and sat alone in his big box on the first tier. Outside the door was a printed card bearing his name. An appreciator and a connoisseur of all the arts, Mr. Satterthwaite was especially fond of good music, and was a regular subscriber to Covent Garden every year, reserving a box for Tuesdays and Fridays throughout the season.

But it was not often that he sat in it alone. He was a gregarious little gentleman, and he liked filling his box with the élite of the great world to which he belonged, and also with the aristocracy of the artistic world in which he was equally at home. He was alone tonight because a Countess had disappointed him. The Countess, besides being a beautiful and celebrated woman, was also a good mother. Her children had been attacked by that common and distressing disease, the mumps, and the Countess remained at home in tearful confabulation with exquisitely starched nurses. Her husband, who had supplied her with the aforementioned children and a title, but who was otherwise a complete nonentity, had seized at the chance to escape. Nothing bored him more than music.

So Mr. Satterthwaite sat alone. *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* were being given that night, and since the first had never appealed to him, he arrived just after the curtain went down, on Santuzza’s death agony, in time to glance round the house with practised eyes, before everyone streamed out, bent on paying visits or fighting for coffee or lemonade. Mr. Satterthwaite adjusted his opera glasses, looked round the house, marked down his prey and sallied forth with a well mapped out plan of campaign ahead of him. A plan, however, which he did not put into execution, for just outside his box he cannoned into a tall dark man, and recognized him with a pleasurable thrill of excitement.

“Mr. Quin,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite.

He seized his friend warmly by the hand, clutching him as though he feared any minute to see him vanish into thin air.

“You must share my box,” said Mr. Satterthwaite determinedly. “You are not with a party?”

“No, I am sitting by myself in the stalls,” responded Mr. Quin with a smile.

“Then, that is settled,” said Mr. Satterthwaite with a sigh of relief.

His manner was almost comic, had there been anyone to observe it.

“You are very kind,” said Mr. Quin.

“Not at all. It is a pleasure. I didn’t know you were fond of music?”

“There are reasons why I am attracted to—Pagliacci.”

“Ah! of course,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, nodding sapiently, though, if put to it, he would have found it hard to explain just why he had used that expression. “Of course, you would be.”

They went back to the box at the first summons of the bell, and leaning over the front of it, they watched the people returning to the stalls.

“That’s a beautiful head,” observed Mr. Satterthwaite suddenly.

He indicated with his glasses a spot immediately beneath them in the stalls circle. A girl sat there whose face they could not see—only the pure gold of her hair that fitted with the closeness of a cap till it merged into the white neck.

“A Greek head,” said Mr. Satterthwaite reverently. “Pure Greek.” He sighed happily. “It’s a remarkable thing when you come to think of it—how very few people have hair that fits them. It’s more noticeable now that everyone is shingled.”

“You are so observant,” said Mr. Quin.

“I see things,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite. “I do see things. For instance, I picked out that head at once. We must have a look at her face sooner or later. But it won’t match, I’m sure. That would be a chance in a thousand.”

Almost as the words left his lips, the lights flickered and went down, the sharp rap of the conductor’s baton was heard, and the opera began. A new tenor, said to be a second Caruso, was singing that night. He had been referred to by the newspapers as a Jugo Slav, a Czech, an Albanian, a Magyar, and a Bulgarian, with a beautiful impartiality. He had given an extraordinary concert at the Albert Hall, a programme of the folk songs of his native hills, with a specially tuned orchestra. They were in strange half-tones and the would-be musical had pronounced them “too marvellous.” Real musicians had reserved judgment, realizing that the ear had to be specially trained and attuned before any criticism was possible. It was quite a relief to some people to find this evening that Yoaschbim could sing in ordinary Italian with all the traditional sobs and quivers.

The curtain went down on the first act and applause burst out vociferously. Mr. Satterthwaite turned to Mr. Quin. He realized that the latter was waiting for him to pronounce judgment, and plumed himself a little. After all, he knew. As a critic he was well-nigh infallible.

Very slowly he nodded his head.

“It is the real thing,” he said.

“You think so?”

“As fine a voice as Caruso’s. People will not recognize that it is so at first, for his technique is not yet perfect. There are ragged edges, a lack of certainty in the attack. But the voice is there—magnificent.”

“I went to his concert at the Albert Hall,” said Mr. Quin.

“Did you? I could not go.”

“He made a wonderful hit with a Shepherd’s Song.”

“I read about it,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “The refrain ends each time with a high note—a kind of cry. A note midway between A and B flat. Very curious.”

Yoaschbim had taken three calls, bowing and smiling. The lights went up and the people began to file out. Mr. Satterthwaite leant over to watch the girl with the golden head. She rose, adjusted her scarf, and turned.

Mr. Satterthwaite caught his breath. There were, he knew, such faces in the world—faces that made history.

The girl moved to the gangway, her companion, a young man, beside her. And Mr. Satterthwaite noticed how every man in the vicinity looked—and continued to look covertly.

“Beauty!” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “There is such a thing. Not charm, nor attraction, nor magnetism, nor any of the things we talk about so glibly—just sheer beauty. The shape of a face, the line of an eyebrow, the curve of a jaw. He quoted softly under his breath: “The face that launched a thousand ships.” And for the first time he realized the meaning of those words.

He glanced across at Mr. Quin, who was watching him in what seemed such perfect comprehension that Mr. Satterthwaite felt there was no need for words.

“I’ve always wondered,” he said simply, “what such women were really like.”

“You mean?”

“The Helens, the Cleopatras, the Mary Stuarts.”

Mr. Quin nodded thoughtfully.

“If we go out,” he suggested, “we may—see.”

They went out together, and their quest was successful. The pair they were in search of were seated on a lounge halfway up the staircase. For the first time, Mr. Satterthwaite noted the girl's companion, a dark young man, not handsome, but with a suggestion of restless fire about him. A face full of strange angles; jutting cheek-bones, a forceful, slightly crooked jaw, deep-set eyes that were curiously light under the dark, overhanging brows.

"An interesting face," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "A real face. It means something."

The young man was leaning forward talking earnestly. The girl was listening. Neither of them belonged to Mr. Satterthwaite's world. He took them to be of the "Arty" class. The girl wore a rather shapeless garment of cheap green silk. Her shoes were of soiled, white satin. The young man wore his evening clothes with an air of being uncomfortable in them.

The two men passed and repassed several times. The fourth time they did so, the couple had been joined by a third—a fair young man with a suggestion of the clerk about him. With his coming a certain tension had set in. The newcomer was fidgeting with his tie and seemed ill at ease, the girl's beautiful face was turned gravely up towards him, and her companion was scowling furiously.

"The usual story," said Mr. Quin very softly, as they passed.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite with a sigh. "It's inevitable, I suppose. The snarling of two dogs over a bone. It always has been, it always will be. And yet, one could wish for something different. Beauty—" he stopped. Beauty, to Mr. Satterthwaite, meant something very wonderful. He found it difficult to speak of it. He looked at Mr. Quin, who nodded his head gravely in understanding.

They went back to their seats for the second act.

At the close of the performance, Mr. Satterthwaite turned eagerly to his friend.

“It is a wet night. My car is here. You must allow me to drive you—er—somewhere.”

The last word was Mr. Satterthwaite’s delicacy coming into play. “To drive you home” would, he felt, have savoured of curiosity. Mr. Quin had always been singularly reticent. It was extraordinary how little Mr. Satterthwaite knew about him.

“But perhaps,” continued the little man, “you have your own car waiting?”

“No,” said Mr. Quin, “I have no car waiting.”

“Then—”

But Mr. Quin shook his head.

“You are most kind,” he said, “but I prefer to go my own way. Besides,” he said with a rather curious smile, “if anything should—happen, it will be for you to act. Goodnight, and thank you. Once again we have seen the drama together.”

He had gone so quickly that Mr. Satterthwaite had no time to protest, but he was left with a faint uneasiness stirring in his mind. To what drama did Mr. Quin refer? Pagliacci or another?

Masters, Mr. Satterthwaite’s chauffeur, was in the habit of waiting in a side street. His master disliked the long delay while the cars drew up in turn before the Opera house. Now, as on previous occasions, he walked rapidly round the corner and along the street towards where he knew he should find Masters awaiting him. Just in front of him were a girl and a man, and even as he recognized them, another man joined them.

It all broke out in a minute. A man’s voice, angrily uplifted. Another man’s voice in injured protest. And then the scuffle. Blows, angry breathing, more blows, the form of a policeman appearing majestically from nowhere—and in another minute Mr. Satterthwaite was beside the girl where she shrank back against the wall.

“Allow me,” he said. “You must not stay here.”

He took her by the arm and marshalled her swiftly down the street. Once she looked back.

“Oughtn’t I—?” she began uncertainly.

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

“It would be very unpleasant for you to be mixed up in it. You would probably be asked to go along to the police station with them. I am sure neither of your—friends would wish that.”

He stopped.

“This is my car. If you will allow me to do so, I shall have much pleasure in driving you home.”

The girl looked at him searchingly. The staid respectability of Mr. Satterthwaite impressed her favourably. She bent her head.

“Thank you,” she said, and got into the car, the door of which Masters was holding open.

In reply to a question from Mr. Satterthwaite, she gave an address in Chelsea, and he got in beside her.

The girl was upset and not in the mood for talking, and Mr. Satterthwaite was too tactful to intrude upon her thoughts. Presently, however, she turned to him and spoke of her own accord.

“I wish,” she said pettishly, “people wouldn’t be so silly.”

“It is a nuisance,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite.

His matter-of-fact manner put her at her ease, and she went on as though feeling the need of confiding in someone.

“It wasn’t as though—I mean, well, it was like this. Mr. Eastney and I have been friends for a long time—ever since I came to London. He’s taken no end of trouble about my voice, and got me some very good introductions, and he’s been more kind to me than I can say. He’s absolutely music mad. It was very good of him to take me tonight. I’m sure he can’t really afford it. And then Mr. Burns came up and spoke to us—quite nicely, I’m sure, and Phil (Mr. Eastney) got sulky about it. I don’t know why he should. It’s a free country, I’m sure. And Mr. Burns is always pleasant, and good-tempered. Then just as we were walking to the Tube, he came up and joined us, and he hadn’t so much as said two words before Philip flew out at him like a madman. And—Oh! I don’t like it.”

“Don’t you?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite very softly.

She blushed, but very little. There was none of the conscious siren about her. A certain measure of pleasurable excitement in being fought for there must be—that was only nature, but Mr. Satterthwaite decided that a worried perplexity lay uppermost, and he had the clue to it in another moment when she observed inconsequently:

“I do hope he hasn’t hurt him.”

“Now which is ‘him?’ ” thought Mr. Satterthwaite, smiling to himself in the darkness.

He backed his own judgment and said:

“You hope Mr.—er—Eastney hasn’t hurt Mr. Burns?”

She nodded.

“Yes, that’s what I said. It seems so dreadful. I wish I knew.”

The car was drawing up.

“Are you on the telephone?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“If you like, I will find out exactly what has happened, and then telephone to you.”

The girl’s face brightened.

“Oh, that would be very kind of you. Are you sure it’s not too much bother?”

“Not in the least.”

She thanked him again and gave him her telephone number, adding with a touch of shyness: “My name is Gillian West.”

As he was driven through the night, bound on his errand, a curious smile came to Mr. Satterthwaite’s lips.

He thought: “So that is all it is . . . ‘The shape of a face, the curve of a jaw!’”

But he fulfilled his promise.

The following Sunday afternoon Mr. Satterthwaite went to Kew Gardens to admire the rhododendrons. Very long ago (incredibly long ago, it seemed to Mr. Satterthwaite) he had driven down to Kew Gardens with a certain young lady to see the bluebells. Mr. Satterthwaite had arranged very carefully beforehand in his own mind exactly what he was going to say, and the precise words he would use in asking the young lady for her hand in marriage. He was just conning them over in his mind, and responding to her raptures about the bluebells a little absentmindedly, when the shock came. The young lady stopped exclaiming at the bluebells and suddenly confided in Mr. Satterthwaite (as a true friend) her love for another. Mr. Satterthwaite put away the little set speech he had prepared, and hastily rummaged for sympathy and friendship in the bottom drawer of his mind.

Such was Mr. Satterthwaite’s romance—a rather tepid early Victorian one, but it had left him with a romantic attachment to Kew Gardens, and he would often go there to see the bluebells, or, if he had been abroad later than usual, the rhododendrons, and would sigh to himself, and feel rather

sentimental, and really enjoy himself very much indeed in an old-fashioned, romantic way.

This particular afternoon he was strolling back past the tea houses when he recognized a couple sitting at one of the small tables on the grass. They were Gillian West and the fair young man, and at that same moment they recognized him. He saw the girl flush and speak eagerly to her companion. In another minute he was shaking hands with them both in his correct, rather prim fashion, and had accepted the shy invitation proffered him to have tea with them.

“I can’t tell you, sir,” said Mr. Burns, “how grateful I am to you for looking after Gillian the other night. She told me all about it.”

“Yes, indeed,” said the girl. “It was ever so kind of you.”

Mr. Satterthwaite felt pleased and interested in the pair. Their naïveté and sincerity touched him. Also, it was to him a peep into a world with which he was not well acquainted. These people were of a class unknown to him.

In his little dried-up way, Mr. Satterthwaite could be very sympathetic. Very soon he was hearing all about his new friends. He noted that Mr. Burns had become Charlie, and he was not unprepared for the statement that the two were engaged.

“As a matter of fact,” said Mr. Burns with refreshing candour, “it just happened this afternoon, didn’t it, Gil?”

Burns was a clerk in a shipping firm. He was making a fair salary, had a little money of his own, and the two proposed to be married quite soon.

Mr. Satterthwaite listened, and nodded, and congratulated.

“An ordinary young man,” he thought to himself, “a very ordinary young man. Nice, straightforward young chap, plenty to say for himself, good opinion of himself without being conceited, nice-looking without being unduly handsome. Nothing remarkable about him and will never set the Thames on fire. And the girl loves him. . . .”

Aloud he said: "And Mr. Eastney—"

He purposely broke off, but he had said enough to produce an effect for which he was not unprepared. Charlie Burns's face darkened, and Gillian looked troubled. More than troubled, he thought. She looked afraid.

"I don't like it," she said in a low voice. Her words were addressed to Mr. Satterthwaite, as though she knew by instinct that he would understand a feeling incomprehensible to her lover. "You see—he's done a lot for me. He's encouraged me to take up singing, and—and helped me with it. But I've known all the time that my voice wasn't really good—not first class. Of course, I've had engagements—"

She stopped.

"You've had a bit of trouble too," said Burns. "A girl wants someone to look after her. Gillian's had a lot of unpleasantness, Mr. Satterthwaite. Altogether she's had a lot of unpleasantness. She's a good-looker, as you can see, and—well, that often leads to trouble for a girl."

Between them, Mr. Satterthwaite became enlightened as to various happenings which were vaguely classed by Burns under the heading of "unpleasantness." A young man who had shot himself, the extraordinary conduct of a Bank Manager (who was a married man!), a violent stranger (who must have been balmy!), the wild behaviour of an elderly artist. A trail of violence and tragedy that Gillian West had left in her wake, recited in the commonplace tones of Charles Burns. "And it's my opinion," he ended, "that this fellow Eastney is a bit cracked. Gillian would have had trouble with him if I hadn't turned up to look after her."

His laugh sounded a little fatuous to Mr. Satterthwaite, and no responsive smile came to the girl's face. She was looking earnestly at Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Phil's all right," she said slowly. "He cares for me, I know, and I care for him like a friend—but—but not anything more. I don't know how he'll take the news about Charlie, I'm sure. He—I'm so afraid he'll be—"

She stopped, inarticulate in face of the dangers she vaguely sensed.

“If I can help you in any way,” said Mr. Satterthwaite warmly, “pray command me.”

He fancied Charlie Burns looked vaguely resentful, but Gillian said at once: “Thank you.”

Mr. Satterthwaite left his new friends after having promised to take tea with Gillian on the following Thursday.

When Thursday came, Mr. Satterthwaite felt a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation. He thought: “I’m an old man—but not too old to be thrilled by a face. A face . . .” Then he shook his head with a sense of foreboding.

Gillian was alone. Charlie Burns was to come in later. She looked much happier, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, as though a load had been lifted from her mind. Indeed, she frankly admitted as much.

“I dreaded telling Phil about Charles. It was silly of me. I ought to have known Phil better. He was upset, of course, but no one could have been sweeter. Really sweet he was. Look what he sent me this morning—a wedding present. Isn’t it magnificent?”

It was indeed rather magnificent for a young man in Philip Eastney’s circumstances. A four-valve wireless set, of the latest type.

“We both love music so much, you see,” explained the girl. “Phil said that when I was listening to a concert on this, I should always think of him a little. And I’m sure I shall. Because we have been such friends.”

“You must be proud of your friend,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gently. “He seems to have taken the blow like a true sportsman.”

Gillian nodded. He saw the quick tears come into her eyes.

“He asked me to do one thing for him. Tonight is the anniversary of the day we first met. He asked me if I would stay at home quietly this evening and listen to the wireless programme—not to go out with Charlie anywhere. I

said, of course I would, and that I was very touched, and that I would think of him with a lot of gratitude and affection.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded, but he was puzzled. He was seldom at fault in his delineation of character, and he would have judged Philip Eastney quite incapable of such a sentimental request. The young man must be of a more banal order than he supposed. Gillian evidently thought the idea quite in keeping with her rejected lover’s character. Mr. Satterthwaite was a little—just a little—disappointed. He was sentimental himself, and knew it, but he expected better things of the rest of the world. Besides sentiment belonged to his age. It had no part to play in the modern world.

He asked Gillian to sing and she complied. He told her her voice was charming, but he knew quite well in his own mind that it was distinctly second class. Any success that could have come to her in the profession she had adopted would have been won by her face, not her voice.

He was not particularly anxious to see young Burns again, so presently he rose to go. It was at that moment that his attention was attracted by an ornament on the mantelpiece which stood out among the other rather gimcrack objects like a jewel on a dust heap.

It was a curving beaker of thin green glass, long-stemmed and graceful, and poised on the edge of it was what looked like a gigantic soap bubble, a ball of iridescent glass. Gillian noticed his absorption.

“That’s an extra wedding present from Phil. It’s rather pretty, I think. He works in a sort of glass factory.”

“It is a beautiful thing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite reverently. “The glass blowers of Murano might have been proud of that.”

He went away with his interest in Philip Eastney strangely stimulated. An extraordinarily interesting young man. And yet the girl with the wonderful face preferred Charlie Burns. What a strange and inscrutable universe!

It had just occurred to Mr. Satterthwaite that, owing to the remarkable beauty of Gillian West, his evening with Mr. Quin had somehow missed

fire. As a rule, every meeting with that mysterious individual had resulted in some strange and unforeseen happening. It was with the hope of perhaps running against the man of mystery that Mr. Satterthwaite bent his steps towards the Arlecchino Restaurant where once, in the days gone by, he had met Mr. Quin, and which Mr. Quin had said he often frequented.

Mr. Satterthwaite went from room to room at the Arlecchino, looking hopefully about him, but there was no sign of Mr. Quin's dark, smiling face. There was, however, somebody else. Sitting at a small table alone was Philip Eastney.

The place was crowded and Mr. Satterthwaite took his seat opposite the young man. He felt a sudden strange sense of exultation, as though he were caught up and made part of a shimmering pattern of events. He was in this thing—whatever it was. He knew now what Mr. Quin had meant that evening at the Opera. There was a drama going on, and in it was a part, an important part, for Mr. Satterthwaite. He must not fail to take his cue and speak his lines.

He sat down opposite Philip Eastney with the sense of accomplishing the inevitable. It was easy enough to get into conversation. Eastney seemed anxious to talk. Mr. Satterthwaite was, as always, an encouraging and sympathetic listener. They talked of the war, of explosives, of poison gases. Eastney had a lot to say about these last, for during the greater part of the war he had been engaged in their manufacture. Mr. Satterthwaite found him really interesting.

There was one gas, Eastney said, that had never been tried. The Armistice had come too soon. Great things had been hoped for it. One whiff of it was deadly. He warmed to animation as he spoke.

Having broken the ice, Mr. Satterthwaite gently turned the conversation to music. Eastney's thin face lit up. He spoke with the passion and abandon of the real music lover. They discussed Yoaschbim, and the young man was enthusiastic. Both he and Mr. Satterthwaite agreed that nothing on earth could surpass a really fine tenor voice. Eastney as a boy had heard Caruso and he had never forgotten it.

“Do you know that he could sing to a wine glass and shatter it?” he demanded.

“I always thought that was a fable,” said Mr. Satterthwaite smiling.

“No, it’s gospel truth, I believe. The thing’s quite possible. It’s a question of resonance.”

He went off into technical details. His face was flushed and his eyes shone. The subject seemed to fascinate him, and Mr. Satterthwaite noted that he seemed to have a thorough grasp of what he was talking about. The elder man realized that he was talking to an exceptional brain, a brain that might almost be described as that of a genius. Brilliant, erratic, undecided as yet as to the true channel to give it outlet, but undoubtedly genius.

And he thought of Charlie Burns and wondered at Gillian West.

It was with quite a start that he realized how late it was getting, and he called for his bill. Eastney looked slightly apologetic.

“I’m ashamed of myself—running on so,” he said. “But it was a lucky chance sent you along here tonight. I—I needed someone to talk to this evening.”

He ended his speech with a curious little laugh. His eyes were still blazing with some subdued excitement. Yet there was something tragic about him.

“It has been quite a pleasure,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Our conversation has been most interesting and instructive to me.”

He then made his funny, courteous little bow and passed out of the restaurant. The night was a warm one and as he walked slowly down the street a very odd fancy came to him. He had the feeling that he was not alone—that someone was walking by his side. In vain he told himself that the idea was a delusion—it persisted. Someone was walking beside him down that dark, quiet street, someone whom he could not see. He wondered what it was that brought the figure of Mr. Quin so clearly before his mind. He felt exactly as though Mr. Quin were there walking beside him, and yet

he had only to use his eyes to assure himself that it was not so, that he was alone.

But the thought of Mr. Quin persisted, and with it came something else: a need, an urgency of some kind, an oppressive foreboding of calamity. There was something he must do—and do quickly. There was something very wrong, and it lay in his hands to put it right.

So strong was the feeling that Mr. Satterthwaite forebore to fight against it. Instead, he shut his eyes and tried to bring that mental image of Mr. Quin nearer. If he could only have asked Mr. Quin—but even as the thought flashed through his mind he knew it was wrong. It was never any use asking Mr. Quin anything. “The threads are all in your hands”—that was the kind of thing Mr. Quin would say.

The threads. Threads of what? He analysed his own feeling and impressions carefully. That presentiment of danger, now. Whom did it threaten?

At once a picture rose up before his eyes, the picture of Gillian West sitting alone listening to the wireless.

Mr. Satterthwaite flung a penny to a passing newspaper boy, and snatched at a paper. He turned at once to the London Radio programme. Yoaschbim was broadcasting tonight, he noted with interest. He was singing “Salve Dimora,” from Faust and, afterwards, a selection of his folk songs. “The Shepherd’s Song,” “The Fish,” “The Little Deer,” etc.

Mr. Satterthwaite crumpled the paper together. The knowledge of what Gillian was listening to seemed to make the picture of her clearer. Sitting there alone . . .

An odd request, that, of Philip Eastney’s. Not like the man, not like him at all. There was no sentimentality in Eastney. He was a man of violent feeling, a dangerous man, perhaps—

Again his thought brought up with a jerk. A dangerous man—that meant something. “The threads are all in your hands.” That meeting with Philip Eastney tonight—rather odd. A lucky chance, Eastney had said. Was it

chance? Or was it part of that interwoven design of which Mr. Satterthwaite had once or twice been conscious this evening?

He cast his mind back. There must be something in Eastney's conversation, some clue there. There must, or else why this strange feeling of urgency? What had he talked about? Singing, war work, Caruso.

Caruso—Mr. Satterthwaite's thoughts went off at a tangent. Yoaschbim's voice was very nearly equal to that of Caruso. Gillian would be sitting listening to it now as it rang out true and powerful, echoing round the room, setting glasses ringing—

He caught his breath. Glasses ringing! Caruso, singing to a wine glass and the wine glass breaking. Yoachbim singing in the London studio and in a room over a mile away the crash and tinkle of glass—not a wine glass, a thin, green, glass beaker. A crystal soap bubble falling, a soap bubble that perhaps was not empty . . .

It was at that moment that Mr. Satterthwaite, as judged by passers-by, suddenly went mad. He tore open the newspaper once more, took a brief glance at the wireless announcements and then began to run for his life down the quiet street. At the end of it he found a crawling taxi, and jumping into it, he yelled an address to the driver and the information that it was life or death to get there quickly. The driver, judging him mentally afflicted but rich, did his utmost.

Mr. Satterthwaite lay back, his head a jumble of fragmentary thoughts, forgotten bits of science learned at school, phrases used by Eastney that night. Resonance—naturall periods—if the period of the force coincides with the natural period—there was something about a suspension bridge, soldiers marching over it and the swing of their stride being the same as the period of the bridge. Eastney had studied the subject. Eastney knew. And Eastney was a genius.

At 10:45 Yoaschbim was to broadcast. It was that now. Yes, but the Faust had to come first. It was the "Shepherd's Song," with the great shout after the refrain that would—that would—do what?

His mind went whirling round again. Tones, overtones, half-tones. He didn't know much about these things—but Eastney knew. Pray heaven he would be in time!

The taxi stopped. Mr. Satterthwaite flung himself out and raced up the stone stairs to a second floor like a young athlete. The door of the flat was ajar. He pushed it open and the great tenor voice welcomed him. The words of the “Shepherd’s Song” were familiar to him in a less unconventional setting.

“Shepherd, see they horse’s flowing main—”

He was in time then. He burst open the sitting-room door. Gillian was sitting there in a tall chair by the fireplace.

“Bayra Mischa’s daughter is to wed today:

To the wedding I must haste away.”

She must have thought him mad. He clutched at her, crying out something incomprehensible, and half pulled, half dragged her out till they stood upon the stairway.

“To the wedding I must haste away—

Ya-ha!”

A wonderful high note, full-throated, powerful, hit full in the middle, a note any singer might be proud of. And with it another sound, the faint tinkle of broken glass.

A stray cat darted past them and in through the flat door. Gillian made a movement, but Mr. Satterthwaite held her back, speaking incoherently.

“No, no—it’s deadly: no smell, nothing to warn you. A mere whiff, and it’s all over. Nobody knows quite how deadly it would be. It’s unlike anything

that's ever been tried before."

He was repeating the things that Philip Eastney had told him over the table at dinner.

Gillian stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Philip Eastney drew out his watch and looked at it. It was just half-past eleven. For the past three-quarters of an hour he had been pacing up and down the Embankment. He looked out over the Thames and then turned—to look into the face of his dinner companion.

"That's odd," he said, and laughed. "We seem fated to run into each other tonight."

"If you call it Fate," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Philip Eastney looked at him more attentively and his own expression changed.

"Yes?" he said quietly.

Mr. Satterthwaite went straight to the point.

"I have just come from Miss West's flat."

"Yes?"

The same voice, with the same deadly quiet.

"We have—taken a dead cat out of it."

There was silence, then Eastney said:

"Who are you?"

Mr. Satterthwaite spoke for some time. He recited the whole history of events.

“So you see, I was in time,” he ended up. He paused and added quite gently:

“Have you anything—to say?”

He expected something, some outburst, some wild justification. But nothing came.

“No,” said Philip Eastney quietly, and turned on his heel and walked away, Mr. Satterthwaite looked after him till his figure was swallowed up in the gloom. In spite of himself, he had a strange fellow feeling for Eastney, the feeling of an artist for another artist, of a sentimentalist for a real lover, of a plain man for a genius.

At last he roused himself with a start and began to walk in the same direction as Eastney. A fog was beginning to come up. Presently he met a policeman who looked at him suspiciously.

“Did you hear a kind of splash just now?” asked the policeman.

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

The policeman was peering out over the river.

“Another of these suicides, I expect,” he grunted disconsolately. “They will do it.”

“I suppose,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that they have their reasons.”

“Money, mostly,” said the policeman. “Sometimes it’s a woman,” he said, as he prepared to move away. “It’s not always their fault, but some women cause a lot of trouble.”

“Some women,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite softly.

When the policeman had gone on, he sat down on a seat with the fog coming up all around him, and thought about Helen of Troy, and wondered if she were a nice, ordinary woman, blessed or cursed with a wonderful face.

Nine

THE DEAD HARLEQUIN

“The Dead Harlequin” was first published in Grand Magazine, March 1929.

Mr. Satterthwaite walked slowly up Bond Street enjoying the sunshine. He was, as usual, carefully and beautifully dressed, and was bound for the Harchester Galleries where there was an exhibition of the paintings of one Frank Bristow, a new and hitherto unknown artist who showed signs of suddenly becoming the rage. Mr. Satterthwaite was a patron of the arts.

As Mr. Satterthwaite entered the Harchester Galleries, he was greeted at once with a smile of pleased recognition.

“Good morning, Mr. Satterthwaite, I thought we should see you before long. You know Bristow’s work? Fine—very fine indeed. Quite unique of its kind.”

Mr. Satterthwaite purchased a catalogue and stepped through the open archway into the long room where the artist’s works were displayed. They were water colours, executed with such extraordinary technique and finish that they resembled coloured etchings. Mr. Satterthwaite walked slowly round the walls scrutinizing and, on the whole, approving. He thought that this young man deserved to arrive. Here was originality, vision, and a most severe and exacting technique. There were crudities, of course. That was only to be expected—but there was also something closely allied to genius. Mr. Satterthwaite paused before a little masterpiece representing Westminster Bridge with its crowd of buses, trams and hurrying pedestrians. A tiny thing and wonderfully perfect. It was called, he noted, The Ant Heap. He passed on and quite suddenly drew in his breath with a gasp, his imagination held and riveted.

The picture was called The Dead Harlequin. The forefront of it represented a floor of inlaid squares of black and white marble. In the middle of the

floor lay Harlequin on his back with his arms outstretched, in his motley of black and red. Behind him was a window and outside that window, gazing in at the figure on the floor, was what appeared to be the same man silhouetted against the red glow of the setting sun.

The picture excited Mr. Satterthwaite for two reasons, the first was that he recognized, or thought that he recognized, the face of the man in the picture. It bore a distinct resemblance to a certain Mr. Quin, an acquaintance whom Mr. Satterthwaite had encountered once or twice under somewhat mystifying circumstances.

“Surely I can’t be mistaken,” he murmured. “If it is so—what does it mean?”

For it had been Mr. Satterthwaite’s experience that every appearance of Mr. Quin had some distinct significance attaching to it.

There was, as already mentioned, a second reason for Mr. Satterthwaite’s interest. He recognized the scene of the picture.

“The Terrace Room at Charnley,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Curious—and very interesting.”

He looked with more attention at the picture, wondering what exactly had been in the artist’s mind. One Harlequin dead on the floor, another Harlequin looking through the window—or was it the same Harlequin? He moved slowly along the walls gazing at other pictures with unseeing eyes, with his mind always busy on the same subject. He was excited. Life, which had seemed a little drab this morning, was drab no longer. He knew quite certainly that he was on the threshold of exciting and interesting events. He crossed to the table where sat Mr. Cobb, a dignitary of the Harchester Galleries, whom he had known for many years.

“I have a fancy for buying no. 39,” he said, “if it is not already sold.”

Mr. Cobb consulted a ledger.

“The pick of the bunch,” he murmured, “quite a little gem, isn’t it? No, it is not sold.” He quoted a price. “It is a good investment, Mr. Satterthwaite. You will have to pay three times as much for it this time next year.”

“That is always said on these occasions,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, smiling.

“Well, and haven’t I been right?” demanded Mr. Cobb. “I don’t believe if you were to sell your collection, Mr. Satterthwaite, that a single picture would fetch less than you gave for it.”

“I will buy this picture,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I will give you a cheque now.”

“You won’t regret it. We believe in Bristow.”

“He is a young man?”

“Twenty-seven or -eight, I should say.”

“I should like to meet him,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Perhaps he will come and dine with me one night?”

“I can give you his address. I am sure he would leap at the chance. Your name stands for a good deal in the artistic world.”

“You flatter me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and was going on when Mr. Cobb interrupted:

“Here he is now. I will introduce you to him right away.”

He rose from behind his table. Mr. Satterthwaite accompanied him to where a big, clumsy young man was leaning against the wall surveying the world at large from behind the barricade of a ferocious scowl.

Mr. Cobb made the necessary introductions and Mr. Satterthwaite made a formal and gracious little speech.

“I have just had the pleasure of acquiring one of your pictures—The Dead Harlequin.”

“Oh! Well, you won’t lose by it,” said Mr. Bristow ungraciously. “It’s a bit of damned good work, although I say it.”

“I can see that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Your work interests me very much, Mr. Bristow. It is extraordinarily mature for so young a man. I wonder if you would give me the pleasure of dining with me one night? Are you engaged this evening?”

“As a matter of fact, I am not,” said Mr. Bristow, still with no overdone appearance of graciousness.

“Then shall we say eight o’clock?” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Here is my card with the address on it.”

“Oh, all right,” said Mr. Bristow. “Thanks,” he added as a somewhat obvious afterthought.

“A young man who has a poor opinion of himself and is afraid that the world should share it.”

Such was Mr. Satterthwaite’s summing up as he stepped out into the sunshine of Bond Street, and Mr. Satterthwaite’s judgment of his fellow men was seldom far astray.

Frank Bristow arrived about five minutes past eight to find his host and a third guest awaiting him. The other guest was introduced as a Colonel Monckton. They went in to dinner almost immediately. There was a fourth place laid at the oval mahogany table and Mr. Satterthwaite uttered a word of explanation.

“I half expected my friend, Mr. Quin, might drop in,” he said. “I wonder if you have ever met him. Mr. Harley Quin?”

“I never meet people,” growled Bristow.

Colonel Monckton stared at the artist with the detached interest he might have accorded to a new species of jellyfish. Mr. Satterthwaite exerted himself to keep the ball of conversation rolling amicably.

“I took a special interest in that picture of yours because I thought I recognized the scene of it as being the Terrace Room at Charnley. Was I right?” As the artist nodded, he went on. “That is very interesting. I have stayed at Charnley several times myself in the past. Perhaps you know some of the family?”

“No, I don’t!” said Bristow. “That sort of family wouldn’t care to know me. I went there in a charabanc.”

“Dear me,” said Colonel Monckton for the sake of saying something. “In a charabanc! Dear me.”

Frank Bristow scowled at him.

“Why not?” he demanded ferociously.

Poor Colonel Monckton was taken aback. He looked reproachfully at Mr. Satterthwaite as though to say:

“These primitive forms of life may be interesting to you as a naturalist, but why drag me in?”

“Oh, beastly things, charabancs!” he said. “They jolt you so going over the bumps.”

“If you can’t afford a Rolls-Royce you have got to go in charabancs,” said Bristow fiercely.

Colonel Monckton stared at him. Mr. Satterthwaite thought:

“Unless I can manage to put this young man at his ease we are going to have a very distressing evening.”

“Charnley always fascinated me,” he said. “I have been there only once since the tragedy. A grim house—and a ghostly one.”

“That’s true,” said Bristow.

“There are actually two authentic ghosts,” said Monckton. “They say that Charles I walks up and down the terrace with his head under his arm—I have forgotten why, I’m sure. Then there is the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer, who is always seen after one of the Charnleys dies.”

“Tosh,” said Bristow scornfully.

“They have certainly been a very ill-fated family,” said Mr. Satterthwaite hurriedly. “Four holders of the title have died a violent death and the late Lord Charnley committed suicide.”

“A ghastly business,” said Monckton gravely. “I was there when it happened.”

“Let me see, that must be fourteen years ago,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “the house has been shut up ever since.”

“I don’t wonder at that,” said Monckton. “It must have been a terrible shock for a young girl. They had been married a month, just home from their honeymoon. Big fancy dress ball to celebrate their homecoming. Just as the guests were starting to arrive Charnley locked himself into the Oak Parlour and shot himself. That sort of thing isn’t done. I beg your pardon?”

He turned his head sharply to the left and looked across at Mr. Satterthwaite with an apologetic laugh.

“I am beginning to get the jimjams, Satterthwaite. I thought for a moment there was someone sitting in that empty chair and that he said something to me.

“Yes,” he went on after a minute or two, “it was a pretty ghastly shock to Alix Charnley. She was one of the prettiest girls you could see anywhere and cram full of what people call the joy of living, and now they say she is like a ghost herself. Not that I have seen her for years. I believe she lives abroad most of the time.”

“And the boy?”

“The boy is at Eton. What he will do when he comes of age I don’t know. I don’t think, somehow, that he will reopen the old place.”

“It would make a good People’s Pleasure Park,” said Bristow.

Colonel Monckton looked at him with cold abhorrence.

“No, no, you don’t really mean that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “You wouldn’t have painted that picture if you did. Tradition and atmosphere are intangible things. They take centuries to build up and if you destroyed them you couldn’t rebuild them again in twenty-four hours.”

He rose. “Let us go into the smoking room. I have some photographs there of Charnley which I should like to show you.”

One of Mr. Satterthwaite’s hobbies was amateur photography. He was also the proud author of a book, “Homes of My Friends.” The friends in question were all rather exalted and the book itself showed Mr. Satterthwaite forth in rather a more snobbish light than was really fair to him.

“That is a photograph I took of the Terrace Room last year,” he said. He handed it to Bristow. “You see it is taken at almost the same angle as is shown in your picture. That is rather a wonderful rug—it is a pity that photographs can’t show colouring.”

“I remember it,” said Bristow, “a marvellous bit of colour. It glowed like a flame. All the same it looked a bit incongruous there. The wrong size for that big room with its black and white squares. There is no rug anywhere else in the room. It spoils the whole effect—it was like a gigantic blood stain.”

“Perhaps that gave you your idea for your picture?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Perhaps it did,” said Bristow thoughtfully. “On the face of it, one would naturally stage a tragedy in the little panelled room leading out of it.”

“The Oak Parlour,” said Monckton. “Yes, that is the haunted room right enough. There is a Priests’ hiding hole there—a movable panel by the fireplace. Tradition has it that Charles I was concealed there once. There were two deaths from duelling in that room. And it was there, as I say, that Reggie Charnley shot himself.”

He took the photograph from Bristow’s hand.

“Why, that is the Bokhara rug,” he said, “worth a couple of thousand pounds, I believe. When I was there it was in the Oak Parlour—the right place for it. It looks silly on that great expanse of marble flags.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was looking at the empty chair which he had drawn up beside his. Then he said thoughtfully: “I wonder when it was moved?”

“It must have been recently. Why, I remember having a conversation about it on the very day of the tragedy. Charnley was saying it really ought to be kept under glass.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. “The house was shut up immediately after the tragedy and everything was left exactly as it was.”

Bristow broke in with a question. He had laid aside his aggressive manner.

“Why did Lord Charnley shoot himself?” he asked.

Colonel Monckton shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“No one ever knew,” he said vaguely.

“I suppose,” said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly, “that it was suicide.”

The Colonel looked at him in blank astonishment.

“Suicide,” he said, “why, of course it was suicide. My dear fellow, I was there in the house myself.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked towards the empty chair at his side and, smiling to himself as though at some hidden joke the others could not see, he said

quietly:

“Sometimes one sees things more clearly years afterwards than one could possibly at the time.”

“Nonsense,” spluttered Monckton, “arrant nonsense! How can you possibly see things better when they are vague in your memory instead of clear and sharp?”

But Mr. Satterthwaite was reinforced from an unexpected quarter.

“I know what you mean,” said the artist. “I should say that possibly you were right. It is a question of proportion, isn’t it? And more than proportion probably. Relativity and all that sort of thing.”

“If you ask me,” said the Colonel, “all this Einstein business is a lot of dashed nonsense. So are spiritualists and the spook of one’s grandmother!” He glared round fiercely.

“Of course it was suicide,” he went on. “Didn’t I practically see the thing happen with my own eyes?”

“Tell us about it,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “so that we shall see it with our eyes also.”

With a somewhat mollified grunt the Colonel settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

“The whole thing was extraordinarily unexpected,” he began. “Charnley had been his usual normal self. There was a big party staying in the house for this ball. No one could ever have guessed he would go and shoot himself just as the guests began arriving.”

“It would have been better taste if he had waited until they had gone,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Of course it would. Damned bad taste—to do a thing like that.”

“Uncharacteristic,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes,” admitted Monckton, “it wasn’t like Charnley.”

“And yet it was suicide?”

“Of course it was suicide. Why, there were three or four of us there at the top of the stairs. Myself, the Ostrander girl, Algie Darcy—oh, and one or two others. Charnley passed along the hall below and went into the Oak Parlour. The Ostrander girl said there was a ghastly look on his face and his eyes were staring—but, of course, that is nonsense—she couldn’t even see his face from where we were—but he did walk in a hunched way, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. One of the girls called to him—she was somebody’s governess, I think, whom Lady Charnley had included in the party out of kindness. She was looking for him with a message. She called out ‘Lord Charnley, Lady Charnley wants to know—’ He paid no attention and went into the Oak Parlour and slammed the door and we heard the key turn in the lock. Then, one minute after, we heard the shot.

“We rushed down to the hall. There is another door from the Oak Parlour leading into the Terrace Room. We tried that but it was locked, too. In the end we had to break the door down. Charnley was lying on the floor—dead—with a pistol close beside his right hand. Now, what could that have been but suicide? Accident? Don’t tell me. There is only one other possibility—murder—and you can’t have murder without a murderer. You admit that, I suppose.”

“The murderer might have escaped,” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

“That is impossible. If you have a bit of paper and a pencil I will draw you a plan of the place. There are two doors into the Oak Parlour, one into the hall and one into the Terrace Room. Both these doors were locked in the inside and the keys were in the locks.”

“The window?”

“Shut, and the shutters fastened across it.”

There was a pause.

“So that is that,” said Colonel Monckton triumphantly.

“It certainly seems to be,” said Mr. Satterthwaite sadly.

“Mind you,” said the Colonel, “although I was laughing just now at the spiritualists, I don’t mind admitting that there was a deuced rummy atmosphere about the place—about that room in particular. There are several bullet holes in the panels of the walls, the results of the duels that took place in that room, and there is a queer stain on the floor, that always comes back though they have replaced the wood several times. I suppose there will be another blood stain on the floor now—poor Charnley’s blood.”

“Was there much blood?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Very little—curiously little—so the doctor said.”

“Where did he shoot himself, through the head?”

“No, through the heart.”

“That is not the easy way to do it,” said Bristow. “Frightfully difficult to know where one’s heart is. I should never do it that way myself.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. He was vaguely dissatisfied. He had hoped to get at something—he hardly knew what. Colonel Monckton went on.

“It is a spooky place, Charnley. Of course, I didn’t see anything.”

“You didn’t see the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer?”

“No, I did not, sir,” said the Colonel emphatically. “But I expect every servant in the place swore they did.”

“Superstition was the curse of the Middle Ages,” said Bristow. “There are still traces of it here and there, but thank goodness, we are getting free from it.”

“Superstition,” mused Mr. Satterthwaite, his eyes turned again to the empty chair. “Sometimes, don’t you think—it might be useful?”

Bristow stared at him.

“Useful, that’s a queer word.”

“Well, I hope you are convinced now, Satterthwaite,” said the Colonel.

“Oh, quite,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “On the face of it, it seems odd—so purposeless for a newly married man, young, rich, happy, celebrating his homecoming—curious—but I agree there is no getting away from the facts.” He repeated softly, “The facts,” and frowned.

“I suppose the interesting thing is a thing we none of us will ever know,” said Monckton, “the story behind it all. Of course there were rumours—all sorts of rumours. You know the kind of things people say.”

“But no one knew anything,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

“It’s not a best seller mystery, is it?” remarked Bristow. “No one gained by the man’s death.”

“No one except an unborn child,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Monckton gave a sharp chuckle. “Rather a blow to poor Hugo Charnley,” he observed. “As soon as it was known that there was going to be a child he had the graceful task of sitting tight and waiting to see if it would be a girl or boy. Rather an anxious wait for his creditors, too. In the end a boy it was and a disappointment for the lot of them.”

“Was the widow very disconsolate?” asked Bristow.

“Poor child,” said Monckton, “I shall never forget her. She didn’t cry or break down or anything. She was like something—frozen. As I say, she shut up the house shortly afterwards and, as far as I know, it has never been reopened since.”

“So we are left in the dark as to motive,” said Bristow with a slight laugh. “Another man or another woman, it must have been one or the other, eh?”

“It seems like it,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“And the betting is strongly on another woman,” continued Bristow, “since the fair widow has not married again. I hate women,” he added dispassionately.

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled a little and Frank Bristow saw the smile and pounced upon it.

“You may smile,” he said, “but I do. They upset everything. They interfere. They get between you and your work. They—I only once met a woman who was—well, interesting.”

“I thought there would be one,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Not in the way you mean. I—I just met her casually. As a matter of fact—it was in a train. After all,” he added defiantly, “why shouldn’t one meet people in trains?”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite soothingly, “a train is as good a place as anywhere else.”

“It was coming down from the North. We had the carriage to ourselves. I don’t know why, but we began to talk. I don’t know her name and I don’t suppose I shall ever meet her again. I don’t know that I want to. It might be—a pity.” He paused, struggling to express himself. “She wasn’t quite real, you know. Shadowy. Like one of the people who come out of the hills in Gaelic fairy tales.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded gently. His imagination pictured the scene easily enough. The very positive and realistic Bristow and a figure that was silvery and ghostly—shadowy, as Bristow had said.

“I suppose if something very terrible had happened, so terrible as to be almost unbearable, one might get like that. One might run away from reality

into a half world of one's own and then, of course, after a time, one wouldn't be able to get back."

"Was that what had happened to her?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite curiously.

"I don't know," said Bristow. "She didn't tell me anything, I am only guessing. One has to guess if one is going to get anywhere."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "One has to guess."

He looked up as the door opened. He looked up quickly and expectantly but the butler's words disappointed him.

"A lady, sir, has called to see you on very urgent business. Miss Aspasia Glen."

Mr. Satterthwaite rose in some astonishment. He knew the name of Aspasia Glen. Who in London did not? First advertised as the Woman with the Scarf, she had given a series of matinées single-handed that had taken London by storm. With the aid of her scarf she had impersonated rapidly various characters. In turn the scarf had been the coif of a nun, the shawl of a mill worker, the headdress of a peasant and a hundred other things, and in each impersonation Aspasia Glen had been totally and utterly different. As an artist, Mr. Satterthwaite paid full reverence to her. As it happened, he had never made her acquaintance. A call upon him at this unusual hour intrigued him greatly. With a few words of apology to the others he left the room and crossed the hall to the drawing room.

Miss Glen was sitting in the very center of a large settee upholstered in gold brocade. So poised she dominated the room. Mr. Satterthwaite perceived at once that she meant to dominate the situation. Curiously enough, his first feeling was one of repulsion. He had been a sincere admirer of Aspasia Glen's art. Her personality, as conveyed to him over the footlights, had been appealing and sympathetic. Her effects there had been wistful and suggestive rather than commanding. But now, face to face with the woman herself, he received a totally different impression. There was something hard—bold—forceful about her. She was tall and dark, possibly about

thirty-five years of age. She was undoubtedly very good-looking and she clearly relied upon the fact.

“You must forgive this unconventional call, Mr. Satterthwaite,” she said. Her voice was full and rich and seductive.

“I won’t say that I have wanted to know you for a long time, but I am glad of the excuse. As for coming tonight”—she laughed—“well, when I want a thing, I simply can’t wait. When I want a thing, I simply must have it.”

“Any excuse that has brought me such a charming lady guest must be welcomed by me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite in an old-fashioned gallant manner.

“How nice you are to me,” said Aspasia Glen.

“My dear lady,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “may I thank you here and now for the pleasure you have so often given me—in my seat in the stalls.”

She smiled delightfully at him.

“I am coming straight to the point. I was at the Harchester Galleries today. I saw a picture there I simply couldn’t live without. I wanted to buy it and I couldn’t because you had already bought it. So”—she paused—“I do want it so,” she went on. “Dear Mr. Satterthwaite, I simply must have it. I brought my cheque book.” She looked at him hopefully. “Everyone tells me you are so frightfully kind. People are kind to me, you know. It is very bad for me—but there it is.”

So these were Aspasia Glen’s methods. Mr. Satterthwaite was inwardly coldly critical of this ultrafemininity and of this spoilt child pose. It ought to appeal to him, he supposed, but it didn’t. Aspasia Glen had made a mistake. She had judged him as an elderly dilettante, easily flattered by a pretty woman. But Mr. Satterthwaite behind his gallant manner had a shrewd and critical mind. He saw people pretty well as they were, not as they wished to appear to him. He saw before him, not a charming woman pleading for a whim, but a ruthless egoist determined to get her own way for some reason which was obscure to him. And he knew quite certainly that Aspasia Glen

was not going to get her own way. He was not going to give up the picture of the Dead Harlequin to her. He sought rapidly in his mind for the best way of circumventing her without overt rudeness.

“I am sure,” he said, “that everyone gives you your own way as often as they can and is only too delighted to do so.”

“Then you are really going to let me have the picture?”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head slowly and regretfully.

“I am afraid that is impossible. You see”—he paused—“I bought that picture for a lady. It is a present.”

“Oh! but surely—”

The telephone on the table rang sharply. With a murmured word of excuse Mr. Satterthwaite took up the receiver. A voice spoke to him, a small, cold voice that sounded very far away.

“Can I speak to Mr. Satterthwaite, please?”

“It is Mr. Satterthwaite speaking.”

“I am Lady Charnley, Alix Charnley. I daresay you don’t remember me Mr. Satterthwaite, it is a great many years since we met.”

“My dear Alix. Of course, I remember you.”

“There is something I wanted to ask you. I was at the Harchester Galleries at an exhibition of pictures today, there was one called The Dead Harlequin, perhaps you recognized it—it was the Terrace Room at Charnley. I—I want to have that picture. It was sold to you.” She paused. “Mr. Satterthwaite, for reasons of my own I want that picture. Will you resell it to me?”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: “Why, this is a miracle.” As he spoke into the receiver he was thankful that Aspasia Glen could only hear one side of the conversation. “If you will accept my gift, dear lady, it will make me very happy.” He heard a sharp exclamation behind him and hurried on. “I

bought it for you. I did indeed. But listen, my dear Alix, I want to ask you to do me a great favour, if you will."

"Of course. Mr. Satterthwaite, I am so very grateful."

He went on. "I want you to come round now to my house, at once."

There was a slight pause and then she answered quietly:

"I will come at once."

Mr. Satterthwaite put down the receiver and turned to Miss Glen.

She said quickly and angrily:

"That was the picture you were talking about?"

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "the lady to whom I am presenting it is coming round to this house in a few minutes."

Suddenly Aspasia Glen's face broke once more into smiles. "You will give me a chance of persuading her to turn the picture over to me?"

"I will give you a chance of persuading her."

Inwardly he was strangely excited. He was in the midst of a drama that was shaping itself to some foredoomed end. He, the looker-on, was playing a star part. He turned to Miss Glen.

"Will you come into the other room with me? I should like you to meet some friends of mine."

He held the door open for her and, crossing the hall, opened the door of the smoking room.

"Miss Glen," he said, "let me introduce you to an old friend of mine, Colonel Monckton. Mr. Bristow, the painter of the picture you admire so much." Then he started as a third figure rose from the chair which he had left empty beside his own.

“I think you expected me this evening,” said Mr. Quin. “During your absence I introduced myself to your friends. I am so glad I was able to drop in.”

“My dear friend,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I—I have been carrying on as well as I am able, but—” He stopped before the slightly sardonic glance of Mr. Quin’s dark eyes. “Let me introduce you. Mr. Harley Quin, Miss Aspasia Glen.”

Was it fancy—or did she shrink back slightly. A curious expression flitted over her face. Suddenly Bristow broke in boisterously. “I have got it.”

“Got what?”

“Got hold of what was puzzling me. There is a likeness, there is a distinct likeness.” He was staring curiously at Mr. Quin. “You see it?”—he turned to Mr. Satterthwaite—“don’t you see a distinct likeness to the Harlequin of my picture—the man looking in through the window?”

It was no fancy this time. He distinctly heard Miss Glen draw in her breath sharply and even saw that she stepped back one pace.

“I told you that I was expecting someone,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He spoke with an air of triumph. “I must tell you that my friend, Mr. Quin, is a most extraordinary person. He can unravel mysteries. He can make you see things.”

“Are you a medium, sir?” demanded Colonel Monckton, eyeing Mr. Quin doubtfully.

The latter smiled and slowly shook his head.

“Mr. Satterthwaite exaggerates,” he said quietly. “Once or twice when I have been with him he has done some extraordinary good deductive work. Why he puts the credit down to me I can’t say. His modesty, I suppose.”

“No, no,” said Mr. Satterthwaite excitedly. “It isn’t. You make me see things—things that I ought to have seen all along—that I actually have seen

—but without knowing that I saw them.”

“It sounds to me deuced complicated,” said Colonel Monckton.

“Not really,” said Mr. Quin. “The trouble is that we are not content just to see things—we will tack the wrong interpretation on to the things we see.”

Aspasia Glen turned to Frank Bristow.

“I want to know,” she said nervously, “what put the idea of painting that picture into your head?”

Bristow shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t quite know,” he confessed. “Something about the place—about Charnley, I mean, took hold of my imagination. The big empty room. The terrace outside, the idea of ghosts and things, I suppose. I have just been hearing the tale of the last Lord Charnley, who shot himself. Supposing you are dead, and your spirit lives on? It must be odd, you know. You might stand outside on the terrace looking in at the window at your own dead body, and you would see everything.”

“What do you mean?” said Aspasia Glen. “See everything?”

“Well, you would see what happened. You would see—”

The door opened and the butler announced Lady Charnley.

Mr. Satterthwaite went to meet her. He had not seen her for nearly thirteen years. He remembered her as she once was, an eager, glowing girl. And now he saw—a Frozen Lady. Very fair, very pale, with an air of drifting rather than walking, a snowflake driven at random by an icy breeze. Something unreal about her. So cold, so far away.

“It was very good of you to come,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He led her forward. She made a half gesture of recognition towards Miss Glen and then paused as the other made no response.

“I am so sorry,” she murmured, “but surely I have met you somewhere, haven’t I?”

“Over the footlights, perhaps,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “This is Miss Aspasia Glen, Lady Charnley.”

“I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Charnley,” said Aspasia Glen.

Her voice had suddenly a slight trans-Atlantic tinge to it. Mr. Satterthwaite was reminded of one of her various stage impersonations.

“Colonel Monckton you know,” continued Mr. Satterthwaite, “and this is Mr. Bristow.”

He saw a sudden faint tinge of colour in her cheeks.

“Mr. Bristow and I have met too,” she said, and smiled a little. “In a train.”

“And Mr. Harley Quin.”

He watched her closely, but this time there was no flicker of recognition. He set a chair for her, and then, seating himself, he cleared his throat and spoke a little nervously. “I—this is rather an unusual little gathering. It centres round this picture. I—I think that if we liked we could—clear things up.”

“You are not going to hold a séance, Satterthwaite?” asked Colonel Monckton. “You are very odd this evening.”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “not exactly a séance. But my friend, Mr. Quin, believes, and I agree, that one can, by looking back over the past, see things as they were and not as they appeared to be.”

“The past?” said Lady Charnley.

“I am speaking of your husband’s suicide, Alix. I know it hurts you—”

“No,” said Alix Charnley, “it doesn’t hurt me. Nothing hurts me now.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought of Frank Bristow's words. "She was not quite real you know. Shadowy. Like one of the people who come out of hills in Gaelic fairy tales."

"Shadowy," he had called her. That described her exactly. A shadow, a reflection of something else. Where then was the real Alix, and his mind answered quickly: "In the past. Divided from us by fourteen years of time."

"My dear," he said, "you frighten me. You are like the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer."

Crash! The coffee cup on the table by Aspasia's elbow fell shattered to the floor. Mr. Satterthwaite waved aside her apologies. He thought: "We are getting nearer, we are getting nearer every minute—but nearer to what?"

"Let us take our minds back to that night fourteen years ago," he said. "Lord Charnley killed himself. For what reason? No one knows."

Lady Charnley stirred slightly in her chair.

"Lady Charnley knows," said Frank Bristow abruptly.

"Nonsense," said Colonel Monckton, then stopped, frowning at her curiously.

She was looking across at the artist. It was as though he drew the words out of her. She spoke, nodding her head slowly, and her voice was like a snowflake, cold and soft.

"Yes, you are quite right. I know. That is why as long as I live I can never go back to Charnley. That is why when my boy Dick wants me to open the place up and live there again I tell him it can't be done."

"Will you tell us the reason, Lady Charnley?" said Mr. Quin.

She looked at him. Then, as though hypnotised, she spoke as quietly and naturally as a child.

“I will tell you if you like. Nothing seems to matter very much now. I found a letter among his papers and I destroyed it.”

“What letter?” said Mr. Quin.

“The letter from the girl—from that poor child. She was the Merriams’ nursery governess. He had—he had made love to her—yes, while he was engaged to me just before we were married. And she—she was going to have a child too. She wrote saying so, and that she was going to tell me about it. So, you see, he shot himself.”

She looked round at them wearily and dreamily like a child who has repeated a lesson it knows too well.

Colonel Monckton blew his nose.

“My God,” he said, “so that was it. Well, that explains things with a vengeance.”

“Does it?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “it doesn’t explain one thing. It doesn’t explain why Mr. Bristow painted that picture.”

“What do you mean?”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked across at Mr. Quin as though for encouragement, and apparently got it, for he proceeded:

“Yes, I know I sound mad to all of you, but that picture is the focus of the whole thing. We are all here tonight because of that picture. That picture had to be painted—that is what I mean.”

“You mean the uncanny influence of the Oak Parlour?” began Colonel Monckton.

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Not the Oak Parlour. The Terrace Room. That is it! The spirit of the dead man standing outside the window and looking in and seeing his own dead body on the floor.”

“Which he couldn’t have done,” said the Colonel, “because the body was in the Oak Parlour.”

“Supposing it wasn’t,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “supposing it was exactly where Mr. Bristow saw it, saw it imaginatively, I mean on the black and white flags in front of the window.”

“You are talking nonsense,” said Colonel Monckton, “if it was there we shouldn’t have found it in the Oak Parlour.”

“Not unless someone carried it there,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“And in that case how could we have seen Charnley going in at the door of the Oak Parlour?” inquired Colonel Monckton.

“Well, you didn’t see his face, did you?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite. “What I mean is, you saw a man going into the Oak Parlour in fancy dress, I suppose.”

“Brocade things and a wig,” said Monckton.

“Just so, and you thought it was Lord Charnley because the girl called out to him as Lord Charnley.”

“And because when we broke in a few minutes later there was only Lord Charnley there dead. You can’t get away from that, Satterthwaite.”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, discouraged. “No—unless there was a hiding place of some kind.”

“Weren’t you saying something about there being a Priests’ hole in that room?” put in Frank Bristow.

“Oh!” cried Mr. Satterthwaite. “Supposing—?” He waved a hand for silence and sheltered his forehead with his other hand and then spoke slowly and hesitatingly.

“I have got an idea—it may be just an idea, but I think it hangs together. Supposing someone shot Lord Charnley. Shot him in the Terrace Room.

Then he—and another person—dragged the body into the Oak Parlour. They laid it down there with the pistol by its right hand. Now we go on to the next step. It must seem absolutely certain that Lord Charnley has committed suicide. I think that could be done very easily. The man in his brocade and wig passes along the hall by the Oak Parlour door and someone, to make sure of things, calls out to him as Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs. He goes in and locks both doors and fires a shot into the woodwork. There were bullet holes already in that room if you remember, one more wouldn't be noticed. He then hides quietly in the secret chamber. The doors are broken open and people rush in. It seems certain that Lord Charnley has committed suicide. No other hypothesis is even entertained."

"Well, I think that is balderdash," said Colonel Monckton. "You forget that Charnley had a motive right enough for suicide."

"A letter found afterwards," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "A lying cruel letter written by a very clever and unscrupulous little actress who meant one day to be Lady Charnley herself."

"You mean?"

"I mean the girl in league with Hugo Charnley," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "You know, Monckton, everyone knows, that that man was a blackguard. He thought that he was certain to come into the title." He turned sharply to Lady Charnley. "What was the name of the girl who wrote that letter?"

"Monica Ford," said Lady Charnley.

"Was it Monica Ford, Monckton, who called out to Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs?"

"Yes, now you come to speak of it, I believe it was."

"Oh, that's impossible," said Lady Charnley. "I—I went to her about it. She told me it was all true. I only saw her once afterwards, but surely she couldn't have been acting the whole time."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked across the room at Aspasia Glen.

“I think she could,” he said quietly. “I think she had in her the makings of a very accomplished actress.”

“There is one thing you haven’t got over,” said Frank Bristow, “there would be blood on the floor of the Terrace Room. Bound to be. They couldn’t clear that up in a hurry.”

“No,” admitted Mr. Satterthwaite, “but there is one thing they could do—a thing that would only take a second or two—they could throw over the bloodstains the Bokhara rug. Nobody ever saw the Bokhara rug in the Terrace Room before that night.”

“I believe you are right,” said Monckton, “but all the same those bloodstains would have to be cleared up some time?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “in the middle of the night. A woman with a jug and basin could go down the stairs and clear up the bloodstains quite easily.”

“But supposing someone saw her?”

“It wouldn’t matter,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I am speaking now of things as they are. I said a woman with a jug and basin. But if I had said a Weeping Lady with a Silver Ewer that is what they would have appeared to be.” He got up and went across to Aspasia Glen. “That is what you did, wasn’t it?” he said. “They call you the ‘Woman with the Scarf’ now, but it was that night you played your first part, the ‘Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer.’ That is why you knocked the coffee cup off that table just now. You were afraid when you saw that picture. You thought someone knew.”

Lady Charnley stretched out a white accusing hand.

“Monica Ford,” she breathed. “I recognize you now.”

Aspasia Glen sprang to her feet with a cry. She pushed little Mr. Satterthwaite aside with a shove of the hand and stood shaking in front of Mr. Quin.

“So I was right. Someone did know! Oh, I haven’t been deceived by this tomfoolery. This pretence of working things out.” She pointed at Mr. Quin. “You were there. You were there outside the window looking in. You saw what we did, Hugo and I. I knew there was someone looking in, I felt it all the time. And yet when I looked up, there was nobody there. I knew someone was watching us. I thought once I caught a glimpse of a face at the window. It has frightened me all these years. Why did you break silence now? That is what I want to know?”

“Perhaps so that the dead may rest in peace,” said Mr. Quin.

Suddenly Aspasia Glen made a rush for the door and stood there flinging a few defiant words over her shoulder.

“Do what you like. God knows there are witnesses enough to what I have been saying. I don’t care, I don’t care. I loved Hugo and I helped him with the ghastly business and he chucked me afterwards. He died last year. You can set the police on my tracks if you like, but as that little dried-up fellow there said, I am a pretty good actress. They will find it hard to find me.” She crashed the door behind her, and a moment later they heard the slam of the front door, also.

“Reggie,” cried Lady Charnley, “Reggie.” The tears were streaming down her face. “Oh, my dear, my dear, I can go back to Charnley now. I can live there with Dickie. I can tell him what his father was, the finest, the most splendid man in all the world.”

“We must consult very seriously as to what must be done in the matter,” said Colonel Monckton. “Alix, my dear, if you will let me take you home I shall be glad to have a few words with you on the subject.”

Lady Charnley rose. She came across to Mr. Satterthwaite, and laying both hands on his shoulders, she kissed him very gently.

“It is so wonderful to be alive again after being so long dead,” she said. “It was like being dead, you know. Thank you, dear Mr. Satterthwaite.” She went out of the room with Colonel Monckton. Mr. Satterthwaite gazed after

them. A grunt from Frank Bristow whom he had forgotten made him turn sharply round.

“She is a lovely creature,” said Bristow moodily. “But she’s not nearly so interesting as she was,” he said gloomily.

“There speaks the artist,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Well, she isn’t,” said Mr. Bristow. “I suppose I should only get the cold shoulder if I ever went butting in at Charnley. I don’t want to go where I am not wanted.”

“My dear young man,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “if you will think a little less of the impression you are making on other people, you will, I think, be wiser and happier. You would also do well to disabuse your mind of some very old-fashioned notions, one of which is that birth has any significance at all in our modern conditions. You are one of those large proportioned young men whom women always consider good-looking, and you have possibly, if not certainly, genius. Just say that over to yourself ten times before you go to bed every night and in three months’ time go and call on Lady Charnley at Charnley. That is my advice to you, and I am an old man with considerable experience of the world.”

A very charming smile suddenly spread over the artist’s face.

“You have been thunderingly good to me,” he said suddenly. He seized Mr. Satterthwaite’s hand and wrung it in a powerful grip. “I am no end grateful. I must be off now. Thanks very much for one of the most extraordinary evenings I have ever spent.”

He looked round as though to say goodbye to someone else and then started.

“I say, sir, your friend has gone. I never saw him go. He is rather a queer bird, isn’t he?”

“He goes and comes very suddenly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “That is one of his characteristics. One doesn’t always see him come and go.”

“Like Harlequin,” said Frank Bristow, “he is invisible,” and laughed heartily at his own joke.

Ten

THE BIRD WITH THE BROKEN WING

“The Bird with the Broken Wing” was published in The Mysterious Mr. Quin by Collins, April 1930. No prior magazine publication has been located.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked out of the window. It was raining steadily. He shivered. Very few country houses, he reflected, were really properly heated. It cheered him to think that in a few hours’ time he would be speeding towards London. Once one had passed sixty years of age, London was really much the best place.

He was feeling a little old and pathetic. Most of the members of the house party were so young. Four of them had just gone off into the library to do table turning. They had invited him to accompany them, but he had declined. He failed to derive any amusement from the monotonous counting of the letters of the alphabet and the usual meaningless jumble of letters that resulted.

Yes, London was the best place for him. He was glad that he had declined Madge Keeley’s invitation when she had rung up to invite him over to Laidell half an hour ago. An adorable young person, certainly, but London was best.

Mr. Satterthwaite shivered again and remembered that the fire in the library was usually a good one. He opened the door and adventured cautiously into the darkened room.

“If I’m not in the way—”

“Was that N or M? We shall have to count again. No, of course not, Mr. Satterthwaite. Do you know, the most exciting things have been happening.

The spirit says her name is Ada Spiers, and John here is going to marry someone called Gladys Bun almost immediately.”

Mr. Satterthwaite sat down in a big easy chair in front of the fire. His eyelids drooped over his eyes and he dozed. From time to time he returned to consciousness, hearing fragments of speech.

“It can’t be P A B Z L—not unless he’s a Russian. John, you’re shoving. I saw you. I believe it’s a new spirit come.”

Another interval of dozing. Then a name jerked him wide awake.

“Q-U-I-N. Is that right?” “Yes, it’s rapped once for ‘Yes.’ Quin. Have you a message for someone here? Yes. For me? For John? For Sarah? For Evelyn? No—but there’s no one else. Oh! it’s for Mr. Satterthwaite, perhaps? It says ‘Yes.’ Mr. Satterthwaite, it’s a message for you.”

“What does it say?”

Mr. Satterthwaite was broad awake now, sitting taut and erect in his chair, his eyes shining.

The table rocked and one of the girls counted.

“LAI—it can’t be—that doesn’t make sense. No word begins LAI.”

“Go on,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and the command in his voice was so sharp that he was obeyed without question.

“LAIDEL? and another L—Oh! that seems to be all.”

“Go on.”

“Tell us some more, please.”

A pause.

“There doesn’t seem to be any more. The table’s gone quite dead. How silly.”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’s silly.”

He rose and left the room. He went straight to the telephone. Presently he was through.

“Can I speak to Miss Keeley? Is that you, Madge, my dear? I want to change my mind, if I may, and accept your kind invitation. It is not so urgent as I thought that I should get back to town. Yes—yes—I will arrive in time for dinner.”

He hung up the receiver, a strange flush on his withered cheeks. Mr. Quin—the mysterious Mr. Harley Quin. Mr. Satterthwaite counted over on his fingers the times he had been brought into contact with that man of mystery. Where Mr. Quin was concerned—things happened! What had happened or was going to happen—at Laidell?

Whatever it was, there was work for him, Mr. Satterthwaite, to do. In some way or other, he would have an active part to play. He was sure of that.

Laidell was a large house. Its owner, David Keeley, was one of those quiet men with indeterminate personalities who seem to count as part of the furniture. Their inconspicuousness has nothing to do with brain power—David Keeley was a most brilliant mathematician, and had written a book totally incomprehensible to ninety-nine hundredths of humanity. But like so many men of brilliant intellect, he radiated no bodily vigour or magnetism. It was a standing joke that David Keeley was a real “invisible man.” Footmen passed him by with the vegetables, and guests forgot to say how do you do or goodbye.

His daughter Madge was very different. A fine upstanding young woman, bursting with energy and life. Thorough, healthy and normal, and extremely pretty.

It was she who received Mr. Satterthwaite when he arrived.

“How nice of you to come—after all.”

“Very delightful of you to let me change my mind. Madge, my dear, you’re looking very well.”

“Oh! I’m always well.”

“Yes, I know. But it’s more than that. You look—well, blooming is the word I have in mind. Has anything happened my dear? Anything—well—special?”

She laughed—blushed a little.

“It’s too bad, Mr. Satterthwaite. You always guess things.”

He took her hand.

“So it’s that, is it? Mr. Right has come along?”

It was an old-fashioned term, but Madge did not object to it. She rather liked Mr. Satterthwaite’s old-fashioned ways.

“I suppose so—yes. But nobody’s supposed to know. It’s a secret. But I don’t really mind your knowing, Mr. Satterthwaite. You’re always so nice and sympathetic.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thoroughly enjoyed romance at second hand. He was sentimental and Victorian.

“I mustn’t ask who the lucky man is? Well, then all I can say is that I hope he is worthy of the honour you are conferring on him.”

Rather a duck, old Mr. Satterthwaite, thought Madge.

“Oh! we shall get on awfully well together, I think,” she said. “You see, we like doing the same things, and that’s so awfully important, isn’t it? We’ve really got a lot in common—and we know all about each other and all that. It’s really been coming on for a long time. That gives one such a nice safe feeling, doesn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “But in my experience one can never really know all about anyone else. That is part of the interest and charm of life.”

“Oh! I’ll risk it,” said Madge, laughing, and they went up to dress for dinner.

Mr. Satterthwaite was late. He had not brought a valet, and having his things unpacked for him by a stranger always flurried him a little. He came down to find everyone assembled, and in the modern style Madge merely said: “Oh! here’s Mr. Satterthwaite. I’m starving. Let’s go in.”

She led the way with a tall grey-haired woman—a woman of striking personality. She had a very clear rather incisive voice, and her face was clear cut and rather beautiful.

“How d’you do, Satterthwaite,” said Mr. Keeley.

Mr. Satterthwaite jumped.

“How do you do,” he said. “I’m afraid I didn’t see you.”

“Nobody does,” said Mr. Keeley sadly.

They went in. The table was a low oval of mahogany. Mr. Satterthwaite was placed between his young hostess and a short dark girl—a very hearty girl with a loud voice and a ringing determined laugh that expressed more the determination to be cheerful at all costs than any real mirth. Her name seemed to be Doris, and she was the type of young woman Mr. Satterthwaite most disliked. She had, he considered, no artistic justification for existence.

On Madge’s other side was a man of about thirty, whose likeness to the grey-haired woman proclaimed them mother and son.

Next to him—

Mr. Satterthwaite caught his breath.

He didn't know what it was exactly. It was not beauty. It was something else—something much more elusive and intangible than beauty.

She was listening to Mr. Keeley's rather ponderous dinner-table conversation, her head bent a little sideways. She was there, it seemed to Mr. Satterthwaite—and yet she was not there! She was somehow a great deal less substantial than anyone else seated round the oval table. Something in the droop of her body sideways was beautiful—was more than beautiful. She looked up—her eyes met Mr. Satterthwaite's for a moment across the table—and the word he wanted leapt to his mind.

Enchantment—that was it. She had the quality of enchantment. She might have been one of those creatures who are only half-human—one of the Hidden People from the Hollow Hills. She made everyone else look rather too real. . . .

But at the same time, in a queer way, she stirred his pity. It was as though semihumanity handicapped her. He sought for a phrase and found it.

“A bird with a broken wing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Satisfied, he turned his mind back to the subject of Girl Guides and hoped that the girl Doris had not noticed his abstraction. When she turned to the man on the other side of her—a man Mr. Satterthwaite had hardly noticed, he himself turned to Madge.

“Who is the lady sitting next to your father?” he asked in a low voice.

“Mrs. Graham? Oh, no! you mean Mabelle. Don't you know her? Mabelle Annesley. She was a Clydesley—one of the illfated Clydesleys.”

He started. The ill-fated Clydesleys. He remembered. A brother had shot himself, a sister had been drowned, another had perished in an earthquake. A queer doomed family. This girl must be the youngest of them.

His thoughts were recalled suddenly. Madge's hand touched his under the table. Everyone else was talking. She gave a faint inclination of her head to her left.

“That’s him,” she murmured ungrammatically.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded quickly in comprehension. So this young Graham was the man of Madge’s choice. Well, she could hardly have done better as far as appearances went—and Mr. Satterthwaite was a shrewd observer. A pleasant, likeable, rather matter-of-fact young fellow. They’d make a nice pair—no nonsense about either of them—good healthy sociable young folk.

Laidell was run on old-fashioned lines. The ladies left the dining room first. Mr. Satterthwaite moved up to Graham and began to talk to him. His estimate of the young man was confirmed, yet there was something that struck him as being not quite true to type. Roger Graham was distraight, his mind seemed far away, his hand shook as he replaced the glass on the table.

“He’s got something on his mind,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite acutely. “Not nearly as important as he thinks it is, I dare say. All the same, I wonder what it is.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was in the habit of swallowing a couple of digestive pastilles after meals. Having neglected to bring them down with him, he went up to his room to fetch them.

On his way down to the drawing room, he passed along the long corridor on the ground floor. About halfway along it was a room known as the terrace room. As Mr. Satterthwaite looked through the open doorway in passing, he stopped short.

Moonlight was streaming into the room. The latticed panes gave it a queer rhythmic pattern. A figure was sitting on the low window sill, drooping a little sideways and softly twanging the string of a ukelele—not in a jazz rhythm, but in a far older rhythm, the beat of fairy horses riding on fairy hills.

Mr. Satterthwaite stood fascinated. She wore a dress of dull dark blue chiffon, ruched and pleated so that it looked like the feathers of a bird. She bent over the instrument crooning to it.

He came into the room—slowly, step by step. He was close to her when she looked up and saw him. She didn't start, he noticed, or seem surprised.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he began.

"Please—sit down."

He sat near her on a polished oak chair. She hummed softly under her breath.

"There's a lot of magic about tonight," she said. "Don't you think so?"

"Yes, there was a lot of magic about."

"They wanted me to fetch my uke," she explained. "And as I passed here, I thought it would be so lovely to be alone here—in the dark and the moon."

"Then I—" Mr. Satterthwaite half rose, but she stopped him.

"Don't go. You—you fit in, somehow. It's queer, but you do."

He sat down again.

"It's been a queer sort of evening," she said. "I was out in the woods late this afternoon, and I met a man—such a strange sort of man—tall and dark, like a lost soul. The sun was setting, and the light of it through the trees made him look like a kind of Harlequin."

"Ah!" Mr. Satterthwaite leant forward—his interest quickened.

"I wanted to speak to him—he—he looked so like somebody I know. But I lost him in the trees."

"I think I know him," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Do you? He is—interesting, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is interesting."

There was a pause. Mr. Satterthwaite was perplexed. There was something, he felt, that he ought to do—and he didn't know what it was. But surely—surely, it had to do with this girl. He said rather clumsily:

“Sometimes—when one is unhappy—one wants to get away—”

“Yes. That's true.” She broke off suddenly. “Oh! I see what you mean. But you're wrong. It's just the other way round. I wanted to be alone because I'm happy.”

“Happy?”

“Terribly happy.”

She spoke quite quietly, but Mr. Satterthwaite had a sudden sense of shock. What this strange girl meant by being happy wasn't the same as Madge Keeley would have meant by the same words. Happiness, for Mabelle Annesley, meant some kind of intense and vivid ecstasy . . . something that was not only human, but more than human. He shrank back a little.

“I—didn't know,” he said clumsily.

“Of course you couldn't. And it's not—the actual thing—I'm not happy yet—but I'm going to be.” She leaned forward. “Do you know what it's like to stand in a wood—a big wood with dark shadows and trees very close all round you—a wood you might never get out of—and then, suddenly—just in front of you, you see the country of your dreams—shining and beautiful—you've only got to step out from the trees and the darkness and you've found it. . . .”

“So many things look beautiful,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “before we've reached them. Some of the ugliest things in the world look the most beautiful. . . .”

There was a step on the floor. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. A fair man with a stupid, rather wooden face, stood there. He was the man Mr. Satterthwaite had hardly noticed at the dinner-table.

“They’re waiting for you, Mabelle,” he said.

She got up, the expression had gone out of her face, her voice was flat and calm.

“I’m coming, Gerard,” she said. “I’ve been talking to Mr. Satterthwaite.”

She went out of the room, Mr. Satterthwaite following. He turned his head over his shoulder as he went and caught the expression on her husband’s face. A hungry, despairing look.

“Enchantment,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite. “He feels it right enough. Poor fellow—poor fellow.”

The drawing room was well lighted. Madge and Doris Coles were vociferous in reproaches.

“Mabelle, you little beast—you’ve been ages.”

She sat on a low stool, tuned the ukelele and sang. They all joined in.

“Is it possible,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite, “that so many idiotic songs could have been written about My Baby.”

But he had to admit that the syncopated wailing tunes were stirring. Though, of course, they weren’t a patch on the old-fashioned waltz.

The air got very smoky. The syncopated rhythm went on.

“No conversation,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite. “No good music. No peace.” He wished the world had not become definitely so noisy.

Suddenly Mabelle Annesley broke off, smiled across the room at him, and began to sing a song of Grieg’s.

“My swan—my fair one. . . .”

It was a favourite of Mr. Satterthwaite's. He liked the note of ingenuous surprise at the end.

"Wert only a swan then? A swan then?"

After that, the party broke up. Madge offered drinks whilst her father picked up the discarded ukelele and began twanging it absentmindedly. The party exchanged goodnights, drifted nearer and nearer to the door. Everyone talked at once. Gerard Annesley slipped away unostentatiously, leaving the others.

Outside the drawing room door, Mr. Satterthwaite bade Mrs. Graham a ceremonious goodnight. There were two staircases, one close at hand, the other at the end of a long corridor. It was by the latter that Mr. Satterthwaite reached his room. Mrs. Graham and her son passed by the stairs near at hand whence the quiet Gerard Annesley had already preceded them.

"You'd better get your ukelele, Mabelle," said Madge. "You'll forget it in the morning if you don't. You've got to make such an early start."

"Come on, Mr. Satterthwaite," said Doris Coles, seizing him boisterously by one arm. "Early to bed—etcetera."

Madge took him by the other arm and all three ran down the corridor to peals of Doris's laughter. They paused at the end to wait for David Keeley, who was following at a much more sedate pace, turning out electric lights as he came. The four of them went upstairs together.

Mr. Satterthwaite was just preparing to descend to the diningroom for breakfast on the following morning, when there was a light tap on the door and Madge Keeley entered. Her face was dead white, and she was shivering all over.

"Oh, Mr. Satterthwaite."

"My dear child, what's happened?" He took her hand.

“Mabelle—Mabelle Annesley . . .”

“Yes?”

What had happened? What? Something terrible—he knew that. Madge could hardly get the words out.

“She—she hanged herself last night . . . On the back of her door. Oh! it’s too horrible.” She broke down—sobbing.

Hanged herself. Impossible. Incomprehensible!

He said a few soothing old-fashioned words to Madge, and hurried downstairs. He found David Keeley looking perplexed and incompetent.

“I’ve telephoned to the police, Satterthwaite. Apparently that’s got to be done. So the doctor said. He’s just finished examining the—the—good lord, it’s a beastly business. She must have been desperately unhappy—to do it that way—Queer that song last night. Swan song, eh? She looked rather like a swan—a black swan.”

“Yes.”

“Swan Song,” repeated Keeley. “Shows it was in her mind, eh?”

“It would seem so—yes, certainly it would seem so.”

He hesitated, then asked if he might see—if, that is. . . .

His host comprehended the stammering request.

“If you want to—I’d forgotten you have a penchant for human tragedies.”

He led the way up the broad staircase. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him. At the head of the stairs was the room occupied by Roger Graham and opposite it, on the other side of the passage, his mother’s room. The latter door was ajar and a faint wisp of smoke floated through it.

A momentary surprise invaded Mr. Satterthwaite's mind. He had not judged Mrs. Graham to be a woman who smoked so early in the day. Indeed, he had had the idea that she did not smoke at all.

They went along the passage to the end door but one. David Keeley entered the room and Mr. Satterthwaite followed him.

The room was not a very large one and showed signs of a man's occupation. A door in the wall led into a second room. A bit of cut rope still dangled from a hook high up on the door. On the bed. . . .

Mr. Satterthwaite stood for a minute looking down on the heap of huddled chiffon. He noticed that it was ruched and pleated like the plumage of a bird. At the face, after one glance, he did not look again.

He glanced from the door with its dangling rope to the communicating door through which they had come.

"Was that open?"

"Yes. At least the maid says so."

"Annesley slept in there? Did he hear anything?"

"He says—nothing."

"Almost incredible," murmured Mr. Satterthwaite. He looked back at the form on the bed.

"Where is he?"

"Annesley? He's downstairs with the doctor."

They went downstairs to find an Inspector of police had arrived. Mr. Satterthwaite was agreeably surprised to recognize in him an old acquaintance, Inspector Winkfield. The Inspector went upstairs with the doctor, and a few minutes later a request came that all members of the house party should assemble in the drawing room.

The blinds had been drawn, and the whole room had a funereal aspect. Doris Coles looked frightened and subdued. Every now and then she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Madge was resolute and alert, her feelings fully under control by now. Mrs. Graham was composed, as always, her face grave and impassive. The tragedy seemed to have affected her son more keenly than anyone. He looked a positive wreck this morning. David Keeley, as usual, had subsided into the background.

The bereaved husband sat alone, a little apart from the others. There was a queer dazed look about him, as though he could hardly realize what had taken place.

Mr. Satterthwaite, outwardly composed, was inwardly seething with the importance of a duty shortly to be performed.

Inspector Winkfield, followed by Dr. Morris, came in and shut the door behind him. He cleared his throat and spoke.

“This is a very sad occurrence—very sad, I’m sure. It’s necessary, under the circumstances, that I should ask everybody a few questions. You’ll not object, I’m sure. I’ll begin with Mr. Annesley. You’ll forgive my asking, sir, but had your good lady ever threatened to take her life?”

Mr. Satterthwaite opened his lips impulsively, then closed them again. There was plenty of time. Better not speak too soon.

“I—no, I don’t think so.”

His voice was so hesitating, so peculiar, that everyone shot a covert glance at him.

“You’re not sure, sir?”

“Yes—I’m—quite sure. She didn’t.”

“Ah! Were you aware that she was unhappy in any way?”

“No. I—no, I wasn’t.”

“She said nothing to you. About feeling depressed, for instance?”

“I—no, nothing.”

Whatever the Inspector thought, he said nothing. Instead he proceeded to his next point.

“Will you describe to me briefly the events of last night?”

“We—all went up to bed. I fell asleep immediately and heard nothing. The housemaid’s scream aroused me this morning. I rushed into the adjoining room and found my wife—and found her—”

His voice broke. The Inspector nodded.

“Yes, yes, that’s quite enough. We needn’t go into that. When did you last see your wife the night before?”

“I—downstairs.”

“Downstairs?”

“Yes, we all left the drawing room together. I went straight up leaving the others talking in the hall.”

“And you didn’t see your wife again? Didn’t she say goodnight when she came up to bed?”

“I was asleep when she came up.”

“But she only followed you a few minutes later. That’s right, isn’t it, sir?”
He looked at David Keeley, who nodded.

“She hadn’t come up half an hour later.”

Annesley spoke stubbornly. The Inspector’s eyes strayed gently to Mrs. Graham.

“She didn’t stay in your room talking, Madam?”

Did Mr. Satterthwaite fancy it, or was there a slight pause before Mrs. Graham said with her customary quiet decision of manner:

“No, I went straight into my room and closed the door. I heard nothing.”

“And you say, sir”—the Inspector had shifted his attention back to Annesley—“that you slept and heard nothing. The communicating door was open, was it not?”

“I—I believe so. But my wife would have entered her room by the other door from the corridor.”

“Even so, sir, there would have been certain sounds—a choking noise, a drumming of heels on the door—”

“No.”

It was Mr. Satterthwaite who spoke, impetuously, unable to stop himself. Every eye turned towards him in surprise. He himself became nervous, stammered, and turned pink.

“I—I beg your pardon, Inspector. But I must speak. You are on the wrong track—the wrong track altogether. Mrs. Annesley did not kill herself—I am sure of it. She was murdered.”

There was a dead silence, then Inspector Winkfield said quietly:

“What leads you to say that, sir?”

“I—it is a feeling. A very strong feeling.”

“But I think, sir, there must be more than that to it. There must be some particular reason.”

Well, of course there was a particular reason. There was the mysterious message from Mr. Quin. But you couldn't tell a police inspector that. Mr. Satterthwaite cast about desperately, and found nothing.

“Last night—when we were talking together, she said she was very happy. Very happy—just that. That wasn’t like a woman thinking of committing suicide.”

He was triumphant. He added:

“She went back to the drawing room to fetch her ukelele, so that she wouldn’t forget it in the morning. That didn’t look like suicide either.”

“No,” admitted the Inspector. “No, perhaps it didn’t.” He turned to David Keeley. “Did she take the ukelele upstairs with her?”

The mathematician tried to remember.

“I think—yes, she did. She went upstairs carrying it in her hand. I remember seeing it just as she turned the corner of the staircase before I turned off the light down here.”

“Oh!” cried Madge. “But it’s here now.”

She pointed dramatically to where the ukelele lay on a table.

“That’s curious,” said the Inspector. He stepped swiftly across and rang the bell.

A brief order sent the butler in search of the housemaid whose business it was to do the rooms in the morning. She came, and was quite positive in her answer. The ukelele had been there first thing that morning when she had dusted.

Inspector Winkfield dismissed her and then said curtly:

“I would like to speak to Mr. Satterthwaite in private, please. Everyone may go. But no one is to leave the house.”

Mr. Satterthwaite twittered into speech as soon as the door had closed behind the others.

“I—I am sure, Inspector, that you have the case excellently in hand. Excellently. I just felt that—having, as I say, a very strong feeling—”

The Inspector arrested further speech with an upraised hand.

“You’re quite right, Mr. Satterthwaite. The lady was murdered.”

“You knew it?” Mr. Satterthwaite was chagrined.

“There were certain things that puzzled Dr. Morris.” He looked across at the doctor, who had remained, and the doctor assented to his statement with a nod of the head. “We made a thorough examination. The rope that was round her neck wasn’t the rope that she was strangled with—it was something much thinner that did the job, something more like a wire. It had cut right into the flesh. The mark of the rope was superimposed on it. She was strangled and then hung up on the door afterwards to make it look like suicide.”

“But who—?”

“Yes,” said the Inspector. “Who? That’s the question. What about the husband sleeping next door, who never said goodnight to his wife and who heard nothing? I should say we hadn’t far to look. Must find out what terms they were on That’s where you can be useful to us, Mr. Satterthwaite. You’ve the ongray here, and you can get the hang of things in a way we can’t. Find out what relations there were between the two.”

“I hardly like—” began Mr. Satterthwaite, stiffening.

“It won’t be the first murder mystery you’ve helped us with. I remember the case of Mrs. Strangeways. You’ve got a flair for that sort of thing, sir. An absolute flair.”

Yes, it was true—he had a flair. He said quietly:

“I will do my best, Inspector.”

Had Gerard Annesley killed his wife? Had he? Mr. Satterthwaite recalled that look of misery last night. He loved her—and he was suffering.

Suffering will drive a man to strange deeds.

But there was something else—some other factor. Mabelle had spoken of herself as coming out of a wood—she was looking forward to happiness—not a quiet rational happiness—but a happiness that was irrational—a wild ecstasy . . .

If Gerard Annesley had spoken the truth, Mabelle had not come to her room till at least half an hour later than he had done. Yet David Keeley had seen her going up those stairs. There were two other rooms occupied in that wing. There was Mrs. Graham's, and there was her son's.

Her son's. But he and Madge. . . .

Surely Madge would have guessed . . . But Madge wasn't the guessing kind. All the same, no smoke without fire—Smoke!

Ah! he remembered. A wisp of smoke curling out through Mrs. Graham's bedroom door.

He acted on impulse. Straight up the stairs and into her room. It was empty. He closed the door behind him and locked it.

He went across to the grate. A heap of charred fragments. Very gingerly he raked them over with his finger. His luck was in. In the very centre were some unburnt fragments—fragments of letters . . .

Very disjointed fragments, but they told him something of value.

“Life can be wonderful, Roger darling. I never knew . . . all my life has been a dream till I met you, Roger. . . .”

“. . . Gerard knows, I think . . . I am sorry but what can I do? Nothing is real to me but you, Roger . . . We shall be together, soon.”

“What are you going to tell him at Laidell, Roger? You write strangely—but I am not afraid. . . .”

Very carefully, Mr. Satterthwaite put the fragments into an envelope from the writing table. He went to the door, unlocked it and opened it to find himself face to face with Mrs. Graham.

It was an awkward moment, and Mr. Satterthwaite was momentarily out of countenance. He did what was, perhaps, the best thing, attacked the situation with simplicity.

“I have been searching your room, Mrs. Graham. I have found something—a packet of letters imperfectly burnt.”

A wave of alarm passed over her face. It was gone in a flash, but it had been there.

“Letters from Mrs. Annesley to your son.”

She hesitated for a minute, then said quietly: “That is so. I thought they would be better burnt.”

“For what reason?”

“My son is engaged to be married. These letters—if they had been brought into publicity through the poor girl’s suicide—might have caused much pain and trouble.”

“Your son could burn his own letters.”

She had no answer ready for that. Mr. Satterthwaite pursued his advantage.

“You found these letters in his room, brought them into your room and burnt them. Why? You were afraid, Mrs. Graham.”

“I am not in the habit of being afraid, Mr. Satterthwaite.”

“No—but this was a desperate case.”

“Desperate?”

“Your son might have been in danger of arrest—for murder.”

“Murder!”

He saw her face go white. He went on quickly:

“You heard Mrs. Annesley go into your son’s room last night. He had told her of his engagement? No, I see he hadn’t. He told her then. They quarrelled, and he—”

“That’s a lie!”

They had been so absorbed in their duel of words that they had not heard approaching footsteps. Roger Graham had come up behind them unperceived by either.

“It’s all right, Mother. Don’t—worry. Come into my room, Mr. Satterthwaite.”

Mr. Satterthwaite followed him into his room. Mrs. Graham had turned away and did not attempt to follow them. Roger Graham shut the door.

“Listen, Mr. Satterthwaite, you think I killed Mabelle. You think I strangled her—here—and took her along and hung her up on that door—later—when everyone was asleep?”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him. Then he said surprisingly:

“No, I do not think so.”

“Thank God for that. I couldn’t have killed Mabelle. I—I loved her. Or didn’t I? I don’t know. It’s a tangle that I can’t explain. I’m fond of Madge—I always have been. And she’s such a good sort. We suit each other. But Mabelle was different. It was—I can’t explain it—a sort of enchantment. I was, I think—afraid of her.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“It was madness—a kind of bewildering ecstasy . . . But it was impossible. It wouldn’t have worked. That sort of thing—doesn’t last. I know what it means now to have a spell cast over you.”

“Yes, it must have been like that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

“I—I wanted to get out of it all. I was going to tell Mabelle—last night.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Graham slowly. “I swear to you, Mr. Satterthwaite, that I never saw her after I said goodnight downstairs.”

“I believe you,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He got up. It was not Roger Graham who had killed Mabelle Annesley. He could have fled from her, but he could not have killed her. He had been afraid of her, afraid of that wild intangible fairy-like quality of hers. He had known enchantment—and turned his back on it. He had gone for the safe sensible thing that he had known “would work” and had relinquished the intangible dream that might lead him he knew not where.

He was a sensible young man, and, as such, uninteresting to Mr. Satterthwaite, who was an artist and a connoisseur in life.

He left Roger Graham in his room and went downstairs. The drawing room was empty. Mabelle’s ukelele lay on a stool by the window. He took it up and twanged it absentmindedly. He knew nothing of the instrument, but his ear told him that it was abominably out of tune. He turned a key experimentally.

Doris Coles came into the room. She looked at him reproachfully.

“Poor Mabelle’s uke,” she said.

Her clear condemnation made Mr. Satterthwaite feel obstinate.

“Tune it for me,” he said, and added: “If you can.”

“Of course I can,” said Doris, wounded at the suggestion of incompetence in any direction.

She took it from him, twanged a string, turned a key briskly—and the string snapped.

“Well, I never. Oh! I see—but how extraordinary! It’s the wrong string—a size too big. It’s an A string. How stupid to put that on. Of course it snaps when you try to tune it up. How stupid people are.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “They are—even when they try to be clever. . .”

His tone was so odd that she stared at him. He took the ukelele from her and removed the broken string. He went out of the room holding it in his hand. In the library he found David Keeley.

“Here,” he said.

He held out the string. Keeley took it.

“What’s this?”

“A broken ukelele string.” He paused and then went on: “What did you do with the other one?”

“The other one?”

“The one you strangled her with. You were very clever, weren’t you? It was done very quickly—just in that moment we were all laughing and talking in the hall.

“Mabelle came back into this room for her ukelele. You had taken the string off as you fiddled with it just before. You caught her round the throat with it and strangled her. Then you came out and locked the door and joined us. Later, in the dead of night, you came down and—and disposed of the body by hanging it on the door of her room. And you put another string on the ukelele—but it was the wrong string, that’s why you were stupid.”

There was a pause.

“But why did you do it?” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “In God’s name, why?”

Mr. Keeley laughed, a funny giggling little laugh that made Mr. Satterthwaite feel rather sick.

“It was so very simple,” he said. “That’s why! And then—nobody ever noticed me. Nobody ever noticed what I was doing. I thought—I thought I’d have the laugh of them. . . .”

And again he gave that furtive little giggle and looked at Mr. Satterthwaite with mad eyes.

Mr. Satterthwaite was glad that at that moment Inspector Winkfield came into the room.

It was twenty-four hours later, on his way to London, that Mr. Satterthwaite awoke from a doze to find a tall dark man sitting opposite to him in the railway carriage. He was not altogether surprised.

“My dear Mr. Quin!”

“Yes—I am here.”

Mr. Satterthwaite said slowly: “I can hardly face you. I am ashamed—I failed.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“I did not save her.”

“But you discovered the truth?”

“Yes—that is true. One or other of those young men might have been accused—might even have been found guilty. So, at any rate, I saved a man’s life. But, she—she—that strange enchanting creature . . .” His voice broke off.

Mr. Quin looked at him.

“Is death the greatest evil that can happen to anyone?”

“I—well—perhaps—No. . . .”

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered . . . Madge and Roger Graham . . . Mabelle’s face in the moonlight—its serene unearthly happiness. . . .

“No,” he admitted. “No—perhaps death is not the greatest evil. . . .”

He remembered the ruffled blue chiffon of her dress that had seemed to him like the plumage of a bird . . . A bird with a broken wing. . . .

When he looked up, he found himself alone. Mr. Quin was no longer there.

But he had left something behind.

On the seat was a roughly carved bird fashioned out of some dim blue stone. It had, possibly, no great artistic merit. But it had something else.

It had the vague quality of enchantment.

So said Mr. Satterthwaite—and Mr. Satterthwaite was a connoisseur.

THE WORLD'S END

“The World’s End” was first published in the USA as “World’s End” in Flynn’s Weekly, 20 November 1926, and then as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 3: The World’s End” in Storyteller magazine, February 1927.

Mr. Satterthwaite had come to Corsica because of the Duchess. It was out of his beat. On the Riviera he was sure of his comforts, and to be comfortable meant a lot to Mr. Satterthwaite. But though he liked his comfort, he also liked a Duchess. In his way, a harmless, gentlemanly, old-fashioned way, Mr. Satterthwaite was a snob. He liked the best people. And the Duchess of Leith was a very authentic Duchess. There were no Chicago pork butchers in her ancestry. She was the daughter of a Duke as well as the wife of one.

For the rest, she was rather a shabby-looking old lady, a good deal given to black bead trimmings on her clothes. She had quantities of diamonds in old-fashioned settings, and she wore them as her mother before her had worn them: pinned all over her indiscriminately. Someone had suggested once that the Duchess stood in the middle of the room whilst her maid flung brooches at her haphazard. She subscribed generously to charities, and looked well after her tenants and dependents, but was extremely mean over small sums. She cadged lifts from her friends, and did her shopping in bargain basements.

The Duchess was seized with a whim for Corsica. Cannes bored her and she had a bitter argument with the hotel proprietor over the price of her rooms.

“And you shall go with me, Satterthwaite,” she said firmly. “We needn’t be afraid of scandal at our time of life.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was delicately flattered. No one had ever mentioned scandal in connection with him before. He was far too insignificant. Scandal—and a Duchess—delicious!

“Picturesque you know,” said the Duchess. “Brigands—all that sort of thing. And extremely cheap, so I’ve heard. Manuel was positively impudent this morning. These hotel proprietors need putting in their place. They can’t expect to get the best people if they go on like this. I told him so plainly.”

“I believe,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that one can fly over quite comfortably. From Antibes.”

“They probably charge you a pretty penny for it,” said the Duchess sharply. “Find out, will you?”

“Certainly, Duchess.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was still in a flutter of gratification despite the fact that his role was clearly to be that of a glorified courier.

When she learned the price of a passage by Avion, the Duchess turned it down promptly.

“They needn’t think I’m going to pay a ridiculous sum like that to go in one of their nasty dangerous things.”

So they went by boat, and Mr. Satterthwaite endured ten hours of acute discomfort. To begin with, as the boat sailed at seven, he took it for granted that there would be dinner on board. But there was no dinner. The boat was small and the sea was rough. Mr. Satterthwaite was decanted at Ajaccio in the early hours of the morning more dead than alive.

The Duchess, on the contrary, was perfectly fresh. She never minded discomfort if she could feel she was saving money. She waxed enthusiastic over the scene on the quay, with the palm trees and the rising sun. The whole population seemed to have turned out to watch the arrival of the boat, and the launching of the gangway was attended with excited cries and directions.

“On dirait,” said a stout Frenchman who stood beside them, “que jamais avant on n’a fait cette manoeuvre là!”

“That maid of mine has been sick all night,” said the Duchess. “The girl’s a perfect fool.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled in a pallid fashion.

“A waste of good food, I call it,” continued the Duchess robustly.

“Did she get any food?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite enviously.

“I happened to bring some biscuits and a stick of chocolate on board with me,” said the Duchess. “When I found there was no dinner to be got, I gave the lot to her. The lower classes always make such a fuss about going without their meals.”

With a cry of triumph the launching of the gangway was accomplished. A Musical Comedy chorus of brigands rushed aboard and wrested hand luggage from the passengers by main force.

“Come on, Satterthwaite,” said the Duchess. “I want a hot bath and some coffee.”

So did Mr. Satterthwaite. He was not wholly successful, however. They were received at the hotel by a bowing manager and were shown to their rooms. The Duchess’s had a bathroom attached. Mr. Satterthwaite, however, was directed to a bath that appeared to be situated in somebody else’s bedroom. To expect the water to be hot at that hour in the morning was, perhaps, unreasonable. Later he drank intensely black coffee, served in a pot without a lid. The shutters and the window of his room had been flung open, and the crisp morning air came in fragrantly. A day of dazzling blue and green.

The waiter waved his hand with a flourish to call attention to the view.

“Ajaccio,” he said solemnly. “Le plus beau port du monde!”

And he departed abruptly.

Looking out over the deep blue of the bay, with the snowy mountains beyond, Mr. Satterthwaite was almost inclined to agree with him. He

finished his coffee, and lying down on the bed, fell fast asleep.

At déjeuner the Duchess was in great spirits.

“This is just what will be good for you, Satterthwaite,” she said. “Get you out of all those dusty little old-maidish ways of yours.” She swept a lorgnette round the room. “Upon my word, there’s Naomi Carlton Smith.”

She indicated a girl sitting by herself at a table in the window. A round-shouldered girl, who slouched as she sat. Her dress appeared to be made of some kind of brown sacking. She had black hair, untidily bobbed.

“An artist?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

He was always good at placing people.

“Quite right,” said the Duchess. “Calls herself one anyway. I knew she was mooching around in some queer quarter of the globe. Poor as a church mouse, proud as Lucifer, and a bee in her bonnet like all the Carlton Smiths. Her mother was my first cousin.”

“She’s one of the Knowlton lot then?”

The Duchess nodded.

“Been her own worst enemy,” she volunteered. “Clever girl too. Mixed herself up with a most undesirable young man. One of that Chelsea crowd. Wrote plays or poems or something unhealthy. Nobody took ’em, of course. Then he stole somebody’s jewels and got caught out. I forget what they gave him. Five years, I think. But you must remember? It was last winter.”

“Last winter I was in Egypt,” explained Mr. Satterthwaite. “I had ’flu very badly the end of January, and the doctors insisted on Egypt afterwards. I missed a lot.”

His voice rang with a note of real regret.

“That girl seems to me to be moping,” said the Duchess, raising her lorgnette once more. “I can’t allow that.”

On her way out, she stopped by Miss Carlton Smith's table and tapped the girl on the shoulder.

"Well, Naomi, you don't seem to remember me?"

Naomi rose rather unwillingly to her feet.

"Yes, I do, Duchess. I saw you come in. I thought it was quite likely you mightn't recognize me."

She drawled the words lazily, with a complete indifference of manner.

"When you've finished your lunch, come and talk to me on the terrace," ordered the Duchess.

"Very well."

Naomi yawned.

"Shocking manners," said the Duchess, to Mr. Satterthwaite, as she resumed her progress. "All the Carlton Smiths have."

They had their coffee outside in the sunshine. They had been there about six minutes when Naomi Carlton Smith lounged out from the hotel and joined them. She let herself fall slackly on to a chair with her legs stretched out ungracefully in front of her.

An odd face, with its jutting chin and deep-set grey eyes. A clever, unhappy face—a face that only just missed being beautiful.

"Well, Naomi," said the Duchess briskly. "And what are you doing with yourself?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just marking time."

"Been painting?"

"A bit."

“Show me your things.”

Naomi grinned. She was not cowed by the autocrat. She was amused. She went into the hotel and came out again with a portfolio.

“You won’t like ’em, Duchess,” she said warningly. “Say what you like. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

Mr. Satterthwaite moved his chair a little nearer. He was interested. In another minute he was more interested still. The Duchess was frankly unsympathetic.

“I can’t even see which way the things ought to be,” she complained. “Good gracious, child, there was never a sky that colour—or a sea either.”

“That’s the way I see ’em,” said Naomi placidly.

“Ugh!” said the Duchess, inspecting another. “This gives me the creeps.”

“It’s meant to,” said Naomi. “You’re paying me a compliment without knowing it.”

It was a queer vorticist study of a prickly pear—just recognizable as such. Grey-green with slodges of violent colour where the fruit glittered like jewels. A swirling mass of evil, fleshy—festering. Mr. Satterthwaite shuddered and turned his head aside.

He found Naomi looking at him and nodding her head in comprehension.

“I know,” she said. “But it is beastly.”

The Duchess cleared her throat.

“It seems quite easy to be an artist nowadays,” she observed witheringly. “There’s no attempt to copy things. You just shovel on some paint—I don’t know what with, not a brush, I’m sure—”

“Palette knife,” interposed Naomi, smiling broadly once more.

“A good deal at a time,” continued the Duchess. “In lumps. And there you are! Everyone says: ‘How clever.’ Well, I’ve no patience with that sort of thing. Give me—”

“A nice picture of a dog or a horse, by Edwin Landseer.”

“And why not?” demanded the Duchess. “What’s wrong with Landseer?”

“Nothing,” said Naomi. “He’s all right. And you’re all right. The tops of things are always nice and shiny and smooth. I respect you, Duchess, you’ve got force. You’ve met life fair and square and you’ve come out on top. But the people who are underneath see the under side of things. And that’s interesting in a way.”

The Duchess stared at her.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” she declared.

Mr. Satterthwaite was still examining the sketches. He realized, as the Duchess could not, the perfection of technique behind them. He was startled and delighted. He looked up at the girl.

“Will you sell me one of these, Miss Carlton Smith?” he asked.

“You can have any one you like for five guineas,” said the girl indifferently.

Mr. Satterthwaite hesitated a minute or two and then he selected a study of prickly pear and aloe. In the foreground was a vivid blur of yellow mimosa, the scarlet of the aloe flower danced in and out of the picture, and inexorable, mathematically underlying the whole, was the oblong pattern of the prickly pear and the sword motif of the aloe.

He made a little bow to the girl.

“I am very happy to have secured this, and I think I have made a bargain. Some day, Miss Carlton Smith, I shall be able to sell this sketch at a very good profit—if I want to!”

The girl leant forward to see which one he had taken. He saw a new look come into her eyes. For the first time she was really aware of his existence, and there was respect in the quick glance she gave him.

“You have chosen the best,” she said. “I—I am glad.”

“Well, I suppose you know what you’re doing,” said the Duchess. “And I daresay you’re right. I’ve heard that you are quite a connoisseur. But you can’t tell me that all this new stuff is art, because it isn’t. Still, we needn’t go into that. Now I’m only going to be here a few days and I want to see something of the island. You’ve got a car, I suppose, Naomi?”

The girl nodded.

“Excellent,” said the Duchess. “We’ll make a trip somewhere tomorrow.”

“It’s only a two-seater.”

“Nonsense, there’s a dickey, I suppose, that will do for Mr. Satterthwaite?”

A shuddering sigh went through Mr. Satterthwaite. He had observed the Corsican roads that morning. Naomi was regarding him thoughtfully.

“I’m afraid my car would be no good to you,” she said. “It’s a terribly battered old bus. I bought it secondhand for a mere song. It will just get me up the hills—with coaxing. But I can’t take passengers. There’s quite a good garage, though, in the town. You can hire a car there.”

“Hire a car?” said the Duchess, scandalized. “What an idea. Who’s that nice-looking man, rather yellow, who drove up in a four-seater just before lunch?”

“I expect you mean Mr. Tomlinson. He’s a retired Indian judge.”

“That accounts for the yellowness,” said the Duchess. “I was afraid it might be jaundice. He seems quite a decent sort of man. I shall talk to him.”

That evening, on coming down to dinner, Mr. Satterthwaite found the Duchess resplendent in black velvet and diamonds, talking earnestly to the

owner of the four-seater car. She beckoned authoritatively.

“Come here, Mr. Satterthwaite, Mr. Tomlinson is telling me the most interesting things, and what do you think?—he is actually going to take us on an expedition tomorrow in his car.”

Mr. Satterthwaite regarded her with admiration.

“We must go in to dinner,” said the Duchess. “Do come and sit at our table, Mr. Tomlinson, and then you can go on with what you were telling me.”

“Quite a decent sort of man,” the Duchess pronounced later.

“With quite a decent sort of car,” retorted Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Naughty,” said the Duchess, and gave him a resounding blow on the knuckles with the dingy black fan she always carried. Mr. Satterthwaite winced with pain.

“Naomi is coming too,” said the Duchess. “In her car. That girl wants taking out of herself. She’s very selfish. Not exactly self-centred, but totally indifferent to everyone and everything. Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, slowly. “I mean, everyone’s interest must go somewhere. There are, of course, the people who revolve round themselves—but I agree with you, she’s not one of that kind. She’s totally uninterested in herself. And yet she’s got a strong character—there must be something. I thought at first it was her art—but it isn’t. I’ve never met anyone so detached from life. That’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous? What do you mean?”

“Well, you see—it must mean an obsession of some kind, and obsessions are always dangerous.”

“Satterthwaite,” said the Duchess, “don’t be a fool. And listen to me. About tomorrow—”

Mr. Satterthwaite listened. It was very much his role in life.

They started early the following morning, taking their lunch with them. Naomi, who had been six months in the island, was to be the pioneer. Mr. Satterthwaite went over to her as she sat waiting to start.

“You are sure that—I can’t come with you?” he said wistfully.

She shook her head.

“You’ll be much more comfortable in the back of the other car. Nicely padded seats and all that. This is a regular old rattle trap. You’d leap in the air going over the bumps.”

“And then, of course, the hills.”

Naomi laughed.

“Oh, I only said that to rescue you from the dickey. The Duchess could perfectly well afford to have hired a car. She’s the meanest woman in England. All the same, the old thing is rather a sport, and I can’t help liking her.”

“Then I could come with you after all?” said Mr. Satterthwaite eagerly.

She looked at him curiously.

“Why are you so anxious to come with me?”

“Can you ask?” Mr. Satterthwaite made his funny old-fashioned bow.

She smiled, but shook her head.

“That isn’t the reason,” she said thoughtfully. “It’s odd . . . But you can’t come with me—not today.”

“Another day, perhaps,” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite politely.

“Oh, another day!” she laughed suddenly, a very queer laugh, Mr. Satterthwaite thought. “Another day! Well, we’ll see.”

They started. They drove through the town, and then round the long curve of the bay, winding inland to cross a river and then back to the coast with its hundreds of little sandy coves. And then they began to climb. In and out, round nerve-shattering curves, upwards, ever upwards on the tortuous winding road. The blue bay was far below them, and on the other side of it Ajaccio sparkled in the sun, white, like a fairy city.

In and out, in and out, with a precipice first one side of them, then the other. Mr. Satterthwaite felt slightly giddy, he also felt slightly sick. The road was not very wide. And still they climbed.

It was cold now. The wind came to them straight off the snow peaks. Mr. Satterthwaite turned up his coat collar and buttoned it tightly under his chin.

It was very cold. Across the water, Ajaccio was still bathed in sunlight, but up here thick grey clouds came drifting across the face of the sun. Mr. Satterthwaite ceased to admire the view. He yearned for a steamheated hotel and a comfortable armchair.

Ahead of them Naomi's little two-seater drove steadily forward. Up, still up. They were on top of the world now. On either side of them were lower hills, hills sloping down to valleys. They looked straight across to the snow peaks. And the wind came tearing over them, sharp, like a knife. Suddenly Naomi's car stopped, and she looked back.

"We've arrived," she said. "At the World's End. And I don't think it's an awfully good day for it."

They all got out. They had arrived in a tiny village, with half a dozen stone cottages. An imposing name was printed in letters a foot high.

"Coti Chiaveeri."

Naomi shrugged her shoulders.

"That's its official name, but I prefer to call it the World's End."

She walked on a few steps, and Mr. Satterthwaite joined her. They were beyond the houses now. The road stopped. As Naomi had said, this was the end, the back of beyond, the beginning of nowhere. Behind them the white ribbon of the road, in front of them—nothing. Only far, far below, the sea. . .

Mr. Satterthwaite drew a deep breath.

“It’s an extraordinary place. One feels that anything might happen here, that one might meet—anyone—”

He stopped, for just in front of them a man was sitting on a boulder, his face turned to the sea. They had not seen him till this moment, and his appearance had the suddenness of a conjuring trick. He might have sprung from the surrounding landscape.

“I wonder—” began Mr. Satterthwaite.

But at that minute the stranger turned, and Mr. Satterthwaite saw his face.

“Why, Mr. Quin! How extraordinary. Miss Carlton Smith, I want to introduce my friend Mr. Quin to you. He’s the most unusual fellow. You are, you know. You always turn up in the nick of time—”

He stopped, with the feeling that he had said something awkwardly significant, and yet for the life of him he could not think what it was.

Naomi had shaken hands with Mr. Quin in her usual abrupt style.

“We’re here for a picnic,” she said. “And it seems to me we shall be pretty well frozen to the bone.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shivered.

“Perhaps,” he said uncertainly, “we shall find a sheltered spot?”

“Which this isn’t,” agreed Naomi. “Still, it’s worth seeing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed.” Mr. Satterthwaite turned to Mr. Quin. “Miss Carlton Smith calls this place the World’s End. Rather a good name, eh?”

Mr. Quin nodded his head slowly several times.

“Yes—a very suggestive name. I suppose one only comes once in one’s life to a place like that—a place where one can’t go on any longer.”

“What do you mean?” asked Naomi sharply.

He turned to her.

“Well, usually, there’s a choice, isn’t there? To the right or to the left. Forward or back. Here—there’s the road behind you and in front of you—nothing.”

Naomi stared at him. Suddenly she shivered and began to retrace her steps towards the others. The two men fell in beside her. Mr. Quin continued to talk, but his tone was now easily conversational.

“Is the small car yours, Miss Carlton Smith?”

“Yes.”

“You drive yourself? One needs, I think, a good deal of nerve to do that round here. The turns are rather appalling. A moment of inattention, a brake that failed to hold, and—over the edge—down—down—down. It would be—very easily done.”

They had now joined the others. Mr. Satterthwaite introduced his friend. He felt a tug at his arm. It was Naomi. She drew him apart from the others.

“Who is he?” she demanded fiercely.

Mr. Satterthwaite gazed at her in astonishment.

“Well, I hardly know. I mean, I have known him for some years now—we have run across each other from time to time, but in the sense of knowing actually—”

He stopped. These were futilities that he was uttering, and the girl by his side was not listening. She was standing with her head bent down, her hands clenched by her sides.

“He knows things,” she said. “He knows things . . . How does he know?”

Mr. Satterthwaite had no answer. He could only look at her dumbly, unable to comprehend the storm that shook her.

“I’m afraid,” she muttered.

“Afraid of Mr. Quin?”

“I’m afraid of his eyes. He sees things. . . .”

Something cold and wet fell on Mr. Satterthwaite’s cheek. He looked up.

“Why, it’s snowing,” he exclaimed, in great surprise.

“A nice day to have chosen for a picnic,” said Naomi.

She had regained control of herself with an effort.

What was to be done? A babel of suggestions broke out. The snow came down thick and fast. Mr. Quin made a suggestion and everyone welcomed it. There was a little stone Cassecroute at the end of the row of houses. There was a stampede towards it.

“You have your provisions,” said Mr. Quin, “and they will probably be able to make you some coffee.”

It was a tiny place, rather dark, for the one little window did little towards lighting it, but from one end came a grateful glow of warmth. An old Corsican woman was just throwing a handful of branches on the fire. It blazed up, and by its light the newcomers realized that others were before them.

Three people were sitting at the end of a bare wooden table. There was something unreal about the scene to Mr. Satterthwaite’s eye, there was

something even more unreal about the people.

The woman who sat at the end of the table looked like a duchess—that is, she looked more like a popular conception of a duchess. She was the ideal stage grande dame. Her aristocratic head was held high, her exquisitely dressed hair was of a snowy white. She was dressed in grey—soft draperies that fell about her in artistic folds. One long white hand supported her chin, the other was holding a roll spread with pâté de foie gras. On her right was a man with a very white face, very black hair, and horn-rimmed spectacles. He was marvellously and beautifully dressed. At the moment his head was thrown back, and his left arm was thrown out as though he were about to declaim something.

On the left of the white-haired lady was a jolly-looking little man with a bald head. After the first glance, nobody looked at him.

There was just a moment of uncertainty, and then the Duchess (the authentic Duchess) took charge.

“Isn’t this storm too dreadful?” she said pleasantly, coming forward, and smiling a purposeful and efficient smile that she had found very useful when serving on Welfare and other committees. “I suppose you’ve been caught in it just like we have? But Corsica is a marvellous place. I only arrived this morning.”

The man with the black hair got up, and the Duchess with a gracious smile slipped into his seat.

The white-haired lady spoke.

“We have been here a week,” she said.

Mr. Satterthwaite started. Could anyone who had once heard that voice ever forget it? It echoed round the stone room, charged with emotion—with exquisite melancholy. It seemed to him that she had said something wonderful, memorable, full of meaning. She had spoken from her heart.

He spoke in a hurried aside to Mr. Tomlinson.

“The man in spectacles is Mr. Vyse—the producer, you know.”

The retired Indian judge was looking at Mr. Vyse with a good deal of dislike.

“What does he produce?” he asked. “Children?”

“Oh, dear me, no,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, shocked by the mere mention of anything so crude in connection with Mr. Vyse. “Plays.”

“I think,” said Naomi, “I’ll go out again. It’s too hot in here.”

Her voice, strong and harsh, made Mr. Satterthwaite jump. She made almost blindly, as it seemed, for the door, brushing Mr. Tomlinson aside. But in the doorway itself she came face to face with Mr. Quin, and he barred her way.

“Go back and sit down,” he said.

His voice was authoritative. To Mr. Satterthwaite’s surprise the girl hesitated a minute and then obeyed. She sat down at the foot of the table as far from the others as possible.

Mr. Satterthwaite bustled forward and buttonholed the producer.

“You may not remember me,” he began, “my name is Satterthwaite.”

“Of course!” A long bony hand shot out and enveloped the other’s in a painful grip. “My dear man. Fancy meeting you here. You know Miss Nunn, of course?”

Mr. Satterthwaite jumped. No wonder that voice had been familiar. Thousands, all over England, had thrilled to those wonderful emotion-laden tones. Rosina Nunn! England’s greatest emotional actress. Mr. Satterthwaite too had lain under her spell. No one like her for interpreting a part—for bringing out the finer shades of meaning. He had thought of her always as an intellectual actress, one who comprehended and got inside the soul of her part.

He might be excused for not recognizing her. Rosina Nunn was volatile in her tastes. For twenty-five years of her life she had been a blonde. After a tour in the States she had returned with the locks of the raven, and she had taken up tragedy in earnest. This “French Marquise” effect was her latest whim.

“Oh, by the way, Mr. Judd—Miss Nunn’s husband,” said Vyse, carelessly introducing the man with the bald head.

Rosina Nunn had had several husbands, Mr. Satterthwaite knew. Mr. Judd was evidently the latest.

Mr. Judd was busily unwrapping packages from a hamper at his side. He addressed his wife.

“Some more pâté, dearest? That last wasn’t as thick as you like it.”

Rosina Nunn surrendered her roll to him, as she murmured simply:

“Henry thinks of the most enchanting meals. I always leave the commissariat to him.”

“Feed the brute,” said Mr. Judd, and laughed. He patted his wife on the shoulder.

“Treats her just as though she were a dog,” murmured the melancholy voice of Mr. Vyse in Mr. Satterthwaite’s ear. “Cuts up her food for her. Odd creatures, women.”

Mr. Satterthwaite and Mr. Quin between them unpacked lunch. Hard-boiled eggs, cold ham and Gruyère cheese were distributed round the table. The Duchess and Miss Nunn appeared to be deep in murmured confidences. Fragments came along in the actress’s deep contralto.

“The bread must be lightly toasted, you understand? Then just a very thin layer of marmalade. Rolled up and put in the oven for one minute—not more. Simply delicious.”

“That woman lives for food,” murmured Mr. Vyse. “Simply lives for it. She can’t think of anything else. I remember in *Riders to the Sea*—you know ‘and it’s the fine quiet time I’ll be having.’ I could not get the effect I wanted. At last I told her to think of peppermint creams—she’s very fond of peppermint creams. I got the effect at once—a sort of far-away look that went to your very soul.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was silent. He was remembering.

Mr. Tomlinson opposite cleared his throat preparatory to entering into conversation.

“You produce plays, I hear, eh? I’m fond of a good play myself. Jim the Penman, now, that was a play.”

“My God,” said Mr. Vyse, and shivered down all the long length of him.

“A tiny clove of garlic,” said Miss Nunn to the Duchess. “You tell your cook. It’s wonderful.”

She sighed happily and turned to her husband.

“Henry,” she said plaintively, “I’ve never even seen the caviare.”

“You’re as near as nothing to sitting on it,” returned Mr. Judd cheerfully. “You put it behind you on the chair.”

Rosina Nunn retrieved it hurriedly, and beamed round the table.

“Henry is too wonderful. I’m so terribly absentminded. I never know where I’ve put anything.”

“Like the day you packed your pearls in your sponge bag,” said Henry jocosely. “And then left it behind at the hotel. My word, I did a bit of wiring and phoning that day.”

“They were insured,” said Miss Nunn dreamily. “Not like my opal.”

A spasm of exquisite heartrending grief flitted across her face.

Several times, when in the company of Mr. Quin, Mr. Satterthwaite had had the feeling of taking part in a play. The illusion was with him very strongly now. This was a dream. Everyone had his part. The words “my opal” were his own cue. He leant forward.

“Your opal, Miss Nunn?”

“Have you got the butter, Henry? Thank you. Yes, my opal. It was stolen, you know. And I never got it back.”

“Do tell us,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Well—I was born in October—so it was lucky for me to wear opals, and because of that I wanted a real beauty. I waited a long time for it. They said it was one of the most perfect ones known. Not very large—about the size of a two-shilling piece—but oh! the colour and the fire.”

She sighed. Mr. Satterthwaite observed that the Duchess was fidgeting and seemed uncomfortable, but nothing could stop Miss Nunn now. She went on, and the exquisite inflections of her voice made the story sound like some mournful Saga of old.

“It was stolen by a young man called Alec Gerard. He wrote plays.”

“Very good plays,” put in Mr. Vyse professionally. “Why, I once kept one of his plays for six months.”

“Did you produce it?” asked Mr. Tomlinson.

“Oh, no,” said Mr. Vyse, shocked at the idea. “But do you know, at one time I actually thought of doing so?”

“It had a wonderful part in it for me,” said Miss Nunn. “Rachel’s Children, it was called—though there wasn’t anyone called Rachel in the play. He came to talk to me about it—at the theatre. I liked him. He was a nice-looking—and very shy, poor boy. I remember”—a beautiful faraway look stole over her face—“he bought me some peppermint creams. The opal was lying on the dressing table. He’d been out in Australia, and he knew

something about opals. He took it over to the light to look at it. I suppose he must have slipped it into his pocket then. I missed it as soon as he'd gone. There was a to-do. You remember?"

She turned to Mr. Vyse.

"Oh, I remember," said Mr. Vyse with a groan.

"They found the empty case in his rooms," continued the actress. "He'd been terribly hard up, but the very next day he was able to pay large sums into his bank. He pretended to account for it by saying that a friend of his had put some money on a horse for him, but he couldn't produce the friend. He said he must have put the case in his pocket by mistake. I think that was a terribly weak thing to say, don't you? He might have thought of something better than that . . . I had to go and give evidence. There were pictures of me in all the papers. My press agent said it was very good publicity—but I'd much rather have had my opal back."

She shook her head sadly.

"Have some preserved pineapple?" said Mr. Judd.

Miss Nunn brightened up.

"Where is it?"

"I gave it to you just now."

Miss Nunn looked behind her and in front of her, eyed her grey silk pochette, and then slowly drew up a large purple silk bag that was reposing on the ground beside her. She began to turn the contents out slowly on the table, much to Mr. Satterthwaite's interest.

There was a powder puff, a lipstick, a small jewel case, a skein of wool, another powder puff, two handkerchiefs, a box of chocolate creams, an enamelled paper knife, a mirror, a little dark brown wooden box, five letters, a walnut, a small square of mauve crêpe de chine, a piece of ribbon and the end of a croissant. Last of all came the preserved pineapple.

“Eureka,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite softly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite hastily. “What a charming paper knife.”

“Yes, isn’t it? Somebody gave it to me. I can’t remember who.”

“That’s an Indian box,” remarked Mr. Tomlinson. “Ingenious little things, aren’t they?”

“Somebody gave me that too,” said Miss Nunn. “I’ve had it a long time. It used always to stand on my dressing table at the theatre. I don’t think it’s very pretty, though, do you?”

The box was of plain dark brown wood. It pushed open from the side. On the top of it were two plain flaps of wood that could be turned round and round.

“Not pretty, perhaps,” said Mr. Tomlinson with a chuckle. “But I’ll bet you’ve never seen one like it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward. He had an excited feeling.

“Why did you say it was ingenious?” he demanded.

“Well, isn’t it?”

The judge appealed to Miss Nunn. She looked at him blankly.

“I suppose I mustn’t show them the trick of it—eh?” Miss Nunn still looked blank.

“What trick?” asked Mr. Judd.

“God bless my soul, don’t you know?”

He looked round the inquiring faces.

“Fancy that now. May I take the box a minute? Thank you.”

He pushed it open.

“Now then, can anyone give me something to put in it—not too big. Here’s a small piece of Gruyère cheese. That will do capitally. I place it inside, shut the box.”

He fumbled for a minute or two with his hands.

“Now see—”

He opened the box again. It was empty.

“Well, I never,” said Mr. Judd. “How do you do it?”

“It’s quite simple. Turn the box upside down, and move the left hand flap halfway round, then shut the right hand flap. Now to bring our piece of cheese back again we must reverse that. The right hand flap halfway round, and the left one closed, still keeping the box upside down. And now—Hey Presto!”

The box slid open. A gasp went round the table. The cheese was there—but so was something else. A round thing that blinked forth every colour of the rainbow.

“My opal!”

It was a clarion note. Rosina Nunn stood upright, her hands clasped to her breast.

“My opal! How did it get there?”

Henry Judd cleared his throat.

“I—er—I rather think, Rosy, my girl, you must have put it there yourself.”

Someone got up from the table and blundered out into the air. It was Naomi Carlton Smith. Mr. Quin followed her.

“But when? Do you mean—?”

Mr. Satterthwaite watched her while the truth dawned on her. It took over two minutes before she got it.

“You mean last year—at the theatre.”

“You know,” said Henry apologetically. “You do fiddle with things, Rosy. Look at you with the caviare today.”

Miss Nunn was painfully following out her mental processes.

“I just slipped it in without thinking, and then I suppose I turned the box about and did the thing by accident, but then—but then—” At last it came. “But then Alec Gerard didn’t steal it after all. Oh!”—a full-throated cry, poignant, moving—“How dreadful!”

“Well,” said Mr. Vyse, “that can be put right now.”

“Yes, but he’s been in prison a year.” And then she startled them. She turned sharp on the Duchess. “Who is that girl—that girl who has just gone out?”

“Miss Carlton Smith,” said the Duchess, “was engaged to Mr. Gerard. She—took the thing very hard.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stole softly away. The snow had stopped, Naomi was sitting on the stone wall. She had a sketch book in her hand, some coloured crayons were scattered around. Mr. Quin was standing beside her.

She held out the sketch book to Mr. Satterthwaite. It was a very rough affair—but it had genius. A kaleidoscopic whirl of snowflakes with a figure in the centre.

“Very good,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Mr. Quin looked up at the sky.

“The storm is over,” he said. “The roads will be slippery, but I do not think there will be any accident—now.”

“There will be no accident,” said Naomi. Her voice was charged with some meaning that Mr. Satterthwaite did not understand. She turned and smiled at him—a sudden dazzling smile. “Mr. Satterthwaite can drive back with me if he likes.”

He knew then to what length desperation had driven her.

“Well,” said Mr. Quin, “I must bid you goodbye.”

He moved away.

“Where is he going?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, staring after him.

“Back where he came from, I suppose,” said Naomi in an odd voice.

“But—but there isn’t anything there,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, for Mr. Quin was making for that spot on the edge of the cliff where they had first seen him. “You know you said yourself it was the World’s End.”

He handed back the sketch book.

“It’s very good,” he said. “A very good likeness. But why—er—why did you put him in Fancy Dress?”

Her eyes met his for a brief second.

“I see him like that,” said Naomi Carlton Smith.

Twelve

HARLEQUIN'S LANE

“Harlequin’s Lane” was first published as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 6” in Storyteller, May 1927.

Mr. Satterthwaite was never quite sure what took him to stay with the Denmans. They were not of his kind—that is to say, they belonged neither to the great world, nor to the more interesting artistic circles. They were Philistines, and dull Philistines at that. Mr. Satterthwaite had met them first at Biarritz, had accepted an invitation to stay with them, had come, had been bored, and yet strangely enough had come again and yet again.

Why? He was asking himself that question on this twenty-first of June, as he sped out of London in his Rolls-Royce.

John Denman was a man of forty, a solid well-established figure respected in the business world. His friends were not Mr. Satterthwaite’s friends, his ideas even less so. He was a man clever in his own line but devoid of imagination outside it.

Why am I doing this thing? Mr. Satterthwaite asked himself once more—and the only answer that came seemed to him so vague and so inherently preposterous that he almost put it aside. For the only reason that presented itself was the fact that one of the rooms in the house (a comfortable well-appointed house), stirred his curiosity. That room was Mrs. Denman’s own sitting room.

It was hardly an expression of her personality because, so far as Mr. Satterthwaite could judge, she had no personality. He had never met a woman so completely expressionless. She was, he knew, a Russian by birth. John Denman had been in Russia at the outbreak of the European war, he had fought with the Russian troops, had narrowly escaped with his life on the outbreak of the Revolution, and had brought this Russian girl with him,

a penniless refugee. In face of strong disapproval from his parents he had married her.

Mrs. Denman's room was in no way remarkable. It was well and solidly furnished with good Hepplewhite furniture—a trifle more masculine than feminine in atmosphere. But in it there was one incongruous item: a Chinese lacquer screen—a thing of creamy yellow and pale rose. Any museum might have been glad to own it. It was a collector's piece, rare and beautiful.

It was out of place against that solid English background. It should have been the keynote of the room with everything arranged to harmonize subtly with it. And yet Mr. Satterthwaite could not accuse the Denmans of lack of taste. Everything else in the house was in perfectly blended accord.

He shook his head. The thing—trivial though it was—puzzled him. Because of it, so he verily believed, he had come again and again to the house. It was, perhaps, a woman's fantasy—but that solution did not satisfy him as he thought of Mrs. Denman—a quiet hard-featured woman, speaking English so correctly that no one would ever have guessed her a foreigner.

The car drew up at his destination and he got out, his mind still dwelling on the problem of the Chinese screen. The name of the Denman's house was "Ashmead," and it occupied some five acres of Melton Heath, which is thirty miles from London, stands five hundred feet above sea level and is, for the most part, inhabited by those who have ample incomes.

The butler received Mr. Satterthwaite suavely. Mr. and Mrs. Denman were both out—at a rehearsal—they hoped Mr. Satterthwaite would make himself at home until they returned.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded and proceeded to carry out these injunctions by stepping into the garden. After a cursory examination of the flower beds, he strolled down a shady walk and presently came to a door in the wall. It was unlocked and he passed through it and came out into a narrow lane.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked to left and right. A very charming lane, shady and green, with high hedges—a rural lane that twisted and turned in good old-

fashioned style. He remembered the stamped address: ASHMEAD, HARLEQUIN'S LANE—remembered too, a local name for it that Mrs. Denman had once told him.

“Harlequin's Lane,” he murmured to himself softly. “I wonder—”

He turned a corner.

Not at the time, but afterwards, he wondered why this time he felt no surprise at meeting that elusive friend of his: Mr. Harley Quin. The two men clasped hands.

“So you're down here,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin. “I'm staying in the same house as you are.”

“Staying there?”

“Yes. Does it surprise you?”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. “Only—well, you never stay anywhere for long, do you?”

“Only as long as is necessary,” said Mr. Quin gravely.

“I see,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

They walked on in silence for some minutes.

“This lane,” began Mr. Satterthwaite, and stopped.

“Belongs to me,” said Mr. Quin.

“I thought it did,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Somehow, I thought it must. There's the other name for it, too, the local name. They call it the ‘Lovers' Lane.’ You know that?”

Mr. Quin nodded.

“But surely,” he said gently, “there is a ‘Lovers’ Lane’ in every village?”

“I suppose so,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and he sighed a little.

He felt suddenly rather old and out of things, a little dried-up wizened old fogey of a man. Each side of him were the hedges, very green and alive.

“Where does this lane end, I wonder?” he asked suddenly.

“It ends—here,” said Mr. Quin.

They came round the last bend. The lane ended in a piece of waste ground, and almost at their feet a great pit opened. In it were tin cans gleaming in the sun, and other cans that were too red with rust to gleam, old boots, fragments of newspapers, a hundred and one odds and ends that were no longer of account to anybody.

“A rubbish heap,” exclaimed Mr. Satterthwaite, and breathed deeply and indignantly.

“Sometimes there are very wonderful things on a rubbish heap,” said Mr. Quin.

“I know, I know,” cried Mr. Satterthwaite, and quoted with just a trace of self-consciousness: “Bring me the two most beautiful things in the city, said God. You know how it goes, eh?”

Mr. Quin nodded.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked up at the ruins of a small cottage perched on the brink of the wall of the cliff.

“Hardly a pretty view for a house,” he remarked.

“I fancy this wasn’t a rubbish heap in those days,” said Mr. Quin. “I believe the Denmans lived there when they were first married. They moved into the big house when the old people died. The cottage was pulled down when they began to quarry the rock here—but nothing much was done, as you can see.”

They turned and began retracing their steps.

“I suppose,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, smiling, “that many couples come wandering down this lane on these warm summer evenings.”

“Probably.”

“Lovers,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He repeated the word thoughtfully and quite without the normal embarrassment of the Englishman. Mr. Quin had that effect upon him. “Lovers . . . You have done a lot for lovers, Mr. Quin.”

The other bowed his head without replying.

“You have saved them from sorrow—from worse than sorrow, from death. You have been an advocate for the dead themselves.”

“You are speaking of yourself—of what you have done—not of me.”

“It is the same thing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “You know it is,” he urged, as the other did not speak. “You have acted—through me. For some reason or other you do not act directly—yourself.”

“Sometimes I do,” said Mr. Quin.

His voice held a new note. In spite of himself Mr. Satterthwaite shivered a little. The afternoon, he thought, must be growing chilly. And yet the sun seemed as bright as ever.

At that moment a girl turned the corner ahead of them and came into sight. She was a very pretty girl, fair-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a pink cotton frock. Mr. Satterthwaite recognized her as Molly Stanwell, whom he had met down here before.

She waved a hand to welcome him.

“John and Anna have just gone back,” she cried. “They thought you must have come, but they simply had to be at the rehearsal.”

“Rehearsal of what?” inquired Mr. Satterthwaite.

“This masquerade thing—I don’t quite know what you’ll call it. There is singing and dancing and all sorts of things in it. Mr. Manly, do you remember him down here? He had quite a good tenor voice, is to be Pierrot, and I am Pierrette. Two professionals are coming down for the dancing—Harlequin and Columbine, you know. And then there is a big chorus of girls. Lady Roscheimer is so keen on training village girls to sing. She’s really getting the thing up for that. The music is rather lovely—but very modern—next to no tune anywhere. Claude Wickam. Perhaps you know him?”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded, for, as has been mentioned before, it was his métier to know everybody. He knew all about that aspiring genius Claude Wickam, and about Lady Roscheimer who was a fat Jewess with a penchant for young men of the artistic persuasion. And he knew all about Sir Leopold Roscheimer who liked his wife to be happy and, most rare among husbands, did not mind her being happy in her own way.

They found Claude Wickam at tea with the Denmans, cramming his mouth indiscriminately with anything handy, talking rapidly, and waving long white hands that had a double-jointed appearance. His shortsighted eyes peered through large hornrimmed spectacles.

John Denman, upright, slightly florid, with the faintest possible tendency to sleekness, listened with an air of bored attention. On the appearance of Mr. Satterthwaite, the musician transferred his remarks to him. Anna Denman sat behind the tea things, quiet and expressionless as usual.

Mr. Satterthwaite stole a covert glance at her. Tall, gaunt, very thin, with the skin tightly stretched over high cheek bones, black hair parted in the middle, a skin that was weather-beaten. An out of door woman who cared nothing for the use of cosmetics. A Dutch Doll of a woman, wooden, lifeless—and yet. . . .

He thought: “There should be meaning behind that face, and yet there isn’t. That’s what’s all wrong. Yes, all wrong.” And to Claude Wickam he said: “I beg your pardon? You were saying?”

Claude Wickam, who liked the sound of his own voice, began all over again. "Russia," he said, "that was the only country in the world worth being interested in. They experimented. With lives, if you like, but still they experimented. Magnificent!" He crammed a sandwich into his mouth with one hand, and added a bite of the chocolate éclair he was waving about in the other. "Take," he said (with his mouth full), "the Russian Ballet." Remembering his hostess, he turned to her. What did she think of the Russian Ballet?

The question was obviously only a prelude to the important point—what Claude Wickam thought of the Russian Ballet, but her answer was unexpected and threw him completely out of his stride.

"I have never seen it."

"What?" He gazed at her openmouthed. "But—surely—"

Her voice went on, level and emotionless.

"Before my marriage, I was a dancer. So now—"

"A busman's holiday," said her husband.

"Dancing." She shrugged her shoulders. "I know all the tricks of it. It does not interest me."

"Oh!"

It took but a moment for Claude to recover his aplomb. His voice went on.

"Talking of lives," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "and experimenting in them. The Russian nation made one costly experiment."

Claude Wickam swung round on him.

"I know what you are going to say," he cried. "Kharsanova! The immortal, the only Kharsanova! You saw her dance?"

“Three times,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Twice in Paris, once in London. I shall—not forget it.”

He spoke in an almost reverent voice.

“I saw her, too,” said Claude Wickam. “I was ten years old. An uncle took me. God! I shall never forget it.”

He threw a piece of bun fiercely into a flower bed.

“There is a statuette of her in a Museum in Berlin,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “It is marvellous. That impression of fragility—as though you could break her with a flip of the thumb nail. I have seen her as Columbine, in the Swan, as the dying Nymph.” He paused, shaking his head. “There was genius. It will be long years before such another is born. She was young too. Destroyed ignorantly and wantonly in the first days of the Revolution.”

“Fools! Madmen! Apes!” said Claude Wickam. He choked with a mouthful of tea.

“I studied with Kharsanova,” said Mrs. Denman. “I remember her well.”

“She was wonderful?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Denman quietly. “She was wonderful.”

Claude Wickam departed and John Denman drew a deep sigh of relief at which his wife laughed.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded. “I know what you think. But in spite of everything, the music that that boy writes is music.”

“I suppose it is,” said Denman.

“Oh, undoubtedly. How long it will be—well, that is different.”

John Denman looked at him curiously.

“You mean?”

“I mean that success has come early. And that is dangerous. Always dangerous.” He looked across at Mr. Quin. “You agree with me?”

“You are always right,” said Mr. Quin.

“We will come upstairs to my room,” said Mrs. Denman. “It is pleasant there.”

She led the way, and they followed her. Mr. Satterthwaite drew a deep breath as he caught sight of the Chinese screen. He looked up to find Mrs. Denman watching him.

“You are the man who is always right,” she said, nodding her head slowly at him. “What do you make of my screen?”

He felt that in some way the words were a challenge to him, and he answered almost haltingly, stumbling over the words a little.

“Why, it’s—it’s beautiful. More, it’s unique.”

“You’re right.” Denman had come up behind him. “We bought it early in our married life. Got it for about a tenth of its value, but even then—well, it crippled us for over a year. You remember, Anna?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Denman, “I remember.”

“In fact, we’d no business to buy it at all—not then. Now, of course, it’s different. There was some very good lacquer going at Christie’s the other day. Just what we need to make this room perfect. All Chinese together. Clear out the other stuff. Would you believe it, Satterthwaite, my wife wouldn’t hear of it?”

“I like this room as it is,” said Mrs. Denman.

There was a curious look on her face. Again Mr. Satterthwaite felt challenged and defeated. He looked round him, and for the first time he noticed the absence of all personal touch. There were no photographs, no flowers, no knickknacks. It was not like a woman’s room at all. Save for

that one incongruous factor of the Chinese screen, it might have been a sample room shown at some big furnishing house.

He found her smiling at him.

“Listen,” she said. She bent forward, and for a moment she seemed less English, more definitely foreign. “I speak to you for you will understand. We bought that screen with more than money—with love. For love of it, because it was beautiful and unique, we went without other things, things we needed and missed. These other Chinese pieces my husband speaks of, those we should buy with money only, we should not pay away anything of ourselves.”

Her husband laughed.

“Oh, have it your own way,” he said, but with a trace of irritation in his voice. “But it’s all wrong against this English background. This other stuff, it’s good enough of its kind, genuine solid, no fake about it—but mediocre. Good plain late Hepplewhite.”

She nodded.

“Good, solid, genuine English,” she murmured softly.

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at her. He caught a meaning behind these words. The English room—the flaming beauty of the Chinese screen . . . No, it was gone again.

“I met Miss Stanwell in the lane,” he said conversationally. “She tells me she is going to be Pierrette in this show tonight.”

“Yes,” said Denman. “And she’s awfully good, too.”

“She has clumsy feet,” said Anna.

“Nonsense,” said her husband. “All women are alike, Satterthwaite. Can’t bear to hear another woman praised. Molly is a very good-looking girl, and so of course every woman has to have their knife into her.”

“I spoke of dancing,” said Anna Denman. She sounded faintly surprised. “She is very pretty, yes, but her feet move clumsily. You cannot tell me anything else because I know about dancing.”

Mr. Satterthwaite intervened tactfully.

“You have two professional dancers coming down, I understand?”

“Yes. For the ballet proper. Prince Oranoff is bringing them down in his car.”

“Sergius Oranoff?”

The question came from Anna Denman. Her husband turned and looked at her.

“You know him?”

“I used to know him—in Russia.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought that John Denman looked disturbed.

“Will he know you?”

“Yes. He will know me.”

She laughed—a low, almost triumphant laugh. There was nothing of the Dutch Doll about her face now. She nodded reassuringly at her husband.

“Sergius. So he is bringing down the two dancers. He was always interested in dancing.”

“I remember.”

John Denman spoke abruptly, then turned and left the room. Mr. Quin followed him. Anna Denman crossed to the telephone and asked for a number. She arrested Mr. Satterthwaite with a gesture as he was about to follow the example of the other two men.

“Can I speak to Lady Roscheimer. Oh! it is you. This is Anna Denman speaking. Has Prince Oranoff arrived yet? What? What? Oh, my dear! But how ghastly.”

She listened for a few moments longer, then replaced the receiver. She turned to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“There has been an accident. There would be with Sergius Ivanovitch driving. Oh, he has not altered in all these years. The girl was not badly hurt, but bruised and shaken, too much to dance tonight. The man’s arm is broken. Sergius Ivanovitch himself is unhurt. The devil looks after his own, perhaps.”

“And what about tonight’s performance?”

“Exactly, my friend. Something must be done about it.”

She sat thinking. Presently she looked at him.

“I am a bad hostess, Mr. Satterthwaite. I do not entertain you.”

“I assure you that it is not necessary. There’s one thing though, Mrs. Denman, that I would very much like to know.”

“Yes?”

“How did you come across Mr. Quin?”

“He is often down here,” she said slowly. “I think he owns land in this part of the world.”

“He does, he does. He told me so this afternoon,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“He is—” She paused. Her eyes met Mr. Satterthwaite’s. “I think you know what he is better than I do,” she finished.

“I?”

“Is it not so?”

He was troubled. His neat little soul found her disturbing. He felt that she wished to force him further than he was prepared to go, that she wanted him to put into words that which he was not prepared to admit to himself.

“You know!” she said. “I think you know most things, Mr. Satterthwaite.”

Here was incense, yet for once it failed to intoxicate him. He shook his head in unwonted humility.

“What can anyone know?” he asked. “So little—so very little.”

She nodded in assent. Presently she spoke again, in a queer brooding voice, without looking at him.

“Supposing I were to tell you something—you would not laugh? No, I do not think you would laugh. Supposing, then, that to carry on one’s”—she paused—“one’s trade, one’s profession, one were to make use of a fantasy—one were to pretend to oneself something that did not exist—that one were to imagine a certain person . . . It is a pretence, you understand, a make believe—nothing more. But one day—”

“Yes?” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He was keenly interested.

“The fantasy came true! The thing one imagined—the impossible thing, the thing that could not be—was real! Is that madness? Tell me, Mr. Satterthwaite. Is that madness—or do you believe it too?”

“I—” Queer how he could not get the words out. How they seemed to stick somewhere at the back of his throat.

“Folly,” said Anna Denman. “Folly.”

She swept out of the room and left Mr. Satterthwaite with his confession of faith unspoken.

He came down to dinner to find Mrs. Denman entertaining a guest, a tall dark man approaching middle age.

“Prince Oranoff—Mr. Satterthwaite.”

The two men bowed. Mr. Satterthwaite had the feeling that some conversation had been broken off on his entry which would not be resumed. But there was no sense of strain. The Russian conversed easily and naturally on those objects which were nearest to Mr. Satterthwaite’s heart. He was a man of very fine artistic taste, and they soon found that they had many friends in common. John Denman joined them, and the talk became localized. Oranoff expressed regret for the accident.

“It was not my fault. I like to drive fast—yes, but I am a good driver. It was Fate—chance”—he shrugged his shoulders—“the masters of all of us.”

“There speaks the Russian in you, Sergius Ivanovitch,” said Mrs. Denman.

“And finds an echo in you, Anna Mikalovna,” he threw back quickly.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked from one to the other of the three of them. John Denman, fair, aloof, English, and the other two, dark, thin, strangely alike. Something rose in his mind—what was it? Ah! he had it now. The first Act of the Walküre. Siegmund and Sieglinde—so alike—and the alien Hunding. Conjectures began to stir in his brain. Was this the meaning of the presence of Mr. Quin? One thing he believed in firmly—wherever Mr. Quin showed himself—there lay drama. Was this it here—the old hackneyed three-cornered tragedy?

He was vaguely disappointed. He had hoped for better things.

“What has been arranged, Anna?” asked Denman. “The thing will have to be put off, I suppose. I heard you ringing the Roscheimers up.”

She shook her head.

“No—there is no need to put it off.”

“But you can’t do it without the ballet?”

“You certainly couldn’t have a Harlequinade without Harlequin and Columbine,” agreed Anna Denman drily. “I’m going to be Columbine,

John.”

“You?” He was astonished—disturbed, Mr. Satterthwaite thought.

She nodded composedly.

“You need not be afraid, John. I shall not disgrace you. You forget—it was my profession once.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought: “What an extraordinary thing a voice is. The things it says—and the things it leaves unsaid and means! I wish I knew. . . .”

“Well,” said John Denman grudgingly, “that solves one half of the problem. What about the other? Where will you find Harlequin?”

“I have found him—there!”

She gestured towards the open doorway where Mr. Quin had just appeared. He smiled back at her.

“Good lord, Quin,” said John Denman. “Do you know anything of this game? I should never have imagined it.”

“Mr. Quin is vouched for by an expert,” said his wife. “Mr. Satterthwaite will answer for him.”

She smiled at Mr. Satterthwaite, and the little man found himself murmuring:

“Oh, yes—I answer for Mr. Quin.”

Denman turned his attention elsewhere.

“You know there’s to be a fancy-dress dance business afterwards. Great nuisance. We’ll have to rig you up, Satterthwaite.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head very decidedly.

“My years will excuse me.” A brilliant idea struck him. A table napkin under his arm. “There I am, an elderly waiter who has seen better days.”

He laughed.

“An interesting profession,” said Mr. Quin. “One sees so much.”

“I’ve got to put on some fool pierrot thing,” said Denman gloomily. “It’s cool anyway, that’s one thing. What about you?” He looked at Oranoff.

“I have a Harlequin costume,” said the Russian. His eyes wandered for a minute to his hostess’s face.

Mr. Satterthwaite wondered if he was mistaken in fancying that there was just a moment of constraint.

“There might have been three of us,” said Denman, with a laugh. “I’ve got an old Harlequin costume my wife made me when we were first married for some show or other.” He paused, looking down on his broad shirt front. “I don’t suppose I could get into it now.”

“No,” said his wife. “You couldn’t get into it now.”

And again her voice said something more than mere words.

She glanced up at the clock.

“If Molly doesn’t turn up soon, we won’t wait for her.”

But at that moment the girl was announced. She was already wearing her Pierrette dress of white and green, and very charming she looked in it, so Mr. Satterthwaite reflected.

She was full of excitement and enthusiasm over the forthcoming performance.

“I’m getting awfully nervous, though,” she announced, as they drank coffee after dinner. “I know my voice will wobble, and I shall forget the words.”

“Your voice is very charming,” said Anna. “I should not worry about it if I were you.”

“Oh, but I do. The other I don’t mind about—the dancing, I mean. That’s sure to go all right. I mean, you can’t go very far wrong with your feet, can you?”

She appealed to Anna, but the older woman did not respond. Instead she said:

“Sing something now to Mr. Satterthwaite. You will find that he will reassure you.”

Molly went over to the piano. Her voice rang out, fresh and tuneful, in an old Irish ballad.

“Shiela, dark Shiela, what is it that you’re seeing?

What is it that you’re seeing, that you’re seeing in the fire?”

“I see a lad that loves me—and I see a lad that leaves me,

And a third lad, a Shadow Lad—and he’s the lad that grieves me.”

The song went on. At the end, Mr. Satterthwaite nodded vigorous approval.

“Mrs. Denman is right. Your voice is charming. Not, perhaps, very fully trained, but delightfully natural, and with that unstudied quality of youth in it.”

“That’s right,” agreed John Denman. “You go ahead, Molly, and don’t be downed by stage fright. We’d better be getting over to the Roscheimers now.”

The party separated to don cloaks. It was a glorious night and they proposed to walk over, the house being only a few hundred yards down the road.

Mr. Satterthwaite found himself by his friend.

“It’s an odd thing,” he said, “but that song made me think of you. A third lad—a Shadow Lad—there’s mystery there, and wherever there’s mystery I—well, think of you.”

“Am I so mysterious?” smiled Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded vigorously.

“Yes, indeed. Do you know, until tonight, I had no idea that you were a professional dancer.”

“Really?” said Mr. Quin.

“Listen,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He hummed the love motif from the Walküre. “That is what has been ringing in my head all through dinner as I looked at those two.”

“Which two?”

“Prince Oranoff and Mrs. Denman. Don’t you see the difference in her tonight? It’s as though—as though a shutter had suddenly been opened and you see the glow within.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin. “Perhaps so.”

“The same old drama,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I am right, am I not? Those two belong together. They are of the same world, think the same thoughts, dream the same dreams . . . One sees how it has come about. Ten years ago Denman must have been very good-looking, young, dashing, a figure of romance. And he saved her life. All quite natural. But now—what is he, after all? A good fellow—prosperous, successful—but—well, mediocre, Good honest English stuff—very much like that Hepplewhite furniture upstairs. As English—and as ordinary—as that pretty English girl with her fresh untrained voice. Oh, you may smile, Mr. Quin, but you cannot deny what I am saying.”

“I deny nothing. In what you see you are always right. And yet—”

“Yet what?”

Mr. Quin leaned forward. His dark melancholy eyes searched for those of Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Have you learned so little of life?” he breathed.

He left Mr. Satterthwaite vaguely disquieted, such a prey to meditation that he found the others had started without him owing to his delay in selecting a scarf for his neck. He went out by the garden, and through the same door as in the afternoon. The lane was bathed in moonlight, and even as he stood in the doorway he saw a couple enlaced in each other’s arms.

For a moment he thought—

And then he saw. John Denman and Molly Stanwell. Denman’s voice came to him, hoarse and anguished.

“I can’t live without you. What are we to do?”

Mr. Satterthwaite turned to go back the way he had come, but a hand stayed him. Someone else stood in the doorway beside him, someone else whose eyes had also seen.

Mr. Satterthwaite had only to catch one glimpse of her face to know how wildly astray all his conclusions had been.

Her anguished hand held him there until those other two had passed up the lane and disappeared from sight. He heard himself speaking to her, saying foolish little things meant to be comforting, and ludicrously inadequate to the agony he had divined. She only spoke once.

“Please,” she said, “don’t leave me.”

He found that oddly touching. He was, then, of use to someone. And he went on saying those things that meant nothing at all, but which were, somehow, better than silence. They went that way to the Roscheimers. Now and then her hand tightened on his shoulder, and he understood that she was glad of his company. She only took it away when they finally came to their destination. She stood very erect, her head held high.

“Now,” she said, “I shall dance! Do not be afraid for me, my friend. I shall dance.”

She left him abruptly. He was seized upon by Lady Roscheimer, much bediamonded and very full of lamentations. By her he was passed on to Claude Wickam.

“Ruined! Completely ruined. The sort of thing that always happens to me. All these country bumpkins think they can dance. I was never even consulted—” His voice went on—went on interminably. He had found a sympathetic listener, a man who knew. He gave himself up to an orgy of self-pity. It only ended when the first strains of music began.

Mr. Satterthwaite came out of his dreams. He was alert, once more the critic. Wickam was an unutterable ass, but he could write music—delicate gossamer stuff, intangible as a fairy web—yet with nothing of the pretty pretty about it.

The scenery was good. Lady Roscheimer never spared expense when aiding her protégés. A glade of Arcady with lighting effects that gave it the proper atmosphere of unreality.

Two figures dancing as they had danced through time immemorial. A slender Harlequin flashing spangles in the moonlight with magic wand and masked face . . . A white Columbine pirouetting like some immortal dream. . . .

Mr. Satterthwaite sat up. He had lived through this before. Yes, surely . . .

Now his body was far away from Lady Roscheimer’s drawingroom. It was in a Berlin Museum at a statuette of an immortal Columbine.

Harlequin and Columbine danced on. The wide world was theirs to dance in. . . .

Moonlight—and a human figure. Pierrot wandering through the wood, singing to the moon. Pierrot who has seen Columbine and knows no rest.

The Immortal two vanish, but Columbine looks back. She has heard the song of a human heart.

Pierrot wandering on through the wood . . . darkness . . . his voice dies away in the distance. . . .

The village green—dancing of village girls—pierrots and pierrettes. Molly as Pierrette. No dancer—Anna Denman was right there—but a fresh tuneful voice as she sings her song “Pierrette dancing on the Green.”

A good tune—Mr. Satterthwaite nodded approval. Wickham wasn’t above writing a tune when there was a need for it. The majority of the village girls made him shudder, but he realized that Lady Roscheimer was determinedly philanthropical.

They press Pierrot to join the dance. He refuses. With white face he wanders on—the eternal lover seeking his ideal. Evening falls. Harlequin and Columbine, invisible, dance in and out of the unconscious throng. The place is deserted, only Pierrot, weary, falls asleep on a grassy bank. Harlequin and Columbine dance round him. He wakes and sees Columbine. He woos her in vain, pleads, beseeches. . . .

She stands uncertain. Harlequin beckons to her to be gone. But she sees him no longer. She is listening to Pierrot, to his song of love outpoured once more. She falls into his arms, and the curtain comes down.

The second Act is Pierrot’s cottage. Columbine sits on her hearth. She is pale, weary. She listens—for what? Pierrot sings to her—woos her back to thoughts of him once more. The evening darkens. Thunder is heard . . . Columbine puts aside her spinning wheel. She is eager, stirred . . . She listens no longer to Pierrot. It is her own music that is in the air, the music of Harlequin and Columbine . . . She is awake. She remembers.

A crash of thunder! Harlequin stands in the doorway. Pierrot cannot see him, but Columbine springs up with a glad laugh. Children come running, but she pushes them aside. With another crash of thunder the walls fall, and Columbine dances out into the wild night with Harlequin.

Darkness, and through it the tune that Pierrette has sung. Light comes slowly. The cottage once more. Pierrot and Pierrette grown old and grey sit in front of the fire in two armchairs. The music is happy, but subdued. Pierrette nods in her chair. Through the window comes a shaft of moonlight, and with it the motif of Pierrot's long-forgotten song. He stirs in his chair.

Faint music—fairy music . . . Harlequin and Columbine outside. The door swings open and Columbine dances in. She leans over the sleeping Pierrot, kisses him on the lips. . . .

Crash! A peal of thunder. She is outside again. In the centre of the stage is the lighted window and through it are seen the two figures of Harlequin and Columbine dancing slowly away, growing fainter and fainter. . . .

A log falls. Pierrette jumps up angrily, rushes across to the window and pulls the blind. So it ends, on a sudden discord. . . .

Mr. Satterthwaite sat very still among the applause and vociferations. At last he got up and made his way outside. He came upon Molly Stanwell, flushed and eager, receiving compliments. He saw John Denman, pushing and elbowing his way through the throng, his eyes alight with a new flame. Molly came towards him, but, almost unconsciously, he put her aside. It was not her he was seeking.

“My wife? Where is she?”

“I think she went out in the garden.”

It was, however, Mr. Satterthwaite who found her, sitting on a stone seat under a cypress tree. When he came up to her, he did an odd thing. He knelt down and raised her hand to his lips.

“Ah!” she said. “You think I danced well?”

“You danced—as you always danced, Madame Kharsanova.”

She drew in her breath sharply.

“So—you have guessed.”

“There is only one Kharsanova. No one could see you dance and forget. But why—why?”

“What else is possible?”

“You mean?”

She had spoken very simply. She was just as simple now. “Oh! but you understand. You are of the world. A great dancer—she can have lovers, yes—but a husband, that is different. And he—he did not want the other. He wanted me to belong to him as—as Kharsanova could never have belonged.”

“I see,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I see. So you gave it up?”

She nodded.

“You must have loved him very much,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gently.

“To make such a sacrifice?” She laughed.

“Not quite that. To make it so lightheartedly.”

“Ah, yes—perhaps—you are right.”

“And now?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

Her face grew grave.

“Now?” She paused, then raised her voice and spoke into the shadows.

“Is that you, Sergius Ivanovitch?”

Prince Oranoff came out into the moonlight. He took her hand and smiled at Mr. Satterthwaite without self-consciousness.

“Ten years ago I mourned the death of Anna Kharsanova,” he said simply. “She was to me as my other self. Today I have found her again. We shall part no more.”

“At the end of the lane in ten minutes,” said Anna. “I shall not fail you.”

Oranoff nodded and went off again. The dancer turned to Mr. Satterthwaite. A smile played about her lips.

“Well—you are not satisfied, my friend?”

“Do you know,” said Mr. Satterthwaite abruptly, “that your husband is looking for you?”

He saw the tremor that passed over her face, but her voice was steady enough.

“Yes,” she said gravely. “That may well be.”

“I saw his eyes. They—” he stopped abruptly.

She was still calm.

“Yes, perhaps. For an hour. An hour’s magic, born of past memories, of music, of moonlight—That is all.”

“Then there is nothing that I can say?” He felt old, dispirited.

“For ten years I have lived with the man I love,” said Anna Kharsanova. “Now I am going to the man who for ten years has loved me.”

Mr. Satterthwaite said nothing. He had no arguments left. Besides it really seemed the simplest solution. Only—only, somehow, it was not the solution he wanted. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

“I know, my friend, I know. But there is no third way. Always one looks for one thing—the lover, the perfect, the eternal lover . . . It is the music of Harlequin one hears. No lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal. And Harlequin is only a myth, an invisible presence . . . unless—”

“Yes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Yes?”

“Unless—his name is—Death!”

Mr. Satterthwaite shivered. She moved away from him, was swallowed up in the shadows. . . .

He never knew quite how long he sat on there, but suddenly he started up with the feeling that he had been wasting valuable time. He hurried away, impelled in a certain direction almost in spite of himself.

As he came out into the lane he had a strange feeling of unreality. Magic—magic and moonlight! And two figures coming towards him . . .

Oranoff in his Harlequin dress. So he thought at first. Then, as they passed him, he knew his mistake. That lithe swaying figure belonged to one person only—Mr. Quin. . . .

They went on down the lane—their feet light as though they were treading on air. Mr. Quin turned his head and looked back, and Mr. Satterthwaite had a shock, for it was not the face of Mr. Quin as he had ever seen it before. It was the face of a stranger—no, not quite a stranger. Ah! he had it now, it was the face of John Denman as it might have looked before life went too well with him. Eager, adventurous, the face at once of a boy and a lover . . .

Her laugh floated down to him, clear and happy . . . He looked after them and saw in the distance the lights of a little cottage. He gazed after them like a man in a dream.

He was rudely awakened by a hand that fell on his shoulder and he was jerked round to face Sergius Oranoff. The man looked white and distracted.

“Where is she? Where is she? She promised—and she has not come.”

“Madam has just gone up the lane—alone.”

It was Mrs. Denman’s maid who spoke from the shadow of the door behind them. She had been waiting with her mistress’s wraps.

“I was standing here and saw her pass,” she added.

Mr. Satterthwaite threw one harsh word at her.

“Alone? Alone, did you say?”

The maid’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes, sir. Didn’t you see her off?”

Mr. Satterthwaite clutched at Oranoff.

“Quickly,” he muttered. “I’m—I’m afraid.”

They hurried down the lane together, the Russian talking in quick disjointed sentences.

“She is a wonderful creature. Ah! how she danced tonight. And that friend of yours. Who is he? Ah! but he is wonderful—unique. In the old days, when she danced the Columbine of Rimsky Korsakoff, she never found the perfect Harlequin. Mordoff, Kassnine—none of them were quite perfect. She had her own little fancy. She told me of it once. Always she danced with a dream Harlequin—a man who was not really there. It was Harlequin himself, she said, who came to dance with her. It was that fancy of hers that made her Columbine so wonderful.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded. There was only one thought in his head.

“Hurry,” he said. “We must be in time. Oh! we must be in time.”

They came round the last corner—came to the deep pit and to something lying in it that had not been there before, the body of a woman lying in a wonderful pose, arms flung wide and head thrown back. A dead face and body that were triumphant and beautiful in the moonlight.

Words came back to Mr. Satterthwaite dimly—Mr. Quin’s words: “wonderful things on a rubbish heap” . . . He understood them now.

Oranoff was murmuring broken phrases. The tears were streaming down his face.

“I loved her. Always I loved her.” He used almost the same words that had occurred to Mr. Satterthwaite earlier in the day. “We were of the same world, she and I. We had the same thoughts, the same dreams. I would have loved her always. . . .”

“How do you know?”

The Russian stared at him—at the fretful peevishness of the tone.

“How do you know?” went on Mr. Satterthwaite. “It is what all lovers think—what all lovers say . . . There is only one lover—”

He turned and almost ran into Mr. Quin. In an agitated manner, Mr. Satterthwaite caught him by the arm and drew him aside.

“It was you,” he said. “It was you who were with her just now?”

Mr. Quin waited a minute and then said gently:

“You can put it that way, if you like.”

“And the maid didn’t see you?”

“The maid didn’t see me.”

“But I did. Why was that?”

“Perhaps, as a result of the price you have paid, you see things that other people—do not.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him uncomprehendingly for a minute or two. Then he began suddenly to quiver all over like an aspen leaf.

“What is this place?” he whispered. “What is this place?”

“I told you earlier today. It is My lane.”

“A Lovers’ Lane,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite. “And people pass along it.”

“Most people, sooner or later.”

“And at the end of it—what do they find?”

Mr. Quin smiled. His voice was very gentle. He pointed at the ruined cottage above them.

“The house of their dreams—or a rubbish heap—who shall say?”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked up at him suddenly. A wild rebellion surged over him. He felt cheated, defrauded.

“But I—” His voice shook. “I have never passed down your lane. . . .”

“And do you regret?”

Mr. Satterthwaite quailed. Mr. Quin seemed to have loomed to enormous proportions . . . Mr. Satterthwaite had a vista of something at once menacing and terrifying . . . Joy, Sorrow, Despair.

And his comfortable little soul shrank back appalled.

“Do you regret?” Mr. Quin repeated his question. There was something terrible about him.

“No,” Mr. Satterthwaite stammered. “N-no.”

And then suddenly he rallied.

“But I see things,” he cried. “I may have been only a looker-on at Life—but I see things that other people do not. You said so yourself, Mr. Quin. . . .”

But Mr. Quin had vanished.

The Man In The Brown Suit (1924)

By Agatha Christie

Prologue

Nadina, the Russian dancer who had taken Paris by storm, swayed to the sound of the applause, bowed and bowed again. Her narrow black eyes narrowed themselves still more, the long line of her scarlet mouth curved faintly upwards. Enthusiastic Frenchmen continued to beat the ground appreciatively as the curtain fell with a swish, hiding the reds and blues and magentas of the bizarre décor. In a swirl of blue and orange draperies the dancer left the stage. A bearded gentleman received her enthusiastically in his arms. It was the Manager.

“Magnificent, petite, magnificent,” he cried. “Tonight you have surpassed yourself.” He kissed her gallantly on both cheeks in a somewhat matter-of-fact manner.

Madame Nadina accepted the tribute with the ease of long habit and passed on to her dressing room, where bouquets were heaped carelessly everywhere, marvellous garments of futuristic design hung on pegs, and the air was hot and sweet with the scent of the massed blossoms and with the more sophisticated perfumes and essences. Jeanne, the dresser, ministered to her mistress, talking incessantly and pouring out a stream of fulsome compliments.

A knock at the door interrupted the flow, Jeanne went to answer it, and returned with a card in her hand.

“Madame will receive?”

“Let me see.”

The dancer stretched out a languid hand, but at the sight of the name on the card, “Count Sergius Paulovitch,” a sudden flicker of interest came into her eyes.

“I will see him. The maize peignoir, Jeanne, and quickly. And when the Count comes you may go.”

“Bien, Madame.”

Jeanne brought the peignoir, an exquisite wisp of corn-coloured chiffon and ermine. Nadina slipped into it, and sat smiling to herself, whilst one long white hand beat a slow tattoo on the glass of the dressing table.

The Count was prompt to avail himself of the privilege accorded to him—a man of medium height, very slim, very elegant, very pale, extraordinarily weary. In feature, little to take hold of, a man difficult to recognize again if one left his mannerisms out of account. He bowed over the dancer’s hand with exaggerated courtliness.

“Madame, this is a pleasure indeed.”

So much Jeanne heard before she went out, closing the door behind her. Alone with her visitor, a subtle change came over Nadina’s smile.

“Compatriots though we are, we will not speak Russian, I think,” she observed.

“Since we neither of us know a word of the language, it might be as well,” agreed her guest.

By common consent, they dropped into English, and nobody, now that the Count’s mannerisms had dropped from him, could doubt that it was his native language. He had, indeed, started life as a quick-change music-hall artiste in London.

“You had great success tonight,” he remarked. “I congratulate you.”

“All the same,” said the woman, “I am disturbed. My position is not what it was. The suspicions aroused during the War have never died down. I am continually watched and spied upon.”

“But no charge of espionage was ever brought against you?”

“Our chief lays his plans too carefully for that.”

“Long life to the ‘Colonel,’ ” said the Count, smiling. “Amazing news, is it not, that he means to retire? To retire! Just like a doctor, or a butcher, or a plumber—”

“Or any other business man,” finished Nadina. “It should not surprise us. That is what the ‘Colonel’ has always been—an excellent man of business. He has organized crime as another man might organize a boot factory. Without committing himself, he has planned and directed a series of stupendous coups, embracing every branch of what we might call his ‘profession.’ Jewel robberies, forgery, espionage (the latter very profitable in wartime), sabotage, discreet assassination, there is hardly anything he has not touched. Wisest of all, he knows when to stop. The game begins to be dangerous?—he retires gracefully—with an enormous fortune!”

“H’m!” said the Count doubtfully. “It is rather—upsetting for all of us. We are at a loose end, as it were.”

“But we are being paid off—on a most generous scale!”

Something, some undercurrent of mockery in her tone, made the man look at her sharply. She was smiling to herself, and the quality of her smile aroused his curiosity. But he proceeded diplomatically:

“Yes, the ‘Colonel’ has always been a great paymaster. I attribute much of his success to that—and to his invariable plan of providing a suitable scapegoat. A great brain, undoubtedly a great brain! And an apostle of the maxim, ‘If you want a thing done safely, do not do it yourself !’ Here are we, every one of us incriminated up to the hilt and absolutely in his power, and not one of us has anything on him.”

He paused, almost as though he were expecting her to disagree with him, but she remained silent, smiling to herself as before.

“Not one of us,” he mused. “Still, you know, he is superstitious, the old man. Years ago, I believe, he went to one of these fortune-telling people.

She prophesied a lifetime of success, but declared that his downfall would be brought about through a woman.”

He had interested her now. She looked up eagerly.

“That is strange, very strange! Through a woman you say?”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Doubtless, now that he has—retired, he will marry. Some young society beauty, who will disperse his millions faster than he acquired them.”

Nadina shook her head.

“No, no, that is not the way of it. Listen, my friend, tomorrow I go to London.”

“But your contract here?”

“I shall be away only one night. And I go incognito, like Royalty. No one will ever know that I have left France. And why do you think that I go?”

“Hardly for pleasure at this time of the year. January, a detestable foggy month! It must be for profit, eh?”

“Exactly.” She rose and stood in front of him, every graceful line of her arrogant with pride. “You said just now that none of us had anything on the chief. You were wrong. I have. I, a woman, have had the wit and, yes, the courage—for it needs courage—to double-cross him. You remember the De Beer diamonds?”

“Yes, I remember. At Kimberley, just before the war broke out? I had nothing to do with it, and I never heard the details, the case was hushed up for some reason, was it not? A fine haul too.”

“A hundred thousand pounds” worth of stones. Two of us worked it—under the ‘Colonel’s’ orders, of course. And it was then that I saw my chance. You see, the plan was to substitute some of the De Beer diamonds for some sample diamonds brought from South America by two young prospectors

who happened to be in Kimberley at the time. Suspicion was then bound to fall on them.”

“Very clever,” interpolated the Count approvingly.

“The ‘Colonel’ is always clever. Well, I did my part—but I also did one thing which the ‘Colonel’ had not foreseen. I kept back some of the South American stones—one or two are unique and could easily be proved never to have passed through De Beers’ hands. With these diamonds in my possession, I have the whip-hand of my esteemed chief. Once the two young men are cleared, his part in the matter is bound to be suspected. I have said nothing all these years, I have been content to know that I had this weapon in reverse, but now matters are different. I want my price—and it will be big, I might almost say a staggering price.”

“Extraordinary,” said the Count. “And doubtless you carry these diamonds about with you everywhere?”

His eyes roamed gently around the disordered room.

Nadina laughed softly.

“You need suppose nothing of the sort. I am not a fool. The diamonds are in a safe place where no one will dream of looking for them.”

“I never thought you a fool, my dear lady, but may I venture to suggest that you are somewhat foolhardy? The ‘Colonel’ is not the type of man to take kindly to being blackmailed, you know.”

“I am not afraid of him,” she laughed. “There is only one man I have ever feared—and he is dead.”

The man looked at her curiously.

“Let us hope that he will not come to life again, then,” he remarked lightly.

“What do you mean?” cried the dancer sharply.

The Count looked slightly surprised.

“I only meant that resurrection would be awkward for you,” he explained.
“A foolish joke.”

She gave a sigh of relief.

“Oh, no, he is dead all right. Killed in the war. He was a man who once—
loved me.”

“In South Africa?” asked the Count negligently.

“Yes, since you ask it, in South Africa.”

“That is your native country, is it not?”

She nodded. Her visitor rose and reached for his hat.

“Well,” he remarked, “you know your own business best, but, if I were you, I should fear the ‘Colonel’ far more than any disillusioned lover. He is a man whom it is particularly easy to—underestimate.”

She laughed scornfully.

“As if I did not know him after all these years!”

“I wonder if you do?” he said softly. “I very much wonder if you do.”

“Oh, I am not a fool! And I am not alone in this. The South African mail boat docks at Southampton tomorrow, and on board her is a man who has come specially from Africa at my request and who has carried out certain orders of mine. The ‘Colonel’ will have not one of us to deal with, but two.”

“Is that wise?”

“It is necessary.”

“You are sure of this man?”

A rather peculiar smile played over the dancer’s face.

“I am quite sure of him. He is inefficient, but perfectly trustworthy.” She paused, and then added in an indifferent tone of voice: “As a matter of fact, he happens to be my husband.”

One

Everybody has been at me, right and left, to write this story, from the great (represented by Lord Nasby) to the small (represented by our late maid-of-all-work, Emily, whom I saw when I was last in England. “Lor, miss, what a beyewtiful book you might make out of it all—just like the pictures!”)

I’ll admit that I’ve certain qualifications for the task. I was mixed up in the affair from the very beginning, I was in the thick of it all through, and I was triumphantly “in at the death.” Very fortunately, too, the gaps that I cannot supply from my own knowledge are amply covered by Sir Eustace Pedler’s diary, of which he has kindly begged me to make use.

So here goes. Anne Beddingfeld starts to narrate her adventures.

I’d always longed for adventures. You see, my life had such a dreadful sameness. My father, Professor Beddingfeld, was one of England’s greatest living authorities on Primitive Man. He really was a genius—everyone admits that. His mind dwelt in Palaeolithic times, and the inconvenience of life for him was that his body inhabited the modern world. Papa did not care for modern man—even Neolithic Man he despised as a mere herder of cattle, and he did not rise to enthusiasm until he reached the Mousterian period.

Unfortunately one cannot entirely dispense with modern men. One is forced to have some kind of truck with butchers and bakers and milkmen and greengrocers. Therefore, Papa being immersed in the past, Mamma having died when I was a baby, it fell to me to undertake the practical side of living. Frankly, I hate Palaeolithic Man, be he Aurignacian, Mousterian, Chellian, or anything else, and though I typed and revised most of Papa’s Neanderthal Man and his Ancestors, Neanderthal men themselves fill me with loathing, and I always reflect what a fortunate circumstance it was that they became extinct in remote ages.

I do not know whether Papa guessed my feelings on the subject, probably not, and in any case he would not have been interested. The opinion of other people never interested him in the slightest degree. I think it was really a sign of his greatness. In the same way, he lived quite detached from the necessities of daily life. He ate what was put before him in an exemplary fashion, but seemed mildly pained when the question of paying for it arose. We never seemed to have any money. His celebrity was not of the kind that brought in a cash return. Although he was a fellow of almost every important society and had rows of letters after his name, the general public scarcely knew of his existence, and his long-learned books, though adding signally to the sum total of human knowledge, had no attraction for the masses. Only on one occasion did he leap into the public gaze. He had read a paper before some society on the subject of the young of the chimpanzee. The young of the human race show some anthropoid features, whereas the young of the chimpanzee approach more nearly to the human than the adult chimpanzee does. That seems to show that whereas our ancestors were more Simian than we are, the chimpanzee's were of a higher type than the present species—in other words, the chimpanzee is a degenerate. That enterprising newspaper, the Daily Budget, being hard up for something spicy, immediately brought itself out with large headlines. "We are not descended from monkeys, but are monkeys descended from us? Eminent Professor says chimpanzees are decadent humans." Shortly afterwards, a reporter called to see Papa, and endeavoured to induce him to write a series of popular articles on the theory. I have seldom seen Papa so angry. He turned the reporter out of the house with scant ceremony, much to my secret sorrow, as we were particularly short of money at the moment. In fact, for a moment I meditated running after the young man and informing him that my father had changed his mind and would send the articles in question. I could easily have written them myself, and the probabilities were that Papa would never have learnt of the transaction, not being a reader of the Daily Budget. However, I rejected this course as being too risky, so I merely put on my best hat and went sadly down the village to interview our justly irate grocer.

The reporter from the Daily Budget was the only young man who ever came to our house. There were times when I envied Emily, our little servant, who "walked out" whenever occasion offered with a large sailor to

whom she was affianced. In between times, to “keep her hand in,” as she expressed it, she walked out with the greengrocer’s young man, and the chemist’s assistant. I reflected sadly that I had no one to “keep my hand in” with. All Papa’s friends were aged Professors—usually with long beards. It is true that Professor Peterson once clasped me affectionately and said I had a “neat little waist” and then tried to kiss me. The phrase alone dated him hopelessly. No self-respecting female has had a “neat little waist” since I was in my cradle.

I yearned for adventure, for love, for romance, and I seemed condemned to an existence of drab utility. The village possessed a lending library, full of tattered works of fiction, and I enjoyed perils and lovemaking at second hand, and went to sleep dreaming of stern silent Rhodesians, and of strong men who always “felled their opponent with a single blow.” There was no one in the village who even looked as though they could “fell” an opponent, with a single blow or several.

There was the cinema too, with a weekly episode of “The Perils of Pamela.” Pamela was a magnificent young woman. Nothing daunted her. She fell out of aeroplanes, adventured in submarines, climbed skyscrapers and crept about in the Underworld without turning a hair. She was not really clever, The Master Criminal of the Underworld caught her each time, but as he seemed loath to knock her on the head in a simple way, and always doomed her to death in a sewer gas chamber or by some new and marvellous means, the hero was always able to rescue her at the beginning of the following week’s episode. I used to come out with my head in a delirious whirl—and then I would get home and find a notice from the Gas Company threatening to cut us off if the outstanding account was not paid!

And yet, though I did not suspect it, every moment was bringing adventure nearer to me.

It is possible that there are many people in the world who have never heard of the finding of an antique skull at the Broken Hill Mine in Northern Rhodesia. I came down one morning to find Papa excited to the point of apoplexy. He poured out the whole story to me.

“You understand, Anne? There are undoubtedly certain resemblances to the Java skull, but superficial—superficial only. No, here we have what I have always maintained—the ancestral form of the Neanderthal race. You grant that the Gibraltar skull is the most primitive of the Neanderthal skulls found? Why? The cradle of the race was in Africa. They passed to Europe —”

“Not marmalade on kippers, Papa,” I said hastily, arresting my parent’s absentminded hand. “Yes, you were saying?”

“They passed to Europe on—”

Here he broke down with a bad fit of choking, the result of an immoderate mouthful of kipper bones.

“But we must start at once,” he declared, as he rose to his feet at the conclusion of the meal. “There is no time to be lost. We must be on the spot—there are doubtless incalculable finds to be found in the neighbourhood. I shall be interested to note whether the implements are typical of the Mousterian period—there will be the remains of the primitive ox, I should say, but not those of the woolly rhinoceros. Yes, a little army will be starting soon. We must get ahead of them. You will write to Cook’s today, Anne?”

“What about money, Papa?” I hinted delicately.

He turned a reproachful eye upon me.

“Your point of view always depresses me, my child. We must not be sordid. No, no, in the cause of science one must not be sordid.”

“I feel Cook’s might be sordid, Papa.”

Papa looked pained.

“My dear Anne, you will pay them in ready money.”

“I haven’t got any ready money.”

Papa looked thoroughly exasperated.

“My child, I really cannot be bothered with these vulgar money details. The bank—I had something from the Manager yesterday, saying I had twenty-seven pounds.”

“That’s your overdraft, I fancy.”

“Ah, I have it! Write to my publishers.”

I acquiesced doubtfully, Papa’s books bringing in more glory than money. I liked the idea of going to Rhodesia immensely. “Stern silent men,” I murmured to myself in an ecstasy. Then something in my parent’s appearance struck me as unusual.

“You have odd boots on, Papa,” I said. “Take off the brown one and put on the other black one. And don’t forget your muffler. It’s a very cold day.”

In a few minutes Papa stalked off, correctly booted and well-muffled.

He returned late that evening, and, to my dismay, I saw his muffler and overcoat were missing.

“Dear me, Anne, you are quite right. I took them off to go into the cavern. One gets so dirty there.”

I nodded feelingly, remembering an occasion when Papa had returned literally plastered from head to foot with rich Pleistocene clay.

Our principal reason for settling in Little Hampsley had been the neighbourhood of Hampsley Cavern, a buried cave rich in deposits of the Aurignacian culture. We had a tiny museum in the village, and the curator and Papa spent most of their days messing about underground and bringing to light portions of woolly rhinoceros and cave bear.

Papa coughed badly all the evening, and the following morning I saw he had a temperature and sent for the doctor.

Poor Papa, he never had a chance. It was double pneumonia. He died four days later.

Two

Everyone was very kind to me. Dazed as I was, I appreciated that. I felt no overwhelming grief. Papa had never loved me. I knew that well enough. If he had, I might have loved him in return. No, there had not been love between us, but we had belonged together, and I had looked after him, and had secretly admired his learning and his uncompromising devotion to science. And it hurt me that Papa should have died just when the interest of life was at its height for him. I should have felt happier if I could have buried him in a cave, with paintings of reindeer and flint implements, but the force of public opinion constrained a neat tomb (with marble slab) in our hideous local churchyard. The vicar's consolations, though well-meant, did not console me in the least.

It took some time to dawn upon me that the thing I had always longed for—freedom—was at last mine. I was an orphan, and practically penniless, but free. At the same time I realized the extraordinary kindness of all these good people. The vicar did his best to persuade me that his wife was in urgent need of a companion help. Our tiny local library suddenly made up its mind to have an assistant librarian. Finally, the doctor called upon me, and after making various ridiculous excuses for failing to send a proper bill, he hummed and hawed a good deal and suddenly suggested I should marry him.

I was very much astonished. The doctor was nearer forty than thirty and a round, tubby little man. He was not at all like the hero of "The Perils of Pamela," and even less like the stern and silent Rhodesian. I reflected a minute and then asked why he wanted to marry me. That seemed to fluster him a good deal, and he murmured that a wife was a great help to a general practitioner. The position seemed even more unromantic than before, and yet something in me urged towards its acceptance. Safety, that was what I was being offered. Safety—and a Comfortable Home. Thinking it over now, I believe I did the little man an injustice. He was honestly in love with me, but a mistaken delicacy prevented him from pressing his suit on those lines. Anyway, my love of romance rebelled.

“It’s extremely kind of you,” I said. “But it’s impossible. I could never marry a man unless I loved him madly.”

“You don’t think—?”

“No, I don’t,” I said firmly.

He sighed.

“But, my dear child, what do you propose to do?”

“Have adventures and see the world,” I replied, without the least hesitation.

“Miss Anne, you are very much a child still. You don’t understand—”

“The practical difficulties? Yes, I do, doctor. I’m not a sentimental schoolgirl—I’m a hardheaded mercenary shrew! You’d know it if you married me!”

“I wish you would reconsider—”

“I can’t.”

He sighed again.

“I have another proposal to make. An aunt of mine who lives in Wales is in want of a young lady to help her. How would that suit you?”

“No, doctor, I’m going to London. If things happen anywhere, they happen in London. I shall keep my eyes open and, you’ll see, something will turn up! You’ll hear of me next in China or Timbuctoo.”

My next visitor was Mr. Flemming, Papa’s London solicitor. He came down specially from town to see me. An ardent anthropologist himself, he was a great admirer of Papa’s work. He was a tall, spare man with a thin face and grey hair. He rose to meet me as I entered the room and taking both my hands in his, patted them affectionately.

“My poor child,” he said. “My poor, poor child.”

Without conscious hypocrisy, I found myself assuming the demeanour of a bereaved orphan. He hypnotized me into it. He was benignant, kind and fatherly—and without the least doubt he regarded me as a perfect fool of a girl left adrift to face an unkind world. From the first I felt that it was quite useless to try to convince him of the contrary. As things turned out, perhaps it was just as well I didn't.

“My dear child, do you think you can listen to me whilst I try to make a few things clear to you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Your father, as you know, was a very great man. Posterity will appreciate him. But he was not a good man of business.”

I knew that quite as well, if not better than Mr. Flemming, but I restrained myself from saying so. He continued: “I do not suppose you understand much of these matters. I will try to explain as clearly as I can.”

He explained at unnecessary length. The upshot seemed to be that I was left to face life with the sum of £87 17s. 4d. It seemed a strangely unsatisfying amount. I waited in some trepidation for what was coming next. I feared that Mr. Flemming would be sure to have an aunt in Scotland who was in want of a bright young companion. Apparently, however, he hadn't.

“The question is,” he went on, “the future. I understand you have no living relatives?”

“I'm alone in the world,” I said, and was struck anew by my likeness to a film heroine.

“You have friends?”

“Everyone has been very kind to me,” I said gratefully.

“Who would not be kind to one so young and charming?” said Mr. Flemming gallantly. “Well, well, my dear, we must see what can be done.”

He hesitated a minute, and then said: "Supposing—how would it be if you came to us for a time?"

I jumped at the chance. London! The place for things to happen.

"It's awfully kind of you," I said. "Might I really? Just while I'm looking around. I must start out to earn my living, you know?"

"Yes, yes, my dear child. I quite understand. We will look round for something—suitable."

I felt instinctively that Mr. Flemming's ideas of "something suitable" and mine were likely to be widely divergent, but it was certainly not the moment to air my views.

"That is settled then. Why not return with me today?"

"Oh, thank you, but will Mrs. Flemming—"

"My wife will be delighted to welcome you."

I wonder if husbands know as much about their wives as they think they do. If I had a husband, I should hate him to bring home orphans without consulting me first.

"We will send her a wire from the station," continued the lawyer.

My few personal belongings were soon packed. I contemplated my hat sadly before putting it on. It had originally been what I call a "Mary" hat, meaning by that the kind of hat a housemaid ought to wear on her day out—but doesn't! A limp thing of black straw with a suitably depressed brim. With the inspiration of genius, I had kicked it once, punched it twice, dented in the crown and affixed to it a thing like a cubist's dream of a jazz carrot. The result had been distinctly chic. The carrot I had already removed, of course, and now I proceeded to undo the rest of my handiwork. The "Mary" hat resumed its former status with an additional battered appearance which made it even more depressing than formerly. I might as well look as much like the popular conception of an orphan as possible. I

was just a shade nervous of Mrs. Flemming's reception, but hoped my appearance might have a sufficiently disarming effect.

Mr. Flemming was nervous too. I realized that as we went up the stairs of the tall house in a quiet Kensington square. Mrs. Flemming greeted me pleasantly enough. She was a stout, placid woman of the "good wife and mother" type. She took me up to a spotless chintz-hung bedroom, hoped I had everything I wanted, informed me that tea would be ready in about a quarter of an hour, and left me to my own devices.

I heard her voice slightly raised, as she entered the drawing room below on the first floor.

"Well, Henry, why on earth—" I lost the rest, but the acerbity of the tone was evident. And a few minutes later another phrase floated up to me, in an even more acid voice: "I agree with you! She is certainly very good-looking."

It is really a very hard life. Men will not be nice to you if you are not good-looking, and women will not be nice to you if you are.

With a deep sigh I proceeded to do things with my hair. I have nice hair. It is black—a real black, not dark brown—and it grows well back from my forehead and down over the ears. With a ruthless hand I dragged it upwards. As ears, my ears are quite all right, but there is no doubt about it, ears are *démodé* nowadays. They are quite like the "Queen of Spain's legs" in Professor Peterson's young day. When I had finished I looked almost unbelievably like the kind of orphan that walks out in a queue with a little bonnet and red cloak.

I noticed when I went down that Mrs. Flemming's eyes rested on my exposed ears with quite a kindly glance. Mr. Flemming seemed puzzled. I had no doubt that he was saying to himself, "What has the child done to herself?"

On the whole the rest of the day passed off well. It was settled that I was to start at once to look for something to do.

When I went to bed, I stared earnestly at my face in the glass. Was I really good-looking? Honestly I couldn't say I thought so! I hadn't got a straight Grecian nose, or a rosebud mouth, or any of the things you ought to have. It is true that a curate once told me that my eyes were like "imprisoned sunshine in a dark, dark wood"—but curates always know so many quotations, and fire them off at random. I'd much prefer to have Irish blue eyes than dark green ones with yellow flecks! Still, green is a good colour for adventuresses.

I wound a black garment tightly round me, leaving my arms and shoulders bare. Then I brushed back my hair and pulled it well down over my ears again. I put a lot of powder on my face, so that the skin seemed even whiter than usual. I fished about until I found some lip salve, and I put oceans of it on my lips. Then I did under my eyes with burnt cork. Finally I draped a red ribbon over my bare shoulder, stuck a scarlet feather in my hair, and placed a cigarette in one corner of my mouth. The whole effect pleased me very much.

"Anna the Adventuress," I said aloud, nodding at my reflection. "Anna the Adventuress. Episode I, 'The House in Kensington!'"

Girls are foolish things.

Three

In the succeeding weeks I was a good deal bored. Mrs. Flemming and her friends seemed to me to be supremely uninteresting. They talked for hours of themselves and their children and of the difficulties of getting good milk for the children and of what they say to the dairy when the milk wasn't good. Then they would go on to the servants, and the difficulties of getting good servants and of what they had said to the woman at the registry office and of what the woman at the registry office had said to them. They never seemed to read the papers or to care about what went on in the world. They disliked travelling—everything was so different to England. The Riviera was all right, of course, because one met all one's friends there.

I listened and contained myself with difficulty. Most of these women were rich. The whole wide beautiful world was theirs to wander in and they deliberately stayed in dirty dull London and talked about milkmen and servants! I think now, looking back, that I was perhaps a shade intolerant. But they were stupid—stupid even at their chosen job: most of them kept the most extraordinarily inadequate and muddled housekeeping accounts.

My affairs did not progress very fast. The house and furniture had been sold, and the amount realized had just covered our debts. As yet, I had not been successful in finding a post. Not that I really wanted one! I had the firm conviction that, if I went about looking for adventure, adventure would meet me half way. It is a theory of mine that one always gets what one wants.

My theory was about to be proved in practice.

It was early in January—the 8th, to be exact. I was returning from an unsuccessful interview with a lady who said she wanted a secretary-companion, but really seemed to require a strong charwoman who would work twelve hours a day for £25 a year. Having parted with mutual veiled impolitenesses, I walked down Edgware Road (the interview had taken place in a house in St. John's Wood), and across Hyde Park to St. George's

Hospital. There I entered Hyde Park Corner Tube Station and took a ticket to Gloucester Road.

Once on the platform I walked to the extreme end of it. My inquiring mind wished to satisfy itself as to whether there really were points and an opening between the two tunnels just beyond the station in the direction of Down Street. I was foolishly pleased to find I was right. There were not many people on the platform, and at the extreme end there was only myself and one man. As I passed him, I sniffed dubiously. If there is one smell I cannot bear it is that of mothballs! This man's heavy overcoat simply reeked of them. And yet most men begin to wear their winter overcoats before January, and consequently by this time the smell ought to have worn off. The man was beyond me, standing close to the edge of the tunnel. He seemed lost in thought, and I was able to stare at him without rudeness. He was a small, thin man, very brown of face, with blue, light eyes and a small dark beard.

"Just come from abroad," I deduced. "That's why his overcoat smells so. He's come from India. Not an officer, or he wouldn't have a beard. Perhaps a tea planter."

At this moment the man turned as though to retrace his steps along the platform. He glanced at me and then his eyes went on to something behind me, and his face changed. It was distorted by fear—almost panic. He took a step backwards as though involuntarily recoiling from some danger, forgetting that he was standing on the extreme edge of the platform, and went down and over. There was a vivid flash from the rails and a crackling sound. I shrieked. People came running up. Two station officials seemed to materialize from nowhere and took command.

I remained where I was, rooted to the spot by a sort of horrible fascination. Part of me was appalled at the sudden disaster, and another part of me was coolly and dispassionately interested in the methods employed for lifting the man off the live rail and back on to the platform.

"Let me pass, please. I am a medical man."

A tall man with a brown beard pressed past me and bent over the motionless body.

As he examined it, a curious sense of unreality seemed to possess me. The thing wasn't real—couldn't be. Finally, the doctor stood upright and shook his head.

“Dead as a doornail. Nothing to be done.”

We had all crowded nearer, and an aggrieved porter raised his voice. “Now then, stand back there, will you? What's the sense in crowding round?”

A sudden nausea seized me, and I turned blindly and ran up the stairs again towards the lift. I felt that it was too horrible. I must get out into the open air. The doctor who had examined the body was just ahead of me. The lift was just about to go up, another having descended, and he broke into a run. As he did so, he dropped a piece of paper.

I stopped, picked it up, and ran after him. But the lift gates clanged in my face, and I was left holding the paper in my hand. By the time the second lift reached street level, there was no sign of my quarry. I hoped it was nothing important that he had lost, and for the first time I examined it. It was a plain half sheet of notepaper with some figures and words scrawled upon it in pencil. This is a facsimile of it:

On the face of it, it certainly did not appear to be of any importance. Still, I hesitated to throw it away. As I stood there holding it, I involuntarily wrinkled my nose in displeasure. Mothballs again! I held the paper gingerly to my nose. Yes, it smelt strongly of them. But, then—

I folded up the paper carefully and put it in my bag. I walked home slowly and did a good deal of thinking.

I explained to Mrs. Flemming that I had witnessed a nasty accident in the Tube and that I was rather upset and would go to my room and lie down. The kind woman insisted on my having a cup of tea. After that I was left to my own devices, and I proceeded to carry out a plan I had formed coming

home. I wanted to know what it was that had produced that curious feeling of unreality whilst I was watching the doctor examine the body. First I lay down on the floor in the attitude of the corpse, then I laid a bolster down in my stead, and proceeded to duplicate, so far as I could remember, every motion and gesture of the doctor. When I had finished I had got what I wanted. I sat back on my heels and frowned at the opposite walls.

There was a brief notice in the evening papers that a man had been killed in the Tube, and a doubt was expressed whether it was suicide or accident. That seemed to me to make my duty clear, and when Mr. Flemming heard my story he quite agreed with me.

“Undoubtedly you will be wanted at the inquest. You say no one else was near enough to see what happened?”

“I had the feeling someone was coming up behind me, but I can’t be sure—and, anyway, they wouldn’t be as near as I was.”

The inquest was held. Mr. Flemming made all the arrangements and took me there with him. He seemed to fear that it would be a great ordeal for me, and I had to conceal from him my complete composure.

The deceased had been identified as L. B. Carton. Nothing had been found in his pockets except a house agent’s order to view a house on the river near Marlow. It was in the name of L. B. Carton, Russell Hotel. The bureau clerk from the hotel indentified the man as having arrived the day before and booked a room under that name. He had registered as L. B. Carton, Kimberley, S. Africa. He had evidently come straight off the steamer.

I was the only person who had seen anything of the affair.

“You think it was an accident?” the coroner asked me.

“I am positive of it. Something alarmed him, and he stepped backwards blindly without thinking what he was doing.”

“But what could have alarmed him?”

“That I don’t know. But there was something. He looked panic-stricken.”

A stolid juryman suggested that some men were terrified of cats. The man might have seen a cat. I didn’t think his suggestion a very brilliant one, but it seemed to pass muster with the jury, who were obviously impatient to get home and only too pleased at being able to give a verdict of accident as opposed to suicide.

“It is extraordinary to me,” said the coroner, “that the doctor who first examined the body has not come forward. His name and address should have been taken at the time. It was most irregular not to do so.”

I smiled to myself. I had my own theory in regard to the doctor. In pursuance of it, I determined to make a call upon Scotland Yard at an early date.

But the next morning brought a surprise. The Flemmings took in the Daily Budget, and the Daily Budget was having a day after its own heart.

EXTRAORDINARY SEQUEL TO TUBE ACCIDENT

WOMAN FOUND STRANGLED IN LONELY HOUSE

I read eagerly.

“A sensational discovery was made yesterday at the Mill House, Marlow. The Mill House, which is the property of Sir Eustace Pedler, MP, is to be let unfurnished, and an order to view this property was found in the pocket of the man who was at first thought to have committed suicide by throwing himself on the live rail at Hyde Park Corner Tube Station. In an upper room of the Mill House the body of a beautiful young woman was discovered yesterday, strangled. She is thought to be a foreigner, but so far has not been identified. The police are reported to have a clue. Sir Eustace Pedler, the owner of the Mill House, is wintering on the Riviera.”

Four

Nobody came forward to identify the dead woman. The inquest elicited the following facts.

Shortly after one o'clock on January 8th, a well-dressed woman with a slight foreign accent had entered the offices of Messrs Butler and Park, house agents, in Knightsbridge. She explained that she wanted to rent or purchase a house on the Thames within easy reach of London. The particulars of several were given to her, including those of the Mill House. She gave the name of Mrs. de Castina and her address at the Ritz, but there proved to be no one of that name staying there, and the hotel people failed to identify the body.

Mrs. James, the wife of Sir Eustace Pedler's gardener, who acted as caretaker to the Mill House and inhabited the small lodge opening on the main road, gave evidence. About three o'clock that afternoon, a lady came to see over the house. She produced an order from the house agents, and, as was the usual custom, Mrs. James gave her the keys to the house. It was situated at some distance from the lodge, and she was not in the habit of accompanying prospective tenants. A few minutes later a young man arrived. Mrs. James described him as tall and broad-shouldered, with a bronzed face and light grey eyes. He was clean-shaven and was wearing a brown suit. He explained to Mrs. James that he was a friend of the lady who had come to look over the house, but had stopped at the post office to send a telegram. She directed him to the house, and thought no more about the matter.

Five minutes later he reappeared, handed back the keys and explained that he feared the house would not suit them. Mrs. James did not see the lady, but thought that she had gone on ahead. What she did notice was that the young man seemed very much upset about something. "He looked like a man who'd seen a ghost. I thought he was taken ill."

On the following day another lady and gentleman came to see the property and discovered the body lying on the floor in one of the upstairs rooms. Mrs. James identified it as that of the lady who had come the day before. The house agents also recognized it as that of "Mrs. de Castina." The police surgeon gave it as his opinion that the woman had been dead about twenty-four hours. The Daily Budget had jumped to the conclusion that the man in the Tube had murdered the woman and afterwards committed suicide. However, as the Tube victim was dead at two o'clock and the woman was alive and well at three o'clock, the only logical conclusion to come to was that the two occurrences had nothing to do with each other, and that the order to view the house at Marlow found in the dead man's pocket was merely one of those coincidences which so often occur in this life.

A verdict of "Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown" was returned, and the police (and the Daily Budget) were left to look for "the man in the brown suit." Since Mrs. James was positive that there was no one in the house when the lady entered it, and that nobody except the young man in question entered it until the following afternoon, it seemed only logical to conclude that he was the murderer of the unfortunate Mrs. de Castina. She had been strangled with a piece of stout black cord, and had evidently been caught unawares with no time to cry out. The black silk handbag which she carried contained a well-filled notecase and some loose change, a fine lace handkerchief, unmarked, and the return half of a first-class ticket to London. Nothing much there to go upon.

Such were the details published broadcast by the Daily Budget, and "Find the Man in the Brown Suit" was their daily war cry. On an average about five hundred people wrote daily to announce their success in the quest, and tall young men with well-tanned faces cursed the day when their tailors had persuaded them to a brown suit. The accident in the Tube, dismissed as a coincidence, faded out of the public mind.

Was it a coincidence? I was not so sure. No doubt I was prejudiced—the Tube incident was my own pet mystery—but there certainly seemed to me to be a connexion of some kind between the two fatalities. In each there was a man with a tanned face—evidently an Englishman living abroad—and there were other things. It was the consideration of these other things that

finally impelled me to what I considered a dashing step. I presented myself at Scotland Yard and demanded to see whoever was in charge of the Mill House case.

My request took some time to understand, as I had inadvertently selected the department for lost umbrellas, but eventually I was ushered into a small room and presented to Detective Inspector Meadows.

Inspector Meadows was a small man with a ginger head and what I considered a peculiarly irritating manner. A satellite, also in plain clothes, sat unobtrusively in a corner.

“Good morning,” I said nervously.

“Good morning. Will you take a seat? I understand you’ve something to tell me that you think may be of use to us.”

His tone seemed to indicate that such a thing was unlikely in the extreme. I felt my temper stirred.

“Of course you know about the man who was killed in the Tube? The man who had an order to view this same house at Marlow in his pocket.”

“Ah!” said the inspector. “You are the Miss Beddingfeld who gave evidence at the inquest. Certainly the man had an order in his pocket. A lot of other people may have had too—only they didn’t happen to be killed.”

I rallied my forces.

“You didn’t think it odd that this man had no ticket in his pocket?”

“Easiest thing in the world to drop your ticket. Done it myself.”

“And no money.”

“He had some loose change in his trousers pocket.”

“But no notecase.”

“Some men don’t carry a pocketbook or notecase of any kind.”

I tried another tack.

“You don’t think it’s odd that the doctor never came forward afterwards?”

“A busy medical man very often doesn’t read the papers. He probably forgot all about the accident.”

“In fact, inspector, you are determined to find nothing odd,” I said sweetly.

“Well, I’m inclined to think you’re a little too fond of the word, Miss Beddingfeld. Young ladies are romantic, I know—fond of mysteries and suchlike. But as I’m a busy man—”

I took the hint and rose.

The man in the corner raised a meek voice.

“Perhaps if the young lady would tell us briefly what her ideas really are on the subject, inspector?”

The inspector fell in with the suggestion readily enough.

“Yes, come now, Miss Beddingfeld, don’t be offended. You’ve asked questions and hinted things. Just straight out what it is you’ve got in your head.”

I wavered between injured dignity and the overwhelming desire to express my theories. Injured dignity went to the wall.

“You said at the inquest you were positive it wasn’t suicide?”

“Yes, I’m quite certain of that. The man was frightened. What frightened him? It wasn’t me. But someone might have been walking up the platform towards us—someone he recognized.”

“You didn’t see anyone?”

“No,” I admitted. “I didn’t turn my head. Then, as soon as the body was recovered from the line, a man pushed forward to examine it, saying he was a doctor.”

“Nothing unusual in that,” said the inspector dryly.

“But he wasn’t a doctor.”

“What?”

“He wasn’t a doctor,” I repeated.

“How do you know that, Miss Beddingfeld?”

“It’s difficult to say, exactly. I’ve worked in hospitals during the war, and I’ve seen doctors handle bodies. There’s a sort of deft professional callousness that this man hadn’t got. Besides, a doctor doesn’t usually feel for the heart on the right side of the body.”

“He did that?”

“Yes, I didn’t notice it specially at the time—except that I felt there was something wrong. But I worked it out when I got home, and then I saw why the whole thing had looked so unhandy to me at the time.”

“H’m,” said the inspector. He was reaching slowly for pen and paper.

“In running his hands over the upper part of the man’s body he would have ample opportunity to take anything he wanted from the pockets.”

“Doesn’t sound likely to me,” said the inspector. “But—well, can you describe him at all?”

“He was tall and broad-shouldered, wore a dark overcoat and black boots, a bowler hat. He had a dark-pointed beard and gold-rimmed eyeglasses.”

“Take away the overcoat, the beard and the eyeglasses, and there wouldn’t be much to know him by,” grumbled the inspector. “He could alter his

appearance easily enough in five minutes if he wanted to—which he would do if he's the swell pickpocket you suggest."

I had not intended to suggest anything of the kind. But from this moment I gave the inspector up as hopeless.

"Nothing more you can tell us about him?" he demanded, as I rose to depart.

"Yes," I said. I seized my opportunity to fire a parting shot. "His head was markedly brachycephalic. He will not find it so easy to alter that."

I observed with pleasure that Inspector Meadows's pen wavered. It was clear that he did not know how to spell brachycephalic.

Five

In the first heat of indignation, I found my next step unexpectedly easy to tackle. I had had a half-formed plan in my head when I went to Scotland Yard. One to be carried out if my interview there was unsatisfactory (it had been profoundly unsatisfactory). That is, if I had the nerve to go through with it.

Things that one would shrink from attempting normally are easily tackled in a flush of anger. Without giving myself time to reflect, I walked straight to the house of Lord Nasby.

Lord Nasby was the millionaire owner of the Daily Budget. He owned other papers—several of them, but the Daily Budget was his special child. It was as the owner of the Daily Budget that he was known to every householder in the United Kingdom. Owing to the fact that an itinerary of the great man's daily proceedings had just been published, I knew exactly where to find him at this moment. It was his hour for dictating to his secretary in his own house.

I did not, of course, suppose that any young woman who chose to come and ask for him would be at once admitted to the august presence. But I had attended to that side of the matter. In the card tray in the hall of the Flemmings' house, I had observed the card of the Marquis of Loamsley, England's most famous sporting peer. I had removed the card, cleaned it carefully with bread crumbs, and pencilled upon it the words: "Please give Miss Beddingfeld a few moments of your time." Adventuresses must not be too scrupulous in their methods.

The thing worked. A powdered footman received the card and bore it away. Presently a pale secretary appeared. I fenced with him successfully. He retired in defeat. He again reappeared and begged me to follow him. I did so. I entered a large room, a frightened-looking shorthand typist fled past me like a visitant from the spirit world. Then the door shut and I was face to face with Lord Nasby.

A big man. Big head. Big face. Big moustache. Big stomach. I pulled myself together. I had not come here to comment on Lord Nasby's stomach. He was already roaring at me.

"Well, what is it? What does Loamsley want? You are his secretary? What's it all about?"

"To begin with," I said with as great an appearance of coolness as I could manage, "I don't know Lord Loamsley, and he certainly knows nothing about me. I took his card from the tray in the house of the people I'm staying with, and I wrote those words on it myself. It was important that I should see you."

For a moment it appeared to be a toss up as to whether Lord Nasby had apoplexy or not. In the end he swallowed twice and got over it.

"I admire your coolness, young woman. Well, you see me! If you interest me, you will continue to see me for exactly two minutes longer."

"That will be ample," I replied. "And I shall interest you. It's the Mill House Mystery."

"If you've found 'The Man in the Brown Suit,' write to the editor," he interrupted hastily.

"If you will interrupt, I shall be more than two minutes," I said sternly. "I haven't found 'The Man in the Brown Suit,' but I'm quite likely to do so."

In as few words as possible I put the facts of the Tube accident and the conclusions I had drawn from them before him. When I had finished he said unexpectedly, "What do you know of brachycephalic heads?"

I mentioned Papa.

"The Monkey man? Eh? Well, you seem to have a head of some kind upon your shoulders, young woman. But it's all pretty thin, you know. Not much to go upon. And no use to us—as it stands."

"I'm perfectly aware of that."

“What d’you want, then?”

“I want a job on your paper to investigate this matter.”

“Can’t do that. We’ve got our own special man on it.”

“And I’ve got my own special knowledge.”

“What you’ve just told me, eh?”

“Oh, no, Lord Nasby. I’ve still got something up my sleeve.”

“Oh, you have, have you? You seem a bright sort of girl. Well, what is it?”

“When this so-called doctor got into the lift, he dropped a piece of paper. I picked it up. It smelt of moth balls. So did the dead man. The doctor didn’t. So I saw at once that the doctor must have taken it off the body. It had two words written on it and some figures.”

“Let’s see it.”

Lord Nasby stretched out a careless hand.

“I think not,” I said, smiling. “It’s my find you see.”

“I’m right. You are a bright girl. Quite right to hang on to it. No scruples about not handing it over to the police?”

“I went there to do so this morning. They persisted in regarding the whole thing as having nothing to do with the Marlow affair, so I thought that in the circumstances I was justified in retaining the paper. Besides, the inspector put my back up.”

“Shortsighted man. Well, my dear girl, here’s all I can do for you. Go on working on this line of yours. If you get anything—anything that’s publishable—send it along and you shall have your chance. There’s always room for real talent on the Daily Budget. But you’ve got to make good first. See?”

I thanked him and apologized for my methods.

“Don’t mention it. I rather like cheek—from a pretty girl. By the way, you said two minutes and you’ve been three, allowing for interruptions. For a woman, that’s quite remarkable! Must be your scientific training.”

I was in the street again, breathing hard as though I had been running. I found Lord Nasby rather wearing as a new acquaintance.

Six

I went home with a feeling of exultation. My scheme had succeeded far better than I could possibly have hoped. Lord Nasby had been positively genial. It only now remained for me to “make good,” as he expressed it. Once locked in my own room, I took out my precious piece of paper and studied it attentively. Here was the clue to the mystery.

To begin with, what did the figures represent? There were five of them, and a dot after the first two. “Seventeen—one hundred and twenty two,” I murmured.

That did not seem to lead to anything.

Next I added them up. That is often done in works of fiction and leads to surprising deductions.

“One and seven make eight and one is nine and two are eleven and two are thirteen!”

Thirteen! Fateful number! Was this a warning to me to leave the whole thing alone? Very possibly. Anyway, except as a warning, it seemed to be singularly useless. I declined to believe that any conspirator would take that way of writing thirteen in real life. If he meant thirteen, he would write thirteen. “13”—like that.

There was a space between the one and the two. I accordingly subtracted twenty-two from a hundred and seventy-one. The result was a hundred and fifty-nine. I did it again and made it a hundred and forty-nine. These arithmetical exercises were doubtless excellent practice, but as regarded the solution of the mystery, they seemed totally ineffectual. I left arithmetic alone, not attempting fancy division or multiplication, and went on to the words.

Kilmorden Castle. That was something definite. A place. Probably the cradle of an aristocratic family. (Missing heir? Claimant to title?) Or possibly a picturesque ruin. (Buried treasure?)

Yes, on the whole I inclined to the theory of buried treasure. Figures always go with buried treasure. One pace to the right, seven paces to the left, dig one foot, descend twenty-two steps. That sort of idea. I could work out that later. The thing was to get to Kilmorden Castle as quickly as possible.

I made a strategic sally from my room, and returned laden with books of reference. Who's Who, Whitaker, a Gazetteer, a History of Scotch Ancestral Homes, and Somebody or other's British Isles.

Time passed. I searched diligently, but with growing annoyance. Finally, I shut the last book with a bang. There appeared to be no such place as Kilmorden Castle.

Here was an unexpected check. There must be such a place. Why should anyone invent a name like that and write it down on a piece of paper? Absurd!

Another idea occurred to me. Possibly it was a castellated abomination in the suburbs with a high-sounding name invented by its owner. But if so, it was going to be extraordinarily hard to find. I sat back gloomily on my heels (I always sit on the floor to do anything really important) and wondered how on earth I was to set about it.

Was there any other line I could follow? I reflected earnestly and then sprang to my feet delightedly. Of course! I must visit the "scene of the crime." Always done by the best sleuths! And no matter how long afterwards it may be they always find something that the police have overlooked. My course was clear. I must go to Marlow.

But how was I to get into the house? I discarded several adventurous methods, and plumped for stern simplicity. The house had been to let—presumably was still to let. I would be a prospective tenant.

I also decided on attacking the local house agents, as having fewer houses on their books.

Here, however, I reckoned without my host. A pleasant clerk produced particulars of about half a dozen desirable properties. It took me all my ingenuity to find objections to them. In the end I feared I had drawn a blank.

“And you’ve really nothing else?” I asked, gazing pathetically into the clerk’s eyes. “Something right on the river, and with a fair amount of garden and a small lodge.” I added, summing up the main points of the Mill House, as I had gathered them from the papers.

“Well, of course, there’s Sir Eustace Pedler’s place,” said the man doubtfully. “The Mill House, you know.”

“Not—not where—” I faltered. (Really, faltering is getting to be my strong point.)

“That’s it! Where the murder took place. But perhaps you wouldn’t like—”

“Oh, I don’t think I should mind,” I said with an appearance of rallying. I felt my bona fides was now quite established. “And perhaps I might get it cheap—in the circumstances.”

A master touch that, I thought.

“Well, it’s possible. There’s no pretending that it will be easy to let now—servants and all that, you know. If you like the place after you’ve seen it, I should advise you to make an offer. Shall I write you out an order?”

“If you please.”

A quarter of an hour later I was at the lodge of the Mill House. In answer to my knock, the door flew open and a tall middle-aged woman literally bounced out.

“Nobody can go into the house, do you hear that? Fairly sick of you reporters, I am. Sir Eustace’s orders are—”

“I understood the house was to let,” I said freezingly, holding out my order.
“Of course, if it’s already taken—”

“Oh, I’m sure I beg your pardon, miss. I’ve been fairly pestered with these newspaper people. Not a minute’s peace. No, the house isn’t let—nor likely to be now.”

“Are the drains wrong?” I asked in an anxious whisper.

“Oh, Lord, miss, the drains is all right! But surely you’ve heard about that foreign lady as was done to death here?”

“I believe I did read something about it in the papers,” I said carelessly.

My indifference piqued the good woman. If I had betrayed any interest, she would probably have closed up like an oyster. As it was she positively bridled.

“I should say you did, miss! It’s been in all the newspapers. The Daily Budget’s out still to catch the man who did it. It seems, according to them, as our police are no good at all. Well I hope they’ll get him—although a nice-looking fellow he was and no mistake. A kind of soldierly look about him—ah, well, I dare say he’d been wounded in the war, and sometimes they go a bit queer afterwards; my sister’s boy did. Perhaps she’d used him bad—they’re a bad lot, those foreigners. Though she was a fine-looking woman. Stood there where you’re standing now.”

“Was she dark or fair?” I ventured. “You can’t tell from these newspaper portraits.”

“Dark hair, and a very white face—too white for nature, I thought—had her lips reddened something cruel. I don’t like to see it—a little powder now and then is quite another thing.”

We were conversing like old friends now. I put another question.

“Did she seem nervous or upset at all?”

“Not a bit. She was smiling to herself, quiet like, as though she was amused at something. That’s why you could have knocked me down with a feather when, the next afternoon, those people came running out calling for the police and saying there’d been murder done. I shall never get over it, and as for setting foot in that house after dark I wouldn’t do it, not if it was ever so. Why, I wouldn’t even stay here at the lodge, if Sir Eustace hadn’t been down on his bended knees to me.”

“I thought Sir Eustace Pedler was at Cannes?”

“So he was, miss. He came back to England when he heard the news, and, as to the bended knees, that was a figure of speech, his secretary, Mr. Pagett, having offered us double pay to stay on, and, as my John says, money is money nowadays.”

I concurred heartily with John’s by no means original remarks.

“The young man now,” said Mrs. James, reverting suddenly to a former point in the conversation. “He was upset. His eyes, light eyes, they were, I noticed them particular, was all shining. Excited, I thought. But I never dreamt of anything being wrong. Not even when he came out again looking all queer.”

“How long was he in the house?”

“Oh, not long, a matter of five minutes maybe.”

“How tall was he, do you think? About six foot?”

“I should say so maybe.”

“He was clean-shaven, you say?”

“Yes, miss—not even one of these toothbrush moustaches.”

“Was his chin at all shiny?” I asked on a sudden impulse.

Mrs. James stared at me with awe.

“Well, now you come to mention it, miss, it was. However did you know?”

“It’s a curious thing, but murderers often have shiny chins,” I explained wildly.

Mrs. James accepted the statement in all good faith.

“Really, now, miss. I never heard that before.”

“You didn’t notice what kind of head he had, I suppose?”

“Just the ordinary kind, miss. I’ll fetch you the keys, shall I?”

I accepted them, and went on my way to the Mill House. My reconstructions so far I considered good. All along I had realized that the differences between the man Mrs. James had described and my Tube “doctor” were those of nonessentials. An overcoat, a beard, gold-rimmed eyeglasses. The “doctor” had appeared middle-aged, but I remembered that he had stooped over the body like a comparatively young man. There had been a suppleness which told of young joints.

The victim of the accident (the Moth Ball man, as I called him to myself) and the foreign woman, Mrs. de Castina, or whatever her real name was, had had an assignation to meet at the Mill House. That was how I pieced the thing together. Either because they feared they were being watched or for some other reason, they chose the rather ingenious method of both getting an order to view the same house. Thus their meeting there might have the appearance of pure chance.

That the Moth Ball man had suddenly caught sight of the “doctor,” and that the meeting was totally unexpected and alarming to him, was another fact of which I was fairly sure. What had happened next? The “doctor” had removed his disguise and followed the woman to Marlow. But it was possible that had he removed it rather hastily traces of spirit gum might still linger on his chin. Hence my question to Mrs. James.

Whilst occupied with my thoughts I had arrived at the low old-fashioned door of the Mill House. Unlocking it with the key, I passed inside. The hall

was low and dark, the place smelt forlorn and mildewy. In spite of myself, I shivered. Did the woman who had come here “smiling to herself” a few days ago feel no chill of premonition as she entered this house? I wondered. Did the smile fade from her lips, and did a nameless dread close round her heart? Or had she gone upstairs, smiling still, unconscious of the doom that was so soon to overtake her? My heart beat a little faster. Was the house really empty? Was doom waiting for me in it also? For the first time, I understood the meaning of the much-used word, “atmosphere.” There was an atmosphere in this house, an atmosphere of cruelty, of menace, of evil.

Seven

Shaking off the feelings that oppressed me, I went quickly upstairs. I had no difficulty in finding the room of the tragedy. On the day the body was discovered it had rained heavily, and large muddy boots had trampled the uncarpeted floor in every direction. I wondered if the murderer had left any footmarks the previous day. It was likely that the police would be reticent on the subject if he had, but on consideration I decided it was unlikely. The weather had been fine and dry.

There was nothing of interest about the room. It was almost square with two big bay windows, plain white walls and a bare floor, the boards being stained round the edges where the carpet had ceased. I searched it carefully, but there was not so much as a pin lying about. The gifted young detective did not seem likely to discover a neglected clue.

I had brought with me a pencil and notebook. There did not seem much to note, but I duly dotted down a brief sketch of the room to cover my disappointment at the failing of my quest. As I was in the act of returning the pencil to my bag, it slipped from my fingers and rolled along the floor.

The Mill House was really old, and the floors were very uneven. The pencil rolled steadily, with increasing momentum, until it came to rest under one of the windows. In the recess of each window there was a broad window seat, underneath which there was a cupboard. My pencil was lying right against the cupboard door. The cupboard was shut, but it suddenly occurred to me that if it had been open my pencil would have rolled inside. I opened the door, and my pencil immediately rolled in and sheltered modestly in the farthest corner. I retrieved it, noting as I did so that owing to lack of light and the peculiar formation of the cupboard one could not see it, but had to feel for it. Apart from my pencil the cupboard was empty, but being thorough by nature I tried the one under the opposite window.

At first sight, it looked as though that also was empty, but I grubbed about perseveringly, and was rewarded by feeling my hand close on a hard paper

cylinder which lay in a sort of trough, or depression, in the far corner of the cupboard. As soon as I had it in my hand, I knew what it was. A roll of Kodak films. Here was a find!

I realized, of course, that these films might very well be an old roll belonging to Sir Eustace Pedler which had rolled in here and had not been found when the cupboard was emptied. But I did not think so. The red paper was far too fresh-looking. It was just as dusty as it would have been had it lain there for two or three days—that is to say, since the murder. Had it been there for any length of time, it would have been thickly-coated.

Who had dropped it? The woman or the man? I remembered that the contents of her handbag had appeared to be intact. If it had been jerked open in the struggle and the roll of films had fallen out, surely some of the loose money would have been scattered about also? No, it was not the woman who had dropped the films.

I sniffed suddenly and suspiciously. Was the smell of mothballs becoming an obsession with me? I could swear that the roll of films smelt of it also. I held them under my nose. They had, as usual, a strong smell of their own, but apart from that I could clearly detect the odour I disliked so much. I soon found the cause. A minute thread of cloth had caught on a rough edge of the centre wood, and that shred was strongly impregnated with mothballs. At some time or another the films had been carried in the overcoat pocket of the man who was killed in the Tube. Was it he who had dropped them here? Hardly. His movements were all accounted for.

No, it was the other man, the “doctor.” He had taken the films when he had taken the paper. It was he who had dropped them here during his struggle with the woman.

I had got my clue! I would have the roll developed, and then I would have further developments to work upon.

Very elated, I left the house, returned the keys to Mrs. James and made my way as quickly as possible to the station. On the way back to town, I took out my paper and studied it afresh. Suddenly the figures took on a new significance. Suppose they were a date? 17 1 22. The 17th of January, 1922.

Surely that must be it! Idiot that I was not to have thought of it before. But in that case I must find out the whereabouts of Kilmorden Castle, for today was actually the 14th. Three days. Little enough—almost hopeless when one had no idea of where to look!

It was too late to hand in my roll today. I had to hurry home to Kensington so as not to be late for dinner. It occurred to me that there was an easy way of verifying whether some of my conclusions were correct. I asked Mr. Flemming whether there had been a camera amongst the dead man's belongings. I knew that he had taken an interest in the case and was conversant with all the details.

To my surprise and annoyance he replied that there had been no camera. All Carton's effects had been gone over very carefully in the hopes of finding something that might throw light upon his state of mind. He was positive that there had been no photographic apparatus of any kind.

That was rather a setback to my theory. If he had no camera, why should he be carrying a roll of films?

I set out early next morning to take my precious roll to be developed. I was so fussy that I went all the way to Regent Street to the big Kodak place. I handed it in and asked for a print of each film. The man finished stacking together a heap of films packed in yellow tin cylinders for the tropics, and picked up my roll.

He looked at me.

"You've made a mistake, I think," he said, smiling.

"Oh, no," I said. "I'm sure I haven't."

"You've given me the wrong roll. This is an unexposed one."

I walked out with what dignity I could muster. I dare say it is good for one now and again to realize what an idiot one can be! But nobody relishes the process.

And then, just as I was passing one of the big shipping offices, I came to a sudden halt. In the window was a beautiful model of one of the company's boats, and it was labelled "Kenilworth Castle." A wild idea shot through my brain. I pushed the door open and went in. I went up to the counter and in a faltering voice (genuine this time!) I murmured:

"Kilmorden Castle?"

"On the 17th from Southampton. Cape Town? First or second class?"

"How much is it?"

"First class, eighty-seven pounds—"

I interrupted him. The coincidence was too much for me. Exactly the amount of my legacy! I would put all my eggs in one basket.

"First class," I said.

I was now definitely committed to the adventure.

Eight

(Extracts from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler, MP)

It is an extraordinary thing that I never seem to get any peace. I am a man who likes a quiet life. I like my Club, my rubber of Bridge, a well-cooked meal, a sound wine. I like England in the summer, and the Riviera in the winter. I have no desire to participate in sensational happenings.

Sometimes, in front of a good fire, I do not object to reading about them in the newspaper. But that is as far as I am willing to go. My object in life is to be thoroughly comfortable. I have devoted a certain amount of thought, and a considerable amount of money, to further that end. But I cannot say that I always succeed. If things do not actually happen to me, they happen round me, and frequently, in spite of myself, I become involved. I hate being involved.

All this because Guy Pagett came into my bedroom this morning with a telegram in his hand and a face as long as a mute at a funeral.

Guy Pagett is my secretary, a zealous, painstaking, hardworking fellow, admirable in every respect. I know no one who annoys me more. For a long time I have been racking my brains as to how to get rid of him. But you cannot very well dismiss a secretary because he prefers work to play, likes getting up early in the morning, and has positively no vices. The only amusing thing about the fellow is his face. He has the face of a fourteenth-century poisoner—the sort of man the Borgias got to do their odd jobs for them.

I wouldn't mind so much if Pagett didn't make me work too. My idea of work is something that should be undertaken lightly and airily—trifled with, in fact! I doubt if Guy Pagett has ever trifled with anything in his life. He takes everything seriously. That is what makes him so difficult to live with.

Last week I had the brilliant idea of sending him off to Florence. He talked about Florence and how much he wanted to go there.

“My dear fellow,” I cried, “You shall go tomorrow. I will pay all your expenses.”

January isn’t the usual time for going to Florence, but it would be all one to Pagett. I could imagine him going about, guidebook in hand, religiously doing all the picture galleries. And a week’s freedom was cheap to me at the price.

It has been a delightful week. I have done everything I wanted to, and nothing that I did not want to do. But when I blinked my eyes open, and perceived Pagett standing between me and the light at the unearthly hour of 9 am this morning, I realized that freedom was over.

“My dear fellow,” I said, “has the funeral already taken place, or is it for later in the morning?”

Pagett does not appreciate dry humour. He merely stared.

“So you know, Sir Eustace?”

“Know what?” I said crossly. “From the expression on your face I inferred that one of your near and dear relatives was to be interred this morning.”

Pagett ignored the sally as far as possible.

“I thought you couldn’t know about this.” He tapped the telegram. “I know you dislike being aroused early—but it is nine o’clock”—Pagett insists on regarding 9 am as practically the middle of the day—“and I thought that under the circumstances—” He tapped the telegram again.

“What is that thing?” I asked.

“It’s a telegram from the police at Marlow. A woman has been murdered in your house.”

That aroused me in earnest.

“What colossal cheek,” I exclaimed. “Why in my house? Who murdered her?”

“They don’t say. I suppose we shall go back to England at once, Sir Eustace?”

“You need suppose nothing of the kind. Why should we go back?”

“The police—”

“What on earth have I to do with the police?”

“Well, it is your house.”

“That,” I said, “appears to be more my misfortune than my fault.”

Guy Pagett shook his head gloomily.

“It will have a very unfortunate effect upon the constituency,” he remarked lugubriously.

I don’t see why it should have—and yet I have a feeling that in such matters Pagett’s instincts are always right. On the face of it, a Member of Parliament will be none the less efficient because a stray young woman comes and gets herself murdered in an empty house that belongs to him—but there is no accounting for the view the respectable British public takes of a matter.

“She’s a foreigner too, and that makes it worse,” continued Pagett gloomily.

Again I believe he is right. If it is disreputable to have a woman murdered in your house, it becomes more disreputable if the woman is a foreigner. Another idea struck me.

“Good heavens,” I exclaimed, “I hope this won’t upset Caroline.”

Caroline is the lady who cooks for me. Incidentally she is the wife of my gardener. What kind of a wife she makes I do not know, but she is an excellent cook. James, on the other hand, is not a good gardener—but I

support him in idleness and give him the lodge to live in solely on account of Caroline's cooking.

"I don't suppose she'll stay after this," said Pagett.

"You always were a cheerful fellow," I said.

I expect I shall have to go back to England. Pagett clearly intends that I shall. And there is Caroline to pacify.

Three days later.

It is incredible to me that anyone who can get away from England in winter does not do so! It is an abominable climate. All this trouble is very annoying. The house agents say it will be next to impossible to let the Mill House after all the publicity. Caroline has been pacified—with double pay. We could have sent her a cable to that effect from Cannes. In fact, as I have said all along, there was no earthly purpose to serve by our coming over. I shall go back tomorrow.

One day later.

Several very suprising things have occurred. To begin with, I met Augustus Milray, the most perfect example of an old ass the present Government has produced. His manner oozed diplomatic secrecy as he drew me aside in the Club into a quiet corner. He talked a good deal. About South Africa and the industrial situation there. About the growing rumours of a strike on the Rand. Of the secret causes actuating that strike. I listened as patiently as I could. Finally, he dropped his voice to a whisper and explained that certain documents had come to light which ought to be placed in the hands of General Smuts.

"I've no doubt you're quite right," I said, stifling a yawn.

"But how are we to get them to him? Our position in the matter is delicate—very delicate."

“What’s wrong with the post?” I said cheerfully. “Put a two-penny stamp on and drop ’em in the nearest letter box.”

He seemed quite shocked at the suggestion.

“My dear Pedler! The common post!”

It has always been a mystery to me why Governments employ King’s Messengers and draw such attention to their confidential documents.

“If you don’t like the post, send one of your own young fellows. He’ll enjoy the trip.”

“Impossible,” said Milray, wagging his head in a senile fashion. “There are reasons, my dear Pedler—I assure you there are reasons.”

“Well,” I said rising, “all this is very interesting, but I must be off—”

“One minute, my dear Pedler, one minute, I beg of you. Now tell me, in confidence, is it not true that you intend visiting South Africa shortly yourself? You have large interests in Rhodesia, I know, and the question of Rhodesia joining in the Union is one in which you have a vital interest.”

“Well, I had thought of going out in about a month’s time.”

“You couldn’t possibly make it sooner? This month? This week, in fact?”

“I could,” I said, eyeing him with some interest. “But I don’t know that I particularly want to.”

“You would be doing the Government a great service—a very great service. You would not find them—er—ungrateful.”

“Meaning, you want me to be the postman?”

“Exactly. Your position is an unofficial one, your journey is bona fide. Everything would be eminently satisfactory.”

“Well,” I said slowly, “I don’t mind if I do. The one thing I am anxious to do is to get out of England again as soon as possible.”

“You will find the climate of South Africa delightful—quite delightful.”

“My dear fellow, I know all about the climate. I was out there shortly before the war.”

“I am really much obliged to you, Pedler. I will send you round the package by messenger. To be placed in General Smuts’s own hands, you understand? The Kilmorden Castle sails on Saturday—quite a good boat.”

I accompanied him a short way along Pall Mall, before we parted. He shook me warmly by the hand, and thanked me again effusively. I walked home reflecting on the curious byways of Governmental policy.

It was the following evening that Jarvis, my butler, informed me that a gentleman wished to see me on private business, but declined to give his name. I have always a lively apprehension of insurance touts, so told Jarvis to say I could not see him. Guy Pagett, unfortunately, when he might for once have been of real use, was laid up with a bilious attack. These earnest, hardworking young men with weak stomachs are always liable to bilious attacks.

Jarvis returned.

“The gentleman asked me to tell you, Sir Eustace, that he comes to you from Mr. Milray.”

That altered the complexion of things. A few minutes later I was confronting my visitor in the library. He was a well-built young fellow with a deeply tanned face. A scar ran diagonally from the corner of his eye to the jaw, disfiguring what would otherwise have been a handsome though somewhat reckless countenance.

“Well,” I said, “what’s the matter?”

“Mr. Milray sent me to you, Sir Eustace. I am to accompany you to South Africa as your secretary.”

“My dear fellow,” I said, “I’ve got a secretary already. I don’t want another.”

“I think you do, Sir Eustace. Where is your secretary now?”

“He’s down with a bilious attack,” I explained.

“You are sure it’s only a bilious attack?”

“Of course it is. He’s subject to them.”

My visitor smiled.

“It may or may not be a bilious attack. Time will show. But I can tell you this, Sir Eustace, Mr. Milray would not be surprised if an attempt were made to get your secretary out of the way. Oh, you need have no fear for yourself”—I suppose a momentary alarm had flickered across my face—“you are not threatened. Your secretary out of the way, access to you would be easier. In any case, Mr. Milray wishes me to accompany you. The passage money will be our affair, of course, but you will take the necessary steps about the passport, as though you had decided that you needed the services of a second secretary.”

He seemed a determined young man. We stared at each other and he stared me down.

“Very well,” I said feebly.

“You will say nothing to anyone as to my accompanying you.”

“Very well,” I said again.

After all, perhaps it was better to have this fellow with me, but I had a premonition that I was getting into deep waters. Just when I thought I had attained peace!

I stopped my visitor as he was turning to depart.

“It might be just as well if I knew my new secretary’s name,” I observed sarcastically.

He considered for a minute.

“Harry Rayburn seems quite a suitable name,” he observed.

It was a curious way of putting it.

“Very well,” I said for the third time.

Nine

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

It is most undignified for a heroine to be seasick. In books the more it rolls and tosses, the better she likes it. When everybody else is ill, she alone staggers along the deck, braving the elements and positively rejoicing in the storm. I regret to say that at the first roll the Kilmorden gave, I turned pale and hastened below. A sympathetic stewardess received me. She suggested dry toast and ginger ale.

I remained groaning in my cabin for three days. Forgotten was my quest. I had no longer any interest in solving mysteries. I was a totally different Anne to the one who had rushed back to the South Kensington square so jubilantly from the shipping office.

I smiled now as I remember my abrupt entry into the drawing room. Mrs. Flemming was alone there. She turned her head as I entered.

"Is that you, Anne, my dear? There is something I want to talk over with you."

"Yes?" I said, curbing my impatience.

"Miss Emery is leaving me." Miss Emery was the governess. "As you have not yet succeeded in finding anything, I wondered if you would care—it would be so nice if you remained with us altogether?"

I was touched. She didn't want me, I knew. It was sheer Christian charity that prompted the offer. I felt remorseful for my secret criticism of her. Getting up, I ran impulsively across the room and flung my arms round her neck.

"You're a dear," I said. "A dear, a dear, a dear! And thank you ever so much. But it's all right, I'm off to South Africa on Saturday."

My abrupt onslaught had startled the good lady. She was not used to sudden demonstrations of affection. My words startled her still more.

“To South Africa? My dear Anne. We would have to look into anything of that kind very carefully.”

That was the last thing I wanted. I explained that I had already taken my passage, and that upon arrival I proposed to take up duties as a parlourmaid. It was the only thing I could think of on the spur of the moment. There was, I said, a great demand for parlourmaids in South Africa. I assured her that I was equal to taking care of myself, and in the end, with a sigh of relief at getting me off her hands, she accepted the project without further query. At parting, she slipped an envelope into my hand. Inside it I found five new crisp five-pound notes and the words: “I hope you will not be offended and will accept this with my love.” She was a very good, kind woman. I could not have continued to live in the same house with her, but I did recognize her intrinsic worth.

So here I was, with twenty-five pounds in my pocket, facing the world and pursuing my adventure.

It was on the fourth day that the stewardess finally urged me up on deck. Under the impression that I should die quicker below, I had steadfastly refused to leave my bunk. She now tempted me with the advent of Madeira. Hope rose in my breast. I could leave the boat and go ashore and be a parlourmaid there. Anything for dry land.

Muffled in coats and rugs, and weak as a kitten on my legs, I was hauled up and deposited, an inert mass, on a deck chair. I lay there with my eyes closed, hating life. The purser, a fair-haired young man, with a round boyish face, came and sat down beside me.

“Hullo! Feeling rather sorry for yourself, eh?”

“Yes,” I replied, hating him.

“Ah, you won’t know yourself in another day or two. We’ve had a rather nasty dusting in the Bay, but there’s smooth weather ahead. I’ll be taking

you on at quoits tomorrow.”

I did not reply.

“Think you’ll never recover, eh? But I’ve seen people much worse than you, and two days later they were the life and soul of the ship. You’ll be the same.”

I did not feel sufficiently pugnacious to tell him outright that he was a liar. I endeavoured to convey it by a glance. He chatted pleasantly for a few minutes more, then he mercifully departed. People passed and repassed, brisk couples “exercising,” curveting children, laughing young people. A few other pallid sufferers lay, like myself, in deck chairs.

The air was pleasant, crisp, not too cold, and the sun was shining brightly. Insensibly, I felt a little cheered. I began to watch the people. One woman in particular attracted me. She was about thirty, of medium height and very fair with a round dimpled face and very blue eyes. Her clothes, though perfectly plain, had that indefinable air of “cut” about them which spoke of Paris. Also, in a pleasant but self-possessed way, she seemed to own the ship!

Deck stewards ran to and fro obeying her commands. She had a special deck chair, and an apparently inexhaustible supply of cushions. She changed her mind three times as to where she would like it placed. Throughout everything she remained attractive and charming. She appeared to be one of those rare people in the world who know what they want, see that they get it, and manage to do so without being offensive. I decided that if ever I recovered—but of course I shouldn’t—it would amuse me to talk to her.

We reached Madeira about midday. I was still too inert to move, but I enjoyed the picturesque-looking merchants who came on board and spread their merchandise about the decks. There were flowers too. I buried my nose in an enormous bunch of sweet wet violets and felt distinctly better. In fact, I thought I might just possibly last out the end of the voyage. When my stewardess spoke of the attractions of a little chicken broth, I only protested feebly. When it came I enjoyed it.

My attractive woman had been ashore. She came back escorted by a tall, soldierly-looking man with dark hair and a bronzed face whom I had noticed striding up and down the deck earlier in the day. I put him down at once as one of the strong silent men of Rhodesia. He was about forty, with a touch of greying hair at either temple, and was easily the best-looking man on board.

When the stewardess brought me up an extra rug, I asked her if she knew who my attractive woman was.

“That’s a well-known society lady, the Hon. Mrs. Clarence Blair. You must have read about her in the papers.”

I nodded, looking at her with renewed interest. Mrs. Blair was very well-known indeed as one of the smartest women of the day. I observed, with some amusement, that she was the centre of a good deal of attention. Several people essayed to scrape acquaintance with the pleasant informality that a boat allows. I admired the polite way that Mrs. Blair snubbed them. She appeared to have adopted the strong, silent man as her special cavalier, and he seemed duly sensible of the privilege accorded him.

The following morning, to my surprise, after taking a few turns round the deck with her attentive companion, Mrs. Blair came to a halt by my chair.

“Feeling better this morning?”

I thanked her, and said I felt slightly more like a human being.

“You did look ill yesterday. Colonel Race and I decided that we should have the excitement of a funeral at sea—but you’ve disappointed us.”

I laughed.

“Being up in the air has done me good.”

“Nothing like fresh air,” said Colonel Race, smiling.

“Being shut up in those stuffy cabins would kill anyone,” declared Mrs. Blair, dropping into a seat by my side and dismissing her companion with a

little nod. “You’ve got an outside one, I hope?”

I shook my head.

“My dear girl! Why don’t you change? There’s plenty of room. A lot of people got off at Madeira, and the boat’s very empty. Talk to the purser about it. He’s a nice little boy—he changed me into a beautiful cabin because I didn’t care for the one I’d got. You talk to him at lunchtime when you go down.”

I shuddered.

“I couldn’t move.”

“Don’t be silly. Come and take a walk now with me.”

She dimpled at me encouragingly. I felt very weak on my legs at first, but as we walked briskly up and down I began to feel a brighter and better being.

After a turn or two, Colonel Race joined us again.

“You can see the Grand Peak of Tenerife from the other side.”

“Can we? Can I get a photograph of it, do you think?”

“No—but that won’t deter you from snapping off at it.”

Mrs. Blair laughed.

“You are unkind. Some of my photographs are very good.”

“About three percent effective, I should say.”

We all went round to the other side of the deck. There, glimmering white and snowy, enveloped in a delicate rose-coloured mist, rose the glistening pinnacle. I uttered an exclamation of delight. Mrs. Blair ran for her camera.

Undeterred by Colonel Race’s sardonic comments, she snapped vigorously:

“There, that’s the end of the roll. Oh,” her tone changed to one of chagrin, “I’ve had the thing at ‘bulb’ all the time.”

“I always like to see a child with a new toy,” murmured the Colonel.

“How horrid you are—but I’ve got another roll.”

She produced it in triumph from the pocket of her sweater. A sudden roll of the boat upset her balance, and as she caught at the rail to steady herself the roll of films flashed over the side.

“Oh!” cried Mrs. Blair, comically dismayed. She leaned over. “Do you think they have gone overboard?”

“No, you may have been fortunate enough to brain an unlucky steward in the deck below.”

A small boy who had arrived unobserved a few paces to our rear blew a deafening blast on a bugle.

“Lunch,” declared Mrs. Blair ecstatically. “I’ve had nothing to eat since breakfast, except two cups of beef tea. Lunch, Miss Beddingfeld?”

“Well,” I said waveringly. “Yes, I do feel rather hungry.”

“Splendid. You’re sitting at the purser’s table, I know. Tackle him about the cabin.”

I found my way down to the saloon, began to eat gingerly, and finished by consuming an enormous meal. My friend of yesterday congratulated me on my recovery. Everyone was changing cabins today, he told me, and he promised that my things should be moved to an outside one without delay.

There were only four at our table. Myself, a couple of elderly ladies, and a missionary who talked a lot about “our poor black brothers.”

I looked round at the other tables. Mrs. Blair was sitting at the Captain’s table. Colonel Race next to her. On the other side of the Captain was a distinguished-looking, grey-haired man. A good many people I had already

noticed on deck, but there was one man who had not previously appeared. Had he done so, he could hardly have escaped my notice. He was tall and dark, and had such a peculiarly sinister type of countenance that I was quite startled. I asked the purser, with some curiosity, who he was.

“That man? Oh, that’s Sir Eustace Pedler’s secretary. Been very seasick, poor chap, and not appeared before. Sir Eustace has got two secretaries with him, and the sea’s been too much for both of them. The other fellow hasn’t turned up yet. This man’s name is Pagett.”

So Sir Eustace Pedler, the owner of the Mill House, was on board. Probably only a coincidence, and yet—

“That’s Sir Eustace,” my informant continued, “sitting next to the Captain. Pompous old ass.”

The more I studied the secretary’s face, the less I liked it. Its even pallor, the secretive, heavy-lidded eyes, the curiously flattened head—it all gave a feeling of distaste, of apprehension.

Leaving the saloon at the same time as he did, I was close behind him as he went up on deck. He was speaking to Sir Eustace, and I overheard a fragment or two.

“I’ll see about the cabin at once then, shall I? It’s impossible to work in yours, with all your trunks.”

“My dear fellow,” Sir Eustace replied. “My cabin is intended (a) for me to sleep in, and (b) to attempt to dress in. I never had any intentions of allowing you to sprawl about the place making an infernal clicking with that typewriter of yours.”

“That’s just what I say, Sir Eustace, we must have somewhere to work—”

Here I parted company from them, and went below to see if my removal was in progress. I found my steward busy at the task.

“Very nice cabin, miss. On D deck. No. 13.”

“Oh, no!” I cried. “Not 13.”

13 is the one thing I am superstitious about. It was a nice cabin too. I inspected it, wavered, but a foolish superstition prevailed. I appealed almost tearfully to the steward.

“Isn’t there any other cabin I can have?”

The steward reflected.

“Well, there’s 17, just along the starboard side. That was empty this morning, but I rather fancy it’s been allotted to someone. Still, as the gentleman’s things aren’t in yet, and as gentlemen aren’t anything like so superstitious as ladies, I daresay he wouldn’t mind changing.”

I hailed the proposition gratefully, and the steward departed to obtain permission from the purser. He returned grinning.

“That’s all right, miss. We can go along.”

He led the way to 17. It was not quite as large as No. 13, but I found it eminently satisfactory.

“I’ll fetch your things right away, miss,” said the steward.

But at that moment the man with the sinister face (as I had nicknamed him) appeared in the doorway.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but this cabin is reserved for the use of Sir Eustace Pedler.”

“That’s all right, sir,” explained the steward. “We’re fitting up No. 13 instead.”

“No, it was No. 17 I was to have.”

“No. 13 is a better cabin, sir—larger.”

“I specially selected No. 17, and the purser said I could have it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said coldly. “But No. 17 has been allotted to me.”

“I can’t agree to that.”

The steward put in his oar.

“The other cabin’s just the same, only better.”

“I want No. 17.”

“What’s all this?” demanded a new voice. “Steward, put my things in here. This is my cabin.”

It was my neighbour at lunch, the Rev. Edward Chichester.

“I beg your pardon,” I said. “It’s my cabin.”

“It is allotted to Sir Eustace Pedler,” said Mr. Pagett.

We were all getting rather heated.

“I’m sorry to have to dispute the matter,” said Chichester with a meek smile which failed to mask his determination to get his own way. Meek men are always obstinate, I have noticed.

He edged himself sideways into the doorway.

“You’re to have No. 28 on the port side,” said the steward. “A very good cabin, sir.”

“I am afraid that I must insist. No. 17 was the cabin promised to me.”

We had come to an impasse. Each one of us was determined not to give way. Strictly speaking, I, at any rate, might have retired from the contest and eased matters by offering to accept Cabin 28. So long as I did not have 13 it was immaterial to me what other cabin I had. But my blood was up. I had not the least intention of being the first to give way. And I disliked Chichester. He had false teeth that clicked when he ate. Many men have been hated for less.

We all said the same things over again. The steward assured us, even more strongly, that both the other cabins were better cabins. None of us paid any attention to him.

Pagett began to lose his temper. Chichester kept his serenely. With an effort I also kept mine. And still none of us would give way an inch.

A wink and a whispered word from the steward gave me my cue. I faded unobtrusively from the scene. I was lucky enough to encounter the purser almost immediately.

“Oh, please,” I said, “you did say I could have cabin 17? And the others won’t go away. Mr. Chichester and Mr. Pagett. You will let me have it, won’t you?”

I always say that there are no people like sailors for being nice to women. My little purser came to scratch splendidly. He strode to the scene, informed the disputants that No. 17 was my cabin, they could have Nos 13 and 28 respectively or stay where they were—whichever they chose.

I permitted my eyes to tell him what a hero he was and then installed myself in my new domain. The encounter had done me worlds of good. The sea was smooth, the weather growing daily warmer. Seasickness was a thing of the past!

I went up on deck and was initiated into the mysteries of deck quoits. I entered my name for various sports. Tea was served on deck, and I ate heartily. After tea, I played shovelboard with some pleasant young men. They were extraordinarily nice to me. I felt that life was satisfactory and delightful.

The dressing bugle came as a surprise and I hurried to my new cabin. The stewardess was awaiting me with a troubled face.

“There’s a terrible smell in your cabin, miss. What it is, I’m sure I can’t think, but I doubt if you’ll be able to sleep here. There’s a deck cabin up on C deck. You might move into that—just for the night, anyway.”

The smell really was pretty bad—quite nauseating. I told the stewardess I would think over the question of moving whilst I dressed. I hurried over my toilet, sniffing distastefully as I did so.

What was the smell? Dead rat? No, worse than that—and quite different. Yet I knew it! It was something I had smelt before. Something—Ah! I had got it. Asafoetida! I had worked in a hospital dispensary during the war for a short time and had become acquainted with various nauseous drugs.

Asafoetida, that was it. But how—

I sank down on the sofa, suddenly realizing the thing. Somebody had put a pinch of asafoetida in my cabin. Why? So that I should vacate it? Why were they so anxious to get me out? I thought of the scene this afternoon from a rather different point of view. What was it about Cabin 17 that made so many people anxious to get hold of it? The other two cabins were better cabins; why had both men insisted on sticking to 17?

17. How the number persisted! It was on the 17th I had sailed from Southampton. It was a 17—I stopped with a sudden gasp. Quickly I unlocked my suitcase, and took my precious paper from its place of concealment in some rolled stockings.

17 1 22—I had taken that for a date, the date of departure of the Kilmorden Castle. Supposing I was wrong. When I came to think of it, would anyone, writing down a date, think it necessary to put the year as well as the month? Supposing 17 meant Cabin 17? and 1? The time—one o'clock. Then 22 must be the date. I looked up at my little almanac.

Tomorrow was the 22nd!

Ten

I was violently excited. I was sure that I had hit on the right trail at last. One thing was clear, I must not move out of the cabin. The asafetida had got to be borne. I examined my facts again.

Tomorrow was the 22nd, and at 1 am or 1 pm something would happen. I plumped for 1 am. It was now seven o'clock. In six hours I should know.

I don't know how I got through the evening. I retired to my cabin fairly early. I had told the stewardess that I had a cold in the head and didn't mind smells. She still seemed distressed, but I was firm.

The evening seemed interminable. I duly retired to bed, but in view of emergencies I swathed myself in a thick flannel dressing gown, and encased my feet in slippers. Thus attired I felt that I could spring up and take an active part in anything that happened.

What did I expect to happen? I hardly knew. Vague fancies, most of them wildly improbable, flitted through my brain. But one thing I was firmly convinced of, at one o'clock something would happen.

At various times I heard fellow passengers coming to bed. Fragments of conversation, laughing good nights, floated in through the open transom. Then, silence. Most of the lights went out. There was still one in the passage outside, and there was therefore a certain amount of light in my cabin. I heard eight bells go. The hour that followed seemed the longest I had ever known. I consulted my watch surreptitiously to be sure I had not overshot the time.

If my deductions were wrong, if nothing happened at one o'clock, I should have made a fool of myself, and spent all the money I had in the world on a mare's nest. My heart beat painfully.

Two bells went overhead. One o'clock! And nothing. Wait—what was that? I heard the quick light patter of feet running—running along the passage.

Then with the suddenness of a bombshell my cabin door burst open and a man almost fell inside.

“Save me,” he said hoarsely. “They’re after me.”

It was not a moment for argument or explanation. I could hear footsteps outside. I had about forty seconds in which to act. I had sprung to my feet and was standing facing the stranger in the middle of the cabin.

A cabin does not abound in hiding places for a six-foot man. With one arm I pulled out my cabin trunk. He slipped down behind it under the bunk. I raised the lid. At the same time, with the other hand I pulled down the washbasin. A deft movement and my hair was screwed into a tiny knot on the top of my head. From the point of view of appearance it was inartistic, from another standpoint it was supremely artistic. A lady, with her hair screwed into an unbecoming knob and in the act of removing a piece of soap from her trunk with which, apparently, to wash her neck, could hardly be suspected of harbouring a fugitive.

There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for me to say “Come in” it was pushed open.

I don't know what I expected to see. I think I had vague ideas of Mr. Pagett brandishing a revolver. Or my missionary friend with a sandbag, or some other lethal weapon. But I certainly did not expect to see a night stewardess, with an inquiring face and looking the essence of respectability.

“I beg your pardon, miss, I thought you called out.”

“No,” I said, “I didn't.”

“I'm sorry for interrupting you.”

“That's all right,” I said. “I couldn't sleep. I thought a wash would do me good.” It sounded rather as though it were a thing I never had as a general

rule.

“I’m so sorry, miss,” said the stewardess again. “But there’s a gentleman about who’s rather drunk and we are afraid he might get into one of the ladies’ cabins and frighten them.”

“How dreadful!” I said, looking alarmed. “He won’t come in here, will he?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, miss. Ring the bell if he does. Good night.”

“Good night.”

I opened the door and peeped down the corridor. Except for the retreating form of the stewardess, there was nobody in sight.

Drunk! So that was the explanation of it. My histrionic talents had been wasted. I pulled the cabin trunk out a little farther and said: “Come out at once, please,” in an acid voice.

There was no answer. I peered under the bunk. My visitor lay immoveable. He seemed to be asleep. I tugged at his shoulder. He did not move.

“Dead drunk,” I thought vexedly. “What am I to do?”

Then I saw something that made me catch my breath, a small scarlet spot on the floor.

Using all my strength, I succeeded in dragging the man out into the middle of the cabin. The dead whiteness of his face showed that he had fainted. I found the cause of his fainting easily enough. He had been stabbed under the left shoulder blade—a nasty deep wound. I got his coat off and set to work to attend to it.

At the sting of the cold water he stirred, then sat up.

“Keep still, please,” I said.

He was the kind of young man who recovers his faculties very quickly. He pulled himself to his feet and stood there swaying a little.

“Thank you; I don’t need anything done for me.”

His manner was defiant, almost aggressive. Not a word of thanks—of even common gratitude!

“That is a nasty wound. You must let me dress it.”

“You will do nothing of the kind.”

He flung the words in my face as though I had been begging a favour of him. My temper, never placid, rose.

“I cannot congratulate you on your manners,” I said coldly.

“I can at least relieve you of my presence.” He started for the door, but reeled as he did so. With an abrupt movement I pushed him down upon the sofa.

“Don’t be a fool,” I said unceremoniously. “You don’t want to go bleeding all over the ship, do you?”

He seemed to see the sense of that, for he sat quietly whilst I bandaged up the wound as best I could.

“There,” I said, bestowing a pat on my handiwork, “that will have to do for the present. Are you better-tempered now and do you feel inclined to tell me what it’s all about?”

“I’m sorry that I can’t satisfy your very natural curiosity.”

“Why not?” I said, chagrined.

He smiled nastily.

“If you want a thing broadcast, tell a woman. Otherwise keep your mouth shut.”

“Don’t you think I could keep a secret?”

“I don’t think—I know.”

He rose to his feet.

“At any rate,” I said spitefully, “I shall be able to do a little broadcasting about the events of this evening.”

“I’ve no doubt you will too,” he said indifferently.

“How dare you!” I cried angrily.

We were facing each other, glaring at each other with the ferocity of bitter enemies. For the first time, I took in the details of his appearance, the close-cropped dark head, the lean jaw, the scar on the brown cheek, the curious light grey eyes that looked into mine with a sort of reckless mockery hard to describe. There was something dangerous about him.

“You haven’t thanked me yet for saving your life!” I said with false sweetness.

I hit him there. I saw him flinch distinctly. Intuitively I knew that he hated above all to be reminded that he owed his life to me. I didn’t care. I wanted to hurt him. I had never wanted to hurt anyone so much.

“I wish to God you hadn’t!” he said explosively. “I’d be better dead and out of it.”

“I’m glad you acknowledge the debt. You can’t get out of it. I saved your life and I’m waiting for you to say ‘Thank you.’ ”

If looks could have killed, I think he would have liked to kill me then. He pushed roughly past me. At the door he turned back, and spoke over his shoulder.

“I shall not thank you—now or at any other time. But I acknowledge the debt. Some day I will pay it.”

He was gone, leaving me with clenched hands, and my heart beating like a mill race.

Eleven

There were no further excitements that night. I had breakfast in bed and got up late the next morning. Mrs. Blair hailed me as I came on deck.

“Good morning, gipsy girl. Sit down here by me. You look as though you hadn’t slept well.”

“Why do you call me that?” I asked, as I sat down obediently.

“Do you mind? It suits you somehow. I’ve called you that in my own mind from the beginning. It’s the gipsy element in you that makes you so different from anyone else. I decided in my own mind that you and Colonel Race were the only two people on board who wouldn’t bore me to death to talk to.”

“That’s funny,” I said. “I thought the same about you—only it’s more understandable in your case. You’re—you’re such an exquisitely finished product.”

“Not badly put,” said Mrs. Blair, nodding her head. “Tell me about yourself, gipsy girl. Why are you going to South Africa?”

I told her something about Papa’s life work.

“So you’re Charles Beddingfeld’s daughter? I thought you weren’t a mere provincial miss! Are you going to Broken Hill to grub up more skulls?”

“I may,” I said cautiously. “I’ve got other plans as well.”

“What a mysterious minx you are. But you do look tired this morning. Didn’t you sleep well? I can’t keep awake on board a boat. Ten hours’ sleep for a fool, they say! I could do with twenty!”

She yawned, looking like a sleepy kitten. “An idiot of a steward woke me up in the middle of the night to return me that roll of films I dropped

yesterday. He did it in the most melodramatic manner, stuck his arm through the ventilator and dropped them neatly in the middle of my tummy. I thought it was a bomb for a moment!”

“Here’s your Colonel,” I said, as the tall soldierly figure of Colonel Race appeared on the deck.

“He’s not my Colonel particularly. In fact he admires you very much, gipsy girl. So don’t run away.”

“I want to tie something round my head. It will be more comfortable than a hat.”

I slipped quickly away. For some reason or other I was uncomfortable with Colonel Race. He was one of the few people who were capable of making me feel shy.

I went down to my cabin and began looking for something with which I could restrain my rebellious locks. Now I am a tidy person, I like my things always arranged in a certain way and I keep them so. I had no sooner opened my drawer than I realized that somebody had been disarranging my things. Everything had been turned over and scattered. I looked in the other drawers and the small hanging cupboard. They told the same tale. It was as though someone had been making a hurried and ineffectual search for something.

I sat down on the edge of the bunk with a grave face. Who had been searching my cabin and what had they been looking for? Was it the half sheet of paper with scribbled figures and words? I shook my head, dissatisfied. Surely that was past history now. But what else could there be?

I wanted to think. The events of last night, though exciting, had not really done anything to elucidate matters. Who was the young man who had burst into my cabin so abruptly? I had not seen him on board previously, either on deck or in the saloon. Was he one of the ship’s company or was he a passenger? Who had stabbed him? Why had they stabbed him? And why, in the name of goodness, should Cabin No 17 figure so prominently? It was all

a mystery, but there was no doubt that some very peculiar occurrences were taking place on the Kilmorden Castle.

I counted off on my fingers the people on whom it behoved me to keep watch.

Setting aside my visitor of the night before, but promising myself that I would discover him on board before another day had passed, I selected the following persons as worthy of my notice:

(1) Sir Eustace Pedler. He was the owner of the Mill House, and his presence on the Kilmorden Castle seemed something of a coincidence.

(2) Mr. Pagett, the sinister-looking secretary, whose eagerness to obtain Cabin 17 had been so very marked. N.B.—Find out whether he had accompanied Sir Eustace to Cannes.

(3) The Rev. Edward Chichester. All I had against him was his obstinacy over Cabin 17, and that might be entirely due to his own peculiar temperament. Obstinacy can be an amazing thing.

But a little conversation with Mr. Chichester would not come amiss, I decided. Hastily tying a handkerchief round my hair, I went up on deck again, full of purpose. I was in luck. My quarry was leaning against the rail, drinking beef tea. I went up to him.

“I hope you’ve forgiven me over Cabin 17,” I said, with my best smile.

“I consider it unchristian to bear a grudge,” said Mr. Chichester coldly. “But the purser had distinctly promised me that cabin.”

“Pursers are such busy men, aren’t they?” I said vaguely. “I suppose they’re bound to forget sometimes.”

Mr. Chichester did not reply.

“Is this your first visit to South Africa?” I inquired conversationally.

“To South Africa, yes. But I have worked for the last two years amongst the cannibal tribes in the interior of East Africa.”

“How thrilling! Have you had many narrow escapes?”

“Escapes?”

“Of being eaten, I mean?”

“You should not treat sacred subjects with levity, Miss Beddingfeld.”

“I didn’t know that cannibalism was a sacred subject,” I retorted, stung.

As the words left my lips, another idea struck me. If Mr. Chichester had indeed spent the last two years in the interior of Africa, how was it that he was not more sunburnt? His skin was as pink and white as a baby’s. Surely there was something fishy there? Yet his manner and voice were so absolutely it. Too much so, perhaps. Was he—or was he not—just a little like a stage clergyman?

I cast my mind back to the curates I had known at Little Hampsley. Some of them I had liked, some of them I had not, but certainly none of them had been quite like Mr. Chichester. They had been human—he was a glorified type.

I was debating all this when Sir Eustace Pedler passed down the deck. Just as he was abreast of Mr. Chichester, he stooped and picked up a piece of paper which he handed to him, remarking, “You’ve dropped something.”

He passed on without stopping, and so probably did not notice Mr. Chichester’s agitation. I did. Whatever it was he had dropped, its recovery agitated him considerably. He turned a sickly green, and crumpled up the sheet of paper into a ball. My suspicions were accentuated a hundredfold.

He caught my eye, and hurried into explanations.

“A—a—fragment of a sermon I was composing,” he said with a sickly smile.

“Indeed?” I rejoined politely.

A fragment of a sermon, indeed! No, Mr. Chichester—too weak for words!

He soon left me with a muttered excuse. I wished, oh, how I wished, that I had been the one to pick up that paper and not Sir Eustace Pedler! One thing was clear, Mr. Chichester could not be exempted from my list of suspects. I was inclined to put him top of the three.

After lunch, when I came up to the lounge for coffee, I noticed Sir Eustace and Pagett sitting with Mrs. Blair and Colonel Race. Mrs. Blair welcomed me with a smile, so I went over and joined them. They were talking about Italy.

“But it is misleading,” Mrs. Blair insisted. “Aqua calda certainly ought to be cold water—not hot.”

“You’re not a Latin scholar,” said Sir Eustace, smiling.

“Men are so superior about their Latin,” said Mrs. Blair. “But all the same I notice that when you ask them to translate inscriptions in old churches they can never do it! They hem and haw, and get out of it somehow.”

“Quite right,” said Colonel Race. “I always do.”

“But I love the Italians,” continued Mrs. Blair. “They’re so obliging—though even that has its embarrassing side. You ask them the way somewhere, and instead of saying ‘first to the right, second to the left’ or something that one could follow, they pour out a flood of well-meaning directions, and when you look bewildered they take you kindly by the arm and walk all the way there with you.”

“Is that your experience in Florence, Pagett?” asked Sir Eustace, turning with a smile to his secretary.

For some reason the question seemed to disconcert Mr. Pagett. He stammered and flushed.

“Oh, quite so, yes—er quite so.”

Then with a murmured excuse, he rose and left the table.

“I am beginning to suspect Guy Pagett of having committed some dark deed in Florence,” remarked Sir Eustace, gazing after his secretary’s retreating figure. “Whenever Florence or Italy is mentioned, he changes the subject or bolts precipitately.”

“Perhaps he murdered someone there,” said Mrs. Blair hopefully. “He looks—I hope I’m not hurting your feelings, Sir Eustace—but he does look as though he might murder someone.”

“Yes, pure Cinquecento! It amuses me sometimes—especially when one knows as well as I do how essentially law-abiding and respectable the poor fellow really is.”

“He’s been with you some time, hasn’t he, Sir Eustace?” asked Colonel Race.

“Six years,” said Sir Eustace with a deep sigh.

“He must be quite invaluable to you,” said Mrs. Blair.

“Oh, invaluable! Yes, quite invaluable.” The poor man sounded even more depressed, as though the invaluable-ness of Mr. Pagett was a secret grief to him. Then he added more briskly: “But his face should really inspire you with confidence, my dear lady. No self-respecting murderer would ever consent to look like one. Crippen, now, I believe, was one of the pleasantest fellows imaginable.”

“He was caught on a liner, wasn’t he?” murmured Mrs. Blair.

There was a slight rattle behind us. I turned quickly. Mr. Chichester had dropped his coffee cup.

Our party soon broke up; Mrs. Blair went below to sleep and I went out on deck. Colonel Race followed me.

“You’re very elusive, Miss Beddingfeld. I looked for you everywhere last night at the dance.”

“I went to bed early,” I explained.

“Are you going to run away tonight too? Or are you going to dance with me?”

“I shall be very pleased to dance with you,” I murmured shyly. “But Mrs. Blair—”

“Our friend, Mrs. Blair, doesn’t care for dancing.”

“And do you?”

“I care for dancing with you.”

“Oh!” I said nervously.

I was a little afraid of Colonel Race. Nevertheless I was enjoying myself. This was better than discussing fossilized skulls with stuffy old professors! Colonel Race was really just my ideal of a stern silent Rhodesian. Possibly I might marry him! I hadn’t been asked, it is true, but, as the Boy Scouts say, Be Prepared! And all women, without in the least meaning it, consider every man they meet as a possible husband for themselves or their best friend.

I danced several times with him that evening. He danced well. When the dancing was over, and I was thinking of going to bed, he suggested a turn round the deck. We walked round three times and finally subsided into two deck chairs. There was nobody else in sight. We made desultory conversation for some time.

“Do you know, Miss Beddingfeld, I think I once met your father? A very interesting man—on his own subject, and it’s a subject that has a special fascination for me. In my humble way, I’ve done a bit in that line myself. Why, when I was in the Dordogne region—”

Our talk became technical. Colonel Race’s boast was not an idle one. He knew a great deal. At the same time, he made one or two curious mistakes—slips of the tongue, I might almost have thought them. But he was quick

to take his cue from me and to cover them up. Once he spoke of the Mousterian period as succeeding the Aurignacian—an absurd mistake for one who knew anything of the subject.

It was twelve o'clock when I went to my cabin. I was still puzzling over those queer discrepancies. Was it possible that he had “got the whole subject up” for the occasion—that really he knew nothing of archaeology? I shook my head, vaguely dissatisfied with that solution.

Just as I was dropping off to sleep, I sat up with a sudden start as another idea flashed into my head. Had he been pumping me? Were those slight inaccuracies just tests—to see whether I really knew what I was talking about? In other words, he suspected me of not being genuinely Anne Beddingfeld.

Why?

Twelve

(Extract from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler)

There is something to be said for life on board ship. It is peaceful. My grey hairs fortunately exempt me from the indignities of bobbing for apples, running up and down deck with potatoes and eggs, and the more painful sports of “Brother Bill” and Bolster Bar. What amusement people can find in these painful proceedings has always been a mystery to me. But there are many fools in the world. One praises God for their existence and keeps out of their way.

Fortunately I am an excellent sailor. Pagett, poor fellow, is not. He began turning green as soon as we were out of the Solent. I presume my other so-called secretary is also seasick. At any rate he has not yet made an appearance. But perhaps it is not seasickness, but high diplomacy. The great thing is that I have not been worried by him.

On the whole, the people onboard are a mangy lot. Only two decent Bridge players and one decent-looking woman—Mrs. Clarence Blair. I’ve met her in town, of course. She is one of the only women I know who can lay claim to a sense of humour. I enjoy talking to her, and should enjoy it more if it were not for a long-legged taciturn ass who attached himself to her like a limpet. I cannot think that this Colonel Race really amuses her. He’s good-looking in his way, but dull as ditch water. One of these strong silent men that lady novelists and young girls always rave over.

Guy Pagett struggled up on deck after we left Madeira and began babbling in a hollow voice about work. What the devil does anyone want to work for onboard ship? It is true that I promised my publishers my “Reminiscences” early in the summer, but what of it? Who really reads reminiscences? Old ladies in the suburbs. And what do my reminiscences amount to? I’ve knocked against a certain number of so-called famous people in my lifetime. With the assistance of Pagett, I invented insipid anecdotes about them. And, the truth of the matter is, Pagett is too honest for the job. He

won't let me invent anecdotes about the people I might have met but haven't.

I tried kindness with him.

"You look a perfect wreck still, my dear chap," I said easily. "What you need is a deck chair in the sun. No—not another word. The work must wait."

The next thing I knew he was worrying about an extra cabin. "There's no room to work in your cabin, Sir Eustace. It's full of trunks."

From his tone, you might have thought the trunks were black beetles, something that had no business to be there.

I explained to him that, though he might not be aware of the fact, it was usual to take a change of clothing with one when travelling. He gave the wan smile with which he always greets my attempts at humour, and then reverted to the business in hand.

"And we could hardly work in my little hole."

I know Pagett's "little holes"—he usually has the best cabin on the ship.

"I'm sorry the Captain didn't turn out for you this time," I said sarcastically. "Perhaps you'd like to dump some of your extra luggage in my cabin?"

Sarcasm is dangerous with a man like Pagett. He brightened up at once.

"Well, if I could get rid of the typewriter and the stationery trunk—"

The stationery trunk weighs several solid tons. It causes endless unpleasantness with the porters, and it is the aim of Pagett's life to foist it on me. It is a perpetual struggle between us. He seems to regard it as my special personal property. I, on the other hand, regard the charge of it as the only thing where a secretary is really useful.

"We'll get an extra cabin," I said hastily.

The thing seemed simple enough, but Pagett is a person who loves to make mysteries. He came to me the next day with a face like a Renaissance conspirator.

“You know you told me to get Cabin 17 for an office?”

“Well, what of it? Has the stationery trunk jammed in the doorway?”

“The doorways are the same size in all the cabins,” replied Pagett seriously. “But I tell you, Sir Eustace, there’s something very queer about that cabin.”

Memories of reading *The Upper Berth* floated through my mind.

“If you mean that it’s haunted,” I said, “we’re not going to sleep there, so I don’t see that it matters. Ghosts don’t affect typewriters.”

Pagett said that it wasn’t a ghost and that, after all, he hadn’t got Cabin 17. He told me a long, garbled story. Apparently, he and a Mr. Chichester, and a girl called Beddingfeld, had almost come to blows over the cabin. Needless to say, the girl had won, and Pagett was apparently feeling sore over the matter.

“Both 13 and 28 are better cabins,” he reiterated. “But they wouldn’t look at them.”

“Well,” I said, stifling a yawn, “for that matter, no more would you, my dear Pagett.”

He gave me a reproachful look.

“You told me to get Cabin 17.”

There is a touch of the “boy upon the burning deck” about Pagett.

“My dear fellow,” I said testily, “I mentioned No. 17 because I happened to observe that it was vacant. But I didn’t mean you to make a stand to the death about it—13 or 28 would have done us equally well.”

He looked hurt.

“There’s something more, though,” he insisted. “Miss Beddingfeld got the cabin, but this morning I saw Chichester coming out of it in a furtive sort of way.”

I looked at him severely.

“If you’re trying to get up a nasty scandal about Chichester, who is a missionary—though a perfectly poisonous person—and that attractive child, Anne Beddingfeld, I don’t believe a word of it,” I said coldly. “Anne Beddingfeld is an extremely nice girl—with particularly good legs. I should say she had far and away the best legs on board.”

Pagett did not like my reference to Anne Beddingfeld’s legs. He is the sort of man who never notices legs himself—or, if he does, would die sooner than say so. Also he thinks my appreciation of such things frivolous. I like annoying Pagett, so I continued maliciously:

“As you’ve made her acquaintance, you might ask her to dine at our table tomorrow night. It’s the Fancy Dress dance. By the way, you’d better go down to the barber and select a fancy costume for me.”

“Surely you will not go in fancy dress?” said Pagett, in tones of horror.

I could see that it was quite incompatible with his idea of my dignity. He looked shocked and pained. I had really had no intention of donning fancy dress, but the complete discomfiture of Pagett was too tempting to be forborne.

“What do you mean?” I said. “Of course I shall wear fancy dress. So will you.”

Pagett shuddered.

“So go down to the barber’s and see about it,” I finished. “I don’t think he’ll have any out sizes,” murmured Pagett, measuring my figure with his eye.

Without meaning it, Pagett can occasionally be extremely offensive.

“And order a table for six in the saloon,” I said. “We’ll have the Captain, the girl with the nice legs, Mrs. Blair—”

“You won’t get Mrs. Blair, without Colonel Race,” Pagett interposed. “He’s asked her to dine with him, I know.”

Pagett always knows everything. I was justifiably annoyed.

“Who is Race?” I demanded, exasperated.

As I said before, Pagett always knows everything—or thinks he does. He looked mysterious again.

“They say he’s a Secret Service chap, Sir Eustace. Rather a great gun too. But of course I don’t know for certain.”

“Isn’t that like the Government?” I exclaimed. “Here’s a man onboard whose business it is to carry about secret documents, and they go giving them to a peaceful outsider, who only asks to be let alone.”

Pagett looked even more mysterious. He came a pace nearer and dropped his voice.

“If you ask me, the whole thing is very queer, Sir Eustace. Look at the illness of mine before we started—”

“My dear fellow,” I interrupted brutally, “that was a bilious attack. You’re always having bilious attacks.”

Pagett winced slightly.

“It wasn’t the usual sort of bilious attack. This time—”

“For God’s sake, don’t go into details of your condition, Pagett. I don’t want to hear them.”

“Very well, Sir Eustace. But my belief is that I was deliberately poisoned!”

“Ah!” I said. “You’ve been talking to Rayburn.”

He did not deny it.

“At any rate, Sir Eustace, he thinks so—and he should be in a position to know.”

“By the way, where is the chap?” I asked. “I’ve not set eyes on him since we came onboard.”

“He gives out that he’s ill, and stays in his cabin, Sir Eustace.” Pagett’s voice dropped again. “But that’s camouflage, I’m sure. So that he can watch better.”

“Watch?”

“Over your safety, Sir Eustace. In case an attack should be made upon you.”

“You’re such a cheerful fellow, Pagett,” I said. “I trust that your imagination runs away with you. If I were you I should go to the dance as a death’s head or an executioner. It will suit your mournful style of beauty.”

That shut him up for the time being. I went on deck. The Beddingfeld girl was deep in conversation with the missionary parson, Chichester. Women always flutter round parsons.

A man of my figure hates stooping, but I had the courtesy to pick up a bit of paper that was fluttering round the parson’s feet.

I got no word of thanks for my pains. As a matter of fact I couldn’t help seeing what was written on the sheet of paper. There was just one sentence.

“Don’t try to play a lone hand or it will be the worse for you.”

That’s a nice thing for a parson to have. Who is this fellow Chichester, I wonder? He looks mild as milk. But looks are deceptive. I shall ask Pagett about him. Pagett always knows everything.

I sank gracefully into my deck chair by the side of Mrs. Blair, thereby interrupting her tête-à-tête with Race, and remarked that I didn’t know what the clergy were coming to nowadays.

Then I asked her to dine with me on the night of the Fancy Dress dance. Somehow or other Race managed to get included in the invitation.

After lunch the Beddingfeld girl came and sat with us for coffee. I was right about her legs. They are the best on the ship. I shall certainly ask her to dinner as well.

I would very much like to know what mischief Pagett was up to in Florence. Whenever Italy is mentioned, he goes to pieces. If I did not know how intensely respectable he is—I should suspect him of some disreputable amour. . . .

I wonder now! Even the most respectable men—It would cheer me up enormously if it was so.

Pagett—with a guilty secret! Splendid!

Thirteen

It has been a curious evening.

The only costume that fitted me in the barber's emporium was that of a Teddy Bear. I don't mind playing bears with some nice young girls on a winter's evening in England—but it's hardly an ideal costume for the equator. However, I created a good deal of merriment, and won first prize for “brought onboard”—an absurd term for a costume hired for the evening. Still, as nobody seemed to have the least idea whether they were made or brought, it didn't matter.

Mrs. Blair refused to dress up. Apparently she is at one with Pagett on the matter. Colonel Race followed her example. Anne Beddingfeld had concocted a gipsy costume for herself, and looked extraordinarily well. Pagett said he had a headache and didn't appear. To replace him I asked a quaint little fellow called Reeves. He's a prominent member of the South African labour party. Horrible little man, but I want to keep in with him, as he gives me information that I need. I want to understand this Rand business from both sides.

Dancing was a hot affair. I danced twice with Anne Beddingfeld and she had to pretend she liked it. I danced once with Mrs. Blair, who didn't trouble to pretend, and I victimized various other damsels whose appearance struck me favourably.

Then we went down to supper. I had ordered champagne; the steward suggested Clicquot 1911 as being the best they had on the boat and I fell in with his suggestion. I seemed to have hit on the one thing that would loosen Colonel Race's tongue. Far from being taciturn, the man became actually talkative. For a while this amused me, then it occurred to me that Colonel Race, and not myself, was becoming the life and soul of the party. He chaffed me at length about keeping a diary.

“It will reveal all your indiscretions one of these days, Pedler.”

“My dear Race,” I said, “I venture to suggest that I am not quite the fool you think me. I may commit indiscretions, but I don’t write them down in black and white. After my death, my executors will know my opinion of a great many people, but I doubt if they will find anything to add or detract from their opinion of me. A diary is useful for recording the idiosyncrasies of other people—but not one’s own.”

“There is such a thing as unconscious self-revelation, though.”

“In the eyes of the psychoanalyst, all things are vile,” I replied sententiously.

“You must have had a very interesting life, Colonel Race?” said Miss Beddingfeld, gazing at him with wide, starry eyes.

That’s how they do it, these girls! Othello charmed Desdemona by telling her stories, but, oh, didn’t Desdemona charm Othello by the way she listened?

Anyway, the girl set Race off all right. He began to tell lion stories. A man who has shot lions in large quantities has an unfair advantage over other men. It seemed to me that it was time I, too, told a lion story. One of a more sprightly character.

“By the way,” I remarked, “that reminds me of a rather exciting tale I heard. A friend of mine was out on a shooting trip somewhere in East Africa. One night he came out of his tent for some reason, and was startled by a low growl. He turned sharply and saw a lion crouching to spring. He had left his rifle in the tent. Quick as thought, he ducked, and the lion sprang right over his head. Annoyed at having missed him, the animal growled and prepared to spring again. Again he ducked, and again the lion sprang right over him. This happened a third time, but by now he was close to the entrance of his tent, and he darted in and seized his rifle. When he emerged, rifle in hand, the lion had disappeared. That puzzled him greatly. He crept round the back of the tent, where there was a little clearing. There, sure enough, was the lion, busily practising low jumps.”

This was received by a roar of applause. I drank some champagne.

“On another occasion,” I remarked, “this friend of mine had a second curious experience. He was trekking across country, and being anxious to arrive at his destination before the heat of the day he ordered his boys to inspan whilst it was still dark. They had some trouble in doing so, as the mules were very restive, but at last they managed it, and a start was made. The mules raced along like the wind, and when daylight came they saw why. In the darkness, the boys had inspanned a lion as the near wheeler.”

This, too, was well-received, a ripple of merriment going round the table, but I am not sure that the greatest tribute did not come from my friend the Labour Member, who remained pale and serious.

“My God!” he said anxiously. “Who un’arnessed them?”

“I must go to Rhodesia,” said Mrs. Blair. “After what you have told us, Colonel Race, I simply must. It’s a horrible journey though, five days in the train.”

“You must join me in my private car,” I said gallantly.

“Oh, Sir Eustace, how sweet of you! Do you really mean it?”

“Do I mean it!” I exclaimed reproachfully, and drank another glass of champagne.

“Just about another week, and we shall be in South Africa,” sighed Mrs. Blair.

“Ah, South Africa,” I said sentimentally, and began to quote from a recent speech of mine at the Colonial Institute. “What has South Africa to show the world? What indeed? Her fruit and her farms, her wool and her wattles, her herds and her hides, her gold mines and her diamonds—”

I was hurrying on, because I knew that as soon as I paused Reeves would butt in and inform me that the hides were worthless because the animals hung themselves up on barbed wire or something of that sort, would crab everything else, and end up with the hardships of the miners on the Rand.

And I was not in the mood to be abused as a Capitalist. However, the interruption came from another source at the magic word diamonds.

“Diamonds!” said Mrs. Blair ecstatically.

“Diamonds!” breathed Miss Beddingfeld.

They both addressed Colonel Race.

“I suppose you’ve been to Kimberley?”

I had been to Kimberley too, but I didn’t manage to say so in time. Race was being inundated with questions. What were mines like? Was it true that the natives were kept shut up in compounds? And so on.

Race answered their questions and showed a good knowledge of his subject. He described the methods of housing the natives, the searches instituted, and the various precautions that De Beers took.

“Then it’s practically impossible to steal any diamonds?” asked Mrs. Blair with as keen an air of disappointment as though she had been journeying there for the express purpose.

“Nothing’s impossible, Mrs. Blair. Thefts do occur—like the case I told you of where the Kafir hid the stone in his wound.”

“Yes, but on a large scale?”

“Once, in recent years. Just before the War, in fact. You must remember the case, Pedler. You were in South Africa at the time?”

I nodded.

“Tell us,” cried Miss Beddingfeld. “Oh, do tell us!”

Race smiled.

“Very well, you shall have the story. I suppose most of you have heard of Sir Laurence Eardsley, the great South African mining magnate? His mines

were gold mines, but he comes into the story through his son. You may remember that just before the War rumours were afield of a new potential Kimberley hidden somewhere in the rocky floor of the British Guiana jungles. Two young explorers, so it was reported, had returned from that part of South America bringing with them a remarkable collection of rough diamonds, some of them of considerable size. Diamonds of small size had been found before in the neighbourhood of the Essequibo and Mazaruni rivers, but these two young men, John Eardsley and his friend Lucas, claimed to have discovered beds of great carbon deposits at the common head of two streams. The diamonds were of every colour, pink, blue, yellow, green, black, and the purest white. Eardsley and Lucas came to Kimberley, where they were to submit their gems to inspection. At the same time a sensational robbery was found to have taken place at De Beers. When sending diamonds to England they are made up into a packet. This remains in the big safe, of which the two keys are held by two different men whilst a third man knows the combination. They are handed to the Bank, and the Bank send them to England. Each package is worth, roughly, about £100,000.

“On this occasion the Bank were struck by something a little unusual about the sealing of the packet. It was opened, and found to contain knobs of sugar!

“Exactly how suspicion came to fasten on John Eardsley I do not know. It was remembered that he had been very wild at Cambridge and that his father had paid his debts more than once. Anyhow, it soon got about that this story of South American diamond fields was all a fantasy. John Eardsley was arrested. In his possession was found a portion of the De Beers diamonds.

“But the case never came to court. Sir Laurence Eardsley paid over a sum equal to the missing diamonds, and De Beers did not prosecute. Exactly how the robbery was committed has never been known. But the knowledge that his son was a thief broke the old man’s heart. He had a stroke shortly afterwards. As for John, his Fate was in a way merciful. He enlisted, went to the War, fought there bravely, and was killed, thus wiping out the stain on his name. Sir Laurence himself had a third stroke and died about a month

ago. He died intestate and his vast fortune passed to his next of kin, a man whom he hardly knew.”

The Colonel paused. A babel of ejaculations and questions broke out. Something seemed to attract Miss Beddingfeld’s attention, and she turned in her chair. At the little gasp she gave, I, too, turned.

My new secretary, Rayburn, was standing in the doorway. Under his tan, his face had the pallor of one who has seen a ghost. Evidently Race’s story had moved him profoundly.

Suddenly conscious of our scrutiny, he turned abruptly and disappeared.

“Do you know who that is?” asked Anne Beddingfeld abruptly.

“That’s my other secretary,” I explained. “Mr. Rayburn. He’s been seedy up to now.”

She toyed with the bread by her plate.

“Has he been your secretary long?”

“Not very long,” I said cautiously.

But caution is useless with a woman, the more you hold back, the more she presses forward. Anne Beddingfeld made no bones about it.

“How long?” she asked bluntly.

“Well—er—I engaged him just before I sailed. Old friend of mine recommended him.”

She said nothing more, but relapsed into a thoughtful silence. I turned to Race with the feeling that it was my turn to display an interest in his story.

“Who is Sir Laurence’s next of kin, Race? Do you know?”

“I should do so,” he replied, with a smile. “I am!”

Fourteen

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

It was on the night of the Fancy Dress dance that I decided that the time had come for me to confide in someone. So far I had played a lone hand and rather enjoyed it. Now suddenly everything was changed. I distrusted my own judgement and for the first time a feeling of loneliness and desolation crept over me.

I sat on the edge of my bunk, still in my gipsy dress, and considered the situation. I thought first of Colonel Race. He had seemed to like me. He would be kind, I was sure. And he was no fool. Yet, as I thought it over, I wavered. He was a man of commanding personality. He would take the whole matter out of my hands. And it was my mystery! There were other reasons, too, which I would hardly acknowledge to myself, but which made it inadvisable to confide in Colonel Race.

Then I thought of Mrs. Blair. She, too, had been kind to me. I did not delude myself into the belief that that really meant anything. It was probably a mere whim of the moment. All the same, I had it in my power to interest her. She was a woman who had experienced most of the ordinary sensations in life. I proposed to supply her with an extraordinary one! And I liked her; liked her ease of manner, her lack of sentimentality, her freedom from any form of affectation.

My mind was made up. I decided to seek her out then and there. She would hardly be in bed yet.

Then I remembered that I did not know the number of her cabin. My friend, the night stewardess, would probably know.

I rang the bell. After some delay it was answered by a man. He gave me the information I wanted. Mrs. Blair's cabin was No. 71. He apologized for the

delay in answering the bell, but explained that he had all the cabins to attend to.

“Where is the stewardess, then?” I asked.

“They all go off duty at ten o’clock.”

“No—I mean the night stewardess.”

“No stewardess on at night, miss.”

“But—but a stewardess came the other night—about one o’clock.”

“You must have been dreaming, miss. There’s no stewardess on duty after ten.”

He withdrew and I was left to digest this morsel of information. Who was the woman who had come to my cabin on the night of the 22nd? My face grew graver as I realized the cunning and audacity of my unknown antagonists. Then, pulling myself together, I left my own cabin and sought that of Mrs. Blair. I knocked at the door.

“Who’s that?” called her voice from within.

“Its me—Anne Beddingfeld.”

“Oh, come in, gipsy girl.”

I entered. A good deal of scattered clothing lay about, and Mrs. Blair herself was draped in one of the loveliest kimonos I had ever seen. It was all orange and gold and black and made my mouth water to look at it.

“Mrs. Blair,” I said abruptly, “I want to tell you the story of my life—that is, if it isn’t too late, and you won’t be bored.”

“Not a bit. I always hate going to bed,” said Mrs. Blair, her face crinkling into smiles in the delightful way it had. “And I should love to hear the story of your life. You’re a most unusual creature, gipsy girl. Nobody else would think of bursting in on me at 1 am to tell me the story of their life.

Especially after snubbing my natural curiosity for weeks as you have done! I'm not accustomed to being snubbed. It's been quite a pleasing novelty. Sit down on the sofa and unburden your soul."

I told her the whole story. It took some time as I was conscientious over all the details. She gave a deep sigh when I had finished, but she did not say at all what I had expected her to say. Instead she looked at me, laughed a little and said:

"Do you know, Anne, you're a very unusual girl? Haven't you ever had qualms?"

"Qualms?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes, qualms, qualms, qualms! Starting off alone with practically no money. What will you do when you find yourself in a strange country with all your money gone?"

"It's no good bothering about that until it comes. I've got plenty of money still. The twenty-five pounds that Mrs. Flemming gave me is practically intact, and then I won the sweep yesterday. That's another fifteen pounds. Why, I've got lots of money. Forty pounds!"

"Lots of money! My God!" murmured Mrs. Blair. "I couldn't do it, Anne, and I've plenty of pluck in my own way. I couldn't start off gaily with a few pounds in my pocket and no idea as to what I was doing and where I was going."

"But that's the fun of it," I cried, thoroughly roused. "It gives one such a splendid feeling of adventure."

She looked at me, nodded once or twice, and then smiled.

"Lucky Anne! There aren't many people in the world who feel as you do."

"Well," I said impatiently, "what do you think of it all, Mrs. Blair?"

"I think it's the most thrilling thing I ever heard! Now, to begin with, you will stop calling me Mrs. Blair. Suzanne will be ever so much better. Is that

agreed?”

“I should love it, Suzanne.”

“Good girl. Now let’s get down to business. You say that in Sir Eustace’s secretary—not that long-faced Pagett, the other one—you recognized the man who was stabbed and came into your cabin for shelter?”

I nodded.

“That gives us two links connecting Sir Eustace with the tangle. The woman was murdered in his house, and it’s his secretary who gets stabbed at the mystic hour of one o’clock. I don’t suspect Sir Eustace himself, but it can’t be all coincidence. There’s a connexion somewhere even if he himself is unaware of it.

“Then there’s the queer business of the stewardess,” she continued thoughtfully. “What was she like?”

“I hardly noticed her. I was so excited and strung up—and a stewardess seemed such an anticlimax. But—yes—I did think her face was familiar. Of course it would be if I’d seen her about the ship.”

“Her face seemed familiar to you,” said Suzanne. “Sure she wasn’t a man?”

“She was very tall,” I admitted.

“Hum. Hardly Sir Eustace, I should think, nor Mr. Pagett—Wait!”

She caught up a scrap of paper and began drawing feverishly. She inspected the result with her head poised on one side.

“A very good likeness of the Rev. Edward Chichester. Now for the etceteras.” She passed the paper over to me. “Is that your stewardess?”

“Why, yes,” I cried. “Suzanne, how clever of you!”

She disdained the compliment with a light gesture.

“I’ve always had suspicions about that Chichester creature. Do you remember how he dropped his coffee cup and turned a sickly green when we were discussing Crippen the other day?”

“And he tried to get Cabin 17!”

“Yes, it all fits in so far. But what does it all mean? What was really meant to happen at one o’clock in Cabin 17? It can’t be the stabbing of the secretary. There would be no point in timing that for a special hour on a special day in a special place. No, it must have been some kind of appointment and he was on his way to keep it when they knifed him. But who was the appointment with? Certainly not with you. It might have been with Chichester. Or it might have been with Pagett.”

“That seems unlikely,” I objected; “they can see each other any time.”

We both sat silent for a minute or two, then Suzanne started off on another tack.

“Could there have been anything hidden in the cabin?”

“That seems more probable,” I agreed. “It would explain my things being ransacked the next morning. But there was nothing hidden there, I’m sure of it.”

“The young man couldn’t have slipped something into a drawer the night before?”

I shook my head.

“I should have seen him.”

“Could it have been your precious bit of paper they were looking for?”

“It might have been, but it seems rather senseless. It was only a time and a date—and they were both past by then.”

Suzanne nodded.

“That’s so, of course. No, it wasn’t the paper. By the way, have you got it with you? I’d rather like to see it.”

I had brought the paper with me as Exhibit A, and I handed it over to her. She scrutinized it, frowning.

“There’s a dot after the 17. Why isn’t there a dot after the 1 too?”

“There’s a space,” I pointed out.

“Yes, there’s a space, but—”

Suddenly she rose and peered at the paper, holding it as close under the light as possible. There was a repressed excitement in her manner.

“Anne, that isn’t a dot! That’s a flaw in the paper! A flaw in the paper, you see? So you’ve got to ignore it, and just go by the spaces—the spaces!”

I had risen and was standing by her. I read out the figures as I now saw them.

“1 71 22.”

“You see,” said Suzanne. “It’s the same, but not quite. It’s one o’clock still, and the 22nd—but it’s Cabin 71! My cabin, Anne!”

We stood staring at each other, so pleased with our new discovery and so rapt with excitement that you might have thought we had solved the whole mystery. Then I fell to earth with a bump.

“But, Suzanne, nothing happened here at one o’clock on the 22nd?”

Her face fell also.

“No—it didn’t.”

Another idea struck me.

“This isn’t your own cabin, is it, Suzanne? I mean not the one you originally booked?”

“No, the purser changed me into it.”

“I wonder if it was booked before sailing for someone—someone who didn’t turn up. I suppose we could find out.”

“We don’t need to find out, gipsy girl,” cried Suzanne. “I know! The purser was telling me about it. The cabin was booked in the name of Mrs. Grey—but it seems that Mrs. Grey was merely a pseudonym for the famous Madame Nadina. She’s a celebrated Russian dancer, you know. She’s never appeared in London, but Paris has been quite mad about her. She had a terrific success there all through the War. A thoroughly bad lot, I believe, but most attractive. The purser expressed his regrets that she wasn’t onboard in a most heartfelt fashion when he gave me her cabin, and then Colonel Race told me a lot about her. It seems there were very queer stories afloat in Paris. She was suspected of espionage, but they couldn’t prove anything. I rather fancy Colonel Race was over there simply on that account. He’s told me some very interesting things. There was a regular organized gang, not German in origin at all. In fact the head of it, a man always referred to as ‘the Colonel,’ was thought to be an Englishman, but they never got any clue to his identity. But there is no doubt that he controlled a considerable organization of international crooks. Robberies, espionage, assaults, he undertook them all—and usually provided an innocent scapegoat to pay the penalty. Diabolically clever, he must have been! This woman was supposed to be one of his agents, but they couldn’t get hold of anything to go upon. Yes, Anne, we’re on the right tack. Nadina is just the woman to be mixed up in this business. The appointment on the morning of the 22nd was with her in this cabin. But where is she? Why didn’t she sail?”

A light flashed upon me.

“She meant to sail,” I said slowly.

“Then why didn’t she?”

“Because she was dead. Suzanne, Nadina was the woman murdered at Marlow!”

My mind went back to the bare room in the empty house and there swept over me again the indefinable sensation of menace and evil. With it came the memory of the falling pencil and the discovery of the roll of films. A roll of films—that struck a more recent note. Where had I heard of a roll of films? And why did I connect that thought with Mrs. Blair?

Suddenly I flew at her and almost shook her in my excitement.

“Your films! The ones that were passed to you through the ventilator? Wasn’t that on the 22nd?”

“The ones I lost?”

“How do you know they were the same? Why would anyone return them to you that way—in the middle of the night? It’s a mad idea. No—they were a message, the films had been taken out of the yellow tin case, and something else put inside. Have you still got it?”

“I may have used it. No, here it is. I remember I tossed it into the rack at the side of the bunk.”

She held it out to me.

It was an ordinary round tin cylinder, such as films are packed in for the tropics. I took it with trembling hand, but even as I did so my heart leapt. It was noticeably heavier than it should have been.

With shaking fingers I peeled off the strip of adhesive plaster that kept it airtight. I pulled off the lid, and a stream of dull glassy pebbles rolled on to the bed.

“Pebbles,” I said, keenly disappointed.

“Pebbles?” cried Suzanne.

The ring in her voice excited me.

“Pebbles? No, Anne, not pebbles! Diamonds!”

Fifteen

Diamonds!

I stared, fascinated, at the glassy heap on the bunk. I picked up one which, but for the weight, might have been a fragment of broken bottle.

“Are you sure, Suzanne?”

“Oh, yes, my dear. I’ve seen rough diamonds too often to have any doubts. They’re beauties too, Anne—and some of them are unique, I should say. There’s a history behind these.”

“The history we heard tonight,” I cried.

“You mean—”

“Colonel Race’s story. It can’t be a coincidence. He told it for a purpose.”

“To see its effect, you mean?”

I nodded.

“Its effect on Sir Eustace?”

“Yes.”

But, even as I said it, a doubt assailed me. Was it Sir Eustace who had been subjected to a test, or had the story been told for my benefit? I remembered the impression I had received on that former night of having been deliberately “pumped.” For some reason or other, Colonel Race was suspicious. But where did he come in? What possible connexion could he have with the affair?

“Who is Colonel Race?” I asked.

“That’s rather a question,” said Suzanne. “He’s pretty well-known as a big-game hunter, and, as you heard him say tonight, he was a distant cousin of Sir Laurence Eardsley. I’ve never actually met him until this trip. He journeys to and from Africa a good deal. There’s a general idea that he does Secret Service work. I don’t know whether it’s true or not. He’s certainly rather a mysterious creature.”

“I suppose he came into a lot of money as Sir Laurence Eardsley’s heir?”

“My dear Anne, he must be rolling. You know, he’d be a splendid match for you.”

“I can’t have a good go at him with you aboard the ship,” I said, laughing. “Oh, these married women!”

“We do have a pull,” murmured Suzanne complacently. “And everybody knows that I am absolutely devoted to Clarence—my husband, you know. It’s so safe and pleasant to make love to a devoted wife.”

“It must be very nice for Clarence to be married to someone like you.”

“Well, I’m wearing to live with! Still, he can always escape to the Foreign Office, where he fixes his eyeglass in his eye, and goes to sleep in a big armchair. We might cable him to tell us all he knows about Race. I love sending cables. And they annoy Clarence so. He always says a letter would have done as well. I don’t suppose he’d tell us anything though. He is so frightfully discreet. That’s what makes him so hard to live with for long on end. But let us go on with our matchmaking. I’m sure Colonel Race is very attracted to you, Anne. Give him a couple of glances from those wicked eyes of yours, and the deed is done. Everyone gets engaged onboard ship. There’s nothing else to do.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Don’t you?” said Suzanne. “Why not? I love being married—even to Clarence!”

I disdained her flippancy.

“What I want to know is,” I said with determination, “what has Colonel Race got to do with this? He’s in it somewhere.”

“You don’t think it was mere chance, his telling that story?”

“No, I don’t,” I said decidedly. “He was watching us all narrowly. You remember, some of the diamonds were recovered, not all. Perhaps these are the missing ones—or perhaps—”

“Perhaps what?”

I did not answer directly.

“I should like to know,” I said, “what became of the other young man. Not Eardsley but—what was his name?—Lucas!”

“We’re getting some light on the thing, anyway. It’s the diamonds all these people are after. It must have been to obtain possession of the diamonds that ‘The Man in the Brown Suit’ killed Nadina.”

“He didn’t kill her,” I said sharply.

“Of course he killed her. Who else could have done so?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure he didn’t kill her.”

“He went into the house three minutes after her and came out as white as a sheet.”

“Because he found her dead.”

“But nobody else went in.”

“Then the murderer was in the house already, or else he got in some other way. There’s no need for him to pass the lodge, he could have climbed over the wall.”

Suzanne glanced at me sharply.

“ ‘The Man in the Brown Suit,’ ” she mused. “Who was he, I wonder? Anyway, he was identical with the ‘doctor’ in the Tube. He would have had time to remove his makeup and follow the woman to Marlow. She and Carton were to have met there, they both had an order to view the same house, and if they took such elaborate precautions to make their meeting appear accidental they must have suspected they were being followed. All the same, Carton did not know that his shadower was the ‘Man in the Brown Suit.’ When he recognized him, the shock was so great that he lost his head completely and stepped back onto the line. That all seems pretty clear, don’t you think so, Anne!”

I did not reply.

“Yes, that’s how it was. He took the paper from the dead man, and in his hurry to get away he dropped it. Then he followed the woman to Marlow. What did he do when he left there, when he had killed her—or, according to you, found her dead? Where did he go?”

Still I said nothing.

“I wonder, now,” said Suzanne musingly. “Is it possible that he induced Sir Eustace Pedler to bring him on board as his secretary? It would be a unique chance of getting safely out of England, and dodging the hue and cry. But how did he square Sir Eustace? It looks as though he had some hold over him.”

“Or over Pagett,” I suggested in spite of myself.

“You don’t seem to like Pagett, Anne. Sir Eustace says he’s a most capable and hardworking young man. And, really, he may be for all we know against him. Well, to continue my surmises, Rayburn is ‘The Man in the Brown Suit.’ He had read the paper he dropped. Therefore, misled by the dot as you were, he attempts to reach Cabin 17 at one o’clock on the 22nd, having previously tried to get possession of the cabin through Pagett. On the way there somebody knifes him—”

“Who?” I interpolated.

“Chichester. Yes, it all fits in. Cable to Lord Nasby that you have found ‘The Man in the Brown Suit,’ and your fortune’s made, Anne!”

“There are several things you’ve overlooked.”

“What things? Rayburn’s got a scar, I know—but a scar can be faked easily enough. He’s the right height and build. What’s the description of a head with which you pulverized them at Scotland Yard?”

I trembled. Suzanne was a well-educated, well-read woman, but I prayed that she might not be conversant with technical terms of anthropology.

“Dolichocephalic,” I said lightly.

Suzanne looked doubtful.

“Was that it?”

“Yes. Long-headed, you know. A head whose width is less than 75 per cent of its length,” I explained fluently.

There was a pause. I was just beginning to breathe freely when Suzanne said suddenly:

“What’s the opposite?”

“What do you mean—the opposite?”

“Well, there must be an opposite. What do you call heads whose breadth is more than 75 per cent of their length?”

“Brachycephalic,” I murmured unwillingly.

“That’s it. I thought that was what you said.”

“Did I? It was a slip of the tongue. I meant dolichocephalic,” I said with all the assurance I could muster.

Suzanne looked at me searchingly. Then she laughed.

“You lie very well, gipsy girl. But it will save time and trouble now if you tell me all about it.”

“There is nothing to tell,” I said unwillingly.

“Isn’t there?” said Suzanne gently.

“I suppose I shall have to tell you,” I said slowly. “I’m not ashamed of it. You can’t be ashamed of something that just—happens to you. That’s what he did. He was detestable—rude and ungrateful—but that I think I understand. It’s like a dog that’s been chained up—or badly treated—it’ll bite anybody. That’s what he was like—bitter and snarling. I don’t know why I care—but I do. I care horribly. Just seeing him has turned my whole life upside-down. I love him. I want him. I’ll walk all over Africa barefoot till I find him, and I’ll make him care for me. I’d die for him. I’d work for him, slave for him, steal for him, even beg or borrow for him! There—now you know!”

Suzanne looked at me for a long time.

“You’re very un-English, gipsy girl,” she said at last. “There’s not a scrap of the sentimental about you. I’ve never met anyone who was at once so practical and so passionate. I shall never care for anyone like that—mercifully for me—and yet—and yet I envy you, gipsy girl. It’s something to be able to care. Most people can’t. But what a mercy for your little doctor man that you didn’t marry him. He doesn’t sound at all the sort of individual who would enjoy keeping high explosive in the house! So there’s to be no cabling to Lord Nasby?”

I shook my head.

“And yet you believe him to be innocent?”

“I also believe that innocent people can be hanged.”

“H’m! yes. But, Anne dear, you can face facts, face them now. In spite of all you say, he may have murdered this woman.”

“No,” I said. “He didn’t.”

“That’s sentiment.”

“No, it isn’t. He might have killed her. He may even have followed her there with that idea in mind. But he wouldn’t take a bit of black cord and strangle her with it. If he’d done it, he would have strangled her with his bare hands.”

Suzanne gave a little shiver. Her eyes narrowed appreciatively.

“H’m! Anne, I am beginning to see why you find this young man of yours so attractive!”

Sixteen

I got an opportunity of tackling Colonel Race on the following morning. The auction of the sweep had just been concluded, and we walked up and down the deck together.

“How’s the gipsy this morning? Longing for land and her caravan?”

I shook my head.

“Now that the sea is behaving so nicely, I feel I should like to stay on it forever and ever.”

“What enthusiasm!”

“Well, isn’t it lovely this morning?”

We leant together over the rail. It was a glassy calm. The sea looked as though it had been oiled. There were great patches of colour on it, blue, pale green, emerald, purple and deep orange, like a cubist picture. There was an occasional flash of silver that showed the flying fish. The air was moist and warm, almost sticky. Its breath was like a perfumed caress.

“That was a very interesting story you told us last night,” I said, breaking the silence.

“Which one?”

“The one about the diamonds.”

“I believe women are always interested in diamonds.”

“Of course we are. By the way, what became of the other young man? You said there were two of them.”

“Young Lucas? Well, of course, they couldn’t prosecute one without the other, so he went scot-free too.”

“And what happened to him?—eventually, I mean. Does anyone know?”

Colonel Race was looking straight ahead of him out to sea. His face was as devoid of expression as a mask, but I had an idea that he did not like my questions. Nevertheless, he replied readily enough.

“He went to the War and acquitted himself bravely. He was reported missing and wounded—believed killed.”

That told me what I wanted to know. I asked no more. But more than ever I wondered how much Colonel Race knew. The part he was playing in all this puzzled me.

One other thing I did. That was to interview the night steward. With a little financial encouragement, I soon got him to talk.

“The lady wasn’t frightened, was she miss? It seemed a harmless sort of joke. A bet, or so I understood.”

I got it all out of him, little by little. On the voyage from Cape Town to England one of the passengers had handed him a roll of film with instructions that they were to be dropped on to the bunk in Cabin 71 at 1 am on January 22nd on the outward journey. A lady would be occupying the cabin, and the affair was described as a bet. I gathered the steward had been liberally paid for his part in the transaction. The lady’s name had not been mentioned. Of course, as Mrs. Blair went straight into Cabin 71, interviewing the purser as soon as she got on board, it never occurred to the steward that she was not the lady in question. The name of the passenger who had arranged the transaction was Carton, and his description tallied exactly with that of the man killed on the Tube.

So one mystery, at all events, was cleared up, and the diamonds were obviously the key to the whole situation.

Those last days on the Kilmorden seemed to pass very quickly. As we drew nearer and nearer to Cape Town, I was forced to consider carefully my future plans. There were so many people I wanted to keep an eye on. Mr. Chichester, Sir Eustace and his secretary, and—yes, Colonel Race! What was I to do about it? Naturally it was Chichester who had first claim on my attention. Indeed, I was on the point of reluctantly dismissing Sir Eustace and Mr. Pagett from their position of suspicious characters when a chance conversation awakened fresh doubts in my mind.

I had forgotten Mr. Pagett's incomprehensible emotion at the mention of Florence. On the last evening onboard we were all sitting on deck and Sir Eustace addressed a perfectly innocent question to his secretary. I forget exactly what it was, something to do with railway delays in Italy, but at once I noticed that Mr. Pagett was displaying the same uneasiness which had caught my attention before. When Sir Eustace claimed Mrs. Blair for a dance, I quickly moved into the chair next to the secretary. I was determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

"I have always longed to go to Italy," I said. "And especially to Florence. Didn't you enjoy it very much there?"

"Indeed I did, Miss Beddingfeld. If you will excuse me, there is some correspondence of Sir Eustace's that—"

I took hold of him firmly by his coat sleeve.

"Oh, you mustn't run away!" I cried with the skittish accent of an elderly dowager. "I'm sure Sir Eustace wouldn't like you to leave me alone with no one to talk to. You never seem to want to talk about Florence. Oh, Mr. Pagett, I believe you have a guilty secret!"

I still had my hand on his arm, and I could feel the sudden start he gave.

"Not at all, Miss Beddingfeld, not at all," he said earnestly. "I should be only too delighted to tell you all about it, but there really are some cables —"

"Oh, Mr. Pagett, what a thin pretence! I shall tell Sir Eustace—"

I got no further. He gave another jump. The man's nerves seemed in a shocking state.

“What is it you want to know?”

The resigned martyrdom of his tone made me smile inwardly.

“Oh, everything! The pictures, the olive trees—”

I paused, rather at a loss myself.

“I suppose you speak Italian?” I resumed.

“Not a word, unfortunately. But of course, with hall porters and—er—guides.”

“Exactly,” I hastened to reply. “And which was your favourite picture?”

“Oh, er—the Madonna—er, Raphael, you know.”

“Dear old Florence,” I murmured sentimentally. So picturesque on the banks of the Arno. A beautiful river. And the Duomo, you remember the Duomo?”

“Of course, of course.”

“Another beautiful river, is it not?” I hazarded. “Almost more beautiful than the Arno?”

“Decidedly so, I should say.”

Emboldened by the success of my little trap, I proceeded further. But there was little room for doubt. Mr. Pagett delivered himself into my hands with every word he uttered. The man had never been in Florence in his life.

But if not in Florence, where had he been? In England? Actually in England at the time of the Mill House Mystery? I decided on a bold step.

“The curious thing is,” I said, “that I fancied I had seen you before somewhere. But I must be mistaken—since you were in Florence at the time. And yet—”

I studied him frankly. There was a hunted look in his eyes. He passed his tongue over dry lips.

“Where—er—where—”

“Did I think I had seen you?” I finished for him. “At Marlow. You know Marlow? Why, of course, how stupid of me, Sir Eustace has a house there!”

But with an incoherent muttered excuse, my victim rose and fled.

That night I invaded Suzanne’s cabin, alight with excitement.

“You see, Suzanne,” I urged, as I finished my tale, “he was in England, in Marlow, at the time of the murder. Are you so sure now that ‘The Man in the Brown Suit’ is guilty?”

“I’m sure of one thing,” Suzanne said, twinkling, unexpectedly.

“What’s that?”

“That ‘The Man in the Brown Suit’ is better looking than poor Mr. Pagett. No, Anne, don’t get cross. I was only teasing. Sit down here. Joking apart, I think you’ve made a very important discovery. Up till now, we’ve considered Pagett as having an alibi. Now we know he hasn’t.”

“Exactly,” I said. “We must keep an eye on him.”

“As well as everybody else,” she said ruefully. “Well, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. That—and finance. No, don’t stick your nose in the air. I know you are absurdly proud and independent, but you’ve got to listen to horse sense over this. We’re partners—I wouldn’t offer you a penny because I liked you, or because you’re a friendless girl—what I want is a thrill, and I’m prepared to pay for it. We’re going into this together regardless of expense. To begin with you’ll come with me to the Mount Nelson Hotel at my expense, and we’ll plan out our campaign.”

We argued the point. In the end I gave in. But I didn't like it. I wanted to do the thing on my own.

"That's settled," said Suzanne at last, getting up and stretching herself with a big yawn. "I'm exhausted with my own eloquence. Now then, let us discuss our victims. Mr. Chichester is going on to Durban. Sir Eustace is going to the Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town and then up to Rhodesia. He's going to have a private car on the railway, and in a moment of expansion, after his fourth glass of champagne the other night, he offered me a place in it. I daresay he didn't really mean it, but, all the same, he can't very well back out if I hold him to it."

"Good," I approved. "You keep an eye on Sir Eustace and Mr. Pagett, and I take on Chichester. But what about Colonel Race?"

Suzanne looked at me queerly.

"Anne, you can't possibly suspect—"

"I do. I suspect everybody. I'm in the mood when one looks round for the most unlikely person."

"Colonel Race is going to Rhodesia too," said Suzanne thoughtfully. "If we could arrange for Sir Eustace to invite him also—"

"You can manage it. You can manage anything."

"I love butter," purred Suzanne.

We parted on the understanding that Suzanne should employ her talents to her best advantage.

I felt too excited to go to bed immediately. It was my last night onboard. Early tomorrow morning we should be in Table Bay.

I slipped up on deck. The breeze was fresh and cool. The boat was rolling a little in the choppy sea. The decks were dark and deserted. It was after midnight.

I leaned over the rail, watching the phosphorescent trail of foam. Ahead of us lay Africa, we were rushing towards it through the dark water. I felt alone in a wonderful world. Wrapped in a strange peace, I stood there, taking no heed of time, lost in a dream.

And suddenly I had a curious intimate premonition of danger. I had heard nothing, but I swung round instinctively. A shadowy form had crept up behind me. As I turned, it sprang. One hand gripped my throat, stifling any cry I might have uttered. I fought desperately, but I had no chance. I was half choking from the grip on my throat, but I bit and clung and scratched in the most approved feminine fashion. The man was handicapped by having to keep me from crying out. If he had succeeded in reaching me unawares it would have been easy enough for him to sling me overboard with a sudden heave. The sharks would have taken care of the rest.

Struggle as I would, I felt myself weakening. My assailant felt it too. He put out all his strength. And then, running on swift noiseless feet, another shadow joined in. With one blow of his fist, he sent my opponent crashing headlong to the deck. Released, I fell back against the rail, sick and trembling.

My rescuer turned to me with a quick movement.

“You’re hurt!”

There was something savage in his tone—a menace against the person who had dared to hurt me. Even before he spoke I had recognized him. It was my man—the man with the scar.

But that one moment in which his attention had been diverted to me had been enough for the fallen enemy. Quick as a flash he had risen to his feet and taken to his heels down the deck. With an oath Rayburn sprang after him.

I always hate being out of things. I joined the chase—a bad third. Round the deck we went to the starboard side of the ship. There by the saloon door lay the man in a crumpled heap. Rayburn was bending over him.

“Did you hit him again?” I called breathlessly.

“There was no need,” he replied grimly. “I found him collapsed by the door. Or else he couldn’t get it open and is shamming. We’ll soon see about that. And we’ll see who he is too.”

With a beating heart I drew nearer. I had realized at once that my assailant was a bigger man than Chichester. Anyway, Chichester was a flabby creature who might use a knife at a pinch, but who would have little strength in his bare hands.

Rayburn struck a match. We both uttered an ejaculation. The man was Guy Pagett.

Rayburn appeared absolutely stupefied by the discovery.

“Pagett,” he muttered. “My God, Pagett.”

I felt a slight sense of superiority.

“You seem surprised.”

“I am,” he said heavily. “I never suspected—” He wheeled suddenly round on me. “And you? You’re not? You recognized him, I suppose, when he attacked you?”

“No, I didn’t. All the same, I’m not so very surprised.”

He stared at me suspiciously.

“Where do you come in, I wonder? And how much do you know?”

I smiled.

“A good deal, Mr—er—Lucas!”

He caught my arm, the unconscious strength of his grip made me wince.

“Where did you get that name?” he asked hoarsely.

“Isn’t it yours?” I demanded sweetly. “Or do you prefer to be called ‘The Man in the Brown Suit?’ ”

That did stagger him. He released my arm and fell back a pace or two.

“Are you a girl, or a witch?” he breathed.

“I’m a friend,” I advanced a step towards him. “I offered you my help once—I offer it again. Will you have it?”

The fierceness of his answer took me aback.

“No. I’ll have no truck with you or with any woman. Do your damndest.”

As before, my own temper began to rise.

“Perhaps,” I said, “you don’t realize how much in my power you are? A word from me to the Captain—”

“Say it,” he sneered. Then advancing with a quick step: “And whilst we’re realizing things, my dear girl, do you realize you’re in my power this minute? I could take you by the throat like this.” With a swift gesture he suited the action to the word. I felt his two hands clasp my throat and press—ever so little. “Like this—and squeeze the life out of you! And then—like our unconscious friend here, but with more success—fling your dead body to the sharks. What do you say to that?”

I said nothing. I laughed. And yet I knew that the danger was real. Just at that moment he hated me. But I knew that I loved the danger, loved the feeling of his hands on my throat. That I would not have exchanged that moment for any moment in my life.

With a short laugh he released me.

“What’s your name?” he asked abruptly.

“Anne Beddingfeld.”

“Does nothing frighten you, Anne Beddingfeld?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, with an assumption of coolness I was far from feeling. “Wasps, sarcastic women, very young men, cockroaches, and superior shop assistants.”

He gave the same short laugh as before. Then he stirred the unconscious form of Pagett with his feet.

“What shall we do with this junk? Throw it overboard?” he asked carelessly.

“If you like,” I answered with equal calm.

“I admire your wholehearted, bloodthirsty instincts, Miss Beddingfeld. But we will leave him to recover at his leisure. He is not seriously hurt.”

“You shrink from a second murder, I see,” I said sweetly.

“A second murder?”

He looked genuinely puzzled.

“The woman at Marlow,” I reminded him, watching the effect of my words closely.

An ugly brooding expression settled down on his face. He seemed to have forgotten my presence.

“I might have killed her,” he said. “Sometimes I believe that I meant to kill her”

A wild rush of feeling, hatred of the dead woman, surged through me. I could have killed her that moment, had she stood before me . . . For he must have loved her once—he must—he must—to have felt like that!

I regained control of myself and spoke in my normal voice:

“We seem to have said all there is to be said—except good night.”

“Good night and good-bye, Miss Beddingfeld.”

“Au revoir, Mr. Lucas.”

Again he flinched at the name. He came nearer.

“Why do you say that—au revoir, I mean?”

“Because I have a fancy that we shall meet again.”

“Not if I can help it!”

Emphatic as his tone was, it did not offend me. On the contrary, I hugged myself with secret satisfaction. I am not quite a fool.

“All the same,” I said gravely, “I think we shall.”

“Why?”

I shook my head, unable to explain the feeling that had actuated my words.

“I never wish to see you again,” he said suddenly, and violently.

It was really a very rude thing to say, but I only laughed softly and slipped away into the darkness.

I heard him start after me, and then pause, and a word floated down the deck. I think it was “witch!”

Seventeen

(Extract from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler)

Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Town.

It is really the greatest relief to get off the Kilmorden. The whole time that I was onboard I was conscious of being surrounded by a network of intrigue. To put the lid on everything, Guy Pagett must needs engage in a drunken brawl the last night. It is all very well to explain it away, but that is what it actually amounts to. What else would you think if a man comes to you with a lump the size of an egg on the side of his head and an eye coloured all the tints of the rainbow?

Of course Pagett would insist on trying to be mysterious about the whole thing. According to him, you would think his black eye was the direct result of his devotion to my interests. His story was extraordinarily vague and rambling and it was a long time before I could make head or tail of it.

To begin with, it appears he caught sight of a man behaving suspiciously. Those are Pagett's words. He has taken them straight from the pages of a German spy story. What he means by a man behaving suspiciously he doesn't know himself. I said so to him.

"He was slinking along in a very furtive manner, and it was the middle of the night, Sir Eustace."

"Well, what were you doing yourself? Why weren't you in bed and asleep like a good Christian?" I demanded irritably.

"I had been coding those cables of yours, Sir Eustace, and typing the diary up to date."

Trust Pagett to be always in the right and a martyr over it!

"Well?"

“I just thought I would have a look round before turning in, Sir Eustace. The man was coming down the passage from your cabin. I thought at once there was something wrong by the way he looked about him. He slunk up the stairs by the saloon. I followed him.

“My dear Pagett,” I said, “why shouldn’t the poor chap go on deck without having his footsteps dogged? Lots of people even sleep on deck—very uncomfortable, I’ve always thought. The sailors wash you down with the rest of the deck at five in the morning.” I shuddered at the idea.

“Anyway,” I continued, “if you went worrying some poor devil who was suffering from insomnia, I don’t wonder he landed you one.”

Pagett looked patient.

“If you would hear me out, Sir Eustace. I was convinced the man had been prowling about near your cabin where he had no business to be. The only two cabins down that passage are yours and Colonel Race’s.”

“Race,” I said, lighting a cigar carefully, “can look after himself without your assistance, Pagett.” I added as an afterthought: “So can I.”

Pagett came nearer and breathed heavily as he always does before imparting a secret.

“You see, Sir Eustace, I fancied—and now indeed I am sure—it was Rayburn.”

“Rayburn?”

“Yes, Sir Eustace.”

I shook my head.

“Rayburn has far too much sense to attempt to wake me up in the middle of the night.”

“Quite so, Sir Eustace. I think it was Colonel Race he went to see. A secret meeting—for orders!”

“Don’t hiss at me, Pagett,” I said, drawing back a little, “and do control your breathing. Your idea is absurd. Why should they want to have a secret meeting in the middle of the night? If they’d anything to say to each other, they could hobnob over beef tea in a perfectly casual and natural manner.”

I could see that Pagett was not in the least convinced.

“Something was going on last night, Sir Eustace,” he urged, “or why should Rayburn assault me so brutally?”

“You’re quite sure it was Rayburn?”

Pagett appeared to be perfectly convinced of that. It was the only part of the story that he wasn’t vague about.

“There’s something very queer about all this,” he said. “To begin with, where is Rayburn?”

It’s perfectly true that we haven’t seen the fellow since we came onshore. He did not come up to the hotel with us. I decline to believe that he is afraid of Pagett, however.

Altogether the whole thing is very annoying. One of my secretaries has vanished into the blue, and the other looks like a disreputable prizefighter. I can’t take him about with me in his present condition. I shall be the laughingstock of Cape Town. I have an appointment later in the day to deliver old Milray’s billet-doux, but I shall not take Pagett with me. Confound the fellow and his prowling ways.

Although I am decidedly out of temper. I had a poisonous breakfast with poisonous people. Dutch waitresses with thick ankles who took half an hour to bring me a bad bit of fish. And this farce of getting up at 5 am on arrival at the port to see a blinking doctor and hold your hands above your head simply makes me tired.

Later.

A very serious thing has occurred. I went to my appointment with the Prime Minister, taking Milray's sealed letter. It didn't look as though it had been tampered with, but inside was a blank sheet of paper!

Now, I suppose, I'm in the devil of a mess. Why I ever let that bleating old fool Milray embroil me in the matter I can't think.

Pagett is a famous Job's comforter. He displays a certain gloomy satisfaction that maddens me. Also, he had taken advantage of my perturbation to saddle me with the stationery trunk. Unless he is careful, the next funeral he attends will be his own.

However in the end I had to listen to him.

"Supposing, Sir Eustace, that Rayburn had overheard a word or two of your conversation with Mr. Milray in the street? Remember, you had no written authority from Mr. Milray. You accepted Rayburn on his own valuation."

"You think Rayburn is a crook, then?" I said slowly.

Pagett did. How far his views were influenced by resentment over his black eye I don't know. He made out a pretty fair case against Rayburn. And the appearance of the latter told against him. My idea was to do nothing in the matter. A man who has permitted himself to be made a thorough fool of is not anxious to broadcast the fact.

But Pagett, his energy unimpaired by his recent misfortunes, was all for vigorous measures. He had his way, of course. He bustled out to the police station, sent innumerable cables, and brought a herd of English and Dutch officials to drink whiskies and sodas at my expense.

We got Milray's answer that evening. He knew nothing of my late secretary! There was only one spot of comfort to be extracted from the situation.

"At any rate," I said to Pagett, "you weren't poisoned. You had one of your ordinary bilious attacks."

I saw him wince. It was my only score.

Later.

Pagett is in his element. His brain positively scintillates with bright ideas. He will have it now that Rayburn is none other than the famous “Man in the Brown Suit.” I dare say he is right. He usually is. But all this is getting unpleasant. The sooner I get off to Rhodesia the better. I have explained to Pagett that he is not to accompany me.

“You see, my dear fellow,” I said, “you must remain here on the spot. You might be required to identify Rayburn any minute. And, besides, I have my dignity as an English Member of Parliament to think of. I can’t go about with a secretary who has apparently recently been indulging in a vulgar street brawl.”

Pagett winced. He is such a respectable fellow that his appearance is pain and tribulation to him.

“But what will you do about your correspondence, and the notes for your speeches, Sir Eustace?”

“I shall manage,” I said airily.

“Your private car is to be attached to the eleven-o’clock train tomorrow, Wednesday, morning,” Pagett continued. “I have made all arrangements. Is Mrs. Blair taking a maid with her?”

“Mrs. Blair?” I gasped.

“She tells me you offered her a place.”

So I did, now I come to think of it. On the night of the Fancy Dress ball. I even urged her to come. But I never thought she would. Delightful as she is, I do not know that I want Mrs. Blair’s society all the way to Rhodesia and back. Women require such a lot of attention. And they are confoundedly in the way sometimes.

“Have I asked anyone else?” I said nervously. One does these things in moments of expansion.

“Mrs. Blair seemed to think you had asked Colonel Race as well.”

I groaned.

“I must have been very drunk if I asked Race. Very drunk indeed. Take my advice, Pagett, and let your black eye be a warning to you, don’t go on the bust again.”

“As you know, I am a teetotaller, Sir Eustace.”

“Much wiser to take the pledge if you have a weakness that way. I haven’t asked anyone else, have I, Pagett?”

“Not that I know of, Sir Eustace.”

I heaved a sigh of relief.

“There’s Miss Beddingfeld,” I said thoughtfully. “She wants to get to Rhodesia to dig up bones, I believe. I’ve a good mind to offer her a temporary job as a secretary. She can typewrite, I know, for she told me so.”

To my surprise, Pagett opposed the idea vehemently. He does not like Anne Beddingfeld. Ever since the night of the black eye, he has displayed uncontrollable emotion whenever she is mentioned. Pagett is full of mysteries nowadays.

Just to annoy him, I shall ask the girl. As I said before, she has extremely nice legs.

Eighteen

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

I don't suppose that as long as I live I shall forget my first sight of Table Mountain. I got up frightfully early and went out on deck. I went right up to the boat deck, which I believe is a heinous offence, but I decided to dare something in the cause of solitude. We were just steaming into Table Bay. There were fleecy white clouds hovering above Table Mountain, and nestling on the slopes below, right down to the sea, was the sleeping town, gilded and bewitched by the morning sunlight.

It made me catch my breath and have that curious hungry pain inside that seizes one sometimes when one comes across something that's extra beautiful. I'm not very good at expressing these things, but I knew well enough that I had found, if only for a fleeting moment, the thing that I had been looking for ever since I left Little Hampsley. Something new, something hitherto undreamed of, something that satisfied my aching hunger for romance.

Perfectly silently, or so it seemed to me, the Kilmorden glided nearer and nearer. It was still very like a dream. Like all dreamers, however, I could not let my dream alone. We poor humans are so anxious not to miss anything.

"This is South Africa," I kept saying to myself industriously. "South Africa, South Africa. You are seeing the world. This is the world. You are seeing it. Think of it, Anne Beddingfeld, you pudding head. You're seeing the world."

I had thought that I had the boat deck to myself, but now I observed another figure leaning over the rail, absorbed as I had been in the rapidly approaching city. Even before he turned his head I knew who it was. The scene of last night seemed unreal and melodramatic in the peaceful morning

sunshine. What must he have thought of me? It made me hot to realize the things that I had said. And I hadn't meant them—or had I?

I turned my head resolutely away, and stared hard at Table Mountain. If Rayburn had come up here to be alone, I, at least, need not disturb him by advertising my presence.

But to my intense surprise I heard a light footfall on the deck behind me, and then his voice, pleasant and normal:

“Miss Beddingfeld.”

“Yes?”

I turned.

“I want to apologize to you. I behaved like a perfect boor last night.”

“It—it was a peculiar night,” I said hastily.

It was not a very lucid remark, but it was absolutely the only thing I could think of.

“Will you forgive me?”

I held out my hand without a word. He took it.

“There's something else I want to say.” His gravity deepened. “Miss Beddingfeld, you may not know it, but you are mixed up in a rather dangerous business.”

“I gather as much,” I said.

“No, you don't. You can't possibly know. I want to warn you. Leave the whole thing alone. It can't concern you really. Don't let your curiosity lead you to tamper with other people's business. No, please don't get angry again. I'm not speaking of myself. You've no idea of what you might come up against—these men will stop at nothing. They are absolutely ruthless. Already you're in danger—look at last night. They fancy you know

something. Your only chance is to persuade them that they're mistaken. But be careful, always be on the lookout for danger, and, look here, if at anytime you should fall into their hands, don't try and be clever—tell the whole truth; it will be your only chance.”

“You make my flesh creep, Mr. Rayburn,” I said, with some truth. “Why do you take the trouble to warn me?”

He did not answer for some minutes, then he said in a low voice:

“It may be the last thing I can do for you. Once on shore I shall be all right—but I may not get onshore.”

“What?” I cried.

“You see, I'm afraid you're not the only person onboard who knows that I am ‘The Man in the Brown Suit.’ ”

“If you think that I told—” I said hotly.

He reassured me with a smile.

“I don't doubt you, Miss Beddingfeld. If I ever said I did, I lied. No, but there's one person onboard who's known all along. He's only to speak—and my number's up. All the same, I'm taking a sporting chance that he won't speak.”

“Why?”

“Because he's a man who likes playing a lone hand. And when the police have got me I should be of no further use to him. Free, I might be! Well, an hour will show.”

He laughed rather mockingly, but I saw his face harden. If he had gambled with Fate, he was a good gambler. He could lose and smile.

“In any case,” he said lightly, “I don't suppose we shall meet again.”

“No,” I said slowly. “I suppose not.”

“So—good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

He gripped my hand hard, just for a minute his curious light eyes seemed to burn into mine, then he turned abruptly and left me. I heard his footsteps ringing along the deck. They echoed and reechoed. I felt that I should hear them always. Footsteps—going out of my life.

I can admit frankly that I did not enjoy the next two hours. Not till I stood on the wharf, having finished with most of the ridiculous formalities that bureaucracies require, did I breathe freely once more. No arrest had been made, and I realized that it was a heavenly day, and that I was extremely hungry. I joined Suzanne. In any case, I was staying the night with her at the hotel. The boat did not go on to Port Elizabeth and Durban until the following morning. We got into a taxi and drove to the Mount Nelson.

It was all heavenly. The sun, the air, the flowers! When I thought of Little Hampsley in January, the mud knee-deep, and the sure-to-be-falling rain, I hugged myself with delight. Suzanne was not nearly so enthusiastic. She has travelled a great deal of course. Besides, she is not the type that gets excited before breakfast. She snubbed me severely when I let out an enthusiastic yelp at the sight of a giant blue convolvulus.

By the way, I should like to make clear here and now that this story will not be a story of South Africa. I guarantee no genuine local colour—you know the sort of thing—half a dozen words in italics on every page. I admire it very much, but I can’t do it. In South Sea Islands, of course, you make an immediate reference to *bêche-de-mer*. I don’t know what *bêche-de-mer* is, I have never known, I probably never shall know. I’ve guessed once or twice and guessed wrong. In South Africa I know you at once begin to talk about a stoep—I do know what a stoep is—it’s the thing round a house and you sit on it. In various other parts of the world you call it a veranda, a piazza, and a ha-ha. Then again, there are pawpaws. I had often read of pawpaws. I discovered at once what they were, because I had one plumped down in front of me for breakfast. I thought at first that it was a melon gone bad. The Dutch waitress enlightened me, and persuaded me to use lemon juice and sugar and try again. I was very pleased to meet a pawpaw. I had always

vaguely associated it with a hula-hula, which, I believe, though I may be wrong, is a kind of straw skirt that Hawaiian girls dance in. No, I think I am wrong—that is a lava-lava.

At any rate, all these things are very cheering after England. I can't help thinking that it would brighten our cold Island life if one could have a breakfast of bacon-bacon, and then go out clad in a jumper-jumper to pay the books.

Suzanne was a little tamer after breakfast. They had given me a room next to hers with a lovely view right out over Table Bay. I looked at the view whilst Suzanne hunted for some special facecream. When she had found it and started an immediate application, she became capable of listening to me.

“Did you see Sir Eustace?” I asked. “He was marching out of the breakfast room as we went in. He'd had some bad fish or something and was just telling the headwaiter what he thought about it, and he bounced a peach on the floor to show how hard it was—only it wasn't quite as hard as he thought and it squashed.”

Suzanne smiled.

“Sir Eustace doesn't like getting up early any more than I do. But, Anne, did you see Mr. Pagett? I ran against him in the passage. He's got a black eye. What can he have been doing?”

“Only trying to push me overboard,” I replied nonchalantly.

It was a distinct score for me. Suzanne left her face half-anointed and pressed for details. I gave them to her.

“It all gets more and more mysterious,” she cried. “I thought I was going to have the soft job sticking to Sir Eustace, and that you would have all the fun with the Rev. Edward Chichester, but now I'm not so sure. I hope Pagett won't push me off the train some dark night.”

“I think you’re still above suspicion, Suzanne. But, if the worst happens I’ll wire to Clarence.”

“That reminds me—give me a cable form. Let me see now, what shall I say? ‘Implicated in the most thrilling mystery please send me a thousand pounds at once Suzanne.’ ”

I took the form from her, and pointed out that she could eliminate a “the,” an “a,” and possibly, if she didn’t care about being polite, a “please.” Suzanne, however, appears to be perfectly reckless in money matters. Instead of attending to my economical suggestions, she added three more words: “enjoying myself hugely.”

Suzanne was engaged to lunch with friends of hers, who came to the hotel about eleven o’clock to fetch her. I was left to my own devices. I went down through the grounds of the hotel, crossed the tramlines and followed a cool shady avenue right down till I came to the main street. I strolled about, seeing the sights, enjoying the sunlight and the black-faced sellers of flowers and fruits. I also discovered a place where they had the most delicious ice cream sodas. Finally, I bought a sixpenny basket of peaches and retraced my steps to the hotel.

To my surprise and pleasure I found a note awaiting me. It was from the curator of the Museum. He had read of my arrival on the Kilmorden, in which I was described as the daughter of the late Professor Beddingfeld. He had known my father slightly and had had great admiration for him. He went on to say that his wife would be delighted if I would come out and have tea with them that afternoon at their Villa at Muizenberg. He gave me instructions for getting there.

It was pleasant to think that poor Papa was still remembered and highly thought of. I foresaw that I would have to be personally escorted round the Museum before I left Cape Town, but I risked that. To most people it would have been a treat—but one can have too much of a good thing if one is brought up on it, morning, noon, and night.

I put on my best hat (one of Suzanne’s castoffs) and my least crumpled white linen and started off after lunch. I caught a fast train to Muizenberg

and got there in about half an hour. It was a nice trip. We wound slowly round the base of Table Mountain, and some of the flowers were lovely. My geography being weak, I had never fully realized that Cape Town is on a peninsula, consequently I was rather surprised on getting out of the train to find myself facing the sea once more. There was some perfectly entrancing bathing going on. The people had short curved boards and came floating in on the waves. It was far too early to go to tea. I made for the bathing pavilion, and when they said would I have a surfboard, I said "Yes, please." Surfing looks perfectly easy. It isn't. I say no more. I got very angry and fairly hurled my plank from me. Nevertheless, I determined to return on the first possible opportunity and have another go. I would not be beaten. Quite by mistake I then got a good run on my board, and came out delirious with happiness. Surfing is like that. You are either vigorously cursing or else you are idiotically pleased with yourself.

I found the Villa Medgee after some difficulty. It was right up on the side of the mountain, isolated from the other cottages and villas. I rang the bell, and a smiling Kafir boy answered it.

"Mrs. Raffini?" I inquired.

He ushered me in, preceded me down the passage and flung open a door. Just as I was about to pass in, I hesitated. I felt a sudden misgiving. I stepped over the threshold and the door swung sharply behind me.

A man rose from his seat behind a table and came forward with outstretched hand.

"So glad we have persuaded you to visit us, Miss Beddingfeld," he said.

He was a tall man, obviously a Dutchman, with a flaming orange beard. He did not look in the least like the curator of a museum. In fact, I realized in a flash that I had made a fool of myself.

I was in the hands of the enemy.

Nineteen

It reminded me forcibly of Episode III in “The Perils of Pamela.” How often had I not sat in the sixpenny seats, eating a twopenny bar of milk chocolate, and yearning for similar things to happen to me! Well, they had happened with a vengeance. And somehow it was not nearly so amusing as I had imagined. It’s all very well on the screen—you have the comfortable knowledge that there’s bound to be an Episode IV. But in real life there was absolutely no guarantee that Anna the Adventuress might not terminate abruptly at the end of any Episode.

Yes, I was in a tight place. All the things that Rayburn had said that morning came back to me with unpleasant distinctness. Tell the truth, he had said. Well, I could always do that, but was it going to help me? To begin with, would my story be believed? Would they consider it likely or possible that I had started off on this mad escapade simply on the strength of a scrap of paper smelling of mothballs? It sounded to me a wildly incredible tale. In that moment of cold sanity I cursed myself for a melodramatic idiot, and yearned for the peaceful boredom of Little Hampsley.

All this passed through my mind in less time than it takes to tell. My first instinctive movement was to step backwards and feel for the handle of the door. My captor merely grinned.

“Here you are and here you stay,” he remarked facetiously.

I did my best to put a bold face upon the matter.

“I was invited to come here by the curator of the Cape Town Museum. If I have made a mistake—”

“A mistake? Oh, yes, a big mistake!”

He laughed coarsely.

“What right have you to detain me? I shall inform the police—”

“Yap, yap, yap—like a little toy dog.” He laughed.

I sat down on a chair.

“I can only conclude that you are a dangerous lunatic,” I said coldly.

“Indeed?”

“I should like to point out to you that my friends are perfectly well aware where I have gone, and that if I have not returned by this evening, they will come in search of me. You understand?”

“So your friends know where you are, do they? Which of them?”

Thus challenged, I did a lightning calculation of chances. Should I mention Sir Eustace? He was a well-known man, and his name might carry weight. But if they were in touch with Pagett, they might know I was lying. Better not risk Sir Eustace.

“Mrs. Blair, for one,” I said lightly. “A friend of mine with whom I am staying.”

“I think not,” said my captor, slyly shaking his orange head. “You have not seen her since eleven this morning. And you received our note, bidding you to come here, at lunchtime.”

His words showed me how closely my movements had been followed, but I was not going to give in without a fight.

“You are very clever,” I said. “Perhaps you have heard of that useful invention, the telephone? Mrs. Blair called me up on it when I was resting in my room after lunch. I told her then where I was going this afternoon.”

To my great satisfaction, I saw a shade of uneasiness pass over his face. Clearly he had overlooked the possibility that Suzanne might have telephoned me. I wished she really had done so!

“Enough of this,” he said harshly, rising.

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked, still endeavouring to appear composed.

“Put you where you can do no harm in case your friends come after you.”

For a moment my blood ran cold, but his next words reassured me.

“Tomorrow you’ll have some questions to answer, and after you’ve answered them we shall know what to do with you. And I can tell you, young lady, we’ve more ways than one of making obstinate little fools talk.”

It was not cheering, but it was at least a respite. I had until tomorrow. This man was clearly an underling obeying the orders of a superior. Could that superior by any chance be Pagett?

He called and two Kafirs appeared. I was taken upstairs. Despite my struggles, I was gagged and then bound hand and foot. The room into which they had taken me was a kind of attic right under the roof. It was dusty and showed little signs of having been occupied. The Dutchman made a mock bow and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

I was quite helpless. Turn and twist as I would, I could not loosen my bonds in the slightest degree, and the gag prevented me from crying out. If, by any possible chance, anyone did come to the house, I could do nothing to attract their attention. Down below I heard the sound of a door shutting. Evidently the Dutchman was going out.

It was maddening not to be able to do anything. I strained again at my bonds, but the knots held. I desisted at last, and either fainted or fell asleep. When I awoke I was in pain all over. It was quite dark now, and I judged that the night must be well-advanced, for the moon was high in the heavens and shining down through the dusty skylight. The gag was half choking me and the stiffness and pain were unendurable.

It was then that my eyes fell on a bit of broken glass lying in the corner. A moonbeam slanted right down on it, and its glistening had caught my attention. As I looked at it, an idea came into my head.

My arms and legs were helpless, but surely I could still roll. Slowly and awkwardly, I set myself in motion. It was not easy. Besides being extremely painful, since I could not guard my face with my arms, it was also exceedingly difficult to keep any particular direction.

I tended to roll in every direction except the one I wanted to go. In the end, however, I came right up against my objective. It almost touched my bound hands.

Even then it was not easy. It took an infinity of time before I could wriggle the glass into such a position, wedged against the wall, that it would rub up and down on my bonds. It was a long heart-rending process, and I almost despaired, but in the end I succeeded in sawing through the cords that bound my wrists. The rest was a matter of time. Once I had restored the circulation to my hands by rubbing the wrists vigorously, I was able to undo the gag. One or two full breaths did a lot for me.

Very soon I had undone the last knot, though even then it was some time before I could stand on my feet, but at last I stood erect, swinging my arms to and fro to restore the circulation, and wishing above all things that I could get hold of something to eat.

I waited about a quarter of an hour, to be quite sure of my recovered strength. Then I tiptoed noiselessly to the door. As I had hoped, it was not locked, only latched. I unlatched it and peeped cautiously out.

Everything was still. The moonlight came in through a window and showed me the dusty uncarpeted staircase. Cautiously I crept down it. Still no sound—but as I stood on the landing below, a faint murmur of voices reached me. I stopped dead, and stood there for some time. A clock on the wall registered the fact that it was after midnight.

I was fully aware of the risks I might run if I descended lower, but my curiosity was too much for me. With infinite precautions I prepared to

explore. I crept softly down the last flight of stairs and stood in the square hall. I looked round me—and then caught my breath with a gasp. A Kafir boy was sitting by the hall door. He had not seen me, indeed I soon realized by his breathing that he was fast asleep.

Should I retreat, or should I go on? The voices came from the room I had been shown into on arrival. One of them was that of my Dutch friend, the other I could not for the moment recognize, though it seemed vaguely familiar.

In the end I decided that it was clearly my duty to hear all I could. I must risk the Kafir boy waking up. I crossed the hall noiselessly and knelt by the study door. For a moment or two I could hear no better. The voices were louder, but I could not distinguish what they said.

I applied my eye to the keyhole instead of my ear. As I had guessed, one of the speakers was the big Dutchman. The other man was sitting outside my circumscribed range of vision.

Suddenly he rose to get himself a drink. His back, blackclad and decorous, came into view. Even before he turned round I knew who he was.

Mr. Chichester!

Now I began to make out the words.

“All the same, it is dangerous. Suppose her friends come after her?”

It was the big man speaking. Chichester answered him. He had dropped his clerical voice entirely. No wonder I had not recognized it.

“All bluff. They haven’t an idea where she is.”

“She spoke very positively.”

“I daresay. I’ve looked into the matter, and we’ve nothing to fear. Anyway, it’s the ‘Colonel’s’ orders. You don’t want to go against them, I suppose?”

The Dutchman ejaculated something in his own language. I judged it to be a hasty disclaimer.

“But why not knock her on the head?” he growled. “It would be simple. The boat is all ready. She could be taken out to sea.”

“Yes,” said Chichester meditatively. “That is what I should do. She knows too much, that is certain. But the ‘Colonel’ is a man who likes to play a lone hand—though no one else must do so.” Something in his own words seemed to awaken a memory that annoyed him. “He wants information of some kind from this girl.”

He had paused before the “information,” and the Dutchman was quick to catch him up.

“Information?”

“Something of the kind.”

“Diamonds,” I said to myself.

“And now,” continued Chichester, “give me the lists.”

For a long time their conversation was quite incomprehensible to me. It seemed to deal with large quantities of vegetables. Dates were mentioned, prices, and various names of places which I did not know. It was quite half an hour before they had finished their checking and counting.

“Good,” said Chichester, and there was a sound as though he pushed back his chair. “I will take these with me for the ‘Colonel’ to see.”

“When do you leave?”

“Ten o’clock tomorrow morning will do.”

“Do you want to see the girl before you go?”

“No. There are strict orders that no one is to see her until the ‘Colonel’ comes. Is she all right?”

“I looked in on her when I came in for dinner. She was asleep, I think. What about food?”

“A little starvation will do no harm. The ‘Colonel’ will be here some time tomorrow. She will answer questions better if she is hungry. No one had better go near her till then. Is she securely tied up?”

The Dutchman laughed.

“What do you think?”

They both laughed. So did I, under my breath. Then, as the sounds seemed to betoken that they were about to come out of the room, I beat a hasty retreat. I was just in time. As I reached the head of the stairs, I heard the door of the room open, and at the same time the Kafir stirred and moved. My retreat by the way of the hall door was not to be thought of. I retired prudently to the attic, gathered my bonds round me and lay down again on the floor, in case they should take it into their heads to come and look at me.

They did not do so, however. After about an hour, I crept down the stairs, but the Kafir by the door was awake and humming softly to himself. I was anxious to get out of the house, but I did not quite see how to manage it.

In the end, I was forced to retreat to the attic again. The Kafir was clearly on guard for the night. I remained there patiently all through the sounds of early morning preparation. The men breakfasted in the hall, I could hear their voices distinctly floating up the stairs. I was getting thoroughly unnerved. How on earth was I to get out of the house?

I counselled myself to be patient. A rash move might spoil everything. After breakfast came the sounds of Chichester departing. To my intense relief, the Dutchman accompanied him.

I waited breathlessly. Breakfast was being cleared away, the work of the house was being done. At last, the various activities seemed to die down. I slipped out from my lair once more. Very carefully I crept down the stairs. The hall was empty. Like a flash I was across it, had unlatched the door, and was outside in the sunshine. I ran down the drive like one possessed.

Once outside, I resumed a normal walk. People stared at me curiously, and I do not wonder. My face and clothes must have been covered in dust from rolling about in the attic. At last I came to a garage. I went in.

“I have met with an accident,” I explained. “I want a car to take me to Cape Town at once. I must catch the boat to Durban.”

I had not long to wait. Ten minutes later I was speeding along in the direction of Cape Town. I must know if Chichester was on the boat. Whether to sail on her myself or not, I could not determine, but in the end I decided to do so. Chichester would not know that I had seen him in the Villa at Muizenberg. He would doubtless lay further traps for me, but I was forewarned. And he was the man I was after, the man who was seeking the diamonds on behalf of the mysterious “Colonel.”

Alas, for my plans! As I arrived at the docks, the Kilmorden Castle was steaming out to sea. And I had no means of knowing whether Chichester had sailed on her or not!

Twenty.

I drove to the hotel. There was no one in the lounge that I knew. I ran upstairs and tapped on Suzanne's door. Her voice bade me "come in." When she saw who it was she literally fell on my neck.

"Anne, dear, where have you been? I've been worried to death about you. What have you been doing?"

"Having adventures," I replied. "Episode III of 'The Perils of Pamela.' "

I told her the whole story. She gave vent to a deep sigh when I finished.

"Why do these things always happen to you?" she demanded plaintively. "Why does no one gag me and bind me hand and foot?"

"You wouldn't like it if they did," I assured her. "To tell you the truth, I'm not nearly so keen on having adventures myself as I was. A little of that sort of thing goes a long way."

Suzanne seemed unconvinced. An hour or two of gagging and binding would have changed her view quickly enough. Suzanne likes thrills, but she hates being uncomfortable.

"And what are we all doing now?" she asked.

"I don't quite know," I said thoughtfully. "You still go to Rhodesia, of course, to keep an eye on Pagett—"

"And you?"

That was just my difficulty. Had Chichester gone on the Kilmorden, or had he not? Did he mean to carry out his original plan of going to Durban? The hour of his leaving Muizenberg seemed to point to an affirmative answer to both questions. In that case, I might go to Durban by train. I fancied that I should get there before the boat. On the other hand, if the news of my

escape were wired to Chichester, and also the information that I had left Cape Town for Durban, nothing was simpler for him than to leave the boat at either Port Elizabeth or East London and so give me the slip completely.

It was rather a knotty problem.

“We’ll inquire about trains to Durban anyway,” I said.

“And it’s not too late for morning tea,” said Suzanne. “We’ll have it in the lounge.”

The Durban train left at 8:15 that evening, so they told me at the office. For the moment I postponed decision, and joined Suzanne for somewhat belated “eleven-o’clock tea.”

“Do you feel that you would really recognize Chichester again—in any other disguise, I mean?” asked Suzanne.

I shook my head ruefully.

“I certainly didn’t recognize him as the stewardess, and never should have but for your drawing.”

“The man’s a professional actor, I’m sure of it,” said Suzanne thoughtfully. “His makeup is perfectly marvellous. He might come off the boat as a navvy or something, and you’d never spot him.”

“You’re very cheering,” I said.

At that minute Colonel Race stepped in through the window and came and joined us.

“What is Sir Eustace doing?” asked Suzanne. “I haven’t seen him about today.”

Rather an odd expression passed over the Colonel’s face.

“He’s got a little trouble of his own to attend to which is keeping him busy.”

“Tell us about it.”

“I mustn’t tell tales out of school.”

“Tell us something—even if you have to invent it for our special benefit.”

“Well, what would you say to the famous ‘Man in the Brown Suit’ having made the voyage with us?”

“What?”

I felt the colour die out of my face and then surge back again. Fortunately Colonel Race was not looking at me.

“It’s a fact, I believe. Every port watched for him and he bamboozled Pedler into bringing him out as his secretary!”

“Not Mr. Pagett?”

“Oh, not Pagett—the other fellow. Rayburn, he called himself.”

“Have they arrested him?” asked Suzanne. Under the table she gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. I waited breathlessly for an answer.

“He seems to have disappeared into thin air.”

“How does Sir Eustace take it?”

“Regards it as a personal insult offered him by Fate.”

An opportunity of hearing Sir Eustace’s views on the matter presented itself later in the day. We were awakened from a refreshing afternoon nap by a page boy with a note. In touching terms it requested the pleasure of our company at tea in his sitting room.

The poor man was indeed in a pitiable state. He poured out his troubles to us, encouraged by Suzanne’s sympathetic murmurs. (She does that sort of thing very well.)

“First a perfectly strange woman has the impertinence to get herself murdered in my house—on purpose to annoy me, I do believe. Why my house? Why, of all the houses in Great Britain, choose the Mill House? What harm had I ever done the woman that she must needs get herself murdered there?”

Suzanne made one of her sympathetic noises again and Sir Eustace proceeded, in a still more aggrieved tone:

“And, if that’s not enough, the fellow who murdered her has the impudence, the colossal impudence, to attach himself to me as my secretary. My secretary, if you please! I’m tired of secretaries, I won’t have any more secretaries. Either they’re concealed murderers or else they’re drunken brawlers. Have you seen Pagett’s black eye? But of course you have. How can I go about with a secretary like that? And his face is such a nasty shade of yellow too—just the colour that doesn’t go with a black eye. I’ve done with secretaries—unless I have a girl. A nice girl, with liquid eyes, who’ll hold my hand when I’m feeling cross. What about you, Miss Anne? Will you take on the job?”

“How often shall I have to hold your hand?” I asked, laughing.

“All day long,” replied Sir Eustace gallantly.

“I shan’t get much typing done at that rate,” I reminded him.

“That doesn’t matter. All this work is Pagett’s idea. He works me to death. I’m looking forward to leaving him behind in Cape Town.”

“He is staying behind?”

“Yes, he’ll enjoy himself thoroughly sleuthing about after Rayburn. That’s the sort of thing that suits Pagett down to the ground. He adores intrigue. But I’m quite serious in my offer. Will you come? Mrs. Blair here is a competent chaperone, and you can have a half holiday every now and again to dig for bones.”

“Thank you very much, Sir Eustace,” I said cautiously, “but I think I’m leaving for Durban tonight.”

“Now don’t be an obstinate girl. Remember, there are lots of lions in Rhodesia. You’ll like lions. All girls do.”

“Will they be practising low jumps?” I asked, laughing. “No, thank you very much, but I must go to Durban.”

Sir Eustace looked at me, sighed deeply, then opened the door of the adjoining room, and called to Pagett.

“If you’ve quite finished your afternoon sleep, my dear fellow, perhaps you’d do a little work for a change.”

Guy Pagett appeared in the doorway. He bowed to us both, starting slightly at the sight of me, and replied in a melancholy voice:

“I have been typing that memorandum all this afternoon, Sir Eustace.”

“Well, stop typing it then. Go down to the Trade Commissioner’s Office, or the Board of Agriculture, or the Chamber of Mines, or one of those places, and ask them to lend me some kind of a woman to take to Rhodesia. She must have liquid eyes and not object to my holding her hand.”

“Yes, Sir Eustace. I will ask for a competent shorthand-typist.”

“Pagett’s a malicious fellow,” said Sir Eustace, after the secretary had departed. “I’d be prepared to bet that he’ll pick out some slab-faced creature on purpose to annoy me. She must have nice feet too—I forgot to mention that.”

I clutched Suzanne excitedly by the hand and almost dragged her along to her room.

“Now, Suzanne,” I said, “we’ve got to make plans—and make them quickly. Pagett is staying behind here—you heard that?”

“Yes. I suppose that means that I shan’t be allowed to go to Rhodesia—which is very annoying, because I want to go to Rhodesia. How tiresome.”

“Cheer up,” I said. “You’re going all right. I don’t see how you could back out at the last moment without its appearing frightfully suspicious. And, besides, Pagett might suddenly be summoned by Sir Eustace, and it would be far harder for you to attach yourself to him for the journey up.”

“It would hardly be respectable,” said Suzanne, dimpling. “I should have to pretend a fatal passion for him as an excuse.”

“On the other hand, if you were there when he arrived, it would all be perfectly simple and natural. Besides, I don’t think we ought to lose sight of the other two entirely.”

“Oh, Anne, you surely can’t suspect Colonel Race or Sir Eustace?”

“I suspect everybody,” I said darkly, “and if you’ve read any detective stories, Suzanne, you must know that it’s always the most unlikely person who’s the villain. Lots of criminals have been cheerful fat men like Sir Eustace.”

“Colonel Race isn’t particularly fat—or particularly cheerful either.”

“Sometimes they’re lean and saturnine,” I retorted. “I don’t say I seriously suspect either of them, but, after all, the woman was murdered in Sir Eustace’s house—”

“Yes, yes, we needn’t go over all that again. I’ll watch him for you, Anne, and if he gets any fatter and any more cheerful, I’ll send you a telegram at once. ‘Sir E. swelling highly suspicious. Come at once.’ ”

“Really, Suzanne,” I cried, “you seem to think all this is a game!”

“I know I do,” said Suzanne, unabashed. “It seems like that. It’s your fault, Anne. I’ve got imbued with your ‘Let’s have an adventure’ spirit. It doesn’t seem a bit real. Dear me, if Clarence knew that I was running about Africa tracking dangerous criminals, he’d have a fit.”

“Why don’t you cable him about it?” I asked sarcastically.

Suzanne’s sense of humour always fails her when it comes to sending cables. She considered my suggestion in perfectly good faith.

“I might. It would have to be a very long one.” Her eyes brightened at the thought. “But I think it’s better not. Husbands always want to interfere with perfectly harmless amusements.”

“Well,” I said, summing up the situation, “you will keep an eye on Sir Eustace and Colonel Race—”

“I know why I’ve got to watch Sir Eustace,” interrupted Suzanne, “because of his figure and his humorous conversation. But I think it’s carrying it rather far to suspect Colonel Race; I do indeed. Why, he’s something to do with the Secret Service. Do you know, Anne, I believe the best thing we could do would be to confide in him and tell him the whole story.”

I objected vigorously to this unsporting proposal. I recognized in it the disastrous effects of matrimony. How often have I not heard a perfectly intelligent female say, in the tone of one clinching an argument, “Edgar says —” And all the time you are perfectly aware that Edgar is a perfect fool. Suzanne, by reason of her married state, was yearning to lean upon some man or other.

However, she promised faithfully that she would not breathe a word to Colonel Race, and we went on with our plan making.

“It’s quite clear that I must stay here and watch Pagett, and this is the best way to do it. I must pretend to leave for Durban this evening, take my luggage down and so on, but really I shall go to some small hotel in the town. I can alter my appearance a little—wear a fair toupee and one of those thick white lace veils, and I shall have a much better chance of seeing what he’s really at if he thinks I’m safely out of the way.”

Suzanne approved this plan heartily. We made due and ostentatious preparations, inquiring once more about the departure of the train at the office and packing my luggage.

We dined together in the restaurant. Colonel Race did not appear, but Sir Eustace and Pagett were at their table in the window. Pagett left the table halfway through the meal, which annoyed me, as I had planned to say good-bye to him. However, doubtless Sir Eustace would do as well. I went over to him when I had finished.

“Good-bye, Sir Eustace,” I said. “I’m off tonight to Durban.”

Sir Eustace sighed heavily.

“So I heard. You wouldn’t like me to come with you, would you?”

“I should love it.”

“Nice girl. Sure you won’t change your mind and come and look for lions in Rhodesia?”

“Quite sure.”

“He must be a very handsome fellow,” said Sir Eustace plaintively. “Some young whippersnapper in Durban, I suppose, who puts my mature charms completely in the shade. By the way, Pagett’s going down in the car in a minute or two. He could take you to the station.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” I said hastily. “Mrs. Blair and I have got our own taxi ordered.”

To go down with Guy Pagett was the last thing I wanted! Sir Eustace looked at me attentively.

“I don’t believe you like Pagett. I don’t blame you. Of all the officious, interfering asses—going about with the air of a martyr, and doing everything he can to annoy and upset me!”

“What has he done now?” I inquired with some curiosity.

“He’s got hold of a secretary for me. You never saw such a woman! Forty, if she’s a day, wears pince-nez and sensible boots and an air of brisk efficiency that will be the death of me. A regular slab-faced woman.”

“Won’t she hold your hand?”

“I devoutly hope not!” exclaimed Sir Eustace. “That would be the last straw. Well, good-bye, liquid eyes. If I shoot a lion I shan’t give you the skin—after the base way you’ve deserted me.”

He squeezed my hand warmly and we parted. Suzanne was waiting for me in the hall. She was to come down to see me off.

“Let’s start at once,” I said hastily, and motioned to the man to get a taxi.

Then a voice behind me made me start:

“Excuse me, Miss Beddingfeld, but I’m just going down in a car. I can drop you and Mrs. Blair at the station.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said hastily. “But there’s no need to trouble you. I—”

“No trouble at all, I assure you. Put the luggage in, porter.”

I was helpless. I might have protested further, but a slight warning nudge from Suzanne urged me to be on my guard.

“Thank you, Mr. Pagett,” I said coldly.

We all got into the car. As we raced down the road into the town, I racked my brains for something to say. In the end Pagett himself broke the silence.

“I have secured a very capable secretary for Sir Eustace,” he observed.

“Miss Pettigrew.”

“He wasn’t exactly raving about her just now,” I remarked.

Pagett looked at me coldly.

“She is a proficient shorthand-typist,” he said repressively.

We pulled up in front of the station. Here surely he would leave us. I turned with outstretched hand—but no.

“I’ll come and see you off. It’s just eight o’clock, your train goes in a quarter of an hour.”

He gave efficient directions to porters. I stood helpless, not daring to look at Suzanne. The man suspected. He was determined to make sure that I did go by the train. And what could I do? Nothing. I saw myself, in a quarter of an hour’s time, steaming out of the station with Pagett planted on the platform waving me adieu. He had turned the tables on me adroitly. His manner towards me had changed, moreover. It was full of an uneasy geniality which sat ill upon him, and which nauseated me. The man was an oily hypocrite. First he tried to murder me, and now he paid me compliments! Did he imagine for one minute that I hadn’t recognized him that night on the boat? No, it was a pose, a pose which he forced me to acquiesce in, his tongue in his cheek all the while.

Helpless as a sheep, I moved along under his expert directions. My luggage was piled in my sleeping compartment—I had a two-berth one to myself. It was twelve minutes past eight. In three minutes the train would start.

But Pagett had reckoned without Suzanne.

“It will be a terribly hot journey, Anne,” she said suddenly. “Especially going through the Karoo tomorrow. You’ve got some eau-de-Cologne or lavender water with you, haven’t you?”

My cue was plain.

“Oh, dear,” I cried. “I left my eau-de-Cologne on the dressing table at the hotel.”

Suzanne’s habit of command served her well. She turned imperiously to Pagett.

“Mr. Pagett. Quick. You’ve just time. There’s a chemist almost opposite the station. Anne must have some eau-de-Cologne.”

He hesitated, but Suzanne’s imperative manner was too much for him. She is a born autocrat. He went. Suzanne followed him with her eyes till he

disappeared.

“Quick, Anne, get out the other side—in case he hasn’t really gone but is watching us from the end of the platform. Never mind your luggage. You can telegraph about that tomorrow. Oh, if only the train starts on time!”

I opened the gate on the opposite side to the platform and climbed down. Nobody was observing me. I could just see Suzanne standing where I had left her, looking up at the train and apparently chatting to me at the window. A whistle blew, the train began to draw out. Then I heard feet racing furiously up the platform. I withdrew to the shadow of a friendly bookstall and watched.

Suzanne turned from waving her handkerchief to the retreating train.

“Too late, Mr. Pagett,” she said cheerfully. “She’s gone. Is that the eau-de-Cologne? What a pity we didn’t think of it sooner!”

They passed not far from me on their way out of the station. Guy Pagett was extremely hot. He had evidently run all the way to the chemist and back.

“Shall I get you a taxi, Mrs. Blair?”

Suzanne did not fail in her role.

“Yes, please. Can’t I give you a lift back? Have you much to do for Sir Eustace? Dear me, I wish Anne Beddingfeld was coming with us tomorrow. I don’t like the idea of a young girl like that travelling off to Durban all by herself. But she was set upon it. Some little attraction there, I fancy—”

They passed out of earshot. Clever Suzanne. She had saved me.

I allowed a minute or two to elapse and then I too made my way out of the station, almost colliding as I did so with a man—an unpleasant-looking man with a nose disproportionately big for his face.

Twenty-one

I had no further difficulty in carrying out my plans. I found a small hotel in a back street, got a room there, paid a deposit as I had no luggage with me, and went placidly to bed.

On the following morning I was up early and went out into the town to purchase a modest wardrobe. My idea was to do nothing until after the departure of the eleven-o'clock train to Rhodesia with most of the party on board. Pagett was not likely to indulge in any nefarious activities until he had got rid of them. Accordingly I took a train out of the town and proceeded to enjoy a country walk. It was comparatively cool, and I was glad to stretch my legs after the long voyage and my close confinement at Muizenberg.

A lot hinges on small things. My shoelace came untied, and I stopped to do it up. The road had just turned a corner, and as I was bending over the offending shoe a man came right round and almost walked into me. He lifted his hat, murmuring an apology, and went on. It struck me at the time that his face was vaguely familiar, but at the moment I thought no more of it. I looked at my wristwatch. The time was getting on. I turned my feet in the direction of Cape Town.

There was a tram on the point of going and I had to run for it. I heard other footsteps running behind me. I swung myself on and so did the other runner. I recognized him at once. It was the man who had passed me on the road when my shoe came untied, and in a flash I knew why his face was familiar. It was the small man with the big nose whom I had run into on leaving the station the night before.

The coincidence was rather startling. Could it be possible that the man was deliberately following me? I resolved to test that as promptly as possible. I rang the bell and got off at the next stop. The man did not get off. I withdrew into the shadow of a shop doorway and watched. He alighted at the next stop and walked back in my direction.

The case was clear enough. I was being followed. I had crowed too soon. My victory over Guy Pagett took on another aspect. I hailed the next tram and, as I expected, my shadower also got on. I gave myself up to some very serious thinking.

It was perfectly apparent that I had stumbled on a bigger thing than I knew. The murder in the house at Marlow was not an isolated incident committed by a solitary individual. I was up against a gang, and, thanks to Colonel Race's revelations to Suzanne, and what I had overheard at the house at Muizenberg, I was beginning to understand some of its manifold activities. Systematized crime, organized by the man known to his followers as the "Colonel!" I remembered some of the talk I had heard on board ship, of the strike on the Rand and the causes underlying it—and the belief that some secret organization was at work fomenting the agitation. That was the "Colonel's" work, his emissaries were acting according to plan. He took no part in these things himself, I had always heard, as he limited himself to directing and organizing. The brain work—not the dangerous labour—for him. But still it well might be that he himself was on the spot, directing affairs from an apparently impeccable position.

That, then, was the meaning of Colonel Race's presence on the Kilmorden Castle. He was out after the arch-criminal. Everything fitted in with that assumption. He was someone high up in the Secret Service whose business it was to lay the "Colonel" by the heels.

I nodded to myself—things were becoming very clear to me. What of my part in the affair? Where did I come in? Was it only diamonds they were after? I shook my head. Great as the value of the diamonds might be, they hardly accounted for the desperate attempts which had been made to get me out of the way. No, I stood for more than that. In some way, unknown to myself, I was a menace, a danger! Some knowledge that I had, or that they thought I had, made them anxious to remove me at all costs—and that knowledge was bound up somehow with the diamonds. There was one person, I felt sure, who could enlighten me—if he would! "The Man in the Brown Suit"—Harry Rayburn. He knew the other half of the story. But he had vanished into the darkness, he was a hunted creature flying from pursuit. In all probability he and I would never meet again. . . .

I brought myself back with a jerk to the actualities of the moment. It was no good thinking sentimentally of Harry Rayburn. He had displayed the greatest antipathy to me from the first. Or, at least—There I was again—dreaming! The real problem was what to do—now!

I, priding myself upon my role of watcher, had become the watched. And I was afraid! For the first time, I began to lose my nerve. I was the little bit of grit that was impeding the smooth working of the great machine—and I fancied that the machine would have a short way with little bits of grit. Once Harry Rayburn had saved me, once I had saved myself—but I felt suddenly that the odds were heavily against me. My enemies were all around me in every direction, and they were closing in. If I continued to play a lone hand I was doomed.

I rallied myself with an effort. After all, what could they do? I was in a civilized city—with policemen every few yards. I would be wary in future. They should not trap me again as they had done in Muizenberg.

As I reached this point in my meditations, the tram arrived at Adderley Street. I got out. Undecided what to do, I walked slowly up the left-hand side of the street. I did not trouble to look if my watcher was behind me. I knew he was. I walked into Cartwright's and ordered two coffee ice cream sodas—to steady my nerves. A man, I suppose, would have had a stiff peg; but girls derive a lot of comfort from ice cream sodas. I applied myself to the end of the straw with gusto. The cool liquid went trickling down my throat in the most agreeable manner. I pushed the first glass aside empty.

I was sitting on one of the little high stools in front of the counter. Out of the tail of my eye, I saw my tracker come in and sit down unostentatiously at a little table near the door. I finished the second coffee soda and demanded a maple one. I can drink practically an unlimited amount of ice cream sodas.

Suddenly the man by the door got up and went out. That surprised me. If he was going to wait outside, why not wait outside from the beginning? I slipped down from my stool and went cautiously to the door. I drew back quickly into the shadow. The man was talking to Guy Pagett.

If I had ever had any doubts, that would have settled it. Pagett had his watch out and was looking at it. They exchanged a few brief words, and then the secretary swung on down the street towards the station. Evidently he had given his orders. But what were they?

Suddenly my heart leapt into my mouth. The man who had followed me crossed to the middle of the road and spoke to a policeman. He spoke at some length, gesticulating towards Cartwright's and evidently explaining something. I saw the plan at once. I was to be arrested on some charge or other—pocket-picking, perhaps. It would be easy enough for the gang to put through a simple little matter like that. Of what good to protest my innocence? They would have seen to every detail. Long ago they had brought a charge of robbing De Beers against Harry Rayburn, and he had not been able to disprove it, though I had little doubt but that he had been absolutely blameless. What chance had I against such a “frame up” as the “Colonel” could devise?

I glanced up at the clock almost mechanically, and immediately another aspect of the case struck me. I saw the point of Guy Pagett's looking at his watch. It was just on eleven, and at eleven the mail train left for Rhodesia bearing with it the influential friends who might otherwise come to my rescue. That was the reason of my immunity up to now. From last night till eleven this morning I had been safe, but now the net was closing in upon me.

I hurriedly opened my bag and paid for my drinks, and as I did so, my heart seemed to stand still, for inside it was a man's wallet stuffed with notes! It must have been deftly introduced into my handbag as I left the tram.

Promptly I lost my head. I hurried out of Cartwright's. The little man with the big nose and the policeman were just crossing the road. They saw me, and the little man designated me excitedly to the policeman. I took to my heels and ran. I judged him to be a slow policeman. I should get a start. But I had no plan, even then. I just ran for my life down Adderley Street. People began to stare. I felt that in another minute someone would stop me.

An idea flashed into my head.

“The station?” I asked, in a breathless gasp.

“Just down on the right.”

I sped on. It is permissible to run for a train. I turned into the station, but as I did so I heard footsteps close behind me. The little man with the big nose was a champion sprinter. I foresaw that I should be stopped before I got to the platform I was in search of. I looked up to the clock—one minute to eleven. I might just do it if my plan succeeded.

I had entered the station by the main entrance in Adderley Street. I now darted out again through the side exit. Directly opposite me was the side entrance to the post office, the main entrance to which is in Adderley Street.

As I expected, my pursuer, instead of following me in, ran down the street to cut me off when I emerged by the main entrance, or to warn the policeman to do so.

In an instant I slipped across the street again and back into the station. I ran like a lunatic. It was just eleven. The long train was moving as I appeared on the platform. A porter tried to stop me, but I wriggled myself out of his grasp and sprang upon the foot-board. I mounted the two steps and opened the gate. I was safe! The train was gathering way.

We passed a man standing by himself at the end of the platform. I waved to him.

“Good-bye Mr. Pagett,” I shouted.

Never have I seen a man more taken aback. He looked as though he had seen a ghost.

In a minute or two I was having trouble with the conductor. But I took a lofty tone.

“I am Sir Eustace Pedler’s secretary,” I said haughtily. “Please take me to his private car.”

Suzanne and Colonel Race were standing on the rear observation platform. They both uttered an exclamation of utter surprise at seeing me.

“Hullo, Miss Anne,” cried Colonel Race, “where have you turned up from? I thought you’d gone to Durban. What an unexpected person you are!”

Suzanne said nothing, but her eyes asked a hundred questions.

“I must report myself to my chief,” I said demurely. “Where is he?”

“He’s in the office—middle compartment—dictating at an incredible rate to the unfortunate Miss Pettigrew.”

“This enthusiasm for work is something new,” I commented.

“H’m!” said Colonel Race. “His idea is, I think, to give her sufficient work to chain her to her typewriter in her own compartment for the rest of the day.”

I laughed. Then, followed by the other two, I sought out Sir Eustace. He was striding up and down the circumscribed space, hurling a flood of words at the unfortunate secretary whom I now saw for the first time. A tall, square woman in drab clothing, with pince-nez and an efficient air. I judged that she was finding it difficult to keep pace with Sir Eustace, for her pencil was flying along, and she was frowning horribly.

I stepped into the compartment.

“Come aboard, sir,” I said saucily.

Sir Eustace paused dead in the middle of a complicated sentence on the labour situation, and stared at me. Miss Pettigrew must be a nervous creature, in spite of her efficient air, for she jumped as though she had been shot.

“God bless my soul!” ejaculated Sir Eustace. “What about the young man in Durban?”

“I prefer you,” I said softly.

“Darling,” said Sir Eustace. “You can start holding my hand at once.”

Miss Pettigrew coughed, and Sir Eustace hastily withdrew his hand.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Let me see, where were we? Yes. Tylman Roos, in his speech at—What’s the matter? Why aren’t you taking it down?”

“I think,” said Colonel Race gently, “that Miss Pettigrew has broken her pencil.”

He took it from her and sharpened it. Sir Eustace stared, and so did I. There was something in Colonel Race’s tone that I did not quite understand.

Twenty-two

(Extract from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler)

I am inclined to abandon my Reminiscences. Instead, I shall write a short article entitled “Secretaries I have had.” As regards secretaries, I seem to have fallen under a blight. At one minute I have no secretaries, at another I have too many. At the present minute I am journeying to Rhodesia with a pack of women. Race goes off with the two best-looking, of course, and leaves me with the dud. That is what always happens to me—and, after all, this is my private car, not Race’s.

Also Anne Beddingfeld is accompanying me to Rhodesia on the pretext of being my temporary secretary. But all this afternoon she has been out on the observation platform with Race exclaiming at the beauty of the Hex River Pass. It is true that I told her her principal duty would be to hold my hand. But she isn’t even doing that. Perhaps she is afraid of Miss Pettigrew. I don’t blame her if so. There is nothing attractive about Miss Pettigrew—she is a repellent female with large feet, more like a man than a woman.

There is something very mysterious about Anne Beddingfeld. She jumped onboard the train at the last minute, puffing like a steam engine, for all the world as though she’s been running a race—and yet Pagett told me that he’d seen her off to Durban last night! Either Pagett has been drinking again, or else the girl must have an astral body.

And she never explains. Nobody ever explains. Yes, “Secretaries I have had.” No. 1, a murderer fleeing from justice. No. 2, a secret drinker who carries on disreputable intrigues in Italy. No. 3, a beautiful girl who possesses the useful faculty of being in two places at once. No. 4, Miss Pettigrew, who, I have no doubt, is really a particularly dangerous crook in disguise! Probably one of Pagett’s Italian friends that he has palmed off on me. I shouldn’t wonder if the world found some day that it had been grossly deceived by Pagett. On the whole, I think Rayburn was the best of the bunch. He never worried me or got in my way. Guy Pagett has had the

impertinence to have the stationery trunk put in here. None of us can move without falling over it.

I went out on the observation platform just now, expecting my appearance to be greeted with hails of delight. Both the women were listening spellbound to one of Race's traveller's tales. I shall label this car—not "Sir Eustace Pedler and Party," but "Colonel Race and Harem."

Then Mrs. Blair must needs begin taking silly photographs. Every time we went round a particularly appalling curve, as we climbed higher and higher, she snapped at the engine.

"You see the point," she cried delightedly. "It must be some curve if you can photograph the front part of the train from the back, and with the mountain background it will look awfully dangerous."

I pointed out to her that no one could possibly tell it had been taken from the back of the train. She looked at me pityingly.

"I shall write underneath it. 'Taken from the train. Engine going round a curve.' "

"You could write that under any snapshot of a train," I said. Women never think of these simple things.

"I'm glad we've come up here in daylight," cried Anne Beddingfeld. "I shouldn't have seen this if I'd gone last night to Durban, should I?"

"No," said Colonel Race, smiling. "You'd have woken up tomorrow morning to find yourself in the Karoo, a hot, dusty desert of stones and rocks."

"I'm glad I changed my mind," said Anne, sighing contentedly, and looking round.

It was rather a wonderful sight. The great mountains all around, through which we turned and twisted and laboured ever steadily upwards.

"Is this the best train in the day to Rhodesia?" asked Anne Beddingfeld.

“In the day?” laughed Race. “Why, my dear Miss Anne, there are only three trains a week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. Do you realize that you don’t arrive at the Falls until Saturday next?”

“How well we shall know each other by that time!” said Mrs. Blair maliciously. “How long are you going to stay at the Falls, Sir Eustace?”

“That depends,” I said cautiously.

“On what?”

“On how things go at Johannesburg. My original idea was to stay a couple of days at the Falls—which I’ve never seen, though this is my third visit to Africa—and then go on to Jo’burg and study the conditions of things on the Rand. At home, you know, I pose as being an authority on South African politics. But from all I hear, Jo’burg will be a particularly unpleasant place to visit in about a week’s time. I don’t want to study conditions in the midst of a raging revolution.”

Race smiled in a rather superior manner.

“I think your fears are exaggerated, Sir Eustace. There will be no great danger in Jo’burg.”

The women immediately looked at him in the “What a brave hero you are” manner. It annoyed me intensely. I am every bit as brave as Race—but I lack the figure. These long, lean, brown men have it all their own way.

“I suppose you’ll be there,” I said coldly.

“Very possibly. We might travel together.”

“I’m not sure that I shan’t stay on at the Falls a bit,” I answered noncommittally. Why is Race so anxious that I should go to Jo’burg? He’s got his eye on Anne, I believe. “What are your plans, Miss Anne?”

“That depends,” she replied demurely, copying me.

“I thought you were my secretary,” I objected.

“Oh, but I’ve been cut out. You’ve been holding Miss Pettigrew’s hand all the afternoon.”

“Whatever I’ve been doing, I can swear I’ve not been doing that,” I assured her.

Thursday night.

We have just left Kimberley. Race was made to tell the story of the diamond robbery all over again. Why are women so excited by anything to do with diamonds?

At last Anne Beddingfeld has shed her veil of mystery. It seems that she’s a newspaper correspondent. She sent an immense cable from De Aar this morning. To judge by the jabbering that went on nearly all night in Mrs. Blair’s cabin she must have been reading aloud all her special articles for years to come.

It seems that all along she’s been on the track of “The Man in the Brown Suit.” Apparently she didn’t spot him on the Kilmorden—in fact, she hardly had the chance, but she’s now very busy cabling home: “How I journeyed out with the Murderer,” and inventing highly fictitious stories of “What he said to me,” etc. I know how these things are done. I do them myself, in my Reminiscences when Pagett will let me. And of course one of Nasby’s efficient staff will brighten up the details still more, so that when it appears in the Daily Budget Rayburn won’t recognize himself.

The girl’s clever, though. All on her own, apparently, she’s ferreted out the identity of the woman who was killed in my house. She was a Russian dancer called Nadina. I asked Anne Beddingfeld if she was sure of this. She replied that it was merely a deduction—quite in the Sherlock Holmes manner. However, I gather that she had cabled it home to Nasby as a proved fact. Women have these intuitions—I’ve no doubt that Anne Beddingfeld is perfectly right in her guess—but to call it a deduction is absurd.

How she ever got on the staff of the Daily Budget is more than I can imagine. But she is the kind of young woman who does these things.

Impossible to withstand her. She is full of coaxing ways that mask an invincible determination. Look how she has got into my private car!

I am beginning to have an inkling why. Race said something about the police suspecting that Rayburn would make for Rhodesia. He might just have got off by Monday's train. They telegraphed all along the line, I presume, and no one of his description was found, but that says little. He's an astute young man and he knows Africa. He's probably exquisitely disguised as an old Kafir woman—and the simple police continue to look for a handsome young man with a scar, dressed in the height of European fashion. I never did quite swallow that scar.

Anyway, Anne Beddingfeld is on his track. She wants the glory of discovering him for herself and the Daily Budget. Young women are very cold-blooded nowadays. I hinted to her that it was an unwomanly action. She laughed at me. She assured me that did she run him to earth her fortune was made. Race doesn't like it, either, I can see. Perhaps Rayburn is on this train. If so, we may all be murdered in our beds. I said so to Mrs. Blair—but she seemed quite to welcome the idea, and remarked that if I were murdered it would be really a terrific scoop for Anne! A scoop for Anne, indeed!

Tomorrow we shall be going through Bechuanaland. The dust will be atrocious. Also at every station little Kafir children come and sell you quaint wooden animals that they carve themselves. Also mealie bowls and baskets. I am rather afraid that Mrs. Blair may run amok. There is a primitive charm about these toys that I feel will appeal to her.

Friday evening.

As I feared. Mrs. Blair and Anne have bought forty-nine wooden animals!

Twenty-three

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

I thoroughly enjoyed the journey up to Rhodesia. There was something new and exciting to see every day. First the wonderful scenery of the Hex River valley, then the desolate grandeur of the Karoo, and finally that wonderful straight stretch of line in Bechaunaland, and the perfectly adorable toys the natives brought to sell. Suzanne and I were nearly left behind at each station—if you could call them stations. It seemed to me that the train just stopped whenever it felt like it, and no sooner had it done so than a horde of natives materialized out of the empty landscape, holding up mealie bowls and sugar canes and fur karosses and adorable carved wooden animals. Suzanne began at once to make a collection of the latter. I imitated her example—most of them cost a “tiki” (threepence) and each was different. There were giraffes and tigers and snakes and a melancholy-looking eland and absurd little black warriors. We enjoyed ourselves enormously.

Sir Eustace tried to restrain us—but in vain. I still think it was a miracle we were not left behind at some oasis of the line. South African trains don't hoot or get excited when they are going to start off again. They just glide quietly away, and you look up from your bargaining and run for your life.

Suzanne's amazement at seeing me climb upon the train at Cape Town can be imagined. We held an exhaustive survey of the situation on the first evening out. We talked half the night.

It had become clear to me that defensive tactics must be adopted as well as aggressive ones. Travelling with Sir Eustace Pedler and his party, I was fairly safe. Both he and Colonel Race were powerful protectors, and I judged that my enemies would not wish to stir up a hornet's nest about my ears. Also, as long as I was near Sir Eustace, I was more or less in touch with Guy Pagett—and Guy Pagett was the heart of the mystery. I asked Suzanne whether in her opinion it was possible that Pagett himself was the mysterious “Colonel.” His subordinate position was, of course, against the

assumption, but it had struck me once or twice that, for all his autocratic ways, Sir Eustace was really very much influenced by his secretary. He was an easy-going man, and one whom an adroit secretary might be able to twist round his little finger. The comparative obscurity of his position might in reality be useful to him, since he would be anxious to be well out of the limelight.

Suzanne, however, negatived these ideas very strongly. She refused to believe that Guy Pagett was the ruling spirit. The real head—the “Colonel”—was somewhere in the background and had probably been already in Africa at the time of our arrival.

I agreed that there was much to be said for her view, but I was not entirely satisfied. For in each suspicious instance Pagett had been shown as the directing genius. It was true that his personality seemed to lack the assurance and decision that one would expect from a master criminal—but after all, according to Colonel Race, it was brain work only that this mysterious leader supplied, and creative genius is often allied to a weak and timorous physical constitution.

“There speaks the Professor’s daughter,” interrupted Suzanne, when I had got to this point in my argument.

“It’s true, all the same. On the other hand, Pagett may be the Grand Vizier, so to speak, of the All Highest.” I was silent for a minute or two, and then went on musingly: “I wish I knew how Sir Eustace made his money!”

“Suspecting him again?”

“Suzanne, I’ve got into that state that I can’t help suspecting somebody! I don’t really suspect him—but, after all, he is Pagett’s employer, and he did own the Mill House.”

“I’ve always heard that he made his money in some way he isn’t anxious to talk about,” said Suzanne thoughtfully. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean crime—it might be tintacks or hair restorer!”

I agreed ruefully.

“I suppose,” said Suzanne doubtfully, “that we’re not barking up the wrong tree? Being led completely astray, I mean, by assuming Pagett’s complicity? Supposing that, after all, he is a perfectly honest man?”

I considered that for a minute or two, then I shook my head.

“I can’t believe that.”

“After all, he has his explanations for everything.”

“Y—es, but they’re not very convincing. For instance, the night he tried to throw me overboard on the Kilmorden, he says he followed Rayburn up on deck and Rayburn turned and knocked him down. Now we know that’s not true.”

“No,” said Suzanne unwillingly. “But we only heard the story at second hand from Sir Eustace. If we’d heard it direct from Pagett himself, it might have been different. You know how people always get a story a little wrong when they repeat it.”

I turned the thing over in my mind.

“No,” I said at last, “I don’t see any way out. Pagett’s guilty. You can’t get away from the fact that he tried to throw me overboard, and everything else fits in. Why are you so persistent in this new idea of yours?”

“Because of his face.”

“His face? But—”

“Yes, I know what you’re going to say. It’s a sinister face. That’s just it. No man with a face like that could be really sinister. It must be a colossal joke on the part of Nature.”

I did not believe much in Suzanne’s argument. I know a lot about Nature in past ages. If she’s got a sense of humour, she doesn’t show it much. Suzanne is just the sort of person who would clothe Nature with all her own attributes.

We passed on to discuss our immediate plans. It was clear to me that I must have some kind of standing. I couldn't go on avoiding explanations forever. The solution of all my difficulties lay ready to my hand, though I didn't think of it for some time. The Daily Budget! My silence or my speech could no longer affect Harry Rayburn. He was marked down as "The Man in the Brown Suit" through no fault of mine. I could help him best by seeming to be against him. The "Colonel" and his gang must have no suspicion that there existed any friendly feeling between me and the man they had elected to be the scapegoat of the murder at Marlow. As far as I knew, the woman killed was still unidentified. I would cable to Lord Nasby, suggesting that she was no other than the famous Russian dancer "Nadina" who had been delighting Paris for so long. It seemed incredible to me that she had not been identified already—but when I learnt more of the case long afterwards I saw how natural it really was.

Nadina had never been to England, during her successful career in Paris. She was unknown to London audiences. The pictures in the papers of the Marlow victim were so blurred and unrecognizable that it is small wonder no one identified them. And, on the other hand, Nadina had kept her intention of visiting England a profound secret from everyone. The day after the murder, a letter had been received by her manager purporting to be from the dancer, in which she said that she was returning to Russia on urgent private affairs and that he must deal with her broken contract as best he could.

All this, of course, I only learned afterwards. With Suzanne's full approval, I sent a long cable from De Aar. It arrived at a psychological moment (this again, of course, I learnt afterwards). The Daily Budget was hard up for a sensation. My guess was verified and proved to be correct and the Daily Budget had the scoop of its lifetime. "Victim of the Mill House Murder identified by our special reporter." And so on. "Our reporter makes voyage with the murderer. The Man in the Brown Suit. What he is really like."

The main facts were, of course, cabled to the South African papers, but I only read my own lengthy articles at a much later date! I received approval and full instructions by cable at Bulawayo. I was on the staff of the Daily Budget, and I had a private word of congratulation from Lord Nasby

himself. I was definitely accredited to hunt down the murderer, and I, and only I, knew that the murderer was not Harry Rayburn! But let the world think that it was he—best so for the present.

Twenty-four

We arrived at Bulawayo early on Saturday morning. I was disappointed in the place. It was very hot, and I hated the hotel. Also Sir Eustace was what I can only describe as thoroughly sulky. I think it was all our wooden animals that annoyed him—especially the big giraffe. It was a colossal giraffe with an impossible neck, a mild eye and a dejected tail. It had character. It had charm. A controversy was already arising as to whom it belonged to—me or Suzanne. We had each contributed a tiki to its purchase. Suzanne advanced the claims of seniority and the married state, I stuck to the position that I had been the first to behold its beauty.

In the meantime, I must admit, it occupied a good deal of this three-dimensional space of ours. To carry forty-nine wooden animals, all of awkward shape, and all of extremely brittle wood, is somewhat of a problem. Two porters were laden with a bunch of animals each—and one promptly dropped a ravishing group of ostriches and broke their heads off. Warned by this, Suzanne and I carried all we could, Colonel Race helped, and I pressed the big giraffe into Sir Eustace's arms. Even the correct Miss Pettigrew did not escape, a large hippopotamus and two black warriors fell to her share. I had a feeling Miss Pettigrew didn't like me. Perhaps she fancied I was a bold hussy. Anyway, she avoided me as much as she could. And the funny thing was, her face seemed vaguely familiar to me, though I couldn't quite place it.

We reposed ourselves most of the morning, and in the afternoon we drove out to the Matopos to see Rhodes's grave. That is to say, we were to have done so, but at the last moment Sir Eustace backed out. He was very nearly in as bad a temper as the morning we arrived at Cape Town—when he bounced the peaches on the floor and they squashed! Evidently arriving early in the morning at places is bad for his temperament. He cursed the porters, he cursed the waiter at breakfast, he cursed the whole hotel management, he would doubtless have liked to curse Miss Pettigrew, who hovered around with her pencil and pad, but I don't think even Sir Eustace would have dared to curse Miss Pettigrew. She's just like the efficient

secretary in a book. I only rescued our dear giraffe just in time. I feel Sir Eustace would have liked to dash him to the ground.

To return to our expedition, after Sir Eustace had backed out, Miss Pettigrew said she would remain at home in case he might want her. And at the very last minute Suzanne sent down a message to say she had a headache. So Colonel Race and I drove off alone.

He is a strange man. One doesn't notice it so much in a crowd. But when one is alone with him the sense of his personality seems really almost overpowering. He becomes more taciturn, and yet his silence seems to say more than speech might do.

It was so that day that we drove to the Matopos through the soft yellow-brown scrub. Everything seemed strangely silent—except our car, which I should think was the first Ford ever made by man! The upholstery of it was torn to ribbons and, though I know nothing about engines, even I could guess that all was not as it should be in its interior.

By and by the character of the country changed. Great boulders appeared, piled up into fantastic shapes. I felt suddenly that I had got into a primitive era. Just for a moment Neanderthal men seemed quite as real to me as they had to Papa. I turned to Colonel Race.

“There must have been giants once,” I said dreamily. “And their children were just like children are today—they played with handfuls of pebbles, piling them up and knocking them down, and the more cleverly they balanced them, the better pleased they were. If I were to give a name to this place I should call it The Country of Giant Children.”

“Perhaps you're nearer the mark than you know,” said Colonel Race gravely. “Simple, primitive, big—that is Africa.”

I nodded appreciatively.

“You love it, don't you?” I asked.

“Yes. But to live in it long—well, it makes one what you would call cruel. One comes to hold life and death very lightly.”

“Yes,” I said, thinking of Harry Rayburn. He had been like that too. “But not cruel to weak things?”

“Opinions differ as to what are and are not ‘weak things,’ Miss Anne.”

There was a note of seriousness in his voice which almost startled me. I felt that I knew very little really of this man at my side.

“I meant children and dogs, I think.”

“I can truthfully say I’ve never been cruel to children or dogs. So you don’t class women as ‘weak things?’ ”

I considered.

“No, I don’t think I do—though they are, I suppose. That is, they are nowadays. But Papa always said that in the beginning men and women roamed the world together, equal in strength—like lions and tigers—”

“And giraffes?” interpolated Colonel Race slyly.

I laughed. Everyone makes fun of that giraffe.

“And giraffes. They were nomadic, you see. It wasn’t till they settled down in communities, and women did one kind of thing and men another, that women got weak. And of course, underneath, one is still the same—one feels the same, I mean—and that is why women worship physical strength in men: it’s what they once had and have lost.”

“Almost ancestor worship, in fact?”

“Something of the kind.”

“And you really think that’s true? That women worship strength, I mean?”

“I think it’s quite true—if one’s honest. You think you admire moral qualities, but when you fall in love, you revert to the primitive where the physical is all that counts. But I don’t think that’s the end; if you lived in primitive conditions it would be all right, but you don’t—and so, in the end, the other thing wins after all. It’s the things that are apparently conquered that always do win, isn’t it? They win in the only way that counts. Like what the Bible says about losing your life and finding it.”

“In the end,” said Colonel Race thoughtfully, “you fall in love—and you fall out of it, is that what you mean?”

“Not exactly, but you can put it that way if you like.”

“But I don’t think you’ve ever fallen out of love, Miss Anne?”

“No, I haven’t,” I admitted frankly.

“Or fallen in love, either?”

I did not answer.

The car drew up at our destination and brought the conversation to a close. We got out and began the slow ascent to the World’s View. Not for the first time, I felt a slight discomfort in Colonel Race’s company. He veiled his thoughts so well behind those impenetrable black eyes. He frightened me a little. He had always frightened me. I never knew where I stood with him.

We climbed in silence till we reached the spot where Rhodes lies guarded by giant boulders. A strange eerie place, far from the haunts of men, that sings a ceaseless paeon of rugged beauty.

We sat there for time in silence. Then descended once more, but diverging slightly from the path. Sometimes it was a rough scramble and once we came to a sharp slope or rock that was almost sheer.

Colonel Race went first, then turned to help me.

“Better lift you,” he said suddenly, and swung me off my feet with a quick gesture.

I felt the strength of him as he set me down and released his clasp. A man of iron, with muscles like taut steel. And again I felt afraid, especially as he did not move aside, but stood directly in front of me, staring into my face.

“What are you really doing here, Anne Beddingfeld?” he said abruptly.

“I’m a gipsy seeing the world.”

“Yes, that’s true enough. The newspaper correspondent is only a pretext. You’ve not the soul of a journalist. You’re out for your own hand—snatching at life. But that’s not all.”

What was he going to make me tell him? I was afraid—afraid. I looked him full in the face. My eyes can’t keep secrets like his, but they can carry the war into the enemy’s country.

“What are you really doing here, Colonel Race?” I asked deliberately.

For a moment I thought he wasn’t going to answer. He was clearly taken aback, though. At last he spoke, and his words seemed to afford him a grim amusement.

“Pursuing ambition,” he said. “Just that—pursuing ambition. You will remember, Miss Beddingfeld, that ‘by that sin fell the angels,’ etc.”

“They say,” I said slowly, “that you are really connected with the Government—that you are in the Secret Service. Is that true?”

Was it my fancy, or did he hesitate for a fraction of a second before he answered?

“I can assure you, Miss Beddingfeld, that I am out here strictly as a private individual travelling for my own pleasure.”

Thinking the answer over later, it struck me as slightly ambiguous. Perhaps he meant it to be so.

We rejoined the car in silence. Halfway back to Bulawayo we stopped for tea at a somewhat primitive structure at the side of the road. The proprietor

was digging in the garden, and seemed annoyed at being disturbed. But he graciously promised to see what he could do. After an interminable wait, he brought us some stale cakes and some lukewarm tea. Then disappeared to his garden again.

No sooner had he departed than we were surrounded by cats, six of them all miaowing piteously at once. The racket was deafening. I offered them some pieces of cake. They devoured them ravenously. I poured all the milk there was into a saucer and they fought each other to get it.

“Oh,” I cried indignantly, “they’re starved! It’s wicked. Please, please, order some more milk and another plate of cake.”

Colonel Race departed silently to do my bidding. The cats had begun miaowing again. He returned with a big jug of milk and the cats finished it all.

I got up with determination on my face.

“I’m going to take those cats home with us—I shan’t leave them here.”

“My dear child, don’t be absurd. You can’t carry six cats as well as fifty wooden animals round with you.”

“Never mind the wooden animals. These cats are alive. I shall take them back with me.”

“You will do nothing of the kind.” I looked at him resentfully but he went on: “You think me cruel—but one can’t go through life sentimentalizing over these things. It’s no good standing out—I shan’t allow you to take them. It’s a primitive country, you know, and I’m stronger than you.”

I always know when I am beaten. I went down to the car with tears in my eyes.

“They’re probably short of food just today,” he explained consolingly. “That man’s wife has gone into Bulawayo for stores. So it will be all right. And anyway, you know, the world’s full of starving cats.”

“Don’t—don’t,” I said fiercely.

“I’m teaching you to realize life as it is. I’m teaching you to be hard and ruthless—like I am. That’s the secret of strength—and the secret of success.”

“I’d sooner be dead than hard,” I said passionately.

We got into the car and started off. I pulled myself together again slowly. Suddenly, to my intense astonishment, he took my hand in his.

“Anne,” he said gently, “I want you. Will you marry me?”

I was utterly taken aback.

“Oh, no,” I stammered. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t care for you in that way. I’ve never thought of you like that.”

“I see. Is that the only reason?”

I had to be honest. I owed it him.

“No,” I said, “it is not. You see—I—care for someone else.”

“I see,” he said again. “And was that true at the beginning—when I first saw you—on the Kilmorden?”

“No,” I whispered. “It was—since then.”

“I see,” he said for the third time, but this time there was a purposeful ring in his voice that made me turn and look at him. His face was grimmer than I had ever seen it.

“What—what do you mean?” I faltered.

He looked at me, inscrutable, dominating.

“Only—that I know now what I have to do.”

His words sent a shiver through me. There was a determination behind them that I did not understand—and it frightened me.

We neither of us said any more until we got back to the hotel. I went straight up to Suzanne. She was lying on her bed reading, and did not look in the least as though she had a headache.

“Here reposes the perfect gooseberry,” she remarked. “Alias the tactful chaperone. Why, Anne dear, what’s the matter?”

For I had burst into a flood of tears.

I told her about the cats—I felt it wasn’t fair to tell her about Colonel Race. But Suzanne is very sharp. I think she saw that there was something more behind.

“You haven’t caught a chill, have you, Anne? Sounds absurd even to suggest such things in this heat, but you keep on shivering.”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Nerves—or someone walking over my grave. I keep feeling something dreadful’s going to happen.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Suzanne, with decision. “Let’s talk of something interesting. Anne, about those diamonds—”

“What about them?”

“I’m not sure they’re safe with me. It was all right before, no one could think they’d be amongst my things. But now that everyone knows we’re such friends, you and I, I’ll be under suspicion too.”

“Nobody knows they’re in a roll of films, though,” I argued. “It’s a splendid hiding place and I really don’t think we could better it.”

She agreed doubtfully, but said we would discuss it again when we got to the Falls.

Our train went at nine o'clock. Sir Eustace's temper was still far from good, and Miss Pettigrew looked subdued. Colonel Race was completely himself. I felt that I had dreamed the whole conversation on the way back.

I slept heavily that night on my hard bunk, struggling with ill-defined, menacing dreams. I awoke with a headache and went out on the observation platform of the car. It was fresh and lovely, and everywhere, as far as one could see, were the undulating wooded hills. I loved it—loved it more than any place I had ever seen. I wished then that I could have a little hut somewhere in the heart of the scrub and live there always—always. . . .

Just before half past two, Colonel Race called me out from the "office" and pointed to a bouquet-shaped white mist that hovered over one portion of the bush.

"The spray from the Falls," he said. "We are nearly there."

I was still wrapped in that strange dream feeling of exaltation that had succeeded my troubled night. Very strongly implanted in me was the feeling that I had come home . . . Home! And yet I had never been here before—or had I in dreams?

We walked from the train to the hotel, a big white building closely wired against mosquitoes. There were no roads, no houses. We went out on the stoep and I uttered a gasp. There, half a mile away, facing us, were the Falls. I've never seen anything so grand and beautiful—I never shall.

"Anne, you're fey," said Suzanne, as we sat down to lunch. "I've never seen you like this before."

She stared at me curiously.

"Am I?" I laughed, but I felt that my laugh was unnatural. "It's just that I love it all."

"It's more than that."

A little frown crossed her brow—one of apprehension.

Yes, I was happy, but beyond that I had the curious feeling that I was waiting for something—something that would happen soon. I was excited—restless.

After tea we strolled out, got on the trolley and were pushed by smiling blacks down the little tracks of rails to the bridge.

It was a marvellous sight, the great chasm and the rushing waters below, and the veil of mist and spray in front of us that parted every now and then for one brief minute to show the cataract of water and then closed up again in its impenetrable mystery. That, to my mind, has always been the fascination of the Falls—their elusive quality. You always think you're going to see—and you never do.

We crossed the bridge and walked slowly on by the path that was marked out with white stone on either side and led round the brink of the gorge. Finally we arrived in a big clearing where on the left a path led downwards towards the chasm.

"The palm gully," explained Colonel Race. "Shall we go down? Or shall we leave it until tomorrow? It will take some time, and it's a good climb up again."

"We'll leave it until tomorrow," said Sir Eustace with decision. He isn't at all fond of strenuous physical exercise, I have noticed.

He led the way back. As we went, we passed a fine native stalking along. Behind him came a woman who seemed to have the entire household belongings piled upon her head! The collection included a frying pan.

"I never have my camera when I want it," groaned Suzanne.

"That's an opportunity that will occur often enough, Mrs. Blair," said Colonel Race. "So don't lament."

We arrived back on the bridge.

“Shall we go into the rainbow forest?” he continued. “Or are you afraid of getting wet?”

Suzanne and I accompanied him. Sir Eustace went back to the hotel. I was rather disappointed in the rainbow forest. There weren’t nearly enough rainbows, and we got soaked to the skin, but every now and then we got a glimpse of the Falls opposite and realized how enormously wide they are. Oh, dear, dear Falls, how I love and worship you and always shall!

We got back to the hotel just in time to change for dinner. Sir Eustace seems to have taken a positive antipathy to Colonel Race. Suzanne and I rallied him gently, but didn’t get much satisfaction.

After dinner he retired to his sitting room, dragging Miss Pettigrew with him. Suzanne and I talked for a while with Colonel Race, and then she declared, with an immense yawn, that she was going to bed. I didn’t want to be left alone with him, so I got up too and went to my room.

But I was far too excited to go to sleep. I did not even undress. I lay back in a chair and gave myself up to dreaming. And all the time I was conscious of something coming nearer and nearer. . . .

There was a knock at the door, and I started. I got up and went to it. A little black boy held out a note. It was addressed to me in a handwriting I did not know. I took it and came back into the room. I stood there holding it. At last I opened it. It was very short!

“I must see you. I dare not come to the hotel. Will you come to the clearing by the palm gully? In memory of Cabin 17 please come. The man you knew as Harry Rayburn.”

My heart beat to suffocation. He was here then! Oh, I had known it—I had known it all along! I had felt him near me. All unwittingly I had come to his place of retreat.

I wound a scarf round my head and stole to the door. I must be careful. He was hunted down. No one must see me meet him. I stole along to Suzanne’s room. She was fast asleep. I could hear her breathing evenly.

Sir Eustace? I paused outside the door of his sitting room. Yes, he was dictating to Miss Pettigrew, I could hear her monotonous voice repeating: “I therefore venture to suggest, that in tackling this problem of coloured labour—” She paused for him to continue, and I heard him grunt something angrily.

I stole on again. Colonel Race’s room was empty. I did not see him in the lounge. And he was the man I feared most! Still, I could waste no more time. I slipped quickly out of the hotel, and took the path to the bridge.

I crossed it and stood there waiting in the shadow. If anyone had followed me, I should see them crossing the bridge. But the minutes passed, and no one came. I had not been followed. I turned and took the path to the clearing. I took six paces or so, and then stopped. Something had rustled behind me. It could not be anyone who had followed me from the hotel. It was someone who was already here, waiting.

And immediately, without rhyme or reason, but with the sureness of instinct, I knew that it was I myself who was threatened. It was the same feeling as I had had on the Kilmorden that night—a sure instinct warning me of danger.

I looked sharply over my shoulder. Silence. I moved on a pace or two. Again I heard that rustle. Still walking, I looked over my shoulder again. A man’s figure came out of the shadow. He saw that I saw him, and jumped forward, hard on my track.

It was too dark to recognize anybody. All I could see was that he was tall, and a European, not a native. I took to my heels and ran. I heard him pounding behind. I ran quicker, keeping my eyes fixed on the white stones that showed me where to step, for there was no moon that night.

And suddenly my foot felt nothingness. I heard the man behind me laugh, an evil, sinister laugh. It rang in my ears, as I fell headlong—down—down—down to destruction far beneath.

Twenty-five

I came to myself slowly and painfully. I was conscious of an aching head and a shooting pain down my left arm when I tried to move, and everything seemed dreamlike and unreal. Nightmare visions floated before me. I felt myself falling—falling again. Once Harry Rayburn's face seemed to come to me out of the mist. Almost I imagined it real. Then it floated away again, mocking me. Once, I remember, someone put a cup to my lips and I drank. A black face grinned into mine—a devil's face, I thought it, and screamed out. Then dreams again—long troubled dreams in which I vainly sought Harry Rayburn to warn him—warn him—what of? I did not know myself. But there was some danger—some great danger—and I alone could save him. Then darkness again, merciful darkness and real sleep.

I woke at last myself again. The long nightmare was over. I remembered perfectly everything that had happened: my hurried flight from the hotel to meet Harry, the man in the shadows and the last terrible moment of falling. .

..

By some miracle or other I had not been killed. I was bruised and aching, and very weak, but I was alive. But where was I? Moving my head with difficulty I looked round me. I was in a small room with rough wooden walls. On them were huge skins of animals and various tusks of ivory. I was lying on a kind of rough couch, also covered with skins, and my left arm was bandaged up and felt stiff and uncomfortable. At first I thought I was alone, and then I saw a man's figure sitting between me and the light, his head turned towards the window. He was so still that he might have been carved out of wood. Something in the close-cropped black head was familiar to me, but I did not dare to let my imagination run astray. Suddenly he turned, and I caught my breath. It was Harry Rayburn. Harry Rayburn in the flesh.

He rose and came over to me.

“Feeling better?” he said a trifle awkwardly.

I could not answer. The tears were running down my face. I was weak still, but I held his hand in both of mine. If only I could die like this, whilst he stood there looking down on me with that new look in his eyes.

“Don’t cry, Anne. Please don’t cry. You’re safe now. No one shall hurt you.”

He went and fetched a cup and brought it to me.

“Drink some of this milk.”

I drank obediently. He went on talking, in a low coaxing tone such as he might have used to a child.

“Don’t ask any more questions now. Go to sleep again. You’ll be stronger by and by. I’ll go away if you like.”

“No,” I said urgently. “No, no.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

He brought a small stool over beside me and sat there. He laid his hand over mine, and, soothed and comforted, I dropped off to sleep once more.

It must have been evening then, but when I woke again the sun was high in the heavens. I was alone in the hut, but as I stirred an old native woman came running in. She was hideous as sin, but she grinned at me encouragingly. She brought me water in a basin and helped me wash my face and hands. Then she brought me a large bowl of soup, and I finished it every drop! I asked her several questions, but she only grinned and nodded and chattered away in a guttural language, so I gathered she knew no English.

Suddenly she stood up and drew back respectfully as Harry Rayburn entered. He gave her a nod of dismissal and she went out leaving us alone. He smiled at me.

“Really better today!”

“Yes, indeed, but very bewildered still. Where am I?”

“You’re on a small island on the Zambesi about four miles up from the Falls.”

“Do—do my friends know I’m here?”

He shook his head.

“I must send word to them.”

“That is as you like, of course, but if I were you I should wait until you are a little stronger.”

“Why?”

He did not answer immediately, so I went on:

“How long have I been here?”

His answer amazed me.

“Nearly a month.”

“Oh!” I cried. “I must send word to Suzanne. She’ll be terribly anxious.”

“Who is Suzanne?”

“Mrs. Blair. I was with her and Sir Eustace and Colonel Race at the hotel—but you knew that, surely?”

He shook his head.

“I know nothing, except that I found you, caught in the fork of a tree, unconscious and with a badly wrenched arm.”

“Where was the tree?”

“Overhanging the ravine. But for your clothes catching on the branches, you would certainly have been dashed to pieces.”

I shuddered. Then a thought struck me.

“You say you didn’t know I was there. What about the note then?”

“What note?”

“The note you sent me, asking me to meet you in the clearing.”

He stared at me.

“I sent no note.”

I felt myself flushing up to the roots of my hair. Fortunately he did not seem to notice.

“How did you come to be on the spot in such a marvellous manner?” I asked, in as nonchalant a manner as I could assume. “And what are you doing in this part of the world, anyway?”

“I live here,” he said simply.

“On this island?”

“Yes, I came here after the War. Sometimes I take parties from the hotel out in my boat, but it costs me very little to live, and mostly I do as I please.”

“You live here all alone?”

“I am not pining for society, I assure you,” he replied coldly.

“I am sorry to have inflicted mine upon you,” I retorted, “but I seem to have had very little to say in the matter.”

To my surprise, his eyes twinkled a little.

“None whatever. I slung you across my shoulders like a sack of coal and carried you to my boat. Quite like a primitive man of the Stone Age.”

“But for a different reason,” I put in.

He flushed this time, a deep burning blush. The tan of his face was suffused.

“But you haven’t told me how you came to be wandering about so conveniently for me?” I said hastily, to cover his confusion.

“I couldn’t sleep. I was restless—disturbed—had the feeling something was going to happen. In the end I took the boat and came ashore and tramped down towards the Falls. I was just at the head of the palm gully when I heard you scream.”

“Why didn’t you get help from the hotel instead of carting me all the way here?” I asked.

He flushed again.

“I suppose it seems an unpardonable liberty to you—but I don’t think that even now you realize your danger! You think I should have informed your friends? Pretty friends, who allowed you to be decoyed out to death. No, I swore to myself that I’d take better care of you than anyone else could. Not a soul comes to this island. I got old Batani, whom I cured of a fever once, to come and look after you. She’s loyal. She’ll never say a word. I could keep you here for months and no one would ever know.”

I could keep you here for months and no one would ever know! How some words please one!

“You did quite right,” I said quietly. “And I shall not send word to anyone. A day or so more anxiety doesn’t make much difference. It’s not as though they were my own people. They’re only acquaintances really—even Suzanne. And whoever wrote that note must have known—a great deal! It was not the work of an outsider.”

I managed to mention the note this time without blushing at all.

“If you would be guided by me—” he said, hesitating.

“I don’t expect I shall be,” I answered candidly. “But there’s no harm in hearing.”

“Do you always do what you like, Miss Beddingfeld?”

“Usually,” I replied cautiously. To anyone else I would have said “Always.”

“I pity your husband,” he said unexpectedly.

“You needn’t,” I retorted. “I shouldn’t dream of marrying anyone unless I was madly in love with him. And of course there is really nothing a woman enjoys so much as doing all the things she doesn’t like for the sake of someone she does like. And the more self-willed she is, the more she likes it.”

“I’m afraid I disagree with you. The boot is on the other leg as a rule.” He spoke with a slight sneer.

“Exactly,” I cried eagerly. “And that’s why there are so many unhappy marriages. It’s all the fault of the men. Either they give way to their women—and then the women despise them—or else they are utterly selfish, insist on their own way and never say ‘thank you.’ Successful husbands make their wives do just what they want, and then make a frightful fuss of them for doing it. Women like to be mastered, but they hate not to have their sacrifices appreciated. On the other hand, men don’t really appreciate women who are nice to them all the time. When I am married, I shall be a devil most of the time, but every now and then, when my husband least expects it, I shall show him what a perfect angel I can be.”

Harry laughed outright.

“What a cat-and-dog life you will lead!”

“Lovers always fight,” I assured him. “Because they don’t understand each other. And by the time they do understand each other they aren’t in love any

more.”

“Does the reverse hold true? Are people who fight each other always lovers?”

“I—I don’t know,” I said, momentarily confused.

He turned away to the fireplace.

“Like some more soup?” he asked in a casual tone.

“Yes, please. I’m so hungry that I would eat a hippopotamus.”

“That’s good.”

He busied himself with the fire, I watched.

“When I can get off the couch, I’ll cook for you,” I promised.

“I don’t suppose you know anything about cooking.”

“I can warm up things out of tins as well as you can,” I retorted, pointing to a row of tins on the mantelpiece.

“Touché,” he said and laughed.

His whole face changed when he laughed. It became boyish, happy—a different personality.

I enjoyed my soup. As I ate it I reminded him that he had not, after all, tendered me his advice.

“Ah, yes, what I was going to say was this. If I were you I would stay quietly perdu here until you are quite strong again. Your enemies will believe you dead. They will hardly be surprised at not finding the body. It would have been dashed to pieces on the rocks and carried down with the torrent.”

I shivered.

“Once you are completely restored to health, you can journey quietly on to Beira and get a boat to take you back to England.”

“That would be very tame,” I objected scornfully.

“There speaks a foolish schoolgirl.”

“I’m not a foolish schoolgirl,” I cried indignantly. “I’m a woman.”

He looked at me with an expression I could not fathom, as I sat up flushed and excited.

“God help me, so you are,” he muttered and went abruptly out.

My recovery was rapid. The two injuries I had sustained were a knock on the head and a badly wrenched arm. The latter was the most serious and, to begin with, my rescuer had believed it to be actually broken. A careful examination, however, convinced him that it was not so, and although it was very painful I was recovering the use of it quite quickly.

It was a strange time. We were cut off from the world, alone together as Adam and Eve might have been—but with what a difference! Old Batani hovered about, counting no more than a dog might have done. I insisted on doing the cooking, or as much of it as I could manage with one arm. Harry was out a good part of the time, but we spent long hours together lying out in the shade of the palms, talking and quarrelling—discussing everything under high heaven, quarrelling and making it up again. We bickered a good deal, but there grew up between us a real and lasting comradeship such as I could never have believed possible. That—and something else.

The time was drawing near, I knew it, when I should be well enough to leave, and I realized it with a heavy heart. Was he going to let me go? Without a word? Without a sign? He had fits of silence, long moody intervals, moments when he would spring up and tramp off by himself. One evening the crisis came. We had finished our simple meal and were sitting in the doorway of the hut. The sun was sinking.

Hairpins were necessities of life with which Harry had not been able to provide me, and my hair, straight and black, hung to my knees. I sat, my chin on my hands, lost in meditation. I felt rather than saw Harry looking at me.

“You look like a witch, Anne,” he said at last, and there was something in his voice that had never been there before.

He reached out his hand and just touched my hair. I shivered. Suddenly he sprang up with an oath.

“You must leave here tomorrow, do you hear?” he cried. “I—I can’t bear any more. I’m only a man after all. You must go, Anne. You must. You’re not a fool. You know yourself that this can’t go on.”

“I suppose not,” I said slowly. “But—it’s been happy, hasn’t it?”

“Happy? It’s been hell!”

“As bad as that!”

“What do you torment me for? Why are you mocking at me? Why do you say that—laughing into your hair?”

“I wasn’t laughing. And I’m not mocking. If you want me to go, I’ll go. But if you want me to stay—I’ll stay.”

“Not that!” he cried vehemently. “Not that. Don’t tempt me, Anne. Do you realize what I am? A criminal twice over. A man hunted down. They know me here as Harry Parker—they think I’ve been away on a trek up country, but any day they may put two and two together—and then the blow will fall. You’re so young, Anne, and so beautiful—with the kind of beauty that sends men mad. All the world’s before you—love, life, everything. Mine’s behind me—scorched, spoiled, with a taste of bitter ashes.”

“If you don’t want me—”

“You know I want you. You know that I’d give my soul to pick you up in my arms and keep you here, hidden away from the world, forever and ever.

And you're tempting me, Anne. You, with your long witch's hair, and your eyes that are golden and brown and green and never stop laughing even when your mouth is grave. But I'll save you from yourself and from me. You shall go tonight. You shall go to Beira—"

"I'm not going to Beira," I interrupted.

"You are. You shall go to Beira if I have to take you there myself and throw you on to the boat. What do you think I'm made of ? Do you think I'll wake up night after night, fearing they've got you? One can't go on counting on miracles happening. You must go back to England, Anne—and—and marry and be happy."

"With a steady man who'll give me a good home!"

"Better that than—utter disaster."

"And what of you?"

His face grew grim and set.

"I've got my work ready to hand. Don't ask what it is. You can guess, I dare say. But I'll tell you this—I'll clear my name, or die in the attempt, and I'll choke the life out of the damned scoundrel who did his best to murder you the other night."

"We must be fair," I said. "He didn't actually push me over."

"He'd no need to. His plan was cleverer than that. I went up to the path afterwards. Everything looked all right, but by the marks on the ground I saw that the stones which outline the path had been taken up and put down again in a slightly different place. There are tall bushes growing just over the edge. He'd balanced the outside stones on them, so that you'd think you were still on the path when in reality you were stepping into nothingness. God help him if I lay my hands upon him!"

He paused a minute and then said, in a totally different tone:

“We’ve never spoken of these things, Anne, have we? But the time’s come. I want you to hear the whole story—from the beginning.”

“If it hurts you to go over the past, don’t tell me,” I said in a low voice.

“But I want you to know. I never thought I should speak of that part of my life to anyone. Funny, isn’t it, the tricks Fate plays?”

He was silent for a minute or two. The sun had set, and the velvety darkness of the African night was enveloping us like a mantle.

“Some of it I know,” I said gently.

“What do you know?”

“I know that your real name is Harry Lucas.”

Still he hesitated—not looking at me, but staring straight out in front of him. I had no clue as to what was passing in his mind, but at last he jerked his head forward as though acquiescing in some unspoken decision of his own, and began his story.

Twenty-six

“You are right. My real name is Harry Lucas. My father was a retired soldier who came out to farm in Rhodesia. He died when I was in my second year at Cambridge.”

“Were you fond of him?” I asked suddenly.

“I—don’t know.”

Then he flushed and went on with sudden vehemence:

“Why do I say that? I did love my father. We said bitter things to each other the last time I saw him, and we had many rows over my wildness and my debts, but I cared for the old man. I know how much now—when it’s too late,” he continued more quietly. “It was at Cambridge that I met the other fellow—”

“Young Eardsley?”

“Yes—young Eardsley. His father, as you know, was one of South Africa’s most prominent men. We drifted together at once, my friend and I. We had our love of South Africa in common and we both had a taste for the untrodden places of the world. After he left Cambridge, Eardsley had a final quarrel with his father. The old man had paid his debts twice, he refused to do so again. There was a bitter scene between them. Sir Laurence declared himself at the end of his patience—he would do no more for his son. He must stand on his own legs for a while. The result was, as you know, that those two young men went off to South America together, prospecting for diamonds. I’m not going into that now, but we had a wonderful time out there. Hardships in plenty, you understand, but it was a good life—a hand-to-mouth scramble for existence far from the beaten track—and, my God that’s the place to know a friend. There was a bond forged between us two out there that only death could have broken. Well, as Colonel Race told you, our efforts were crowned with success. We found a second Kimberley in the

heart of the British Guiana jungles. I can't tell you our elation. It wasn't so much the actual value in money of the find—you see, Eardsley was used to money, and he knew that when his father died he would be a millionaire, and Lucas had always been poor and was used to it. No, it was the sheer delight of discovery."

He paused, and then added, almost apologetically.

"You don't mind my telling it this way, do you? As though I wasn't in it at all. It seems like that now when I look back and see those two boys. I almost forget that one of them was—Harry Rayburn."

"Tell it any way you like," I said, and he went on:

"We came to Kimberley—very cock-a-hoop over our find. We brought a magnificent selection of diamonds with us to submit to the experts. And then—in the hotel at Kimberley—we met her—"

I stiffened a little, and the hand that rested on the doorpost clenched itself involuntarily.

"Anita Grünberg—that was her name. She was an actress. Quite young and very beautiful. She was South African born, but her mother was a Hungarian, I believe. There was some sort of mystery about her, and that, of course, heightened her attraction for two boys home from the wilds. She must have had an easy task. We both fell for her right away, and we both took it hard. It was the first shadow that had ever come between us—but even then it didn't weaken our friendship. Each of us, I honestly believe, was willing to stand aside for the other to go in and win. But that wasn't her game. Sometimes, afterwards, I wondered why it hadn't been, for Sir Laurence Eardsley's only son was quite a parti. But the truth of it was that she was married—to a sorter in De Beers—though nobody knew of it. She pretended enormous interest in our discovery, and we told her all about it and even showed her the diamonds. Delilah—that's what she should have been called—and she played her part well!

"The De Beers robbery was discovered, and like a thunderclap the police came down upon us. They seized our diamonds. We only laughed at first—

the whole thing was so absurd. And then the diamonds were produced in court—and without question they were the stones stolen from De Beers. Anita Grünberg had disappeared. She had effected the substitution neatly enough, and our story that these were not the stones originally in our possession was laughed to scorn.

“Sir Laurence Eardsley had enormous influence. He succeeded in getting the case dismissed—but it left two young men ruined and disgraced to face the world with the stigma of thief attached to their name, and it pretty well broke the old fellow’s heart. He had one bitter interview with his son in which he heaped upon him every reproach imaginable. He had done what he could to save the family name, but from that day on his son was his son no longer. He cast him off utterly. And the boy, like the proud young fool that he was, remained silent, disdaining to protest his innocence in the face of his father’s disbelief. He came out furious from the interview—his friend was waiting for him. A week later, war was declared. The two friends enlisted together. You know what happened. The best pal a man ever had was killed, partly through his own mad recklessness in rushing into unnecessary danger. He died with his name tarnished. . . .

“I swear to you, Anne, that it was mainly on his account that I was so bitter against that woman. It had gone deeper with him than with me. I had been madly in love with her for the moment—I even think that I frightened her sometimes—but with him it was a quieter and deeper feeling. She had been the very centre of his universe—and her betrayal of him tore up the very roots of life. The blow stunned him and left him paralysed.”

Harry paused. After a minute or two he went on:

“As you know, I was reported ‘Missing, presumed killed.’ I never troubled to correct the mistake. I took the name of Parker and came to this island, which I knew of old. At the beginning of the War I had had ambitious hopes of proving my innocence, but now all that spirit seemed dead. All I felt was, ‘What’s the good?’ My pal was dead, neither he nor I had any living relations who would care. I was supposed to be dead too; let it remain at that. I led a peaceful existence here, neither happy nor unhappy—numbed of all feeling. I see now, though I did not realize it at the time, that that was partly the effect of the War.

“And then one day something occurred to wake me right up again. I was taking a party of people in my boat on a trip up the river, and I was standing at the landing stage, helping them in, when one of the men uttered a startled exclamation. It focused my attention on him. He was a small, thin man with a beard, and he was staring at me for all he was worth as though I was a ghost. So powerful was his emotion that it awakened my curiosity. I made inquiries about him at the hotel and learned that his name was Carton, that he came from Kimberley, and that he was a diamond-sorter employed by De Beers. In a minute all the old sense of wrong surged over me again. I left the island and went to Kimberley.

“I could find out little more about him, however. In the end, I decided that I must force an interview. I took my revolver with me. In the brief glimpse I had had of him, I had realized that he was a physical coward. No sooner were we face to face than I recognized that he was afraid of me. I soon forced him to tell me all he knew. He had engineered part of the robbery and Anita Grünberg was his wife. He had once caught sight of both of us when we were dining with her at the hotel, and, having read that I was killed, my appearance in the flesh at the Falls had startled him badly. He and Anita had married quite young, but she had soon drifted away from him. She had got in with a bad lot, he told me—and it was then for the first time that I heard of the ‘Colonel.’ Carton himself had never been mixed up in anything except this one affair—so he solemnly assured me, and I was inclined to believe him. He was emphatically not of the stuff of which successful criminals are made.

“I still had the feeling that he was keeping back something. As a test, I threatened to shoot him there and then, declaring that I cared very little what became of me now. In a frenzy of terror he poured out a further story. It seems that Anita Grünberg did not quite trust the ‘Colonel.’ Whilst pretending to hand over to him the stones she had taken from the hotel, she kept back some in her own possession. Carton advised her, with his technical knowledge, which to keep. If, at any time, these stones were produced, they were of such colour and quality as to be readily identifiable, and the experts at De Beers would admit at once that these stones had never passed through their hands. In this way, my story of a substitution would be supported, my name would be cleared, and suspicion would be diverted to

the proper quarter. I gathered that, contrary to his usual practice, the ‘Colonel’ himself had been concerned in this affair, therefore Anita felt satisfied that she had a real hold over him, should she need it. Carton now proposed that I should make a bargain with Anita Grünberg, or Nadina, as she now called herself. For a sufficient sum of money, he thought that she would be willing to give up the diamonds and betray her former employer. He would cable to her immediately.

“I was still suspicious of Carton. He was a man whom it was easy enough to frighten, but who, in his fright, would tell so many lies that to sift the truth out from them would be no easy job. I went back to the hotel and waited. By the following evening I judged that he would have received the reply to his cable. I called round to his house and was told that Mr. Carton was away, but would be returning on the morrow. Instantly I became suspicious. In the nick of time I found out that he was in reality sailing for England on the Kilmorden Castle, which left Cape Town in two days’ time. I had just time to journey down and catch the same boat.

“I had no intention of alarming Carton by revealing my presence on board. I had done a good deal of acting in my time at Cambridge, and it was comparatively easy for me to transform myself into a grave bearded gentleman of middle age. I avoided Carton carefully on board the boat, keeping to my own cabin as far as possible under the pretence of illness.

“I had no difficulty in trailing him when we got to London. He went straight to an hotel and did not go out until the following day. He left the hotel shortly before one o’clock. I was behind him. He went straight to a house agent in Knightsbridge. There he asked for particulars of houses to let on the river.

“I was at the next table also inquiring about houses. Then suddenly I walked Anita Grünberg, Nadina—whatever you like to call her. Superb, insolent, and almost as beautiful as ever. God! how I hated her. There she was, the woman who had ruined my life—and who had also ruined a better life than mine. At that minute I could have put my hands round her neck and squeezed the life out of her inch by inch! Just for a minute or two I saw red. I hardly took in what the agent was saying. It was her voice that I heard next, high and clear, with an exaggerated foreign accent: ‘The Mill House,

Marlow. The property of Sir Eustace Pedler. That sounds as though it might suit me. At any rate, I will go and see it.”

“The man wrote her an order, and she walked out again in her regal insolent manner. Not by word or a sign had she recognized Carton, yet I was sure that their meeting there was a preconceived plan. Then I started to jump to conclusions. Not knowing that Sir Eustace was at Cannes, I thought that this house-hunting business was a mere pretext for meeting him in the Mill House. I knew that he had been in South Africa at the time of the robbery, and never having seen him I immediately leaped to the conclusion that he himself was the mysterious ‘Colonel’ of whom I had heard so much.

“I followed my two suspects along Knightsbridge. Nadina went into the Hyde Park Hotel. I quickened my pace and went in also. She walked straight into the restaurant, and I decided that I would not risk her recognizing me at the moment, but would continue to follow Carton. I was in great hopes that he was going to get the diamonds, and that by suddenly appearing and making myself known to him when he least expected it I might startle the truth out of him. I followed him down into the Tube station at Hyde Park Corner. He was standing by himself at the end of the platform. There was some girl standing near, but no one else. I decided that I would accost him then and there. You know what happened. In the sudden shock of seeing a man whom he imagined far away in South Africa, he lost his head and stepped back upon the line. He was always a coward. Under the pretext of being a doctor, I managed to search his pockets. There was a wallet with some notes in it and one or two unimportant letters, there was a roll of films—which I must have dropped somewhere later—and there was a piece of paper with an appointment made on it for the 22nd on the Kilmorden Castle. In my haste to get away before anyone detained me, I dropped that also, but fortunately I remembered the figures.

“I hurried to the nearest cloak room and hastily removed my makeup. I did not want to be laid by the heels for picking a dead man’s pocket. Then I retraced my steps to the Hyde Park Hotel. Nadina was still having lunch. I needn’t describe in detail how I followed her down to Marlow. She went into the house, and I spoke to the woman at the lodge, pretending that I was with her. Then I, too, went in.

He stopped. There was a tense silence.

“You will believe me, Anne, won’t you? I swear before God that what I am going to say is true. I went into the house after her with something very like murder in my heart—and she was dead! I found her in that first-floor room—God! It was horrible. Dead—and I was not more than three minutes behind her. And there was no sign of anyone else in the house! Of course I realized at once the terrible position I was in. By one masterstroke the blackmailed had rid himself of the blackmailer, and at the same time had provided a victim to whom the crime would be ascribed. The hand of the ‘Colonel’ was very plain. For the second time I was to be his victim. Fool that I had been to walk into the trap so easily!

“I hardly know what I did next. I managed to go out of the place looking fairly normal, but I knew that it could not be long before the crime was discovered and a description of my appearance telegraphed all over the country.

“I lay low for some days, not daring to make a move. In the end, chance came to my aid. I overheard a conversation between two middle-aged gentlemen in the street, one of whom proved to be Sir Eustace Pedler. I at once conceived the idea of attaching myself to him as his secretary. The fragment of conversation I had overheard gave me my clue. I was now no longer so sure that Sir Eustace Pedler was the ‘Colonel.’ His house might have been appointed as a rendezvous by accident, or for some obscure motive that I had not fathomed.”

“Do you know,” I interrupted, “that Guy Pagett was in Marlow at the date of the murder?”

“That settles it then. I thought he was at Cannes with Sir Eustace.”

“He was supposed to be in Florence—but he certainly never went there. I’m pretty certain he was really in Marlow, but of course I can’t prove it.”

“And to think I never suspected Pagett for a minute until the night he tried to throw you overboard. The man’s a marvellous actor.”

“Yes, isn’t he?”

“That explains why the Mill House was chosen. Pagett could probably get in and out of it unobserved. Of course he made no objection to my accompanying Sir Eustace across in the boat. He didn’t want me laid by the heels immediately. You see, evidently Nadina didn’t bring the jewels with her to the rendezvous, as they had counted on her doing. I fancy that Carton really had them and concealed them somewhere on the Kilmorden Castle—that’s where he came in. They hoped that I might have some clue as to where they were hidden. As long as the ‘Colonel’ did not recover the diamonds, he was still in danger—hence his anxiety to get them at all costs. Where the devil Carton hid them—if he did hide them—I don’t know.”

“That’s another story,” I quoted. “My story. And I’m going to tell it to you now.”

Twenty-seven

Harry listened attentively whilst I recounted all the events that I have narrated in these pages. The thing that bewildered and astonished him most was to find that all along the diamonds had been in my possession—or rather in Suzanne's. That was a fact he had never suspected. Of course, after hearing his story, I realized the point of Carton's little arrangement—or rather Nadina's, since I had no doubt that it was her brain which had conceived the plan. No surprise tactics executed against her or her husband could result in the seizure of the diamonds. The secret was locked in her own brain, and the "Colonel" was not likely to guess that they had been entrusted to the keeping of an ocean steward!

Harry's vindication from the old charge of theft seemed assured. It was the other graver charge that paralysed all our activities. For, as things stood, he could not come out in the open to prove his case.

The one thing we came back to, again and again, was the identity of the "Colonel." Was he, or was he not, Guy Pagett?

"I should say he was but for one thing," said Harry. "It seems pretty much of a certainty that it was Pagett who murdered Anita Grünberg at Marlow—and that certainly lends colour to the supposition that he is actually the 'Colonel,' since Anita's business was not of the nature to be discussed with a subordinate. No—the only thing that militates against that theory is the attempt to put you out of the way the night of your arrival here. You saw Pagett left behind at Cape Town—by no possible means could he have arrived here before the following Wednesday. He is unlikely to have any emissaries in this part of the world, and all his plans were laid to deal with you in Cape Town. He might, of course, have cabled instructions to some lieutenant of his in Johannesburg, who could have joined the Rhodesian train at Mafeking, but his instructions would have had to be particularly definite to allow of that note being written."

We sat silent for a moment, then Harry went on slowly:

“You say that Mrs. Blair was asleep when you left the hotel and that you heard Sir Eustace dictating to Miss Pettigrew? Where was Colonel Race?”

“I could not find him anywhere.”

“Had he any reason to believe that—you and I might be friendly with each other?”

“He might have had,” I answered thoughtfully, remembering our conversation on the way back from the Matopos. “He’s a very powerful personality,” I continued, “but not at all my idea of the ‘Colonel.’ And, anyway, such an idea would be absurd. He’s in the Secret Service.”

“How do we know that he is? It’s the easiest thing in the world to throw out a hint of that kind. No one contradicts it, and the rumour spreads until everyone believes it as gospel truth. It provides an excuse for all sorts of doubtful doings. Anne, do you like Race?”

“I do—and I don’t. He repels me and at the same time fascinates me; but I know one thing, I’m always a little afraid of him.”

“He was in South Africa, you know, at the time of the Kimberley robbery,” said Harry slowly.

“But it was he who told Suzanne all about the ‘Colonel’ and how he had been in Paris trying to get on his track.”

“Camouflage—of a particularly clever kind.”

“But where does Pagett come in? Is he in Race’s pay?”

“Perhaps,” said Harry slowly, “he doesn’t come in at all.”

“What?”

“Think back, Anne. Did you ever hear Pagett’s own account of that night on the Kilmorden?”

“Yes—through Sir Eustace.”

I repeated it. Harry listened closely.

“He saw a man coming from the direction of Sir Eustace’s cabin and followed him up on deck. Is that what he says? Now, who had the cabin opposite to Sir Eustace? Colonel Race. Supposing Colonel Race crept up on deck, and, foiled in his attack on you, fled round the deck and met Pagett just coming through the saloon door. He knocks him down and springs inside, closing the door. We dash round and find Pagett lying there. How’s that?”

“You forget that he declares positively it was you who knocked him down.”

“Well, suppose that just as he regains consciousness he sees me disappearing in the distance? Wouldn’t he take it for granted that I was his assailant? Especially as he thought all along it was I he was following?”

“It’s possible, yes,” I said slowly. “But it alters all our ideas. And there are other things.”

“Most of them are open to explanation. The man who followed you in Cape Town spoke to Pagett, and Pagett looked at his watch. The man might have merely asked him the time.”

“It was just a coincidence, you mean?”

“Not exactly. There’s a method in all this, connecting Pagett with the affair. Why was the Mill House chosen for the murder? Was it because Pagett had been in Kimberley when the diamonds were stolen? Would he have been made the scapegoat if I had not appeared so providentially upon the scene?”

“Then you think he may be entirely innocent?”

“It looks like it, but, if so, we’ve got to find out what he was doing in Marlow. If he’s got a reasonable explanation of that, we’re on the right track.”

He got up.

“It’s past midnight. Turn in, Anne, and get some sleep. Just before dawn I’ll take you over in the boat. You must catch the train at Livingstone. I’ve got a friend there who will keep you hidden away until the train starts. You go to Bulawayo and catch the Beira train there. I can find out from my friend in Livingstone what’s going on at the hotel and where your friends are now.”

“Beira,” I said meditatively.

“Yes, Anne, it’s Beira for you. This is man’s work. Leave it to me.”

We had had a momentary respite from emotion whilst we talked the situation out, but it was on us again now. We did not even look at each other.

“Very well,” I said, and passed into the hut.

I lay down on the skin-covered couch, but I didn’t sleep, and outside I could hear Harry Rayburn pacing up and down, up and down through the long dark hours. At last he called me:

“Come, Anne, it’s time to go.”

I got up and came out obediently. It was still quite dark, but I knew that dawn was not far off.

“We’ll take the canoe, not the motorboat—” Harry began, when suddenly he stopped dead and held up his hand.

“Hush! What’s that?”

I listened, but could hear nothing. His ears were sharper than mine, however, the ears of a man who has lived long in the wilderness. Presently I heard it too—the faint splash of paddles in the water coming from the direction of the right bank of the river and rapidly approaching our little landing stage.

We strained our eyes in the darkness, and could make out a dark blur on the surface of the water. It was a boat. Then there was a momentary spurt of

flame. Someone had struck a match. By its light I recognized one figure, the red-bearded Dutchman of the villa at Muizenberg. The others were natives.

“Quick—back to the hut.”

Harry swept me back with him. He took down a couple of rifles and a revolver from the wall.

“Can you load a rifle?”

“I never have. Show me how.”

I grasped his instructions well enough. We closed the door and Harry stood by the window which overlooked the landing stage. The boat was just about to run alongside it.

“Who’s that?” called out Harry, in a ringing voice.

Any doubt we might have had as to our visitors’ intentions was swiftly resolved. A hail of bullets splattered round us. Fortunately neither of us was hit. Harry raised the rifle. It spat murderously, and again and again. I heard two groans and a splash.

“That’s given ’em something to think about,” he muttered grimly, as he reached for the second rifle. “Stand well back, Anne, for God’s sake. And load quickly.”

More bullets. One just grazed Harry’s cheek. His answering fire was more deadly than theirs. I had the rifle reloaded when he turned for it. He caught me close with his left arm and kissed me once savagely before he turned to the window again. Suddenly he uttered a shout.

“They’re going—had enough of it. They’re a good mark out there on the water, and they can’t see how many of us there are. They’re routed for the moment—but they’ll come back. We’ll have to get ready for them.” He flung down the rifle and turned to me.

“Anne! You beauty! You wonder! You little queen! As brave as a lion. Black-haired witch!”

He caught me in his arms. He kissed my hair, my eyes, my mouth.

“And now to business,” he said, suddenly releasing me. “Get out those tins of paraffin.”

I did as I was told. He was busy inside the hut. Presently I saw him on the roof of the hut, crawling along with something in his arms. He rejoined me in a minute or two.

“Go down to the boat. We’ll have to carry it across the island to the other side.”

He picked up the paraffin as I disappeared.

“They’re coming back,” I called softly. I had seen the blur moving out from the opposite shore.

He ran down to me.

“Just in time. Why—where the hell’s the boat?”

Both had been cut adrift. Harry whistled softly.

“We’re in a tight place, honey. Mind?”

“Not with you.”

“Ah, but dying together’s not much fun. We’ll do better than that. See—they’ve got two boatloads this time. Going to land at two different points. Now for my little scenic effect.”

Almost as he spoke a long flame shot up from the hut. Its light illuminated two crouching figures huddled together on the roof.

“My old clothes—stuffed with rags—but they won’t tumble to it for some time. Come, Anne, we’ve got to try desperate means.”

Hand in hand, we raced across the island. Only a narrow channel of water divided it from the shore on that side.

“We’ve got to swim for it. Can you swim at all, Anne? Not that it matters. I can get you across. It’s the wrong side for a boat—too many rocks, but the right side for swimming, and the right side for Livingstone.”

“I can swim a little—further than that. What’s the danger, Harry?” For I had seen the grim look on his face. “Sharks?”

“No, you little goose. Sharks live in the sea. But you’re sharp, Anne. Crocs, that’s the trouble.”

“Crocodiles?”

“Yes, don’t think of them—or say your prayers, whichever you feel inclined.”

We plunged in. My prayers must have been efficacious, for we reached the shore without adventure, and drew ourselves up wet and dripping on the bank.

“Now for Livingstone. It’s rough going, I’m afraid, and wet clothes won’t make it any better. But it’s got to be done.”

That walk was a nightmare. My wet skirts flapped round my legs, and my stockings were soon torn off by the thorns. Finally, I stopped, utterly exhausted. Harry came back to me.

“Hold up, honey. I’ll carry you for a bit.”

That was the way I came into Livingstone, slung across his shoulder like a sack of coals. How he did it for all that way, I don’t know. The first faint light of dawn was just breaking. Harry’s friend was a young man of twenty years old who kept a store of native curios. His name was Ned—perhaps he had another, but I never heard it. He didn’t seem in the least surprised to see Harry walk in, dripping wet, holding an equally dripping female by the hand. Men are very wonderful.

He gave us food to eat, and hot coffee, and got our clothes dried for us whilst we rolled ourselves in Manchester blankets of gaudy hue. In the tiny

back room of the hut we were safe from observation whilst he departed to make judicious inquiries as to what had become of Sir Eustace's party, and whether any of them were still at the hotel.

It was then that I informed Harry that nothing would induce me to go to Beira. I never meant to, anyway, but now all reason for such proceedings had vanished. The point of the plan had been that my enemies believed me dead. Now that they knew I wasn't dead, my going to Beira would do no good whatever. They could easily follow me there and murder me quietly. I should have no one to protect me. It was finally arranged that I should join Suzanne, wherever she was, and devote all my energies to taking care of myself. On no account was I to seek adventures or endeavour to checkmate the "Colonel."

I was to remain quietly with her and await instructions from Harry. The diamonds were to be deposited in the Bank at Kimberley under the name of Parker.

"There's one thing," I said thoughtfully, "we ought to have a code of some kind. We don't want to be hoodwinked again by messages purporting to come from one to the other."

"That's easy enough. Any message that comes genuinely from me will have the word 'and' crossed out in it."

"Without trademark, none genuine," I murmured. "What about wires?"

"Any wires from me will be signed 'Andy.' "

"Train will be in before long, Harry," said Ned, putting his head in, and withdrawing it immediately.

I stood up.

"And shall I marry a nice steady man if I find one?" I asked demurely.

Harry came close to me.

“My God! Anne, if you ever marry anyone else but me, I’ll wring his neck. And as for you—”

“Yes,” I said, pleasurably excited.

“I shall carry you away and beat you black and blue!”

“What a delightful husband I have chosen!” I said satirically. “And doesn’t he change his mind overnight!”

Twenty-eight

(Extract from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler)

As I remarked once before, I am essentially a man of peace. I yearn for a quiet life—and that's just the one thing I don't seem able to have. I am always in the middle of storms and alarms. The relief of getting away from Pagett with his incessant nosing out of intrigues was enormous, and Miss Pettigrew is certainly a useful creature. Although there is nothing of the houri about her, one or two of her accomplishments are invaluable. It is true that I had a touch of liver at Bulawayo and behaved like a bear in consequence, but I had had a disturbed night in the train. At 3 am an exquisitely dressed young man looking like a musical-comedy hero of the Wild West entered my compartment and asked where I was going. Disregarding my first murmur of "Tea—and for God's sake don't put sugar in it," he repeated his question, laying stress on the fact that he was not a waiter but an Immigration officer. I finally succeeded in satisfying him that I was suffering from no infectious disease, that I was visiting Rhodesia from the purest of motives, and further gratified him with my full Christian names and my place of birth. I then endeavoured to snatch a little sleep, but some officious ass aroused me at 5:30 with a cup of liquid sugar which he called tea. I don't think I threw it at him, but I know that that was what I wanted to do. He brought me unsugared tea, stone cold, at 6, and I then fell asleep utterly exhausted, to awaken just outside Bulawayo and be landed with a beastly wooden giraffe, all legs and neck!

But for these small contretemps, all had been going smoothly. And then fresh calamity befell.

It was the night of our arrival at the Falls. I was dictating to Miss Pettigrew in my sitting room, when suddenly Mrs. Blair burst in without a word of excuse and wearing most compromising attire.

"Where's Anne?" she cried.

A nice question to ask. As though I were responsible for the girl. What did she expect Miss Pettigrew to think? That I was in the habit of producing Anne Beddingfeld from my pocket at midnight or thereabouts? Very compromising for a man in my position.

“I presume,” I said coldly, “that she is in her bed.”

I cleared my throat and glanced at Miss Pettigrew, to show that I was ready to resume dictating. I hoped Mrs. Blair would take the hint. She did nothing of the kind. Instead she sank into a chair, and waved a slippered foot in an agitated manner.

“She’s not in her room. I’ve been there. I had a dream—a terrible dream—that she was in some awful danger, and I got up and went to her room, just to reassure myself, you know. She wasn’t there and her bed hadn’t been slept in.”

She looked at me appealingly.

“What shall I do, Sir Eustace?”

Repressing the desire to reply, “Go to bed, and don’t worry over nothing. An able-bodied young woman like Anne Beddingfeld is perfectly well able to take care of herself,” I frowned judicially.

“What does Race say about it?”

Why should Race have it all his own way? Let him have some of the disadvantages as well as the advantages of female society.

“I can’t find him anywhere.”

She was evidently making a night of it. I sighed, and sat down in a chair.

“I don’t quite see the reason for your agitation,” I said patiently.

“My dream—”

“That curry we had for dinner!”

“Oh, Sir Eustace!”

The woman was quite indignant. And yet everybody knows that nightmares are a direct result of injudicious eating.

“After all,” I continued persuasively, “why shouldn’t Anne Beddingfeld and Race go out for a little stroll without having the whole hotel aroused about it?”

“You think they’ve just gone out for a stroll together? But it’s after midnight?”

“One does these foolish things when one is young,” I murmured, “though Race is certainly old enough to know better.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I dare say they’ve run away to make a match of it,” I continued soothingly, though fully aware that I was making an idiotic suggestion. For, after all, at a place like this, where is there to run away to?

I don’t know how much longer I should have gone on making feeble remarks, but at that moment Race himself walked in upon us. At any rate, I had been partly right—he had been out for a stroll, but he hadn’t taken Anne with him. However, I had been quite wrong in my way of dealing with the situation. I was soon shown that. Race had the whole hotel turned upside down in three minutes. I’ve never seen a man more upset.

The thing is very extraordinary. Where did the girl go? She walked out of the hotel, fully dressed, about ten minutes past eleven, and she was never seen again. The idea of suicide seems impossible. She was one of these energetic young women who are in love with life, and have not the faintest intention of quitting it. There was no train either way until midday on the morrow, so she can’t have left the place. Then where the devil is she?

Race is almost beside himself, poor fellow. He has left no stone unturned. All the DC’s, or whatever they call themselves, for hundreds of miles round have been pressed into the service. The native trackers have run about on all

fours. Everything that can be done is being done—but no sign of Anne Beddingfeld. The accepted theory is that she walked in her sleep. There are signs on the path near the bridge which seem to show that the girl walked deliberately off the edge. If so, of course, she must have been dashed to pieces on the rocks below. Unfortunately, most of the footprints were obliterated by a party of tourists who chose to walk that way early on the Monday morning.

I don't know that it's a very satisfactory theory. In my young days, I was always told that sleepwalkers couldn't hurt themselves—that their own sixth sense took care of them. I don't think the theory satisfies Mrs. Blair either.

I can't make that woman out. Her whole attitude towards Race has changed. She watches him now like a cat a mouse, and she makes obvious efforts to bring herself to be civil to him. And they used to be such friends. Altogether she is unlike herself, nervous, hysterical, starting and jumping at the least sound. I am beginning to think that it is high time I went to Jo'burg.

A rumour came along yesterday of a mysterious island somewhere up the river, with a man and a girl on it. Race got very excited. It turned out to be all a mare's nest, however. The man had been there for years, and is well-known to the manager of the hotel. He takes parties up and down the river in the season and points out crocodiles and a stray hippopotamus or so to them. I believe that he keeps a tame one which is trained to bite pieces out of the boat on occasions. Then he fends it off with a boathook, and the party feel they have really got to the back of beyond at last. How long the girl has been there is not definitely known, but it seems pretty clear that she can't be Anne, and there is a certain delicacy in interfering in other people's affairs. If I were this young fellow, I should certainly kick Race off the island if he came asking questions about my love affairs.

Later.

It is definitely settled that I go to Jo'burg tomorrow. Race urges me to do so. Things are getting unpleasant there, by all I hear, but I might as well go before they get worse. I dare say I shall be shot by a striker, anyway. Mrs.

Blair was to have accompanied me, but at the last minute she changed her mind and decided to stay on at the Falls. It seems as though she couldn't bear to take her eyes off Race. She came to me tonight, and said, with some hesitation, that she had a favour to ask. Would I take charge of her souvenirs for her?

"Not the animals?" I asked, in lively alarm. I always felt that I should get stuck with those beastly animals sooner or later.

In the end, we effected a compromise. I took charge of two small wooden boxes for her which contained fragile articles. The animals are to be packed by the local store in vast crates and sent to Cape Town by rail, where Pagett will see to their being stored.

The people who are packing them say that they are of a particularly awkward shape (!), and that special cases will have to be made. I pointed out to Mrs. Blair that by the time she has got them home those animals will have cost her easily a pound apiece!

Pagett is straining at the leash to rejoin me in Jo'burg. I shall make an excuse of Mrs. Blair's cases to keep him in Cape Town. I have written him that he must receive the cases and see to their safe disposal, as they contain rare curios of immense value.

So all is settled, and I and Miss Pettigrew go off into the blue together. And anyone who has seen Miss Pettigrew will admit that it is perfectly respectable.

Twenty-nine

Johannesburg, March 6th.

There is something about the state of things here that is not at all healthy. To use the well-known phrase that I have so often read, we are all living on the edge of a volcano. Bands of strikers, or so-called strikers, patrol the streets and scowl at one in a murderous fashion. They are picking out the bloated capitalists ready for when the massacres begin, I suppose. You can't ride in a taxi—If you do, strikers pull you out again. And the hotels hint pleasantly that when the food gives out they will fling you out on the mat!

I met Reeves, my labour friend of the Kilmorden, last night. He has cold feet worse than any man I ever saw. He's like all the rest of these people; they make inflammatory speeches of enormous length, solely for political purposes, and then wish they hadn't. He's busy now going about and saying he didn't really do it. When I met him, he was just off to Cape Town, where he meditates making a three days' speech in Dutch, vindicating himself, and pointing out that the things he said really meant something entirely different. I am thankful that I do not have to sit in the Legislative Assembly of South Africa. The House of Commons is bad enough, but at least we have only one language, and some slight restriction as to length of speeches. When I went to the Assembly before leaving Cape Town, I listened to a grey-haired gentleman with a drooping moustache who looked exactly like the Mock Turtle in Alice in Wonderland. He dropped out his words one by one in a particularly melancholy fashion. Every now and then he galvanized himself to further efforts by ejaculating something that sounded like "Platt Skeet," uttered fortissimo and in marked contrast to the rest of his delivery. When he did this, half his audience yelled "whoof, whoof!" which is possibly Dutch for "Hear, hear," and the other half woke up with a start from the pleasant nap they had been having. I was given to understand that the gentleman had been speaking for at least three days. They must have a lot of patience in South Africa.

I have invented endless jobs to keep Pagett in Cape Town, but at last the fertility of my imagination has given out, and he joins me tomorrow in the spirit of the faithful dog who comes to die by his master's side. And I was getting on so well with my Reminiscences too! I had invented some extraordinarily witty things that the strike leaders said to me and I said to the strike leaders.

This morning I was interviewed by a Government official. He was urbane, persuasive and mysterious in turn. To begin with, he alluded to my exalted position and importance, and suggested that I should remove myself, or be removed by him, to Pretoria.

"You expect trouble, then?" I asked.

His reply was so worded as to have no meaning whatsoever, so I gathered that they were expecting serious trouble. I suggested to him that his Government were letting things go rather too far.

"There is such a thing as giving a man enough rope, and letting him hang himself, Sir Eustace."

"Oh, quite so, quite so."

"It is not the strikers themselves who are causing the trouble. There is some organization at work behind them. Arms and explosives have been pouring in, and we have made a haul of certain documents which throw a good deal of light on the methods adopted to import them. There is a regular code. Potatoes mean 'detonators,' cauliflower, 'rifles,' other vegetables stand for various explosives."

"That's very interesting," I commented.

"More than that, Sir Eustace, we have every reason to believe that the man who runs the whole show, the directing genius of the affair, is at this minute in Johannesburg."

He stared at me so hard that I began to fear that he suspected me of being the man. I broke out into a cold perspiration at the thought, and began to

regret that I had ever conceived the idea of inspecting a miniature revolution at first hand.

“No trains are running from Jo’burg to Pretoria,” he continued. “But I can arrange to send you over by private car. In case you should be stopped on the way, I can provide you with two separate passes, one issued by the Union Government, and the other stating that you are an English visitor who has nothing whatsoever to do with the Union.”

“One for your people, and one for the strikers, eh?”

“Exactly.”

The project did not appeal to me—I know what happens in a case of that kind. You get flustered and mix the things up. I should hand the wrong pass to the wrong person, and it would end in my being summarily shot by a bloodthirsty rebel, or one of the supporters of law and order whom I notice guarding the streets wearing bowler hats and smoking pipes, with rifles tucked carelessly under their arms. Besides, what should I do with myself in Pretoria? Admire the architecture of the Union buildings, and listen to the echoes of the shooting round Johannesburg? I should be penned up there God knows how long. They’ve blown up the railway line already, I hear. It isn’t even as if one could get a drink there. They put the place under martial law two days ago.

“My dear fellow,” I said, “you don’t seem to realize that I’m studying conditions on the Rand. How the devil am I going to study them from Pretoria? I appreciate your care for my safety, but don’t worry about me, I shall be all right.”

“I warn you, Sir Eustace, that the food question is already serious.”

“A little fasting will improve my figure,” I said, with a sigh.

We were interrupted by a telegram being handed to me. I read it with amazement.

“Anne is safe. Here with me at Kimberley. Suzanne Blair.”

I don't think I ever really believed in the annihilation of Anne. There is something peculiarly indestructible about that young woman—she is like the patent balls that one gives to terriers. She has an extraordinary knack of turning up smiling. I still don't see why it was necessary for her to walk out of the hotel in the middle of the night in order to get to Kimberley. There was no train, anyway. She must have put on a pair of angel's wings and flown there. And I don't suppose she will ever explain. Nobody does—to me. I always have to guess. It becomes monotonous after a while. The exigencies of journalism are at the bottom of it, I suppose. “How I shot the rapids,” by our Special Correspondent.

I refolded the telegram and got rid of my Governmental friend. I don't like the prospect of being hungry, but I'm not alarmed for my personal safety. Smuts is perfectly capable of dealing with the revolution. But I would give a considerable sum of money for a drink! I wonder if Pagett will have the sense to bring a bottle of whisky with him when he arrives tomorrow?

I put on my hat and went out, intending to buy a few souvenirs. The curio shops in Jo'burg are rather pleasant. I was just studying a window full of imposing karosses, when a man coming out of the shop cannoned into me. To my surprise it turned out to be Race.

I can't flatter myself that he looked pleased to see me. As a matter of fact, he looked distinctly annoyed, but I insisted on his accompanying me back to the hotel. I get tired of having no one but Miss Pettigrew to talk to.

“I had no idea you were in Jo'burg,” I said chattily. “When did you arrive?”

“Last night.”

“Where are you staying?”

“With friends.”

He was disposed to be extraordinarily taciturn, and seemed to be embarrassed by my questions.

“I hope they keep poultry,” I remarked. “A diet of new-laid eggs, and the occasional slaughtering of an old cock, will be decidedly agreeable soon, from all I hear.”

“By the way,” I said, when we were back in the hotel, “have you heard that Miss Beddingfeld is alive and kicking?”

He nodded.

“She gave us quite a fright,” I said airily. “Where the devil did she go to that night, that’s what I’d like to know.”

“She was on the island all the time.”

“Which island? Not the one with the young man on it?”

“Yes.”

“How very improper,” I said. “Pagett will be quite shocked. He always did disapprove of Anne Beddingfeld. I suppose that was the young man she originally intended to meet in Durban?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t tell me anything if you don’t want to,” I said, by way of encouraging him.

“I fancy that this is a young man we should all be very glad to lay our hands on.”

“Not—?” I cried, in rising excitement.

He nodded.

“Harry Rayburn, alias Harry Lucas—that’s his real name, you know. He’s given us all the slip once more, but we’re bound to rope him in soon.”

“Dear me, dear me,” I murmured.

“We don’t suspect the girl of complicity in any case. On her side it’s—just a love affair.”

I always did think Race was in love with Anne. The way he said those last words made me feel sure of it.

“She’s gone to Beira,” he continued rather hastily.

“Indeed,” I said, staring. “How do you know?”

“She wrote to me from Bulawayo, telling me she was going home that way. The best thing she can do, poor child.”

“Somehow, I don’t fancy she is in Beira,” I said meditatively.

“She was just starting when she wrote.”

I was puzzled. Somebody was clearly lying. Without stopping to reflect that Anne might have excellent reasons for her misleading statements, I gave myself up to the pleasure of scoring off Race. He is always so cocksure. I took the telegram from my pocket and handed it to him.

“Then how do you explain this?” I asked nonchalantly.

He seemed dumbfounded. “She said she was just starting for Beira,” he said, in a dazed voice.

I know that Race is supposed to be clever. He is, in my opinion, rather a stupid man. It never seemed to occur to him that girls do not always tell the truth.

“Kimberley too. What are they doing there?” he muttered.

“Yes, that surprised me. I should have thought Miss Anne would have been in the thick of it here, gathering copy for the Daily Budget.”

“Kimberley,” he said again. The place seemed to upset him. “There’s nothing to see there—the pits aren’t being worked.”

“You know what women are,” I said vaguely.

He shook his head and went off. I have evidently given him something to think about.

No sooner had he departed than my Government official reappeared.

“I hope you will forgive me for troubling you again, Sir Eustace,” he apologized. “But there are one or two questions I should like to ask you.”

“Certainly, my dear fellow,” I said cheerfully. “Ask away.”

“It concerns your secretary—”

“I know nothing about him,” I said hastily. “He foisted himself upon me in London, robbed me of valuable papers—for which I shall be hauled over the coals—and disappeared like a conjuring trick at Cape Town. It’s true that I was at the Falls at the same time as he was, but I was at the hotel, and he was on an island. I can assure you that I never set eyes upon him the whole time that I was there.”

I paused for breath.

“You misunderstand me. It was of your other secretary that I spoke.”

“What? Pagett?” I cried, in lively astonishment. “He’s been with me eight years—a most trustworthy fellow.”

My interlocutor smiled.

“We are still at cross-purposes. I refer to the lady.”

“Miss Pettigrew?” I exclaimed.

“Yes. She has been seen coming out of Agrasato’s Native Curio shop.”

“God bless my soul!” I interrupted. “I was going into that place myself this afternoon. You might have caught me coming out!”

There doesn't seem to be any innocent thing that one can do in Jo'burg without being suspected for it.

“Ah! but she has been seen there more than once—and in rather doubtful circumstances. I may as well tell you—in confidence, Sir Eustace—that the place is suspected of being a well-known rendezvous used by the secret organization behind this revolution. That is why I should be glad to hear all that you can tell me about this lady. Where and how did you come to engage her?”

“She was lent to me,” I replied coldly, “by your own Government.”

He collapsed utterly.

Thirty.

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

I

As soon as I got to Kimberlely I wired to Suzanne. She joined me there with the utmost dispatch, heralding her arrival with telegrams sent off en route. I was awfully surprised to find that she really was fond of me—I thought I had been just a new sensation, but she positively fell on my neck and wept when we met.

When we had recovered from our emotion a little, I sat down on the bed and told her the whole story from A to Z.

“You always did suspect Colonel Race,” she said thoughtfully, when I had finished. “I didn’t until the night you disappeared. I liked him so much all along and thought he would make such a nice husband for you. Oh, Anne, dear, don’t be cross, but how do you know that this young man of yours is telling the truth? You believe every word he says.”

“Of course I do,” I cried indignantly.

“But what is there in him that attracts you so? I don’t see that there’s anything in him at all except his rather reckless good looks and his modern Sheik-cum-Stone-Age lovemaking.”

I poured out the vials of my wrath upon Suzanne for some minutes.

“Just because you’re comfortably married and getting fat, you’ve forgotten that there’s any such thing as romance,” I ended.

“Oh, I’m not getting fat, Anne. All the worry I’ve had about you lately must have worn me to a shred.”

“You look particularly well-nourished,” I said coldly. “I should say you must have put on about half a stone.”

“And I don’t know that I’m so comfortably married either,” continued Suzanne in a melancholy voice. “I’ve been having the most dreadful cables from Clarence ordering me to come home at once. At last I didn’t answer them, and now I haven’t heard for over a fortnight.”

I’m afraid I didn’t take Suzanne’s matrimonial troubles very seriously. She will be able to get round Clarence all right when the time comes. I turned the conversation to the subject of the diamonds.

Suzanne looked at me with a dropped jaw.

“I must explain, Anne. You see, as soon as I began to suspect Colonel Race, I was terribly upset about the diamonds. I wanted to stay on at the Falls in case he might have kidnapped you somewhere close by, but didn’t know what to do about the diamonds. I was afraid to keep them in my possession —”

Suzanne looked round her uneasily, as though she feared the walls might have ears, and then whispered vehemently in my ear.

“A distinctly good idea,” I approved. “At the time, that is. It’s a bit awkward now. What did Sir Eustace do with the cases?”

“The big ones were sent down to Cape Town. I heard from Pagett before I left the Falls, and he enclosed the receipt for their storage. He’s leaving Cape Town today by the by, to join Sir Eustace in Johannesburg.”

“I see,” I said thoughtfully. “And the small ones, where are they?”

“I suppose Sir Eustace has got them with him.”

I turned the matter over in my mind.

“Well,” I said at last, “it’s awkward—but it’s safe enough. We’d better do nothing for the present.”

Suzanne looked at me with a little smile.

“You don’t like doing nothing, do you, Anne?”

“Not very much,” I replied honestly.

The one thing I could do was to get hold of a timetable and see what time Guy Pagett’s train would pass through Kimberley. I found that it would arrive at 5:40 on the following afternoon and depart again at 6. I wanted to see Pagett as soon as possible, and that seemed to me a good opportunity. The situation on the Rand was getting very serious, and it might be a long time before I got another chance.

The only thing that livened up the day was a wire dispatched from Johannesburg. A most innocent-sounding telegram:

“Arrived safely. All going well. Eric here, also Eustace, but not Guy. Remain where you are for the present. Andy.”

II

Eric was our pseudonym for Race. I chose it because it is a name I dislike exceedingly. There was clearly nothing to be done until I could see Pagett. Suzanne employed herself in sending off a long soothing cable to the far-off Clarence. She became quite sentimental over him. In her way—which of course is quite different from me and Harry—she is really fond of Clarence.

“I do wish he was here, Anne,” she gulped. “It’s such a long time since I’ve seen him.”

“Have some face cream,” I said soothingly.

Suzanne rubbed a little on the tip of her charming nose.

“I shall want some more face cream soon too,” she remarked, “and you can only get this kind in Paris.” She sighed. “Paris!”

“Suzanne,” I said, “very soon you’ll have had enough of South Africa and adventure.”

“I should like a really nice hat,” admitted Suzanne wistfully. “Shall I come with you to meet Guy Pagett tomorrow?”

“I prefer to go alone. He’d be shy speaking before two of us.”

So it came about that I was standing in the doorway of the hotel on the following afternoon, struggling with a recalcitrant parasol that refused to go up, whilst Suzanne lay peacefully on her bed with a book and a basket of fruit.

According to the hotel porter, the train was on its good behaviour today and would be almost on time, though he was extremely doubtful whether it would ever get through to Johannesburg. The line had been blown up, so he solemnly assured me. It sounded cheerful!

The train drew in just ten minutes late. Everybody tumbled out on the platform and began walking up and down feverishly. I had no difficulty in espying Pagett. I accosted him eagerly. He gave his usual nervous start at seeing me—somewhat accentuated this time.

“Dear me, Miss Beddingfeld, I understood that you had disappeared.”

“I have reappeared again,” I told him solemnly. “And how are you, Mr. Pagett?”

“Very well, thank you—looking forward to taking up my work again with Sir Eustace.”

“Mr. Pagett,” I said, “there is something I want to ask you. I hope that you won’t be offended, but a lot hangs on it, more than you can possibly guess. I want to know what you were doing at Marlow on the 8th of January last?”

He started violently.

“Really, Miss Beddingfeld—I—indeed—”

“You were there, weren’t you?”

“I—for reasons of my own I was in the neighbourhood, yes.”

“Won’t you tell me what those reasons were?”

“Sir Eustace has not already told you?”

“Sir Eustace? Does he know?”

“I am almost sure that he does. I hoped he had not recognized me, but from the hints he has let drop, and his remarks, I fear it is only too certain. In any case, I meant to make a clean breast of the matter and offer my resignation. He is a peculiar man, Miss Beddingfeld, with an abnormal sense of humour. It seems to amuse him to keep me on tenterhooks. All the time, I dare say, he was perfectly well aware of the true facts. Possibly he has known them for years.”

I hoped that sooner or later I should be able to understand what Pagett was talking about. He went on fluently:

“It is difficult for a man of Sir Eustace’s standing to put himself in my position. I know that I was in the wrong, but it seemed a harmless deception. I would have thought it better taste on his part to have tackled me outright—instead of indulging in covert jokes at my expense.”

A whistle blew, and the people began to surge back into the train.

“Yes, Mr. Pagett,” I broke in, “I’m sure I quite agree with all you’re saying about Sir Eustace. But why did you go to Marlow?”

“It was wrong of me, but natural under the circumstances—yes, I still feel natural under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” I cried desperately.

For the first time, Pagett seemed to recognize that I was asking him a question. His mind detached itself from the peculiarities of Sir Eustace, and his own justification, and came to rest on me.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Beddingfeld,” he said stiffly, “but I fail to see your concern in the matter.”

He was back in the train now, leaning down to speak to me. I felt desperate. What could one do with a man like that?

“Of course, if it’s so dreadful that you’d be ashamed to speak of it to me—” I began spitefully.

At last I had found the right stop. Pagett stiffened and flushed.

“Dreadful? Ashamed? I don’t understand you.”

“Then tell me.”

In three short sentences he told me. At last I knew Pagett’s secret! It was not in the least what I expected.

I walked slowly back to the hotel. There a wire was handed to me. I tore it open. It contained full and definite instructions for me to proceed forthwith to Johannesburg, or rather to a station this side of Johannesburg, where I should be met by a car. It was signed, not Andy, but Harry.

I sat down in a chair to do some very serious thinking.

Thirty-one

(From the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler)

Johannesburg, March 7th.

Pagett has arrived. He is in a blue funk, of course. Suggested at once that we should go off to Pretoria. Then, when I had told him kindly but firmly that we were going to remain here, he went to the other extreme, wished he had his rifle here, and began bucking about some bridge he guarded during the Great War. A railway bridge at Little Puddacombe junction, or something of that sort.

I soon cut that short by telling him to unpack the big typewriter. I thought that that would keep him employed for some time, because the typewriter was sure to have gone wrong—it always does—and he would have to take it somewhere to be mended. But I had forgotten Pagett's powers of being in the right.

"I've already unpacked all the cases, Sir Eustace. The typewriter is in perfect condition."

"What do you mean—all the cases?"

"The two small cases as well."

"I wish you wouldn't be so officious, Pagett. Those small cases were no business of yours. They belong to Mrs. Blair."

Pagett looked crestfallen. He hates to make a mistake.

"So you can just pack them up again neatly," I continued. "After that you can go out and look around you. Jo'burg will probably be a heap of smoking ruins by tomorrow, so it may be your last chance."

I thought that that would get rid of him successfully for the morning, at any rate.

“There is something I want to say to you when you have the leisure, Sir Eustace.”

“I haven’t got it now,” I said hastily. “At this minute I have absolutely no leisure whatsoever.”

Pagett retired.

“By the way,” I called after him, “what was there in those cases of Mrs. Blair’s?”

“Some fur rugs, and a couple of fur—hats, I think.”

“That’s right,” I assented. “She bought them on the train. They are hats—of a kind—though I hardly wonder at your not recognizing them. I dare say she’s going to wear one of them at Ascot. What else was there?”

“Some rolls of films, and some baskets—a lot of baskets—”

“There would be,” I assured him. “Mrs. Blair is the kind of woman who never buys less than a dozen or so of anything.”

“I think that’s all, Sir Eustace, except some miscellaneous odds and ends, a motor veil and some odd gloves—that sort of thing.”

“If you hadn’t been a born idiot, Pagett, you would have seen from the start that those couldn’t possibly be my belongings.”

“I thought some of them might belong to Miss Pettigrew.”

“Ah, that reminds me—what do you mean by picking me out such a doubtful character as a secretary?”

And I told him about the searching cross-examination I had been put through. Immediately I was sorry, I saw a glint in his eye that I know only

too well. I changed the conversation hurriedly. But it was too late. Pagett was on the warpath.

He next proceeded to bore me with a long pointless story about the Kilmorden. It was about a roll of films and a wager. The roll of films being thrown through a porthole in the middle of the night by some steward who ought to have known better. I hate horseplay. I told Pagett so, and he began to tell me the story all over again. He tells a story extremely badly, anyway. It was a long time before I could make head or tail of this one.

I did not see him again until lunchtime. Then he came in brimming over with excitement, like a bloodhound on the scent. I never have cared for bloodhounds. The upshot of it all was that he had seen Rayburn.

“What?” I cried, startled.

Yes, he had caught sight of someone whom he was sure was Rayburn crossing the street. Pagett had followed him.

“And who do you think I saw him stop and speak to? Miss Pettigrew!”

“What?”

“Yes, Sir Eustace. And that’s not all. I’ve been making inquiries about her —”

“Wait a bit. What happened to Rayburn?”

“He and Miss Pettigrew went into that corner curioshop—”

I uttered an involuntary exclamation. Pagett stopped inquiringly.

“Nothing,” I said. “Go on.”

“I waited outside for ages—but they didn’t come out. At last I went in. Sir Eustace, there was no one in the shop! There must be another way out.”

I stared at him.

“As I was saying, I came back to the hotel and made some inquiries about Miss Pettigrew.” Pagett lowered his voice and breathed hard as he always does when he wants to be confidential. “Sir Eustace, a man was seen coming out of her room last night.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“And I always regarded her as a lady of such eminent respectability,” I murmured.

Pagett went on without heeding.

“I went straight up and searched her room. What do you think I found?”

I shook my head.

“This!”

Pagett held up a safety razor and a stick of shaving soap.

“What should a woman want with these?”

I don’t suppose Pagett ever reads the advertisements in the high-class ladies’ papers. I do. Whilst not proposing to argue with him on the subject, I refused to accept the presence of the razor as proof positive of Miss Pettigrew’s sex. Pagett is so hopelessly behind the times. I should not have been at all surprised if he had produced a cigarette case to support his theory. However, even Pagett has his limits.

“You’re not convinced, Sir Eustace. What do you say to this?”

I inspected the article which he dangled aloft triumphantly.

“It looks like hair,” I remarked distastefully.

“It is hair. I think it’s what they call a toupee.”

“Indeed,” I commented.

“Now are you convinced that that Pettigrew woman is a man in disguise?”

“Really, my dear Pagett, I think I am. I might have known it by her feet.”

“Then that’s that. And now, Sir Eustace, I want to speak to you about my private affairs. I cannot doubt, from your hints and your continual allusions to the time I was in Florence, that you have found me out.”

At last the mystery of what Pagett did in Florence is going to be revealed!

“Make a clean breast of it, my dear fellow,” I said kindly. “Much the best way.”

“Thank you, Sir Eustace.”

“Is it her husband? Annoying fellows, husbands. Always turning up when they’re least expected.”

“I fail to follow you, Sir Eustace. Whose husband?”

“The lady’s husband.”

“What lady?”

“God bless my soul, Pagett, the lady you met in Florence. There must have been a lady. Don’t tell me that you merely robbed a church or stabbed an Italian in the back because you didn’t like his face.”

“I am quite at a loss to understand you, Sir Eustace. I suppose you are joking.”

“I am an amusing fellow sometimes, when I take the trouble, but I can assure you that I am not trying to be funny this minute.”

“I hoped that as I was a good way off you had not recognized me, Sir Eustace.”

“Recognized you where?”

“At Marlow, Sir Eustace?”

“At Marlow? What the devil were you doing at Marlow?”

“I thought you understood that—”

“I’m beginning to understand less and less. Go back to the beginning of the story and start again. You went to Florence—”

“Then you don’t know after all—and you didn’t recognize me!”

“As far as I can judge, you seem to have given yourself away needlessly—made a coward of by your conscience. But I shall be able to tell better when I’ve heard the whole story. Now, then, take a deep breath and start again. You went to Florence—”

“But I didn’t go to Florence. That is just it.”

“Well, where did you go, then?”

“I went home—to Marlow.”

“What the devil did you want to go to Marlow for?”

“I wanted to see my wife. She was in delicate health and expecting—”

“Your wife? But I didn’t know you were married!”

“No, Sir Eustace, that is just what I am telling you. I deceived you in this matter.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Just over eight years. I had been married just six months when I became your secretary. I did not want to lose the post. A resident secretary is not supposed to have a wife, so I suppressed the fact.”

“You take my breath away,” I remarked. “Where has she been all these years?”

“We have had a small bungalow on the river at Marlow, quite close to the Mill House, for over five years.”

“God bless my soul,” I muttered. “Any children?”

“Four children, Sir Eustace.”

I gazed at him in a kind of stupor. I might have known, all along, that a man like Pagett couldn’t have a guilty secret. The respectability of Pagett has always been my bane. That’s just the kind of secret he would have—a wife and four children.

“Have you told this to anyone else?” I demanded at last, when I had gazed at him in fascinated interest for quite a long while.

“Only Miss Beddingfeld. She came to the station at Kimberley.”

I continued to stare at him. He fidgeted under my glance.

“I hope, Sir Eustace, that you are not seriously annoyed?”

“My dear fellow,” I said, “I don’t mind telling you here and now that you’ve blinking well torn it!”

I went out seriously ruffled. As I passed the corner curioshop, I was assailed by a sudden irresistible temptation and went in. The proprietor came forward obsequiously, rubbing his hands.

“Can I show you something? Furs, curios?”

“I want something quite out of the ordinary,” I said. “It’s for a special occasion. Will you show me what you’ve got?”

“Perhaps you will come into my back room? We have many specialities there.”

That is where I made a mistake. And I thought I was going to be so clever. I followed him through the swinging portières.

Thirty-two

(Anne's Narrative Resumed)

I had great trouble with Suzanne. She argued, she pleaded, she even wept before she would let me carry out my plan. But in the end I got my own way. She promised to carry out my instructions to the letter and came down to the station to bid me a tearful farewell.

I arrived at my destination the following morning early. I was met by a short black-bearded Dutchman whom I had never seen before. He had a car waiting and we drove off. There was a queer booming in the distance, and I asked him what it was. "Guns," he answered laconically. So there was fighting going on in Jo'burg!

I gathered that our objective was a spot somewhere in the suburbs of the city. We turned and twisted and made several detours to get there, and every minute the guns were nearer. It was an exciting time. At last we stopped before a somewhat ramshackle building. The door was opened by a Kafir boy. My guide signed to me to enter. I stood irresolute in the dingy square hall. The man passed me and threw open a door.

"The young lady to see Mr. Harry Rayburn," he said, and laughed.

Thus announced, I passed in. The room was sparsely furnished and smelt of cheap tobacco smoke. Behind a desk a man sat writing. He looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"Dear me," he said, "if it isn't Miss Beddingfeld!"

"I must be seeing double," I apologized. "Is it Mr. Chichester, or is it Miss Pettigrew? There is an extraordinary resemblance to both of them."

"Both characters are in abeyance for the moment. I have doffed my petticoats—and my cloth likewise. Won't you sit down?"

I accepted a seat composedly.

“It would seem,” I remarked, “that I have come to the wrong address.”

“From your point of view, I am afraid you have. Really, Miss Beddingfeld, to fall into the trap a second time!”

“It was not very bright of me,” I admitted meekly.

Something about my manner seemed to puzzle him.

“You hardly seem upset by the occurrence,” he remarked dryly.

“Would my going into heroics have any effect upon you?” I asked.

“It certainly would not.”

“My Great-aunt Jane always used to say that a true lady was neither shocked nor surprised at anything that might happen,” I murmured dreamily. “I endeavour to live up to her precepts.”

I read Mr. Chichester-Pettigrew’s opinion so plainly written on his face that I hastened into speech once more.

“You really are positively marvellous at makeup,” I said generously. “All the time you were Miss Pettigrew I never recognized you—even when you broke your pencil in the shock of seeing me climb upon the train at Cape Town.”

He tapped upon the desk with the pencil he was holding in his hand at the minute.

“All this is very well in its way, but we must get to business. Perhaps, Miss Beddingfeld, you can guess why we required your presence here?”

“You will excuse me,” I said, “but I never do business with anyone but principals.”

I had read the phrase or something like it in a moneylender's circular, and I was rather pleased with it. It certainly had a devastating effect upon Mr. Chichester-Pettigrew. He opened his mouth and then shut it again. I beamed upon him.

"My Great-uncle George's maxim," I added, as an afterthought. "Great-aunt Jane's husband, you know. He made knobs for brass beds."

I doubt if Chichester-Pettigrew had ever been ragged before. He didn't like it at all.

"I think you would be wise to alter your tone, young lady."

I did not reply, but yawned—a delicate little yawn that hinted at intense boredom.

"What the devil—" he began forcibly.

I interrupted him.

"I can assure you it's no good shouting at me. We are only wasting time here. I have no intention of talking with underlings. You will save a lot of time and annoyance by taking me straight to Sir Eustace Pedler."

"To—"

He looked dumbfounded.

"Yes," I said. "Sir Eustace Pedler."

"I—I—excuse me—"

He bolted from the room like a rabbit. I took advantage of the respite to open my bag and powder my nose thoroughly. Also I settled my hat at a more becoming angle. Then I settled myself to wait with patience for my enemy's return.

He reappeared in a subtly chastened mood.

“Will you come this way, Miss Beddingfeld?”

I followed him up the stairs. He knocked at the door of a room, a brisk “Come in” sounded from inside, and he opened the door and motioned to me to pass inside.

Sir Eustace Pedler sprang up to greet me, genial and smiling.

“Well, well, Miss Anne.” He shook me warmly by the hand. “I’m delighted to see you. Come and sit down. Not tired after your journey? That’s good.”

He sat down facing me, still beaming. It left me rather at a loss. His manner was so completely natural.

“Quite right to insist on being brought straight to me,” he went on. “Minks is a fool. A clever actor—but a fool. That was Minks you saw downstairs.”

“Oh, really,” I said feebly.

“And now,” said Sir Eustace cheerfully, “let’s get down to facts. How long have you known that I was the ‘Colonel?’ ”

“Ever since Mr. Pagett told me that he had seen you in Marlow when you were supposed to be in Cannes.”

Sir Eustace nodded ruefully.

“Yes, I told the fool he’d blinking well torn it. He didn’t understand, of course. His whole mind was set on whether I’d recognized him. It never occurred to him to wonder what I was doing down there. A piece of sheer bad luck that was. I arranged it all so carefully too, sending him off to Florence, telling the hotel I was going over to Nice for one night or possibly two. Then, by the time the murder was discovered, I was back again in Cannes, with nobody dreaming that I’d ever left the Riviera.”

He still spoke quite naturally and unaffectedly. I had to pinch myself to understand that this was all real—that the man in front of me was really that deep-dyed criminal, the “Colonel.” I followed things out in my mind.

“Then it was you who tried to throw me overboard on the Kilmorden,” I said slowly. “It was you that Pagett followed up on deck that night?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I apologize, my dear child, I really do. I always liked you—but you were so confoundingly interfering. I couldn’t have all my plans brought to naught by a chit of a girl.”

“I think your plan at the Falls was really the cleverest,” I said, endeavouring to look at the thing in a detached fashion. “I would have been ready to swear anywhere that you were in the hotel when I went out. Seeing is believing in future.”

“Yes, Minks had one of his greatest successes, as Miss Pettigrew, and he can imitate my voice quite creditably.”

“There is one thing I should like to know.”

“Yes?”

“How did you induce Pagett to engage her?”

“Oh, that was quite simple. She met Pagett in the doorway of the Trade Commissioner’s office or the Chamber of Mines, or wherever it was he went—told him I had phoned down in a hurry, and that she had been selected by the Government department in question. Pagett swallowed it like a lamb.”

“You’re very frank,” I said, studying him.

“There’s no earthly reason why I shouldn’t be.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I hastened to put my own interpretation on it.

“You believe in the success of this Revolution? You’ve burnt your boats.”

“For an otherwise intelligent young woman, that’s a singularly unintelligent remark. No, my dear child, I do not believe in this Revolution. I give it a

couple of days longer and it will fizzle out ignominiously.”

“Not one of your successes, in fact?” I said nastily.

“Like all women, you’ve no idea of business. The job I took on was to supply certain explosives and arms—heavily paid for—to foment feeling generally, and to incriminate certain people up to the hilt. I’ve carried out my contract with complete success, and I was careful to be paid in advance. I took special care over the whole thing, as I intended it be my last contract before retiring from business. As for burning my boats, as you call it, I simply don’t know what you mean. I’m not the rebel chief, or anything of that kind—I’m a distinguished English visitor, who had the misfortune to go nosing into a certain curioshop—and saw a little more than he was meant to, and so the poor fellow was kidnapped. Tomorrow, or the day after, when circumstances permit, I shall be found tied up somewhere, in a pitiable state of terror and starvation.”

“Ah!” I said slowly. “But what about me?”

“That’s just it,” said Sir Eustace softly. “What about you? I’ve got you here—I don’t want to rub it in in any way—but I’ve got you here very neatly. The question is, what am I going to do with you? The simplest way of disposing of you—and, I may add, the pleasantest to myself—is the way of marriage. Wives can’t accuse their husbands, you know, and I’d rather like a pretty young wife to hold my hand and glance at me out of liquid eyes—don’t flash them at me so! You quite frighten me. I see that the plan does not commend itself to you?”

“It does not.”

Sir Eustace sighed.

“A pity! But I am no Adelphi villain. The usual trouble, I suppose. You love another, as the books say.”

“I love another.”

“I thought as much—first I thought it was that long-legged, pompous ass, Race, but I suppose it’s the young hero who fished you out of the Falls that night. Women have no taste. Neither of those two have half the brains that I have. I’m such an easy person to underestimate.”

I think he was right about that. Although I knew well enough the kind of man he was and must be, I could not bring myself to realize it. He had tried to kill me on more than one occasion, he had actually killed another woman, and he was responsible for endless other deeds of which I knew nothing, and yet I was quite unable to bring myself into the frame of mind for appreciating his deeds as they deserved. I could not think of him as other than our amusing, genial, travelling companion. I could not even feel frightened of him—and yet I knew he was capable of having me murdered in cold blood if it struck him as necessary. The only parallel I can think of is the case of Stevenson’s Long John Silver. He must have been much the same kind of man.

“Well, well,” said this extraordinary person, leaning back in his chair. “It’s a pity that the idea of being Lady Pedler doesn’t appeal to you. The other alternatives are rather crude.”

I felt a nasty feeling going up and down my spine. Of course I had known all along that I was taking a big risk, but the prize had seemed worth it. Would things turn out as I had calculated, or would they not?

“The fact of the matter is,” Sir Eustace was continuing, “I’ve a weakness for you. I really don’t want to proceed to extremes. Suppose you tell me the whole story, from the very beginning, and let’s see what we can make of it. But no romancing, mind—I want the truth.”

I was not going to make any mistake over that. I had a great deal of respect for Sir Eustace’s shrewdness. It was a moment for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I told him the whole story, omitting nothing, up to the moment of my rescue by Harry. When I had finished, he nodded his head in approval.

“Wise girl. You’ve made a clean breast of the thing. And let me tell you I should soon have caught you out if you hadn’t. A lot of people wouldn’t

believe your story, anyway, especially the beginning part, but I do. You're the kind of girl who would start off like that—at a moment's notice, on the slenderest of motives. You've had amazing luck, of course, but sooner or later the amateur runs up against the professional and then the result is a foregone conclusion. I am the professional. I started on this business when I was quite a youngster. All things considered, it seemed to me a good way of getting rich quickly. I always could think things out and devise ingenious schemes—and I never made the mistake of trying to carry out my schemes myself. Always employ the expert—that has been my motto. The one time I departed from it I came to grief—but I couldn't trust anyone to do that job for me. Nadina knew too much. I'm an easygoing man, kindhearted and good-tempered so long as I'm not thwarted. Nadina both thwarted me and threatened me—just as I was at the apex of a successful career. Once she was dead and the diamonds were in my possession, I was safe. I've come to the conclusion now that I bungled the job. That idiot Pagett, with his wife and family! My fault—it tickled my sense of humour to employ the fellow, with his Cinquecento poisoner's face and his mid-Victorian soul. A maxim for you, my dear Anne. Don't let your sense of humour carry you away. For years I've had an instinct that it would be wise to get rid of Pagett, but the fellow was so hardworking and conscientious that I honestly couldn't find an excuse for sacking him. So I let things drift.

“But we're wandering from the point. The question is what to do with you. Your narrative was admirably clear, but there is one thing that still escapes me. Where are the diamonds now?”

“Harry Rayburn has them,” I said, watching him.

His face did not change, it retained its expression of sardonic good humour.

“H'm. I want those diamonds.”

“I don't see much chance of your getting them,” I replied.

“Don't you? Now I do. I don't want to be unpleasant, but I should like you to reflect that a dead girl or so found in this quarter of the city will occasion no surprise. There's a man downstairs who does those sort of jobs very neatly. Now, you're a sensible young woman. What I propose is this: you

will sit down and write to Harry Rayburn, telling him to join you here and bring the diamonds with him—”

“I won’t do anything of the kind.”

“Don’t interrupt your elders. I propose to make a bargain with you. The diamonds in exchange for your life. And don’t make any mistake about it, your life is absolutely in my power.”

“And Harry?”

“I’m far too tenderhearted to part two young lovers. He shall go free too—on the understanding, of course, that neither of you interfere with me in the future.”

“And what guarantee have I that you will keep your side of the bargain?”

“None whatever, my dear girl. You’ll have to trust me and hope for the best. Of course, if you’re in an heroic mood and prefer annihilation, that’s another matter.”

This was what I had been playing for. I was careful not to jump at the bait. Gradually I allowed myself to be bullied and cajoled into yielding. I wrote at Sir Eustace’s dictation:

“Dear Harry,

I think I see a chance of establishing your innocence beyond any possible doubt. Please follow my instructions minutely. Go to Agrasato’s curioshop. Ask to see something ‘out of the ordinary,’ ‘for a special occasion.’ The man will then ask you to ‘come into the back room.’ Go with him. You will find a messenger who will bring you to me. Do exactly as he tells you. Be sure and bring the diamonds with you. Not a word to anyone.”

Sir Eustace stopped.

“I leave the fancy touches to your own imagination,” he remarked. “But be careful to make no mistakes.”

“ ‘Yours for ever and ever, Anne,’ will be sufficient,” I remarked.

I wrote in the words. Sir Eustace stretched out his hand for the letter and read it through.

“That seems all right. Now the address.”

I gave it him. It was that of a small shop which received letters and telegrams for a consideration.

He struck the bell upon the table with his hand. Chichester-Pettigrew, alias Minks, answered the summons.

“This letter is to go immediately—the usual route.”

“Very well, Colonel.”

He looked at the name on the envelope. Sir Eustace was watching him keenly.

“A friend of yours, I think?”

“Of mine?” The man seemed startled.

“You had a prolonged conversation with him in Johannesburg yesterday.”

“A man came up and questioned me about your movements and those of Colonel Race. I gave him misleading information.”

“Excellent, my dear fellow, excellent,” said Sir Eustace genially. “My mistake.”

I chanced to look at Chichester-Pettigrew as he left the room. He was white to the lips, as though in deadly terror. No sooner was he outside, than Sir Eustace picked up a speaking tube that rested by his elbow, and spoke down it. “That you, Schwart? Watch Minks. He’s not to leave the house without orders.”

He put the speaking tube down again, and frowned, slightly tapping the table with his hand.

“May I ask you a few questions, Sir Eustace,” I said, after a minute or two of silence.

“Certainly. What excellent nerves you have, Anne! You are capable of taking an intelligent interest in things when most girls would be sniffling and wringing their hands.”

“Why did you take Harry as your secretary instead of giving him up to the police?”

“I wanted those cursed diamonds. Nadina, the little devil, was playing off your Harry against me. Unless I gave her the price she wanted, she threatened to sell them back to him. That was another mistake I made—I thought she’d have them with her that day. But she was too clever for that. Carton, her husband, was dead too—I’d no clue whatsoever as to where the diamonds were hidden. Then I managed to get a copy of a wireless message sent to Nadina by someone on board the Kilmorden—either Carton or Rayburn, I didn’t know which. It was a duplicate of that piece of paper you picked up. ‘Seventeen one twenty two,’ it ran. I took it to be an appointment with Rayburn, and when he was so desperate to get aboard the Kilmorden I was convinced that I was right. So I pretended to swallow his statements, and let him come. I kept a pretty sharp watch upon him and hoped that I should learn more. Then I found Minks trying to play a lone hand, and interfering with me. I soon stopped that. He came to heel all right. It was annoying not getting Cabin 17, and it worried me not being able to place you. Were you the innocent young girl you seemed, or were you not? When Rayburn set out to keep the appointment that night, Minks was told off to intercept him. Minks muffed it, of course.”

“But why did the wireless message say ‘seventeen’ instead of ‘seventy-one?’ ”

“I’ve thought that out. Carton must have given that wireless operator his own memorandum to copy off on to a form, and he never read the copy through. The operator made the same mistake we all did, and read it as

17.1.22 instead of 1.71.22. The thing I don't know is how Minks got on to Cabin 17. It must have been sheer instinct."

"And the dispatch to General Smuts? Who tampered with that?"

"My dear Anne, you don't suppose I was going to have a lot of my plans given away, without making an effort to save them? With an escaped murderer as a secretary, I had no hesitation whatever in substituting blanks. Nobody would think of suspecting poor old Pedler."

"What about Colonel Race?"

"Yes, that was a nasty jar. When Pagett told me he was a Secret Service fellow, I had an unpleasant feeling down the spine. I remembered that he'd been nosing around Nadina in Paris during the War—and I had a horrible suspicion that he was out after me! I don't like the way he's stuck to me ever since. He's one of those strong, silent men who have always got something up their sleeve."

A whistle sounded. Sir Eustace picked up the tube, listened for a minute or two, then answered:

"Very well, I'll see him now."

"Business," he remarked. "Miss Anne, let me show you your room."

He ushered me into a small shabby apartment, a Kafir boy brought up my small suitcase, and Sir Eustace, urging me to ask for anything I wanted, withdrew, the picture of a courteous host. A can of hot water was on the washstand, and I proceeded to unpack a few necessities. Something hard and unfamiliar in my spongebag puzzled me greatly. I untied the string and looked inside.

To my utter amazement I drew out a small pearl-handled revolver. It hadn't been there when I started from Kimberley. I examined the thing gingerly. It appeared to be loaded.

I handled it with a comfortable feeling. It was a useful thing to have in a house such as this. But modern clothes are quite unsuited to the carrying of firearms. In the end I pushed it gingerly into the top of my stocking. It made a terrible bulge, and I expected every minute that it would go off and shoot me in the leg, but it really seemed the only place.

Thirty-three

I was not summoned to Sir Eustace's presence until late in the afternoon. Eleven-o'clock tea and a substantial lunch had been served to me in my own apartment, and I felt fortified for further conflict.

Sir Eustace was alone. He was walking up and down the room, there was a gleam in his eye and a restlessness in his manner which did not escape me. He was exultant about something. There was a subtle change in his manner towards me.

"I have news for you. Your young man is on his way. He will be here in a few minutes. Moderate your transports—I have something more to say. You attempted to deceive me this morning. I warned you that you would be wise to stick to the truth, and up to a certain point you obeyed me. Then you ran off the rails. You attempted to make me believe that the diamonds were in Harry Rayburn's possession. At the time I accepted your statement because it facilitated my task—the task of inducing you to decoy Harry Rayburn here. But, my dear Anne, the diamonds have been in my possession ever since I left the Falls—though I only discovered the fact yesterday."

"You know!" I gasped.

"It may interest you to hear that it was Pagett who gave the show away. He insisted on boring me with a long pointless story about a wager and a tin of films. It didn't take me long to put two and two together—Mrs. Blair's distrust of Colonel Race, her agitation, her entreaty that I would take care of her souvenirs for her. The excellent Pagett had already unfastened the cases through an excess of zeal. Before leaving the hotel, I simply transferred all the rolls of films to my own pocket. They are in the corner there. I admit that I haven't had time to examine them yet, but I notice that one is of a totally different weight to the others, rattles in a peculiar fashion, and has evidently been stuck down with seccotine, which will necessitate the use of a tin opener. The case seems clear, does it not? And now, you see, I have

you both nicely in the trap . . . It's a pity that you didn't take kindly to the idea of becoming Lady Pedler."

I did not answer. I stood looking at him.

There was the sound of feet on the stairs, the door was flung open, and Harry Rayburn was hustled into the room between two men. Sir Eustace flung me a look of triumph.

"According to plan," he said softly. "You amateurs will pit yourselves against professionals."

"What's the meaning of this?" cried Harry hoarsely.

"It means that you have walked into my parlour—said the spider to the fly," remarked Sir Eustace facetiously. "My dear Rayburn, you are extraordinarily unlucky."

"You said I could come safely, Anne."

"Do not reproach her, my dear fellow. That note was written at my dictation, and the lady could not help herself. She would have been wiser not to write it, but I did not tell her so at the time. You followed her instructions, went to the curioshop, were taken through the secret passage from the back room—and found yourself in the hands of your enemies!"

Harry looked at me. I understood his glance and edged nearer to Sir Eustace.

"Yes," murmured the latter, "decidedly you are not lucky! This is—let me see, the third encounter."

"You are right," said Harry. "This is the third encounter. Twice you have worsted me—have you never heard that the third time the luck changes? This is my round—cover him, Anne."

I was all ready. In a flash I had whipped the pistol out of my stocking and was holding it to his head. The two men guarding Harry sprang forward, but his voice stopped them.

“Another step—and he dies! If they come any nearer, Anne, pull the trigger—don’t hesitate.”

“I shan’t,” I replied cheerfully. “I’m rather afraid of pulling it, anyway.”

I think Sir Eustace shared my fears. He was certainly shaking like a jelly.

“Stay where you are,” he commanded, and the men stopped obediently.

“Tell them to leave the room,” said Harry.

Sir Eustace gave the order. The men filed out, and Harry shot the bolt across the door behind them.

“Now we can talk,” he observed grimly, and, coming across the room, he took the revolver out of my hand.

Sir Eustace uttered a sigh of relief and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

“I’m shockingly out of condition,” he observed. “I think I must have a weak heart. I am glad that revolver is in competent hands. I didn’t trust Miss Anne with it. Well, my young friend, as you say, now we can talk. I’m willing to admit that you stole a march upon me. Where the devil that revolver came from I don’t know. I had the girl’s luggage searched when she arrived. And where did you produce it from now? You hadn’t got it on you a minute ago?”

“Yes, I had,” I replied. “It was in my stocking.”

“I don’t know enough about women. I ought to have studied them more,” said Sir Eustace sadly. “I wonder if Pagett would have known that?”

Harry rapped sharply on the table.

“Don’t play the fool. If it weren’t for your grey hairs, I’d throw you out of the window. You damned scoundrel! Grey hairs, or no grey hairs, I—”

He advanced a step or two, and Sir Eustace skipped nimbly behind the table.

“The young are always so violent,” he said reproachfully. “Unable to use their brains, they rely solely on their muscles. Let us talk sense. For the moment you have the upper hand. But that state of affairs cannot continue. The house is full of my men. You are hopelessly outnumbered. Your momentary ascendancy has been gained by an accident—”

“Has it?”

Something in Harry’s voice, a grim raillery, seemed to attract Sir Eustace’s attention. He stared at him.

“Has it?” said Harry again. “Sit down, Sir Eustace, and listen to what I have to say.” Still covering him with the revolver, he went on: “The cards are against you this time. To begin with, listen to that!”

That was a dull banging at the door below. There were shouts, oaths, and then a sound of firing. Sir Eustace paled.

“What’s that?”

“Race—and his people. You didn’t know, did you, Sir Eustace, that Anne had an arrangement with me by which we should know whether communications from one to the other were genuine? Telegrams were to be signed ‘Andy,’ letters were to have the word ‘and’ crossed out somewhere in them. Anne knew that your telegram was a fake. She came here of her own free will, walked deliberately into the snare, in the hope that she might catch you in your own trap. Before leaving Kimberley she wired both to me and to Race. Mrs. Blair has been in communication with us ever since. I received the letter written at your dictation, which was just what I expected. I had already discussed the probabilities of a secret passage leading out of the curioshop with Race, and he had discovered the place where the exit was situated.”

There was a screaming, tearing sound, and a heavy explosion which shook the room.

“They’re shelling this part of the town. I must get you out of here, Anne.”

A bright light flared up. The house opposite was on fire. Sir Eustace had risen and was pacing up and down. Harry kept him covered with the revolver.

“So you see, Sir Eustace, the game is up. It was you yourself who very kindly provided us with the clue of your whereabouts. Race’s men were watching the exit of the secret passage. In spite of the precautions you took, they were successful in following me here.”

Sir Eustace turned suddenly.

“Very clever. Very creditable. But I’ve still a word to say. If I’ve lost the trick, so have you. You’ll never be able to bring the murder of Nadina home to me. I was in Marlow on that day, that’s all you’ve got against me. No one can prove that I even knew the woman. But you knew her, you had a motive for killing her—and your record’s against you. You’re a thief, remember, a thief. There’s one thing you don’t know, perhaps. I’ve got the diamonds. And here goes—”

With an incredibly swift movement, he stooped, swung up his arm and threw. There was a tinkle of breaking glass, as the object went through the window and disappeared into the blazing mass opposite.

“There goes your only hope of establishing your innocence over the Kimberley affair. And now we’ll talk. I’ll drive a bargain with you. You’ve got me cornered. Race will find all he needs in this house. There’s a chance for me if I can get away. I’m done for if I stay, but so are you, young man! There’s a skylight in the next room. A couple of minutes’ start and I shall be all right. I’ve got one or two little arrangements all ready made. You let me out of the way, and give me a start—and I leave you a signed confession that I killed Nadina.”

“Yes, Harry,” I cried. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He turned a stern face on me.

“No, Anne, a thousand times, no. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I do. It solves everything.”

“I’d never be able to look Race in the face again. I’ll take my chance, but I’m damned if I’ll let this slippery old fox get away. It’s no good, Anne. I won’t do it.”

Sir Eustace chuckled. He accepted defeat without the least emotion.

“Well, well,” he remarked. “You seem to have met your master, Anne. But I can assure you both that moral rectitude does not always pay.”

There was a crash of rending wood, and footsteps surged up the stairs. Harry drew back the bolt. Colonel Race was the first to enter the room. His face lit at the sight of us.

“You’re safe, Anne. I was afraid—” He turned to Sir Eustace. “I’ve been after you for a long time, Pedler—and at last I’ve got you.”

“Everybody seems to have gone completely mad,” declared Sir Eustace airily. “These young people have been threatening me with revolvers and accusing me of the most shocking things. I don’t know what it’s all about.”

“Don’t you? It means that I’ve found the ‘Colonel.’ It means that on January 8th last you were not at Cannes, but at Marlow. It means that when your tool, Madame Nadina, turned against you, you planned to do away with her—and at last we shall be able to bring the crime home to you.”

“Indeed? And from whom did you get all this interesting information? From the man who is even now being looked for by the police? His evidence will be very valuable.”

“We have other evidence. There is someone else who knew that Nadina was going to meet you at the Mill House.”

Sir Eustace looked surprised. Colonel Race made a gesture with his hand. Arthur Minks alias the Rev. Edward Chichester alias Miss Pettigrew stepped forward. He was pale and nervous, but he spoke clearly enough:

“I saw Nadina in Paris the night before she went over to England. I was posing at the time as a Russian Count. She told me of her purpose. I warned her, knowing what kind of man she had to deal with, but she did not take my advice. There was a wireless message on the table. I read it. Afterwards I thought I would have a try for the diamonds myself. In Johannesburg Mr. Rayburn accosted me. He persuaded me to come over to his side.”

Sir Eustace looked at him. He said nothing, but Minks seemed visibly to wilt.

“Rats always leave a sinking ship,” observed Sir Eustace. “I don’t care for rats. Sooner or later, I destroy vermin.”

“There’s just one thing I’d like to tell you, Sir Eustace,” I remarked. “That tin you threw out of the window didn’t contain the diamonds. It had common pebbles in it. The diamonds are in a perfectly safe place. As a matter of fact they’re in the big giraffe’s stomach. Suzanne hollowed it out, put the diamonds in with cotton wool, so that they wouldn’t rattle, and plugged it up again.”

Sir Eustace looked at me for some time. His reply was characteristic:

“I always did hate that blinking giraffe,” he said. “It must have been instinct.”

Thirty-four

We were not able to return to Johannesburg that night. The shells were coming over pretty fast, and I gathered that we were now more or less cut off, owing to the rebels having obtained possession of a new part of the suburbs.

Our place of refuge was a farm some twenty miles or so from Johannesburg—right out on the veld. I was dropping with fatigue. All the excitement and anxiety of the last two days had left me little better than a limp rag.

I kept repeating to myself, without being able to believe it, that our troubles were really over. Harry and I were together and we should never be separated again. Yet all through I was conscious of some barrier between us—a constraint on his part, the reason of which I could not fathom.

Sir Eustace had been driven off in an opposite direction accompanied by a strong guard. He waved his hand airily to us on departing.

I came out on to the stoep early on the following morning and looked across the veld in the direction of Johannesburg. I could see the great dumps glistening in the pale morning sunshine, and I could hear the low rumbling mutter of the guns. The Revolution was not over yet.

The farmer's wife came out and called me in to breakfast. She was a kind, motherly soul, and I was already very fond of her. Harry had gone out at dawn and had not yet returned, so she informed me. Again I felt a stir of uneasiness pass over me. What was this shadow of which I was so conscious between us?

After breakfast I sat out on the stoep, a book in my hand which I did not read. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I never saw Colonel Race ride up and dismount from his horse. It was not until he said "Good morning, Anne," that I became aware of his presence.

“Oh,” I said, with a flush, “it’s you.”

“Yes. May I sit down?”

He drew a chair up beside me. It was the first time we had been alone together since that day at the Matopos. As always, I felt that curious mixture of fascination and fear that he never failed to inspire in me.

“What is the news?” I asked.

“Smuts will be in Johannesburg tomorrow. I give this outbreak three days more before it collapses utterly. In the meantime the fighting goes on.”

“I wish,” I said, “that one could be sure that the right people were the ones to get killed. I mean the ones who wanted to fight—not just all the poor people who happen to live in the parts where the fighting is going on.”

He nodded.

“I know what you mean, Anne. That’s the unfairness of war. But I’ve other news for you.”

“Yes?”

“A confession of incompetency on my part. Pedler has managed to escape.”

“What?”

“Yes. No one knows how he managed it. He was securely locked up for the night—in an upper-story room of one of the farms roundabouts which the Military have taken over, but this morning the room was empty and the bird had flown.”

Secretly, I was rather pleased. Never, to this day, have I been able to rid myself of a sneaking fondness for Sir Eustace. I daresay it’s reprehensible, but there it is. I admired him. He was a thoroughgoing villain, I daresay—but he was a pleasant one. I’ve never met anyone half so amusing since.

I concealed my feelings, of course. Naturally Colonel Race would feel quite differently about it. He wanted Sir Eustace brought to justice. There was nothing very surprising in his escape when one came to think of it. All round Jo'burg he must have innumerable spies and agents. And, whatever Colonel Race might think, I was exceedingly doubtful that they would ever catch him. He probably had a well-planned line of retreat. Indeed, he had said as much to us.

I expressed myself suitably, though in a rather lukewarm manner, and the conversation languished. Then Colonel Race asked suddenly for Harry. I told him that he had gone off at dawn and that I hadn't seen him this morning.

"You understand, don't you, Anne, that apart from formalities, he is completely cleared? There are technicalities, of course, but Sir Eustace's guilt is well-assured. There is nothing now to keep you apart."

He said this without looking at me, in a slow, jerky voice.

"I understand," I said gratefully.

"And there is no reason why he should not at once resume his real name."

"No, of course not."

"You know his real name?"

The question surprised me.

"Of course I do. Harry Lucas."

He did not answer, and something in the quality of his silence struck me as peculiar.

"Anne, do you remember that, as we drove home from the Matopos that day, I told you that I knew what I had to do?"

"Of course I remember."

“I think that I may fairly say I have done it. The man you love is cleared of suspicion.”

“Was that what you meant?”

“Of course.”

I hung my head, ashamed of the baseless suspicion I had entertained. He spoke again in a thoughtful voice:

“When I was a mere youngster, I was in love with a girl who jilted me. After that I thought only of my work. My career meant everything to me. Then I met you, Anne—and all that seemed worth nothing. But youth calls to youth . . . I’ve still got my work.”

I was silent. I suppose one can’t really love two men at once—but you can feel like it. The magnetism of this man was very great. I looked up at him suddenly.

“I think that you’ll go very far,” I said dreamily. “I think that you’ve got a great career ahead of you. You’ll be one of the world’s big men.”

I felt as though I was uttering a prophecy.

“I shall be alone, though.”

“All the people who do really big things are.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

He took my hand, and said in a low voice:

“I’d rather have had—the other.”

Then Harry came striding round the corner of the house. Colonel Race rose.

“Good morning—Lucas,” he said.

For some reason Harry flushed up to the roots of his hair.

“Yes,” I said gaily, “you must be known by your real name now.”

But Harry was still staring at Colonel Race.

“So you know, sir,” he said at last.

“I never forget a face. I saw you once as a boy.”

“What’s all this about?” I asked, puzzled, looking from one to the other.

It seemed a conflict of wills between them. Race won. Harry turned slightly away.

“I suppose you’re right, sir. Tell her my real name.”

“Anne, this isn’t Harry Lucas. Harry Lucas was killed in the War. This is John Harold Eardsley.”

Thirty-five

With his last words, Colonel Race had swung away and left us. I stood staring after him. Harry's voice recalled me to myself.

"Anne, forgive me, say you forgive me."

He took my hand in his and almost mechanically I drew it away.

"Why did you deceive me?"

"I don't know that I can make you understand. I was afraid of all that sort of thing—the power and fascination of wealth. I wanted you to care for me just for myself—for the man I was—without ornaments and trappings."

"You mean you didn't trust me?"

"You can put it that way if you like, but it isn't quite true. I'd become embittered, suspicious—always prone to look for ulterior motives—and it was so wonderful to be cared for in the way you cared for me."

"I see," I said slowly. I was going over in my own mind the story he had told me. For the first time I noted discrepancies in it which I had disregarded—an assurance of money, the power to buy back the diamonds of Nadina, the way in which he had preferred to speak of both men from the point of view of an outsider. And when he had said "my friend" he had meant not Eardsley, but Lucas. It was Lucas, the quiet fellow, who had loved Nadina so deeply.

"How did it come about?" I asked.

"We were both reckless—anxious to get killed. One night we exchanged identification discs—for luck! Lucas was killed the next day—blown to pieces."

I shuddered.

“But why didn’t you tell me now? This morning? You couldn’t have doubted my caring for you by this time?”

“Anne, I didn’t want to spoil it all. I wanted to take you back to the island. What’s the good of money? It can’t buy happiness. We’d have been happy on the island. I tell you I’m afraid of that other life—it nearly rotted me through once.”

“Did Sir Eustace know who you really were?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And Carton?”

“No. He saw us both with Nadina at Kimberley one night, but he didn’t know which was which. He accepted my statement that I was Lucas, and Nadina was deceived by his cable. She was never afraid of Lucas. He was a quiet chap—very deep. But I always had the devil’s own temper. She’d have been scared out of her life if she’d known that I’d come to life again.”

“Harry, if Colonel Race hadn’t told me, what did you mean to do?”

“Say nothing. Go on as Lucas.”

“And your father’s millions?”

“Race was welcome to them. Anyway, he would make a better use of them than I ever shall. Anne, what are you thinking about? You’re frowning so.”

“I’m thinking,” I said slowly, “that I almost wish Colonel Race hadn’t made you tell me.”

“No. He was right. I owed you the truth.”

He paused, then said suddenly:

“You know, Anne, I’m jealous of Race. He loves you too—and he’s a bigger man than I am or ever shall be.”

I turned to him, laughing.

“Harry, you idiot. It’s you I want—and that’s all that matters.”

As soon as possible we started for Cape Town. There Suzanne was waiting to greet me, and we disembowelled the big giraffe together. When the Revolution was finally quelled, Colonel Race came down to Cape Town and at his suggestion the big villa at Muizenberg that had belonged to Sir Laurence Eardsley was reopened and we all took up our abode in it.

There we made our plans. I was to return to England with Suzanne and to be married from her house in London. And the trousseau was to be bought in Paris! Suzanne enjoyed planning all these details enormously. So did I. And yet the future seemed curiously unreal. And sometimes, without knowing why, I felt absolutely stifled—as though I couldn’t breathe.

It was the night before we were to sail. I couldn’t sleep. I was miserable, and I didn’t know why. I hated leaving Africa. When I came back to it, would it be the same thing? Would it ever be the same thing again?

And then I was startled by an authoritative rap on the shutter. I sprang up. Harry was on the stoep outside.

“Put some clothes on, Anne, and come out. I want to speak to you.”

I huddled on a few garments, and stepped out into the cool night air—still and scented, with its velvety feel. Harry beckoned me out of earshot of the house. His face looked pale and determined and his eyes were blazing.

“Anne, do you remember saying to me once that women enjoyed doing things they disliked for the sake of someone they liked?”

“Yes,” I said, wondering what was coming.

He caught me in his arms.

“Anne, come away with me—now—tonight. Back to Rhodesia—back to the island. I can’t stand all this tomfoolery. I can’t wait for you any longer.”

I disengaged myself a minute.

“And what about my French frocks?” I lamented mockingly.

To this day, Harry never knows when I’m in earnest, and when I’m only teasing him.

“Damn your French frocks. Do you think I want to put frocks on you? I’m a damned sight more likely to want to tear them off you. I’m not going to let you go, do you hear? You’re my woman. If I let you go away, I may lose you. I’m never sure of you. You’re coming with me now—tonight—and damn everybody.”

He held me to him, kissing me until I could hardly breathe.

“I can’t do without you any longer, Anne. I can’t indeed. I hate all this money. Let Race have it. Come on. Let’s go.”

“My toothbrush?” I demurred.

“You can buy one. I know I’m a lunatic, but for God’s sake, come!”

He stalked off at a furious pace. I followed him as meekly as the Barotsi woman I had observed at the Falls. Only I wasn’t carrying a frying pan on my head. He walked so fast that it was very difficult to keep up with him.

“Harry,” I said at last, in a meek voice, “are we going to walk all the way to Rhodesia?”

He turned suddenly, and with a great shout of laughter gathered me up in his arms.

“I’m mad, sweetheart, I know it. But I do love you so.”

“We’re a couple of lunatics. And, oh, Harry, you never asked me, but I’m not making a sacrifice at all! I wanted to come!”

Thirty-six

That was two years ago. We still live on the island. Before me, on the rough wooden table, is the letter that Suzanne wrote me.

Dear Babes in the Wood—Dear Lunatics in Love,

I'm not surprised—not at all. All the time we've been talking Paris and frocks I felt that it wasn't a bit real—that you'd vanish into the blue some day to be married over the tongs in the good old gipsy fashion. But you are a couple of lunatics! This idea of renouncing a vast fortune is absurd. Colonel Race wanted to argue the matter, but I have persuaded him to leave the argument to time. He can administer the estate for Harry—and none better. Because, after all, honeymoons don't last forever—you're not here, Anne, so I can safely say that without having you fly out at me like a little wildcat—Love in the wilderness will last a good while, but one day you will suddenly begin to dream of houses in Park Lane, sumptuous furs, Paris frocks, the largest thing in motors and the latest thing in perambulators, French maids and Norland nurses! Oh, yes, you will!

But have your honeymoon, dear lunatics, and let it be a long one. And think of me sometimes, comfortably putting on weight amidst the fleshpots!

Your loving friend,

Suzanne Blair

P.S.—I am sending you an assortment of frying pans as a wedding present, and an enormous terrine of pâté de foie gras to remind you of me.

There is another letter that I sometimes read. It came a good while after the other and was accompanied by a bulky parcel. It appeared to be written from somewhere in Bolivia.

My dear Anne Beddingfeld,

I can't resist writing to you, not so much for the pleasure it gives me to write, as for the enormous pleasure I know it will give you to hear from me. Our friend Race wasn't quite as clever as he thought himself, was he?

I think I shall appoint you my literary executor. I'm sending you my diary. There's nothing in it that would interest Race and his crowd, but I fancy that there are passages in it which may amuse you. Make use of it in any way you like. I suggest an article for the Daily Budget, "Criminals I have met." I only stipulate that I shall be the central figure.

By this time I have no doubt that you are no longer Anne Beddingfeld, but Lady Eardsley, queening it in Park Lane. I should just like to say that I bear you no malice whatever. It is hard, of course, to have to begin all over again at my time of life, but, *entre nous*, I had a little reserve fund carefully put aside for such a contingency. It has come in very usefully and I am getting together a nice little connexion. By the way, if you ever come across that funny friend of yours, Arthur Minks, just tell him that I haven't forgotten him, will you? That will give him a nasty jar.

On the whole I think I have displayed a most Christian and forgiving spirit. Even to Pagett. I happened to hear that he—or rather Mrs. Pagett—had brought a sixth child into the world the other day. England will be entirely populated by Pagetts soon. I sent the child a silver mug, and, on a postcard, declared my willingness to act as godfather. I can see Pagett taking both mug and postcard straight to Scotland Yard without a smile on his face!

Bless you, liquid eyes. Some day you will see what a mistake you have made in not marrying me.

Yours ever

Eustace Pedler

Harry was furious. It is the one point on which he and I do not see eye to eye. To him, Sir Eustace was the man who tried to murder me and whom he regards as responsible for the death of his friend. Sir Eustace's attempts on my life have always puzzled me. They are not in the picture, so to speak. For I am sure that he always had a genuinely kindly feeling towards me.

Then why did he twice attempt to take my life? Harry says “because he’s a damned scoundrel,” and seems to think that settles the matter. Suzanne was more discriminating. I talked it over with her, and she put it down to a “fear complex.” Suzanne goes in rather for psychoanalysis. She pointed out to me that Sir Eustace’s whole life was actuated by a desire to be safe and comfortable. He had an acute sense of self-preservation. And the murder of Nadina removed certain inhibitions. His actions did not represent the state of his feeling towards me, but were the result of his acute fears for his own safety. I think Suzanne is right. As for Nadina, she was the kind of woman who deserved to die. Men do all sorts of questionable things in order to get rich, but women shouldn’t pretend to be in love when they aren’t for ulterior motives.

I can forgive Sir Eustace easily enough, but I shall never forgive Nadina. Never, never, never!

The other day I was unpacking some tins that were wrapped in bits of an old Daily Budget, and I suddenly came upon the words, “The Man in the Brown Suit.” How long ago it seemed! I had, of course, severed my connexion with the Daily Budget long ago—I had done with it sooner than it had done with me. MY ROMANTIC WEDDING was given a halo of publicity.

My son is lying in the sun, kicking his legs. There’s a “man in a brown suit” if you like. He’s wearing as little as possible, which is the best costume for Africa, and is as brown as a berry. He’s always burrowing in the earth. I think he takes after Papa. He’ll have that same mania for Pleistocene clay.

Suzanne sent me a cable when he was born:

“Congratulations and love to the latest arrival on Lunatics’ Island. Is his head dolichocephalic or brachycephalic?”

I wasn’t going to stand that from Suzanne. I sent her a reply of one word, economical and to the point:

“Platycephalic!”

Sparkling Cyanide (1945)

By Agatha Christie

BOOK 1
ROSEMARY

“What can I do to drive away
remembrances from mine eyes?”

Six people were thinking of Rosemary Barton who had died nearly a year ago. . . .

One

IRIS MARLE

I

Iris Marle was thinking about her sister, Rosemary.

For nearly a year she had deliberately tried to put the thought of Rosemary away from her. She hadn't wanted to remember.

It was too painful—too horrible!

The blue cyanosed face, the convulsed clutching fingers. . . .

The contrast between that and the gay lovely Rosemary of the day before . . . Well, perhaps not exactly gay. She had had 'flu—she had been depressed, run-down . . . All that had been brought out at the inquest. Iris herself had laid stress on it. It accounted, didn't it, for Rosemary's suicide?

Once the inquest was over, Iris had deliberately tried to put the whole thing out of her mind. Of what good was remembrance? Forget it all! Forget the whole horrible business.

But now, she realized, she had got to remember. She had got to think back into the past . . . To remember carefully every slight unimportant seeming incident. . . .

That extraordinary interview with George last night necessitated remembrance.

It had been so unexpected, so frightening. Wait—had it been so unexpected? Hadn't there been indications beforehand? George's growing absorption, his absentmindedness, his unaccountable actions—his—well, queerness was the only word for it! All leading up to that moment last night when he had called her into the study and taken the letters from the drawer of the desk.

So now there was no help for it. She had got to think about Rosemary—to remember.

Rosemary—her sister. . . .

With a shock Iris realized suddenly that it was the first time in her life she had ever thought about Rosemary. Thought about her, that is, objectively, as a person.

She had always accepted Rosemary without thinking about her. You didn't think about your mother or your father or your sister or your aunt. They just existed, unquestioned, in those relationships.

You didn't think about them as people. You didn't ask yourself, even, what they were like.

What had Rosemary been like?

That might be very important now. A lot might depend upon it. Iris cast her mind back into the past. Herself and Rosemary as children. . . .

Rosemary had been the elder by six years.

II

Glimpses of the past came back—brief flashes—short scenes. Herself as a small child eating bread and milk, and Rosemary, important in pigtails, “doing lessons” at a table.

The seaside one summer—Iris envying Rosemary who was a “big girl” and could swim!

Rosemary going to boarding school—coming home for the holidays. Then she herself at school, and Rosemary being “finished” in Paris. Schoolgirl Rosemary; clumsy, all arms and legs. “Finished” Rosemary coming back from Paris with a strange new frightening elegance, soft voiced, graceful, with a swaying undulating figure, with red gold chestnut hair and big black fringed dark blue eyes. A disturbing beautiful creature—grown up—in a different world!

From then on they had seen very little of each other, the six-year gap had been at its widest.

Iris had been still at school, Rosemary in the full swing of a “season.” Even when Iris came home, the gap remained. Rosemary’s life was one of late mornings in bed, fork luncheons with other débutantes, dances most evenings of the week. Iris had been in the schoolroom with Mademoiselle, had gone for walks in the Park, had had supper at nine o’clock and gone to bed at ten. The intercourse between the sisters had been limited to such brief interchanges as:

“Hullo, Iris, telephone for a taxi for me, there’s a lamb, I’m going to be devastatingly late,” or

“I don’t like that new frock, Rosemary. It doesn’t suit you. It’s all bunch and fuss.”

Then had come Rosemary’s engagement to George Barton. Excitement, shopping, streams of parcels, bridesmaids’ dresses.

The wedding. Walking up the aisles behind Rosemary, hearing whispers:

“What a beautiful bride she makes. . . .”

Why had Rosemary married George? Even at the time Iris had been vaguely surprised. There had been so many exciting young men, ringing Rosemary up, taking her out. Why choose George Barton, fifteen years older than herself, kindly, pleasant, but definitely dull?

George was well-off, but it wasn’t money. Rosemary had her own money, a great deal of it.

Uncle Paul’s money. . . .

Iris searched her mind carefully, seeking to differentiate between what she knew now and what she had known then: Uncle Paul, for instance?

He wasn’t really an uncle, she had always known that. Without ever having been definitely told them she knew certain facts. Paul Bennett had been in

love with their mother. She had preferred another and a poorer man. Paul Bennett had taken his defeat in a romantic spirit. He had remained the family friend, adopted an attitude of romantic platonic devotion. He had become Uncle Paul, had stood godfather to the firstborn child, Rosemary. When he died, it was found that he had left his entire fortune to his little goddaughter, then a child of thirteen.

Rosemary, besides her beauty, had been an heiress. And she had married nice dull George Barton.

Why? Iris had wondered then. She wondered now. Iris didn't believe that Rosemary had ever been in love with him. But she had seemed very happy with him and she had been fond of him—yes, definitely fond of him. Iris had good opportunities for knowing, for a year after the marriage, their mother, lovely delicate Viola Marle, had died, and Iris, a girl of seventeen, had gone to live with Rosemary Barton and her husband.

A girl of seventeen. Iris pondered over the picture of herself. What had she been like? What had she felt, thought, seen?

She came to the conclusion that that young Iris Marle had been slow of development—unthinking, acquiescing in things as they were. Had she resented, for instance, her mother's earlier absorption in Rosemary? On the whole she thought not. She had accepted, unhesitatingly, the fact that Rosemary was the important one. Rosemary was "out"—naturally her mother was occupied as far as her health permitted with her elder daughter. That had been natural enough. Her own turn would come someday. Viola Marle had always been a somewhat remote mother, preoccupied mainly with her own health, relegating her children to nurses, governesses, schools, but invariably charming to them in those brief moments when she came across them. Hector Marle had died when Iris was five years old. The knowledge that he drank more than was good for him had permeated so subtly that she had not the least idea how it had actually come to her.

Seventeen-year-old Iris Marle had accepted life as it came, had duly mourned for her mother, had worn black clothes, had gone to live with her sister and her sister's husband at their house in Elvaston Square.

Sometimes it had been rather dull in that house. Iris wasn't to come out, officially, until the following year. In the meantime she took French and German lessons three times a week, and also attended domestic science classes. There were times when she had nothing much to do and nobody to talk to. George was kind, invariably affectionate and brotherly. His attitude had never varied. He was the same now.

And Rosemary? Iris had seen very little of Rosemary. Rosemary had been out a good deal. Dressmakers, cocktail parties, bridge. . . .

What did she really know about Rosemary when she came to think of it? Of her tastes, of her hopes, of her fears? Frightening, really, how little you might know of a person after living in the same house with them! There had been little or no intimacy between the sisters.

But she'd got to think now. She'd got to remember. It might be important.

Certainly Rosemary had seemed happy enough. . . .

III

Until that day—a week before it happened.

She, Iris, would never forget that day. It stood out crystal clear—each detail, each word. The shining mahogany table, the pushed back chair, the hurried characteristic writing. . . .

Iris closed her eyes and let the scene come back. . . .

Her own entry into Rosemary's sitting room, her sudden stop.

It had startled her so; what she saw! Rosemary, sitting at the writing table, her head laid down on her outstretched arms. Rosemary weeping with a deep abandoned sobbing. She'd never seen Rosemary cry before—and this bitter, violent weeping frightened her.

True, Rosemary had had a bad go of 'flu. She'd only been up a day or two. And everyone knew that 'flu did leave you depressed. Still—

Iris had cried out, her voice childish, startled:

“Oh, Rosemary, what is it?”

Rosemary sat up, swept the hair back from her disfigured face. She struggled to regain command of herself. She said quickly:

“It’s nothing—nothing—don’t stare at me like that!”

She got up and passing her sister, she ran out of the room.

Puzzled, upset, Iris went farther into the room. Her eyes, drawn wonderingly to the writing table, caught sight of her own name in her sister’s handwriting. Had Rosemary been writing to her then?

She drew nearer, looked down on the sheet of blue notepaper with the big characteristic sprawling writing, even more sprawling than usual owing to the haste and agitation behind the hand that held the pen.

Darling Iris,

There isn’t any point in my making a will because my money goes to you anyway, but I’d like certain of my things to be given to certain people.

To George, the jewellery he’s given me, and the little enamel casket we bought together when we were engaged.

To Gloria King, my platinum cigarette case.

To Maisie, my Chinese Pottery horse that she’s always admired—

It stopped there, with a frantic scrawl of the pen as Rosemary had dashed it down and given way to uncontrollable weeping.

Iris stood as though turned to stone.

What did it mean? Rosemary wasn’t going to die, was she? She’d been very ill with influenza, but she was all right now. And anyway people didn’t die

of 'flu—at least sometimes they did, but Rosemary hadn't. She was quite well now, only weak and run-down.

Iris's eyes went over the words again and this time a phrase stood out with startling effect:

“ . . . my money goes to you anyway. . . . ”

It was the first intimation she had had of the terms of Paul Bennett's will. She had known since she was a child that Rosemary had inherited Uncle Paul's money, that Rosemary was rich whilst she herself was comparatively poor. But until this moment she had never questioned what would happen to that money on Rosemary's death.

If she had been asked, she would have replied that she supposed it would go to George as Rosemary's husband, but would have added that it seemed absurd to think of Rosemary dying before George!

But here it was, set down in black and white, in Rosemary's own hand. At Rosemary's death the money came to her, Iris. But surely that wasn't legal? A husband or wife got any money, not a sister. Unless, of course, Paul Bennett had left it that way in his will. Yes, that must be it. Uncle Paul had said the money was to go to her if Rosemary died. That did make it rather less unfair—

Unfair? She was startled as the word leapt to her thoughts. Had she been thinking that it was unfair for Rosemary to get all Uncle Paul's money? She supposed that, deep down, she must have been feeling just that. It was unfair. They were sisters, she and Rosemary. They were both her mother's children. Why should Uncle Paul give it all to Rosemary?

Rosemary always had everything!

Parties and frocks and young men in love with her and an adoring husband.

The only unpleasant thing that ever happened to Rosemary was having an attack of 'flu! And even that hadn't lasted longer than a week!

Iris hesitated, standing by the desk. That sheet of paper—would Rosemary want it left about for the servants to see?

After a minute's hesitation she picked it up, folded it in two and slipped it into one of the drawers of the desk.

It was found there after the fatal birthday party, and provided an additional proof, if proof was necessary, that Rosemary had been in a depressed and unhappy state of mind after her illness, and had possibly been thinking of suicide even then.

Depression after influenza. That was the motive brought forward at the inquest, the motive that Iris's evidence helped to establish. An inadequate motive, perhaps, but the only one available, and consequently accepted. It had been a bad type of influenza that year.

Neither Iris nor George Barton could have suggested any other motive—then.

Now, thinking back over the incident in the attic, Iris wondered that she could have been so blind.

The whole thing must have been going on under her eyes! And she had seen nothing, noticed nothing!

Her mind took a quick leap over the tragedy of the birthday party. No need to think of that! That was over—done with. Put away the horror of that and the inquest and George's twitching face and bloodshot eyes. Go straight on to the incident of the trunk in the attic.

IV

That had been about six months after Rosemary's death.

Iris had continued to live at the house in Elvaston Square. After the funeral the Marle family solicitor, a courtly old gentleman with a shining bald head and unexpectedly shrewd eyes, had had an interview with Iris. He had explained with admirable clarity that under the will of Paul Bennett,

Rosemary had inherited his estate in trust to pass at her death to any children she might have. If Rosemary died childless, the estate was to go to Iris absolutely. It was, the solicitor explained, a very large fortune which would belong to her absolutely upon attaining the age of twenty-one or on her marriage.

In the meantime, the first thing to settle was her place of residence. Mr. George Barton had shown himself anxious for her to continue living with him and had suggested that her father's sister, Mrs. Drake, who was in impoverished circumstances owing to the financial claims of a son (the black sheep of the Marle family), should make her home with them and chaperon Iris in society. Did Iris approve of this plan?

Iris had been quite willing, thankful not to have to make new plans. Aunt Lucilla she remembered as an amiable friendly sheep with little will of her own.

So the matter had been settled. George Barton had been touchingly pleased to have his wife's sister still with him and treated her affectionately as a younger sister. Mrs. Drake, if not a stimulating companion, was completely subservient to Iris's wishes. The household settled down amicably.

It was nearly six months later that Iris made her discovery in the attic.

The attics of the Elvaston Square house were used as storage rooms for odds and ends of furniture, and a number of trunks and suitcases.

Iris had gone up there one day after an unsuccessful hunt for an old red pullover for which she had an affection. George had begged her not to wear mourning for Rosemary, Rosemary had always been opposed to the idea, he said. This, Iris knew, was true, so she acquiesced and continued to wear ordinary clothes, somewhat to the disapproval of Lucilla Drake, who was old-fashioned and liked what she called "the decencies" to be observed. Mrs. Drake herself was still inclined to wear crêpe for a husband deceased some twenty-odd years ago.

Various unwanted clothes, Iris knew, had been packed away in a trunk upstairs. She started hunting through it for her pullover, coming across, as

she did so, various forgotten belongings, a grey coat and skirt, a pile of stockings, her skiing kit and one or two old bathing dresses.

It was then that she came across an old dressing gown that had belonged to Rosemary and which had somehow or other escaped being given away with the rest of Rosemary's things. It was a mannish affair of spotted silk with big pockets.

Iris shook it out, noting that it was in perfectly good condition. Then she folded it carefully and returned it to the trunk. As she did so, her hand felt something crackle in one of the pockets. She thrust in her hand and drew out a crumpled-up piece of paper. It was in Rosemary's handwriting and she smoothed it out and read it.

Leopard darling, you can't mean it . . . You can't—you can't . . . We love each other! We belong together! You must know that just as I know it! We can't just say good-bye and go on coolly with our own lives. You know that's impossible, darling—quite impossible. You and I belong together—forever and ever. I'm not a conventional woman—I don't mind about what people say. Love matters more to me than anything else. We'll go away together—and be happy—I'll make you happy. You said to me once that life without me was dust and ashes to you—do you remember, Leopard darling? And now you write calmly that all this had better end—that it's only fair to me. Fair to me? But I can't live without you! I'm sorry about George—he's always been sweet to me—but he'll understand. He'll want to give me my freedom. It isn't right to live together if you don't love each other anymore. God meant us for each other, darling—I know He did. We're going to be wonderfully happy—but we must be brave. I shall tell George myself—I want to be quite straight about the whole thing—but not until after my birthday.

I know I'm doing what's right, Leopard darling—and I can't live without you—can't, can't—CAN'T. How stupid it is of me to write all this. Two lines would have done. Just "I love you. I'm never going to let you go." Oh darling—

The letter broke off.

Iris stood motionless, staring down at it.

How little one knew of one's own sister!

So Rosemary had had a lover—had written him passionate love letters—had planned to go away with him?

What had happened? Rosemary had never sent the letter after all. What letter had she sent? What had been finally decided between Rosemary and this unknown man?

("Leopard!" What extraordinary fancies people had when they were in love. So silly. Leopard indeed!)

Who was this man? Did he love Rosemary as much as she loved him? Surely he must have done. Rosemary was so unbelievably lovely. And yet, according to Rosemary's letter, he had suggested "ending it all." That suggested—what? Caution? He had evidently said that the break was for Rosemary's sake. That it was only fair to her. Yes, but didn't men say that sort of thing to save their faces? Didn't it really mean that the man, whoever he was, was tired of it all? Perhaps it had been to him a mere passing distraction. Perhaps he had never really cared. Somehow Iris got the impression that the unknown man had been very determined to break with Rosemary finally. . . .

But Rosemary had thought differently. Rosemary wasn't going to count the cost. Rosemary had been determined, too. . . .

Iris shivered.

And she, Iris, hadn't known a thing about it! Hadn't even guessed! Had taken it for granted that Rosemary was happy and contented and that she and George were quite satisfied with one another. Blind! She must have been blind not to know a thing like that about her own sister.

But who was the man?

She cast her mind back, thinking, remembering. There had been so many men about, admiring Rosemary, taking her out, ringing her up. There had been no one special. But there must have been—the rest of the bunch were mere camouflage for the one, the only one, that mattered. Iris frowned perplexedly, sorting her remembrances carefully.

Two names stood out. It must, yes, positively it must, be one or the other. Stephen Farraday? It must be Stephen Farraday. What could Rosemary have seen in him? A stiff pompous young man—and not so very young either. Of course people did say he was brilliant. A rising politician, an undersecretaryship prophesied in the near future, and all the weight of the influential Kidderminster connection behind him. A possible future Prime Minister! Was that what had given him glamour in Rosemary's eyes? Surely she couldn't care so desperately for the man himself—such a cold self-contained creature? But they said that his own wife was passionately in love with him, that she had gone against all the wishes of her powerful family in marrying him—a mere nobody with political ambitions! If one woman felt like that about him, another woman might also. Yes, it must be Stephen Farraday.

Because, if it wasn't Stephen Farraday, it must be Anthony Browne.

And Iris didn't want it to be Anthony Browne.

True, he'd been very much Rosemary's slave, constantly at her beck and call, his dark good-looking face expressing a kind of humorous desperation. But surely that devotion had been too open, too freely declared to go really deep?

Odd the way he had disappeared after Rosemary's death. They had none of them seen him since.

Still not so odd really—he was a man who travelled a lot. He had talked about the Argentine and Canada and Uganda and the U.S.A. She had an idea that he was actually an American or a Canadian, though he had hardly any accent. No, it wasn't really strange that they shouldn't have seen anything of him since.

It was Rosemary who had been his friend. There was no reason why he should go on coming to see the rest of them. He had been Rosemary's friend. But not Rosemary's lover! She didn't want him to have been Rosemary's lover. That would hurt—that would hurt terribly. . . .

She looked down at the letter in her hand. She crumpled it up. She'd throw it away, burn it. . . .

It was sheer instinct that stopped her.

Someday it might be important to produce that letter. . . .

She smoothed it out, took it down with her and locked it away in her jewel case.

It might be important, someday, to show why Rosemary took her own life.

V

“And the next thing, please?”

The ridiculous phrase came unbidden into Iris's mind and twisted her lips into a wry smile. The glib shopkeeper's question seemed to represent so exactly her own carefully directed mental processes.

Was not that exactly what she was trying to do in her survey of the past? She had dealt with the surprising discovery in the attic. And now—on to “the next thing, please!” What was the next thing?

Surely the increasingly odd behaviour of George. That dated back for a long time. Little things that had puzzled her became clear now in the light of the surprising interview last night. Disconnected remarks and actions took their proper place in the course of events.

And there was the reappearance of Anthony Browne. Yes, perhaps that ought to come next in sequence, since it had followed the finding of the letter by just one week.

Iris couldn't recall her sensations exactly. . . .

Rosemary had died in November. In the following May, Iris, under the wing of Lucilla Drake, had started her social young girl's life. She had gone to luncheons and teas and dances without, however, enjoying them very much. She had felt listless and unsatisfied. It was at a somewhat dull dance towards the end of June that she heard a voice say behind her:

"It is Iris Marle, isn't it?"

She had turned, flushing, to look into Anthony's—Tony's—dark quizzical face.

He said:

"I don't expect you to remember me, but—"

She interrupted.

"Oh, but I do remember you. Of course I do!"

"Splendid. I was afraid you'd have forgotten me. It's such a long time since I saw you."

"I know. Not since Rosemary's birthday par—"

She stopped. The words had come gaily, unthinkingly, to her lips. Now the colour rushed away from her cheeks, leaving them white and drained of blood. Her lips quivered. Her eyes were suddenly wide and dismayed.

Anthony Browne said quickly:

"I'm terribly sorry. I'm a brute to have reminded you."

Iris swallowed. She said:

"It's all right."

(Not since the night of Rosemary's birthday party. Not since the night of Rosemary's suicide. She wouldn't think of it. She would not think of it!)

Anthony Browne said again:

“I’m terribly sorry. Please forgive me. Shall we dance?”

She nodded. Although already engaged for the dance that was just beginning, she had floated on to the floor in his arms. She saw her partner, a blushing immature young man whose collar seemed too big for him, peering about for her. The sort of partner, she thought scornfully, that debts have to put up with. Not like this man—Rosemary’s friend.

A sharp pang went through her. Rosemary’s friend. That letter. Had it been written to this man she was dancing with now? Something in the easy feline grace with which he danced lent substance to the nickname “Leopard.” Had he and Rosemary—

She said sharply:

“Where have you been all this time?”

He held her a little way from him, looking down into her face. He was unsmiling now, his voice held coldness.

“I’ve been travelling—on business.”

“I see.” She went on uncontrollably, “Why have you come back?”

He smiled then. He said lightly:

“Perhaps—to see you, Iris Marle.”

And suddenly gathering her up a little closer, he executed a long daring glide through the dancers, a miracle of timing and steering. Iris wondered why, with a sensation that was almost wholly pleasure, she should feel afraid.

Since then Anthony had definitely become part of her life. She saw him at least once a week.

She met him in the Park, at various dances, found him put next to her at dinner.

The only place he never came to was the house in Elvaston Square. It was some time before she noticed this, so adroitly did he manage to evade or refuse invitations there. When she did realize it she began to wonder why. Was it because he and Rosemary—

Then, to her astonishment, George, easy-going, non interfering George, spoke to her about him.

“Who’s this fellow, Anthony Browne, you’re going about with? What do you know about him?”

She stared at him.

“Know about him? Why, he was a friend of Rosemary’s!”

George’s face twitched. He blinked. He said in a dull heavy voice:

“Yes, of course, so he was.”

Iris cried remorsefully:

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reminded you.”

George Barton shook his head. He said gently:

“No, no, I don’t want her forgotten. Never that. After all,” he spoke awkwardly, his eyes averted, “that’s what her name means. Rosemary—remembrance.” He looked full at her. “I don’t want you to forget your sister, Iris.”

She caught her breath.

“I never shall.”

George went on:

“But about this young fellow, Anthony Browne. Rosemary may have liked him, but I don’t believe she knew much about him. You know, you’ve got to be careful, Iris. You’re a very rich young woman.”

A kind of burning anger swept over her.

“Tony—Anthony—has plenty of money himself. Why, he stays at Claridge’s when he’s in London.”

George Barton smiled a little. He murmured:

“Eminently respectable—as well as costly. All the same, my dear, nobody seems to know much about this fellow.”

“He’s an American.”

“Perhaps. If so, it’s odd he isn’t sponsored more by his own Embassy. He doesn’t come much to this house, does he?”

“No. And I can see why, if you’re so horrid about him!”

George shook his head.

“Seem to have put my foot in it. Oh well. Only wanted to give you a timely warning. I’ll have a word with Lucilla.”

“Lucilla!” said Iris scornfully.

George said anxiously:

“Is everything all right? I mean, does Lucilla see to it that you get the sort of time you ought to have? Parties—all that sort of thing?”

“Yes, indeed, she works like a beaver. . . .”

“Because, if not, you’ve only got to say, you know, child. We could get hold of someone else. Someone younger and more up to date. I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I do, George. Oh, George, I do.”

He said rather heavily:

“Then that’s all right. I’m not much hand at these shows myself—never was. But see to it you get everything you want. There’s no need to stint expense.”

That was George all over—kind, awkward, blundering.

True to his promise, or threat, he “had a word” with Mrs. Drake on the subject of Anthony Browne, but as Fate would have it the moment was unpropitious for gaining Lucilla’s full attention.

She had just had a cable from that ne’er-do-well son who was the apple of her eye and who knew, only too well, how to wring the maternal heartstrings to his own financial advantage.

“Can you send me two hundred pounds. Desperate. Life or death. Victor.”

“Victor is so honourable. He knows how straitened my circumstances are and he’d never apply to me except in the last resource. He never has. I’m always so afraid he’ll shoot himself.”

“Not he,” said George Barton unfeelingly.

“You don’t know him. I’m his mother and naturally I know what my own son is like. I should never forgive myself if I didn’t do what he asked. I could manage by selling out those shares.”

George sighed.

“Look here, Lucilla. I’ll get full information by cable from one of my correspondents out there. We’ll find out just exactly what sort of a jam Victor’s in. But my advice to you is to let him stew in his own juice. He’ll never make good until you do.”

“You’re so hard, George. The poor boy has always been unlucky—”

George repressed his opinions on that point. Never any good arguing with women.

He merely said:

“I’ll get Ruth on to it at once. We should hear by tomorrow.”

Lucilla was partially appeased. The two hundred was eventually cut down to fifty, but that amount Lucilla firmly insisted on sending.

George, Iris knew, provided the amount himself though pretending to Lucilla that he was selling her shares. Iris admired George very much for his generosity and said so. His answer was simple.

“Way I look at it—always some black sheep in the family. Always someone who’s got to be kept. Someone or other will have to fork out for Victor until he dies.”

“But it needn’t be you. He’s not your family.”

“Rosemary’s family’s mine.”

“You’re a darling, George. But couldn’t I do it? You’re always telling me I’m rolling.”

He grinned at her.

“Can’t do anything of that kind until you’re twenty-one, young woman. And if you’re wise you won’t do it then. But I’ll give you one tip. When a fellow wires that he’ll end everything unless he gets a couple of hundred by return, you’ll usually find that twenty pounds will be ample . . . I daresay a tenner would do! You can’t stop a mother coughing up, but you can reduce the amount—remember that. Of course Victor Drake would never do away with himself, not he! These people who threaten suicide never do it.”

Never? Iris thought of Rosemary. Then she pushed the thought away. George wasn’t thinking of Rosemary. He was thinking of an unscrupulous, plausible young man in Rio de Janeiro.

The net gain from Iris's point of view was that Lucilla's maternal preoccupations kept her from paying full attention to Iris's friendship with Anthony Browne.

So—on to the “next thing, Madam.” The change in George! Iris couldn't put it off any longer. When had that begun? What was the cause of it?

Even now, thinking back, Iris could not put her finger definitely on the moment when it began. Ever since Rosemary's death George had been abstracted, had had fits of inattention and brooding. He had seemed older, heavier. That was all natural enough. But when exactly had his abstraction become something more than natural?

It was, she thought, after their clash over Anthony Browne, that she had first noticed him staring at her in a bemused, perplexed manner. Then he formed a new habit of coming home early from business and shutting himself up in his study. He didn't seem to be doing anything there. She had gone in once and found him sitting at his desk staring straight ahead of him. He looked at her when she came in with dull lacklustre eyes. He behaved like a man who has had a shock, but to her question as to what was the matter, he replied briefly, “Nothing.”

As the days went on, he went about with the careworn look of a man who has some definite worry upon his mind.

Nobody had paid very much attention. Iris certainly hadn't. Worries were always conveniently “Business.”

Then, at odd intervals, and with no seeming reason, he began to ask questions. It was then that she began to put his manner down as definitely “queer.”

“Look here, Iris, did Rosemary ever talk to you much?”

Iris stared at him.

“Why, of course, George. At least—well, about what?”

“Oh, herself—her friends—how things were going with her. Whether she was happy or unhappy. That sort of thing.”

She thought she saw what was in his mind. He must have got wind of Rosemary’s unhappy love affair.

She said slowly:

“She never said much. I mean—she was always busy—doing things.”

“And you were only a kid, of course. Yes, I know. All the same, I thought she might have said something.”

He looked at her inquiringly—rather like a hopeful dog.

She didn’t want George to be hurt. And anyway Rosemary never had said anything. She shook her head.

George sighed. He said heavily:

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter.”

Another day he asked her suddenly who Rosemary’s best women friends had been.

Iris reflected.

“Gloria King. Mrs. Atwell—Maisie Atwell. Jean Raymond.”

“How intimate was she with them?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly.”

“I mean, do you think she might have confided in any of them?”

“I don’t really know . . . I don’t think it’s awfully likely . . . What sort of confidence do you mean?”

Immediately she wished she hadn't asked that last question, but George's response to it surprised her.

"Did Rosemary ever say she was afraid of anybody?"

"Afraid?" Iris stared.

"What I'm trying to get at is, did Rosemary have any enemies?"

"Amongst other women?"

"No, no, not that kind of thing. Real enemies. There wasn't anyone—that you knew of—who—who might have had it in for her?"

Iris's frank stare seemed to upset him. He reddened, muttered:

"Sounds silly, I know. Melodramatic, but I just wondered."

It was a day or two after that that he started asking about the Farradays.

How much had Rosemary seen of the Farradays?

Iris was doubtful.

"I really don't know, George."

"Did she ever talk about them?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Were they intimate at all?"

"Rosemary was very interested in politics."

"Yes. After she met the Farradays in Switzerland. Never cared a button about politics before that."

"No. I think Stephen Farraday interested her in them. He used to lend her pamphlets and things."

George said:

“What did Sandra Farraday think about it?”

“About what?”

“About her husband lending Rosemary pamphlets.”

Iris said uncomfortably:

“I don’t know.”

George said, “She’s a very reserved woman. Looks cold as ice. But they say she’s crazy about Farraday. Sort of woman who might resent his having a friendship with another woman.”

“Perhaps.”

“How did Rosemary and Farraday’s wife get on?”

Iris said slowly:

“I don’t think they did. Rosemary laughed at Sandra. Said she was one of those stuffed political women like a rocking horse. (She is rather like a horse, you know.) Rosemary used to say that ‘if you pricked her sawdust would ooze out.’ ”

George grunted.

Then he said:

“Still seeing a good deal of Anthony Browne?”

“A fair amount.” Iris’s voice was cold, but George did not repeat his warnings. Instead he seemed interested.

“Knocked about a good deal, hasn’t he? Must have had an interesting life. Does he ever talk to you about it?”

“Not much. He’s travelled a lot, of course.”

“Business, I suppose.”

“I suppose so.”

“What is his business?”

“I don’t know.”

“Something to do with armament firms, isn’t it?”

“He’s never said.”

“Well, needn’t mention I asked. I just wondered. He was about a lot last Autumn with Dewsbury, who’s chairman of the United Arms Ltd . . . Rosemary saw rather a lot of Anthony Browne, didn’t she?”

“Yes—yes, she did.”

“But she hadn’t known him very long—he was more or less of a casual acquaintance? Used to take her dancing, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I was rather surprised, you know, that she wanted him at her birthday party. Didn’t realize she knew him so well.”

Iris said quietly:

“He dances very well. . . .”

“Yes—yes, of course. . . .”

Without wishing to, Iris unwillingly let a picture of that evening flit across her mind.

The round table at the Luxembourg, the shaded lights, the flowers. The dance band with its insistent rhythm. The seven people round the table,

herself, Anthony Browne, Rosemary, Stephen Far-raday, Ruth Lessing, George, and on George's right, Stephen Farraday's wife, Lady Alexandra Farraday with her pale straight hair and those slightly arched nostrils and her clear arrogant voice. Such a gay party it had been, or hadn't it?

And in the middle of it, Rosemary—No, no, better not think about that. Better only to remember herself sitting next to Tony—that was the first time she had really met him. Before that he had been only a name, a shadow in the hall, a back accompanying Rosemary down the steps in front of the house to a waiting taxi.

Tony—

She came back with a start. George was repeating a question.

“Funny he cleared off so soon after. Where did he go, do you know?”

She said vaguely, “Oh, Ceylon, I think, or India.”

“Never mentioned it that night.”

Iris said sharply:

“Why should he? And have we got to talk about—that night?”

His face crimsoned over.

“No, no, of course not. Sorry, old thing. By the way, ask Browne to dinner one night. I'd like to meet him again.”

Iris was delighted. George was coming round. The invitation was duly given and accepted, but at the last minute Anthony had to go North on business and couldn't come.

One day at the end of July, George startled both Lucilla and Iris by announcing that he had bought a house in the country.

“Bought a house?” Iris was incredulous. “But I thought we were going to rent that house at Goring for two months?”

“Nicer to have a place of one’s own—eh? Can go down for weekends all through the year.”

“Where is it? On the river?”

“Not exactly. In fact, not at all. Sussex. Marlingham. Little Priors, it’s called. Twelve acres—small Georgian house.”

“Do you mean you’ve bought it without us even seeing it?”

“Rather a chance. Just came into the market. Snapped it up.”

Mrs. Drake said:

“I suppose it will need a lot of doing up and redecorating.”

George said in an offhand way:

“Oh, that’s all right. Ruth has seen to all that.”

They received the mention of Ruth Lessing, George’s capable secretary, in respectful silence. Ruth was an institution—practically one of the family. Good looking in a severe black-and-white kind of way, she was the essence of efficiency combined with tact. . . .

During Rosemary’s lifetime, it had been usual for Rosemary to say, “Let’s get Ruth to see to it. She’s marvellous. Oh, leave it to Ruth.”

Every difficulty could always be smoothed out by Miss Lessing’s capable fingers. Smiling, pleasant, aloof, she surmounted all obstacles. She ran George’s office and, it was suspected, ran George as well. He was devoted to her and leaned upon her judgement in every way. She seemed to have no needs, no desires of her own.

Nevertheless on this occasion Lucilla Drake was annoyed.

“My dear George, capable as Ruth is, well, I mean—the women of a family do like to arrange the colour scheme of their own drawing room! Iris should

have been consulted. I say nothing about myself. I do not count. But it is annoying for Iris.”

George looked conscience-stricken.

“I wanted it to be a surprise!”

Lucilla had to smile.

“What a boy you are, George.”

Iris said:

“I don’t mind about colour schemes. I’m sure Ruth will have made it perfect. She’s so clever. What shall we do down there? There’s a tennis court, I suppose.”

“Yes, and golf links six miles away, and it’s only about fourteen miles to the sea. What’s more we shall have neighbours. Always wise to go to a part of the world where you know somebody, I think.”

“What neighbours?” asked Iris sharply.

George did not meet her eyes.

“The Farradays,” he said. “They live about a mile and a half away just across the park.”

Iris stared at him. In a minute she leapt to the conviction that the whole of this elaborate business, the purchasing and equipping of a country house, had been undertaken with one object only—to bring George into close relationship with Stephen and Sandra Farraday. Near neighbours in the country, with adjoining estates, the two families were bound to be on intimate terms. Either that or a deliberate coolness!

But why? Why this persistent harping on the Farradays? Why this costly method of achieving an incomprehensible aim?

Did George suspect that Rosemary and Stephen Farraday had been something more than friends? Was this a strange manifestation of postmortem jealousy? Surely that was a thought too far-fetched for words!

But what did George want from the Farradays? What was the point of all the odd questions he was continually shooting at her, Iris? Wasn't there something very queer about George lately?

The odd fuddled look he had in the evenings! Lucilla attributed it to a glass or so too much of port. Lucilla would!

No, there was something queer about George lately. He seemed to be labouring under a mixture of excitement interlarded with great spaces of complete apathy when he sunk in a coma.

Most of that August they spent in the country at Little Priors. Horrible house! Iris shivered. She hated it. A gracious well-built house, harmoniously furnished and decorated (Ruth Lessing was never at fault!). And curiously, frighteningly vacant. They didn't live there. They occupied it. As soldiers, in a war, occupied some lookout post.

What made it horrible was the overlay of ordinary normal summer living. People down for weekends, tennis parties, informal dinners with the Farradays. Sandra Farraday had been charming to them—the perfect manner to neighbours who were already friends. She introduced them to the county, advised George and Iris about horses, was prettily deferential to Lucilla as an older woman.

And behind the mask of her pale smiling face no one could know what she was thinking. A woman like a sphinx.

Of Stephen they had seen less. He was very busy, often absent on political business. To Iris it seemed certain that he deliberately avoided meeting the Little Priors party more than he could help.

So August had passed and September, and it was decided that in October they should go back to the London house.

Iris had drawn a deep breath of relief. Perhaps, once they were back George would return to his normal self.

And then, last night, she had been roused by a low tapping on her door. She switched on the light and glanced at the time. Only one o'clock. She had gone to bed at half past ten and it had seemed to her it was much later.

She threw on a dressing gown and went to the door. Somehow that seemed more natural than just to shout "Come in."

George was standing outside. He had not been to bed and was still in his evening clothes. His breath was coming unevenly and his face was a curious blue colour.

He said:

"Come down to the study, Iris. I've got to talk to you. I've got to talk to someone."

Wondering, still dazed with sleep, she obeyed.

Inside the study, he shut the door and motioned her to sit opposite him at the desk. He pushed the cigarette box across to her, at the same time taking one and lighting it, after one or two attempts, with a shaking hand.

She said, "Is anything the matter, George?"

She was really alarmed now. He looked ghastly.

George spoke between small gasps, like a man who has been running.

"I can't go on by myself. I can't keep it any longer. You've got to tell me what you think—whether it's true—whether it's possible—"

"But what is it you're talking about, George?"

"You must have noticed something, seen something. There must have been something she said. There must have been a reason—"

She stared at him.

He passed his hand over his forehead.

“You don’t understand what I’m talking about. I can see that. Don’t look so scared, little girl. You’ve got to help me. You’ve got to remember every damned thing you can. Now, now, I know I sound a bit incoherent, but you’ll understand in a minute—when I’ve shown you the letters.”

He unlocked one of the drawers at the side of the desk and took out two single sheets of paper.

They were of a pale innocuous blue, with words printed on them in small prim letters.

“Read that,” said George.

Iris stared down at the paper. What it said was quite clear and devoid of circumlocution:

“YOU THINK YOUR WIFE COMMITTED SUICIDE. SHE DIDN’T. SHE WAS KILLED.”

The second ran:

“YOUR WIFE ROSEMARY DIDN’T KILL HERSELF. SHE WAS MURDERED.”

As Iris stayed staring at the words, George went on:

“They came about three months ago. At first I thought it was a joke—a cruel rotten sort of joke. Then I began to think. Why should Rosemary have killed herself?”

Iris said in a mechanical voice:

“Depression after influenza.”

“Yes, but really when you come to think of it, that’s rather piffle, isn’t it? I mean lots of people have influenza and feel a bit depressed afterwards—what?”

Iris said with an effort:

“She might—have been unhappy?”

“Yes, I suppose she might.” George considered the point quite calmly. “But all the same I don’t see Rosemary putting an end to herself because she was unhappy. She might threaten to, but I don’t think she would really do it when it came to the point.”

“But she must have done, George! What other explanation could there be? Why, they even found the stuff in her handbag.”

“I know. It all hangs together. But ever since these came,” he tapped the anonymous letters with his fingernail, “I’ve been turning things over in my mind. And the more I’ve thought about it the more I feel sure there’s something in it. That’s why I’ve asked you all those questions—about Rosemary ever making any enemies. About anything she’d ever said that sounded as though she were afraid of someone. Whoever killed her must have had a reason—”

“But, George, you’re crazy—”

“Sometimes I think I am. Other times I know that I’m on the right track. But I’ve got to know. I’ve got to find out. You’ve got to help me, Iris. You’ve got to think. You’ve got to remember. That’s it—remember. Go back over that night again and again. Because you do see, don’t you, that if she was killed, it must have been someone who was at the table that night? You do see that, don’t you?”

Yes, she had seen that. There was no pushing aside the remembrance of that scene any longer. She must remember it all. The music, the roll of drums, the lowered lights, the cabaret and the lights going up again and Rosemary sprawled forward on the table, her face blue and convulsed.

Iris shivered. She was frightened now—horribly frightened. . . .

She must think—go back—remember.

Rosemary, that's for remembrance.

There was to be no oblivion.

Two

RUTH LESSING

Ruth Lessing, during a momentary lull in her busy day, was remembering her employer's wife, Rosemary Barton.

She had disliked Rosemary Barton a good deal. She had never known quite how much until that November morning when she had first talked with Victor Drake.

That interview with Victor had been the beginning of it all, had set the whole train in motion. Before then, the things she had felt and thought had been so far below the stream of her consciousness that she hadn't really known about them.

She was devoted to George Barton. She always had been. When she had first come to him, a cool, competent young woman of twenty-three, she had seen that he needed taking charge of. She had taken charge of him. She had saved him time, money and worry. She had chosen his friends for him, and directed him to suitable hobbies. She had restrained him from ill-advised business adventures, and encouraged him to take judicious risks on occasions. Never once in their long association had George suspected her of being anything other than subservient, attentive and entirely directed by himself. He took a distinct pleasure in her appearance, the neat shining dark head, the smart tailor-mades and crisp shirts, the small pearls in her well-shaped ears, the pale discreetly powdered face and the faint restrained rose shade of her lipstick.

Ruth, he felt, was absolutely right.

He liked her detached impersonal manner, her complete absence of sentiment or familiarity. In consequence he talked to her a good deal about his private affairs and she listened sympathetically and always put in a useful word of advice.

She had nothing to do, however, with his marriage. She did not like it. However, she accepted it and was invaluable in helping with the wedding arrangements, relieving Mrs. Marle of a great deal of work.

For a time after the marriage, Ruth was on slightly less confidential terms with her employer. She confined herself strictly to the office affairs. George left a good deal in her hands.

Nevertheless such was her efficiency that Rosemary soon found that George's Miss Lessing was an invaluable aid in all sorts of ways. Miss Lessing was always pleasant, smiling and polite.

George, Rosemary and Iris all called her Ruth and she often came to Elvaston Square to lunch. She was now twenty-nine and looked exactly the same as she had looked at twenty-three.

Without an intimate word ever passing between them, she was always perfectly aware of George's slightest emotional reactions. She knew when the first elation of his married life passed into an ecstatic content, she was aware when that content gave way to something else that was not so easy to define. A certain inattention to detail shown by him at this time was corrected by her own forethought.

However distrait George might be, Ruth Lessing never seemed to be aware of it. He was grateful to her for that.

It was on a November morning that he spoke to her of Victor Drake.

"I want you to do a rather unpleasant job for me, Ruth?"

She looked at him inquiringly. No need to say that certainly she would do it. That was understood.

"Every family's got a black sheep," said George.

She nodded comprehendingly.

"This is a cousin of my wife's—a thorough bad hat, I'm afraid. He's half ruined his mother—a fatuous sentimental soul who has sold out most of

what few shares she has on his behalf. He started by forging a cheque at Oxford—they got that hushed up and since then he's been shipped about the world—never making good anywhere."

Ruth listened without much interest. She was familiar with the type. They grew oranges, started chicken farms, went as jackaroos to Australian stations, got jobs with meat-freezing concerns in New Zealand. They never made good, never stayed anywhere long, and invariably got through any money that had been invested on their behalf. They had never interested her much. She preferred success.

"He's turned up now in London and I find he's been worrying my wife. She hadn't set eyes on him since she was a schoolgirl, but he's a plausible sort of scoundrel and he's been writing to her for money, and I'm not going to stand for that. I've made an appointment with him for twelve o'clock this morning at his hotel. I want you to deal with it for me. The fact is I don't want to get into contact with the fellow. I've never met him and I never want to and I don't want Rosemary to meet him. I think the whole thing can be kept absolutely businesslike if it's fixed up through a third party."

"Yes, that is always a good plan. What is the arrangement to be?"

"A hundred pounds cash and a ticket to Buenos Aires. The money to be given to him actually on board the boat."

Ruth smiled.

"Quite so. You want to be sure he actually sails!"

"I see you understand."

"It's not an uncommon case," she said indifferently.

"No, plenty of that type about." He hesitated. "Are you sure you don't mind doing this?"

"Of course not." She was a little amused. "I can assure you I am quite capable of dealing with the matter."

“You’re capable of anything.”

“What about booking his passage? What’s his name, by the way?”

“Victor Drake. The ticket’s here. I rang up the steamship company yesterday. It’s the San Cristobal, sails from Tilbury tomorrow.”

Ruth took the ticket, glanced over it to make sure of its correctness and put it into her handbag.

“That’s settled. I’ll see to it. Twelve o’clock. What address?”

“The Rupert, off Russell Square.”

She made a note of it.

“Ruth, my dear, I don’t know what I should do without you—” He put a hand on her shoulder affectionately; it was the first time he had ever done such a thing. “You’re my right hand, my other self.”

She flushed, pleased.

“I’ve never been able to say much—I’ve taken all you do for granted—but it’s not really like that. You don’t know how much I rely on you for everything—” he repeated: “everything. You’re the kindest, dearest, most helpful girl in the world!”

Ruth said, laughing to hide her pleasure and embarrassment, “You’ll spoil me saying such nice things.”

“Oh, but I mean them. You’re part of the firm, Ruth. Life without you would be unthinkable.”

She went out feeling a warm glow at his words. It was still with her when she arrived at the Rupert Hotel on her errand.

Ruth felt no embarrassment at what lay before her. She was quite confident of her powers to deal with any situation. Hard-luck stories and people never

appealed to her. She was prepared to take Victor Drake as all in the day's work.

He was very much as she had pictured him, though perhaps definitely more attractive. She made no mistake in her estimate of his character. There was not much good in Victor Drake. As coldhearted and calculating a personality as could exist, well masked behind an agreeable devilry. What she had not allowed for was his power of reading other people's souls, and the practised ease with which he could play on the emotions. Perhaps, too, she had underestimated her own resistance to his charm. For he had charm.

He greeted her with an air of delighted surprise.

"George's emissary? But how wonderful. What a surprise!"

In dry even tones, she set out George's terms. Victor agreed to them in the most amiable manner.

"A hundred pounds? Not bad at all. Poor old George. I'd have taken sixty—but don't tell him so! Conditions:—'Do not worry lovely Cousin Rosemary—do not contaminate innocent Cousin Iris—do not embarrass worthy Cousin George.' All agreed to! Who is coming to see me off on the San Cristobal? You are, my dear Miss Lessing? Delightful." He wrinkled up his nose, his dark eyes twinkled sympathetically. He had a lean brown face and there was a suggestion about him of a toreador—romantic conception! He was attractive to women and knew it!

"You've been with Barton some time, haven't you, Miss Lessing?"

"Six years."

"And he wouldn't know what to do without you. Oh yes, I know all about it. And I know all about you, Miss Lessing."

"How do you know?" asked Ruth sharply.

Victor grinned. "Rosemary told me."

"Rosemary? But—"

“That’s all right. I don’t propose to worry Rosemary any further. She’s already been very nice to me—quite sympathetic. I got a hundred out of her, as a matter of fact.”

“You—”

Ruth stopped and Victor laughed. His laugh was infectious. She found herself laughing too.

“That’s too bad of you, Mr. Drake.”

“I’m a very accomplished sponger. Highly finished technique. The mater, for instance, will always come across if I send a wire hinting at imminent suicide.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I disapprove of myself very deeply. I’m a bad lot, Miss Lessing. I’d like you to know just how bad.”

“Why?” She was curious.

“I don’t know. You’re different. I couldn’t play up the usual technique to you. Those clear eyes of yours—you wouldn’t fall for it. No, ‘More sinned against than sinning, poor fellow,’ wouldn’t cut any ice with you. You’ve no pity in you.”

Her face hardened.

“I despise pity.”

“In spite of your name? Ruth is your name, isn’t it? Piquant that. Ruth the ruthless.”

She said, “I’ve no sympathy with weakness!”

“Who said I was weak? No, no, you’re wrong there, my dear. Wicked, perhaps. But there’s one thing to be said for me.”

Her lip curled a little. The inevitable excuse.

“Yes?”

“I enjoy myself. Yes,” he nodded, “I enjoy myself immensely. I’ve seen a good deal of life, Ruth. I’ve done almost everything. I’ve been an actor and a storekeeper and a waiter and an odd job man, and a luggage porter, and a property man in a circus! I’ve sailed before the mast in a tramp steamer. I’ve been in the running for President in a South American Republic. I’ve been in prison! There are only two things I’ve never done, an honest day’s work, or paid my own way.”

He looked at her, laughing. She ought, she felt, to have been revolted. But the strength of Victor Drake was the strength of the devil. He could make evil seem amusing. He was looking at her now with that uncanny penetration.

“You needn’t look so smug, Ruth! You haven’t as many morals as you think you have! Success is your fetish. You’re the kind of girl who ends up by marrying the boss. That’s what you ought to have done with George. George oughtn’t to have married that little ass Rosemary. He ought to have married you. He’d have done a damned sight better for himself if he had.”

“I think you’re rather insulting.”

“Rosemary’s a damned fool, always has been. Lovely as paradise and dumb as a rabbit. She’s the kind men fall for but never stick to. Now you—you’re different. My God, if a man fell in love with you—he’d never tire.”

He had reached the vulnerable spot. She said with sudden raw sincerity:

“If! But he wouldn’t fall in love with me!”

“You mean George didn’t? Don’t fool yourself, Ruth. If anything happened to Rosemary, George would marry you like a shot.”

(Yes, that was it. That was the beginning of it all.)

Victor said, watching her:

“But you know that as well as I do.”

(George’s hand on hers, his voice affectionate, warm—Yes, surely it was true . . . He turned to her, depended on her . . .)

Victor said gently: “You ought to have more confidence in yourself, my dear girl. You could twist George round your little finger. Rosemary’s only a silly little fool.”

“It’s true,” Ruth thought. “If it weren’t for Rosemary, I could make George ask me to marry him. I’d be good to him. I’d look after him well.”

She felt a sudden blind anger, an uprushing of passionate resentment. Victor Drake was watching her with a good deal of amusement. He liked putting ideas into people’s heads. Or, as in this case, showing them the ideas that were already there. . . .

Yes, that was how it started—that chance meeting with the man who was going to the other side of the globe on the following day. The Ruth who came back to the office was not quite the same Ruth who had left it, though no one could have noticed anything different in her manner or appearance.

Shortly after she had returned to the office Rosemary Barton rang up on the telephone.

“Mr. Barton has just gone out to lunch. Can I do anything?”

“Oh, Ruth, would you? That tiresome Colonel Race has sent a telegram to say he won’t be back in time for my party. Ask George who he’d like to ask instead. We really ought to have another man. There are four women—Iris is coming as a treat and Sandra Farraday and—who on earth’s the other? I can’t remember.”

“I’m the fourth, I think. You very kindly asked me.”

“Oh, of course. I’d forgotten all about you!”

Rosemary’s laugh came light and tinkling. She could not see the sudden flush, the hard line of Ruth Lessing’s jaw.

Asked to Rosemary's party as a favour—a concession to George! “Oh, yes, we'll have your Ruth Lessing. After all she'll be pleased to be asked, and she is awfully useful. She looks quite presentable too.”

In that moment Ruth Lessing knew that she hated Rosemary Barton.

Hated her for being rich and beautiful and careless and brainless. No routine hard work in an office for Rosemary—everything handed to her on a golden platter. Love affairs, a doting husband—no need to work or plan—

Hateful, condescending, stuck-up, frivolous beauty. . . .

“I wish you were dead,” said Ruth Lessing in a low voice to the silent telephone.

Her own words startled her. They were so unlike her. She had never been passionate, never vehement, never been anything but cool and controlled and efficient.

She said to herself: “What's happening to me?”

She had hated Rosemary Barton that afternoon. She still hated Rosemary Barton on this day a year later.

Someday, perhaps, she would be able to forget Rosemary Barton. But not yet.

She deliberately sent her mind back to those November days.

Sitting looking at the telephone—feeling hatred surge up in her heart. . . .

Giving Rosemary's message to George in her pleasant controlled voice. Suggesting that she herself should not come so as to leave the number even. George had quickly overridden that!

Coming in to report next morning on the sailing of the San Cristobal. George's relief and gratitude.

“So he's sailed on her all right?”

“Yes. I handed him the money just before the gangway was taken up.” She hesitated and said, “He waved his hand as the boat backed away from the quay and called out ‘Love and kisses to George and tell him I’ll drink his health tonight.’ ”

“Impudence!” said George. He asked curiously, “What did you think of him, Ruth?”

Her voice was deliberately colourless as she replied:

“Oh—much as I expected. A weak type.”

And George saw nothing, noticed nothing! She felt like crying out: “Why did you send me to see him? Didn’t you know what he might do to me? Don’t you realize that I’m a different person since yesterday? Can’t you see that I’m dangerous? That there’s no knowing what I may do?”

Instead she said in her businesslike voice, “About that San Paulo letter—”

She was the competent efficient secretary. . . .

Five more days.

Rosemary’s birthday.

A quiet day at the office—a visit to the hairdresser—the putting on of a new black frock, a touch of makeup skilfully applied. A face looking at her in the glass that was not quite her own face. A pale, determined, bitter face.

It was true what Victor Drake had said. There was no pity in her.

Later, when she was staring across the table at Rosemary Barton’s blue convulsed face, she still felt no pity.

Now, eleven months later, thinking of Rosemary Barton, she felt suddenly afraid. . . .

Three

ANTHONY BROWNE

Anthony Browne was frowning into the middle distance as he thought about Rosemary Barton.

A damned fool he had been ever to get mixed up with her. Though a man might be excused for that! Certainly she was easy upon the eyes. That evening at the Dorchester he'd been able to look at nothing else. As beautiful as a houri—and probably just about as intelligent!

Still he'd fallen for her rather badly. Used up a lot of energy trying to find someone who would introduce him. Quite unforgivable really when he ought to have been attending strictly to business. After all, he wasn't idling his days away at Claridge's for pleasure.

But Rosemary Barton was lovely enough in all conscience to excuse any momentary lapse from duty. All very well to kick himself now and wonder why he'd been such a fool. Fortunately there was nothing to regret. Almost as soon as he spoke to her the charm had faded a little. Things resumed their normal proportions. This wasn't love—nor yet infatuation. A good time was to be had by all, no more, no less.

Well, he'd enjoyed it. And Rosemary had enjoyed it too. She danced like an angel and wherever he took her men turned round to stare at her. It gave a fellow a pleasant feeling. So long as you didn't expect her to talk. He thanked his stars he wasn't married to her. Once you got used to all that perfection of face and form where would you be? She couldn't even listen intelligently. The sort of girl who would expect you to tell her every morning at the breakfast table that you loved her passionately!

Oh, all very well to think those things now.

He'd fallen for her all right, hadn't he?

Danced attendance on her. Rung her up, taken her out, danced with her, kissed her in the taxi. Been in a fair way to making rather a fool of himself over her until that startling, that incredible day.

He could remember just how she had looked, the piece of chestnut hair that had fallen loose over one ear, the lowered lashes and the gleam of her dark blue eyes through them. The pout of the soft red lips.

“Anthony Browne. It’s a nice name!”

He said lightly:

“Eminently well established and respectable. There was a chamberlain to Henry the Eighth called Anthony Browne.”

“An ancestor, I suppose?”

“I wouldn’t swear to that.”

“You’d better not!”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I’m the Colonial branch.”

“Not the Italian one?”

“Oh,” he laughed. “My olive complexion? I had a Spanish mother.”

“That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“A great deal, Mr. Anthony Browne.”

“You’re very fond of my name.”

“I said so. It’s a nice name.”

And then quickly like a bolt from the blue: “Nicer than Tony Morelli.”

For a moment he could hardly believe his ears! It was incredible!
Impossible!

He caught her by the arm. In the harshness of his grip she winced away.

“Oh, you’re hurting me!”

“Where did you get hold of that name?”

His voice was harsh, menacing.

She laughed, delighted with the effect she had produced. The incredible little fool!

“Who told you?”

“Someone who recognized you.”

“Who was it? This is serious, Rosemary. I’ve got to know.”

She shot a sideways glance at him.

“A disreputable cousin of mine, Victor Drake.”

“I’ve never met anyone of that name.”

“I imagine he wasn’t using that name at the time you knew him. Saving the family feelings.”

Anthony said slowly. “I see. It was—in prison?”

“Yes. I was reading Victor the riot act—telling him he was a disgrace to us all. He didn’t care, of course. Then he grinned and said, ‘You aren’t always so particular yourself, sweetheart. I saw you the other night dancing with an ex-gaolbird—one of your best boyfriends, in fact. Calls himself Anthony Browne, I hear, but in stir he was Tony Morelli.’ ”

Anthony said in a light voice:

“I must renew my acquaintance with this friend of my youth. We old prison ties must stick together.”

Rosemary shook her head. “Too late. He’s been shipped off to South America. He sailed yesterday.”

“I see.” Anthony drew a deep breath. “So you’re the only person who knows my guilty secret?”

She nodded. “I won’t tell on you.”

“You’d better not.” His voice grew stern. “Look here, Rosemary, this is dangerous. You don’t want your lovely face carved up, do you? There are people who don’t stick at a little thing like ruining a girl’s beauty. And there’s such a thing as being bumped off. It doesn’t only happen in books and films. It happens in real life, too.”

“Are you threatening me, Tony?”

“Warning you.”

Would she take the warning? Did she realize that he was in deadly earnest? Silly little fool. No sense in that lovely empty head. You couldn’t rely on her to keep her mouth shut. All the same he’d have to try and ram his meaning home.

“Forget you’ve ever heard the name of Tony Morelli, do you understand?”

“But I don’t mind a bit, Tony. I’m quite broadminded. It’s quite a thrill for me to meet a criminal. You needn’t feel ashamed of it.”

The absurd little idiot. He looked at her coldly. He wondered in that moment how he could ever have fancied he cared. He’d never been able to suffer fools gladly—not even fools with pretty faces.

“Forget about Tony Morelli,” he said grimly. “I mean it. Never mention that name again.”

He'd have to get out. That was the only thing to do. There was no relying on this girl's silence. She'd talk whenever she felt inclined.

She was smiling at him—an enchanting smile, but it left him unmoved.

“Don't be so fierce. Take me to the Jarrows' dance next week.”

“I shan't be here. I'm going away.”

“Not before my birthday party. You can't let me down. I'm counting on you. Now don't say no. I've been miserably ill with that horrid 'flu and I'm still feeling terribly weak. I musn't be crossed. You've got to come.”

He might have stood firm. He might have chucked it all—gone right away.

Instead, through an open door, he saw Iris coming down the stairs. Iris, very straight and slim, with her pale face and black hair and grey eyes. Iris with much less than Rosemary's beauty and with all the character that Rosemary would never have.

In that moment he hated himself for having fallen a victim, in however small a degree, to Rosemary's facile charm. He felt as Romeo felt remembering Rosaline when he had first seen Juliet.

Anthony Browne changed his mind.

In the flash of a second he committed himself to a totally different course of action.

Four

STEPHEN FARRADAY

Stephen Farraday was thinking of Rosemary—thinking of her with that incredulous amazement that her image always aroused in him. Usually he banished all thoughts of her from his mind as promptly as they arose—but there were times when, persistent in death as she had been in life, she refused to be thus arbitrarily dismissed.

His first reaction was always the same, a quick irresponsible shudder as he remembered the scene in the restaurant. At least he need not think again of that. His thoughts turned further back, to Rosemary alive, Rosemary smiling, breathing, gazing into his eyes. . . .

What a fool—what an incredible fool he had been!

And amazement held him, sheer bewildered amazement. How had it all come about? He simply could not understand it. It was as though his life were divided into two parts, one, the larger part, a sane well-balanced orderly progression, the other a brief uncharacteristic madness. The two parts simply did not fit.

For with all his ability and his clever, shrewd intellect, Stephen had not the inner perception to see that actually they fitted only too well.

Sometimes he looked back over his life, appraising it coldly and without undue emotion, but with a certain priggish self-congratulation. From a very early age he had been determined to succeed in life, and in spite of difficulties and certain initial disadvantages he had succeeded.

He had always had a certain simplicity of belief and outlook. He believed in the Will. What a man willed, that he could do!

Little Stephen Farraday had steadfastly cultivated his Will. He could look for little help in life save that which he got by his own efforts. A small pale boy of seven, with a good forehead and a determined chin, he meant to rise

—and rise high. His parents, he already knew, would be of no use to him. His mother had married beneath her station in life—and regretted it. His father, a small builder, shrewd, cunning and cheeseparing, was despised by his wife and also by his son. . . . For his mother, vague, aimless, and given to extraordinary variations of mood, Stephen felt only a puzzled incomprehension until the day he found her slumped down on the corner of a table with an empty eau-de-Cologne bottle fallen from her hand. He had never thought of drink as an explanation of his mother's moods. She never drank spirits or beer, and he had never realized that her passion for eau de Cologne had had any other origin than her vague explanation of headaches.

He realized in that moment that he had little affection for his parents. He suspected shrewdly that they had not much for him. He was small for his age, quiet, with a tendency to stammer. Namby-pamby his father called him. A well-behaved child, little trouble in the house. His father would have preferred a more rumbustious type. "Always getting into mischief I was, at his age." Sometimes, looking at Stephen, he felt uneasily his own social inferiority to his wife. Stephen took after her folk.

Quietly, with growing determination, Stephen mapped out his own life. He was going to succeed. As a first test of will, he determined to master his stammer. He practised speaking slowly, with a slight hesitation between every word. And in time his efforts were crowned with success. He no longer stammered. In school he applied himself to his lessons. He intended to have education. Education got you somewhere. Soon his teachers became interested, encouraged him. He won a scholarship. His parents were approached by the educational authorities—the boy had promise. Mr. Farraday, doing well out of a row of jerry-built houses, was persuaded to invest money in his son's education.

At twenty-two Stephen came down from Oxford with a good degree, a reputation as a good and witty speaker, and a knack of writing articles. He had also made some useful friends. Politics were what attracted him. He had learnt to overcome his natural shyness and to cultivate an admirable social manner—modest, friendly, and with that touch of brilliance that led people to say, "That young man will go far." Though by predilection a Liberal, Stephen realized that for the moment, at least, the Liberal Party was

dead. He joined the ranks of the Labour Party. His name soon became known as that of a “coming” young man. But the Labour Party did not satisfy Stephen. He found it less open to new ideas, more hidebound by tradition than its great and powerful rival. The Conservatives, on the other hand, were on the lookout for promising young talent.

They approved of Stephen Farraday—he was just the type they wanted. He contested a fairly solid Labour constituency and won it by a very narrow majority. It was with a feeling of triumph that Stephen took his seat in the House of Commons. His career had begun and this was the right career he had chosen. Into this he could put all his ability, all his ambition. He felt in him the ability to govern, and to govern well. He had a talent for handling people, for knowing when to flatter and when to oppose. One day, he swore it, he would be in the Cabinet.

Nevertheless, once the excitement of actually being in the House had subsided, he experienced swift disillusionment. The hardly fought election had put him in the limelight, now he was down in the rut, a mere insignificant unit of the rank and file, subservient to the party whips, and kept in his place. It was not easy here to rise out of obscurity. Youth here was looked upon with suspicion. One needed something above ability. One needed influence.

There were certain interests. Certain families. You had to be sponsored.

He considered marriage. Up to now he had thought very little about the subject. He had a dim picture in the back of his mind of some handsome creature who would stand hand in hand with him sharing his life and his ambitions; who would give him children and to whom he could unburden his thoughts and perplexities. Some woman who felt as he did and who would be eager for his success and proud of him when he achieved it.

Then one day he went to one of the big receptions at Kidderminster House. The Kidderminster connection was the most powerful in England. They were, and always had been, a great political family. Lord Kidderminster, with his little Imperial, his tall, distinguished figure, was known by sight everywhere. Lady Kidderminster’s large rocking horse face was familiar on

public platforms and on committees all over England. They had five daughters, three of them beautiful, and one son still at Eton.

The Kidderminsters made a point of encouraging likely young members of the Party. Hence Farraday's invitation.

He did not know many people there and he was standing alone near a window about twenty minutes after his arrival. The crowd by the tea table was thinning out and passing into the other rooms when Stephen noticed a tall girl in black standing alone by the table looking for a moment slightly at a loss.

Stephen Farraday had a very good eye for faces. He had picked up that very morning in the Tube a "Home Gossip" discarded by a woman traveller and glanced over it with slight amusement. There had been a rather smudgy reproduction of Lady Alexandra Hayle, third daughter of the Earl of Kidderminster, and below a gossipy little extract about her—" . . . always been of a shy and retiring disposition—devoted to animals—Lady Alexandra has taken a course in Domestic Science as Lady Kidderminster believes in her daughters being thoroughly grounded in all domestic subjects."

That was Lady Alexandra Hayle standing there, and with the unerring perception of a shy person, Stephen knew that she, too, was shy. The plainest of the five daughters, Alexandra had always suffered under a sense of inferiority. Given the same education and upbringing as her sisters, she had never quite attained their *savoir faire*, which annoyed her mother considerably. Sandra must make an effort—it was absurd to appear so awkward, so *gauche*.

Stephen did not know that, but he knew that the girl was ill at ease and unhappy. And suddenly a rush of conviction came to him. This was his chance! "Take it, you fool, take it! It's now or never!"

He crossed the room to the long buffet. Standing beside the girl he picked up a sandwich. Then, turning, and speaking nervously and with an effort (no acting, that—he was nervous!) he said:

“I say, do you mind if I speak to you? I don’t know many people here and I can see you don’t either. Don’t snub me. As a matter of fact I’m awfully s-s-shy” (his stammer of years ago came back at a most opportune moment) “and—and I think you’re s-s-shy too, aren’t you?”

The girl flushed—her mouth opened. But as he had guessed, she could not say it. Too difficult to find words to say “I’m the daughter of the house.” Instead she admitted quietly:

“As a matter of fact, I—I am shy. I always have been.”

Stephen went on quickly:

“It’s a horrible feeling. I don’t know whether one ever gets over it. Sometimes I feel absolutely tongue-tied.”

“So do I.”

He went on—talking rather quickly, stammering a little—his manner was boyish, appealing. It was a manner that had been natural to him a few years ago and which was now consciously retained and cultivated. It was young, naïve, disarming.

He led the conversation soon to the subject of plays, mentioned one that was running which had attracted a good deal of interest. Sandra had seen it. They discussed it. It had dealt with some point of the social services and they were soon deep in a discussion of these measures.

Stephen did not overdo things. He saw Lady Kidderminster entering the room, her eyes in search of her daughter. It was no part of his plan to be introduced now. He murmured a good-bye.

“I have enjoyed talking to you. I was simply hating the whole show till I found you. Thank you.”

He left Kidderminster House with a feeling of exhilaration. He had taken his chance. Now to consolidate what he had started.

For several days after that he haunted the neighbourhood of Kidderminster House. Once Sandra came out with one of her sisters. Once she left the house alone, but with a hurried step. He shook his head. That would not do, she was obviously en route to some particular appointment. Then, about a week after the party, his patience was rewarded. She came out one morning with a small black Scottie dog and she turned with a leisurely step in the direction of the Park.

Five minutes later, a young man walking rapidly in the opposite direction pulled up short and stopped in front of Sandra. He exclaimed blithely:

“I say, what luck! I wondered if I’d ever see you again.”

His tone was so delighted that she blushed just a little.

He stooped to the dog.

“What a jolly little fellow. What’s his name?”

“MacTavish.”

“Oh, very Scotch.”

They talked dog for some moments. Then Stephen said, with a trace of embarrassment:

“I never told you my name the other day. It’s Farraday. Stephen Farraday. I’m an obscure M.P.”

He looked inquiringly and saw the colour come up in her cheeks again as she said: “I’m Alexandra Hayle.”

He responded to that very well. He might have been back in the O.U.D.S. Surprise, recognition, dismay, embarrassment!

“Oh, you’re—you’re Lady Alexandra Hayle—you—my goodness! What a stupid fool you must have thought me the other day!”

Her answering move was inevitable. She was bound both by her breeding and her natural kindliness to do all she could to put him at his ease, to reassure him.

“I ought to have told you at the time.”

“I ought to have known. What an oaf you must think me!”

“How should you have known? What does it matter anyway? Please, Mr. Farraday, don’t look so upset. Let’s walk to the Serpentine. Look, MacTavish is simply pulling.”

After that, he met her several times in the Park. He told her his ambitions. Together they discussed political topics. He found her intelligent, well-informed and sympathetic. She had good brains and a singularly unbiased mind. They were friends now.

The next advance came when he was asked to dinner at Kidderminster House and to go on to a dance. A man had fallen through at the last moment. When Lady Kidderminster was racking her brains Sandra said quietly:

“What about Stephen Farraday?”

“Stephen Farraday?”

“Yes, he was at your party the other day and I’ve met him once or twice since.”

Lord Kidderminster was consulted and was all in favour of encouraging the young hopefuls of the political world.

“Brilliant young fellow—quite brilliant. Never heard of his people, but he’ll make a name for himself one of these days.”

Stephen came and acquitted himself well.

“A useful young man to know,” said Lady Kidderminster with unconscious arrogance.

Two months later Stephen put his fortunes to the test. They were by the Serpentine and MacTavish sat with his head on Sandra's foot.

"Sandra, you know—you must know that I love you. I want you to marry me. I wouldn't ask you if I didn't believe that I shall make a name for myself one day. I do believe it. You shan't be ashamed of your choice. I swear it."

She said, "I'm not ashamed."

"Then you do care?"

"Didn't you know?"

"I hoped—but I couldn't be sure. Do you know that I've loved you since that very first moment when I saw you across the room and took my courage in both hands and came to speak to you. I was never more terrified in my life."

She said, "I think I loved you then, too. . . ."

It was not all plain sailing. Sandra's quiet announcement that she was going to marry Stephen Farraday sent her family into immediate protests. Who was he? What did they know about him?

To Lord Kidderminster Stephen was quite frank about his family and origin. He spared a fleeting thought that it was just as well for his prospects that his parents were now both dead.

To his wife, Lord Kidderminster said, "H'm, it might be worse."

He knew his daughter fairly well, knew that her quiet manner hid inflexible purpose. If she meant to have the fellow she would have him. She'd never give in!

"The fellow's got a career ahead of him. With a bit of backing he'll go far. Heaven knows we could do with some young blood. He seems a decent chap, too."

Lady Kidderminster assented grudgingly. It was not at all her idea of a good match for her daughter. Still, Sandra was certainly the most difficult of the family. Susan had been a beauty and Esther had brains. Diana, clever child, had married the young Duke of Harwich—the parti of the season. Sandra had certainly less charm—there was her shyness—and if this young man had a future as everyone seemed to think. . . .

She capitulated, murmuring:

“But, of course, one will have to use influence. . . .”

So Alexandra Catherine Hayle took Stephen Leonard Farraday for better and for worse, in white satin and Brussels lace, with six bridesmaids and two minute pages and all the accessories of a fashionable wedding. They went to Italy for the honeymoon and came back to a small charming house in Westminster, and a short time afterwards Sandra’s godmother died and left her a very delightful small Queen Anne Manor house in the country. Everything went well for the young married pair. Stephen plunged into Parliamentary life with renewed ardour, Sandra aided and abetted him in every way, identifying herself heart and soul with his ambitions. Sometimes, Stephen would think with an almost incredulous realization of how Fortune had favoured him! His alliance with the powerful Kidderminster faction assured him of rapid rise in his career. His own ability and brilliance would consolidate the position that opportunity made for him. He believed honestly in his own powers and was prepared to work unsparingly for the good of his country.

Often, looking across the table at his wife, he felt gladly what a perfect helpmate she was—just what he had always imagined. He liked the lovely clean lines of her head and neck, the direct hazel eyes under their level brows, the rather high white forehead and the faint arrogance of her aquiline nose. She looked, he thought, rather like a racehorse—so well groomed, so instinct with breeding, so proud. He found her an ideal companion, their minds raced alike to the same quick conclusions. Yes, he thought, Stephen Farraday, that little disconsolate boy, had done very well for himself. His life was shaping exactly as he had meant it to be. He was only a year or two over thirty and already success lay in the hollow of his hand.

And in that mood of triumphant satisfaction, he went with his wife for a fortnight to St. Moritz, and looking across the hotel lounge saw Rosemary Barton.

What happened to him at that moment he never understood. By a kind of poetic revenge the words he had spoken to another woman came true. Across a room he fell in love. Deeply, overwhelmingly, crazily in love. It was the kind of desperate, headlong, adolescent calf love that he should have experienced years ago and got over.

He had always assumed that he was not a passionate type of man. One or two ephemeral affairs, a mild flirtation—that, so far as he knew, was all that “love” meant to him. Sensual pleasures simply did not appeal to him. He told himself that he was too fastidious for that sort of thing.

If he had been asked if he loved his wife, he would have replied “Certainly”—yet he knew, well enough, that he would not have dreamed of marrying her if she had been, say, the daughter of a penniless country gentleman. He liked her, admired her and felt a deep affection for her and also a very real gratitude for what her position had brought him.

That he could fall in love with the abandon and misery of a callow boy was a revelation. He could think of nothing but Rosemary. Her lovely laughing face, the rich chestnut of her hair, her swaying voluptuous figure. He couldn’t eat—he couldn’t sleep. They went skiing together. He danced with her. And as he held her to him he knew that he wanted her more than anything on earth. So this, this misery, this aching longing agony—this was love!

Even in his preoccupation he blessed Fate for having given him a naturally imperturbable manner. No one must guess, no one must know, what he was feeling—except Rosemary herself.

The Bartons left a week earlier than the Farradays. Stephen said to Sandra that St. Moritz was not very amusing. Should they cut their time short and go back to London? She agreed very amiably. Two weeks after their return, he became Rosemary’s lover.

A strange ecstatic hectic period—feverish, unreal. It lasted—how long? Six months at most. Six months during which Stephen went about his work as usual, visited his constituency, asked questions in the House, spoke at various meetings, discussed politics with Sandra and thought of one thing only—Rosemary.

Their secret meetings in the little flat, her beauty, the passionate endearments he showered on her, her clinging passionate embraces. A dream. A sensual infatuated dream.

And after the dream—the awakening.

It seemed to happen quite suddenly.

Like coming out of a tunnel into the daylight.

One day he was a bemused lover, the next day he was Stephen Farraday again thinking that perhaps he ought not to see Rosemary quite so often. Dash it all, they had been taking some terrific risks. If Sandra was ever to suspect—He stole a look at her down the breakfast table. Thank goodness, she didn't suspect. She hadn't an idea. Yet some of his excuses for absence lately had been pretty thin. Some women would have begun to smell a rat. Thank goodness Sandra wasn't a suspicious woman.

He took a deep breath. Really he and Rosemary had been very reckless! It was a wonder her husband hadn't got wise to things. One of those foolish unsuspecting chaps—years older than she was.

What a lovely creature she was. . . .

He thought suddenly of golf links. Fresh air blowing over sand dunes, tramping round with clubs—swinging a driver—a nice clean shot off the tee—a little chip with a mashie. Men. Men in plus fours smoking pipes. And no women allowed on the links!

He said suddenly to Sandra:

“Couldn't we go down to Fairhaven?”

She looked up, surprised.

“Do you want to? Can you get away?”

“Might take the inside of a week. I’d like to get some golf. I feel stale.”

“We could go tomorrow if you like. It will mean putting off the Astleys, and I must cancel that meeting on Tuesday. But what about the Lovats?”

“Oh, let’s cancel that too. We can think of some excuse. I want to get away.”

It had been peaceful at Fairhaven with Sandra and the dogs on the terrace and in the old walled garden, and with golf at Sandley Heath, and pottering down to the farm in the evening with MacTavish at his heels.

He had felt rather like someone who is recovering from an illness.

He had frowned when he saw Rosemary’s writing. He’d told her not to write. It was too dangerous. Not that Sandra ever asked him who his letters were from, but all the same it was unwise. Servants weren’t always to be trusted.

He ripped open the envelope with some annoyance, having taken the letter into his study. Pages. Simply pages.

As he read, the old enchantment swept over him again. She adored him, she loved him more than ever, she couldn’t endure not seeing him for five whole days. Was he feeling the same? Did the Leopard miss his Ethiopian?

He half-smiled, half-sighed. That ridiculous joke—born when he had bought her a man’s spotted dressing gown that she had admired. The Leopard changing his spots, and he had said, “But you mustn’t change your skin, darling.” And after that she had called him Leopard and he had called her his Black Beauty.

Damned silly, really. Yes, damned silly. Rather sweet of her to have written such pages and pages. But still she shouldn’t have done it. Dash it all, they’d got to be careful! Sandra wasn’t the sort of woman who would stand

for anything of that kind. If she once got an inkling—Writing letters was dangerous. He'd told Rosemary so. Why couldn't she wait until he got back to town? Dash it all, he'd see her in another two or three days.

There was another letter on the breakfast table the following morning. This time Stephen swore inwardly. He thought Sandra's eyes rested on it for a couple of seconds. But she didn't say anything. Thank goodness she wasn't the sort of woman who asked questions about a man's correspondence.

After breakfast he took the car over the market town eight miles away. Wouldn't do to put through a call from the village. He got Rosemary on the phone.

"Hullo—that you, Rosemary? Don't write anymore letters."

"Stephen, darling, how lovely to hear your voice!"

"Be careful, can anyone overhear you?"

"Of course not. Oh, angel, I have missed you. Have you missed me?"

"Yes, of course. But don't write. It's much too risky."

"Did you like my letter? Did it make you feel I was with you? Darling, I want to be with you every minute. Do you feel that too?"

"Yes—but not on the phone, old thing."

"You're so ridiculously cautious. What does it matter?"

"I'm thinking of you, too, Rosemary. I couldn't bear any trouble to come to you through me."

"I don't care what happens to me. You know that."

"Well, I care, sweetheart."

"When are you coming back?"

“Tuesday.”

“And we’ll meet at the flat, Wednesday.”

“Yes—er, yes.”

“Darling, I can hardly bear to wait. Can’t you make some excuse and come up today? Oh, Stephen, you could! Politics or something stupid like that?”

“I’m afraid it’s out of the question.”

“I don’t believe you miss me half as much as I miss you.”

“Nonsense, of course I do.”

When he rang off he felt tired. Why should women insist on being so damned reckless? Rosemary and he must be more careful in future. They’d have to meet less often.

Things after that became difficult. He was busy—very busy. It was quite impossible to give as much time to Rosemary—and the trying thing was she didn’t seem able to understand. He explained but she just wouldn’t listen.

“Oh, your stupid old politics—as though they were important!”

“But they are—”

She didn’t realize. She didn’t care. She took no interest in his work, in his ambitions, in his career. All she wanted was to hear him reiterate again and again that he loved her. “Just as much as ever? Tell me again that you really love me?”

Surely, he thought, she might take that for granted by this time! She was a lovely creature, lovely—but the trouble was that you couldn’t talk to her.

The trouble was they’d been seeing too much of each other. You couldn’t keep up an affair at fever heat. They must meet less often—slacken off a bit.

But that made her resentful—very resentful. She was always reproaching him now.

“You don’t love me as you used to do.”

And then he’d have to reassure her, to swear that of course he did. And she would constantly resurrect everything he had ever said to her.

“Do you remember when you said it would be lovely if we died together? Fell asleep forever in each other’s arms? Do you remember when you said we’d take a caravan and go off into the desert? Just the stars and the camels—and how we’d forget everything in the world?”

What damned silly things one said when one was in love! They hadn’t seemed fatuous at the time, but to have them hashed up in cold blood! Why couldn’t women let things decently alone? A man didn’t want to be continually reminded what an ass he’d made of himself.

She came out with sudden unreasonable demands. Couldn’t he go abroad to the South of France and she’d meet him there? Or go to Sicily or Corsica—one of those places where you never saw anyone you knew? Stephen said grimly that there was no such place in the world. At the most unlikely spots you always met some dear old school friend that you’d never seen for years.

And then she said something that frightened him.

“Well, but it wouldn’t really matter, would it?”

He was alert, watchful, suddenly cold within.

“What do you mean?”

She was smiling up at him, that same enchanting smile that had once made his heart turn over and his bones ache with longing. Now it made him merely impatient.

“Leopard, darling, I’ve thought sometimes that we’re stupid to go on trying to carry on this hole-and-corner business. It’s not worthy, somehow. Let’s

go away together. Let's stop pretending. George will divorce me and your wife will divorce you and then we can get married."

Just like that! Disaster! Ruin! And she couldn't see it!

"I wouldn't let you do such a thing."

"But, darling, I don't care. I'm not really very conventional."

"But I am. But I am," thought Stephen.

"I do feel that love is the most important thing in the world. It doesn't matter what people think of us."

"It would matter to me, my dear. An open scandal of that kind would be the end of my career."

"But would that really matter? There are hundreds of other things that you could do."

"Don't be silly."

"Why have you got to do anything anyway? I've got lots of money, you know. Of my own, I mean, not George's. We could wander about all over the world, going to the most enchanting out-of-the-way places—places, perhaps, where nobody else has ever been. Or to some island in the Pacific—think of it, the hot sun and the blue sea and the coral reefs."

He did think of it. A South Sea Island! Of all the idiotic ideas. What sort of a man did she think he was—a beachcomber?

He looked at her with eyes from which the last traces of scales had fallen. A lovely creature with the brains of a hen! He'd been mad—utterly and completely mad. But he was sane again now. And he'd got to get out of this fix. Unless he was careful she'd ruin his whole life.

He said all the things that hundreds of men had said before him. They must end it all—so he wrote. It was only fair to her. He couldn't risk bringing unhappiness on her. She didn't understand—and so on and so on.

It was all over—he must make her understand that.

But that was just what she refused to understand. It wasn't to be as easy as that. She adored him, she loved him more than ever, she couldn't live without him! The only honest thing was for her to tell her husband, and for Stephen to tell his wife the truth! He remembered how cold he had felt as he sat holding her letter. The little fool! The silly clinging fool! She'd go and blab the whole thing to George Barton and then George would divorce her and cite him as co-respondent. And Sandra would perforce divorce him too. He hadn't any doubt of that. She had spoken once of a friend, had said with faint surprise, "But of course when she found out he was having an affair with another woman, what else could she do but divorce him?" That was what Sandra would feel. She was proud. She would never share a man.

And then he would be done, finished—the influential Kidderminster backing would be withdrawn. It would be the kind of scandal that he would not be able to live down, even though public opinion was broaderminded than it used to be. But not in a flagrant case like this! Good-bye to his dreams, his ambitions. Everything wrecked, broken—all because of a crazy infatuation for a silly woman. Calf love, that was all it had been. Calf love contracted at the wrong time of life.

He'd lose everything he'd staked. Failure! Ignominy!

He'd lose Sandra. . . .

And suddenly, with a shock of surprise he realized that it was that that he would mind most. He'd lose Sandra. Sandra with her square white forehead and her clear hazel eyes. Sandra, his dear friend and companion, his arrogant, proud, loyal Sandra. No, he couldn't lose Sandra—he couldn't . . . Anything but that.

The perspiration broke out on his forehead.

Somehow he must get out of this mess.

Somehow he must make Rosemary listen to reason . . . But would she? Rosemary and reason didn't go together. Supposing he were to tell her that,

after all, he loved his wife? No. She simply wouldn't believe it. She was such a stupid woman. Empty-headed, clinging, possessive. And she loved him still—that was the mischief of it.

A kind of blind rage rose up in him. How on earth was he to keep her quiet? To shut her mouth? Nothing short of a dose of poison would do that, he thought bitterly.

A wasp was buzzing close at hand. He stared abstractedly. It had got inside a cut-glass jam-pot and was trying to get out.

Like me, he thought, entrapped by sweetness and now—he can't get out, poor devil.

But he, Stephen Farraday, was going to get out somehow. Time, he must play for time.

Rosemary was down with 'flu at the moment. He'd sent conventional inquiries—a big sheaf of flowers. It gave him a respite. Next week Sandra and he were dining with the Bartons—a birthday party for Rosemary. Rosemary had said, "I shan't do anything until after my birthday—it would be too cruel to George. He's making such a fuss about it. He's such a dear. After it's all over we'll come to an understanding."

Supposing he were to tell her brutally that it was all over, that he no longer cared? He shivered. No, he dare not do that. She might go to George in hysterics. She might even come to Sandra. He could hear her tearful, bewildered voice.

"He says he doesn't care anymore, but I know it's not true. He's trying to be loyal—to play the game with you—but I know you'll agree with me that when people love each other honesty is the only way. That's why I'm asking you to give him his freedom."

That was just the sort of nauseating stuff she would pour out. And Sandra, her face proud and disdainful, would say, "He can have his freedom!"

She wouldn't believe—how could she believe? If Rosemary were to bring out those letters—the letters he'd been asinine enough to write to her. Heaven knew what he had said in them. Enough and more than enough to convince Sandra—letters such as he had never written to her—

He must think of something—some way of keeping Rosemary quiet. “It's a pity,” he thought grimly, “that we don't live in the days of the Borgias. . . .”

A glass of poisoned champagne was about the only thing that would keep Rosemary quiet.

Yes, he had actually thought that.

Cyanide of potassium in her champagne glass, cyanide of potassium in her evening bag. Depression after influenza.

And across the table, Sandra's eyes meeting his.

Nearly a year ago—and he couldn't forget.

Five

ALEXANDRA FARRADAY

Sandra Farraday had not forgotten Rosemary Barton.

She was thinking of her at this very minute—thinking of her slumped forward across the table in the restaurant that night.

She remembered her own sharp indrawn breath and how then, looking up, she had found Stephen watching her. . . .

Had he read the truth in her eyes? Had he seen the hate, the mingling of horror and triumph?

Nearly a year ago now—and as fresh in her mind as if it had been yesterday! Rosemary, that's for remembrance. How horribly true that was. It was no good a person being dead if they lived on in your mind. That was what Rosemary had done. In Sandra's mind—and in Stephen's, too? She didn't know, but she thought it probable.

The Luxembourg—that hateful place with its excellent food, its deft swift service, its luxurious décor and setting. An impossible place to avoid, people were always asking you there.

She would have liked to forget—but everything conspired to make her remember. Even Fairhaven was no longer exempt now that George Barton had come to live at Little Priors.

It was really rather extraordinary of him. George Barton was altogether an odd man. Not at all the kind of neighbour she liked to have. His presence at Little Priors spoiled for her the charm and peace of Fairhaven. Always, up to this summer, it had been a place of healing and rest, a place where she and Stephen had been happy—that is, if they ever had been happy?

Her lips pressed thinly together. Yes, a thousand times, yes! They could have been happy but for Rosemary. It was Rosemary who had shattered the delicate edifice of mutual trust and tenderness that she and Stephen were

beginning to build. Something, some instinct, had bade her hide from Stephen her own passion, her single-hearted devotion. She had loved him from the moment he came across the room to her that day at Kidderminster House, pretending to be shy, pretending not to know who she was.

For he had known. She could not say when she had first accepted that fact. Sometime after their marriage, one day when he was expounding some neat piece of political manipulation necessary to the passing of some Bill.

The thought had flashed across her mind then: "This reminds me of something. What?" Later she realized that it was, in essence, the same tactics he had used that day at Kidderminster House. She accepted the knowledge without surprise, as though it were something of which she had long been aware, but which had only just risen to the surface of her mind.

From the day of their marriage she had realized that he did not love her in the same way as she loved him. But she thought it possible that he was actually incapable of such a love. That power of loving was her own unhappy heritage. To care with a desperation, an intensity that was, she knew, unusual among women! She would have died for him willingly; she was ready to lie for him, scheme for him, suffer for him! Instead she accepted with pride and reserve the place he wanted her to fill. He wanted her cooperation, her sympathy, her active and intellectual help. He wanted of her, not her heart, but her brains, and those material advantages which birth had given her.

One thing she would never do, embarrass him by the expression of a devotion to which he could make no adequate return. And she did believe honestly that he liked her, that he took pleasure in her company. She foresaw a future in which her burden would be immeasurably lightened—a future of tenderness and friendship.

In his way, she thought, he loved her.

And then Rosemary came.

She wondered sometimes, with a wry painful twist of the lips, how it was that he could imagine that she did not know. She had known from the first

minute—up there at St. Moritz—when she had first seen the way he looked at the woman.

She had known the very day the woman became his mistress.

She knew the scent the creature used. . . .

She could read in Stephen's polite face, with eyes abstracted, just what his memories were, what he was thinking about—that woman—the woman he had just left!

It was difficult, she thought dispassionately, to assess the suffering she had been through. Enduring, day after day, the tortures of the damned, with nothing to carry her through but her belief in courage—her own natural pride. She would not show, she would never show, what she was feeling. She lost weight, grew thinner and paler, the bones of her head and shoulders showing more distinctly with the flesh stretched tightly over them. She forced herself to eat, but could not force herself to sleep. She lay long nights, with dry eyes, staring into darkness. She despised the taking of drugs as weakness. She would hang on. To show herself hurt, to plead, to protest—all these things were abhorrent to her.

She had one crumb of comfort, a meagre one—Stephen did not wish to leave her. Granted that that was for the sake of his career, not out of fondness for her, still the fact remained. He did not want to leave her.

Someday, perhaps, the infatuation would pass. . . .

What could he, after all, see in the girl? She was attractive, beautiful—but so were other women. What did he find in Rosemary Barton that infatuated him?

She was brainless—silly—and not—she clung to this point especially—not even particularly amusing. If she had had wit, charm and provocation of manner—those were the things that held men. Sandra clung to the belief that the thing would end—that Stephen would tire of it.

She was convinced that the main interest in his life was his work. He was marked out for great things and he knew it. He had a fine statesmanlike brain and he delighted in using it. It was his appointed task in life. Surely once the infatuation began to wane he would realize that fact?

Never for one minute did Sandra consider leaving him. The idea never even came to her. She was his, body and soul, to take or discard. He was her life, her existence. Love burned in her with a medieval force.

There was a moment when she had hope. They went down to Fairhaven. Stephen seemed more his normal self. She felt suddenly a renewal of the old sympathy between them. Hope rose in her heart. He wanted her still, he enjoyed her company, he relied on her judgement. For the moment, he had escaped from the clutches of that woman.

He looked happier, more like his own self.

Nothing was irretrievably ruined. He was getting over it. If only he could make up his mind to break with her. . . .

Then they went back to London and Stephen relapsed. He looked haggard, worried, ill. He began to be unable to fix his mind on his work.

She thought she knew the cause. Rosemary wanted him to go away with her . . . He was making up his mind to take the step—to break with everything he cared about most. Folly! Madness! He was the type of man with whom his work would always come first—a very English type. He must know that himself, deep down—Yes, but Rosemary was very lovely—and very stupid. Stephen would not be the first man who had thrown away his career for a woman and been sorry afterwards!

Sandra caught a few words—a phrase one day at a cocktail party.

“ . . . Telling George—got to make up our minds.”

It was soon after that that Rosemary went down with 'flu.

A little hope rose in Sandra's heart. Suppose she were to get pneumonia—people did after 'flu—a young friend of hers had died that way only last winter. If Rosemary were to die—

She did not try to repress the thought—she was not horrified at herself. She was medieval enough to hate with a steady and untroubled mind.

She hated Rosemary Barton. If thoughts could kill, she would have killed her.

But thoughts do not kill—

Thoughts are not enough. . . .

How beautiful Rosemary had looked that night at the Luxembourg with her pale fox furs slipping off her shoulders in the ladies' cloakroom. Thinner, paler since her illness—an air of delicacy made her beauty more ethereal. She had stood in front of the glass touching up her face. . . .

Sandra, behind her, looked at their joint reflection in the mirror. Her own face like something sculptured, cold, lifeless. No feeling there, you would have said—a cold hard woman.

And then Rosemary said: "Oh, Sandra, am I taking all the glass? I've finished now. This horrid 'flu has pulled me down a lot. I look a sight. And I feel quite weak still and headachy."

Sandra had asked with quiet polite concern:

"Have you got a headache tonight?"

"Just a bit of one. You haven't got an aspirin, have you?"

"I've got a Cachet Faivre."

She had opened her handbag, taken out the cachet. Rosemary had accepted it. "I'll take it in my bag in case."

That competent dark-haired girl, Barton's secretary, had watched the little transaction. She came in turn to the mirror, and just put on a slight dusting of powder. A nice-looking girl, almost handsome. Sandra had the impression that she didn't like Rosemary.

Then they had gone out of the cloakroom, Sandra first, then Rosemary, then Miss Lessing—oh, and of course, the girl Iris, Rosemary's sister, she had been there. Very excited, with big grey eyes, and a schoolgirlish white dress.

They had gone out and joined the men in the hall.

And the headwaiter had come bustling forward and showed them to their table. They had passed in under the great domed arch and there had been nothing, absolutely nothing, to warn one of them that she would never come out through that door again alive. . . .

Six

GEORGE BARTON

Rosemary. . . .

George Barton lowered his glass and stared rather owlishly into the fire.

He had drunk just enough to feel maudlin with self-pity.

What a lovely girl she had been. He'd always been crazy about her. She knew it, but he'd always supposed she'd only laugh at him.

Even when he first asked her to marry him, he hadn't done it with any conviction.

Mowed and mumbled. Acted like a blithering fool.

"You know, old girl, anytime—you've only got to say. I know it's no good. You wouldn't look at me. I've always been the most awful fool. Got a bit of a corporation, too. But you do know what I feel, don't you, eh? I mean—I'm always there. Know I haven't got an earthly chance, but thought I'd just mention it."

And Rosemary had laughed and kissed the top of his head.

"You're sweet, George, and I'll remember the kind offer, but I'm not marrying anyone just at present."

And he had said seriously: "Quite right. Take plenty of time to look around. You can take your pick."

He'd never had any hope—not any real hope.

That's why he had been so incredulous, so dazed when Rosemary had said she was going to marry him.

She wasn't in love with him, of course. He knew that quite well. In fact, she admitted as much.

"You do understand, don't you? I want to feel settled down and happy and safe. I shall with you. I'm so sick of being in love. It always goes wrong somehow and ends in a mess. I like you, George. You're nice and funny and sweet and you think I'm wonderful. That's what I want."

He had answered rather incoherently:

"Steady does it. We'll be as happy as kings."

Well, that hadn't been far wrong. They had been happy. He'd always felt humble in his own mind. He'd always told himself that there were bound to be snags. Rosemary wasn't going to be satisfied with a dull kind of chap like himself. There would be incidents! He'd schooled himself to accept—incidents! He would hold firm to the belief that they wouldn't be lasting! Rosemary would always come back to him. Once let him accept that view and all would be well.

For she was fond of him. Her affection for him was constant and unvarying. It existed quite apart from her flirtations and her love affairs.

He had schooled himself to accept those. He had told himself that they were inevitable with someone of Rosemary's susceptible temperament and unusual beauty. What he had not bargained for were his own reactions.

Flirtations with this young man and that were nothing, but when he first got an inkling of a serious affair—

He'd known quick enough, sensed the difference in her. The rising excitement, the added beauty, the whole glowing radiance. And then what his instinct told him was confirmed by ugly concrete facts.

There was that day when he'd come into her sitting room and she had instinctively covered with her hand the page of the letter she was writing. He'd known then. She was writing to her lover.

Presently, when she went out of the room, he went across to the blotter. She had taken the letter with her, but the blotting sheet was nearly fresh. He'd taken it across the room and held it up to the glass—seen the words in Rosemary's dashing script, "My own beloved darling. . . ."

His blood had sung in his ears. He understood in that moment just what Othello had felt. Wise resolutions? Pah! Only the natural man counted. He'd like to choke the life out of her! He'd like to murder the fellow in cold blood. Who was it? That fellow Browne? Or that stick Stephen Farraday? They'd both of them been making sheep's eyes at her.

He caught sight of his face in the glass. His eyes were suffused with blood. He looked as though he were going to have a fit.

As he remembered that moment, George Barton let his glass fall from his hand. Once again he felt the choking sensation, the beating blood in his ears. Even now—

With an effort he pushed remembrance away. Mustn't go over that again. It was past—done with. He wouldn't ever suffer like that again. Rosemary was dead. Dead and at peace. And he was at peace too. No more suffering. . . .

Funny to think that that was what her death had meant to him. Peace. . . .

He'd never told even Ruth that. Good girl, Ruth. A good headpiece on her. Really, he didn't know what he would do without her. The way she helped. The way she sympathized. And never a hint of sex. Not man-mad like Rosemary. . . .

Rosemary . . . Rosemary sitting at the round table in the restaurant. A little thin in the face after 'flu—a little pulled down—but lovely, so lovely. And only an hour later—

No, he wouldn't think of that. Not just now. His plan. He would think of The Plan.

He'd speak to Race first. He'd show Race the letters. What would Race make of these letters? Iris had been dumbfounded. She evidently hadn't had the slightest idea.

Well, he was in charge of the situation now. He'd got it all taped.

The Plan. All worked out. The date. The place.

Nov. 2nd. All Souls' Day. That was a good touch. The Luxembourg, of course. He'd try to get the same table.

And the same guests. Anthony Browne, Stephen Farraday, Sandra Farraday. Then, of course, Ruth and Iris and himself. And as the odd, the seventh guest he'd get Race. Race who was originally to have been at the dinner.

And there would be one empty place.

It would be splendid!

Dramatic!

A repetition of the crime.

Well, not quite a repetition. . . .

His mind went back. . . .

Rosemary's birthday. . . .

Rosemary, sprawled forward on that table—dead . . . ?

BOOK 2
ALL SOULS' DAY

“There’s Rosemary, that’s for remembrance.”

One

Lucilla Drake was twittering. That was the term always used in the family and it was really a very apt description of the sounds that issued from Lucilla's kindly lips.

She was concerned on this particular morning with many things—so many that she found it hard to pin her attention down to one at a time. There was the imminence of the move back to town and the household problems involved in that move. Servants, housekeeping, winter storage, a thousand minor details—all these contended with a concern over Iris's looks.

“Really, dear, I feel quite anxious about you—you look so white and washed out—as though you hadn't slept—did you sleep? If not, there's that nice sleeping preparation of Dr. Wylie's or was it Dr. Gaskell's?—which reminds me—I shall have to go and speak to the grocer myself—either the maids have been ordering things in on their own, or else it's deliberate swindling on his part. Packets and packets of soap flakes—and I never allow more than three a week. But perhaps a tonic would be better? Eaton's syrup, they used to give when I was a girl. And spinach, of course. I'll tell cook to have spinach for lunch today.”

Iris was too languid and too used to Mrs. Drake's discursive style to inquire why the mention of Dr. Gaskell should have reminded her aunt of the local grocer, though had she done so, she would have received the immediate response: “Because the grocer's name is Cranford, my dear.” Aunt Lucilla's reasoning was always crystal clear to herself.

Iris merely said with what energy she could command, “I'm perfectly well, Aunt Lucilla.”

“Black under the eyes,” said Mrs. Drake. “You've been doing too much.”

“I've done nothing at all—for weeks.”

“So you think, dear. But too much tennis is overtiring for young girls. And I think the air down here is inclined to be enervating. This place is in a

hollow. If George had consulted me instead of that girl.”

“Girl?”

“That Miss Lessing he thinks so much of. All very well in the office, I daresay—but a great mistake to take her out of her place. Encourage her to think herself one of the family. Not that she needs any encouragement, I should say.”

“Oh, well, Aunt Lucilla, Ruth is practically one of the family.”

Mrs. Drake sniffed. “She means to be—that’s quite clear. Poor George—really an infant in arms where women are concerned. But it won’t do, Iris. George must be protected from himself and if I were you I should make it very clear that nice as Miss Lessing is, any idea of marriage is out of the question.”

Iris was startled for a moment out of her apathy.

“I never thought of George marrying Ruth.”

“You don’t see what goes on under your nose, child. Of course you haven’t had my experience of life.” Iris smiled in spite of herself. Aunt Lucilla was really very funny sometimes. “That young woman is out for matrimony.”

“Would it matter?” asked Iris.

“Matter? Of course it would matter.”

“Wouldn’t it really be rather nice?” Her aunt stared at her. “Nice for George, I mean. I think you’re right about her, you know. I think she is fond of him. And she’d be an awfully good wife to him and look after him.”

Mrs. Drake snorted and an almost indignant expression appeared on her rather sheep-like amiable face.

“George is very well looked after at present. What more can he want, I should like to know? Excellent meals and his mending seen to. Very pleasant for him to have an attractive young girl like you about the house

and when you marry some day I should hope I was still capable of seeing to his comfort and looking after his health. Just as well or better than a young woman out of an office could do—what does she know about housekeeping? Figures and ledgers and shorthand and typing—what good is that in a man's home?"

Iris smiled and shook her head, but she did not argue the point. She was thinking of the smooth dark satin of Ruth's head, of the clear complexion and the figure so well set off by the severe tailor-made clothes that Ruth affected. Poor Aunt Lucilla, all her mind on comfort and housekeeping, with romance so very far behind her that she had probably forgotten what it meant—if indeed, thought Iris, remembering her uncle by marriage, it had ever meant much.

Lucilla Drake had been Hector Marle's half-sister, the child of an earlier marriage. She had played the little mother to a very much younger brother when his own mother died. Housekeeping for her father, she had stiffened into a pronounced spinsterhood. She was close on forty when she met the Rev. Caleb Drake, he himself a man of over fifty. Her married life had been short, a mere two years, then she had been left a widow with an infant son. Motherhood, coming late and unexpectedly, had been the supreme experience of Lucilla Drake's life. Her son had turned out an anxiety, a source of grief and a constant financial drain—but never a disappointment. Mrs. Drake refused to recognize anything in her son Victor except an amiable weakness of character. Victor was too trusting—too easily led astray by bad companions because of his own belief in them. Victor was unlucky. Victor was deceived. Victor was swindled. He was the cat's-paw of wicked men who exploited his innocence. The pleasant, rather silly sheep's face hardened into obstinacy when criticism of Victor was to the fore. She knew her own son. He was a dear boy, full of high spirits, and his so-called friends took advantage of him. She knew, none better, how Victor hated having to ask her for money. But when the poor boy was really in such a terrible situation, what else could he do? It wasn't as though he had anyone but her to go to.

All the same, as she admitted, George's invitation to come and live in the house and look after Iris, had come as a godsend, at a moment when she

really had been in desperate straits of genteel poverty. She had been very happy and comfortable this last year and it was not in human nature to look kindly on the possibility of being superseded by an upstart young woman, all modern efficiency and capability, who in any case, so she persuaded herself, would only be marrying George for his money. Of course that was what she was after! A good home and a rich indulgent husband. You couldn't tell Aunt Lucilla, at her age, that any young woman really liked working for her living! Girls were the same as they always had been—if they could get a man to keep them in comfort, they much preferred it. This Ruth Lessing was clever, worming her way into a position of confidence, advising George about house furnishing, making herself indispensable—but, thank goodness, there was one person at least who saw what she was up to!

Lucilla Drake nodded her head several times, causing her soft double chins to quiver, raised her eyebrows with an air of superb human sapience, and abandoned the subject for one equally interesting and possibly even more pressing.

“It's the blankets I can't make up my mind about, dear. You see, I can't get it clearly laid down whether we shan't be coming down again until next spring or whether George means to run down for weekends. He won't say.”

“I suppose he doesn't really know.” Iris tried to give her attention to a point that seemed completely unimportant. “If it was nice weather it might be fun to come down occasionally. Though I don't think I want to particularly. Still the house will be here if we do want to come.”

“Yes, dear, but one wants to know. Because, you see, if we aren't coming down until next year, then the blankets ought to be put away with mothballs. But if we are coming down, that wouldn't be necessary, because the blankets would be used—and the smell of mothballs is so unpleasant.”

“Well, don't use them.”

“Yes, but it's been such a hot summer there are a lot of moths about. Everyone says it's a bad year for moths. And for wasps, of course. Hawkins

told me yesterday he's taken thirty wasps' nests this summer—thirty—just fancy—”

Iris thought of Hawkins—stalking out at dusk—cyanide in hand—Cyanide—Rosemary—Why did everything lead back to that—?

The thin trickle of sound that was Aunt Lucilla's voice was going on—it had reached by now a different point—

“—and whether one ought to send the silver to the bank or not? Lady Alexandra was saying so many burglaries—though of course we do have good shutters—I don't like the way she does her hair myself—it makes her face look so hard—but I should think she was a hard woman. And nervy, too. Everyone is nervy nowadays. When I was a girl people didn't know what nerves were. Which reminds me that I didn't like the look of George lately—I wonder if he could be going to have 'flu? I've wondered once or twice whether he was feverish. But perhaps it is some business worry. He looks to me, you know, as though he has got something on his mind.”

Iris shivered, and Lucilla Drake exclaimed triumphantly: “There, I said you had a chill.”

Two

“How I wish they had never come here.”

Sandra Farraday uttered the words with such unusual bitterness that her husband turned to look at her in surprise. It was as though his own thoughts had been put into words—the thoughts that he had been trying so hard to conceal. So Sandra, too, felt as he did? She, too, had felt that Fairhaven was spoiled, its peace impaired, by these new neighbours a mile away across the Park. He said, voicing his surprise impulsively:

“I didn’t know you felt like that about them, too.”

Immediately, or so it seemed to him, she withdrew into herself.

“Neighbours are so important in the country. One has either to be rude or friendly; one can’t, as in London, just keep people as amiable acquaintances.”

“No,” said Stephen, “one can’t do that.”

“And now we’re committed to this extraordinary party.”

They were both silent, running over in their minds the scene at lunch. George Barton had been friendly, even exuberant in manner, with a kind of undercurrent of excitement of which they had both been conscious. George Barton was really very odd these days. Stephen had never noticed him much in the time preceding Rosemary’s death. George had just been there in the background, the kindly dull husband of a young and beautiful wife. Stephen had never even felt a pang of disquiet over the betrayal of George. George had been the kind of husband who was born to be betrayed. So much older—so devoid of the attractions necessary to hold an attractive and capricious woman. Had George himself been deceived? Stephen did not think so. George, he thought, knew Rosemary very well. He loved her, and he was the kind of man who was humble about his own powers of holding a wife’s interest.

All the same, George must have suffered. . . .

Stephen began to wonder just what George had felt when Rosemary died.

He and Sandra had seen little of him in the months following the tragedy. It was not until he had suddenly appeared as a near neighbour at Little Priors that he had reentered their lives and at once, so Stephen thought, he had seemed different.

More alive, more positive. And—yes, decidedly odd.

He had been odd today. That suddenly blurted-out invitation. A party for Iris's eighteenth birthday. He did so hope Stephen and Sandra would both come. Stephen and Sandra had been so kind to them down here.

Sandra had said quickly; of course, it would be delightful. Naturally Stephen would be rather tied when they got back to London and she herself had a great many tiresome engagements, but she did hope they would be able to manage it.

"Then let's settle a day now, shall we?"

George's face—florid, smiling, insistent.

"I thought perhaps one day the week after next—Wednesday or Thursday? Thursday is November 2nd. Would that be all right? But we'll arrange any day that suits you both."

It had been the kind of invitation that pinned you down—there was a certain lack of social savoir faire. Stephen noticed that Iris Marle had gone red and looked embarrassed. Sandra had been perfect. She had smilingly surrendered to the inevitable and said that Thursday, November 2nd, would suit them very well.

Suddenly voicing his thoughts, Stephen said sharply, "We needn't go."

Sandra turned her face slightly towards him. It wore a thoughtful considering air.

“You think not?”

“It’s easy to make some excuse.”

“He’ll only insist on us coming some other time—or change the day. He—he seems very set on our coming.”

“I can’t think why. It’s Iris’s party—and I can’t believe she is so particularly anxious for our company.”

“No—no—” Sandra sounded thoughtful.

Then she said:

“You know where this party is to be?”

“No.”

“The Luxembourg.”

The shock nearly deprived him of speech. He felt the colour ebbing out of his cheeks. He pulled himself together and met her eyes. Was it his fancy or was there meaning in the level gaze?

“But it’s preposterous,” he exclaimed, blustering a little in his attempt to conceal his own personal emotion. “The Luxembourg where—to revive all that. The man must be mad.”

“I thought of that,” said Sandra.

“But then we shall certainly refuse to go. The—the whole thing was terribly unpleasant. You remember all the publicity—the pictures in the papers.”

“I remember the unpleasantness,” said Sandra.

“Doesn’t he realize how disagreeable it would be for us?”

“He has a reason, you know, Stephen. A reason that he gave me.”

“What was it?”

He felt thankful that she was looking away from him when she spoke.

“He took me aside after lunch. He said he wanted to explain. He told me that the girl—Iris—had never recovered properly from the shock of her sister’s death.”

She paused and Stephen said unwillingly:

Well, I daresay that may be true enough—she looks far from well. I thought at lunch how ill she was looking.”

“Yes, I noticed it too—although she has seemed in good health and spirits on the whole lately. But I am telling you what George Barton said. He told me that Iris has consistently avoided the Luxembourg ever since as far as she was able.”

“I don’t wonder.”

“But according to him that is all wrong. It seems he consulted a nerve specialist on the subject—one of these modern men—and his advice is that after a shock of any kind, the trouble must be faced, not avoided. The principle, I gather, is like that of sending up an airman again immediately after a crash.”

“Does the specialist suggest another suicide?”

Sandra replied quietly, “He suggests that the associations of the restaurant must be overcome. It is, after all, just a restaurant. He proposed an ordinary pleasant party with, as far as possible, the same people present.”

“Delightful for the people!”

“Do you mind so much, Stephen?”

A swift pang of alarm shot through him. He said quickly: “Of course I don’t mind. I just thought it rather a gruesome idea. Personally I shouldn’t mind in the least . . . I was really thinking of you. If you don’t mind—”

She interrupted him.

“I do mind. Very much. But the way George Barton put it made it very difficult to refuse. After all, I have frequently been to the Luxembourg since—so have you. One is constantly being asked there.”

“But not under these circumstances.”

“No.”

Stephen said:

“As you say, it is difficult to refuse—and if we put it off the invitation will be renewed. But there’s no reason, Sandra, why you should have to endure it. I’ll go and you can cry off at the last minute—a headache, chill—something of that kind.”

He saw her chin go up.

“That would be cowardly. No, Stephen, if you go, I go. After all,” she laid her hand on his arm, “however little our marriage means, it should at least mean sharing our difficulties.”

But he was staring at her—rendered dumb by one poignant phrase which had escaped her so easily, as though it voiced a long familiar and not very important fact.

Recovering himself he said, “Why do you say that? However little our marriage means?”

She looked at him steadily, her eyes wide and honest.

“Isn’t it true?”

“No, a thousand times no. Our marriage means everything to me.”

She smiled.

“I suppose it does—in a way. We’re a good team, Stephen. We pull together with a satisfactory result.”

“I didn’t mean that.” He found his breath was coming unevenly. He took her hand in both of his, holding it very closely—“Sandra, don’t you know that you mean all the world to me?”

And suddenly she did know it. It was incredible—unforeseen, but it was so.

She was in his arms and he was holding her close, kissing her, stammering out incoherent words.

“Sandra—Sandra—darling. I love you . . . I’ve been so afraid—so afraid I’d lose you.”

She heard herself saying:

“Because of Rosemary?”

“Yes.” He let go of her, stepped back, his face was ludicrous in its dismay.

“You knew—about Rosemary?”

“Of course—all the time.”

“And you understand?”

She shook her head.

“No, I don’t understand. I don’t think I ever should. You loved her?”

“Not really. It was you I loved.”

A surge of bitterness swept over her. She quoted: “From the first moment you saw me across the room? Don’t repeat that lie—for it was a lie!”

He was not taken aback by that sudden attack. He seemed to consider her words thoughtfully.

“Yes, it was a lie—and yet in a queer way it wasn’t. I’m beginning to believe that it was true. Oh, try and understand, Sandra. You know the people who always have a noble and good reason to mask their meaner actions? The people who ‘have to be honest’ when they want to be unkind, who ‘thought it their duty to repeat so and so,’ who are such hypocrites to themselves that they go through to their life’s end convinced that every mean and beastly action was done in a spirit of unselfishness! Try and realize that the opposite of those people can exist too. People who are so cynical, so distrustful of themselves and of life that they only believe in their bad motives. You were the woman I needed. That, at least, is true. And I do honestly believe, now, looking back on it, that if it hadn’t been true, I should never have gone through with it.”

She said bitterly:

“You were not in love with me.”

“No. I’d never been in love. I was a starved, sexless creature who prided himself—yes, I did—on the fastidious coldness of his nature! And then I did fall in love ‘across a room’—a silly violent puppy love. A thing like a midsummer thunderstorm, brief, unreal, quickly over.” He added bitterly: “Indeed a ‘tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ ”

He paused, and then went on:

“It was here, at Fairhaven, that I woke up and realized the truth.”

“The truth?”

“The only thing in life that mattered to me was you—and keeping your love.”

“If I had only known. . . .”

“What did you think?”

“I thought you were planning to go away with her.”

“With Rosemary?” He gave a short laugh. “That would indeed have been penal servitude for life!”

“Didn’t she want you to go away with her?”

“Yes, she did.”

“What happened?”

Stephen drew a deep breath. They were back again. Facing once more that intangible menace. He said:

“The Luxembourg happened.”

They were both silent, seeing, they both knew, the same thing. The blue cyanosed face of a once lovely woman.

Staring at a dead woman, and then—looking up to meet each other’s eyes. . .

Stephen said:

“Forget it, Sandra, for God’s sake, let us forget it!”

“It’s no use forgetting. We’re not going to be allowed to forget.”

There was a pause. Then Sandra said:

“What are we going to do?”

“What you said just now. Face things—together. Go to this horrible party whatever the reason for it may be.”

“You don’t believe what George Barton said about Iris?”

“No. Do you?”

“It could be true. But even if it is, it’s not the real reason.”

“What do you think the real reason is?”

“I don’t know, Stephen. But I’m afraid.”

“Of George Barton?”

“Yes, I think he—knows.”

Stephen said sharply:

“Knows what?”

She turned her head slowly until her eyes met his.

She said in a whisper:

“We mustn’t be afraid. We must have courage—all the courage in the world. You’re going to be a great man, Stephen—a man the world needs—and nothing shall interfere with that. I’m your wife and I love you.”

“What do you think this party is, Sandra?”

“I think it’s a trap.”

He said slowly, “And we walk into it?”

“We can’t afford to show we know it’s a trap.”

“No, that’s true.”

Suddenly Sandra threw back her head and laughed. She said: “Do your worst, Rosemary. You won’t win.”

He gripped her shoulder.

“Be quiet, Sandra. Rosemary’s dead.”

“Is she? Sometimes—she feels very much alive. . . .”

Three

Halfway across the Park Iris said:

“Do you mind if I don’t come back with you, George? I feel like a walk. I thought I’d go up over Friar’s Hill and come down through the wood. I’ve had an awful headache all day.”

“My poor child. Do go. I won’t come with you—I’m expecting a fellow along sometime this afternoon and I’m not quite sure when he’ll turn up.”

“Right. Good-bye till teatime.”

She turned abruptly and made off at right angles to where a belt of larches showed on the hillside.

When she came out on the brow of the hill she drew a deep breath. It was one of those close humid days common in October. A dank moisture coated the leaves of the trees and the grey cloud hung low overhead promising yet more rain shortly. There was not really much more air up here on the hill than there had been in the valley, but Iris felt nevertheless as though she could breathe more freely.

She sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and stared down into the valley to where Little Priors nestled demurely in its wooded hollow. Farther to the left, Fairhaven Manor showed a glimpse of rose red on brick.

Iris stared out sombrely over the landscape, her chin cupped in her hand.

The slight rustle behind her was hardly louder than the drip of the leaves, but she turned her head sharply as the branches parted and Anthony Browne came through them.

She cried half angrily: “Tony! Why do you always have to arrive like—like a demon in a pantomime?”

Anthony dropped to the ground beside her. He took out his cigarette case, offered her one and when she shook her head took one himself and lighted

it. Then inhaling the first puff he replied:

“It’s because I’m what the papers call a Mystery Man. I like appearing from nowhere.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“An excellent pair of bird glasses. I heard you were lunching with the Farradays and spied on you from the hillside when you left.”

“Why don’t you come to the house like an ordinary person?”

“I’m not an ordinary person,” said Anthony in a shocked tone. “I’m very extraordinary.”

“I think you are.”

He looked at her quickly. Then he said:

“Is anything the matter?”

“No, of course not. At least—”

She paused. Anthony said interrogatively:

“At least?”

She drew a deep breath.

“I’m tired of being down here. I hate it. I want to go back to London.”

“You’re going soon, aren’t you?”

“Next week.”

“So this was a farewell party at the Farradays?”

“It wasn’t a party. Just them and one old cousin.”

“Do you like the Farradays, Iris?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I do very much—although I shouldn’t say that because they’ve really been very nice to us.”

“Do you think they like you?”

“No, I don’t. I think they hate us.”

“Interesting.”

“Is it?”

“Oh, not the hatred—if true. I meant the use of the word ‘us.’ My question referred to you personally.”

“Oh, I see . . . I think they like me quite well in a negative sort of way. I think it’s us as a family living next door that they mind about. We weren’t particular friends of theirs—they were Rosemary’s friends.”

“Yes,” said Anthony, “as you say they were Rosemary’s friends—not that I should imagine Sandra Farraday and Rosemary were ever bosom friends, eh?”

“No,” said Iris. She looked faintly apprehensive but Anthony smoked peacefully. Presently he said:

“Do you know what strikes me most about the Farradays?”

“What?”

“Just that—that they are the Farradays. I always think of them like that—not as Stephen and Sandra, two individuals linked by the State and the Established Church—but as a definite dual entity—the Farradays. That is rarer than you would think. They are two people with a common aim, a common way of life, identical hopes and fears and beliefs. And the odd part of it is that they are actually very dissimilar in character. Stephen Farraday, I should say, is a man of very wide intellectual scope, extremely sensitive to outside opinion, horribly diffident about himself and somewhat lacking in

moral courage. Sandra, on the other hand, has a narrow medieval mind, is capable of fanatical devotion, and is courageous to the point of recklessness.”

“He always seems to me,” said Iris, “rather pompous and stupid.”

“He’s not at all stupid. He’s just one of the usual unhappy successes.”

“Unhappy?”

“Most successes are unhappy. That’s why they are successes—they have to reassure themselves about themselves by achieving something that the world will notice.”

“What extraordinary ideas you have, Anthony.”

“You’ll find they’re quite true if you only examine them. The happy people are failures because they are on such good terms with themselves that they don’t give a damn. Like me. They are also usually agreeable to get on with—again like me.”

“You have a very good opinion of yourself.”

“I am just drawing attention to my good points in case you mayn’t have noticed them.”

Iris laughed. Her spirits had risen. The dull depression and fear had lifted from her mind. She glanced down at her watch.

“Come home and have tea, and give a few more people the benefit of your unusually agreeable society.”

Anthony shook his head.

“Not today. I must be getting back.”

Iris turned sharply on him.

“Why will you never come to the house? There must be a reason.”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

“Put it that I’m rather peculiar in my ideas of accepting hospitality. Your brother-in-law doesn’t like me—he’s made that quite clear.”

“Oh, don’t bother about George. If Aunt Lucilla and I ask you—she’s an old dear—you’d like her.”

“I’m sure I should—but my objection holds.”

“You used to come in Rosemary’s time.”

“That,” said Anthony, “was rather different.”

A faint cold hand touched Iris’s heart. She said, “What made you come down here today? Had you business in this part of the world?”

“Very important business—with you. I came here to ask you a question, Iris.”

The cold hand vanished. Instead there came a faint flutter, that throb of excitement that women have known from time immemorial. And with it Iris’s face adopted that same look of blank inquiry that her great-grandmother might have worn prior to saying a few minutes later, “Oh, Mr. X, this is so sudden!”

“Yes?” She turned that impossibly innocent face towards Anthony.

He was looking at her, his eyes were grave, almost stern.

“Answer me truthfully, Iris. This is my question. Do you trust me?”

It took her aback. It was not what she had expected. He saw that.

“You didn’t think that that was what I was going to say? But it is a very important question, Iris. The most important question in the world to me. I ask it again. Do you trust me?”

She hesitated, a bare second, then she answered, her eyes falling: “Yes.”

“Then I’ll go on and ask you something else. Will you come up to London and marry me without telling anybody about it?”

She stared.

“But I couldn’t! I simply couldn’t.”

“You couldn’t marry me?”

“Not in that way.”

“And yet you love me. You do love me, don’t you?”

She heard herself saying:

“Yes, I love you, Anthony.”

“But you won’t come and marry me at the Church of Saint Elfrida, Bloomsbury, in the parish of which I have resided for some weeks and where I can consequently get married by licence at any time?”

“How can I do a thing like that? George would be terribly hurt and Aunt Lucilla would never forgive me. And anyway I’m not of age. I’m only eighteen.”

“You’d have to lie about your age. I don’t know what penalties I should incur for marrying a minor without her guardian’s consent. Who is your guardian, by the way?”

“George. He’s my trustee as well.”

“As I was saying, whatever penalties I incurred, they couldn’t unmarry us and that is really all I care about.”

Iris shook her head. “I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be so unkind. And in any case, why? What’s the point of it?”

Anthony said: “That’s why I asked you first if you could trust me. You’d have to take my reasons on trust. Let’s say that it is the simplest way. But

never mind.”

Iris said timidly:

“If George only got to know you a little better. Come back now with me. It will be only he and Aunt Lucilla.”

“Are you sure? I thought—” he paused. “As I struck up the hill I saw a man going up your drive—and the funny thing is that I believe I recognized him as a man I”—he hesitated—“had met.”

“Of course—I forgot—George said he was expecting someone.”

“The man I thought I saw was a man called Race—Colonel Race.”

“Very likely,” Iris agreed. “George does know a Colonel Race. He was coming to dinner on that night when Rosemary—”

She stopped, her voice quivering. Anthony gripped her hand.

“Don’t go on remembering it, darling. It was beastly, I know.”

She shook her head.

“I can’t help it. Anthony—”

“Yes?”

“Did it ever occur to you—did you ever think—” she found a difficulty in putting her meaning into words.

“Did it ever strike you that—that Rosemary might not have committed suicide? That she might have been—killed?”

“Good God, Iris, what put that idea into your head?”

She did not reply—merely persisted: “That idea never occurred to you?”

“Certainly not. Of course Rosemary committed suicide.”

Iris said nothing.

“Who’s been suggesting these things to you?”

For a moment she was tempted to tell him George’s incredible story, but she refrained. She said slowly:

“It was just an idea.”

“Forget it, darling idiot.” He pulled her to her feet and kissed her cheek lightly. “Darling morbid idiot. Forget Rosemary. Only think of me.”

Four

Puffing at his pipe, Colonel Race looked speculatively at George Barton.

He had known George Barton ever since the latter's boyhood. Barton's uncle had been a country neighbour of the Races. There was a difference of over twenty years between the two men. Race was over sixty, a tall, erect, military figure, with sunburnt face, closely cropped iron-grey hair, and shrewd dark eyes.

There had never been any particular intimacy between the two men—but Barton remained to Race “young George”—one of the many vague figures associated with earlier days.

He was thinking at this moment that he had really no idea what “young George” was like. On the brief occasions when they had met in later years, they had found little in common. Race was an out-of-door man, essentially of the Empire-builder type—most of his life had been spent abroad. George was emphatically the city gentleman. Their interests were dissimilar and when they met it was to exchange rather lukewarm reminiscences of “the old days,” after which an embarrassed silence was apt to occur. Colonel Race was not good at small talk and might indeed have posed as the model of a strong silent man so beloved by an earlier generation of novelists.

Silent at this moment, he was wondering just why “young George” had been so insistent on this meeting. Thinking, too, that there was some subtle change in the man since he had last seen him a year ago. George Barton had always struck him as the essence of stodginess—cautious, practical, unimaginative.

There was, he thought, something very wrong with the fellow. Jumpy as a cat. He'd already re-lit his cigar three times—and that wasn't like Barton at all.

He took his pipe out of his mouth.

“Well, young George, what's the trouble?”

“You’re right, Race, it is trouble. I want your advice badly—and your help.”

The colonel nodded and waited.

“Nearly a year ago you were coming to dine with us in London—at the Luxembourg. You had to go abroad at the last minute.”

Again Race nodded.

“South Africa.”

“At that dinner party my wife died.”

Race stirred uncomfortably in his chair.

“I know. Read about it. Didn’t mention it now or offer you sympathy because I didn’t want to stir up things again. But I’m sorry, old man, you know that.”

“Oh, yes, yes. That’s not the point. My wife was supposed to have committed suicide.”

Race fastened on the key word. His eyebrows rose.

“Supposed?”

“Read these.”

He thrust the two letters into the other’s hand. Race’s eyebrows rose still higher.

“Anonymous letters?”

“Yes. And I believe them.”

Race shook his head slowly.

“That’s a dangerous thing to do. You’d be surprised how many lying spiteful letters get written after any event that’s been given any sort of

publicity in the Press.”

“I know that. But these weren’t written at the time—they weren’t written until six months afterwards.”

Race nodded.

“That’s a point. Who do you think wrote them?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. The point is that I believe what they say is true. My wife was murdered.”

Race laid down his pipe. He sat up a little straighter in his chair.

“Now just why do you think that? Had you any suspicion at the time. Had the police?”

“I was dazed when it happened—completely bowled over. I just accepted the verdict at the inquest. My wife had had ’flu, was run-down. No suspicion of anything but suicide arose. The stuff was in her handbag, you see.”

“What was the stuff?”

“Cyanide.”

“I remember. She took it in champagne.”

“Yes. It seemed, at the time, all quite straightforward.”

“Had she ever threatened to commit suicide?”

“No, never. Rosemary,” said George Barton, “loved life.”

Race nodded. He had only met George’s wife once. He had thought her a singularly lovely nitwit—but certainly not a melancholic type.

“What about the medical evidence as to state of mind, etcetera?”

“Rosemary’s own doctor—an elderly man who has attended the Marle family since they were young children—was away on a sea voyage. His partner, a young man, attended Rosemary when she had ’flu. All he said, I remember, was that the type of ’flu about was inclined to leave serious depression.”

George paused and went on.

“It wasn’t until after I got these letters that I talked with Rosemary’s own doctor. I said nothing of the letters, of course—just discussed what had happened. He told me then that he was very surprised at what had happened. He would never have believed it, he said. Rosemary was not at all a suicidal type. It showed, he said, how even a patient one knew well might act in a thoroughly uncharacteristic manner.”

Again George paused and then went on:

“It was after talking to him that I realized how absolutely unconvincing to me Rosemary’s suicide was. After all, I knew her very well. She was a person who was capable of violent fits of unhappiness. She could get very worked up over things, and she would on occasions take very rash and unconsidered action, but I have never known her in the frame of mind that ‘wanted to get out of it all.’ ”

Race murmured in a slightly embarrassed manner:

“Could she have had a motive for suicide apart from mere depression? Was she, I mean, definitely unhappy about anything?”

“I—no—she was perhaps rather nervy.”

Avoiding looking at his friend, Race said:

“Was she at all a melodramatic person? I only saw her once, you know. But there is a type that—well—might get a kick out of attempted suicide—usually if they’ve quarrelled with someone. The rather childish motive of —‘I’ll make them sorry!’ ”

“Rosemary and I hadn’t quarrelled.”

“No. And I must say that the fact of cyanide having been used rather rules that possibility out. It’s not the kind of thing you can monkey about with safely—and everybody knows it.”

“That’s another point. If by any chance Rosemary had contemplated doing away with herself, surely she’d never do it that way? Painful and—and ugly. An overdose of some sleeping stuff would be far more likely.”

“I agree. Was there any evidence as to her purchasing or getting hold of the cyanide?”

“No. But she had been staying with friends in the country and they had taken a wasps’ nest one day. It was suggested that she might have taken a handful of potassium cyanide crystals then.”

“Yes—it’s not a difficult thing to get hold of. Most gardeners keep a stock of it.”

He paused and then said:

“Let me summarize the position. There was no positive evidence as to a disposition to suicide, or to any preparation for it. The whole thing was negative. But there can also have been no positive evidence pointing to murder, or the police would have got hold of it. They’re quite wide awake, you know.”

“The mere idea of murder would have seemed fantastic.”

“But it didn’t seem fantastic to you six months later?”

George said slowly:

“I think I must have been unsatisfied all along. I think I must have been subconsciously preparing myself so that when I saw the thing written down in black and white I accepted it without doubt.”

“Yes.” Race nodded. “Well, then, let’s have it. Who do you suspect?”

George leaned forward—his face twitching.

“That’s what is so terrible. If Rosemary was killed, one of those people round the table, one of our friends, must have done it. No one else came near the table.”

“Waiters? Who poured out the wine?”

“Charles, the headwaiter at the Luxembourg. You know Charles?”

Race assented. Everybody knew Charles. It seemed quite impossible to imagine that Charles could have deliberately poisoned a client.

“And the waiter who looked after us was Giuseppe. We know Giuseppe well. I’ve known him for years. He always looks after me there. He’s a delightful cheery little fellow.”

“So we come to the dinner party. Who was there?”

“Stephen Farraday, the M.P. His wife, Lady Alexandra Farraday. My secretary, Ruth Lessing. A fellow called Anthony Browne. Rosemary’s sister, Iris, and myself. Seven in all. We should have been eight if you had come. When you dropped out we couldn’t think of anybody suitable to ask at the last minute.”

“I see. Well, Barton, who do you think did it?”

George cried out: “I don’t know—I tell you I don’t know. If I had any idea —”

“All right—all right. I just thought you might have a definite suspicion. Well, it oughtn’t to be difficult. How did you sit—starting with yourself?”

“I had Sandra Farraday on my right, of course. Next to her, Anthony Browne. Then Rosemary. Then Stephen Farraday, then Iris, then Ruth Lessing who sat on my left.”

“I see. And your wife had drunk champagne earlier in the evening?”

“Yes. The glasses had been filled up several times. It—it happened while the cabaret show was on. There was a lot of noise—it was one of those negro shows and we were all watching it. She slumped forward on the table just before the lights went up. She may have cried out—or gasped—but nobody heard anything. The doctor said that death must have been practically instantaneous. Thank God for that.”

“Yes, indeed. Well, Barton—on the face of it, it seems fairly obvious.”

“You mean?”

“Stephen Farraday of course. He was on her right hand. Her champagne glass would be close to his left hand. Easiest thing in the world to put the stuff in as soon as the lights were lowered and general attention went to the raised stage. I can’t see that anybody else had anything like as good an opportunity. I know those Luxembourg tables. There’s plenty of room round them—I doubt very much if anybody could have leaned across the table, for instance, without being noticed even if the lights were down. The same thing applies to the fellow on Rosemary’s left. He would have had to lean across her to put anything in her glass. There is one other possibility, but we’ll take the obvious person first. Any reason why Stephen Farraday, M.P., should want to do away with your wife?”

George said in a stifled voice:

“They—they had been rather close friends. If—if Rosemary had turned him down, for instance, he might have wanted revenge.”

“Sounds highly melodramatic. That is the only motive you can suggest?”

“Yes,” said George. His face was very red. Race gave him the most fleeting of glances. Then he went on:

“We’ll examine possibility No. 2. One of the women.”

“Why the women?”

“My dear George, has it escaped your notice that in a party of seven, four women and three men, there will probably be one or two periods during the evening when three couples are dancing and one woman is sitting alone at the table? You did all dance?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Good. Now before the cabaret, can you remember who was sitting alone at any moment?”

George thought a minute.

“I think—yes, Iris was odd man out last, and Ruth the time before.”

“You don’t remember when your wife drank champagne last?”

“Let me see, she had been dancing with Browne. I remember her coming back and saying that had been pretty strenuous—he’s rather a fancy dancer. She drank up the wine in her glass then. A few minutes later they played a waltz and she—she danced with me. She knew a waltz is the only dance I’m really any good at. Farraday danced with Ruth and Lady Alexandra with Browne. Iris sat out. Immediately after that, they had the cabaret.”

“Then let’s consider your wife’s sister. Did she come into any money on your wife’s death?”

George began to splutter.

“My dear Race—don’t be absurd. Iris was a mere child, a schoolgirl.”

“I’ve known two schoolgirls who committed murder.”

“But Iris! She was devoted to Rosemary.”

“Never mind, Barton. She had opportunity. I want to know if she had motive. Your wife, I believe, was a rich woman. Where did her money go—to you?”

“No, it went to Iris—a trust fund.”

He explained the position, to which Race listened attentively.

“Rather a curious position. The rich sister and the poor sister. Some girls might have resented that.”

“I’m sure Iris never did.”

“Maybe not—but she had a motive all right. We’ll try that tack now. Who else had a motive?”

“Nobody—nobody at all. Rosemary hadn’t an enemy in the world, I’m sure. I’ve been looking into all that—asking questions—trying to find out. I’ve even taken this house near the Farradays’ so as to—”

He stopped. Race took up his pipe and began to scratch at its interior.

“Hadn’t you better tell me everything, young George?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re keeping something back—it sticks out a mile. You can sit there defending your wife’s reputation—or you can try and find out if she was murdered or not—but if the latter matters most to you, you’ll have to come clean.”

There was a silence.

“All right then,” said George in a stifled voice. “You win.”

“You’d reason to believe your wife had a lover, is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Stephen Farraday?”

“I don’t know! I swear to you I don’t know! It might have been him or it might have been the other fellow, Browne. I couldn’t make up my mind. It was hell.”

“Tell me what you know about this Anthony Browne? Funny, I seem to have heard the name.”

“I don’t know anything about him. Nobody does. He’s a good-looking, amusing sort of chap—but nobody knows the first thing about him. He’s supposed to be an American but he’s got no accent to speak of.”

“Oh, well, perhaps the Embassy will know something about him. You’ve no idea—which?”

“No—no, I haven’t. I’ll tell you, Race. She was writing a letter—I—I examined the blotting paper afterwards. It—it was a love letter all right—but there was no name.”

Race turned his eyes away carefully.

“Well, that gives us a bit more to go on. Lady Alexandra, for instance—she comes into it, if her husband was having an affair with your wife. She’s the kind of woman, you know, who feels things rather intensely. The quiet, deep type. It’s a type that will do murder at a pinch. We’re getting on. There’s Mystery Browne and Farraday and his wife, and young Iris Marle. What about this other woman, Ruth Lessing?”

“Ruth couldn’t have had anything to do with it. She at least had no earthly motive.”

“Your secretary, you say? What sort of a girl is she?”

“The dearest girl in the world.” George spoke with enthusiasm. “She’s practically one of the family. She’s my right hand—I don’t know anyone I think more highly of, or have more absolute faith in.”

“You’re fond of her,” said Race, watching him thoughtfully.

“I’m devoted to her. That girl, Race, is an absolute trump. I depend upon her in every way. She’s the truest, dearest creature in the world.”

Race murmured something that sounded liked “Umhum” and left the subject. There was nothing in his manner to indicate to George that he had

mentally chalked down a very definite motive to the unknown Ruth Lessing. He could imagine that this “dearest girl in the world” might have a very decided reason for wanting the removal of Mrs. George Barton to another world. It might be a mercenary motive—she might have envisaged herself as the second Mrs. Barton. It might be that she was genuinely in love with her employer. But the motive for Rosemary’s death was there.

Instead he said gently: “I suppose it’s occurred to you, George, that you had a pretty good motive yourself.”

“I?” George looked flabbergasted.

“Well, remember Othello and Desdemona.”

“I see what you mean. But—but it wasn’t like that between me and Rosemary. I adored her, of course, but I always knew that there would be things that—that I’d have to endure. Not that she wasn’t fond of me—she was. She was very fond of me and sweet to me always. But of course I’m a dull stick, no getting away from it. Not romantic, you know. Anyway, I’d made up my mind when I married her that it wasn’t going to be all beer and skittles. She as good as warned me. It hurt, of course, when it happened—but to suggest that I’d have touched a hair of her head—”

He stopped, and then went on in a different tone:

“Anyway, if I’d done it, why on earth should I go raking it all up? I mean, after a verdict of suicide, and everything all settled and over. It would be madness.”

“Absolutely. That’s why I don’t seriously suspect you, my dear fellow. If you were a successful murderer and got a couple of letters like these, you’d put them quietly in the fire and say nothing at all about it. And that brings me to what I think is the one really interesting feature of the whole thing. Who wrote those letters?”

“Eh?” George looked rather startled. “I haven’t the least idea.”

“The point doesn’t seem to have interested you. It interests me. It’s the first question I asked you. We can assume, I take it, that they weren’t written by the murderer. Why should he queer his own pitch when, as you say, everything had settled down and suicide was universally accepted? Then who wrote them? Who is it who is interested in stirring the whole thing up again?”

“Servants?” hazarded George vaguely.

“Possibly. If so, what servants, and what do they know? Did Rosemary have a confidential maid?”

George shook his head.

“No. At the time we had a cook—Mrs. Pound—we’ve still got her, and a couple of maids. I think they’ve both left. They weren’t with us very long.”

“Well, Barton, if you want my advice, which I gather you do, I should think the matter over very carefully. On one side there’s the fact that Rosemary is dead. You can’t bring her back to life whatever you do. If the evidence for suicide isn’t particularly good, neither is the evidence for murder. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that Rosemary was murdered. Do you really wish to rake up the whole thing? It may mean a lot of unpleasant publicity, a lot of washing of dirty linen in public, your wife’s love affairs becoming public property—”

George Barton winced. He said violently:

“Do you really advise me to let some swine get away with it? That stick Farraday, with his pompous speeches, and his precious career—and all the time, perhaps, a cowardly murderer.”

“I only want you to be clear what it involves.”

“I want to get at the truth.”

“Very well. In that case, I should go to the police with these letters. They’ll probably be able to find out fairly easily who wrote them and if the writer

knows anything. Only remember that once you've started them on the trail, you won't be able to call them off."

"I'm not going to the police. That's why I wanted to see you. I'm going to set a trap for the murderer."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Listen, Race. I'm going to have a party at the Luxembourg. I want you to come. The same people, the Farradays, Anthony Browne, Ruth, Iris, myself. I've got it all worked out."

"What are you going to do?"

George gave a faint laugh.

"That's my secret. It would spoil it if I told anyone beforehand—even you. I want you to come with an unbiased mind and—see what happens."

Race leant forward. His voice was suddenly sharp.

"I don't like it, George. These melodramatic ideas out of books don't work. Go to the police—there's no better body of men. They know how to deal with these problems. They're professionals. Amateur shows in crime aren't advisable."

"That's why I want you there. You're not an amateur."

"My dear fellow. Because I once did work for M.I.5? And anyway you propose to keep me in the dark."

"That's necessary."

Race shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I refuse. I don't like your plan and I won't be a party to it. Give it up, George, there's a good fellow."

"I'm not going to give it up. I've got it all worked out."

“Don’t be so damned obstinate. I know a bit more about these shows than you do. I don’t like the idea. It won’t work. It may even be dangerous. Have you thought of that?”

“It will be dangerous for somebody all right.”

Race sighed.

“You don’t know what you’re doing. Oh, well, don’t say I haven’t warned you. For the last time I beg you to give up this crackbrained idea of yours.”

George Barton only shook his head.

Five

The morning of November 2nd dawned wet and gloomy. It was so dark in the dining room of the house in Elvaston Square that they had to have the lights on for breakfast.

Iris, contrary to her habit, had come down instead of having her coffee and toast sent up to her and sat there white and ghostlike pushing uneaten food about her plate. George rustled his Times with a nervy hand and at the other end of the table Lucilla Drake wept copiously into a handkerchief.

“I know the dear boy will do something dreadful. He’s so sensitive—and he wouldn’t say it was a matter of life and death if it wasn’t.”

Rustling his paper, George said sharply:

“Please don’t worry, Lucilla. I’ve said I’ll see to it.”

“I know, dear George, you are always so kind. But I do feel any delay might be fatal. All these inquiries you speak of making—they will all take time.”

“No, no, we’ll hurry them through.”

“He says: ‘without fail by the 3rd’ and tomorrow is the 3rd. I should never forgive myself if anything happened to the darling boy.”

“It won’t.” George took a long drink of coffee.

“And there is still that Conversion Loan of mine—”

“Look here, Lucilla, you leave it all to me.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Lucilla,” put in Iris. “George will be able to arrange it all. After all, this has happened before.”

“Not for a long time” (“Three months,” said George), “not since the poor boy was deceived by those dreadful swindling friends of his on that horrid ranch.”

George wiped his moustache on his napkin, got up, patted Mrs. Drake kindly on the back as he made his way out of the room.

“Now do cheer up, my dear. I’ll get Ruth to cable right away.”

As he went out in the hall, Iris followed him.

“George, don’t you think we ought to put off the party tonight? Aunt Lucilla is so upset. Hadn’t we better stay at home with her?”

“Certainly not!” George’s pink face went purple. “Why should that damned swindling young crook upset our whole lives? It’s blackmail—sheer blackmail, that’s what it is. If I had my way, he shouldn’t get a penny.”

“Aunt Lucilla would never agree to that.”

“Lucilla’s a fool—always has been. These women who have children when they’re over forty never seem to learn any sense. Spoil the brats from the cradle by giving them every damned thing they want. If young Victor had once been told to get out of this mess by himself it might have been the making of him. Now don’t argue, Iris. I’ll get something fixed up before tonight so that Lucilla can go to bed happy. If necessary we’ll take her along with us.”

“Oh, no, she hates restaurants—and gets so sleepy, poor darling. And she dislikes the heat and the smoky air gives her asthma.”

“I know. I wasn’t serious. Go and cheer her up, Iris. Tell her everything will be all right.”

He turned away and out of the front door. Iris turned slowly back towards the dining room. The telephone rang and she went to answer it.

“Hallo—who?” Her face changed, its white hopelessness dissolved into pleasure. “Anthony!”

“Anthony himself. I rang you up yesterday but couldn’t get you. Have you been putting in a spot of work with George?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, George was so pressing over his invitation to your party tonight. Quite unlike his usual style of ‘hands off my lovely ward!’ Absolutely insistent that I should come. I thought perhaps it was the result of some tactful work on your part.”

“No—no—it’s nothing to do with me.”

“A change of heart all on his own?”

“Not exactly. It’s—”

“Hallo—have you gone away?”

“No, I’m here.”

“You were saying something. What’s the matter, darling? I can hear you sighing through the telephone. Is anything the matter?”

“No—nothing. I shall be all right tomorrow. Everything will be all right tomorrow.”

“What touching faith. Don’t they say ‘tomorrow never comes?’ ”

“Don’t.”

“Iris—something is the matter?”

“No, nothing. I can’t tell you. I promised, you see.”

“Tell me, my sweet.”

“No—I can’t really. Anthony, will you tell me something?”

“If I can.”

“Were you—ever in love with Rosemary?”

A momentary pause and then a laugh.

“So that’s it. Yes, Iris, I was a bit in love with Rosemary. She was very lovely, you know. And then one day I was talking to her and I saw you coming down the staircase—and in a minute it was all over, blown away. There was nobody but you in the world. That’s the cold sober truth. Don’t brood over a thing like that. Even Romeo, you know, had his Rosaline before he was bowled over for good and all by Juliet.”

“Thank you, Anthony. I’m glad.”

“See you tonight. It’s your birthday, isn’t it?”

“Actually not for a week—it’s my birthday party though.”

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic about it.”

“I’m not.”

“I suppose George knows what he’s doing, but it seems to me a crazy idea to have it at the same place where—”

“Oh, I’ve been to the Luxembourg several times since—since Rosemary—I mean, one can’t avoid it.”

“No, and it’s just as well. I’ve got a birthday present for you, Iris. I hope you’ll like it. Au revoir.”

He rang off.

Iris went back to Lucilla Drake, to argue, persuade and reassure.

George, on his arrival at his office, sent at once for Ruth Lessing.

His worried frown relaxed a little as she entered, calm and smiling, in her neat black coat and skirt.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Ruth. Trouble again. Look at this.”

She took the cable he held out.

“Victor Drake again!”

“Yes, curse him.”

She was silent a minute, holding the cable. A lean, brown face wrinkling up round the nose when he laughed. A mocking voice saying, “the sort of girl who ought to marry the Boss . . .” How vividly it all came back.

She thought:

“It might have been yesterday. . . .”

George’s voice recalled her.

“Wasn’t it about a year ago that we shipped him out there?”

She reflected.

“I think so, yes. Actually I believe it was October 27th.”

“What an amazing girl you are. What a memory!”

She thought to herself that she had a better reason for remembering than he knew. It was fresh from Victor Drake’s influence that she had listened to Rosemary’s careless voice over the phone and decided that she hated her employer’s wife.

“I suppose we’re lucky,” said George, “that he’s lasted as long as he has out there. Even if it did cost us fifty pounds three months ago.”

“Three hundred pounds now seems a lot.”

“Oh, yes. He won’t get as much as that. We’ll have to make the usual investigations.”

“I’d better communicate with Mr. Ogilvie.”

Alexander Ogilvie was their agent in Buenos Aires—a sober, hard headed Scotsman.

“Yes. Cable at once. His mother is in a state, as usual. Practically hysterical. Makes it very difficult with the party tonight.”

“Would you like me to stay with her?”

“No.” He negatived the idea emphatically. “No, indeed. You’re the one person who’s got to be there. I need you, Ruth.” He took her hand. “You’re too unselfish.”

“I’m not unselfish at all.”

She smiled and suggested:

“Would it be worth trying telephonic communication with Mr. Ogilvie? We might get the whole thing cleared up by tonight.”

“A good idea. Well worth the expense.”

“I’ll get busy at once.”

Very gently she disengaged her hand from his and went out.

George dealt with various matters awaiting his attention.

At half past twelve he went out and took a taxi to the Luxembourg.

Charles, the notorious and popular headwaiter, came towards him, bending his stately head and smiling in welcome.

“Good morning, Mr. Barton.”

“Good morning, Charles. Everything all right for tonight?”

“I think you will be satisfied, sir.”

“The same table?”

“The middle one in the alcove, that is right, is it not?”

“Yes—and you understand about the extra place?”

“It is all arranged.”

“And you’ve got the—the rosemary?”

“Yes, Mr. Barton. I’m afraid it won’t be very decorative. You wouldn’t like some red berries incorporated—or say a few chrysanthemums?”

“No, no, only the rosemary.”

“Very good, sir. You would like to see the menu. Giuseppe.”

With a flick of the thumb Charles produced a smiling little middle-aged Italian.

“The menu for Mr. Barton.”

It was produced.

Oysters, Clear Soup, Sole Luxembourg, Grouse, Poires Hélène, Chicken Livers in Bacon.

George cast an indifferent eye over it.

“Yes, yes, quite all right.”

He handed it back. Charles accompanied him to the door.

Sinking his voice a little, he murmured:

“May I just mention how appreciative we are, Mr. Barton, that you are—er—coming back to us?”

A smile, rather a ghastly smile, showed on George’s face. He said:

“We’ve got to forget the past—can’t dwell on the past. All that is over and done with.”

“Very true, Mr. Barton. You know how shocked and grieved we were at the time. I’m sure I hope that Mademoiselle will have a very happy birthday party and that everything will be as you like it.”

Gracefully bowing, Charles withdrew and darted like an angry dragonfly on some very inferior grade of waiter who was doing the wrong thing at a table near the window.

George went out with a wry smile on his lips. He was not an imaginative enough man to feel a pang of sympathy for the Luxembourg. It was not, after all, the fault of the Luxembourg that Rosemary had decided to commit suicide there or that someone had decided to murder her there. It had been decidedly hard on the Luxembourg. But like most people with an idea, George thought only of that idea.

He lunched at his club and went afterwards to a directors’ meeting.

On his way back to the office, he put through a phone call to a Maida Vale number from a public call box. He came out with a sigh of relief. Everything was set according to schedule.

He went back to the office.

Ruth came to him at once.

“About Victor Drake.”

“Yes?”

“I’m afraid it’s rather a bad business. A possibility of criminal prosecution. He’s been helping himself to the firm’s money over a considerable period.”

“Did Ogilvie say so?”

“Yes. I got through to him this morning and he got a call through to us this afternoon ten minutes ago. He says Victor was quite brazen about the whole

thing.”

“He would be!”

“But he insists that they won’t prosecute if the money is refunded. Mr. Ogilvie saw the senior partner and that seems to be correct. The actual sum in question is one hundred and sixty-five pounds.”

“So that Master Victor was hoping to pocket a clear hundred and thirty-five on the transaction?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Well, we’ve scotched that, at any rate,” said George with grim satisfaction.

“I told Mr. Ogilvie to go ahead and settle the business. Was that right?”

“Personally I should be delighted to see that young crook go to prison—but one has to think of his mother. A fool—but a dear soul. So Master Victor scores as usual.”

“How good you are,” said Ruth.

“Me?”

“I think you’re the best man in the world.”

He was touched. He felt pleased and embarrassed at the same time. On an impulse he picked up her hand and kissed it.

“Dearest Ruth. My dearest and best of friends. What would I have done without you?”

They stood very close together.

She thought: “I could have been happy with him. I could have made him happy. If only—”

He thought: “Shall I take Race’s advice? Shall I give it all up? Wouldn’t that really be the best thing?”

Indecision hovered over him and passed. He said:

“9:30 at the Luxembourg.”

Six

They had all come.

George breathed a sigh of relief. Up to the last moment he had feared some last minute defection—but they were all here. Stephen Farraday, tall and stiff, a little pompous in manner. Sandra Farraday in a severe black velvet gown wearing emeralds around her neck. The woman had breeding, not a doubt of it. Her manner was completely natural, possibly a little more gracious than usual. Ruth also in black with no ornament save one jewelled clip. Her raven black hair smooth and lying close to her head, her neck and arms very white—whiter than those of the other women. Ruth was a working girl, she had no long leisured ease in which to acquire sun tan. His eyes met hers and, as though she saw the anxiety in his, she smiled reassurance. His heart lifted. Loyal Ruth. Beside him Iris was unusually silent. She alone showed consciousness of this being an unusual party. She was pale but in some way it suited her, gave her a grave steadfast beauty. She wore a straight simple frock of leaf green. Anthony Browne came last, and to George's mind, he came with the quick stealthy step of a wild creature—a panther, perhaps, or a leopard. The fellow wasn't really quite civilized.

They were all there—all safe in George's trap. Now, the play could begin. . .

Cocktails were drained. They got up and passed through the open arch into the restaurant proper.

Dancing couples, soft negro music, deft hurrying waiters.

Charles came forward and smilingly piloted them to their table. It was at the far end of the room, a shallow arched alcove which held three tables—a big one in the middle and two small ones for two people either side of it. A middle-aged sallow foreigner and a blonde lovely were at one, a slip of a boy and a girl at the other. The middle table was reserved for the Barton party.

George genially assigned them to their places.

“Sandra, will you sit here, on my right. Browne next to her. Iris, my dear, it’s your party. I must have you here next to me, and you beyond her, Farraday. Then you, Ruth—”

He paused—between Ruth and Anthony was a vacant chair—the table had been laid for seven.

“My friend Race may be a bit late. He said we weren’t to wait for him. He’ll be along some time. I’d like you all to know him—he’s a splendid fellow, knocked about all over the world and can tell you some good yarns.”

Iris was conscious of a feeling of anger as she seated herself. George had done it on purpose—separated her from Anthony. Ruth ought to have been sitting where she was, next to her host. So George still disliked and mistrusted Anthony.

She stole a glance across the table. Anthony was frowning. He did not look across at her. Once he directed a sharp sideways glance at the empty chair beside him. He said:

“Glad you’ve got another man, Barton. There’s just a chance I may have to go off early. Quite unavoidable. But I ran into a man here I know.”

George said smilingly:

“Running business into pleasure hours? You’re too young for that, Browne. Not that I’ve ever known exactly what your business is?”

By chance there was a lull in the conversation. Anthony’s reply came deliberately and coolly.

“Organized crime, Barton, that’s what I always say when I’m asked. Robberies arranged. Larcenies a feature. Families waited upon at their private addresses.”

Sandra Farraday laughed as she said:

“You’re something to do with armaments, aren’t you, Mr. Browne? An armament king is always the villain of the piece nowadays.”

Iris saw Anthony’s eyes momentarily widen in a stare of quick surprise. He said lightly:

“You mustn’t give me away, Lady Alexandra, it’s all very hush-hush. The spies of a foreign power are everywhere. Careless talk.”

He shook his head with mock solemnity.

The waiter took away the oyster plates. Stephen asked Iris if she would like to dance.

Soon they were all dancing. The atmosphere lightened.

Presently Iris’s turn came to dance with Anthony.

She said: “Mean of George not to let us sit together.”

“Kind of him. This way I can look at you all the time across the table.”

“You won’t really have to go early?”

“I might.”

Presently he said:

“Did you know that Colonel Race was coming?”

“No, I hadn’t the least idea.”

“Rather odd, that.”

“Do you know him? Oh, yes, you said so, the other day.”

She added:

“What sort of a man is he?”

“Nobody quite knows.”

They went back to the table. The evening wore on. Slowly the tension, which had relaxed, seemed to close again. There was an atmosphere of taut nerves about the table. Only the host seemed genial and unconcerned.

Iris saw him glance at his watch.

Suddenly there was a roll of drums—the lights went down. A stage rose in the room. Chairs were pushed a little back, turned sideways. Three men and three girls took the floor, dancing. They were followed by a man who could make noises. Trains, steam rollers, aeroplanes, sewing machines, cows coughing. He was a success. Lenny and Flo followed in an exhibition dance which was more of a trapeze act than a dance. More applause. Then another ensemble by the Luxembourg Six. The lights went up.

Everyone blinked.

At the same time a wave of sudden freedom from restraint seemed to pass over the party at the table. It was as though they had been subconsciously expecting something that had failed to happen. For on an earlier occasion the going up of the lights had coincided with the discovery of a dead body lying across the table. It was as though now the past was definitely past—vanished into oblivion. The shadow of a bygone tragedy had lifted.

Sandra turned to Anthony in an animated way. Stephen made an observation to Iris and Ruth leaned forward to join in. Only George sat in his chair staring—staring, his eyes fixed on the empty chair opposite him. The place in front of it was laid. There was champagne in the glass. At any moment, someone might come, might sit down there—

A nudge from Iris recalled him:

“Wake up, George. Come and dance. You haven’t danced with me yet.”

He roused himself. Smiling at her he lifted his glass.

“We’ll drink a toast first—to the young lady whose birthday we’re celebrating. Iris Marle, may her shadow never grow less!”

They drank it laughing, then they all got up to dance, George and Iris, Stephen and Ruth, Anthony and Sandra.

It was a gay jazz melody.

They all came back together, laughing and talking. They sat down.

Then suddenly George leaned forward.

“I’ve something I want to ask you all. A year ago, more or less, we were here before on an evening that ended tragically. I don’t want to recall past sadness, but it’s just that I don’t want to feel that Rosemary is completely forgotten. I’ll ask you to drink to her memory—for Remembrance sake.”

He raised his glass. Everyone else obediently raised theirs. Their faces were polite masks.

George said:

“To Rosemary for remembrance.”

The glasses were raised to their lips. They drank.

There was a pause—then George swayed forward and slumped down in his chair, his hands rising frenziedly to his neck, his face turning purple as he fought for breath.

It took him a minute and a half to die.

BOOK 3
IRIS

“For I thought that the dead had peace

But it is not so . . .”

One

Colonel Race turned into the doorway of New Scotland Yard. He filled in the form that was brought forward and a very few minutes later he was shaking hands with Chief Inspector Kemp in the latter's room.

The two men were well acquainted. Kemp was slightly reminiscent of that grand old veteran, Battle, in type. Indeed, since he had worked under Battle for many years, he had perhaps unconsciously copied a good many of the older man's mannerisms. He bore about him the same suggestion of being carved all in one piece—but whereas Battle had suggested some wood such as teak or oak, Chief Inspector Kemp suggested a somewhat more showy wood—mahogany, say, or good old-fashioned rosewood.

“It was good of you to ring us, colonel,” said Kemp. “We shall want all the help we can get on this case.”

“It seems to have got us into exalted hands,” said Race.

Kemp did not make modest disclaimers. He accepted quite simply the indubitable fact that only cases of extreme delicacy, wide publicity or supreme importance came his way. He said seriously:

“It's the Kidderminster connection. You can imagine that means careful going.”

Race nodded. He had met Lady Alexandra Farraday several times. One of those quiet women of unassailable position whom it seems fantastic to associate with sensational publicity. He had heard her speak on public platforms—without eloquence, but clearly and competently, with a good grasp of her subject, and with an excellent delivery.

The kind of woman whose public life was in all the papers, and whose private life was practically nonexistent except as a bland domestic background.

Nevertheless, he thought, such women have a private life. They know despair, and love, and the agonies of jealousy. They can lose control and risk life itself on a passionate gamble.

He said curiously:

“Suppose she ‘done it,’ Kemp?”

“Lady Alexandra? Do you think she did, sir?”

“I’ve no idea. But suppose she did. Or her husband—who comes under the Kidderminster mantle.”

The steady sea-green eyes of Chief Inspector Kemp looked in an untroubled way into Race’s dark ones.

“If either of them did murder, we’ll do our level best to hang him or her. You know that. There’s no fear and no favour for murderers in this country. But we’ll have to be absolutely sure of our evidence—the public prosecutor will insist on that.”

Race nodded.

Then he said, “Let’s have the doings.”

“George Barton died of cyanide poisoning—same thing as his wife a year ago. You said you were actually in the restaurant?”

“Yes. Barton had asked me to join his party. I refused. I didn’t like what he was doing. I protested against it and urged him, if he had doubts about his wife’s death, to go to the proper people—to you.”

Kemp nodded.

“That’s what he ought to have done.”

“Instead he persisted in an idea of his own—setting a trap for the murderer. He wouldn’t tell me what that trap was. I was uneasy about the whole business—so much so that I went to the Luxembourg last night so as to

keep an eye on things. My table, necessarily, was some distance away—I didn't want to be spotted too obviously. Unfortunately I can tell you nothing. I saw nothing in the least suspicious. The waiters and his own party were the only people who approached the table."

"Yes," said Kemp, "it narrows it down, doesn't it? It was one of them, or it was the waiter, Giuseppe Bolsano. I've got him on the mat again this morning—thought you might like to see him—but I can't believe he had anything to do with it. Been at the Luxembourg for twelve years—good reputation, married, three children, good record behind him. Gets on well with all the clients."

"Which leaves us with the guests."

"Yes. The same party as was present when Mrs. Barton—died."

"What about that business, Kemp?"

"I've been going into it since it seems pretty obvious that the two hang together. Adams handled it. It wasn't what we call a clear case of suicide, but suicide was the most probable solution and in the absence of any direct evidence suggesting murder, one had to let it go as suicide. Couldn't do anything else. We've a good many cases like that in our records, as you know. Suicide with a query mark. The public doesn't know about the query mark—but we keep it in mind. Sometimes we go on quite a bit hunting about quietly.

"Sometimes something crops up—sometimes it doesn't. In this case it didn't."

"Until now."

"Until now. Somebody tipped Mr. Barton off to the fact that his wife had been murdered. He got busy on his own—he as good as announced that he was on the right track—whether he was or not I don't know—but the murderer must have thought so—so the murderer gets rattled and bumps off Mr. Barton. That seems the way of it as far as I can see—I hope you agree?"

“Oh, yes—that part of it seems straightforward enough. God knows what the ‘trap’ was—I noticed that there was an empty chair at the table. Perhaps it was waiting for some unexpected witness. Anyhow it accomplished rather more than it was meant to do. It alarmed the guilty person so much that he or she didn’t wait for the trap to be sprung.”

“Well,” said Kemp, “we’ve got five suspects. And we’ve got the first case to go on—Mrs. Barton.”

“You’re definitely of the opinion now that it was not suicide?”

“This murder seems to prove that it wasn’t. Though I don’t think you can blame us at the time for accepting the suicide theory as the most probable. There was some evidence for it.”

“Depression after influenza?”

Kemp’s wooden face showed a ripple of a smile.

“That was for the coroner’s court. Agreed with the medical evidence and saved everybody’s feelings. That’s done every day. And there was a half-finished letter to the sister directing how her personal belongings were to be given away—showed she’d had the idea of doing away with herself in her mind. She was depressed all right, I don’t doubt, poor lady—but nine times out of ten, with women, it’s a love affair. With men it’s mostly money worries.”

“So you knew Mrs. Barton had a love affair.”

“Yes, we soon found that out. It had been discreet—but it didn’t take much finding.”

“Stephen Farraday?”

“Yes. They used to meet in a little flat out Earl’s Court way. It had been going on for over six months. Say they’d had a quarrel—or possibly he was getting tired of her—well, she wouldn’t be the first woman to take her life in a fit of desperation.”

“By potassium cyanide in a public restaurant?”

“Yes—if she wanted to be dramatic about it—with him looking on and all. Some people have a feeling for the spectacular. From what I could find out she hadn’t much feeling for the conventions—all the precautions were on his side.”

“Any evidence as to whether his wife knew what was going on?”

“As far as we could learn she knew nothing about it.”

“She may have, for all that, Kemp. Not the kind of woman to wear her heart on her sleeve.”

“Oh, quite so. Count them both in as possibles. She for jealousy. He for his career. Divorce would have dished that. Not that divorce means as much as it used to, but in his case it would have meant the antagonism of the Kidderminster clan.”

“What about the secretary girl?”

“She’s a possible. Might have been sweet on George Barton. They were pretty thick at the office and there’s an idea there that she was keen on him. Actually yesterday afternoon one of the telephone girls was giving an imitation of Barton holding Ruth Lessing’s hand and saying he couldn’t do without her, and Miss Lessing came out and caught them and sacked the girl there and then—gave her a month’s money and told her to go. Looks as though she was sensitive about it all. Then the sister came into a peck of money—one’s got to remember that. Looked a nice kid, but you can never tell. And there was Mrs. Barton’s other boyfriend.”

“I’m rather anxious to hear what you know about him?”

Kemp said slowly:

“Remarkably little—but what there is isn’t too good. His passport’s in order. He’s an American citizen about whom we can’t find anything,

detrimental or otherwise. He came over here, stayed at Claridge's and managed to strike up an acquaintance with Lord Dewsbury."

"Confidence man?"

"Might be. Dewsbury seems to have fallen for him—asked him to stay. Rather a critical time just then."

"Armaments," said Race. "There was that trouble about the new tank trials in Dewsbury's works."

"Yes. This fellow Browne represented himself as interested in armaments. It was soon after he'd been up there that they discovered that sabotage business—just in the nick of time. Browne met a good many cronies of Dewsbury—he seemed to have cultivated all the ones who were connected with the armament firms. As a result he's been shown a lot of stuff that in my opinion he ought never to have seen—and in one or two cases there's been serious trouble in the works not long after he's been in the neighbourhood."

"An interesting person, Mr. Anthony Browne?"

"Yes. He's got a lot of charm, apparently, and plays it for all he's worth."

"And where did Mrs. Barton come in? George Barton hasn't anything to do with the armament world?"

"No. But they seem to have been fairly intimate. He may have let out something to her. You know, colonel, none better, what a pretty woman can get out of a man."

Race nodded, taking the chief inspector's words, as meant, to refer to the Counterespionage Department which he had once controlled and not—as some ignorant person might have thought—to some personal indiscretions of his own.

He said after a minute or two:

"Have you had a go at those letters that George Barton received?"

“Yes. Found them in his desk at his house last night. Miss Marle found them for me.”

“You know I’m interested in those letters, Kemp. What’s the expert opinion on them?”

“Cheap paper, ordinary ink—fingerprints show George Barton and Iris Marle handled them—and a horde of unidentified dabs on the envelope, postal employees, etc. They were printed and the experts say by someone of good education in normal health.”

“Good education. Not a servant?”

“Presumably not.”

“That makes it more interesting still.”

“It means that somebody else had suspicions, at least.”

“Someone who didn’t go to the police. Someone who was prepared to arouse George’s suspicions but who didn’t follow the business up. There’s something odd there, Kemp. He couldn’t have written them himself, could he?”

“He could have. But why?”

“As a preliminary to suicide—a suicide which he intended to look like murder.”

“With Stephen Farraday booked for the hangman’s rope? It’s an idea—but he’d have made quite sure that everything pointed to Farraday as the murderer. As it is we’ve nothing against Farraday at all.”

“What about cyanide? Was there any container found?”

“Yes. A small white paper packet under the table. Traces of cyanide crystals inside. No fingerprints on it. In a detective story, of course, it would be some special kind of paper or folded in some special way. I’d like to give these detective story writers a course of routine work. They’d soon learn

how most things are untraceable and nobody ever notices anything anywhere!”

Race smiled.

“Almost too sweeping a statement. Did anybody notice anything last night?”

“Actually that’s what I’m starting on today. I took a brief statement from everyone last night and I went back to Elvaston Square with Miss Marle and had a look through Barton’s desk and papers. I shall get fuller statements from them all today—also statements from the people sitting at the other two tables in the alcove—” He rustled through some papers —“Yes, here they are. Gerald Tollington, Grenadier Guards, and the Hon. Patricia Brice-Woodworth. Young engaged couple. I’ll bet they didn’t see anything but each other. And Mr. Pedro Morales—nasty bit of goods from Mexico—even the whites of his eyes are yellow—and Miss Christine Shannon—a gold-digging blonde lovely—I’ll bet she didn’t see anything—dumber than you’d believe possible except where money is concerned. It’s a hundred to one chance that any of them saw anything, but I took their names and addresses on the off chance. We’ll start off with the waiter chap, Giuseppe. He’s here now. I’ll have him sent in.”

Two

Giuseppe Bolsano was a middle-aged man, slight with a rather monkey-like intelligent face. He was nervous, but not unduly so. His English was fluent since he had, he explained, been in the country since he was sixteen and had married an English wife.

Kemp treated him sympathetically.

“Now then, Giuseppe, let’s hear whether anything more has occurred to you about this.”

“It is for me very unpleasant. It is I who serve that table. I who pour out the wine. People will say that I am off my head, that I put poison into the wine glasses. It is not so, but that is what people will say. Already, Mr. Goldstein says it is better that I take a week away from work—so that people do not ask me questions there and point me out. He is a fair man, and just, and he knows it is not my fault, and that I have been there for many years, so he does not dismiss me as some restaurant owners would do. M. Charles, too, he has been kind, but all the same it is a great misfortune for me—and it makes me afraid. Have I an enemy, I ask myself?”

“Well,” said Kemp at his most wooden, “have you?”

The sad monkeyface twitched into laughter. Giuseppe stretched out his arms.

“I? I have not an enemy in the world. Many good friends but no enemies.”

Kemp grunted.

“Now about last night. Tell me about the champagne.”

“It was Clicquot, 1928—very good and expensive wine. Mr. Barton was like that—he liked good food and drink—the best.”

“Had he ordered the wine beforehand?”

“Yes. He had arranged everything with Charles.”

“What about the vacant place at the table?”

“That, too, he had arranged for. He told Charles and he told me. A young lady would occupy it later in the evening.”

“A young lady?” Race and Kemp looked at each other. “Do you know who the young lady was?”

Giuseppe shook his head.

“No, I know nothing about that. She was to come later, that is all I heard.”

“Go on about the wine. How many bottles?”

“Two bottles and a third to be ready if needed. The first bottle was finished quite quickly. The second I open not long before the cabaret. I fill up the glasses and put the bottle in the ice bucket.”

“When did you last notice Mr. Barton drinking from his glass?”

“Let me see, when the cabaret was over, they drink the young lady’s health. It is her birthday so I understand. Then they go and dance. It is after that, when they come back, that Mr. Barton drinks and in a minute, like that! he is dead.”

“Had you filled up the glasses during the time they were dancing?”

“No, monsieur. They were full when they drank to mademoiselle and they did not drink much, only a few mouthfuls. There was plenty left in the glasses.”

“Did anyone—anyone at all—come near the table whilst they were dancing?”

“No one at all, sir. I am sure of that.”

“Did they all go to dance at the same time?”

“Yes.”

“And came back at the same time?”

Giuseppe screwed up his eyes in an effort of memory.

“Mr. Barton he came back first—with the young lady. He was stouter than the rest—he did not dance quite so long, you comprehend. Then came the fair gentleman, Mr. Farraday, and the young lady in black. Lady Alexandra Farraday and the dark gentleman came last.”

“You know Mr. Farraday and Lady Alexandra?”

“Yes, sir. I have seen them in the Luxembourg often. They are very distinguished.”

“Now, Giuseppe, would you have seen if one of those people had put something in Mr. Barton’s glass?”

“That I cannot say, sir. I have my service, the other two tables in the alcove, and two more in the main restaurant. There are dishes to serve. I do not watch at Mr. Barton’s table. After the cabaret everyone nearly gets up and dances, so at that time I am standing still—and that is why I can be sure that no one approached the table then. But as soon as people sit down, I am at once very busy.”

Kemp nodded.

“But I think,” Giuseppe continued, “that it would be very difficult to do without being observed. It seems to me that only Mr. Barton himself could do it. But you do not think so, no?”

He looked inquiringly at the police officer.

“So that’s your idea, is it?”

“Naturally I know nothing—but I wonder. Just a year ago that beautiful lady, Mrs. Barton, she kills herself. Could it not be that Mr. Barton he grieves so much that he too decides to kill himself the same way? It would

be poetic. Of course it is not good for the restaurant—but a gentleman who is going to kill himself would not think of that.”

He looked eagerly from one to the other of the two men.

Kemp shook his head.

“I doubt if it’s as easy as that,” he said.

He asked a few more questions, then Giuseppe was dismissed.

As the door closed behind Giuseppe, Race said:

“I wonder if that’s what we are meant to think?”

“Grieving husband kills himself on anniversary of wife’s death? Not that it was the anniversary—but near enough.”

“It was All Soul’s Day,” said Race.

“True. Yes, it’s possible that was the idea—but if so, whoever it was can’t have known about those letters being kept and that Mr. Barton had consulted you and shown them to Iris Marle.”

He glanced at his watch.

“I’m due at Kidderminster House at 12:30. We’ve time before that to go and see those people at the other two tables—some of them at any rate. Come with me, won’t you, colonel?”

Three

Mr. Morales was staying at the Ritz. He was hardly a pretty sight at this hour in the morning, still unshaven, the whites of his eyes bloodshot and with every sign of a severe hangover.

Mr. Morales was an American subject and spoke a variant of the American language. Though professing himself willing to remember anything he could, his recollections of the previous evening were of the vaguest description.

“Went with Chrissie—that baby is sure hard-boiled! She said it was a good joint. Honey pie, I said, we’ll go just where you say. It was a classy joint, that I’ll admit—and do they know how to charge you! Set me back the best part of thirty dollars. But the band was punk—they just couldn’t seem to swing it.”

Diverted from his recollections of his own evening, Mr. Morales was pressed to remember the table in the middle of the alcove. Here he was not very helpful.

“Sure there was a table and some people at it. I don’t remember what they looked like, though. Didn’t take much account of them till the guy there croaked. Thought at first he couldn’t hold his liquor. Say now, I remember one of the dames. Dark hair and she had what it takes, I should say.”

“You mean the girl in the green velvet dress?”

“No, not that one. She was skinny. This baby was in black with some good curves.”

It was Ruth Lessing who had taken Mr. Morales’ roving eye.

He wrinkled up his nose appreciatively.

“I watched her dancing—and say, could that baby dance! I gave her the high sign once or twice, but she had a frozen eye—just looked through me in your British way.”

Nothing more of value could be extracted from Mr. Morales and he admitted frankly that his alcoholic condition was already well advanced by the time the cabaret was on.

Kemp thanked him and prepared to take his leave.

“I’m sailing for New York tomorrow,” said Morales. “You wouldn’t,” he asked wistfully, “care for me to stay on?”

“Thank you, but I don’t think your evidence will be needed at the inquest.”

“You see I’m enjoying it right here—and if it was police business the firm couldn’t kick. When the police tell you to stay put, you’ve got to stay put. Maybe I could remember something if I thought hard enough?”

But Kemp declined to rise to this wistful bait, and he and Race drove to Brook Street where they were greeted by a choleric gentleman, the father of the Hon. Patricia Brice-Woodworth.

General Lord Woodworth received them with a good deal of outspoken comment.

What on earth was the idea of suggesting that his daughter—his daughter!—was mixed up in this sort of thing? If a girl couldn’t go out with her fiancé to dine in a restaurant without being subjected to annoyance by detectives and Scotland Yard, what was England coming to? She didn’t even know these people what was their name—Hubbard—Barton? Some City fellow or other! Showed you couldn’t be too careful where you went—Luxembourg was always supposed to be all right—but apparently this was the second time a thing of this sort had happened there. Gerald must be a fool to have taken Pat there—these young men thought they knew everything. But in any case he wasn’t going to have his daughter badgered and bullied and cross-questioned—not without a solicitor’s say so. He’d ring up old Anderson in Lincoln’s Inn and ask him—

Here the general paused abruptly and staring at Race said, “Seen you somewhere. Now where—?”

Race's answer was immediate and came with a smile.

"Badderpore. 1923."

"By Jove," said the general. "If it isn't Johnny Race! What are you doing mixed up in this show?"

Race smiled.

"I was with Chief Inspector Kemp when the question of interviewing your daughter came up. I suggested it would be much pleasanter for her if Inspector Kemp came round here than if she had to come down to Scotland Yard, and I thought I'd come along too."

"Oh—er—well, very decent, of you, Race."

"We naturally wanted to upset the young lady as little as possible," put in Chief Inspector Kemp.

But at this moment the door opened and Miss Patricia Brice-Woodworth walked in and took charge of the situation with the coolness and detachment of the very young.

"Hallo," she said. "You're from Scotland Yard, aren't you? About last night? I've been longing for you to come. Is father being tiresome? Now don't, daddy—you know what the doctor said about your blood pressure. Why you want to get into such states about everything, I can't think. I'll just take the inspectors or superintendents or whatever they are into my room and I'll send Walters to you with a whisky and soda."

The general had a choleric desire to express himself in several blistering ways at once, but only succeeded in saying, "Old friend of mine, Major Race," at which introduction, Patricia lost interest in Race and bent a beatific smile on Chief Inspector Kemp.

With cool generalship, she shepherded them out of the room and into her own sitting room, firmly shutting her father in his study.

“Poor daddy,” she observed. “He will fuss. But he’s quite easy to manage really.”

The conversation then proceeded on most amicable lines but with very little result.

“It’s maddening really,” said Patricia. “Probably the only chance in my life that I shall ever have of being right on the spot when a murder was done—it is a murder, isn’t it? The papers were very cautious and vague, but I said to Gerry on the telephone that it must be murder. Think of it, a murder done right close by me and I wasn’t even looking!”

The regret in her voice was unmistakable.

It was evident enough that, as the chief inspector had gloomily prognosticated, the two young people who had got engaged only a week previously had had eyes only for each other.

With the best will in the world, a few personalities were all that Patricia Brice-Woodworth could muster.

“Sandra Farraday was looking very smart, but then she always does. That was a Schiaparelli model she had on.”

“You know her?” Race asked.

Patricia shook her head.

“Only by sight. He looks rather a bore, I always think. So pompous, like most politicians.”

“Did you know any of the others by sight?”

She shook her head.

“No, I’d never seen any of them before—at least I don’t think so. In fact, I don’t suppose I would have noticed Sandra Farraday if it hadn’t been for the Schiaparelli.”

“And you’ll find,” said Chief Inspector Kemp grimly as they left the house, “that Master Tollington will be exactly the same—only there won’t even have been a Skipper—skipper what—sounds like a sardine—to attract his attention.”

“I don’t suppose,” agreed Race, “that the cut of Stephen Farraday’s dress suit will have caused him any heart pangs.”

“Oh, well,” said the inspector. “Let’s try Christine Shannon. Then we’ll have finished with the outside chances.”

Miss Shannon was, as Chief Inspector Kemp had stated, a blonde lovely. The bleached hair, carefully arranged, swept back from a soft vacant baby-like countenance. Miss Shannon might be as Inspector Kemp had affirmed, dumb—but she was eminently easy to look at, and a certain shrewdness in the large baby-blue eyes indicated that her dumbness only extended in intellectual directions and that where horse sense and a knowledge of finance were indicated, Christine Shannon was right on the spot.

She received the two men with the utmost sweetness, pressing drinks upon them and when these were refused, urging cigarettes. Her flat was small and cheaply modernistic.

“I’d just love to be able to help you, chief inspector. Do ask me any questions you like.”

Kemp led off with a few conventional questions about the bearing and demeanour of the party at the centre table.

At once Christine showed herself to be an unusually keen and shrewd observer.

“The party wasn’t going well—you could see that. Stiff as stiff could be. I felt quite sorry for the old boy—the one who was giving it. Going all out he was to try and make things go—and just as nervous as a cat on wires—but all he could do didn’t seem to cut any ice. The tall woman he’d got on his right was as stiff as though she’d swallowed the poker and the kid on his left was just mad, you could see, because she wasn’t sitting next to the nice-

looking dark boy opposite. As for the tall fair fellow next to her he looked as though his tummy was out of order, ate his food as though he thought it would choke him. The woman next to him was doing her best, she pegged away at him, but she looked rather as though she had the jumps herself.”

“You seem to have been able to notice a great deal, Miss Shannon,” said Colonel Race.

“I’ll let you into a secret. I wasn’t being so much amused myself. I’d been out with that boyfriend of mine three nights running, and was I getting tired of him! He was all out for seeing London—especially what he called the classy spots—and I will say for him he wasn’t mean. Champagne every time. We went to the Compradour and the Mille Fleurs and finally the Luxembourg, and I’ll say he enjoyed himself. In a way it was kind of pathetic. But his conversation wasn’t what you’d call interesting. Just long histories of business deals he’d put through in Mexico and most of those I heard three times—and going on to all the dames he’d known and how mad they were about him. A girl gets kind of tired listening after a while and you’ll admit that Pedro is nothing much to look at—so I just concentrated on the eats and let my eyes roam round.”

“Well, that’s excellent from our point of view, Miss Shannon,” said the chief inspector. “And I can only hope that you will have seen something that may help us solve our problem.”

Christine shook her blonde head.

“I’ve no idea who bumped the old boy off—no idea at all. He just took a drink of champagne, went purple in the face and sort of collapsed.”

“Do you remember when he had last drunk from his glass before that?”

The girl reflected.

“Why—yes—it was just after the cabaret. The lights went up and he picked up his glass and said something and the others did it too. Seemed to me it was a toast of some kind.”

The chief inspector nodded.

“And then?”

“Then the music began and they all got up and went off to dance, pushing their chairs back and laughing. Seemed to get warmed up for the first time. Wonderful what champagne will do for the stickiest parties.”

“They all went together—leaving the table empty?”

“Yes.”

“And no one touched Mr. Barton’s glass.”

“No one at all.” Her reply came promptly. “I’m perfectly certain of that.”

“And no one—no one at all came near the table while they were away.”

“No one—except the waiter, of course.”

“A waiter? Which waiter?”

“One of the half-fledged ones with an apron, round about sixteen. Not the real waiter. He was an obliging little fellow rather like a monkey—Italian I guess he was.”

Chief Inspector Kemp acknowledged this description of Giuseppe Bolsano with a nod of the head.

“And what did he do, this young waiter? He filled up the glasses?”

Christine shook her head.

“Oh, no. He didn’t touch anything on the table. He just picked up an evening bag that one of the girls had dropped when they all got up.”

“Whose bag was it?”

Christine took a minute or two to think. Then she said:

“That’s right. It was the kid’s bag—a green and gold thing. The other two women had black bags.”

“What did the waiter do with the bag?”

Christine looked surprised.

“He just put it back on the table, that’s all.”

“You’re quite sure he didn’t touch any of the glasses?”

“Oh, no. He just dropped the bag down very quick and ran off because one of the real waiters was hissing at him to go somewhere or get something and everything was going to be his fault!”

“And that’s the only time anyone went near the table?”

“That’s right.”

“But of course someone might have gone to the table without your noticing?”

But Christine shook her head very determinedly.

“No, I’m quite sure they didn’t. You see Pedro had been called to the telephone and hadn’t got back yet, so I had nothing to do but look around and feel bored. I’m pretty good at noticing things and from where I was sitting there wasn’t much else to see but the empty table next to us.”

Race asked:

“Who came back first to the table?”

“The girl in green and the old boy. They sat down and then the fair man and the girl in black came back and after them the haughty piece of goods and the good-looking dark boy. Some dancer, he was. When they were all back and the waiter was warming up a dish like mad on the spirit lamp, the old boy leaned forward and made a kind of speech and then they all picked up their glasses again. And then it happened.” Christine paused and added

brightly, “Awful, wasn’t it? Of course I thought it was a stroke. My aunt had a stroke and she went down just like that. Pedro came back just then and I said, ‘Look, Pedro, that man’s had a stroke.’ And all Pedro would say was, ‘Just passing out—just passing out—that’s all’ which was about what he was doing. I had to keep my eye on him. They don’t like you passing out at a place like the Luxembourg. That’s why I don’t like Dagoes. When they’ve drunk too much they’re not a bit refined anymore—a girl never knows what unpleasantness she may be let in for.” She brooded for a moment and then glancing at a showy looking bracelet on her right wrist, she added, “Still, I must say they’re generous enough.”

Gently distracting her from the trials and compensations of a girl’s existence Kemp took her through her story once more.

“That’s our last chance of outside help gone,” he said to Race when they had left Miss Shannon’s flat. “And it would have been a good chance if it had come off. That girl’s the right kind of witness. Sees things and remembers them accurately. If there had been anything to see, she’d have seen it. So the answer is that there wasn’t anything to see. It’s incredible. It’s a conjuring trick! George Barton drinks champagne and goes and dances. He comes back, drinks from the same glass that no one has touched and Hey Presto it’s full of cyanide. It’s crazy—I tell you—it couldn’t have happened except that it did.”

He stopped a minute.

“That waiter. The little boy. Giuseppe never mentioned him. I might look into that. After all, he’s the one person who was near the table whilst they were all away dancing. There might be something in it.”

Race shook his head.

“If he’d put anything in Barton’s glass, that girl would have seen him. She’s a born observer of detail. Nothing to think about inside her head and so she uses her eyes. No, Kemp, there must be some quite simple explanation if only we could get it.”

“Yes, there’s one. He dropped it in himself.”

“I’m beginning to believe that that is what happened—that it’s the only thing that can have happened. But if so, Kemp, I’m convinced he didn’t know it was cyanide.”

“You mean someone gave it to him? Told him it was for indigestion or blood pressure—something like that?”

“It could be.”

“Then who was the someone? Not either of the Farradays.”

“That would certainly seem unlikely.”

“And I’d say Mr. Anthony Browne is equally unlikely. That leaves us two people—an affectionate sister-in-law—”

“And a devoted secretary.”

Kemp looked at him.

“Yes—she could have planted something of the kind on him—I’m due now to go to Kidderminster House—What about you? Going round to see Miss Marle?”

“I think I’ll go and see the other one—at the office. Condolences of an old friend. I might take her out to lunch.”

“So that is what you think.”

“I don’t think anything yet. I’m casting about for spoor.”

“You ought to see Iris Marle, all the same.”

“I’m going to see her—but I’d rather go to the house first when she isn’t there. Do you know why, Kemp?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say.”

“Because there’s someone there who twitters—twitters like a little bird . . .
A little bird told me—was a saying of my youth. It’s very true, Kemp—
these twitterers can tell one a lot if one just lets them—twitter!”

Four

The two men parted. Race halted a taxi and was driven to George Barton's office in the city. Chief Inspector Kemp, mindful of his expense account, took a bus to within a stone's throw of Kidderminster House.

The inspector's face was rather grim as he mounted the steps and pushed the bell. He was, he knew, on difficult ground. The Kidderminster faction had immense political influence and its ramifications spread out like a network throughout the country. Chief Inspector Kemp had full belief in the impartiality of British justice. If Stephen or Alexandra Farraday had been concerned in the death of Rosemary Barton or in that of George Barton no "pull" or "influence" would enable them to escape the consequences. But if they were guiltless, or the evidence against them was too vague to ensure conviction, then the responsible officer must be careful how he trod or he would be liable to get a rap over the knuckles from his superiors. In these circumstances it can be understood that the chief inspector did not much relish what lay before him. It seemed to him highly probable that the Kidderminsters would, as he phrased it to himself, "cut up rough."

Kemp soon found, however, that he had been somewhat naïve in his assumption. Lord Kidderminster was far too experienced a diplomat to resort to crudities.

On stating his business, Chief Inspector Kemp was taken at once by a pontifical butler to a dim book-lined room at the back of the house where he found Lord Kidderminster and his daughter and son-in-law awaiting him.

Coming forward, Lord Kidderminster shook hands and said courteously:

"You are exactly on time, chief inspector. May I say that I much appreciate your courtesy in coming here instead of demanding that my daughter and her husband should come to Scotland Yard which, of course, they would have been quite prepared to do if necessary—that goes without saying—but they appreciate your kindness."

Sandra said in a quiet voice:

“Yes, indeed, inspector.”

She was wearing a dress of some soft dark red material, and sitting as she was with the light from the long narrow window behind her, she reminded Kemp of a stained glass figure he had once seen in a cathedral abroad. The long oval of her face and the slight angularity of her shoulders helped the illusion. Saint Somebody or other, they had told him—but Lady Alexandra Farraday was no saint—not by a long way. And yet some of these old saints had been funny people from his point of view, not kindly ordinary decent Christian folk, but intolerant, fanatical, cruel to themselves and others.

Stephen Farraday stood close by his wife. His face expressed no emotion whatever. He looked correct and formal, an appointed legislator of the people. The natural man was well buried. But the natural man was there, as the chief inspector knew.

Lord Kidderminster was speaking, directing with a good deal of ability the trend of the interview.

“I won’t disguise from you, chief inspector, that this is a very painful and disagreeable business for us all. This is the second time that my daughter and son-in-law have been connected with a violent death in a public place—the same restaurant and two members of the same family. Publicity of such a kind is always harmful to a man in the public eye. Publicity, of course, cannot be avoided. We all realize that, and both my daughter and Mr. Farraday are anxious to give you all the help they can in the hope that the matter may be cleared up speedily and public interest in it die down.”

“Thank you, Lord Kidderminster. I much appreciate the attitude you have taken up. It certainly makes things easier for us.”

Sandra Farraday said:

“Please ask us any questions you like, chief inspector.”

“Thank you, Lady Alexandra.”

“Just one point, chief inspector,” said Lord Kidderminster. “You have, of course, your own sources of information and I gather from my friend the Commissioner that this man Barton’s death is regarded as murder rather than suicide, though on the face of it, to the outside public, suicide would seem a more likely explanation. You thought it was suicide, didn’t you, Sandra, my dear?”

The Gothic figure bowed its head slightly. Sandra said in a thoughtful voice:

“It seemed to me so obvious last night. We were there in the same restaurant and actually at the same table where poor Rosemary Barton poisoned herself last year. We have seen something of Mr. Barton during the summer in the country and he has really been very odd—quite unlike himself—and we all thought that his wife’s death was preying on his mind. He was very fond of her, you know, and I don’t think he ever got over her death. So that the idea of suicide seemed, it not natural, at least possible—whereas I can’t imagine why anyone should want to murder George Barton.”

Stephen Farraday said quickly:

“No more can I. Barton was an excellent fellow. I’m sure he hadn’t got an enemy in the world.”

Chief Inspector Kemp looked at the three inquiring faces turned towards him and reflected a moment before speaking. “Better let ’em have it,” he thought to himself.

“What you say is quite correct, I am sure, Lady Alexandra. But you see there are a few things that you probably don’t know yet.”

Lord Kidderminster interposed quickly:

“We mustn’t force the chief inspector’s hand. It is entirely in his discretion what facts he makes public.”

“Thanks, m’lord, but there’s no reason I shouldn’t explain things a little more clearly. I’ll boil it down to this. George Barton, before his death, expressed to two people his belief that his wife had not, as was believed, committed suicide, but had instead been poisoned by some third party. He also thought that he was on the track of that third party, and the dinner and celebration last night, ostensibly in honour of Miss Marle’s birthday, was really some part of a plan he had made for finding out the identity of his wife’s murderer.”

There was a moment’s silence—and in that silence Chief Inspector Kemp, who was a sensitive man in spite of his wooden appearance, felt the presence of something that he classified as dismay. It was not apparent on any face, but he could have sworn that it was there.

Lord Kidderminster was the first to recover himself. He said:

“But surely—that belief in itself might point to the fact that poor Barton was not quite—er—himself? Brooding over his wife’s death might have slightly unhinged him mentally.”

“Quite so, Lord Kidderminster, but it at least shows that his frame of mind was definitely not suicidal.”

“Yes—yes, I take your point.”

And again there was silence. Then Stephen Farraday said sharply:

“But how did Barton get such an idea into his head? After all, Mrs. Barton did commit suicide.”

Chief Inspector Kemp transferred a placid gaze to him.

“Mr. Barton didn’t think so.”

Lord Kidderminster interposed.

“But the police were satisfied? There was no suggestion of anything but suicide at the time?”

Chief Inspector Kemp said quietly:

“The facts were compatible with suicide. There was no evidence that her death was due to any other agency.”

He knew that a man of Lord Kidderminster’s calibre would seize on the exact meaning of that.

Becoming slightly more official, Kemp said, “I would like to ask you some questions now, if I may, Lady Alexandra?”

“Certainly.” She turned her head slightly towards him.

“You had no suspicions at the time of Mr. Barton’s death that it might be murder, not suicide?”

“Certainly not. I was quite sure it was suicide.” She added, “I still am.”

Kemp let that pass. He said:

“Have you received any anonymous letters in the past year, Lady Alexandra?”

The calm of her manner seemed broken by pure astonishment.

“Anonymous letters? Oh, no.”

“You’re quite sure? Such letters are very unpleasant things and people usually prefer to ignore them, but they may be particularly important in this case, and that is why I want to stress that if you did receive any such letters it is most essential that I should know about them.”

“I see. But I can only assure you, chief inspector, that I have received nothing of the kind.”

“Very well. Now you say Mr. Barton’s manner has been odd this summer. In what way?”

She considered a minute.

“Well, he was jumpy, nervous. It seemed difficult for him to focus his attention on what was said to him.” She turned her head towards her husband. “Was that how it struck you, Stephen?”

“Yes, I should say that was a very fair description. The man looked physically ill, too. He had lost weight.”

“Did you notice any difference in his attitude towards you and your husband? Any less cordiality, for instance?”

“No. On the contrary. He had bought a house, you know, quite close to us, and he seemed very grateful for what we were able to do for him—in the way of local introductions, I mean, and all that. Of course we were only too pleased to do everything we could in that line, both for him and for Iris Marle who is a charming girl.”

“Was the late Mrs. Barton a great friend of yours, Lady Alexandra?”

“No, we were not very intimate.” She gave a light laugh. “She was really mostly Stephen’s friend. She became interested in politics and he helped to—well, educate her politically—which I’m sure he enjoyed. She was a very charming and attractive woman, you know.”

“And you’re a very clever one,” thought Chief Inspector Kemp to himself appreciatively. “I wonder how much you know about those two—a good deal, I shouldn’t wonder.”

He went on:

“Mr. Barton never expressed to you the view that his wife did not commit suicide?”

“No, indeed. That was why I was so startled just now.”

“And Miss Marle? She never talked about her sister’s death, either?”

“No.”

“Any idea what made George Barton buy a house in the country? Did you or your husband suggest the idea to him?”

“No. It was quite a surprise.”

“And his manner to you was always friendly?”

“Very friendly indeed.”

“And what do you know about Mr. Anthony Browne, Lady Alexandra?”

“I really know nothing at all. I have met him occasionally and that is all.”

“What about you, Mr. Farraday?”

“I think I know probably less about Browne than my wife does. She at any rate has danced with him. He seems a likeable chap—American, I believe.”

“Would you say from observation at the time that he was on special terms of intimacy with Mrs. Barton?”

“I have absolutely no knowledge on that point, chief inspector.”

“I am simply asking you for your impression, Mr. Farraday.”

Stephen frowned.

“They were friendly—that is all I can say.”

“And you, Lady Alexandra?”

“Simply my impression, chief inspector?”

“Simply your impression.”

“Then, for what it is worth, I did form the impression that they knew each other well and were on intimate terms. Simply, you understand, from the way they looked at each other—I have no concrete evidence.”

“Ladies have often very good judgement on these matters,” said Kemp. That somewhat fatuous smile with which he delivered this remark would have amused Colonel Race if he had been present. “Now, what about Miss Lessing, Lady Alexandra?”

“Miss Lessing, I understand, was Mr. Barton’s secretary. I met her for the first time on the evening that Mrs. Barton died. After that I met her once when she was staying down in the country, and last night.”

“If I may ask you another informal question, did you form the impression that she was in love with George Barton?”

“I really haven’t the least idea.”

“Then we’ll come to the events of last night.”

He questioned both Stephen and his wife minutely on the course of the tragic evening. He had not hoped for much from this, and all he got was confirmation of what he had already been told. All accounts agreed on the important points—Barton had proposed a toast to Iris, had drunk it and immediately afterwards had got up to dance. They had all left the table together and George and Iris had been the first to return to it. Neither of them had any explanation to offer as to the empty chair except that George Barton had distinctly said that he was expecting a friend of his, a Colonel Race, to occupy it later in the evening—a statement which, as the inspector knew, could not possibly be the truth. Sandra Farraday said, and her husband agreed, that when the lights went up after the cabaret, George had stared at the empty chair in a peculiar manner and had for some moments seemed so absentminded as not to hear what was said to him—then he had rallied himself and proposed Iris’s health.

The only item that the chief inspector could count as an addition to his knowledge, was Sandra’s account of her conversation with George at Fairhaven—and his plea that she and her husband would collaborate with him over this party for Iris’s sake.

It was a reasonably plausible pretext, the chief inspector thought, though not the true one. Closing his notebook in which he had jotted down one or

two hieroglyphics, he rose to his feet.

“I’m very grateful to you, my lord, and to Mr. Farraday and Lady Alexandra for your help and collaboration.”

“Will my daughter’s presence be required at the inquest?”

“The proceedings will be purely formal on this occasion. Evidence of identification and the medical evidence will be taken and the inquest will then be adjourned for a week. By then,” said the chief inspector, his tone changing slightly, “we shall, I hope, be further on.”

He turned to Stephen Farraday:

“By the way, Mr. Farraday, there are one or two small points where I think you could help me. No need to trouble Lady Alexandra. If you will give me a ring at the Yard, we can settle a time that will suit you. You are, I know, a busy man.”

It was pleasantly said, with an air of casualness, but on three pairs of ears the words fell with deliberate meaning.

With an air of friendly cooperation Stephen managed to say:

“Certainly, chief inspector.” Then he looked at his watch and murmured: “I must go along to the House.”

When Stephen had hurried off, and the chief inspector had likewise departed, Lord Kidderminster turned to his daughter and asked a question with no beating about the bush.

“Had Stephen been having an affair with that woman?”

There was a split second of a pause before his daughter answered.

“Of course not. I should have known it if he had. And anyway, Stephen’s not that kind.”

“Now, look here, my dear, no good laying your ears back and digging your hoofs in. These things are bound to come out. We want to know where we are in this business.”

“Rosemary Barton was a friend of that man, Anthony Browne. They went about everywhere together.”

“Well,” said Lord Kidderminster slowly. “You should know.”

He did not believe his daughter. His face, as he went slowly out of the room, was grey and perplexed. He went upstairs to his wife’s sitting room. He had vetoed her presence in the library, knowing too well that her arrogant methods were apt to arouse antagonism and at this juncture he felt it vital that relations with the official police should be harmonious.

“Well?” said Lady Kidderminster. “How did it go off?”

“Quite well on the face of it,” said Lord Kidderminster slowly. “Kemp is a courteous fellow—very pleasant in his manner—he handled the whole thing with tact—just a little too much tact for my fancy.”

“It’s serious, then?”

“Yes, it’s serious. We should never have let Sandra marry that fellow, Vicky.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Yes—yes . . .” He acknowledged her claim. “You were right—and I was wrong. But, mind you, she would have had him anyway. You can’t turn Sandra when her mind is fixed on a thing. Her meeting Farraday was a disaster—a man of whose antecedents and ancestors we know nothing. When a crisis comes how does one know how a man like that will react?”

“I see,” said Lady Kidderminster. “You think we’ve taken a murderer into the family?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to condemn the fellow offhand—but it’s what the police think—and they’re pretty shrewd. He had an affair with this

Barton woman—that's plain enough. Either she committed suicide on his account, or else he—Well, whatever happened, Barton got wise to it and was heading for an exposé and scandal. I suppose Stephen simply couldn't take it—and—"

"Poisoned him?"

"Yes."

Lady Kidderminster shook her head.

"I don't agree with you."

"I hope you're right. But somebody poisoned him."

"If you ask me," said Lady Kidderminster, "Stephen simply wouldn't have the nerve to do a thing like that."

"He's in deadly earnest about his career—he's got great gifts, you know, and the makings of a true statesman. You can't say what anyone will do when they're forced into a corner."

His wife still shook her head.

"I still say he hasn't got the nerve. You want someone who's a gambler and capable of being reckless. I'm afraid, William, I'm horribly afraid."

He stared at her. "Are you suggesting that Sandra—Sandra—?"

"I hate even to suggest such a thing—but it's no use being cowardly and refusing to face possibilities. She's besotted about that man—she always has been—and there's a queer streak in Sandra. I've never really understood her—but I've always been afraid for her. She'd risk anything—anything—for Stephen. Without counting the cost. And if she's been mad enough and wicked enough to do this thing, she's got to be protected."

"Protected? What do you mean—protected?"

“By you. We’ve got to do something about our own daughter, haven’t we? Mercifully you can pull any amount of strings.”

Lord Kidderminster was staring at her. Though he had thought he knew his wife’s character well, he was nevertheless appalled at the force and courage of her realism—at her refusal to blink at unpalatable facts—and also at her unscrupulousness.

“If my daughter’s a murderess, do you suggest that I should use my official position to rescue her from the consequences of her act?”

“Of course,” said Lady Kidderminster.

“My dear Vicky! You don’t understand! One can’t do things like that. It would be a breach of—of honour.”

“Rubbish!” said Lady Kidderminster.

They looked at each other—so far divided that neither could see the other’s point of view. So might Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have stared at each other with the word Iphigenia on their lips.

“You could bring government pressure to bear on the police so that the whole thing is dropped and a verdict of suicide brought in. It has been done before—don’t pretend.”

“That has been when it was a matter of public policy—in the interests of the State. This is a personal and private matter. I doubt very much whether I could do such a thing.”

“You can if you have sufficient determination.”

Lord Kidderminster flushed angrily.

“If I could, I wouldn’t! It would be abusing my public position.”

“If Sandra were arrested and tried, wouldn’t you employ the best counsel and do everything possible to get her off however guilty she was?”

“Of course, of course. That’s entirely different. You women never grasp these things.”

Lady Kidderminster was silent, unperturbed by the thrust. Sandra was the least dear to her of her children—nevertheless she was at this moment a mother, and a mother only—willing to defend her young by any means, honourable or dishonourable. She would fight with tooth and claw for Sandra.

“In any case,” said Lord Kidderminster, “Sandra will not be charged unless there is an absolutely convincing case against her. And I, for one, refuse to believe that a daughter of mine is a murderess. I’m astonished at you, Vicky, for entertaining such an idea for a moment.”

His wife said nothing, and Lord Kidderminster went uneasily out of the room. To think that Vicky—Vicky—whom he had known intimately for so many years—should prove to have such unsuspected and really very disturbing depths in her!

Five

Race found Ruth Lessing busy with papers at a large desk. She was dressed in a black coat and skirt and a white blouse and he was impressed by her quiet unhurried efficiency. He noticed the dark circles under her eyes and the unhappy set line of her mouth, but her grief, if it was grief, was as well controlled as all her other emotions.

Race explained his visit and she responded at once.

“It is very good of you to come. Of course I know who you are. Mr. Barton was expecting you to join us last night, was he not? I remember his saying so.”

“Did he mention that before the evening itself?”

She thought for a moment.

“No. It was when we were actually taking our seats round the table. I remember that I was a little surprised—” She paused and flushed slightly. “Not, of course, at his inviting you. You are an old friend, I know. And you were to have been at the other party a year ago. All I meant was that I was surprised, if you were coming, that Mr. Barton hadn’t invited another woman to balance the numbers—but of course if you were going to be late and might perhaps not come at all—” She broke off. “How stupid I am. Why go over all these petty things that don’t matter? I am stupid this morning.”

“But you have come to work as usual?”

“Of course.” She looked surprised—almost shocked. “It is my job. There is so much to clear up and arrange.”

“George always told me how much he relied upon you,” said Race gently.

She turned away. He saw her swallow quickly and blink her eyes. Her absence of any display of emotion almost convinced him of her entire innocence. Almost, but not quite. He had met women who were good

actresses before now, women whose reddened eyelids and the black circles underneath whose eyes had been due to art and not to natural causes.

Reserving judgement, he said to himself:

“At any rate she’s a cool customer.”

Ruth turned back to the desk and in answer to his last remark she said quietly:

“I was with him for many years—it will be eight years next April—and I knew his ways, and I think he—trusted me.”

“I’m sure of that.”

He went on: “It is nearly lunchtime. I hoped you would come out and lunch quietly with me somewhere? There is a good deal I would like to say to you.”

“Thank you. I should like to very much.”

He took her to a small restaurant that he knew of, where the tables were set far apart and where a quiet conversation was possible.

He ordered, and when the waiter had gone, looked across the table at his companion.

She was a good-looking girl, he decided, with her sleek dark head and her firm mouth and chin.

He talked a little on desultory topics until the food was brought, and she followed his lead, showing herself intelligent and sensible.

Presently, after a pause, she said:

“You want to talk to me about last night? Please don’t hesitate to do so. The whole thing is so incredible that I would like to talk about it. Except that it happened and I saw it happen, I would not have believed it.”

“You’ve seen Chief Inspector Kemp, of course?”

“Yes, last night. He seems intelligent and experienced.” She paused. “Was it really murder, Colonel Race?”

“Did Kemp tell you so?”

“He didn’t volunteer any information, but his questions made it plain enough what he had in mind.”

“Your opinion as to whether or not it was suicide should be as good as anyone’s, Miss Lessing. You knew Barton well and you were with him most of yesterday, I imagine. How did he seem? Much as usual? Or was he disturbed—upset—excited?”

She hesitated.

“It’s difficult. He was upset and disturbed—but then there was a reason for that.”

She explained the situation that had arisen in regard to Victor Drake and gave a brief sketch of that young man’s career.

“H’m,” said Race. “The inevitable black sheep. And Barton was upset about him?”

Ruth said slowly:

“It’s difficult to explain. I knew Mr. Barton so well, you see. He was annoyed and bothered about the business—and I gather Mrs. Drake had been very tearful and upset, as she always was on these occasions—so of course he wanted to straighten it all out. But I had the impression—”

“Yes, Miss Lessing? I’m sure your impressions will be accurate.”

“Well, then, I fancied that his annoyance was not quite the usual annoyance, if I may put it like that. Because we had had this same business before, in one form or another. Last year Victor Drake was in this country and in trouble, and we had to ship him off to South America, and only last June he

cabled home for money. So you see I was familiar with Mr. Barton's reactions. And it seemed to me this time that his annoyance was principally at the cable having arrived just at this moment when he was entirely preoccupied with the arrangements for the party he was giving. He seemed so taken up by the preparations for it that he grudged any other preoccupation arising."

"Did it strike you that there was anything odd about this party of his, Miss Lessing?"

"Yes, it did. Mr. Barton was really most peculiar about it. He was excited—like a child might have been."

"Did it occur to you that there might have been a special purpose for such a party?"

"You mean that it was a replica of the party a year ago when Mrs. Barton committed suicide?"

"Yes."

"Frankly, I thought it a most extraordinary idea."

"But George didn't volunteer any explanation—or confide in you in any way?"

She shook her head.

"Tell me, Miss Lessing, has there ever been any doubt in your mind as to Mrs. Barton's having committed suicide?"

She looked astonished. "Oh, no."

"George Barton didn't tell you that he believed his wife had been murdered?"

She stared at him.

"George believed that?"

“I see that is news to you. Yes, Miss Lessing. George had received anonymous letters stating that his wife had not committed suicide but had been killed.”

“So that is why he became so odd this summer? I couldn’t think what was the matter with him.”

“You knew nothing about these anonymous letters?”

“Nothing. Were there many of them?”

“He showed me two.”

“And I knew nothing about them!”

There was a note of bitter hurt in her voice.

He watched her for a moment or two, then he said:

“Well, Miss Lessing, what do you say? Is it possible, in your opinion, for George to have committed suicide?”

She shook her head.

“No—oh, no.”

“But you said he was excited—upset?”

“Yes, but he had been like that for some time. I see why now. And I see why he was so excited about last night’s party. He must have had some special idea in his head—he must have hoped that by reproducing the conditions, he would gain some additional knowledge—poor George, he must have been so muddled about it all.”

“And what about Rosemary Barton, Miss Lessing? Do you still think her death was suicide?”

She frowned.

“I’ve never dreamt of it being anything else. It seemed so natural.”

“Depression after influenza?”

“Well, rather more than that, perhaps. She was definitely very unhappy. One could see that.”

“And guess the cause?”

“Well—yes. At least I did. Of course I may have been wrong. But women like Mrs. Barton are very transparent—they don’t trouble to hide their feelings. Mercifully I don’t think Mr. Barton knew anything . . . Oh, yes, she was very unhappy. And I know she had a bad headache that night besides being run-down with flu.”

“How did you know she had a headache?”

“I heard her telling Lady Alexandra so—in the cloakroom when we were taking off our wraps. She was wishing she had a Cachet Faivre and luckily Lady Alexandra had one with her and gave it to her.”

Colonel Race’s hand stopped with a glass in mid air.

“And she took it?”

“Yes.”

He put his glass down untasted and looked across the table. The girl looked placid and unaware of any significance in what she had said. But it was significant. It meant that Sandra who, from her position at table, would have had the most difficulty in putting anything unseen in Rosemary’s glass, had had another opportunity of administering the poison. She could have given it to Rosemary in a cachet. Ordinarily a cachet would take only a few minutes to dissolve, but possibly this had been a special kind of cachet, it might have had a lining of gelatine or some other substance. Or Rosemary might possibly not have swallowed it then but later.

He said abruptly:

“Did you see her take it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

He saw by her puzzled face that her mind had gone on elsewhere.

“Did you see Rosemary Barton swallow that cachet?”

Ruth looked a little startled.

“I—well, no, I didn’t actually see her. She just thanked Lady Alexandra.”

So Rosemary might have slipped the cachet in her bag and then, during the cabaret, with a headache increasing, she might have dropped it into her champagne glass and let it dissolve. Assumption—pure assumption—but a possibility.

Ruth said:

“Why do you ask me that?”

Her eyes were suddenly alert, full of questions. He watched, so it seemed to him, her intelligence working.

Then she said:

“Oh, I see. I see why George took that house down there near the Farradays. And I see why he didn’t tell me about those letters. It seemed to me so extraordinary that he hadn’t. But of course if he believed them, it meant that one of us, one of those five people round the table must have killed her. It might—it might even have been me!”

Race said in a very gentle voice:

“Had you any reason for killing Rosemary Barton?”

He thought at first that she hadn’t heard the question. She sat so very still with her eyes cast down.

But suddenly with a sigh, she raised them and looked straight at him.

“It is not the sort of thing one cares to talk about,” she said. “But I think you had better know. I was in love with George Barton. I was in love with him before he even met Rosemary. I don’t think he ever knew—certainly he didn’t care. He was fond of me—very fond of me—but I suppose never in that way. And yet I used to think that I would have made him a good wife—that I could have made him happy. He loved Rosemary, but he wasn’t happy with her.”

Race said gently:

“And you disliked Rosemary?”

“Yes, I did. Oh! She was very lovely and very attractive and could be very charming in her way. She never bothered to be charming to me! I disliked her a good deal. I was shocked when she died—and at the way she died, but I wasn’t really sorry. I’m afraid I was rather glad.”

She paused.

“Please, shall we talk about something else?”

Race responded quickly:

“I’d like you to tell me exactly, in detail, everything you can remember about yesterday—from the morning onwards—especially anything George did or said.”

Ruth replied promptly, going over the events of the morning—George’s annoyance over Victor’s importunity, her own telephone calls to South America and the arrangements made and George’s pleasure when the matter was settled. She then described her arrival at the Luxembourg and George’s flurried excited bearing as host. She carried her narrative up to the final moment of the tragedy. Her account tallied in every respect with those he had already heard.

With a worried frown, Ruth voiced his own perplexity.

“It wasn’t suicide—I’m sure it wasn’t suicide—but how can it have been murder? I mean, how can it have been done? The answer is, it couldn’t, not by one of us! Then was it someone who slipped the poison into George’s glass while we were away dancing? But if so, who could it have been? It doesn’t seem to make sense.”

“The evidence is that no one went near the table while you were dancing.”

“Then it really doesn’t make sense! Cyanide doesn’t get into a glass by itself!”

“Have you absolutely no idea—no suspicion, even, who might have put the cyanide in the glass? Think back over last night. Is there nothing, no small incident, that awakens your suspicions in any degree, however small?”

He saw her face change, saw for a moment uncertainty come into her eyes. There was a tiny, almost infinitesimal pause before she answered
“Nothing.”

But there had been something. He was sure of that. Something she had seen or heard or noticed that, for some reason or other, she had decided not to tell.

He did not press her. He knew that with a girl of Ruth’s type that would be no good. If, for some reason, she had made up her mind to keep silence, she would not, he felt sure, change her mind.

But there had been something. That knowledge cheered him and gave him fresh assurance. It was the first sign of a crevice in the blank wall that confronted him.

He took leave of Ruth after lunch and drove to Elvaston Square thinking of the woman he had just left.

Was it possible that Ruth Lessing was guilty? On the whole, he was prepossessed in her favour. She had seemed entirely frank and straightforward.

Was she capable of murder? Most people were, if you came to it. Capable not of murder in general, but of one particular individual murder. That was what made it so difficult to weed anyone out. There was a certain quality of ruthlessness about that young woman. And she had a motive—or rather a choice of motives. By removing Rosemary she had a very good chance of becoming Mrs. George Barton. Whether it was a question of marrying a rich man, or of marrying the man she had loved, the removal of Rosemary was the first essential.

Race was inclined to think that marrying a rich man was not enough. Ruth Lessing was too coolheaded and cautious to risk her neck for mere comfortable living as a rich man's wife. Love? Perhaps. For all her cool and detached manner, he suspected her of being one of those women who can be kindled to unlikely passion by one particular man. Given love of George and hate of Rosemary, she might have coolly planned and executed Rosemary's death. The fact that it had gone off without a hitch, and that suicide had been universally accepted without demur, proved her inherent capability.

And then George had received anonymous letters (From whom? Why? That was the teasing vexing problem that never ceased to nag at him) and had grown suspicious. He had planned a trap. And Ruth had silenced him.

No, that wasn't right. That didn't ring true. That spelt panic—and Ruth Lessing was not the kind of woman who panicked. She had better brains than George and could have avoided any trap that he was likely to set with the greatest of ease.

It looked as though Ruth didn't add up after all.

Six

Lucilla Drake was delighted to see Colonel Race.

The blinds were all down and Lucilla came into the room draped in black and with a handkerchief to her eyes and explained, as she advanced a tremulous hand to meet his, how of course she couldn't have seen anyone—anyone at all—except such an old friend of dear, dear George's—and it was so dreadful to have no man in the house! Really without a man in the house one didn't know how to tackle anything. Just herself, a poor lonely widow, and Iris, just a helpless young girl, and George had always looked after everything. So kind of dear Colonel Race and really she was so grateful—no idea what they ought to do. Of course Miss Lessing would attend to all business matters—and the funeral to arrange for—but how about the inquest? and so dreadful having the police—actually in the house—plain clothes, of course, and really very considerate. But she was so bewildered and the whole thing was such an absolute tragedy and didn't Colonel Race think it must be all due to suggestion—that was what the psychoanalyst said, wasn't it, that everything is suggestion? And poor George at that horrid place, the Luxembourg, and practically the same party and remembering how poor Rosemary had died there—and it must have come over him quite suddenly, only if he'd listened to what she, Lucilla, had said, and taken that excellent tonic of dear Dr. Gaskell's—run-down, all the summer—yes, thoroughly run-down.

Whereupon Lucilla herself ran down temporarily, and Race had a chance to speak.

He said how deeply he sympathized and how Mrs. Drake must count upon him in every way.

Whereupon Lucilla started off again and said it was indeed kind of him, and it was the shock that had been so terrible—here today, and gone tomorrow, as it said in the Bible, cometh up like grass and cut down in the evening—only that wasn't quite right, but Colonel Race would know what she meant, and it was so nice to feel there was someone on whom they could rely. Miss Lessing meant well, of course, and was very efficient, but rather an

unsympathetic manner and sometimes took things upon herself a little too much, and in her, Lucilla's, opinion, George had always relied upon her far too much, and at one time she had been really afraid that he might do something foolish which would have been a great pity and probably she would have bullied him unmercifully once they were married. Of course she, Lucilla, had seen what was in the wind. Dear Iris was so unworldly, and it was nice, didn't Colonel Race think, for young girls to be unspoilt and simple? Iris had really always been very young for her age and very quiet—one didn't know half the time what she was thinking about. Rosemary being so pretty and so gay had been out a great deal, and Iris had mooned about the house which wasn't really right for a young girl—they should go to classes—cooking and perhaps dressmaking. It occupied their minds and one never knew when it might come in useful. It had really been a mercy that she, Lucilla, had been free to come and live here after poor Rosemary's death—that horrid 'flu, quite an unusual kind of flu, Dr. Gaskell had said. Such a clever man and such a nice, breezy manner.

She had wanted Iris to see him this summer. The girl had looked so white and pulled down. "But really, Colonel Race, I think it was the situation of the house. Low, you know, and damp, with quite a miasma in the evenings." Poor George had gone off and bought it all by himself without asking anyone's advice—such a pity. He had said he wanted it to be a surprise, but really it would have been better if he had taken some older woman's advice. Men knew nothing about houses. George might have realized that she, Lucilla, would have been willing to take any amount of trouble. For, after all, what was her life now? Her dear husband dead many years ago, and Victor, her dear boy, far away in the Argentine—she meant Brazil, or was it the Argentine? Such an affectionate, handsome boy.

Colonel Race said he had heard she had a son abroad.

For the next quarter of an hour, he was regaled with a full account of Victor's multitudinous activities. Such a spirited boy, willing to turn his hand to anything—here followed a list of Victor's varied occupations. Never unkind, or bearing malice to anyone. "He's always been unlucky, Colonel Race. He was misjudged by his housemaster and I consider the authorities at Oxford behaved quite disgracefully. People don't seem to

understand that a clever boy with a taste for drawing would think it an excellent joke to imitate someone's handwriting. He did it for the fun of the thing, not for money." But he'd always been a good son to his mother, and he never failed to let her know when he was in trouble which showed, didn't it, that he trusted her? Only it did seem curious, didn't it, that the jobs people found for him so often seemed to take him out of England. She couldn't help feeling that if only he could be given a nice job, in the Bank of England say, he would settle down much better. He might perhaps live a little out of London and have a little car.

It was quite twenty minutes before Colonel Race, having heard all Victor's perfections and misfortunes, was able to switch Lucilla from the subject of sons to that of servants.

Yes, it was very true what he said, the old-fashioned type of servant didn't exist any longer. Really the trouble people had nowadays! Not that she ought to complain, for really they had been very lucky. Mrs. Pound, though she had the misfortune to be slightly deaf, was an excellent woman. Her pastry sometimes a little heavy and a tendency to overpepper the soup, but really on the whole most reliable—and economical too. She had been there ever since George married and she had made no fuss about going to the country this year, though there had been trouble with the others over that and the parlour maid had left—but that really was all for the best—an impertinent girl who answered back—besides breaking six of the best wineglasses, not one by one at odd times which might happen to anybody, but all at once which really meant gross carelessness, didn't Colonel Race think so?

"Very careless indeed."

"That is what I told her. And I said to her that I should be obliged to say so in her reference—for I really feel one has a duty, Colonel Race. I mean, one should not mislead. Faults should be mentioned as well as good qualities. But the girl was—really—well, quite insolent and said that at any rate she hoped that in her next place she wouldn't be in the kind of house where people got bumped off—a dreadful common expression, acquired at the cinema, I believe, and ludicrously inappropriate since poor dear Rosemary took her own life—though not at the time responsible for her actions as the

coroner very rightly pointed out—and that dreadful expression refers, I believe, to gangsters executing each other with tommy guns. I am so thankful that we have nothing of that kind in England. And so, as I say, I put in her reference that Betty Archdale thoroughly understood her duties as parlourmaid and was sober and honest, but that she was inclined to have too many breakages and was not always respectful in her manner. And personally, if I had been Mrs. Rees-Talbot, I should have read between the lines and not engaged her. But people nowadays just jump at anything they can get, and will sometimes take a girl who has only stayed her month in three places running.”

Whilst Mrs. Drake paused to take breath, Colonel Race asked quickly whether that was Mrs. Richard Rees-Talbot? If so, he had known her, he said, in India.

“I really couldn’t say. Cadogan Square was the address.”

“Then it is my friends.”

Lucilla said that the world was such a small place, wasn’t it? And that there were no friends like old friends. Friendship was a wonderful thing. She had always thought it had been so romantic about Viola and Paul. Dear Viola, she had been a lovely girl, and so many men in love with her, but, oh dear, Colonel Race wouldn’t even know who she was talking about. One did so tend to re-live the past.

Colonel Race begged her to go on and in return for this politeness received the life history of Hector Marle, of his upbringing by his sister, of his peculiarities and his weaknesses and finally, when Colonel Race had almost forgotten her, of his marriage to the beautiful Viola. “She was an orphan, you know, and a ward in Chancery.” He heard how Paul Bennett, conquering his disappointment at Viola’s refusal, had transformed himself from lover to family friend, and of his fondness for his godchild, Rosemary, and of his death and the terms of his will. “Which I have always felt most romantic—such an enormous fortune! Not of course that money is everything—no, indeed. One has only to think of poor Rosemary’s tragic death. And even dear Iris I am not quite happy about!”

Race gave her an inquiring look.

“I find the responsibility most worrying. The fact that she is a great heiress is of course well known. I keep a very sharp eye on the undesirable type of young man, but what can one do, Colonel Race? One can’t look after girls nowadays as one used to do. Iris has friends I know next to nothing about. ‘Ask them to the house, dear,’ is what I always say—but I gather that some of these young men simply will not be brought. Poor George was worried, too. About a young man called Browne. I myself have never seen him, but it seems that he and Iris have been seeing a good deal of each other. And one does feel that she could do better. George didn’t like him—I’m quite sure of that. And I always think, Colonel Race, that men are so much better judges of other men. I remember thinking Colonel Pusey, one of our churchwardens, such a charming man, but my husband always preserved a very distant attitude towards him and enjoined on me to do the same—and sure enough one Sunday when he was handing round the offertory plate, he fell right down—completely intoxicated, it seems. And of course afterwards—one always hears these things afterwards, so much better if one heard them before—we found out that dozens of empty brandy bottles were taken out of the house every week! It was very sad really, because he was truly religious, though inclined to be Evangelical in his views. He and my husband had a terrific battle over the details of the service on All Saints’ Day. Oh, dear, All Saints’ Day. To think that yesterday was All Souls’ Day.”

A faint sound made Race look over Lucilla’s head at the open doorway. He had seen Iris before—at Little Priors. Nevertheless he felt that he was seeing her now for the first time. He was struck by the extraordinary tension behind her stillness and her wide eyes met his with something in their expression that he felt he ought to recognize, yet failed to do so.

In her turn, Lucilla Drake turned her head.

“Iris, dear, I didn’t hear you come in. You know Colonel Race? He is being so very kind.”

Iris came and shook hands with him gravely, the black dress she wore made her look thinner and paler than he remembered her.

“I came to see if I could be of any help to you,” said Race.

“Thank you. That was kind of you.”

She had had a bad shock, that was evident, and was still suffering from the effects of it. But had she been so fond of George that his death could affect her so powerfully?

She turned her eyes to her aunt and Race realized that they were watchful eyes. She said:

“What were you talking about—just now, as I came in?”

Lucilla became pink and flustered. Race guessed that she was anxious to avoid any mention of the young man, Anthony Browne. She exclaimed:

“Now let me see—oh, yes, All Saints’ Day—and yesterday being All Souls.’ All Souls’—that seems to me such an odd thing—one of those coincidences one never believes in in real life.”

“Do you mean,” said Iris, “that Rosemary came back yesterday to fetch George?”

Lucilla gave a little scream.

“Iris, dear, don’t. What a terrible thought—so un-Christian.”

“Why un-Christian? It’s the Day of the Dead. In Paris people used to go and put flowers on the graves.”

“Oh, I know, dear, but then they are Catholics, aren’t they?”

A faint smile twisted Iris’s lips. Then she said directly:

“I thought, perhaps, you were talking of Anthony—Anthony Browne.”

“Well,” Lucilla’s twitter became very high and birdlike, “as a matter of fact we did just mention him. I happened to say, you know, that we know nothing about him—”

Iris interrupted, her voice hard:

“Why should you know anything about him?”

“No, dear, of course not. At least, I mean, well, it would be rather nice, wouldn’t it, if we did?”

“You’ll have every chance of doing so in future,” said Iris, “because I’m going to marry him.”

“Oh, Iris!” It was halfway between a wail and a bleat. “You mustn’t do anything rash—I mean nothing can be settled at present.”

“It is settled, Aunt Lucilla.”

“No, dear, one can’t talk about things like marriage when the funeral hasn’t even taken place yet. It wouldn’t be decent. And this dreadful inquest and everything. And really, Iris, I don’t think dear George would have approved. He didn’t like this Mr. Browne.”

“No,” said Iris, “George wouldn’t have liked it and he didn’t like Anthony, but that doesn’t make any difference. It’s my life, not George’s—and anyway George is dead. . . .”

Mrs. Drake gave another wail.

“Iris, Iris. What has come over you? Really that was a most unfeeling thing to say.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Lucilla.” The girl spoke wearily. “I know it must have sounded like that but I didn’t mean it that way. I only meant that George is at peace somewhere and hasn’t got to worry about me and my future anymore. I must decide things for myself.”

“Nonsense, dear, nothing can be decided at a time like this—it would be most unfitting. The question simply doesn’t arise.”

Iris gave a sudden short laugh.

“But it has arisen. Anthony asked me to marry him before we left Little Priors. He wanted me to come up to London and marry him the next day without telling anyone. I wish now that I had.”

“Surely that was a very curious request,” said Colonel Race gently.

She turned defiant eyes to him.

“No, it wasn’t. It would have saved a lot of fuss. Why couldn’t I trust him? He asked me to trust him and I didn’t. Anyway, I’ll marry him now as soon as he likes.”

Lucilla burst out in a stream of incoherent protest. Her plump cheeks quivered and her eyes filled.

Colonel Race took rapid charge of the situation.

“Miss Marle, might I have a word with you before I go? On a strictly business matter?”

Rather startled, the girl murmured “Yes,” and found herself moving to the door. As she passed through, Race took a couple of strides back to Mrs. Drake.

“Don’t upset yourself, Mrs. Drake. Least said, you know, soonest mended. We’ll see what we can do.”

Leaving her slightly comforted he followed Iris who led him across the hall and into a small room giving out on the back of the house where a melancholy plane tree was shedding its last leaves.

Race spoke in a businesslike tone.

“All I had to say, Miss Marle, was that Chief Inspector Kemp is a personal friend of mine, and that I am sure you will find him most helpful and kindly. His duty is an unpleasant one, but I’m sure he will do it with the utmost consideration possible.”

She looked at him for a moment or two without speaking, then she said abruptly:

“Why didn’t you come and join us last night as George expected you to do?”

He shook his head.

“George didn’t expect me.”

“But he said he did.”

“He may have said so, but it wasn’t true. George knew perfectly well that I wasn’t coming.”

She said: “But that empty chair . . . Who was it for?”

“Not for me.”

Her eyes half closed and her face went very white.

She whispered:

“It was for Rosemary . . . I see . . . It was for Rosemary. . . .”

He thought she was going to fall. He came quickly to her and steadied her, then forced her to sit down.

“Take it easy. . . .”

She said in a low breathless voice:

“I’m all right . . . But I don’t know what to do . . . I don’t know what to do.”

“Can I help you?”

She raised her eyes to his face. They were wistful and sombre.

Then she said: “I must get things clear. I must get them”—she made a groping gesture with her hands—“in sequence. First of all, George believed Rosemary didn’t kill herself—but was killed. He believed that because of those letters. Colonel Race, who wrote those letters?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. Have you yourself any idea?”

“I simply can’t imagine. Anyway, George believed what they said, and he arranged this party last night, and he had an empty chair and it was All Souls’ Day . . . that’s the Day of the Dead—and it was a day when Rosemary’s spirit could have come back and—and told him the truth.”

“You mustn’t be too imaginative.”

“But I’ve felt her myself—felt her quite near sometimes—I’m her sister—and I think she’s trying to tell me something.”

“Take it easy, Iris.”

“I must talk about it. George drank Rosemary’s health and he—died. Perhaps—she came and took him.”

“The spirits of the dead don’t put potassium cyanide in a champagne glass, my dear.”

The words seemed to restore her balance. She said in a more normal tone:

“But it’s so incredible. George was killed—yes, killed. That’s what the police think and it must be true. Because there isn’t any other alternative. But it doesn’t make sense.”

“Don’t you think it does? If Rosemary was killed, and George was beginning to suspect by whom—”

She interrupted him.

“Yes, but Rosemary wasn’t killed. That’s why it doesn’t make sense. George believed those stupid letters partly because depression after

influenza isn't a very convincing reason for killing yourself. But Rosemary had a reason. Look, I'll show you."

She ran out of the room and returned a few moments later with a folded letter in her hand. She thrust it on him.

"Read it. See for yourself."

He unfolded the slightly crumpled sheet.

"Leopard darling. . . ."

He read it twice before handing it back.

The girl said eagerly:

"You see? She was unhappy—brokenhearted. She didn't want to go on living."

"Do you know to whom that letter was written?"

Iris nodded.

"Stephen Farraday. It wasn't Anthony. She was in love with Stephen and he was cruel to her. So she took the stuff with her to the restaurant and drank it there where he could see her die. Perhaps she hoped he'd be sorry then."

Race nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing. After a moment or two he said:

"When did you find this?"

"About six months ago. It was in the pocket of an old dressing gown."

"You didn't show it to George?"

Iris cried passionately:

"How could I? How could I? Rosemary was my sister. How could I give her away to George? He was so sure that she loved him. How could I show him

this after she was dead? He'd got it all wrong, but I couldn't tell him so. But what I want to know is, what am I to do now? I've shown it to you because you were George's friend. Has Inspector Kemp got to see it?"

"Yes. Kemp must have it. It's evidence, you see."

"But then they'll—they might read it out in court?"

"Not necessarily. That doesn't follow. It's George's death that is being investigated. Nothing will be made public that is not strictly relevant. You had better let me take this now."

"Very well."

She went with him to the front door. As he opened it she said abruptly:

"It does show, doesn't it, that Rosemary's death was suicide?"

Race said:

"It certainly shows that she had a motive for taking her own life."

She gave a deep sigh. He went down the steps. Glancing back once, he saw her standing framed in the open doorway, watching him walk away across the square.

Seven

Mary Rees-Talbot greeted Colonel Race with a positive shriek of unbelief.

“My dear, I haven’t seen you since you disappeared so mysteriously from Allahabad that time. And why are you here now? It isn’t to see me, I’m quite sure. You never pay social calls. Come on now, own up, you needn’t be diplomatic about it.”

“Diplomatic methods would be a waste of time with you, Mary. I always have appreciated your X-ray mind.”

“Cut the cackle and come to the horses, my pet.”

Race smiled.

“Is the maid who let me in Betty Archdale?” he inquired.

“So that’s it! Now don’t tell me that the girl, a pure Cockney if ever there was one, is a well-known European spy because I simply don’t believe it.”

“No, no, nothing of the kind.”

“And don’t tell me she’s one of our counterespionage either, because I don’t believe that.”

“Quite right. The girl is simply a parlourmaid.”

“And since when have you been interested in simple parlourmaids—not that Betty is simple—an artful dodger is more like it.”

“I think,” said Colonel Race, “that she might be able to tell me something.”

“If you asked her nicely? I shouldn’t be surprised if you’re right. She has the close-to-the-door-when-there’s-anything-interesting-going-on technique very highly developed. What does M. do?”

“M. very kindly offers me a drink and rings for Betty and orders it.”

“And when Betty brings it?”

“By then M. has very kindly gone away.”

“To do some listening outside the door herself?”

“If she likes.”

“And after that I shall be bursting with Inside Information about the latest European crisis?”

“I’m afraid not. There is no political situation involved in this.”

“What a disappointment! All right. I’ll play!”

Mrs. Rees-Talbot, who was a lively near-brunette of forty-nine, rang the bell and directed her good-looking parlourmaid to bring Colonel Race a whisky and soda.

When Betty Archdale returned, with a salver and the drink upon it, Mrs. Rees-Talbot, was standing by the far door into her own sitting room.

“Colonel Race has some questions to ask you,” she said and went out.

Betty turned her impudent eyes on the tall grey-haired soldier with some alarm in their depths. He took the glass from the tray and smiled.

“Seen the papers today?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.” Betty eyed him warily.

“Did you see that Mr. George Barton died last night at the Luxembourg Restaurant?”

“Oh, yes, sir.” Betty’s eyes sparkled with the pleasure of public disaster. “Wasn’t it dreadful?”

“You were in service there, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I left last winter, soon after Mrs. Barton died.”

“She died at the Luxembourg, too.”

Betty nodded. “Sort of funny, that, isn’t it, sir?”

Race did not think it funny, but he knew what the words were intended to convey. He said gravely:

“I see you’ve got brains. You can put two and two together.”

Betty clasped her hands and cast discretion to the winds.

“Was he done in, too? The papers didn’t say exactly.”

“Why do you say ‘too?’ Mrs. Barton’s death was brought in by the coroner’s jury as suicide.”

She gave him a quick look out of the corner of her eye. Ever so old, she thought, but he’s nice looking. That quiet kind. A real gentleman. Sort of gentleman who’d have given you a gold sovereign when he was young. Funny, I don’t even know what a sovereign looks like! What’s he after, exactly?

She said demurely: “Yes, sir.”

“But perhaps you never thought it was suicide?”

“Well, no, sir. I didn’t—not really.”

“That’s very interesting—very interesting indeed. Why didn’t you think so?”

She hesitated, her fingers began pleating her apron.

So nicely he said that, so gravely. Made you feel important and as though you wanted to help him. And anyway she had been smart over Rosemary Barton’s death. Never been taken in, she hadn’t!

“She was done in, sir, wasn’t she?”

“It seems possible that it may be so. But how did you come to think so?”

“Well,” Betty hesitated. “It was something I heard one day.”

“Yes?”

His tone was quietly encouraging.

“The door wasn’t shut or anything. I mean I’d never go and listen at a door. I don’t like that sort of thing,” said Betty virtuously. “But I was going through the hall to the dining room and carrying the silver on a tray and they were speaking quite loud. Saying something she was—Mrs. Barton I mean—about Anthony Browne not being his name. And then he got really nasty, Mr. Browne did. I wouldn’t have thought he had it in him—so nice looking and so pleasant spoken as he was as a rule. Said something about carving up her face—ooh! and then he said if she didn’t do what he told her he’d bump her off. Just like that! I didn’t hear any more because Miss Iris was coming down the stairs, and of course I didn’t think very much of it at the time, but after there was all the fuss about her committing suicide at that party and I heard he’d been there at the time—well, it gave me shivers all down my back—it did indeed!”

“But you didn’t say anything?”

The girl shook her head.

“I didn’t want to get mixed up with the police—and anyway I didn’t know anything—not really. And perhaps if I had said anything I’d have been bumped off too. Or taken for a ride as they call it.”

“I see.” Race paused a moment and then said in his gentlest voice: “So you just wrote an anonymous letter to Mr. George Barton?”

She stared at him. He detected no uneasy guilt—nothing but pure astonishment.

“Me? Write to Mr. Barton? Never.”

“Now don’t be afraid to tell about it. It was really a very good idea. It warned him without your having to give yourself away. It was very clever of you.”

“But I didn’t, sir. I never thought of such a thing. You mean write to Mr. Barton and say that his wife had been done in? Why, the idea never came into my head!”

She was so earnest in her denial that, in spite of himself, Race was shaken. But it all fitted in so well—it could all be explained so naturally if only the girl had written the letters. But she persisted in her denials, not vehemently or uneasily, but soberly and without undue protestation. He found himself reluctantly believing her.

He shifted his ground.

“Whom did you tell about this?”

She shook her head.

“I didn’t tell anyone. I’ll tell you honest, sir, I was scared. I thought I’d better keep my mouth shut. I tried to forget it. I only brought it up once—that was when I gave Mrs. Drake my notice—fussing terribly she’d been, more than a girl could stand, and now wanting me to go and bury myself in the dead of the country and not even a bus route! And then she turned nasty about my reference, saying I broke things, and I said sarcastic-like that at any rate I’d find a place where people didn’t get bumped off—and I felt scared when I’d said it, but she didn’t pay any real attention. Perhaps I ought to have spoken out at the time, but I couldn’t really tell. I mean the whole thing might have been a joke. People do say all sorts of things, and Mr. Browne was ever so nice really, and quite a one for joking, so I couldn’t tell, sir, could I?”

Race agreed that she couldn’t. Then he said:

“Mrs. Barton spoke of Browne not being his real name. Did she mention what his real name was?”

“Yes, she did. Because he said, ‘Forget about Tony’—now what was it? Tony something . . . Reminded me of the cherry jam cook had been making.”

“Tony Cheriton? Cherable.”

She shook her head.

“More of a fancy name than that. Began with an M. And sounded foreign.”

“Don’t worry. It will come back to you, perhaps. If so, let me know. Here is my card with my address. If you remember the name write to me at that address.”

He handed her the card and a treasury note.

“I will, sir, thank you, sir.”

A gentleman, she thought, as she ran downstairs. A pound note, not ten shillings. It must have been nice when there were gold sovereigns. . . .

Mary Rees-Talbot came back into the room.

“Well, successful?”

“Yes, but there’s still one snag to surmount. Can your ingenuity help me? Can you think of a name that would remind you of cherry jam?”

“What an extraordinary proposition.”

“Think Mary. I’m not a domestic man. Concentrate on jam making, cherry jam in particular.”

“One doesn’t often make cherry jam.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s inclined to go sugary—unless you use cooking cherries, Morello cherries.”

Race gave an exclamation.

“That’s it—I bet that’s it. Good-bye, Mary, I’m endlessly grateful. Do you mind if I ring that bell so that the girl comes and shows me out?”

Mrs. Rees-Talbot called after him as he hurried out of the room:

“Of all the ungrateful wretches! Aren’t you going to tell me what it’s all about?”

He called back:

“I’ll come and tell you the whole story later.”

“Sez you,” murmured Mrs. Rees-Talbot.

Downstairs, Betty waited with Race’s hat and stick.

He thanked her and passed out. On the doorstep he paused.

“By the way,” he said, “was the name Morelli?”

Betty’s face lighted up.

“Quite right, sir. That was it. Tony Morelli that’s the name he told her to forget. And he said he’d been in prison, too.”

Race walked down the steps smiling.

From the nearest call box he put through a call to Kemp.

Their interchange was brief but satisfactory. Kemp said:

“I’ll send off a cable at once. We ought to hear by return. I must say it will be a great relief if you’re right.”

“I think I’m right. The sequence is pretty clear.”

Eight

Chief Inspector Kemp was not in a very good humour.

For the last half hour he had been interviewing a frightened white rabbit of sixteen who, by virtue of his uncle Charles's great position, was aspiring to be a waiter of the class required by the Luxembourg. In the meantime, he was one of six harried underlings who ran about with aprons round their waists to distinguish them from the superior article, and whose duty it was to bear the blame for everything, fetch and carry, provide rolls and pats of butter and be occasionally and unceasingly hissed at in French, Italian and occasionally English. Charles, as befitted a great man, so far from showing favour to a blood relation, hissed, cursed and swore at him even more than he did at the others. Nevertheless Pierre aspired in his heart to be no less than the headwaiter of a chic restaurant himself one day in the far future.

At the moment, however, his career had received a check, and he gathered that he was suspected of no less than murder.

Kemp turned the lad inside out and disgustedly convinced himself that the boy had done no less and no more than what he had said—namely, picked up a lady's bag from the floor and replaced it by her plate.

“It is as I am hurrying with sauce to M. Robert and already he is impatient, and the young lady sweeps her bag off the table as she goes to dance, so I pick it up and put it on the table, and then I hurry on, for already M. Robert he is making the signs frantically to me. That is all, monsieur.”

And that was all. Kemp disgustedly let him go, feeling strongly tempted to add, “But don't let me catch you doing that sort of thing again.”

Sergeant Pollock made a distraction by announcing that they had telephoned up to say that a young lady was asking for him or rather for the officer in charge of the Luxembourg case.

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Miss Chloe West.”

“Let’s have her up,” said Kemp resignedly. “I can give her ten minutes. Mr. Farraday’s due after that. Oh, well, won’t do any harm to keep him waiting a few minutes. Makes them jittery, that does.”

When Miss Chloe West walked into the room, Kemp was at once assailed by the impression that he recognized her. But a minute later he abandoned that impression. No, he had never seen this girl before, he was sure of that. Nevertheless the vague haunting sense of familiarity remained to plague him.

Miss West was about twenty-five, tall, brown-haired and very pretty. Her voice was rather conscious of its diction and she seemed decidedly nervous.

“Well, Miss West, what can I do for you?”

Kemp spoke briskly.

“I read in the paper about the Luxembourg—the man who died there.”

“Mr. George Barton? Yes? Did you know him?”

“Well, no, not exactly. I mean I didn’t really know him.”

Kemp looked at her carefully and discarded his first deduction.

Chloe West was looking extremely refined and virtuous—severely so. He said pleasantly:

“Can I have your exact name and address first, please, so that we know where we are?”

“Chloe Elizabeth West. 15 Merryvale Court, Maida Vale. I’m an actress.”

Kemp looked at her again out of the corner of his eye, and decided that that was what she really was. Repertory, he fancied—in spite of her looks she was the earnest kind.

“Yes, Miss West?”

“When I read about Mr. Barton’s death and that the—the police were inquiring into it, I thought perhaps I ought to come and tell you something. I spoke to my friend about it and she seemed to think so. I don’t suppose it’s really anything to do with it, but—” Miss West paused.

“We’ll be the judge of that,” said Kemp pleasantly. “Just tell me about it.”

“I’m not acting just at the moment,” explained Miss West.

Inspector Kemp nearly said “Resting” to show that he knew the proper terms, but restrained himself.

“But my name is down at the agencies and my picture in Spotlight . . . That, I understand, is where Mr. Barton saw it. He got into touch with me and explained what he wanted me to do.”

“Yes?”

“He told me he was having a dinner party at the Luxembourg and that he wanted to spring a surprise on his guests. He showed me a photograph and told me that he wanted me to make up as the original. I was very much the same colouring, he said.”

Illumination flashed across Kemp’s mind. The photograph of Rosemary he had seen on the desk in George’s room in Elvaston Square. That was who the girl reminded him of. She was like Rosemary Barton—not perhaps startlingly so—but the general type and cast of features was the same.

“He also brought me a dress to wear—I’ve brought it with me. A greyish green silk. I was to do my hair like the photograph (it was a coloured one) and accentuate the resemblance with makeup. Then I was to come to the Luxembourg and go into the restaurant during the first cabaret show and sit down at Mr. Barton’s table where there would be a vacant place. He took me to lunch there and showed me where the table would be.”

“And why didn’t you keep the appointment, Miss West?”

“Because about eight o’clock that night—someone—Mr. Barton—rang up and said the whole thing had been put off. He said he’d let me know next day when it was coming off. Then, the next morning, I saw his death in the papers.”

“And very sensibly you came along to us,” said Kemp pleasantly. “Well, thank you very much, Miss West. You’ve cleared up one mystery—the mystery of the vacant place. By the way, you said just now—‘someone’—and then, ‘Mr. Barton.’ Why is that?”

“Because at first I didn’t think it was Mr. Barton. His voice sounded different.”

“It was a man’s voice?”

“Oh, yes, I think so—at least—it was rather husky as though he had a cold.”

“And that’s all he said?”

“That’s all.”

Kemp questioned her a little longer, but got no further.

When she had gone, he said to the sergeant:

“So that was George Barton’s famous ‘plan.’ I see now why they all said he stared at the empty chair after the cabaret and looked queer and absentminded. His precious plan had gone wrong.”

“You don’t think it was he who put her off?”

“Not on your life. And I’m not so sure it was a man’s voice, either. Huskiness is a good disguise through the telephone. Oh, well, we’re getting on. Send in Mr. Farraday if he’s here.”

Nine

I

Outwardly cool and unperturbed, Stephen Farraday had turned into Great Scotland Yard full of inner shrinking. An intolerable weight burdened his spirits. It had seemed that morning as though things were going so well. Why had Inspector Kemp asked for his presence here with such significance? What did he know or suspect? It could be only vague suspicion. The thing to do was to keep one's head and admit nothing.

He felt strangely bereft and lonely without Sandra. It was as though when the two faced a peril together it lost half its terrors. Together they had strength, courage, power. Alone, he was nothing, less than nothing. And Sandra, did she feel the same? Was she sitting now in Kidderminster House, silent, reserved, proud and inwardly feeling horribly vulnerable?

Inspector Kemp received him pleasantly but gravely. There was a uniformed man sitting at a table with a pencil and a pad of paper. Having asked Stephen to sit down, Kemp spoke in a strongly formal manner.

"I propose, Mr. Farraday, to take a statement from you. That statement will be written down and you will be asked to read it over and sign it before you leave. At the same time it is my duty to tell you that you are at liberty to refuse to make such a statement and that you are entitled to have your solicitor present if you so desire."

Stephen was taken aback but did not show it. He forced a wintry smile. "That sounds very formidable, chief inspector."

"We like everything to be clearly understood, Mr. Farraday."

"Anything I say may be used against me, is that it?"

"We don't use the word against. Anything you say will be liable to be used in evidence."

Stephen said quietly:

“I understand, but I cannot imagine, inspector, why you should need any further statement from me? You heard all I had to say this morning.”

“That was a rather informal session—useful as a preliminary starting-off point. And also, Mr. Farraday, there are certain facts which I imagined you would prefer to discuss with me here. Anything irrelevant to the case we try to be as discreet about as is compatible with the attainment of justice. I daresay you understand what I am driving at.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

Chief Inspector Kemp sighed.

“Just this. You were on very intimate terms with the late Mrs. Rosemary Barton—”

Stephen interrupted him.

“Who says so?”

Kemp leaned forward and took a typewritten document from his desk.

“This is a copy of a letter found amongst the late Mrs. Barton’s belongings. The original is filed here and was handed to us by Miss Iris Marle, who recognizes the writing as that of her sister.”

Stephen read:

“Leopard darling—”

A wave of sickness passed over him. Rosemary’s voice . . . speaking—pleading . . . Would the past never die—never consent to be buried?

He pulled himself together and looked at Kemp.

“You may be correct in thinking Mrs. Barton wrote this letter—but there is nothing to indicate that it was written to me.”

“Do you deny that you paid the rent of 21 Malland Mansions, Earl’s Court?”

So they knew! He wondered if they had known all the time.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“You seem very well informed. May I ask why my private affairs should be dragged into the limelight?”

“They will not unless they prove to be relevant to the death of George Barton.”

“I see. You are suggesting that I first made love to his wife, and then murdered him.”

“Come, Mr. Farraday, I’ll be frank with you. You and Mrs. Barton were very close friends—you parted by your wish, not the lady’s. She was proposing, as this letter shows, to make trouble. Very conveniently, she died.”

“She committed suicide. I daresay I may have been partly to blame. I may reproach myself, but it is no concern of the law’s.”

“It may have been suicide—it may not. George Barton thought not. He started to investigate—and he died. The sequence is rather suggestive.”

“I do not see why you should—well, pitch on me.”

“You admit that Mrs. Barton’s death came at a very convenient moment for you? A scandal, Mr. Farraday, would have been highly prejudicial to your career.”

“There would have been no scandal. Mrs. Barton would have seen reason.”

“I wonder! Did your wife know about this affair, Mr. Farraday?”

“Certainly not.”

“You are quite sure of that statement?”

“Yes, I am. My wife has no idea that there was anything but friendship between myself and Mrs. Barton. I hope she will never learn otherwise.”

“Is your wife a jealous woman, Mr. Farraday?”

“Not at all. She has never displayed the least jealousy where I am concerned. She is far too sensible.”

The inspector did not comment on that. Instead he said:

“Have you at any time in the past year had cyanide in your possession, Mr. Farraday?”

“No.”

“But you keep a supply of cyanide at your country property?”

“The gardener may. I know nothing about it.”

“You have never purchased any yourself at a chemist’s or for photography?”

“I know nothing of photography, and I repeat that I have never purchased cyanide.”

Kemp pressed him a little further before he finally let him go.

To his subordinate he said thoughtfully, “He was very quick denying that his wife knew about his affair with the Barton woman. Why was that, I wonder?”

“Daresay he’s in a funk in case she should get to hear of it, sir.”

“That may be, but I should have thought he’d got the brains to see that if his wife was in ignorance, and would cut up rough, that gives him an additional motive for wanting to silence Rosemary Barton. To save his skin his line

ought to have been that his wife more or less knew about the affair but was content to ignore it.”

“I daresay he hadn’t thought of that, sir.”

Kemp shook his head. Stephen Farraday was not a fool. He had a clear and astute brain. And he had been passionately keen to impress on the inspector that Sandra knew nothing.

“Well,” said Kemp, “Colonel Race seems pleased with the line he’s dug up and if he’s right, the Farradays are out—both of them. I shall be glad if they are. I like this chap. And personally I don’t think he’s a murderer.”

II

Opening the door of their sitting room, Stephen said, “Sandra?”

She came to him out of the darkness, suddenly holding him, her hands on his shoulders.

“Stephen?”

“Why are you all in the dark?”

“I couldn’t bear the light. Tell me.”

He said:

“They know.”

“About Rosemary?”

“Yes.”

“And what do they think?”

“They see, of course, that I had a motive. . . . Oh, my darling, see what I’ve dragged you into. It’s all my fault. If only I’d cut loose after Rosemary’s

death—gone away—left you free—so that at any rate you shouldn't be mixed up in all this horrible business.”

“No, not that . . . Never leave me . . . never leave me.”

She clung to him—she was crying, the tears coursing down her cheeks. He felt her shudder.

“You're my life, Stephen, all my life—never leave me. . . .”

“Do you care so much, Sandra? I never knew. . . .”

“I didn't want you to know. But now—”

“Yes, now . . . We're in this together, Sandra . . . we'll face it together . . . whatever comes, together!”

Strength came to them as they stood there, clasped together in the darkness.

Sandra said with determination:

“This shall not wreck our lives! It shall not. It shall not!”

Ten

Anthony Browne looked at the card the little page was holding out to him.

He frowned, then shrugged his shoulders. He said to the boy:

“All right, show him up.”

When Colonel Race came in, Anthony was standing by the window with the bright sun striking obliquely over his shoulder.

He saw a tall soldierly man with a lined bronze face and iron-grey hair—a man whom he had seen before, but not for some years, and a man whom he knew a great deal about.

Race saw a dark graceful figure and the outline of a well-shaped head. A pleasant indolent voice said:

“Colonel Race? You were a friend of George Barton’s, I know. He talked about you on that last evening. Have a cigarette.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Anthony said as he held a match:

“You were the unexpected guest that night who did not turn up—just as well for you.”

“You are wrong there. That empty place was not for me.”

Anthony’s eyebrows went up.

“Really? Barton said—”

Race cut in.

“George Barton may have said so. His plans were quite different. That chair, Mr. Browne, was intended to be occupied when the lights went down

by an actress called Chloe West.”

Anthony stared.

“Chloe West? Never heard of her. Who is she?”

“A young actress not very well known but who possesses a certain superficial resemblance to Rosemary Barton.”

Anthony whistled.

“I begin to see.”

“She had been given a photograph of Rosemary so that she could copy the style of hairdressing and she also had the dress which Rosemary wore the night she died.”

“So that was George’s plan? Up go the lights—Hey Presto, gasps of supernatural dread! Rosemary has come back. The guilty party gasps out: ‘It’s true—it’s true—I dunnit.’ ” He paused and added: “Rotten—even for an ass like poor old George.”

“I’m not sure I understand you.”

Anthony grinned.

“Oh, come now, sir—a hardened criminal isn’t going to behave like a hysterical schoolgirl. If somebody poisoned Rosemary Barton in cold blood, and was preparing to administer the same fatal dose of cyanide to George Barton, that person had a certain amount of nerve. It would take more than an actress dressed up as Rosemary to make him or her spill the beans.”

“Macbeth, remember, a decidedly hardened criminal, went to pieces when he saw the ghost of Banquo at the feast.”

“Ah, but what Macbeth saw really was a ghost! It wasn’t a ham actor wearing Banquo’s duds! I’m prepared to admit that a real ghost might bring its own atmosphere from another world. In fact I am willing to admit that I

believe in ghosts—have believed in them for the last six months—one ghost in particular.”

“Really—and whose ghost is that?”

“Rosemary Barton’s. You can laugh if you like. I’ve not seen her—but I’ve felt her presence. For some reason or other Rosemary, poor soul, can’t stay dead.”

“I could suggest a reason.”

“Because she was murdered?”

“To put it in another idiom, because she was bumped off. How about that, Mr. Tony Morelli?”

There was a silence. Anthony sat down, chucked his cigarette into the grate and lighted another one.

Then he said:

“How did you find out?”

“You admit that you are Tony Morelli?”

“I shouldn’t dream of wasting time by denying it. You’ve obviously cabled to America and got all the dope.”

“And you admit that when Rosemary Barton discovered your identity you threatened to bump her off unless she held her tongue.”

“I did everything I could think of to scare her into holding her tongue,” agreed Tony pleasantly.

A strange feeling stole over Colonel Race. This interview was not going as it should. He stared at the figure in front of him lounging back in its chair—and an odd sense of familiarity came to him.

“Shall I recapitulate what I know about you, Morelli?”

“It might be amusing.”

“You were convicted in the States of attempted sabotage in the Ericson aeroplane works and were sentenced to a term of imprisonment. After serving your sentence, you came out and the authorities lost sight of you. You were next heard of in London staying at Claridge’s and calling yourself Anthony Browne. There you scraped acquaintance with Lord Dewsbury and through him you met certain other prominent armaments manufacturers. You stayed in Lord Dewsbury’s house and by means of your position as his guest you were shown things which you ought never to have seen! It is curious coincidence, Morelli, that a trail of unaccountable accidents and some very near escapes from disaster on a large scale followed very closely after your visits to various important works and factories.”

“Coincidences,” said Anthony, “are certainly extraordinary things.”

“Finally, after another lapse of time, you reappeared in London and renewed your acquaintance with Iris Marle, making excuses not to visit her home, so that her family should not realize how intimate you were becoming. Finally you tried to induce her to marry you secretly.”

“You know,” said Anthony, “it’s really extraordinary the way you have found out all these things—I don’t mean the armaments business—I mean my threats to Rosemary, and the tender nothings I whispered to Iris. Surely those don’t come within the province of M.I.5?”

Race looked sharply at him.

“You’ve got a good deal to explain, Morelli.”

“Not at all. Granted your facts are all correct, what of them? I’ve served my prison sentence. I’ve made some interesting friends. I’ve fallen in love with a very charming girl and am naturally impatient to marry her.”

“So impatient that you would prefer the wedding to take place before her family have the chance of finding out anything about your antecedents. Iris Marle is a very rich young woman.”

Anthony nodded his head agreeably.

“I know. When there’s money, families are inclined to be abominably nosy. And Iris, you see, doesn’t know anything about my murky past. Frankly, I’d rather she didn’t.”

“I’m afraid she is going to know all about it.”

“A pity,” said Anthony.

“Possibly you don’t realize—”

Anthony cut in with a laugh.

“Oh! I can dot the i’s and cross the t’s. Rosemary Barton knew my criminal past, so I killed her. George Barton was growing suspicious of me, so I killed him! Now I’m after Iris’s money! It’s all very agreeable and it hangs together nicely, but you haven’t got a mite of proof.”

Race looked at him attentively for some minutes. Then he got up.

“Everything I have said is true,” he said. “And it’s all wrong.”

Anthony watched him narrowly.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re wrong.” Race walked slowly up and down the room. “It hung together all right until I saw you—but now I’ve seen you, it won’t do. You’re not a crook. And if you’re not a crook, you’re one of our kind. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Anthony looked at him in silence while a smile slowly broadened on his face. Then he hummed softly under his breath.

“ ‘For the Colonel’s lady and Judy O’Grady are sisters under the skin.’ Yes, funny how one knows one’s own kind. That’s why I’ve tried to avoid meeting you. I was afraid you’d spot me for what I am. It was important then that nobody should know—important up to yesterday. Now, thank

goodness, the balloon's gone up! We've swept our gang of international saboteurs into the net. I've been working on this assignment for three years. Frequenting certain meetings, agitating among workmen, getting myself the right reputation. Finally it was fixed that I pulled an important job and got sentenced. The business had to be genuine if I was to establish my bona fides.

"When I came out, things began to move. Little by little I got further into the centre of things—a great international net run from Central Europe. It was as their agent I came to London and went to Claridge's. I had orders to get on friendly terms with Lord Dewsbury—that was my lay, the social butterfly! I got to know Rosemary Barton in my character of attractive young man about town. Suddenly, to my horror, I found that she knew I had been in prison in America as Tony Morelli. I was terrified for her! The people I was working with would have had her killed without a moment's hesitation if they had thought she knew that. I did my best to scare her into keeping her mouth shut, but I wasn't very hopeful. Rosemary was born to be indiscreet. I thought the best thing I could do was to sheer off—and then I saw Iris coming down a staircase, and I swore that after my job was done I would come back and marry her.

"When the active part of my work was over, I turned up again and got into touch with Iris, but I kept aloof from the house and her people for I knew they'd want to make inquiries about me and I had to keep under cover for a bit longer. But I got worried about her. She looked ill and afraid—and George Barton seemed to be behaving in a very odd fashion. I urged her to come away and marry me. Well, she refused. Perhaps she was right. And then I was roped in for this party. It was as we sat down to dinner that George mentioned you were to be there. I said rather quickly that I'd met a man I knew and might have to leave early. Actually I had seen a fellow I knew in America—Monkey Coleman—though he didn't remember me—but I really wanted to avoid meeting you. I was still on my job.

"You know what happened next—George died. I had nothing to do with his death or with Rosemary's. I don't know now who did kill them."

"Not even an idea?"

“It must have been either the waiter or one of the five people round the table. I don’t think it was the waiter. It wasn’t me and it wasn’t Iris. It could have been Sandra Farraday or it could have been Stephen Farraday, or it could have been both of them together. But the best bet, in my opinion, is Ruth Lessing.”

“Have you anything to support that belief?”

“No. She seems to me the most likely person—but I don’t see in the least how she did it! In both tragedies she was so placed at the table that it would be practically impossible for her to tamper with the champagne glass—and the more I think over what happened the other night, the more it seems to me impossible that George could have been poisoned at all—and yet he was!” Anthony paused. “And there’s another thing that gets me—have you found out who wrote those anonymous letters that started him on the track?”

Race shook his head.

“No. I thought I had—but I was wrong.”

“Because the interesting thing is that it means that there is someone, somewhere, who knows that Rosemary was murdered, so that, unless you’re careful—that person will be murdered next!”

Eleven

From information received over the telephone Anthony knew that Lucilla Drake was going out at five o'clock to drink a cup of tea with a dear old friend. Allowing for possible contingencies (returning for a purse, determination after all to take an umbrella just in case, and last-minute chats on the doorstep) Anthony timed his own arrival at Elvaston Square at precisely twenty-five minutes past five. It was Iris he wanted to see, not her aunt. And by all accounts once shown into Lucilla's presence, he would have had very little chance of uninterrupted conversation with his lady.

He was told by the parlourmaid (a girl lacking the impudent polish of Betty Archdale) that Miss Iris had just come in and was in the study.

Anthony said with a smile, "Don't bother. I'll find my way," and went past her and along to the study door.

Iris spun round at his entrance with a nervous start.

"Oh, it's you."

He came over to her swiftly.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Nothing." She paused, then said quickly, "Nothing. Only I was nearly run over. Oh, my own fault, I expect I was thinking so hard and mooning across the road without looking, and the car came tearing round a corner and just missed me."

He gave her a gentle little shake.

"You mustn't do that sort of thing, Iris. I'm worried about you—oh! not about your miraculous escape from under the wheels of a car, but about the reason that lets you moon about in the midst of traffic. What is it, darling? There's something special, isn't there?"

She nodded. Her eyes, raised mournfully to his, were large and dark with fear. He recognized their message even before she said very low and quick:

“I’m afraid.”

Anthony recovered his calm smiling poise. He sat down beside Iris on a wide settee.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s have it.”

“I don’t think I want to tell you, Anthony.”

“Now then, funny, don’t be like the heroines of third-rate thrillers who start in the very first chapter by having something they can’t possibly tell for no real reason except to gum up the hero and make the book spin itself out for another fifty thousand words.”

She gave a faint pale smile.

“I want to tell you, Anthony, but I don’t know what you’d think—I don’t know if you’d believe—”

Anthony raised a hand and began to check off the fingers.

“One, an illegitimate baby. Two, a blackmailing lover. Three—”

She interrupted him indignantly:

“Of course not. Nothing of that kind.”

“You relieve my mind,” said Anthony. “Come on, little idiot.”

Iris’s face clouded over again.

“It’s nothing to laugh at. It’s—it’s about the other night.”

“Yes?” His voice sharpened.

Iris said:

“You were at the inquest this morning—you heard—”

She paused.

“Very little,” said Anthony. “The police surgeon being technical about cyanides generally and the effect of potassium cyanide on George, and the police evidence as given by that first inspector, not Kemp, the one with the smart moustache who arrived first at the Luxembourg and took charge. Identification of the body by George’s chief clerk. The inquest was then adjourned for a week by a properly docile coroner.”

“It’s the inspector I mean,” said Iris. “He described finding a small paper packet under the table containing traces of potassium cyanide.”

Anthony looked interested.

“Yes. Obviously whoever slipped that stuff into George’s glass just dropped the paper that had contained it under the table. Simplest thing to do. Couldn’t risk having it found on him—or her.”

To his surprise Iris began to tremble violently.

“Oh, no, Anthony. Oh, no, it wasn’t like that.”

“What do you mean, darling? What do you know about it?”

Iris said, “I dropped that packet under the table.”

He turned astonished eyes upon her.

“Listen, Anthony. You remember how George drank off that champagne and then it happened?”

He nodded.

“It was awful—like a bad dream. Coming just when everything had seemed to be all right. I mean that, after the cabaret, when the lights went up—I felt so relieved. Because it was then, you know, that we found Rosemary dead

—and somehow, I don't know why, I felt I'd see it all happen again . . . I felt she was there, dead, at the table. . . .”

“Darling. . . .”

“Oh, I know. It was just nerves. But anyway, there we were, and there was nothing awful and suddenly it seemed the whole thing was really done with at last and one could—I don't know how to explain it—begin again. And so I danced with George and really felt I was enjoying myself at last, and we came back to the table. And then George suddenly talked about Rosemary and asked us to drink to her memory and then he died and all the nightmare had come back.

“I just felt paralysed I think. I stood there, shaking. You came round to look at him, and I moved back a little, and the waiters came and someone asked for a doctor. And all the time I was standing there frozen. Then suddenly a big lump came in my throat and tears began to run down my cheeks and I jerked open my bag to get my handkerchief. I just fumbled in it, not seeing properly, and got out my handkerchief, but there was something caught up inside the handkerchief—a folded stiff bit of white paper, like the kind you get powders in from the chemist. Only, you see, Anthony, it hadn't been in my bag when I started from home. I hadn't had anything like that! I'd put the things in myself when the bag was quite empty—a powder compact, a lipstick, my handkerchief, my evening comb in its case and a shilling and a couple of sixpences. Somebody had put that packet in my bag—they must have done. And I remembered how they'd found a packet like that in Rosemary's bag after she died and how it had had cyanide in it. I was frightened, Anthony, I was horribly frightened. My fingers went limp and the packet fluttered down from my handkerchief under the table. I let it go. And I didn't say anything. I was too frightened. Somebody meant it to look as though I had killed George, and I didn't.”

Anthony gave vent to a long and prolonged whistle.

“And nobody saw you?” he said.

Iris hesitated.

“I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I believe Ruth noticed. But she was looking so dazed that I don’t know whether she really noticed—or if she was just staring at me blankly.”

Anthony gave another whistle.

“This,” he remarked, “is a pretty kettle of fish.”

Iris said:

“It’s got worse and worse. I’ve been so afraid they’d find out.”

“Why weren’t your fingerprints on it, I wonder? The first thing they’d do would be to fingerprint it.”

“I suppose it was because I was holding it through the handkerchief.”

Anthony nodded.

“Yes, you had luck there.”

“But who could have put it in my bag? I had my bag with me all the evening.”

“That’s not so impossible as you think. When you went to dance after the cabaret, you left your bag on the table. Somebody may have tampered with it then. And there are the women. Could you get up and give me an imitation of just how a woman behaves in the ladies’ cloakroom? It’s the sort of thing I wouldn’t know. Do you congregate and chat or do you drift off to different mirrors?”

Iris considered.

“We all went to the same table—a great long glass-topped one. And we put our bags down and looked at our faces, you know.”

“Actually I don’t. Go on.”

“Ruth powdered her nose and Sandra patted her hair and pushed a hairpin in and I took off my fox cape and gave it to the woman and then I saw I’d got some dirt on my hand—a smear of mud and I went over to the washbasins.”

“Leaving your bag on the glass table?”

“Yes. And I washed my hands. Ruth was still fixing her face I think and Sandra went and gave up her cloak and then she went back to the glass and Ruth came and washed her hands and I went back to the table and just fixed my hair a little.”

“So either of those two could have put something in your bag without your seeing?”

“Yes, but I can’t believe either Ruth or Sandra would do such a thing.”

“You think too highly of people. Sandra is the kind of Gothic creature who would have burned her enemies at the stake in the Middle Ages—and Ruth would make the most devastatingly practical poisoner that ever stepped this earth.”

“If it was Ruth why didn’t she say she saw me drop it?”

“You have me there. If Ruth deliberately planted cyanide on you, she’d take jolly good care you didn’t get rid of it. So it looks as though it wasn’t Ruth. In fact the waiter is far and away the best bet. The waiter, the waiter! If only we had a strange waiter, a peculiar waiter, a waiter hired for that evening only. But instead we have Giuseppe and Pierre and they just don’t fit. . . .”

Iris sighed.

“I’m glad I’ve told you. No one will ever know now, will they? Only you and I?”

Anthony looked at her with a rather embarrassed expression.

“It’s not going to be just like that, Iris. In fact you’re coming with me now in a taxi to old man Kemp. We can’t keep this under our hats.”

“Oh, no, Anthony. They’ll think I killed George.”

They’ll certainly think so if they find out later that you sat tight and said nothing about all this! Your explanation will then sound extremely thin. If you volunteer it now there’s a likelihood of its being believed.”

“Please, Anthony.”

“Look here, Iris, you’re in a tight place. But apart from anything else, there’s such a thing as truth. You can’t play safe and take care of your own skin when it’s a question of justice.”

“Oh, Anthony, must you be so grand?”

“That,” said Anthony, “was a very shrewd blow! But all the same we’re going to Kemp! Now!”

Unwillingly she came with him out into the hall. Her coat was lying tossed on a chair and he took it and held it out for her to put on.

There was both mutiny and fear in her eyes, but Anthony showed no sign of relenting. He said:

“We’ll pick up a taxi at the end of the Square.”

As they went towards the hall door the bell was pressed and they heard it ringing in the basement below.

Iris gave an exclamation.

“I forgot. It’s Ruth. She was coming here when she left the office to settle about the funeral arrangements. It’s to be the day after tomorrow. I thought we could settle things better while Aunt Lucilla was out. She does confuse things so.”

Anthony stepped forward and opened the door, forestalling the parlourmaid who came running up the stairs from below.

“It’s all right, Evans,” said Iris, and the girl went down again.

Ruth was looking tired and rather dishevelled. She was carrying a large-sized attaché case.

“I’m sorry I’m late, but the tube was so terribly crowded tonight and then I had to wait for three buses and not a taxi in sight.”

It was, thought Anthony, unlike the efficient Ruth to apologize. Another sign that George’s death had succeeded in shattering that almost inhuman efficiency.

Iris said:

“I can’t come with you now, Anthony. Ruth and I must settle things.”

Anthony said firmly:

“I’m afraid this is more important . . . I’m awfully sorry, Miss Lessing, to drag Iris off like this, but it really is important.”

Ruth said quickly:

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Browne. I can arrange everything with Mrs. Drake when she comes in.” She smiled faintly. “I can really manage her quite well, you know.”

“I’m sure you could manage anyone, Miss Lessing,” said Anthony admiringly.

“Perhaps, Iris, if you can tell me any special points?”

“There aren’t any. I suggested our arranging this together simply because Aunt Lucilla changes her mind about everything every two minutes, and I thought it would be rather hard on you. You’ve had so much to do. But I really don’t care what sort of funeral it is! Aunt Lucilla likes funerals, but I hate them. You’ve got to bury people, but I hate making a fuss about it. It can’t matter to the people themselves. They’ve got away from it all. The dead don’t come back.”

Ruth did not answer, and Iris repeated with a strange defiant insistence:
“The dead don’t come back!”

“Come on,” said Anthony, and pulled her out through the open door.

A cruising taxi was coming slowly along the Square. Anthony hailed it and helped Iris in.

“Tell me, beautiful,” he said, after he had directed the driver to go to Scotland Yard. “Who exactly did you feel was there in the hall when you found it so necessary to affirm that the dead are dead? Was it George or Rosemary?”

“Nobody! Nobody at all! I just hate funerals, I tell you.”

Anthony sighed.

“Definitely,” he said. “I must be psychic!”

Twelve

Three men sat at a small round marble-topped table.

Colonel Race and Chief Inspector Kemp were drinking cups of dark brown tea, rich in tannin. Anthony was drinking an English café's idea of a nice cup of coffee. It was not Anthony's idea, but he endured it for the sake of being admitted on equal terms to the other two men's conference. Chief Inspector Kemp, having painstakingly verified Anthony's credentials, had consented to recognize him as a colleague.

"If you ask me," said the chief inspector, dropping several lumps of sugar into his black brew and stirring it, "this case will never be brought to trial. We'll never get the evidence."

"You think not?" asked Race.

Kemp shook his head and took an approving sip of his tea.

"The only hope was to get evidence concerning the actual purchasing or handling of cyanide by one of those five. I've drawn a blank everywhere. It'll be one of those cases where you know who did it, and can't ever prove it."

"So you know who did it?" Anthony regarded him with interest.

"Well, I'm pretty certain in my own mind. Lady Alexandra Farraday."

"So that's your bet," said Race. "Reasons?"

"You shall have 'em. I'd say she's the type that's madly jealous. And autocratic, too. Like that queen in history—Eleanor of Something, that followed the clue to Fair Rosamund's Bower and offered her the choice of a dagger or a cup of poison."

"Only in this case," said Anthony, "she didn't offer Fair Rosemary any choice."

Chief Inspector Kemp went on:

“Someone tips Mr. Barton off. He becomes suspicious—and I should say his suspicions were pretty definite. He wouldn’t have gone so far as actually buying a house in the country unless he wanted to keep an eye on the Farradays. He must have made it pretty plain to her—harping on this party and urging them to come to it. She’s not the kind to Wait and See.

Autocratic again, she finished him off! That, you say so far, is all theory and based on character. But I’ll say that the only person who could have had any chance whatever of dropping something into Mr. Barton’s glass just before he drank would be the lady on his right.”

“And nobody saw her do it?” said Anthony.

“Quite. They might have—but they didn’t. Say, if you like, she was pretty adroit.”

“A positive conjurer.”

Race coughed. He took out his pipe and began stuffing the bowl.

“Just one minor point. Granted Lady Alexandra is autocratic, jealous and passionately devoted to her husband, granted that she’d not stick at murder, do you think she is the type to slip incriminating evidence into a girl’s handbag? A perfectly innocent girl, mind, who has never harmed her in any way? Is that in the Kidderminster tradition?”

Inspector Kemp squirmed uneasily in his seat and peered into his teacup.

“Women don’t play cricket,” he said. “If that’s what you mean.”

“Actually, a lot of them do,” said Race, smiling. “But I’m glad to see you look uncomfortable.”

Kemp escaped from his dilemma by turning to Anthony with an air of gracious patronage.

“By the way, Mr. Browne (I’ll still call you that, if you don’t mind), I want to say that I’m very much obliged to you for the prompt way you brought

Miss Marle along this evening to tell that story of hers.”

“I had to do it promptly,” said Anthony. “If I’d waited I should probably not have brought her along at all.”

“She didn’t want to come, of course,” said Colonel Race.

“She’s got the wind up badly, poor kid,” said Anthony. “Quite natural, I think.”

“Very natural,” said the inspector and poured himself out another cup of tea. Anthony took a gingerly sip of coffee.

“Well,” said Kemp. “I think we relieved her mind—she went off home quite happily.”

“After the funeral,” said Anthony, “I hope she’ll get away to the country for a bit. Twenty-four hours’ peace and quiet away from Auntie Lucilla’s nonstop tongue will do her good, I think.”

“Aunt Lucilla’s tongue has its uses,” said Race.

“You’re welcome to it,” said Kemp. “Lucky I didn’t think it necessary to have a shorthand report made when I took her statement. If I had, the poor fellow would have been in hospital with writer’s cramp.”

“Well,” said Anthony. “I daresay you’re right, chief inspector, in saying that the case will never come to trial—but that’s a very unsatisfactory finish—and there’s one thing we still don’t know—who wrote those letters to George Barton telling him his wife was murdered? We haven’t the least idea who that person is.”

Race said: “Your suspicions still the same, Browne?”

“Ruth Lessing? Yes, I stick to her as my candidate. You told me that she admitted to you she was in love with George. Rosemary by all accounts was pretty poisonous to her. Say she saw suddenly a good chance of getting rid of Rosemary, and was fairly convinced that with Rosemary out of the way, she could marry George out of hand.”

“I grant you all that,” said Race. “I’ll admit that Ruth Lessing has the calm practical efficiency that can contemplate and carry out murder, and that she perhaps lacks that quality of pity which is essentially a product of imagination. Yes, I give you the first murder. But I simply can’t see her committing the second one. I simply cannot see her panicking and poisoning the man she loved and wanted to marry! Another point that rules her out—why did she hold her tongue when she saw Iris throw the cyanide packet under the table?”

“Perhaps she didn’t see her do it,” suggested Anthony, rather doubtfully.

“I’m fairly sure she did,” said Race. “When I was questioning her, I had the impression that she was keeping something back. And Iris Marle herself thought Ruth Lessing saw her.”

“Come now, colonel,” said Kemp. “Let’s have your ‘spot.’ You’ve got one, I suppose?”

Race nodded.

“Out with it. Fair’s fair. You’ve listened to ours—and raised objections.”

Race’s eyes went thoughtfully from Kemp’s face to Anthony and rested there.

Anthony’s eyebrows rose.

“Don’t say you still think I am the villain of the piece?”

Slowly Race shook his head.

“I can imagine no possible reason why you should kill George Barton. I think I know who did kill him—and Rosemary Barton too.”

“Who is it?”

Race said musingly:

“Curious how we have all selected women as suspects. I suspect a woman, too.” He paused and said quietly: “I think the guilty person is Iris Marle.”

With a crash Anthony pushed his chair back. For a moment his face went dark crimson—then with an effort, he regained command of himself. His voice, when he spoke, had a slight tremor but was deliberately as light and mocking as ever.

“By all means let us discuss the possibility,” he said. “Why Iris Marle? And if so, why should she, of her own accord, tell me about dropping the cyanide paper under the table?”

“Because,” said Race, “she knew that Ruth Lessing had seen her do it.”

Anthony considered the reply, his head on one side. Finally he nodded.

“Passed,” he said. “Go on. Why did you suspect her in the first place?”

“Motive,” said Race. “An enormous fortune had been left to Rosemary in which Iris was not to participate. For all we know she may have struggled for years with a sense of unfairness. She was aware that if Rosemary died childless, all that money came to her. And Rosemary was depressed, unhappy, run-down after flu, just the mood when a verdict of suicide would be accepted without question.”

“That’s right, make the girl out a monster!” said Anthony.

“Not a monster,” said Race. “There is another reason why I suspected her—a far-fetched one, it may seem to you—Victor Drake.”

“Victor Drake?” Anthony stared.

“Bad blood. You see, I didn’t listen to Lucilla Drake for nothing. I know all about the Marle family. Victor Drake—not so much weak as positively evil. His mother, feeble in intellect and incapable of concentration. Hector Marle, weak, vicious and a drunkard. Rosemary, emotionally unstable. A family history of weakness, vice and instability. Predisposing causes.”

Anthony lit a cigarette. His hands trembled.

“Don’t you believe that there may be a sound blossom on a weak or even a bad stock?”

“Of course there may. But I am not sure that Iris Marle is a sound blossom.”

“And my word doesn’t count,” said Anthony slowly, “because I’m in love with her. George showed her those letters, and she got in a funk and killed him? That’s how it goes on, is it?”

“Yes. Panic would obtain in her case.”

“And how did she get the stuff into George’s champagne glass?”

“That, I confess, I do not know.”

“I’m thankful there’s something you don’t know.” Anthony tilted his chair back and then forward. His eyes were angry and dangerous. “You’ve got a nerve saying all this to me.”

Race replied quietly:

“I know. But I consider it had to be said.”

Kemp watched them both with interest, but he did not speak. He stirred his tea round and round absentmindedly.

“Very well.” Anthony sat upright. “Things have changed. It’s no longer a question of sitting round a table, drinking disgusting fluids, and airing academic theories. This case has got to be solved. We’ve got to resolve all the difficulties and get at the truth. That’s got to be my job—and I’ll do it somehow. I’ve got to hammer at the things we don’t know—because when we do know them, the whole thing will be clear.

“I’ll re-state the problem. Who knew that Rosemary had been murdered? Who wrote to George telling him so? Why did they write to him?

“And now the murders themselves. Wash out the first one. It’s too long ago, and we don’t know exactly what happened. But the second murder took place in front of my eyes. I saw it happen. Therefore I ought to know how it

happened. The ideal time to put the cyanide in George's glass was during the cabaret—but it couldn't have been put in then because he drank from his glass immediately afterwards. I saw him drink. After he drank, nobody put anything in his glass. Nobody touched his glass, nevertheless next time he drank, it was full of cyanide. He couldn't have been poisoned—but he was! There was cyanide in his glass—but nobody could have put it there! Are we getting on?"

"No," said Chief Inspector Kemp.

"Yes," said Anthony. "The thing has now entered into the realm of a conjuring trick. Or a spirit manifestation. I will now outline my psychic theory. Whilst we were dancing, the ghost of Rosemary hovers near George's glass and drops in some cleverly materialized cyanide—any spirit can make cyanide out of ectoplasm. George comes back and drinks her health and—oh, Lord!"

The other two stared curiously at him. His hands were holding his head. He rocked to and fro in apparent mental agony. He said:

"That's it . . . that's it . . . the bag . . . the waiter. . . ."

"The waiter?" Kemp was alert.

Anthony shook his head.

"No, no. I don't mean what you mean. I did think once that what we needed was a waiter who was not a waiter but a conjurer—a waiter who had been engaged the day before. Instead we had a waiter who had always been a waiter—and a little waiter who was of the royal line of waiters—a cherubic waiter—a waiter above suspicion. And he's still above suspicion—but he played his part! Oh, Lord, yes, he played a star part."

He stared at them.

"Don't you see it? A waiter could have poisoned the champagne but the waiter didn't. Nobody touched George's glass but George was poisoned. A, indefinite article. The, definite article. George's glass! George! Two

separate things. And the money—lots and lots of money! And who knows—perhaps love as well? Don't look at me as though I'm mad. Come on, I'll show you."

Thrusting his chair back he sprang to his feet and caught Kemp by the arm.

"Come with me."

Kemp cast a regretful glance at his half-full cup.

"Got to pay," he muttered.

"No, no, we'll be back in a moment. Come on. I must show you outside. Come on, Race."

Pushing the table aside, he swept them away with him to the vestibule.

"You see that telephone box there?"

"Yes?"

Anthony felt in his pockets.

"Damn, I haven't got two pence. Never mind. On second thoughts I'd rather not do it that way. Come back."

They went back into the café, Kemp first, Race following with Anthony's hand on his arm.

Kemp had a frown on his face as he sat down and picked up his pipe. He blew down it carefully and began to operate on it with a hairpin which he brought out of his waistcoat pocket.

Race was frowning at Anthony with a puzzled face. He leaned back and picked up his cup, draining the remaining fluid in it.

"Damn," he said violently. "It's got sugar in it!"

He looked across the table to meet Anthony's slowly widening smile.

“Hallo,” said Kemp, as he took a sip from his cup. “What the hell’s this?”

“Coffee,” said Anthony. “And I don’t think you’ll like it. I didn’t.”

Thirteen

Anthony had the pleasure of seeing instant comprehension flash into the eyes of both his companions.

His satisfaction was short-lived, for another thought struck him with the force of a physical blow.

He ejaculated out loud:

“My God—that car!”

He sprang up.

“Fool that I was—idiot! She told me that a car had nearly run her down—and I hardly listened. Come on, quick!”

Kemp said:

“She said she was going straight home when she left the Yard.”

“Yes. Why didn’t I go with her?”

“Who’s at the house?” asked Race.

“Ruth Lessing was there, waiting for Mrs. Drake. It’s possible that they’re both discussing the funeral still!”

“Discussing everything else as well if I know Mrs. Drake,” said Race. He added abruptly, “Has Iris Marle any other relations?”

“Not that I know of.”

“I think I see the direction in which your thoughts, ideas, are leading you. But—is it physically possible?”

“I think so. Consider for yourself how much has been taken for granted on one person’s word.”

Kemp was paying the check. The three men hurried out as Kemp said:

“You think the danger is acute? To Miss Marle?”

“Yes, I do.”

Anthony swore under his breath and hailed a taxi. The three men got in and the driver was told to go to Elvaston Square as quickly as possible.

Kemp said slowly:

“I’ve only got the general idea as yet. It washes the Farradays right out.”

“Yes.”

“Thank goodness for that. But surely there wouldn’t be another attempt—so soon?”

“The sooner the better,” said Race. “Before there’s any chance of our minds running on the right track. Third time lucky—that will be the idea.” He added: “Iris Marle told me, in front of Mrs. Drake, that she would marry you as soon as you wanted her to.”

They spoke in spasmodic jerks, for the taxi driver was taking their directions literally and was hurtling round corners and cutting through traffic with immense enthusiasm.

Turning with a final spurt into Elvaston Square, he drew up with a terrific jerk in front of the house.

Elvaston Square had never looked more peaceful.

Anthony, with an effort regained his usual cool manner, murmured:

“Quite like the movies. Makes one feel rather a fool, somehow.”

But he was on the top step ringing the bell while Race paid off the taxi and Kemp followed up the steps.

The parlourmaid opened the door.

Anthony said sharply:

“Has Miss Iris got back?”

Evans looked a little surprised.

“Oh, yes, sir. She came in half an hour ago.”

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief. Everything in the house was so calm and normal that he felt ashamed of his recent melodramatic fears.

“Where is she?”

“I expect she’s in the drawing room with Mrs. Drake.”

Anthony nodded and took the stairs in easy strides, Race and Kemp close behind him.

In the drawing room, placid under its shaded electric lights, Lucilla Drake was hunting through the pigeon holes of the desk with the hopeful absorption of a terrier and murmuring audibly:

“Dear, dear, now where did I put Mrs. Marsham’s letter? Now, let me see. . .
.”

“Where’s Iris?” demanded Anthony abruptly.

Lucilla turned and stared.

“Iris? She—I beg your pardon!” She drew herself up. “May I ask who you are?”

Race came forward from behind him and Lucilla’s face cleared. She did not yet see Chief Inspector Kemp who was the third to enter the room.

“Oh, dear, Colonel Race! How kind of you to come! But I do wish you could have been here a little earlier—I should have liked to consult you

about the funeral arrangements—a man’s advice, so valuable—and really I was feeling so upset, as I said to Miss Lessing, that really I couldn’t even think—and I must say that Miss Lessing was really very sympathetic for once and offered to do everything she could to take the burden off my shoulders—only, as she put it very reasonably, naturally I should be the person most likely to know what were George’s favourite hymns—not that I actually did, because I’m afraid George didn’t very often go to church—but naturally, as a clergyman’s wife—I mean widow—I do know what is suitable—”

Race took advantage of a momentary pause to slip in his question: “Where is Miss Marle?”

“Iris? She came in some time ago. She said she had a headache and was going straight up to her room. Young girls, you know, do not seem to me to have very much stamina nowadays—they don’t eat enough spinach—and she seems positively to dislike talking about the funeral arrangements, but after all, someone has to do these things—and one does want to feel that everything has been done for the best, and proper respect shown to the dead—not that I have ever thought motor hearses really reverent—if you know what I mean—not like horses with their long black tails—but, of course, I said at once that it was quite all right, and Ruth—I called her Ruth and not Miss Lessing—and I were managing splendidly, and she could leave everything to us.”

Kemp asked:

“Miss Lessing has gone?”

“Yes, we settled everything, and Miss Lessing left about ten minutes ago. She took the announcements for the papers with her. No flowers, under the circumstances—and Canon Westbury to take the service—”

As the flow went on, Anthony edged gently out of the door. He had left the room before Lucilla, suddenly interrupting her narrative, paused to say:

“Who was that young man who came with you? I didn’t realize at first that you had brought him. I thought possibly he might have been one of those dreadful reporters. We have had such trouble with them.”

Anthony was running lightly up the stairs. Hearing footsteps behind him, he turned his head, and grinned at Chief Inspector Kemp.

“You deserted too? Poor old Race!”

Kemp muttered.

“He does these things so nicely. I’m not popular in that quarter.”

They were on the second floor and just preparing to start up the third when Anthony heard a light footstep descending. He pulled Kemp inside an adjacent bathroom door.

The footsteps went on down the stairs.

Anthony emerged and ran up the next flight of stairs. Iris’s room, he knew, was the small one at the back. He rapped lightly on the door.

“Hi—Iris.” There was no reply—and he knocked and called again. Then he tried the handle but found the door locked.

With real urgency now he beat upon it.

“Iris—Iris—”

After a second or two, he stopped and glanced down. He was standing on one of those woolly old-fashioned rugs made to fit outside doors to obviate draughts. This one was close up against the door. Anthony kicked it away. The space under the door at the bottom was quite wide—sometime, he deduced, it had been cut to clear a fitted carpet instead of stained boards.

He stooped to the keyhole but could see nothing, but suddenly he raised his head and sniffed. Then he lay down flat and pressed his nose against the crack under the door.

Springing up, he shouted: “Kemp!”

There was no sign of the chief inspector. Anthony shouted again.

It was Colonel Race, however, who came running up the stairs. Anthony gave him no chance to speak. He said:

“Gas—pouring out! We’ll have to break the door down.”

Race had a powerful physique. He and Anthony made short shrift of the obstacle. With a splintering, cracking noise, the lock gave.

They fell back for a moment, then Race said:

“She’s there by the fireplace. I’ll dash in and break the window. You get her.”

Iris Marle was lying by the gas fire—her mouth and nose lying on the wide open gas jet.

A minute or two later, choking and spluttering, Anthony and Race laid the unconscious girl on the landing floor in the draught of the passage window.

Race said:

“I’ll work on her. You get a doctor quickly.”

Anthony swung down the stairs. Race called after him:

“Don’t worry. I think she’ll be all right. We got here in time.”

In the hall Anthony dialled and spoke into the mouthpiece, hampered by a background of exclamations from Lucilla Drake.

He turned at last from the telephone to say with a sigh of relief:

“Caught him. He lives just across the Square. He’ll be here in a couple of minutes.”

“—but I must know what has happened! Is Iris ill?”

It was a final wail from Lucilla.

Anthony said:

“She was in her room. Door locked. Her head in the gas fire and the gas full on.”

“Iris?” Mrs. Drake gave a piercing shriek. “Iris has committed suicide? I can’t believe it. I don’t believe it!”

A faint ghost of Anthony’s grin returned to him.

“You don’t need to believe it,” he said. “It isn’t true.”

Fourteen

“And now, please, Tony, will you tell me all about it?”

Iris was lying on a sofa, and the valiant November sunshine was making a brave show outside the windows of Little Priors.

Anthony looked across at Colonel Race who was sitting on the windowsill, and grinned engagingly:

“I don’t mind admitting, Iris, that I’ve been waiting for this moment. If I don’t explain to someone soon how clever I’ve been, I shall burst. There will be no modesty in this recital. It will be shameless blowing of my own trumpet with suitable pauses to enable you to say ‘Anthony, how clever of you’ or ‘Tony, how wonderful’ or some phrase of a like nature. Ahem! The performance will now begin. Here we go.

“The thing as a whole looked simple enough. What I mean is, that it looked like a clear case of cause and effect. Rosemary’s death, accepted at the time as suicide, was not suicide. George became suspicious, started investigating, was presumably getting near the truth, and before he could unmask the murderer was, in his turn, murdered. The sequence, if I may put it that way, seems perfectly clear.

“But almost at once we came across some apparent contradictions. Such as: A. George could not be poisoned. B. George was poisoned. And: A. Nobody touched George’s glass. B. George’s glass was tampered with.

“Actually I was overlooking a very significant fact—the varied use of the possessive case. George’s ear is George’s ear indisputably because it is attached to his head and cannot be removed without a surgical operation! But by George’s watch, I only mean the watch that George is wearing—the question might arise whether it is his or maybe one lent him by someone else. And when I come to George’s glass, or George’s teacup, I begin to realize that I mean something very vague indeed. All I actually mean is the glass or cup out of which George has lately been drinking—and which has

nothing to distinguish it from several other cups and glasses of the same pattern.

“To illustrate this, I tried an experiment. Race was drinking tea without sugar, Kemp was drinking tea with sugar, and I was drinking coffee. In appearance the three fluids were of much the same colour. We were sitting round a small marble-topped table among several other round marble-topped tables. On the pretext of an urgent brainwave I urged the other two out of their seats and out into the vestibule, pushing the chairs aside as we went, and also managing to move Kemp’s pipe which was lying by his plate to a similar position by my plate but without letting him see me do it. As soon as we were outside I made an excuse and we returned, Kemp slightly ahead. He pulled the chair to the table and sat down opposite the plate that was marked by the pipe he had left behind him. Race sat on his right as before and I on his left—but mark what had happened—a new A. and B. contradiction! A. Kemp’s cup has sugared tea in it. B. Kemp’s cup has coffee in it. Two conflicting statements that cannot both be true—But they are both true. The misleading term is Kemp’s cup. Kemp’s cup when he left the table and Kemp’s cup when he returned to the table are not the same.

“And that, Iris, is what happened at the Luxembourg that night. After the cabaret, when you all went to dance, you dropped your bag. A waiter picked it up—not the waiter, the waiter attending on that table who knew just where you had been sitting—but a waiter, an anxious hurried little waiter with everybody bullying him, running along with a sauce, and who quickly stooped, picked up the bag and placed it by a plate—actually by the plate one place to the left of where you had been sitting. You and George came back first and you went without a thought straight to the place marked by your bag—just as Kemp did to the place marked by his pipe. George sat down in what he thought to be his place, on your right. And when he proposed his toast in memory of Rosemary, he drank from what he thought was his glass but was in reality your glass—the glass that can quite easily have been poisoned without needing a conjuring trick to explain it, because the only person who did not drink after the cabaret, was necessarily the person whose health was being drunk!

“Now go over the whole business again and the setup is entirely different! You are the intended victim, not George! So it looks, doesn’t it, as though George is being used. What, if things had not gone wrong, would have been the story as the world would see it? A repetition of the party a year ago—and a repetition of—suicide! Clearly, people would say, a suicidal streak in that family! Bit of paper which has contained cyanide found in your bag. Clear case! Poor girl has been brooding over her sister’s death. Very sad—but these rich girls are sometimes very neurotic!”

Iris interrupted him. She cried out:

“But why should anyone want to kill me? Why? Why?”

“All that lovely money, angel. Money, money, money! Rosemary’s money went to you on her death. Now suppose you were to die—unmarried. What would happen to that money? The answer was it would go to your next of kin—to your aunt, Lucilla Drake. Now from all accounts of the dear lady, I could hardly see Lucilla Drake as First Murderess. But is there anyone else who would benefit? Yes, indeed. Victor Drake. If Lucilla has money, it will be exactly the same as Victor having it—Victor will see to that! He has always been able to do what he likes with his mother. And there is nothing difficult about seeing Victor as First Murderer. All along, from the very start of the case, there have been references to Victor, mentions of Victor. He has been in the offing, a shadowy, unsubstantial, evil figure.”

“But Victor’s in the Argentine! He’s been in South America for over a year.”

“Has he? We’re coming now to what has been said to be the fundamental plot of every story. ‘Girl meets Boy!’ When Victor met Ruth Lessing, this particular story started. He got hold of her. I think she must have fallen for him pretty badly. Those quiet, levelheaded, law-abiding women are the kind that often fall for a real bad lot.

“Think a minute and you’ll realize that all the evidence for Victor’s being in South America depends on Ruth’s word. None of it was verified because it was never a main issue! Ruth said that she had seen Victor off on the S.S. Cristobal before Rosemary’s death! It was Ruth who suggested putting a

call through to Buenos Aires on the day of George's death—and later sacked the telephone girl who might have inadvertently let out that she did no such thing.

“Of course it's been easy to check up now! Victor Drake arrived in Buenos Aires by a boat leaving England the day after Rosemary's death a year ago. Ogilvie, in Buenos Aires, had no telephone conversation with Ruth on the subject of Victor Drake on the day of George's death. And Victor Drake left Buenos Aires for New York some weeks ago. Easy enough for him to arrange for a cable to be sent off in his name on a certain day—one of those well-known cables asking for money that seemed proof positive that he was many thousands of miles away. Instead of which—”

“Yes, Anthony?”

“Instead of which,” said Anthony, leading up to his climax with intense pleasure, “he was sitting at the next table to ours at the Luxembourg with a not-so-dumb blonde!”

“Not that awful-looking man?”

“A yellow blotchy complexion and bloodshot eyes are easy things to assume, and they make a lot of difference to a man. Actually, of our party, I was the only person (apart from Ruth Lessing) who had ever seen Victor Drake—and I had never known him under that name! In any case I was sitting with my back to him. I did think I recognized, in the cocktail lounge outside, as we came in, a man I had known in my prison days—Monkey Coleman. But as I was now leading a highly respectable life I was not too anxious that he should recognize me. I never for one moment suspected that Monkey Coleman had had anything to do with the crime—much less that he and Victor Drake were one and the same.”

“But I don't see now how he did it?”

Colonel Race took up the tale.

“In the easiest way in the world. During the cabaret he went out to telephone, passing our table. Drake had been an actor and he had been

something more important—a waiter. To assume the makeup and play the part of Pedro Morales was child’s play to an actor, but to move deftly round a table, with the step and gait of a waiter, filling up the champagne glasses, needed the definite knowledge and technique of a man who had actually been a waiter. A clumsy action or movement would have drawn your attention to him, but as a bona fide waiter none of you noticed or saw him. You were looking at the Cabaret, not noticing that portion of the restaurant’s furnishings—the waiter!”

Iris said in a hesitating voice:

“And Ruth?”

Anthony said:

“It was Ruth, of course, who put the cyanide paper in your bag—probably in the cloakroom at the beginning of the evening. The same technique she had adopted a year ago—with Rosemary.”

“I always thought it odd,” said Iris, “that George hadn’t told Ruth about those letters. He consulted her about everything.”

Anthony gave a short laugh.

“Of course he told her—first thing. She knew he would. That’s why she wrote them. Then she arranged all his ‘plan’ for him—having first got him well worked up. And so she had the stage set—all nicely arranged for suicide No. 2—and if George chose to believe that you had killed Rosemary and were committing suicide out of remorse or panic—well, that wouldn’t make any difference to Ruth!”

“And to think I liked her—liked her very much! And actually wanted her to marry George.”

“She’d probably have made him a very good wife, if she hadn’t come across Victor,” said Anthony. “Moral: every murderess was a nice girl once.”

Iris shivered. “All that for money!”

“You innocent, money is what these things are done for! Victor certainly did it for money. Ruth partly for money, partly for Victor, and partly, I think, because she hated Rosemary. Yes, she’d travelled a long way by the time she deliberately tried to run you down in a car, and still further when she left Lucilla in the drawing room, banged the front door and then ran up to your bedroom. What did she seem like? Excited at all?”

Iris considered.

“I don’t think so. She just tapped on the door, came in and said everything was fixed up and she hoped I was feeling all right. I said yes, I was just a bit tired. And then she picked up my big rubber-covered torch and said what a nice torch that was and after that I don’t seem to remember anything.”

“No, dear,” said Anthony. “Because she hit you a nice little crack, not too hard, on the back of the neck with your nice torch. Then she arranged you artistically by the gas fire, shut the windows tight, turned on the gas, went out, locking the door and passing the key underneath it, pushed the woolly mat close up against the crack so as to shut out any draught and tripped gently down the stairs. Kemp and I just got into the bathroom in time. I raced on up to you and Kemp followed Miss Ruth Lessing unbeknownst to where she had left that car parked—you know, I felt at the time there was something fishy and uncharacteristic about the way Ruth tried to force it on our minds that she had come by bus and tube!”

Iris gave a shudder.

“It’s horrible—to think anyone was as determined to kill me as all that. Did she hate me too by then?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so. But Miss Ruth Lessing is a very efficient young woman. She’d already been an accessory in two murders and she didn’t fancy having risked her neck for nothing. I’ve no doubt Lucilla Drake bleated out your decision to marry me at a moment’s notice, and in that case there was no time to lose. Once married, I should be your next of kin and not Lucilla.”

“Poor Lucilla. I’m so terribly sorry for her.”

“I think we all are. She’s a harmless, kindly soul.”

“Is he really arrested?”

Anthony looked at Race, who nodded and said:

“This morning, when he landed in New York.”

“Was he going to marry Ruth—afterwards?”

“That was Ruth’s idea. I think she would have brought it off too.”

“Anthony—I don’t think I like my money very much.”

“All right, sweet—we’ll do something noble with it if you like. I’ve got enough money to live on—and to keep a wife in reasonable comfort. We’ll give it all away if you like—endow homes for children, or provide free tobacco for old men, or—how about a campaign for serving better coffee all over England?”

“I shall keep a little,” said Iris. “So that if I ever wanted to, I could be grand and walk out and leave you.”

“I don’t think, Iris, that is the right spirit in which to enter upon married life. And, by the way, you didn’t once say ‘Tony, how wonderful’ or ‘Anthony, how clever of you!’ ”

Colonel Race smiled and got up.

“Going over to the Farradays for tea,” he exclaimed. There was a faint twinkle in his eye as he said to Anthony: “Don’t suppose you’re coming?”

Anthony shook his head and Race went out of the room. He paused in the doorway to say, over his shoulder:

“Good show.”

“That,” said Anthony as the door closed behind him, “denotes supreme British approval.”

Iris asked in a calm voice:

“He thought I’d done it, didn’t he?”

“You mustn’t hold that against him,” said Anthony. “You see, he’s known so many beautiful spies, all stealing secret formulas and wheedling secrets out of major-generals, that it’s soured his nature and warped his judgement. He thinks it’s just got to be the beautiful girl in the case!”

“Why did you know I hadn’t, Tony?”

“Just love, I suppose,” said Anthony lightly.

Then his face changed, grew suddenly serious. He touched a little vase by Iris’s side in which was a single sprig of grey-green with a mauve flower.

“What’s that doing in flower at this time of year?”

“It does sometimes—just an odd sprig—if it’s a mild autumn.”

Anthony took it out of the glass and held it for a moment against his cheek. He half-closed his eyes and saw rich chestnut hair, laughing blue eyes and a red passionate mouth. . . .

He said in a quiet conversational tone:

“She’s not around now any longer, is she?”

“Who do you mean?”

“You know who I mean. Rosemary . . . I think she knew, Iris, that you were in danger.”

He touched the sprig of fragrant green with his lips and threw it lightly out of the window.

“Good-bye, Rosemary, thank you. . . .”

Iris said softly:

“That’s for remembrance. . . .”

And more softly still:

“Pray love remember. . . .”

The Sittaford Mystery (1931)

By Agatha Christie

One

SITTA FORD HOUSE

Major Burnaby drew on his gum boots, buttoned his overcoat collar round his neck, took from a shelf near the door a hurricane lantern, and cautiously opened the front door of his little bungalow and peered out.

The scene that met his eyes was typical of the English countryside as depicted on Xmas cards and in old-fashioned melodramas. Everywhere was snow, deep drifts of it—no mere powdering an inch or two thick. Snow had fallen all over England for the last four days, and up here on the fringe of Dartmoor it had attained a depth of several feet. All over England householders were groaning over burst pipes, and to have a plumber friend (or even a plumber's mate) was the most coveted of all distinctions.

Up here, in the tiny village of Sittaford, at all times remote from the world, and now almost completely cut off, the rigours of winter were a very real problem.

Major Burnaby, however, was a hardy soul. He snorted twice, grunted once, and marched resolutely out into the snow.

His destination was not far away. A few paces along a winding lane, then in at a gate, and so up a drive partially swept clear of snow to a house of some considerable size built of granite.

The door was opened by a neatly clad parlourmaid. The Major was divested of his British Warm, his gum boots and his aged scarf.

A door was flung open and he passed through it into a room which conveyed all the illusion of a transformation scene.

Although it was only half past three the curtains had been drawn, the electric lights were on and a huge fire blazed cheerfully on the hearth. Two

women in afternoon frocks rose to greet the staunch old warrior.

“Splendid of you to turn out, Major Burnaby,” said the elder of the two.

“Not at all, Mrs. Willett, not at all. Very good of you to ask me.” He shook hands with them both.

“Mr. Garfield is coming,” went on Mrs. Willett, “and Mr. Duke, and Mr. Rycroft said he would come—but one can hardly expect him at his age in such weather. Really, it is too dreadful. One feels one must do something to keep oneself cheerful. Violet, put another log on the fire.”

The Major rose gallantly to perform this task.

“Allow me, Miss Violet.”

He put the log expertly in the right place and returned once more to the armchair his hostess had indicated. Trying not to appear as though he were doing so, he cast surreptitious glances round the room. Amazing how a couple of women could alter the whole character of a room—and without doing anything very outstanding that you could put your finger on.

Sittaford House had been built ten years ago by Captain Joseph Trevelyan, R.N., on the occasion of his retirement from the Navy. He was a man of substance, and he had always had a great hankering to live on Dartmoor. He had placed his choice on the tiny hamlet of Sittaford. It was not in a valley like most of the villages and farms, but perched right on the shoulder of the moor under the shadow of Sittaford Beacon. He had purchased a large tract of ground, had built a comfortable house with its own electric light plant and an electric pump to save labour in pumping water. Then, as a speculation, he had built six small bungalows, each in its quarter acre of ground, along the lane.

The first of these, the one at his very gates, had been allotted to his old friend and crony, John Burnaby—the others had by degrees been sold, there being still a few people who from choice or necessity like to live right out of the world. The village itself consisted of three picturesque but dilapidated cottages, a forge and a combined post office and sweet shop.

The nearest town was Exhampton, six miles away, a steady descent which necessitated the sign, “Motorists engage your lowest gear,” so familiar on the Dartmoor roads.

Captain Trevelyan, as has been said, was a man of substance. In spite of this—or perhaps because of it—he was a man who was inordinately fond of money. At the end of October a house agent in Exhampton wrote to him asking if he would consider letting Sittaford House. A tenant had made inquiries concerning it, wishing to rent it for the winter.

Captain Trevelyan’s first impulse was to refuse, his second to demand further information. The tenant in question proved to be a Mrs. Willett, a widow with one daughter. She had recently arrived from South Africa and wanted a house on Dartmoor for the winter.

“Damn it all, the woman must be mad,” said Captain Trevelyan. “Eh, Burnaby, don’t you think so?”

Burnaby did think so, and said so as forcibly as his friend had done.

“Anyway, you don’t want to let,” he said. “Let the fool woman go somewhere else if she wants to freeze. Coming from South Africa too!”

But at this point Captain Trevelyan’s money complex asserted itself. Not once in a hundred times would you get a chance of letting your house in mid-winter. He demanded what rent the tenant was willing to pay.

An offer of twelve guineas a week clinched matters. Captain Trevelyan went into Exhampton, rented a small house on the outskirts at two guineas a week, and handed over Sittaford House to Mrs. Willett, half the rent to be paid in advance.

“A fool and her money are soon parted,” he growled.

But Burnaby was thinking this afternoon as he scanned Mrs. Willett covertly, that she did not look a fool. She was a tall woman with a rather silly manner—but her physiognomy was shrewd rather than foolish. She was inclined to overdress, had a distinct Colonial accent, and seemed

perfectly content with the transaction. She was clearly very well-off and that—as Burnaby had reflected more than once—really made the whole affair more odd. She was not the kind of woman one would credit with a passion for solitude.

As a neighbour she had proved almost embarrassingly friendly. Invitations to Sittaford House were rained on everybody. Captain Trevelyan was constantly urged to “Treat the house as though we hadn’t rented it.” Trevelyan, however, was not fond of women. Report went that he had been jilted in his youth. He persistently refused all invitations.

Two months had passed since the installation of the Willetts and the first wonder at their arrival had passed away.

Burnaby, naturally a silent man, continued to study his hostess, oblivious to any need for small talk. Liked to make herself out a fool, but wasn’t really. So he summed up the situation. His glance shifted to Violet Willett. Pretty girl—scraggy, of course—they all were nowadays. What was the good of a woman if she didn’t look like a woman? Papers said curves were coming back. About time too.

He roused himself to the necessity of conversation.

“We were afraid at first that you wouldn’t be able to come,” said Mrs. Willett. “You said so, you remember. We were so pleased when you said that after all you would.”

“Friday,” said Major Burnaby, with an air of being explicit.

Mrs. Willett looked puzzled.

“Friday?”

“Every Friday go to Trevelyan’s. Tuesday he comes to me. Both of us done it for years.”

“Oh! I see. Of course, living so near—”

“Kind of habit.”

“But do you still keep it up? I mean now that he is living in Exhampton—”

“Pity to break a habit,” said Major Burnaby. “We’d both of us miss those evenings.”

“You go in for competitions, don’t you?” asked Violet. “Acrostics and crosswords and all those things.”

Burnaby nodded.

“I do crosswords. Trevelyan does acrostics. We each stick to our own line of country. I won three books last month in a crossword competition,” he volunteered.

“Oh! really. How nice. Were they interesting books?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t read them. Looked pretty hopeless.”

“It’s the winning them that matters, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Willett vaguely.

“How do you get to Exhampton?” asked Violet. “You haven’t got a car.”

“Walk.”

“What? Not really? Six miles.”

“Good exercise. What’s twelve miles? Keeps a man fit. Great thing to be fit.”

“Fancy! Twelve miles. But both you and Captain Trevelyan were great athletes, weren’t you?”

“Used to go to Switzerland together. Winter sports in winter, climbing in summer. Wonderful man on ice, Trevelyan. Both too old for that sort of thing nowadays.”

“You won the Army Racquets Championship, too, didn’t you?” asked Violet.

The Major blushed like a girl.

“Who told you that?” he mumbled.

“Captain Trevelyan.”

“Joe should hold his tongue,” said Burnaby. “He talks too much. What’s the weather like now?”

Respecting his embarrassment, Violet followed him to the window. They drew the curtain aside and looked out over the desolate scene.

“More snow coming,” said Burnaby. “A pretty heavy fall too, I should say.”

“Oh! how thrilling,” said Violet. “I do think snow is so romantic. I’ve never seen it before.”

“It isn’t romantic when the pipes freeze, you foolish child,” said her mother.

“Have you lived all your life in South Africa, Miss Willett?” asked Major Burnaby.

Some of the girl’s animation dropped away from her. She seemed almost constrained in her manner as she answered.

“Yes—this is the first time I’ve ever been away. It’s all most frightfully thrilling.”

Thrilling to be shut away like this in a remote moorland village? Funny ideas. He couldn’t get the hang of these people.

The door opened and the parlourmaid announced:

“Mr. Rycroft and Mr. Garfield.”

There entered a little elderly, dried-up man and a fresh-coloured, boyish young man. The latter spoke first.

“I brought him along, Mrs. Willett. Said I wouldn’t let him be buried in a snowdrift. Ha, ha. I say, this all looks simply marvellous. Yule logs burning.”

“As he says, my young friend very kindly piloted me here,” said Mr. Rycroft as he shook hands somewhat ceremoniously. “How do you do, Miss Violet? Very seasonable weather—rather too seasonable, I fear.”

He moved to the fire talking to Mrs. Willett. Ronald Garfield buttonholed Violet.

“I say, can’t we get up any skating anywhere? Aren’t there some ponds about?”

“I think path digging will be your only sport.”

“I’ve been at it all the morning.”

“Oh! you he-man.”

“Don’t laugh at me. I’ve got blisters all over my hands.”

“How’s your aunt?”

“Oh! she’s always the same—sometimes she says she’s better and sometimes she says she’s worse, but I think it’s all the same really. It’s a ghastly life, you know. Each year, I wonder how I can stick it—but there it is—if one doesn’t rally round the old bird for Xmas—why, she’s quite capable of leaving her money to a Cat’s Home. She’s got five of them, you know. I’m always stroking the brutes and pretending I dote upon them.”

“I like dogs much better than cats.”

“So do I. Any day. What I mean is a dog is—well, a dog’s a dog, you know.”

“Has your aunt always been fond of cats?”

“I think it’s just a kind of thing old maids grow into. Ugh! I hate the brutes.”

“Your aunt’s very nice, but rather frightening.”

“I should think she was frightening. Snaps my head off sometimes. Thinks I’ve got no brains, you know.”

“Not really?”

“Oh! look here, don’t say it like that. Lots of fellows look like fools and are laughing underneath.”

“Mr. Duke,” announced the parlourmaid.

Mr. Duke was a recent arrival. He had bought the last of the six bungalows in September. He was a big man, very quiet and devoted to gardening. Mr. Rycroft who was an enthusiast on birds and who lived next door to him had taken him up, overruling the section of thought which voiced the opinion that of course Mr. Duke was a very nice man, quite unassuming, but was he, after all, quite—well, quite? Mightn’t he, just possibly, be a retired tradesman?

But nobody liked to ask him—and indeed it was thought better not to know. Because if one did know, it might be awkward, and really in such a small community it was best to know everybody.

“Not walking to Exhampton in this weather?” he asked of Major Burnaby.

“No, I fancy Trevelyan will hardly expect me tonight.”

“It’s awful, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Willett with a shudder. “To be buried up here, year after year—it must be ghastly.”

Mr. Duke gave her a quick glance. Major Burnaby too stared at her curiously.

But at that moment tea was brought in.

Two

THE MESSAGE

After tea, Mrs. Willett suggested bridge.

“There are six of us. Two can cut in.”

Ronnie’s eyes brightened.

“You four start,” he suggested. “Miss Willett and I will cut in.”

But Mr. Duke said that he did not play bridge.

Ronnie’s face fell.

“We might play a round game,” said Mrs. Willett.

“Or table-turning,” suggested Ronnie. “It’s a spooky evening. We spoke about it the other day, you remember. Mr. Rycroft and I were talking about it this evening as we came along here.”

“I am a member of the Psychical Research Society,” explained Mr. Rycroft in his precise way. “I was able to put my young friend right on one or two points.”

“Tommy rot,” said Major Burnaby very distinctly.

“Oh! but it’s great fun, don’t you think?” said Violet Willett. “I mean, one doesn’t believe in it or anything. It’s just an amusement. What do you say, Mr. Duke?”

“Anything you like, Miss Willett.”

“We must turn the lights out, and we must find a suitable table. No—not that one, Mother. I’m sure it’s much too heavy.”

Things were settled at last to everyone's satisfaction. A small round table with a polished top was brought from an adjoining room. It was set in front of the fire and everyone took his place round it with the lights switched off.

Major Burnaby was between his hostess and Violet. On the other side of the girl was Ronnie Garfield. A cynical smile creased the Major's lips. He thought to himself:

"In my young days it was Up Jenkins." And he tried to recall the name of a girl with fluffy hair whose hand he had held beneath the table at considerable length. A long time ago that was. But Up Jenkins had been a good game.

There were all the usual laughs, whispers, stereotyped remarks.

"The spirits are a long time."

"Got a long way to come."

"Hush—nothing will happen unless we are serious."

"Oh! do be quiet—everyone."

"Nothing's happening."

"Of course not—it never does at first."

"If only you'd all be quiet."

At last, after some time, the murmur of talk died away.

A silence.

"This table's dead as mutton," murmured Ronnie Garfield disgustedly.

"Hush."

A tremor ran through the polished surface. The table began to rock.

“Ask it questions. Who shall ask? You, Ronnie.”

“Oh—er—I say—what do I ask it?”

“Is a spirit present?” prompted Violet.

“Oh! Hullo—is a spirit present?”

A sharp rock.

“That means yes,” said Violet.

“Oh! er—who are you?”

No response.

“Ask it to spell its name.”

The table started rocking violently.

“A B C D E F G H I—I say, was that I or J?”

“Ask it. Was that I?”

One rock.

“Yes. Next letter, please.”

The spirit’s name was Ida.

“Have you a message for anyone here?”

“Yes.”

“Who is it for? Miss Willett?”

“No.”

“Mrs. Willett?”

“No.”

“Mr. Rycroft?”

“No.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s for you, Ronnie. Go on. Make it spell it out.”

The table spelt “Diana.”

“Who’s Diana? Do you know anyone called Diana?”

“No, I don’t. At least—”

“There you are. He does.”

“Ask her if she’s a widow?”

The fun went on. Mr. Rycroft smiled indulgently. Young people must have their jokes. He caught one glance of his hostess’s face in a sudden flicker of the firelight. It looked worried and abstracted. Her thoughts were somewhere faraway.

Major Burnaby was thinking of the snow. It was going to snow again this evening. Hardest winter he ever remembered.

Mr. Duke was playing very seriously. The spirits, alas, paid very little attention to him. All the messages seemed to be for Violet and Ronnie.

Violet was told she was going to Italy. Someone was going with her. Not a woman. A man. His name was Leonard.

More laughter. The table spelt the name of the town. A Russian jumble of letters—not in the least Italian.

The usual accusations were levelled.

“Look here, Violet,” (“Miss Willett” had been dropped) “you are shoving.”

“I’m not. Look, I take my hands right off the table and it rocks just the same.”

“I like raps. I’m going to ask it to rap. Loud ones.”

“There should be raps.” Ronnie turned to Mr. Rycroft. “There ought to be raps, oughtn’t there, sir?”

“Under the circumstances, I should hardly think it likely,” said Mr. Rycroft drily.

There was a pause. The table was inert. It returned no answer to questions.

“Has Ida gone away?”

One languid rock.

“Will another spirit come, please?”

Nothing. Suddenly the table began to quiver and rock violently.

“Hurrah. Are you a new spirit?”

“Yes.”

“Have you a message for someone?”

“Yes.”

“For me?”

“No.”

“For Violet?”

“No.”

“For Major Burnaby?”

“Yes.”

“It’s for you, Major Burnaby. Will you spell it out, please?”

The table started rocking slowly.

“T R E V—are you sure it’s V? It can’t be. T R E V—it doesn’t make sense.”

“Trevelyan, of course,” said Mrs. Willett. “Captain Trevelyan.”

“Do you mean Captain Trevelyan?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got a message for Captain Trevelyan?”

“No.”

“Well, what is it then?”

The table began to rock—slowly, rhythmically. So slowly that it was easy to count the letters.

“D—” a pause. “E—A D.”

“Dead.”

“Somebody is dead?”

Instead of Yes or No, the table began to rock again till it reached the letter T.

“T—do you mean Trevelyan?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t mean Trevelyan is dead?”

“Yes.”

A very sharp rock. “Yes.”

Somebody gasped. There was a faint stir all round the table.

Ronnie’s voice as he resumed his questions held a different note—an awed uneasy note.

“You mean—that Captain Trevelyan is dead?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause. It was as though no one knew what to ask next, or how to take this unexpected development.

And in the pause, the table started rocking again.

Rhythmically and slowly, Ronnie spelled out the letters aloud. . . .

M-U-R-D-E-R. . . .

Mrs. Willett gave a cry and took her hands off the table.

“I won’t go on with this. It’s horrible. I don’t like it.”

Mr. Duke’s voice rang out, resonant and clear. He was questioning the table.

“Do you mean—that Captain Trevelyan has been murdered?”

The last word had hardly left his lips when the answer came. The table rocked so violently and assertively that it nearly fell over. One rock only.

“Yes. . . .”

“Look here,” said Ronnie. He took his hands from the table. “I call this a rotten joke.” His voice trembled.

“Turn up the lights,” said Mr. Rycroft.

Major Burnaby rose and did so. The sudden glare revealed a company of pale uneasy faces.

Everyone looked at each other. Somehow—nobody quite knew what to say.

“All rot, of course,” said Ronnie with an uneasy laugh.

“Silly nonsense,” said Mrs. Willett. “Nobody ought to—to make jokes like that.”

“Not about people dying,” said Violet. “It’s—oh! I don’t like it.”

“I wasn’t shoving,” said Ronnie, feeling unspoken criticism levelled at him. “I swear I wasn’t.”

“I can say the same,” said Mr. Duke. “And you, Mr. Rycroft?”

“Certainly not,” said Mr. Rycroft warmly.

“You don’t think I’d make a joke of that kind, do you?” growled Major Burnaby. “Rotten bad taste.”

“Violet dear—”

“I didn’t, Mother. Indeed, I didn’t. I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

The girl was almost tearful.

Everyone was embarrassed. A sudden blight had come over the cheerful party.

Major Burnaby pushed back his chair, went to the window and pulled aside the curtain. He stood there looking out with his back to the room.

“Twenty-five minutes past five,” said Mr. Rycroft glancing up at the clock. He compared it with his own watch and somehow everyone felt the action was significant in some way.

“Let me see,” said Mrs. Willett with forced cheerfulness. “I think we’d better have cocktails. Will you ring the bell, Mr. Garfield?”

Ronnie obeyed.

Ingredients for cocktails were brought and Ronnie was appointed mixer. The situation grew a little easier.

“Well,” said Ronnie, raising his glass. “Here’s how.”

The others responded—all but the silent figure by the window.

“Major Burnaby. Here’s your cocktail.”

The Major roused himself with a start. He turned slowly.

“Thank you, Mrs. Willett. Not for me.” He looked once more out into the night, then came slowly back to the group by the fire. “Many thanks for a very pleasant time. Good night.”

“You’re not going?”

“Afraid I must.”

“Not so soon. And on a night like this.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Willett—but it’s got to be done. If there were only a telephone.”

“A telephone?”

“Yes—to tell you the truth—I’m—well. I’d like to be sure that Joe Trevelyan’s all right. Silly superstition and all that—but there it is. Naturally, I don’t believe in this tommy rot—but—”

“But you can’t telephone from anywhere. There’s not such a thing in Sittaford.”

“That’s just it. As I can’t telephone, I’ll have to go.”

“Go—but you couldn’t get a car down that road! Elmer wouldn’t take his car out on such a night.”

Elmer was the proprietor of the sole car in the place, an aged Ford, hired at a handsome price by those who wished to go into Exhampton.

“No, no—car’s out of the question. My two legs will take me there, Mrs. Willett.”

There was a chorus of protest.

“Oh! Major Burnaby—it’s impossible. You said yourself it was going to snow.”

“Not for an hour—perhaps longer. I’ll get there, never fear.”

“Oh! you can’t. We can’t allow it.”

She was seriously disturbed and upset.

But argument and entreaty had no more effect on Major Burnaby than if he were a rock. He was an obstinate man. Once his mind was made up on any point, no power on earth could move him.

He had determined to walk to Exhampton and see for himself that all was well with his old friend, and he repeated that simple statement half a dozen times.

In the end they were brought to realize that he meant it. He wrapped himself up in his overcoat, lighted the hurricane lantern, and stepped out into the night.

“I’ll just drop in to my place for a flask,” he said cheerily, “and then push straight on. Trevelyan will put me up for the night when I get there.

Ridiculous fuss, I know. Everything sure to be all right. Don't worry, Mrs. Willett. Snow or no snow—I'll get there in a couple of hours. Good night."

He strode away. The others returned to the fire.

Rycroft had looked up at the sky.

"It is going to snow," he murmured to Mr. Duke. "And it will begin long before he gets to Exhampton. I—I hope he gets there all right."

Duke frowned.

"I know. I feel I ought to have gone with him. One of us ought to have done so."

"Most distressing," Mrs. Willett was saying, "most distressing. Violet, I will not have that silly game ever played again. Poor Major Burnaby will probably plunge into a snowdrift—or if he doesn't he'll die of the cold and exposure. At his age, too. Very foolish of him to go off like that. Of course, Captain Trevelyan is perfectly all right."

Everyone echoed:

"Of course."

But even now they did not feel really too comfortable.

Supposing something had happened to Captain Trevelyan. . . .

Supposing. . . .

Three

FIVE AND TWENTY PAST FIVE

Two and a half hours later, just before eight o'clock, Major Burnaby, hurricane lantern in hand, his head dropped forward so as not to meet the blinding drive of snow, stumbled up the path to the door of "Hazelmoor," the small house tenanted by Captain Trevelyan.

The snow had begun to fall about an hour ago—great blinding flakes of it. Major Burnaby was gasping, emitting the loud sighing gasps of an utterly exhausted man. He was numbed with cold. He stamped his feet, blew, puffed, snorted and applied a numbed finger to the bell push.

The bell trilled shrilly.

Burnaby waited. After a pause of a few minutes, as nothing happened, he pushed the bell again.

Once more there was no stir of life.

Burnaby rang a third time. This time he kept his finger on the bell.

It trilled on and on—but there was still no sign of life in the house.

There was a knocker on the door. Major Burnaby seized it and worked it vigorously, producing a noise like thunder.

And still the little house remained silent as the dead.

The Major desisted. He stood for a moment as though perplexed—then he slowly went down the path and out at the gate, continuing on the road he had come towards Exhampton. A hundred yards brought him to the small police station.

He hesitated again, then finally made up his mind and entered.

Constable Graves, who knew the Major well, rose in astonishment.

“Well, I never, sir, fancy you being out on a night like this.”

“Look here,” said Burnaby curtly. “I’ve been ringing and knocking at the Captain’s house and I can’t get any answer.”

“Why, of course, it’s Friday,” said Graves who knew the habits of the two pretty well. “But you don’t mean to say you’ve actually come down from Sittaford on a night like this? Surely the Captain would never expect you.”

“Whether he’s expected me or not, I’ve come,” said Burnaby testily. “And as I’m telling you, I can’t get in. I’ve rung and knocked and nobody answers.”

Some of his uneasiness seemed to communicate itself to the policeman.

“That’s odd,” he said, frowning.

“Of course, it’s odd,” said Burnaby.

“It’s not as though he’s likely to be out—on a night like this.”

“Of course he’s not likely to be out.”

“It is odd,” said Graves again.

Burnaby displayed impatience at the man’s slowness.

“Aren’t you going to do something?” he snapped.

“Do something?”

“Yes, do something.”

The policeman ruminated.

“Think he might have been taken bad?” His face brightened. “I’ll try the telephone.” It stood at his elbow. He took it up and gave the number.

But to the telephone, as to the front door bell, Captain Trevelyan gave no reply.

“Looks as though he has been taken bad,” said Graves as he replaced the receiver. “And all alone in the house, too. We’d best got hold of Dr. Warren and take him along with us.”

Dr. Warren’s house was almost next door to the police station. The doctor was just sitting down to dinner with his wife and was not best pleased at the summons. However, he grudgingly agreed to accompany them, drawing on an aged British Warm and a pair of rubber boots and muffling his neck with a knitted scarf.

The snow was still falling.

“Damnable night,” murmured the doctor. “Hope you haven’t brought me out on a wild goose chase. Trevelyan’s as strong as a horse. Never has anything the matter with him.”

Burnaby did not reply.

Arriving at Hazelmoor once more, they rang again and knocked, but elicited no response.

The doctor then suggested going round the house to one of the back windows.

“Easier to force than the door.”

Graves agreeing, they went round the back. There was a side door which they tried on the way, but it too was locked, and presently they emerged on the snow-covered lawn that led up to the back windows. Suddenly, Warren uttered an exclamation.

“The window of the study—it’s open.”

True enough, the window, a French one, was standing ajar. They quickened their steps. On a night like this, no one in his senses would open a window. There was a light in the room that streamed out in a thin yellow band.

The three men arrived simultaneously at the window—Burnaby was the first man to enter, the constable hard on his heels.

They both stopped dead inside and something like a muffled cry came from the ex-soldier. In another moment Warren was beside them, and saw what they had seen.

Captain Trevelyan lay on the floor, face downwards. His arms sprawled widely. The room was in confusion—drawers of the bureau pulled out, papers lying about the floor. The window beside them was splintered where it had been forced near the lock. Beside Captain Trevelyan was a dark green baize tube about two inches in diameter.

Warren sprang forward. He knelt down by the prostrate figure.

One minute sufficed. He rose to his feet, his face pale.

“He’s dead?” asked Burnaby.

The doctor nodded.

Then he turned to Graves.

“It’s for you to say what’s to be done. I can do nothing except examine the body and perhaps you’d rather I didn’t do that until the Inspector comes. I can tell you the cause of death now. Fracture of the base of the skull. And I think I can make a guess at the weapon.”

He indicated the green baize tube.

“Trevelyan always had them along the bottom of the door—to keep the draught out,” said Burnaby.

His voice was hoarse.

“Yes—a very efficient form of sandbag.”

“My God!”

“But this here—” the constable broke in, his wits arriving at the point slowly. “You mean—this here is murder.”

The policeman stepped to the table on which stood a telephone.

Major Burnaby approached the doctor.

“Have you any idea,” he said, breathing hard, “how long he’s been dead?”

“About two hours, I should say, or possibly three. That’s a rough estimate.”

Burnaby passed his tongue over dry lips.

“Would you say,” he asked, “that he might have been killed at five twenty-five?”

The doctor looked at him curiously.

“If I had to give a time definitely, that’s just about the time I would suggest.”

“Oh my God,” said Burnaby.

Warren stared at him.

The Major felt his way blindly to a chair, collapsed onto it and muttered to himself whilst a kind of staring terror overspread his face.

“Five and twenty past five—Oh my God, then it was true after all.”

Four

INSPECTOR NARRACOTT

It was the morning after the tragedy, and two men were standing in the little study of Hazelmoor.

Inspector Narracott looked round him. A little frown appeared upon his forehead.

“Ye-es,” he said thoughtfully. “Ye-es.”

Inspector Narracott was a very efficient officer. He had a quiet persistence, a logical mind and a keen attention to detail which brought him success where many another man might have failed.

He was a tall man with a quiet manner, rather faraway grey eyes, and a slow soft Devonshire voice.

Summoned from Exeter to take charge of the case, he had arrived on the first train that morning. The roads had been impassable for cars, even with chains, otherwise he would have arrived the night before. He was standing now in Captain Trevelyan’s study having just completed his examination of the room. With him was Sergeant Pollock of the Exhampton police.

“Ye-es,” said Inspector Narracott.

A ray of pale wintry sunshine came in through the window. Outside was the snowy landscape. There was a fence about a hundred yards from the window and beyond it the steep ascending slope of the snow-covered hillside.

Inspector Narracott bent once more over the body which had been left for his inspection. An athletic man himself, he recognized the athlete’s type, the broad shoulders, narrow flanks, and the good muscular development. The head was small and well set on the shoulders, and the pointed naval beard

was carefully trimmed. Captain Trevelyan's age, he had ascertained, was sixty, but he looked not much more than fifty-one or two.

"Ah!" said Sergeant Pollock.

The other turned on him.

"What is your view of it?"

"Well—" Sergeant Pollock scratched his head. He was a cautious man, unwilling to advance further than necessary.

"Well," he said, "as I see it, sir, I should say that the man came to the window, forced the lock, and started rifling the room. Captain Trevelyan, I suppose, must have been upstairs. Doubtless the burglar thought the house was empty—"

"Where is Captain Trevelyan's bedroom situated?"

"Upstairs, sir. Over this room."

"At the present time of year it is dark at four o'clock. If Captain Trevelyan was up in his bedroom the electric light would have been on, the burglar would have seen it as he approached this window."

"You mean he'd have waited."

"No man in his senses would break into a house with a light in it. If anyone forced this window—he did it because he thought the house was empty."

Sergeant Pollock scratched his head.

"Seems a bit odd, I admit. But there it is."

"We'll let it pass for the moment. Go on."

"Well, suppose the Captain hears a noise downstairs. He comes down to investigate. The burglar hears him coming. He snatches up that bolster

arrangement, gets behind the door, and as the Captain enters the room strikes him down from behind.”

Inspector Narracott nodded.

“Yes, that’s true enough. He was struck down when he was facing the window. But all the same, Pollock, I don’t like it.”

“No, sir?”

“No, as I say, I don’t believe in houses that are broken into at five o’clock in the afternoon.”

“We-ell, he may have thought it a good opportunity—”

“It is not a question of opportunity—slipping in because he found a window unlatched. It was deliberate housebreaking—look at the confusion everywhere—what would a burglar go for first? The pantry where the silver is kept.”

“That’s true enough,” admitted the Sergeant.

“And this confusion—this chaos,” continued Narracott, “these drawers pulled out and their contents scattered. Pah! It’s bunkum.”

“Bunkum?”

“Look at the window, Sergeant. That window was not locked and forced open! It was merely shut and then splintered from the outside to give the appearance of forcing.”

Pollock examined the latch of the window closely, uttering an ejaculation to himself as he did so.

“You are right, sir,” he said with respect in his voice. “Who’d have thought of that now!”

“Someone who wishes to throw dust in our eyes—and hasn’t succeeded.”

Sergeant Pollock was grateful for the “our.” In such small ways did Inspector Narracott endear himself to his subordinates.

“Then it wasn’t burglary. You mean, sir, it was an inside job.”

Inspector Narracott nodded. “Yes,” he said. “The only curious thing is, though, that I think the murderer did actually enter by the window. As you and Graves reported, and as I can still see for myself, there are damp patches still visible where the snow melted and was trodden in by the murderer’s boots. These damp patches are only in this room. Constable Graves was quite positive that there was nothing of the kind in the hall when he and Dr. Warren passed through it. In this room he noticed them immediately. In that case it seems clear that the murderer was admitted by Captain Trevelyan through the window. Therefore it must have been someone whom Captain Trevelyan knew. You are a local man, Sergeant, can you tell me if Captain Trevelyan was a man who made enemies easily?”

“No, sir, I should say he hadn’t an enemy in the world. A bit keen on money, and a bit of a martinet—wouldn’t stand for any slackness or incivility—but bless my soul, he was respected for that.”

“No enemies,” said Narracott thoughtfully.

“Not here, that is.”

“Very true—we don’t know what enemies he may have made during his naval career. It’s my experience, Sergeant, that a man who makes enemies in one place will make them in another, but I agree that we can’t put that possibility entirely aside. We come logically now to the next motive—the most common motive for every crime—gain. Captain Trevelyan was, I understand, a rich man?”

“Very warm indeed by all accounts. But close. Not an easy man to touch for a subscription.”

“Ah!” said Narracott thoughtfully.

“Pity it snowed as it did,” said the Sergeant. “But for that we’d have had his footprints as something to go on.”

“There was no one else in the house?” asked the Inspector.

“No. For the last five years Captain Trevelyan has only had one servant—retired naval chap. Up at Sittaford House a woman came in daily, but this chap, Evans, cooked and looked after his master. About a month ago he got married—much to the Captain’s annoyance. I believe that’s one of the reasons he let Sittaford House to this South African lady. He wouldn’t have any woman living in the house. Evans lives just round the corner here in Fore Street with his wife, and comes in daily to do for his master. I’ve got him here now for you to see. His statement is that he left here at half past two yesterday afternoon, the Captain having no further need for him.”

“Yes, I shall want to see him. He may be able to tell us something—useful.”

Sergeant Pollock looked at his superior officer curiously. There was something so odd about his tone.

“You think—” he began.

“I think,” said Inspector Narracott deliberately, “that there’s a lot more in this case than meets the eye.”

“In what way, sir?”

But the Inspector refused to be drawn.

“You say this man, Evans, is here now?”

“He’s waiting in the dining room.”

“Good. I’ll see him straight away. What sort of a fellow is he?”

Sergeant Pollock was better at reporting facts than at descriptive accuracy.

“He’s a retired naval chap. Ugly customer in a scrap, I should say.”

“Does he drink?”

“Never been the worse for it that I know of.”

“What about this wife of his? Not a fancy of the Captain’s or anything of that sort?”

“Oh! no, sir, nothing of that kind about Captain Trevelyan. He wasn’t that kind at all. He was known as a woman hater, if anything.”

“And Evans was supposed to be devoted to his master?”

“That’s the general idea, sir, and I think it would be known if he wasn’t. Exhampton’s a small place.”

Inspector Narracott nodded.

“Well,” he said, “there’s nothing more to be seen here. I’ll interview Evans and I’ll take a look at the rest of the house and after that we will go over to the Three Crowns and see this Major Burnaby. That remark of his about the time was curious. Twenty-five past five, eh? He must know something he hasn’t told, or why should he suggest the time of the crime so accurately?”

The two men moved towards the door.

“It’s a rum business,” said Sergeant Pollock, his eye wandering to the littered floor. “All this burglary fake!”

“It’s not that that strikes me as odd,” said Narracott, “under the circumstances it was probably the natural thing to do. No—what strikes me as odd is the window.”

“The window, sir?”

“Yes. Why should the murderer go to the window? Assuming it was someone Trevelyan knew and admitted without question, why not go to the front door? To get round to this window from the road on a night like last night would have been a difficult and unpleasant proceeding with the snow lying as thick as it does. Yet there must have been some reason.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Pollock, “the man didn’t want to be seen turning in to the house from the road.”

“There wouldn’t be many people about yesterday afternoon to see him. Nobody who could help it was out of doors. No—there’s some other reason. Well, perhaps it will come to light in due course.”

Five

EVANS

They found Evans waiting in the dining room. He rose respectfully on their entrance.

He was a short thickset man. He had very long arms and a habit of standing with his hands half clenched. He was clean shaven with small, rather piglike eyes, yet he had a look of cheerfulness and efficiency that redeemed his bulldog appearance.

Inspector Narracott mentally tabulated his impressions.

“Intelligent. Shrewd and practical. Looks rattled.”

Then he spoke:

“You’re Evans, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Christian names?”

“Robert Henry.”

“Ah! Now what do you know about this business?”

“Not a thing, sir. It’s fair knocked me over. To think of the Capting being done in!”

“When did you last see your master?”

“Two o’clock I should say it was, sir. I cleared away the lunch things and laid the table here as you see for supper. The Capting, he told me as I needn’t come back.”

“What do you usually do?”

“As a general rule, I come back about seven for a couple of hours. Not always—sometimes the Capting would say as I needn’t.”

“Then you weren’t surprised when he told you that yesterday you wouldn’t be wanted again?”

“No, sir. I didn’t come back the evening before either—on account of the weather. Very considerate gentleman, the Capting was, as long as you didn’t try to shirk things. I knew him and his ways pretty well.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“Well, he looked out of the window and he says, ‘Not a hope of Burnaby today.’ ‘Shouldn’t wonder,’ he says, ‘if Sittaford isn’t cut off altogether. Don’t remember such a winter since I was a boy.’ That was his friend Major Burnaby over to Sittaford that he was referring to. Always comes on a Friday, he does, he and the Capting play chess and do acrostics. And on Tuesdays the Capting would go to Major Burnaby’s. Very regular in his habits was the Capting. Then he said to me: ‘You can go now, Evans, and you needn’t come till tomorrow morning.’ ”

“Apart from his reference to Major Burnaby, he didn’t speak of expecting anyone that afternoon?”

“No, sir, not a word.”

“There was nothing unusual or different in any way in his manner?”

“No, sir, not that I could see.”

“Ah! Now I understand, Evans, that you have lately got married.”

“Yes, sir. Mrs. Belling’s daughter at the Three Crowns. Matter of two months ago, sir.”

“And Captain Trevelyan was not overpleased about it.”

A very faint grin appeared for a moment on Evans's face.

"Cut up rough about it, he did, the Capting. My Rebecca is a fine girl, sir, and a very good cook. And I hoped we might have been able to do for the Capting together, but he—he wouldn't hear of it. Said he wouldn't have women servants about his house. In fact, sir, things were rather at a deadlock when this South African lady came along and wanted to take Sittaford House for the winter. The Capting he rented this place, I came in to do for him every day, and I don't mind telling you, sir, that I had been hoping that by the end of the winter the Capting would have come round to the idea; and that me and Rebecca would go back to Sittaford with him. Why, he would never even know she was in the house. She would keep to the kitchen, and she would manage so that he would never meet her on the stairs."

"Have you any idea what lay behind Captain Trevelyan's dislike of women?"

"Nothing to it, sir. Just an 'abit, sir, that's all. I have seen many a gentleman like it before. If you ask me, it's nothing more or less than shyness. Some young lady or other gives them a snub when they are young—and they gets the 'abit."

"Captain Trevelyan was not married?"

"No, indeed, sir."

"What relations had he? Do you know?"

"I believe he had a sister living at Exeter, sir, and I think I have heard him mention a nephew or nephews."

"None of them ever came to see him?"

"No, sir. I think he quarrelled with his sister at Exeter."

"Do you know her name?"

"Gardner, I think, sir, but I wouldn't be sure."

“You don’t know her address?”

“I’m afraid I don’t, sir.”

“Well, doubtless we shall come across that in looking through Captain Trevelyan’s papers. Now, Evans, what were you yourself doing from four o’clock onwards yesterday afternoon?”

“I was at home, sir.”

“Where’s home?”

“Just round the corner, sir, 85 Fore Street.”

“You didn’t go out at all?”

“Not likely, sir. Why, the snow was coming down a fair treat.”

“Yes, yes. Is there anyone who can support your statement?”

“Beg pardon, sir.”

“Is there anyone who knows that you were at home during that time?”

“My wife, sir.”

“She and you were alone in the house?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, well, I have no doubt that’s all right. That will be all for the present, Evans.”

The ex-sailor hesitated. He shifted from one foot to the other.

“Anything I can do here, sir—in the way of tidying up?”

“No—the whole place is to be left exactly as it is for the present.”

“I see.”

“You had better wait, though, until I have had a look round,” said Narracott, “in case there might be any question I want to ask you.”

“Very good, sir.”

Inspector Narracott transferred his gaze from Evans to the room.

The interview had taken place in the dining room. On the table an evening meal was set out. A cold tongue, pickles, a Stilton cheese and biscuits, and on a gas ring by the fire a saucepan containing soup. On the sideboard was a tantalus, a soda water siphon, and two bottles of beer. There was also an immense array of silver cups and with them—a rather incongruous item—three very new-looking novels.

Inspector Narracott examined one or two of the cups and read the inscriptions on them.

“Bit of a sportsman, Captain Trevelyan,” he observed.

“Yes, indeed, sir,” said Evans. “Been an athlete all his life, he had.”

Inspector Narracott read the titles of the novels. “Love Turns the Key,” “The Merry Men of Lincoln,” “Love’s Prisoner.”

“H’m,” he remarked. “The Captain’s taste in literature seems somewhat incongruous.”

“Oh! that, sir.” Evans laughed. “That’s not for reading, sir. That’s the prizes he won in these Railway Pictures Names Competitions. Ten solutions the Capting sent in under different names, including mine, because he said 85 Fore Street was a likely address to give a prize to! The commoner your name and address the more likely you were to get a prize in the Capting’s opinion. And sure enough a prize I got—but not the £2,000, only three new novels—and the kind of novels, in my opinion, that no one would ever pay money for in a shop.”

Narracott smiled, then again mentioning that Evans was to wait, he proceeded on his tour of inspection. There was a large kind of cupboard in one corner of the room. It was almost a small room in itself. Here, packed in unceremoniously, were two pairs of skis, a pair of skulls mounted, ten or twelve hippopotamus tusks, rods and lines and various fishing tackle including a book of flies, a bag of golf clubs, a tennis racket, an elephant's foot stuffed and mounted and a tiger skin. It was clear that, when Captain Trevelyan had let Sittaford House furnished, he had removed his most precious possessions, distrustful of female influence.

"Funny idea—to bring all this with him," said the Inspector. "The house was only let for a few months, wasn't it?"

"That's right, sir."

"Surely these things could have been locked up at Sittaford House?"

For the second time in the course of the interview, Evans grinned.

"That would have been much the easiest way of doing it," he agreed. "Not that there are many cupboards at Sittaford House. The architect and the Captiving planned it together, and it takes a female to understand the value of cupboard room. Still, as you say, sir, that would have been the commonsense thing to do. Carting them down here was a job—I should say it was a job! But there, the Captiving couldn't bear the idea of anyone messing around with his things. And lock things up as you will, he says, a woman will always find a way of getting in. It's curiosity, he says. Better not lock them up at all if you don't want her to handle them, he says. But best of all, take them along, and then you're sure to be on the safe side. So take 'em along we did, and as I say, it was a job, and came expensive too. But there, those things of the Captiving's was like his children."

Evans paused, out of breath.

Inspector Narracott nodded thoughtfully. There was another point on which he wanted information, and it seemed to him that this was a good moment when the subject had arisen naturally.

“This Mrs. Willett,” he said casually. “Was she an old friend or acquaintance of the Captain’s?”

“Oh no, sir, she was quite a stranger to him.”

“You are sure of that?” said the Inspector, sharply.

“Well—” the sharpness took the old sailor aback. “The Captaining never actually said so—but—Oh yes, I’m sure of it.”

“I ask,” explained the Inspector, “because it is a very curious time of year for a let. On the other hand, if this Mrs. Willett was acquainted with Captain Trevelyan and knew the house, she might have written to him and suggested taking it.”

Evans shook his head.

“ ’Twas the agents—Williamsons—that wrote, said they had an offer from a lady.”

Inspector Narracott frowned. He found this business of letting Sittaford House distinctly odd.

“Captain Trevelyan and Mrs. Willett met, I suppose?” he asked.

“Oh! yes. She came to see the house and he took her over it.”

“And you’re positive they hadn’t met before?”

“Oh! quite, sir.”

“Did they—er—” the Inspector paused, as he tried to frame the question naturally. “Did they get on well together? Were they friendly?”

“The lady was.” A faint smile crossed Evans’s lips. “All over him, as you might say. Admiring the house, and asking him if he’d planned the building of it. Altogether laying it on thick, as you might say.”

“And the Captain?”

The smile broadened.

“That sort of gushing lady wasn’t likely to cut any ice with him. Polite he was, but nothing more. And declined her invitations.”

“Invitations?”

“Yes, to consider the house as his own any time, and drop in, that’s how she put it—drop in. You don’t drop in to a place when you’re living six miles away.”

“She seemed anxious to—well—to see something of the Captain?”

Narracott was wondering. Was that the reason for the taking of the house? Was it only a prelude to the making of Captain Trevelyan’s acquaintance? Was that the real game? It would probably not have occurred to her that the Captain would have gone as far as Exhampton to live. She might have calculated on his moving into one of the small bungalows, perhaps sharing Major Burnaby’s.

Evans’s answer was not very helpful.

“She’s a very hospitable lady, by all accounts. Someone in to lunch or dinner every day.”

Narracott nodded. He could learn no more here. But he determined to seek an interview with this Mrs. Willett at an early date. Her abrupt arrival needed looking into.

“Come on, Pollock, we’ll go upstairs now,” he said.

They left Evans in the dining room and proceeded to the upper story.

“All right, do you think?” asked the Sergeant in a low voice, jerking his head over his shoulder in the direction of the closed dining room door.

“He seems so,” said the Inspector. “But one never knows. He’s no fool, that fellow, whatever else he is.”

“No, he’s an intelligent sort of chap.”

“His story seems straightforward enough,” went on the Inspector. “Perfectly clear and aboveboard. Still, as I say, one never knows.”

And with this pronouncement, very typical of his careful and suspicious mind, the Inspector proceeded to search the rooms on the first floor.

There were three bedrooms and a bathroom. Two of the bedrooms were empty and had clearly not been entered for some weeks. The third, Captain Trevelyan’s own room, was in exquisite and apple-pie order. Inspector Narracott moved about in it, opening drawers and cupboards. Everything was in its right place. It was the room of a man almost fanatically tidy and neat in his habits. Narracott finished his inspection and glanced into the adjoining bathroom. Here, too, everything was in order. He gave a last glance at the bed, neatly turned down, with folded pyjamas laid ready.

Then he shook his head.

“Nothing here,” he said.

“No, everything seems in perfect order.”

“There are the papers in the desk in the study. You had better go through those, Pollock. I’ll tell Evans that he can go. I may call round and see him at his own place later.”

“Very good, sir.”

“The body can be removed. I shall want to see Warren, by the way. He lives near here, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This side of the Three Crowns or the other?”

“The other, sir.”

“Then I’ll take the Three Crowns first. Carry on, Sergeant.”

Pollock went to the dining room to dismiss Evans. The Inspector passed out of the front door and walked rapidly in the direction of the Three Crowns.

AT THE THREE CROWNS

Inspector Narracott was not destined to see Major Burnaby until he had had a protracted interview with Mrs. Belling—licensed proprietor of the Three Crowns. Mrs. Belling was fat and excitable, and so voluble that there was nothing to be done but to listen patiently until such time as the stream of conversation should dry up.

“And such a night as never was,” she ended up. “And little did any of us think what was happening to the poor dear gentleman. Those nasty tramps—if I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a dozen times, I can’t abear those nasty tramps. Do anybody in they would. The Captain had not so much as a dog to protect him. Can’t abear a dog, tramps can’t. Ah, well, you never know what is happening within a stone’s throw.

“Yes, Mr. Narracott,” she proceeded in answer to his question, “the Major is having his breakfast now. You will find him in the coffee room. And what kind of a night he has passed with no pyjamas or anything, and me a widow woman with nothing to lend him, I can’t say, I am sure. Said it made no matter he did—all upset and queer he was—and no wonder with his best friend murdered. Very nice gentlemen the two of them, though the Captain had the reputation of being close with his money. Ah, well, well, I have always thought it dangerous to live up to Sittaford, miles away from anywhere, and here’s the Captain struck down in Exhampton itself. It’s always what you don’t expect in this life that happens, isn’t it, Mr. Narracott?”

The Inspector said that undoubtedly it was. Then he added:

“Who did you have staying here yesterday, Mrs. Belling? Any strangers?”

“Now let me see. There was Mr. Moresby and Mr. Jones—commercial gentlemen they are, and there was a young gentleman from London.

Nobody else. It stands to reason there wouldn't be this time of year. Very quiet here in the winter. Oh, and there was another young gentleman—arrived by the last train. Nosey young fellow I call him. He isn't up yet."

"The last train?" said the Inspector. "That gets in at ten o'clock, eh? I don't think we need trouble ourselves about him. What about the other—the one from London? Did you know him?"

"Never seen him before in my life. Not a commercial gentleman, oh, no—a cut above that. I can't remember his name for the moment—but you'll find it in the register. Left on the first train to Exeter this morning, he did. Six ten. Rather curious. What did he want down here anyway, that's what I'd like to know."

"He didn't mention his business?"

"Not a word."

"Did he go out at all?"

"Arrived at lunchtime, went out about half past four and came in about twenty past six."

"Where did he go when he went out?"

"I haven't the remotest idea, sir. May have been just for a stroll like. That was before the snow came, but it wasn't what you might call a pleasant day for walking."

"Went out at half past four and returned about twenty past six," said the Inspector thoughtfully. "That's rather odd. He didn't mention Captain Trevelyan?"

Mrs. Belling shook her head decisively.

"No, Mr. Narracott, he didn't mention anybody at all. Kept himself to himself he did. A nice looking young fellow—but worried, I should say."

The Inspector nodded and stepped across to inspect the register.

“James Pearson, London,” said the Inspector. “Well—that doesn’t tell us much. We’ll have to make a few inquiries about Mr. James Pearson.”

Then he strode off to the coffee room in search of Major Burnaby.

The Major was the only occupant of the room. He was drinking some rather muddy-looking coffee and The Times was propped up in front of him.

“Major Burnaby?”

“That’s my name.”

“I am Inspector Narracott from Exeter.”

“Good morning, Inspector. Any forrarder?”

“Yes, sir. I think we are a little forrarder. I think I can safely say that.”

“Glad to hear it,” said the Major drily. His attitude was one of resigned disbelief.

“Now there are just one or two points I would like some information on, Major Burnaby,” said the Inspector, “and I think you can probably tell me what I want to know.”

“Do what I can,” said Burnaby.

“Had Captain Trevelyan any enemies to your knowledge?”

“Not an enemy in the world.” Burnaby was decisive.

“This man, Evans—do you yourself consider him trustworthy?”

“Should think so. Trevelyan trusted him, I know.”

“There was no ill feeling about this marriage of his?”

“Not ill feeling, no. Trevelyan was annoyed—didn’t like his habits upset. Old bachelor, you know.”

“Talking of bachelors, that’s another point. Captain Trevelyan was unmarried—do you know if he made a will? And in the event of there being no will, have you any idea who would inherit his estate?”

“Trevelyan made a will,” said Burnaby promptly.

“Ah—you know that.”

“Yes. Made me executor. Told me so.”

“Do you know how he left his money?”

“That I can’t say.”

“I understand he was very comfortably off?”

“Trevelyan was a rich man,” replied Burnaby. “I should say he was much better off than anyone around here suspected.”

“What relations had he—do you know?”

“He’d a sister and some nephews and nieces, I believe. Never saw much of any of them, but there was no quarrel.”

“About this will, do you know where he kept it?”

“It’s at Walters & Kirkwood—the solicitors here in Exhampton. They drew it up for him.”

“Then perhaps, Major Burnaby, as you are executor, I wonder if you would come round to Walters & Kirkwood with me now. I should like to have an idea of the contents of that will as soon as possible.”

Burnaby looked up alertly.

“What’s in the wind?” he said. “What’s the will got to do with it?”

Inspector Narracott was not disposed to show his hand too soon.

“The case isn’t such plain sailing as we thought,” he said. “By the way, there’s another question I want to ask you. I understand, Major Burnaby, that you asked Dr. Warren whether death had occurred at five and twenty minutes past five?”

“Well,” said the Major gruffly.

“What made you select that exact time, Major?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” said Burnaby.

“Well—something must have put it into your head.”

There was quite a pause before Major Burnaby replied. Inspector Narracott’s interest was aroused. The Major had something he quite patently wished to conceal. To watch him doing so was almost ludicrous.

“Why shouldn’t I say twenty-five past five?” he demanded truculently, “or twenty-five to six—or twenty past four, for that matter?”

“Quite so, sir,” said Inspector Narracott soothingly.

He did not wish to antagonize the Major just at this moment. He promised himself that he would get to the bottom of the matter before the day was out.

“There’s one thing that strikes me as curious, sir,” he went on.

“Yes?”

“This business of the letting of Sittaford House. I don’t know what you think about it, but it seems to me a curious thing to have happened.”

“If you ask me,” said Burnaby, “it’s damned odd.”

“That’s your opinion?”

“It’s everyone’s opinion.”

“In Sittaford?”

“In Sittaford and Exhampton too. The woman must be mad.”

“Well, I suppose there’s no accounting for tastes,” said the Inspector.

“Damned odd taste for a woman of that kind.”

“You know the lady?”

“I know her. Why, I was at her house when—”

“When what?” asked Narracott as the Major came to an abrupt halt.

“Nothing,” said Burnaby.

Inspector Narracott looked at him keenly. There was something here he would have liked to get at. The Major’s obvious confusion and embarrassment did not escape him. He had been on the point of saying—what?

“All in good time,” said Narracott to himself. “Now isn’t the moment to rub him up the wrong way.”

Aloud he said innocently:

“You were at Sittaford House, you say, sir. The lady has been there now—about how long?”

“A couple of months.”

The Major was eager to escape the result of his imprudent words. It made him more loquacious than usual.

“A widow lady with her daughter?”

“That’s it.”

“Does she give any reason for her choice of residence?”

“Well—” the Major rubbed his nose dubiously. “She talks a lot, she’s that kind of woman—beauties of nature—out of the world—that sort of thing. But—”

He paused rather helplessly. Inspector Narracott came to his rescue.

“It didn’t strike you as natural on her part?”

“Well, it’s like this. She’s a fashionable sort of woman. Dressed up to the nines—daughter’s a smart, pretty girl. Natural thing would be for them to be staying at the Ritz or Claridge’s, or some other big hotel somewhere. You know the sort.”

Narracott nodded.

“They don’t keep themselves to themselves, do they?” he asked. “You don’t think they are—well—hiding?”

Major Burnaby shook his head positively.

“Oh! no, nothing of that kind. They’re very sociable—a bit too sociable. I mean, in a little place like Sittaford, you can’t have previous engagements, and when invitations are showered on you it’s a bit awkward. They’re exceedingly kind, hospitable people, but a bit too hospitable for English ideas.”

“The Colonial touch,” said the Inspector.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“You’ve no reason to think they were previously acquainted with Captain Trevelyan?”

“Sure they weren’t.”

“You seem very positive?”

“Joe would have told me.”

“And you don’t think their motive could have been—well—to scrape acquaintance with the Captain?”

This was clearly a new idea to the Major. He pondered over it for some minutes.

“Well, I never thought of that. They were very gushing to him, certainly. Not that they got any change out of Joe. But no, I think it was just their usual manner. Over friendly, you know, like Colonials are,” added the super-insular soldier.

“I see. Now, as to the house itself. Captain Trevelyan built that, I understand?”

“Yes.”

“And nobody else has ever lived in it? I mean, it’s not been let before?”

“Never.”

“Then it doesn’t seem as though it could be anything in the house itself that was the attraction. It’s a puzzle. Ten to one it’s got nothing to do with the case, but it just struck me as an odd coincidence. This house that Captain Trevelyan took, Hazelmoor, whose property was that?”

“Miss Larpent’s. Middle-aged woman, she’s gone to a boarding house at Cheltenham for the winter. Does every year. Usually shuts the house up, but lets it if she can, which isn’t often.”

There seemed nothing promising there. The Inspector shook his head in a discouraged fashion.

“Williamsons were the agents, I understand?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Their office is in Exhampton?”

“Next door to Walters & Kirkwood.”

“Ah! then, perhaps, if you don’t mind, Major, we might just drop in on our way.”

“Not at all. You won’t find Kirkwood at his office before ten anyway. You know what lawyers are.”

“Then, shall we go?”

The Major, who had finished his breakfast some time ago, nodded assent and rose.

Seven

THE WILL

An alert-looking young man rose to receive them in the office of Messrs. Williamson.

“Good morning, Major Burnaby.”

“Morning.”

“Terrible business, this,” said the young man chattily. “Not been such a thing in Exhampton for years.”

He spoke with gusto and the Major winced.

“This is Inspector Narracott,” he said.

“Oh! yes,” said the young man pleasurablely excited.

“I want some information that I think you can give me,” said the Inspector. “I understand that you put through this let of Sittaford House.”

“To Mrs. Willett? Yes, we did.”

“Can you give me full details, please, of how that came about. Did the lady apply personally, or by letter?”

“By letter. She wrote, let me see—” He opened a drawer and turned up a file. “Yes, from the Carlton Hotel, London.”

“Did she mention Sittaford House by name?”

“No, she merely said she wanted to rent a house for the winter, it must be right on Dartmoor and have at least eight bedrooms. Being near a railway station or town was of no consequence.”

“Was Sittaford House on your books?”

“No, it was not. But as a matter of fact it was the only house in the neighbourhood that at all fulfilled the requirements. The lady mentioned in her letter that she would be willing to go to twelve guineas, and in these circumstances I thought it worthwhile writing to Captain Trevelyan and asking whether he would consider letting. He replied in the affirmative, and we fixed the thing up.”

“Without Mrs. Willett seeing the house?”

“She agreed to take it without seeing it, and signed the agreement. Then she came down here one day, drove up to Sittaford, saw Captain Trevelyan, arranged with him about plate and linen, etc., and saw over the house.”

“She was quite satisfied?”

“She came in and said she was delighted with it.”

“And what did you think?” asked Inspector Narracott, eyeing him keenly.

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

“You learn never to be surprised at anything in the house business,” he said.

On this note of philosophy they left, the Inspector thanking the young man for his help.

“Not at all, a pleasure, I’m sure.”

He accompanied them politely to the door.

The offices of Messrs. Walters and Kirkwood were, as Major Burnaby had said, next door to the estate agents. On reaching there, they were told that Mr. Kirkwood had just arrived and they were shown into his room.

Mr. Kirkwood was an elderly man with a benign expression. He was a native of Exhampton and had succeeded his father and grandfather in the firm.

He rose, put on his mourning face, and shook hands with the Major.

“Good morning, Major Burnaby,” he said. “This is a very shocking affair. Very shocking indeed. Poor Trevelyan.”

He looked inquiringly at Narracott and Major Burnaby explained his presence in a few succinct words.

“You are in charge of the case, Inspector Narracott?”

“Yes, Mr. Kirkwood. In pursuance of my investigations, I have come to ask you for certain information.”

“I shall be happy to give you any information if it is proper for me to do so,” said the lawyer.

“It concerns the late Captain Trevelyan’s will,” said Narracott. “I understand the will is here in your office.”

“That is so.”

“It was made some time ago?”

“Five or six years ago. I cannot be sure of the exact date at the moment.”

“Ah! I am anxious, Mr. Kirkwood, to know the contents of that will as soon as possible. It may have an important bearing on the case.”

“Indeed?” said the lawyer. “Indeed! I should not have thought that, but naturally you know your own business best, Inspector. Well—” he glanced across at the other man. “Major Burnaby and myself are joint executors of the will. If he has no objection—”

“None.”

“Then I see no reason why I should not accede to your request, Inspector.”

Taking a telephone that stood on his desk he spoke a few words down it. In two or three minutes a clerk entered the room and laid a sealed envelope in

front of the lawyer. The clerk left the room, Mr. Kirkwood picked up the envelope, slit it open with a paper knife and drew out a large and important-looking document, cleared his throat and began to read—

“I, Joseph Arthur Trevelyan, of Sittaford House, Sittaford, in the County of Devon, declare this to be my last will and testament which I make this thirteenth day of August nineteen hundred and twenty-six.

“(1) I appoint John Edward Burnaby of 1 The Cottages, Sittaford, and Frederick Kirkwood of Exhampton, to be the executors and trustees of this, my will.

“(2) I give to Robert Henry Evans, who has served me long and faithfully, the sum of £100 (one hundred pounds) free of legacy duty for his own benefit absolutely, provided that he is in my service at the time of my death and not under notice to leave whether given or received.

“(3) I give the said John Edward Burnaby, as a token of our friendship and of my affection and regard for him, all my trophies of sport, including my collection of heads and pelts of big game as well as any challenge cups and prizes awarded to me in any department of sport and any spoils of the chase in my possession.

“(4) I give all my real and personal property, not otherwise disposed of by this, my will, or any codicil hereto, to my Trustees upon Trust that my Trustees shall sell, call in and convert the same into money.

“(5) My Trustees shall out of the moneys to arise out of such sale, calling in and conversion pay any funeral and testamentary expenses and debts, and the legacies given by this, my will, or any codicil hereto and all death duties and other moneys.

“(6) My Trustees shall hold the residue of such moneys or the investments for the time being, representing the same upon Trust to divide the same into four equal parts or shares.

“(7) Upon such division as aforesaid my Trustees shall hold one such equal fourth part or share upon Trust to pay the same to my sister Jennifer

Gardner for her own use and enjoyment absolutely.

“And my Trustees shall hold the remaining three such equal fourth parts or shares upon Trust to pay one such equal fourth part or share to each of the three children of my deceased sister, Mary Pearson, for the benefit of each such child absolutely.

“In Witness whereof I, the said Joseph Arthur Trevelyan, have hereunto set my hand the day and year first above written.

“Signed by the above names Testator as his last will in the presence of us both present at the same time, who in his presence and at his request and in the presence of each other have hereunto subscribed our names as witness.”

Mr. Kirkwood handed the document to the Inspector.

“Witnessed by two of my clerks in this office.”

The Inspector ran his eye over the will thoughtfully.

“My deceased sister, Mary Pearson,” he said. “Can you tell me anything about Mrs. Pearson, Mr. Kirkwood?”

“Very little. She died about ten years ago, I believe. Her husband, a stockbroker, had predeceased her. As far as I know, she never visited Captain Trevelyan here.”

“Pearson,” said the Inspector again. Then he added: “One thing more. The amount of Captain Trevelyan’s estate is not mentioned. To what sum do you think it will amount?”

“That is difficult to say exactly,” said Mr. Kirkwood, enjoying, like all lawyers, making the reply to a simple question difficult. “It is a question of real or personal estate. Besides Sittaford House, Captain Trevelyan owns some property in the neighbourhood of Plymouth, and various investments he made from time to time have fluctuated in value.”

“I just want an approximate idea,” said Inspector Narracott.

“I should not like to commit myself—”

“Just the roughest estimate as a guide. For instance would twenty thousand pounds be out of the way?”

“Twenty thousand pounds. My dear sir! Captain Trevelyan’s estate will be worth at least four times as much as that. Eighty or even ninety thousand pounds will be much nearer the mark.”

“I told you Trevelyan was a rich man,” said Burnaby.

Inspector Narracott rose.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Kirkwood,” he said, “for the information you have given me.”

“You think you will find it helpful, eh?”

The lawyer very clearly was agog with curiosity, but Inspector Narracott was in no mood to satisfy it at present.

“In a case like this we have to take everything into account,” he said, noncommittally. “By the way, have you the names and addresses of this Jennifer Gardner and of the Pearson family?”

“I know nothing of the Pearson family. Mrs. Gardner’s address is The Laurels, Waldon Road, Exeter.”

The Inspector noted it down in his book.

“That will do to get on with,” he said. “You don’t know how many children the late Mrs. Pearson left?”

“Three, I fancy. Two girls and a boy—or possibly two boys and a girl—I cannot remember which.”

The Inspector nodded and put away his notebook and thanked the lawyer once more and took his departure.

When they had reached the street, he turned suddenly and faced his companion.

“And now, sir,” he said, “we’ll have the truth about the twenty-five past five business.”

Major Burnaby’s face reddened with annoyance.

“I have told you already—”

“That won’t go down with me. Withholding information, that is what you are doing, Major Burnaby. You must have had some idea in mentioning that specific time to Dr. Warren—and I think I have a very good idea of what that something is.”

“Well, if you know about it, why ask me?” growled the Major.

“I take it that you were aware that a certain person had an appointment with Captain Trevelyan somewhere about that time. Now, isn’t that so?”

Major Burnaby stared at him in surprise.

“Nothing of the kind,” he snarled, “nothing of the kind.”

“Be careful, Major Burnaby. What about Mr. James Pearson?”

“James Pearson? James Pearson, who’s he? Do you mean one of Trevelyan’s nephews?”

“I presume it would be a nephew. He had one called James, hadn’t he?”

“Not the least idea. Trevelyan had nephews—I know that. But what their names were, I haven’t the vaguest idea.”

“The young man in question was at the Three Crowns last night. You probably recognized him there.”

“I didn’t recognize anybody,” growled the Major. “Shouldn’t anyway—never saw any of Trevelyan’s nephews in my life.”

“But you knew that Captain Trevelyan was expecting a nephew to call upon him yesterday afternoon?”

“I did not,” roared the Major.

Several people in the street turned round to stare at him.

“Damn it, won’t you take plain truth! I knew nothing about any appointment. Trevelyan’s nephews may have been in Timbuctoo for all I knew about them.”

Inspector Narracott was a little taken aback. The Major’s vehement denial bore the mark of truth too plainly for him to be deceived.

“Then why this twenty-five past five business?”

“Oh! well—I suppose I had better tell you,” the Major coughed in an embarrassed fashion. “But mind you—the whole thing is damned foolishness! Tommy rot, sir. How any thinking man can believe such nonsense!”

Inspector Narracott looked more and more surprised. Major Burnaby was looking more uncomfortable and ashamed of himself every minute.

“You know what it is, Inspector. You have to join in these things to please a lady. Of course, I never thought there was anything in it.”

“In what, Major Burnaby?”

“Table-turning.”

“Table-turning?”

Whatever Narracott had expected he had not expected this. The Major proceeded to explain himself. Haltingly, and with many disclaimers of his own belief in the thing, he described the events of the previous afternoon and the message that had purported to come through for himself.

“You mean, Major Burnaby, that the table spelt out the name of Trevelyan and informed you that he was dead—murdered?”

Major Burnaby wiped his forehead.

“Yes, that’s what happened. I didn’t believe in it—naturally, I didn’t believe in it.” He looked ashamed. “Well—it was Friday and I thought after all I would make sure and go along and see if everything was all right.”

The Inspector reflected on the difficulties of that six mile walk, with the piled-up snowdrifts and the prospect of a heavy snowfall, and he realized that deny it as he would Major Burnaby must have been deeply impressed by the spirit message. Narracott turned it over in his mind. A queer thing to happen—a very queer thing to happen. The sort of thing you couldn’t explain satisfactorily. There might be something in this spirit business after all. It was the first well-authenticated case he had come across.

A very queer business altogether but, as far as he could see, though it explained Major Burnaby’s attitude, it had no practical bearing on the case as far as he himself was concerned. He had to deal with the physical world and not the psychic.

It was his job to track down the murderer.

And to do that he required no guidance from the spirit world.

Eight

MR. CHARLES ENDERBY

Glancing at his watch, the Inspector realized he could just catch the train for Exeter if he hurried off. He was anxious to interview the late Captain Trevelyan's sister as soon as possible and obtain from her the addresses of the other members of the family. So, with a hurried word of farewell to Major Burnaby, he raced off to the station. The Major retraced his steps to the Three Crowns. He had hardly put a foot across the doorstep when he was accosted by a bright young man with a very shiny head and a round, boyish face.

"Major Burnaby?" said the young man.

"Yes."

"Of No. 1 Sittaford Cottages?"

"Yes," said Major Burnaby.

"I represent the Daily Wire," said the young man, "and I—"

He got no further. In true military fashion of the old school, the Major exploded.

"Not another word," he roared. "I know you and your kind. No decency. No reticence. Clustering round a murder like vultures round a carcass, but I can tell you, young man, you will get no information from me. Not a word. No story for your damned paper. If you want to know anything, go and ask the police, and have the decency to leave the friends of the dead man alone."

The young man seemed not a whit taken aback. He smiled more encouragingly than ever.

“I say, sir, you know you have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. I know nothing about this murder business.”

This was not, strictly speaking, the truth. No one in Exhampton could pretend ignorance of the event that had shaken the quiet moorland town to its core.

“I am empowered on behalf of the Daily Wire,” went on the young man, “to hand you this cheque for £5,000 and congratulate you on sending in the only correct solution of our football competition.”

Major Burnaby was completely taken aback.

“I have no doubt,” continued the young man, “that you have already received our letter yesterday morning informing you of the good news.”

“Letter?” said Major Burnaby. “Do you realize, young man, that Sittaford is about ten feet deep in snow? What chance do you think we have had in the last few days of a regular delivery of letters?”

“But doubtless you saw your name announced as winner in the Daily Wire, this morning?”

“No,” said Major Burnaby. “I haven’t glanced at the paper this morning.”

“Ah! of course not,” said the young man. “This sad business. The murdered man was a friend of yours, I understand.”

“My best friend,” said the Major.

“Hard lines,” said the young man tactfully averting his eyes. Then he drew from his pocket a small folded piece of mauve paper and handed it to Major Burnaby with a bow.

“With the compliments of the Daily Wire,” he said.

Major Burnaby took it and said the only thing possible under the circumstances.

“Have a drink, Mr.—er—?”

“Enderby, Charles Enderby my name is. I got here last night,” he explained. “Made inquiries about getting to Sittaford. We make it a point to hand cheques to winners personally. Always publish a little interview. Interests our readers. Well, everyone told me it was out of the question—the snow was falling and it simply couldn’t be done, and then with the greatest good luck I find you are actually here, staying at the Three Crowns.” He smiled. “No difficulty about identification. Everybody seems to know everybody else in this part of the world.”

“What will you have?” said the Major.

“Beer for me,” said Enderby.

The Major ordered two beers.

“The whole place seems off its head with this murder,” remarked Enderby. “Rather a mysterious business by all accounts.”

The Major grunted. He was in something of a quandary. His sentiments towards journalists remained unchanged, but a man who has just handed you a cheque for £5,000 is in a privileged position. You cannot very well tell him to go to the devil.

“No enemies, had he?” asked the young man.

“No,” said the Major.

“But I hear the police don’t think it is robbery,” went on Enderby.

“How do you know that?” asked the Major.

Mr. Enderby, however, did not reveal the source of his information.

“I hear it was you who actually discovered the body, sir,” said the young man.

“Yes.”

“It must have been an awful shock.”

The conversation proceeded. Major Burnaby was still determined to give no information, but he was no match for the adroitness of Mr. Enderby. The latter made statements with which the Major was forced to agree or disagree, thereby providing the information the young man wanted. So pleasant was his manner, however, that the process was really not painful at all and the Major found himself taking quite a liking to the ingenuous young man.

Presently, Mr. Enderby rose and observed that he must go along to the post office.

“If you will just give me a receipt for that cheque, sir.”

The Major went across to the writing table, wrote a receipt and handed it to him.

“Splendid,” said the young man and slipped it into his pocket.

“I suppose,” said Major Burnaby, “that you are off back to London today?”

“Oh! no,” said the young man. “I want to take a few photographs, you know, of your cottage at Sittaford, and of you feeding the pigs, or hoeing up the dandelions, or doing anything characteristic that you fancy. You have no idea how our readers appreciate that sort of thing. Then I would like to have a few words from you on ‘What I intend to do with the £5,000.’ ”

Something snappy. You have no idea how disappointed our readers would be if they didn’t get that sort of thing.”

“Yes, but look here—it’s impossible to get to Sittaford in this weather. The fall of snow was exceptionally heavy. No vehicle has been able to take the road for three days anyway, and it may be another three before the thaw sets in properly.”

“I know,” said the young man, “it is awkward. Well, well, one will just have to resign oneself to kicking up one’s heels in Exhampton. They do you pretty well at the Three Crowns. So long, sir, see you later.”

He emerged into the main street of Exhampton and made his way to the post office and wired his paper that by the greatest of good luck he would be able to supply them with tasty and exclusive information on the Exhampton Murder Case.

He reflected on his next course of action and decided on interviewing the late Captain Trevelyan's servant, Evans, whose name Major Burnaby had incautiously let slip during their conversation.

A few inquiries brought him to 85 Fore Street. The servant of the murdered man was a person of importance today. Everyone was willing and anxious to point out where he lived.

Enderby beat a smart rat-tat on the door. It was opened by a man so typically an ex-sailor that Enderby had no doubt of his identity.

"Evans, isn't it?" said Enderby cheerfully. "I have just come along from Major Burnaby."

"Oh—" Evans hesitated a moment. "Will you come in, sir."

Enderby accepted the invitation. A buxom young woman with dark hair and red cheeks hovered in the background. Enderby judged her as the newlywed Mrs. Evans.

"Bad thing about your late master," said Enderby.

"It's shocking, sir, that's what it is."

"Who do you think did it?" demanded Enderby with an ingenuous air of seeking information.

"One of those low-down tramps, I suppose," said Evans.

"Oh! no, my dear man. That theory is quite exploded."

"Eh?"

"That's all a put-up job. The police saw through that at once."

“Who told you that, sir?”

Enderby’s real informant had been the housemaid at the Three Crowns whose sister was the legal spouse of Constable Graves, but he replied:

“Had a tip from headquarters. Yes, the burglary idea was all a put-up job.”

“Who do they think did it then?” demanded Mrs. Evans, coming forward. Her eyes looked frightened and eager.

“Now, Rebecca, don’t you take on so,” said her husband.

“Cruel stupid the police are,” said Mrs. Evans. “Don’t mind who they take up as long as they get hold of someone.” She cast a quick glance at Enderby.

“Are you connected with the police, sir?”

“Me? Oh! no. I am from a newspaper, the Daily Wire. I came down to see Major Burnaby. He has just won our Free Football Competition for £5,000.”

“What?” cried Evans. “Damn it all, then those things are square after all.”

“Didn’t you think they were?” asked Enderby.

“Well, it’s a wicked world, sir.” Evans was a little confused, feeling that his exclamation had been wanting in tact. “I have heard there’s a lot of trickery concerned. The late Captiving used to say that a prize never went to a good address. That’s why he used mine time and again.”

With a certain naïveté he described the Captain’s winning of three new novels.

Enderby encouraged him to talk. He saw a very good story being made out of Evans. The faithful servant—old sea dog touch. He wondered just a little why Mrs. Evans seemed so nervous, he put it down to the suspicious ignorance of her class.

“You find the skunk that done it,” said Evans. “Newspapers can do a lot, they say, in hunting down criminals.”

“It was a burglar,” said Mrs. Evans. “That’s what it was.”

“Of course, it was a burglar,” said Evans. “Why, there’s no one in Exhampton would want to harm the Captin.”

Enderby rose.

“Well,” he said. “I must be going. I will run in now and then and have a little chat if I may. If the Captain won three new novels in a Daily Wire Competition, the Daily Wire ought to make it a personal matter to hunt down his murderer.”

“You can’t say fairer than that, sir. No, you can’t say fairer than that.”

Wishing them a cheery good day, Charles Enderby took his leave.

“I wonder who really did the beggar in?” he murmured to himself. “I don’t think our friend Evans. Perhaps it was a burglar! Very disappointing, if so. Doesn’t seem any woman in the case, which is a pity. We’ve got to have some sensational development soon or the case will fade into insignificance. Just my luck, if so. First time I have ever been on the spot in a matter of this kind. I must make good. Charles, my boy, your chance in life has come. Make the most of it. Our military friend will, I see, soon be eating out of my hand if I remember to be sufficiently respectful and call him ‘sir’ often enough. Wonder if he was in the Indian Mutiny. No, of course not, not old enough for that. The South African War, that’s it. Ask him about the South African War, that will tame him.”

And pondering these resolutions in his mind Mr. Enderby sauntered back to the Three Crowns.

Nine

THE LAURELS

It takes about half an hour from Exhampton to Exeter by train. At five minutes to twelve Inspector Narracott was ringing the front door bell of The Laurels.

The Laurels was a somewhat dilapidated house, badly in need of a new coat of paint. The garden round it was unkempt and weedy and the gate hung askew on its hinges.

“Not too much money about here,” thought Inspector Narracott to himself. “Evidently hard up.”

He was a very fair-minded man, but inquiries seemed to indicate that there was very little possibility of the Captain’s having been done to death by an enemy. On the other hand, four people, as far as he could make out, stood to gain a considerable sum by the old man’s death. The movements of each of these four people had got to be inquired into. The entry in the hotel register was suggestive, but after all Pearson was quite a common name. Inspector Narracott was anxious not to come to any decision too rapidly and to keep a perfectly open mind whilst covering the preliminary ground as rapidly as possible.

A somewhat slatternly-looking maid answered the bell.

“Good afternoon,” said Inspector Narracott. “I want to see Mrs. Gardner, please. It is in connection with the death of her brother, Captain Trevelyan, at Exhampton.”

He purposely did not hand his official card to the maid. The mere fact of his being a police officer, as he knew by experience, would render her awkward and tongue-tied.

“She’s heard of her brother’s death?” asked the Inspector casually as the maid drew back to let him into the hall.

“Yes, got a telegram she did. From the lawyer, Mr. Kirkwood.”

“Just so,” said Inspector Narracott.

The maid ushered him into the drawing room—a room which, like the outside of the house, was badly in need of a little money spent upon it, but yet had, with all that, an air of charm which the Inspector felt without being able to particularize the why and wherefore of it.

“Must have been a shock to your mistress,” he observed.

The girl seemed a little vague about that, he noticed.

“She didn’t see much of him,” was her answer.

“Shut the door and come here,” said Inspector Narracott.

He was anxious to try the effect of a surprise attack.

“Did the telegram say that it was murder?” he asked.

“Murder!”

The girl’s eyes opened wide, a mixture of horror and intense enjoyment in them. “Murdered was he?”

“Ah!” said Inspector Narracott, “I thought you hadn’t heard that. Mr. Kirkwood didn’t want to break the news too abruptly to your mistress, but you see, my dear—what is your name, by the way?”

“Beatrice, sir.”

“Well, you see, Beatrice, it will be in the evening papers tonight.”

“Well, I never,” said Beatrice. “Murdered. ’orrible, isn’t it? Did they bash his head in or shoot him or what?”

The Inspector satisfied her passion for detail, then added casually, "I believe there was some idea of your mistress going over to Exhampton yesterday afternoon. But I suppose the weather was too bad for her."

"I never heard anything about it, sir," said Beatrice. "I think you must have made a mistake. The mistress went out in the afternoon to do some shopping and then she went to the Pictures."

"What time did she get in?"

"About six o'clock."

So that let Mrs. Gardner out.

"I don't know much about the family," he went on in a casual tone. "Is Mrs. Gardner a widow?"

"Oh, no, sir, there's master."

"What does he do?"

"He doesn't do anything," said Beatrice staring. "He can't. He's an invalid."

"An invalid, is he? Oh, I'm sorry. I hadn't heard."

"He can't walk. He lies in bed all day. Got a nurse always in the house we have. It isn't every girl what stays on with an 'ospital nurse in the house the whole time. Always wanting trays carried up and pots of tea made."

"Must be very trying," said the Inspector soothingly. "Now, will you go and tell your mistress, please, that I am here from Mr. Kirkwood of Exhampton?"

Beatrice withdrew, and a few minutes later the door opened and a tall, rather commanding woman came into the room. She had an unusual-looking face, broad about the brows, and black hair with a touch of grey at the temples, which she wore combed straight back from her forehead. She looked at the Inspector inquiringly.

“You have come from Mr. Kirkwood at Exhampton?”

“Not exactly, Mrs. Gardner. I put it that way to your maid. Your brother, Captain Trevelyan, was murdered yesterday afternoon and I am Divisional Inspector Narracott in charge of the case.”

Whatever else Mrs. Gardner might be she was certainly a woman of iron nerve. Her eyes narrowed and she drew in her breath sharply, then motioning the Inspector to a chair and sitting down herself she said:

“Murdered! How extraordinary! Who in the world would want to murder Joe?”

“That is what I’m anxious to find out, Mrs. Gardner.”

“Of course. I hope I shall be able to help you in some way, but I doubt it. My brother and I have seen very little of each other in the last ten years. I know nothing of his friends or of any ties he has formed.”

“You’ll excuse me, Mrs. Gardner, but had you and your brother quarrelled?”

“No—not quarrelled. I think estranged would be a better word to describe the position between us. I don’t want to go into family details, but my brother rather resented my marriage. Brothers, I think, seldom approve of their sisters’ choice, but usually, I fancy, they conceal it better than my brother did. My brother, as perhaps you know, had a large fortune left him by an aunt. Both my sister and myself married poor men. When my husband was invalided out of the army after the war with shell shock, a little financial assistance would have been a wonderful relief—would have enabled me to give him an expensive course of treatment which was otherwise denied to him. I asked my brother for a loan which he refused. That, of course, he was perfectly entitled to do. But since then we have met at very rare intervals, and hardly corresponded at all.”

It was a clear succinct statement.

An intriguing personality, this Mrs. Gardner's, the Inspector thought. Somehow, he couldn't quite make her out. She seemed unnaturally calm, unnaturally ready with her recital of facts. He also noticed that, with all her surprise, she asked for no details of her brother's death. That struck him as extraordinary.

"I don't know if you want to hear what exactly occurred—at Exhampton," he began.

She frowned.

"Must I hear it? My brother was killed—painlessly, I hope."

"Quite painlessly, I should say."

"Then please spare me any revolting details."

"Unnatural," thought the Inspector, "decidedly unnatural."

As though she had read his mind she used the word that he had spoken to himself.

"I suppose you think that very unnatural, Inspector, but—I have heard a good many horrors. My husband has told me things when he has had one of his bad turns—" she shivered. "I think you would understand if you knew my circumstances better."

"Oh! quite so, quite so, Mrs. Gardner. What I really came for was to get a few family details from you."

"Yes?"

"Do you know how many relatives living your brother has besides yourself?"

"Of near relations, only the Pearsons. My sister Mary's children."

"And they are?"

“James, Sylvia and Brian.”

“James?”

“He is the eldest. He works in an Insurance Office.”

“What age is he?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Is he married?”

“No, but he is engaged—to a very nice girl, I believe. I’ve not yet met her.”

“And his address?”

“21 Cromwell Street, S.W.3.”

The Inspector noted it down.

“Yes, Mrs. Gardner?”

“Then there’s Sylvia. She’s married to Martin Dering—you may have read his books. He’s a moderately successful author.”

“Thank you, and their address?”

“The Nook, Surrey Road, Wimbledon.”

“Yes?”

“And the youngest is Brian—but he is out in Australia. I am afraid I don’t know his address, but either his brother or sister would know.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gardner. Just a matter of form, do you mind my asking you how you spent yesterday afternoon?”

She looked surprised.

“Let me see. I did some shopping—yes—then I went to the Pictures. I came home about six and lay down on my bed until dinner, as the Pictures had given me rather a headache.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gardner.”

“Is there anything else?”

“No, I don’t think I have anything further to ask you. I will now get into communication with your nephew and niece. I don’t know if Mr. Kirkwood has informed you of the fact yet, but you and the three young Pearsons are the joint inheritors of Captain Trevelyan’s money.”

The colour came into her face in a slow, rich blush.

“That will be wonderful,” she said quietly. “It has been so difficult—so terribly difficult—always skimping and saving and wishing.”

She started up as a man’s rather querulous voice came floating down the stairs.

“Jennifer, Jennifer, I want you.”

“Excuse me,” she said.

As she opened the door the call came again, louder and more imperiously.

“Jennifer, where are you? I want you, Jennifer.”

The Inspector had followed her to the door. He stood in the hall looking after her as she ran up the stairs.

“I am coming, dear,” she called.

A hospital nurse who was coming down the stairs stood aside to let her pass up.

“Please go to Mr. Gardner, he is getting very excited. You always manage to calm him.”

Inspector Narracott stood deliberately in the nurse's way as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" he said. "My conversation with Mrs. Gardner was interrupted."

The nurse came with alacrity into the drawing room.

"The news of the murder has upset my patient," she explained, adjusting a well-starched cuff. "That foolish girl, Beatrice, came running up and blurted it all out."

"I am sorry," said the Inspector. "I am afraid that was my fault."

"Oh, of course, you couldn't be expected to know," said the nurse graciously.

"Is Mr. Gardner dangerously ill?" inquired the Inspector.

"It's a sad case," said the nurse. "Of course, in a manner of speaking, there's nothing the matter with him really. He's lost the use of his limbs entirely through nervous shock. There's no visible disability."

"He had no extra strain or shock yesterday afternoon?" inquired the Inspector.

"Not that I know of," the nurse looked somewhat surprised.

"You were with him all the afternoon?"

"I intended to be, but, well—as a matter of fact, Captain Gardner was very anxious for me to change two books for him at the library. He had forgotten to ask his wife before she went out. So, to oblige him I went out with them, and he asked me at the same time to get one or two little things for him—presents for his wife as a matter of fact. Very nice about it he was, and told me I was to have tea at his expense at Boots. He said nurses never liked missing their tea. His little joke, you know. I didn't get out until past four, and what with the shops being so full just before Christmas, and one thing

and another, I didn't get back until after six, but the poor fellow had been quite comfortable. In fact, he told me he had been asleep most of the time."

"Mrs. Gardner was back by then?"

"Yes, I believe she was lying down."

"She's very devoted to her husband, isn't she?"

"She worships him. I really do believe that woman would do anything in the world for him. Quite touching, and very different from some of the cases I have attended. Why, only last month—"

But Inspector Narracott fended off the impending scandal of last month with considerable skill. He glanced at his watch and gave a loud exclamation.

"Goodness gracious," he cried, "I shall miss my train. The station is not far away, is it?"

"St. David's is only three minutes' walk, if it's St. David's you want, or did you mean Queen Street?"

"I must run," said the Inspector, "tell Mrs. Gardner I am sorry not to have seen her to say good-bye. Very pleased to have had this little chat with you, nurse."

The nurse bridled ever so slightly.

"Rather a good-looking man," she said to herself as the front door shut after the Inspector. "Really quite good-looking. Such a nice sympathetic manner."

And with a slight sigh she went upstairs to her patient.

Ten

THE PEARSON FAMILY

Inspector Narracott's next move was to report to his superior, Superintendent Maxwell.

The latter listened with interest to the Inspector's narrative.

"It's going to be a big case," he said thoughtfully. "There'll be headlines in the papers over this."

"I agree with you, sir."

"We've got to be careful. We don't want to make any mistake. But I think you're on the right track. You must get after this James Pearson as soon as possible—find out where he was yesterday afternoon. As you say, it's a common enough name, but there's the Christian name as well. Of course, his signing his own name openly like that shows there wasn't any premeditation about it. He'd hardly have been such a fool otherwise. It looks to me like a quarrel and a sudden blow. If it is the man, he must have heard of his uncle's death that night. And if so, why did he sneak off by the six train in the morning without a word to anyone? No, it looks bad. Always granting that the whole thing's not a coincidence. You must clear that up as quickly as possible."

"That's what I thought, sir. I'd better take the 1:45 to town. Some time or other I want to have a word with this Willett woman who rented the Captain's house. There's something fishy there. But I can't get to Sittaford at present, the roads are impassable with snow. And anyway, she can't have any direct connection with the crime. She and her daughter were actually—well—table-turning at the time the crime was committed. And, by the way, rather a queer thing happened—"

The Inspector narrated the story he had heard from Major Burnaby.

“That’s a rum go,” ejaculated the Superintendent. “Think this old fellow was telling the truth? That’s the sort of story that gets cooked up afterwards by those believers in spooks and things of that kind.”

“I fancy it’s true all right,” said Narracott with a grin. “I had a lot of difficulty getting it out of him. He’s not a believer—just the opposite—old soldier, all damned nonsense attitude.”

The Superintendent nodded his comprehension.

“Well, it’s odd, but it doesn’t get us anywhere,” was his conclusion.

“Then I’ll take the 1:45 to London.”

The other nodded.

On arrival in town Narracott went straight to 21 Cromwell Street. Mr. Pearson, he was told, was at the office. He would be back for certain about seven o’clock.

Narracott nodded carelessly as though the information were of no value to him.

“I’ll call back if I can,” he said. “It’s nothing of importance,” and departed quickly without leaving a name.

He decided not to go to the Insurance Office, but to visit Wimbledon instead and have an interview with Mrs. Martin Dering, formerly Miss Sylvia Pearson.

There were no signs of shabbiness about The Nook. “New and shoddy,” was how Inspector Narracott described it to himself.

Mrs. Dering was at home. A rather pert-looking maid dressed in lilac colour showed him into a rather overcrowded drawing room. He gave her his official card to take to her mistress.

Mrs. Dering came to him almost immediately, his card in her hand.

“I suppose you have come about poor Uncle Joseph,” was her greeting. “It’s shocking—really shocking! I am so dreadfully nervous of burglars myself. I had two extra bolts put on the back door last week, and new patent catches on the windows.”

Sylvia Dering, the Inspector knew from Mrs. Gardner, was only twenty-five, but she looked considerably over thirty. She was small and fair and anaemic-looking, with a worried and harassed expression. Her voice had that faintly complaining note in it which is about the most annoying sound a human voice can contain. Still not allowing the Inspector to speak, she went on:

“If there’s anything I can do to help you in any way, of course, I shall be only too glad to do so, but one hardly ever saw Uncle Joseph. He wasn’t a very nice man—I am sure he couldn’t have been. Not the sort of person one could go to in trouble, always carping and criticizing. Not the sort of man who had any knowledge of what literature meant. Success—true success is not always measured in terms of money, Inspector.”

At last she paused, and the Inspector, to whom those remarks had opened certain fields of conjecture, was given his turn to speak.

“You’ve heard of the tragedy very quickly, Mrs. Dering.”

“Aunt Jennifer wired it to me.”

“I see.”

“But I suppose it will be in the evening papers. Dreadful, isn’t it?”

“I gather you’ve not seen your uncle of late years.”

“I have only seen him twice since my marriage. On the second occasion he was really very rude to Martin. Of course he was a regular philistine in every way—devoted to sport. No appreciation, as I said just now, of literature.”

“Husband applied to him for a loan and got refused,” was Inspector Narracott’s private comment on the situation.

“Just as a matter of form, Mrs. Dering, will you tell me what your movements were yesterday afternoon?”

“My movements? What a very queer way of putting it, Inspector. I played bridge most of the afternoon and a friend came in and spent the evening with me, as my husband was out.”

“Out, was he? Away from home altogether?”

“A literary dinner,” explained Mrs. Dering with importance. “He lunched with an American publisher and had this dinner in the evening.”

“I see.”

That seemed quite fair and aboveboard. He went on.

“Your younger brother is in Australia, I believe, Mrs. Dering?”

“Yes.”

“You have his address?”

“Oh, yes, I can find it for you if you wish—rather a peculiar name—I’ve forgotten it for the minute. Somewhere in New South Wales.”

“And now, Mrs. Dering, your elder brother?”

“Jim?”

“Yes. I shall want to get in touch with him.”

Mrs. Dering hastened to supply him with the address—the same as that which Mrs. Gardner had already given him.

Then, feeling there was no more to be said on either side, he cut the interview short.

Glancing at his watch, he noted that by the time he had returned to town it would be seven o'clock—a likely time, he hoped, for finding Mr. James Pearson at home.

The same superior-looking, middle-aged woman opened the door of No. 21. Yes, Mr. Pearson was at home now. It was on the second floor, if the gentleman would walk up.

She preceded him, tapped at a door, and in a murmured and apologetic voice said: “The gentleman to see you, sir.” Then, standing back, she allowed the Inspector to enter.

A young man in evening dress was standing in the middle of the room. He was good-looking, indeed handsome, if you took no account of the rather weak mouth and the irresolute slant of the eye. He had a haggard, worried look and an air of not having had much sleep of late.

He looked inquiringly at the Inspector as the latter advanced.

“I am Detective Inspector Narracott,” he began—but got no further.

With a hoarse cry the young man dropped onto a chair, flung his arms out in front of him on the table, bowing his head on them and muttering:

“Oh! my God! It's come.”

After a minute or two he lifted his head and said, “Well, why don't you get on with it, man?”

Inspector Narracott looked exceedingly stolid and unintelligent.

“I am investigating the death of your uncle, Captain Joseph Trevelyan. May I ask you, sir, if you have anything to say?”

The young man rose slowly to his feet and said in a low strained voice:

“Are you—arresting me?”

“No, sir, I am not. If I was arresting you I would give you the customary caution. I am simply asking you to account for your movements yesterday afternoon. You may reply to my questions or not as you see fit.”

“And if I don’t reply to them—it will tell against me. Oh, yes, I know your little ways. You’ve found out then that I was down there yesterday?”

“You signed your name in the hotel register, Mr. Pearson.”

“Oh, I suppose there’s no use denying it. I was there—why shouldn’t I be?”

“Why indeed?” said the Inspector mildly.

“I went down there to see my uncle.”

“By appointment?”

“What do you mean, by appointment?”

“Did your uncle know you were coming?”

“I—no—he didn’t. It—it was a sudden impulse.”

“No reason for it?”

“I—reason? No—no, why should there be? I—I just wanted to see my uncle.”

“Quite so, sir. And you did see him?”

There was a pause—a very long pause. Indecision was written on every feature of the young man’s face. Inspector Narracott felt a kind of pity as he watched him. Couldn’t the boy see that his palpable indecision was as good as an admission of the fact?

At last Jim Pearson drew a deep breath. “I—I suppose I had better make a clean breast of it. Yes—I did see him. I asked at the station how I could get to Sittaford. They told me it was out of the question. The roads were impassable for any vehicle. I said it was urgent.”

“Urgent?” murmured the Inspector.

“I—I wanted to see my uncle very much.”

“So it seems, sir.”

“The porter continued to shake his head and say that it was impossible. I mentioned my uncle’s name and at once his face cleared up, and he told me my uncle was actually in Exhampton, and gave me full directions as to how to find the house he had rented.”

“This was at what time, sir?”

“About one o’clock, I think. I went to the Inn—the Three Crowns—booked a room and had some lunch there. Then afterwards I—I went out to see my uncle.”

“Immediately afterwards?”

“No, not immediately.”

“What time was it?”

“Well, I couldn’t say for certain.”

“Half past three? Four o’clock? Half past four?”

“I—I—” he stammered worse than ever. “I don’t think it could have been as late as that.”

“Mrs. Belling, the proprietress, said you went out at half past four.”

“Did I? I—I think she’s wrong. It couldn’t have been as late as that.”

“What happened next?”

“I found my uncle’s house, had a talk with him and came back to the Inn.”

“How did you get into your uncle’s house?”

“I rang the bell and he opened the door to me himself.”

“Wasn’t he surprised to see you?”

“Yes—yes—he was rather surprised.”

“How long did you remain with him, Mr. Pearson?”

“A quarter of an hour—twenty minutes. But look here, he was perfectly all right when I left him. Perfectly all right. I swear it.”

“And what time did you leave him?”

The young man lowered his eyes. Again, the hesitation was palpable in his tone, “I don’t know exactly.”

“I think you do, Mr. Pearson.”

The assured tone had its effect. The boy replied in a low tone.

“It was a quarter past five.”

“You returned to the Three Crowns at a quarter to six. At most it could only take you seven or eight minutes to walk over from your uncle’s house.”

“I didn’t go straight back. I walked about the town.”

“In that icy weather—in the snow!”

“It wasn’t actually snowing then. It came on to snow later.”

“I see. And what was the nature of your conversation with your uncle?”

“Oh! nothing in particular. I—I just wanted to talk to the old boy, look him up, that sort of thing, you know.”

“He’s a poor liar,” thought Inspector Narracott to himself. “Why, I could manage better than that myself.”

Aloud he said:

“Very good, sir. Now, may I ask you why, on hearing of your uncle’s murder, you left Exhampton without disclosing your relationship to the murdered man?”

“I was scared,” said the young man frankly. “I heard he had been murdered round about the time I left him. Now, dash it all, that’s enough to scare anyone, isn’t it? I got the wind up and left the place by the first available train. Oh, I daresay I was a fool to do anything of the sort. But you know what it is when you are rattled. And anyone might have been rattled under these circumstances.”

“And that’s all you have to say, sir?”

“Yes—yes, of course.”

“Then, perhaps you’ll have no objection, sir, to coming round with me and having this statement taken down in writing, after which you will have it read over to you, and you will sign it.”

“Is—is that all?”

“I think it possible, Mr. Pearson, that it may be necessary to detain you until after the inquest.”

“Oh! my God,” said Jim Pearson. “Can nobody help me?”

At that moment the door opened and a young woman walked into the room.

She was, as the observant Inspector Narracott noted at once, a very exceptional kind of young woman. She was not strikingly beautiful, but she had a face which was arresting and unusual, a face that having once seen you could not forget. There was about her an atmosphere of common sense, savoir faire, invincible determination and a most tantalizing fascination.

“Oh! Jim,” she exclaimed. “What’s happened?”

“It’s all over, Emily,” said the young man. “They think I murdered my uncle.”

“Who thinks so?” demanded Emily.

The young man indicated his visitor by a gesture.

“This is Inspector Narracott,” he said, and he added with a dismal attempt at introduction, “Miss Emily Trefusis.”

“Oh!” said Emily Trefusis.

She studied Inspector Narracott with keen hazel eyes.

“Jim,” she said, “is a frightful idiot. But he doesn’t murder people.”

The Inspector said nothing.

“I expect,” said Emily, turning to Jim, “that you’ve been saying the most frightfully imprudent things. If you read the papers a little better than you do, Jim, you would know that you must never talk to policemen unless you have a strong solicitor sitting beside you making objections to every word. What’s happened? Are you arresting him, Inspector Narracott?”

Inspector Narracott explained technically and clearly exactly what he was doing.

“Emily,” cried the young man, “you won’t believe I did it? You never will believe it, will you?”

“No, darling,” said Emily kindly. “Of course not.” And she added in a gentle meditative tone, “You haven’t got the guts.”

“I don’t feel as if I had a friend in the world,” groaned Jim.

“Yes, you have,” said Emily. “You’ve got me. Cheer up, Jim, look at the winking diamonds on the third finger of my left hand. Here stands the faithful fiancée. Go with the Inspector and leave everything to me.”

Jim Pearson rose, still with a dazed expression on his face. His overcoat was lying over a chair and he put it on. Inspector Narracott handed him a hat which was lying on a bureau near by. They moved towards the door and the Inspector said politely:

“Good evening, Miss Trefusis.”

“Au revoir, Inspector,” said Emily sweetly.

And if he had known Miss Emily Trefusis better he would have known that in these three words lay a challenge.

Eleven

EMILY SETS TO WORK

The inquest on the body of Captain Trevelyan was held on Monday morning. From the point of view of sensation it was a tame affair, for it was almost immediately adjourned for a week, thus disappointing large numbers of people. Between Saturday and Monday Exhampton had sprung into fame. The knowledge that the dead man's nephew had been detained in connection with the murder made the whole affair spring from a mere paragraph in the back pages of the newspapers to gigantic headlines. On the Monday, reporters had arrived at Exhampton in large numbers. Mr. Charles Enderby had reason once more to congratulate himself on the superior position he had obtained from the purely fortuitous chance of the football competition prize.

It was the journalist's intention to stick to Major Burnaby like a leech, and under the pretext of photographing the latter's cottage, to obtain exclusive information of the inhabitants of Sittaford and their relationship with the dead man.

It did not escape Mr. Enderby's notice that at lunchtime a small table near the door was occupied by a very attractive girl. Mr. Enderby wondered what she was doing in Exhampton. She was well dressed in a demure and provocative style, and did not appear to be a relation of the deceased, and still less could be labelled as one of the idle curious.

"I wonder how long she's staying?" thought Mr. Enderby. "Rather a pity I am going up to Sittaford this afternoon. Just my luck. Well, you can't have it both ways, I suppose."

But shortly after lunch, Mr. Enderby received an agreeable surprise. He was standing on the steps of the Three Crowns observing the fast-melting snow, and enjoying the sluggish rays of wintry sunshine, when he was aware of a voice, an extremely charming voice, addressing him.

“I beg your pardon—but could you tell me—if there is anything to see in Exhampton?”

Charles Enderby rose to the occasion promptly.

“There’s a castle, I believe,” he said. “Not much to it—but there it is. Perhaps you would allow me to show you the way to it.”

“That would be frightfully kind of you,” said the girl. “If you are sure you are not too busy—”

Charles Enderby disclaimed immediately the notion of being busy.

They set out together.

“You are Mr. Enderby, aren’t you?” said the girl.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Mrs. Belling pointed you out to me.”

“Oh, I see.”

“My name is Emily Trefusis. Mr. Enderby—I want you to help me.”

“To help you?” said Enderby. “Why, certainly—but—”

“You see, I am engaged to Jim Pearson.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Enderby, journalistic possibilities rising before his mind.

“And the police are going to arrest him. I know they are. Mr. Enderby, I know that Jim didn’t do this thing. I am down here to prove he didn’t. But I must have someone to help me. One can’t do anything without a man. Men know so much, and are able to get information in so many ways that are simply impossible to women.”

“Well—I—yes, I suppose that is true,” said Mr. Enderby complacently.

“I was looking at all these journalists this morning,” said Emily. “Such a lot of them I thought had such stupid faces. I picked you out as the one really clever one among them.”

“Oh! I say. I don’t think that’s true, you know,” said Mr. Enderby still more complacently.

“What I want to propose,” said Emily Trefusis, “is a kind of partnership. There would, I think, be advantages on both sides. There are certain things I want to investigate—to find out about. There you in your character of journalist can help me. I want—”

Emily paused. What she really wanted was to engage Mr. Enderby as a kind of private sleuth of her own. To go where she told him, to ask the questions she wanted asked, and in general to be a kind of bond slave. But she was aware of the necessity of couching these proposals in terms at once flattering and agreeable. The whole point was that she was to be the boss, but the matter needed managing tactfully.

“I want,” said Emily, “to feel that I can depend upon you.”

She had a lovely voice, liquid and alluring. As she uttered the last sentence a feeling rose in Mr. Enderby’s bosom that this lovely helpless girl could depend upon him to the last ditch.

“It must be ghastly,” said Mr. Enderby, and taking her hand he squeezed it with fervour.

“But you know,” he went on with a journalistic reaction, “my time is not entirely my own. I mean, I have got to go where I am sent, and all that.”

“Yes,” said Emily. “I have thought of that, and that you see is where I come in. Surely I am what you call a ‘scoop,’ aren’t I? You can do an interview with me every day, you can make me say anything that you think your readers will like. Jim Pearson’s fiancée. Girl who believes passionately in his innocence. Reminiscences of his childhood which she supplies. I don’t really know about his childhood, you know,” she added, “but that doesn’t matter.”

“I think,” said Mr. Enderby, “that you are marvellous. You really are marvellous.”

“And then,” said Emily pursuing her advantage, “I have access naturally to Jim’s relations. I can get you in there as a friend of mine, where quite possibly you might have the door shut in your face any other way.”

“Don’t I know that only too well,” said Mr. Enderby with feeling, recalling various rebuffs of the past.

A glorious prospect opened out before him. He had been in luck over this affair all round. First the lucky chance of the football competition, and now this.

“It’s a deal,” he said fervently.

“Good,” said Emily becoming brisk and businesslike. “Now, what’s the first move?”

“I’m going up to Sittaford this afternoon.”

He explained the fortunate circumstance which had put him in such an advantageous position with regard to Major Burnaby. “Because, mind you, he is the kind of old buffer that hates newspaper men like poison. But you can’t exactly push a chap in the face who has just handed you £5,000, can you?”

“It would be awkward,” said Emily. “Well, if you are going to Sittaford, I am coming with you.”

“Splendid,” said Mr. Enderby. “I don’t know, though, if there’s anywhere to stay up there. As far as I know there’s only Sittaford House and a few old cottages belonging to people like Burnaby.”

“We shall find something,” said Emily. “I always find something.”

Mr. Enderby could well believe that. Emily had the kind of personality that soars triumphantly over all obstacles.

They had arrived by now at the ruined castle, but paying no attention to it, they sat down on a piece of wall in the so-called sunshine and Emily proceeded to develop her ideas.

“I am looking at this, Mr. Enderby, in an absolutely unsentimental and businesslike way. You’ve got to take it from me to begin with that Jim didn’t do the murder. I’m not saying that simply because I am in love with him, or believe in his beautiful character or anything like that. It’s just well—knowledge. You see I have been on my own pretty well since I was sixteen. I have never come into contact with many women and I know very little about them, but I know a lot about men. And unless a girl can size up a man pretty accurately, and know what she’s got to deal with, she will never get on. I have got on. I work as a mannequin at Lucie’s, and I can tell you, Mr. Enderby, that to arrive there is a Feat.

“Well, as I was saying, I can size up men pretty accurately. Jim is rather a weak character in many ways. I am not sure,” said Emily, forgetting for a moment her rôle of admirer of strong men, “that that’s not why I like him. The feeling that I can run him and make something of him. There are quite a lot of—well—even criminal things that I can imagine him doing if pushed to it—but not murder. He simply couldn’t pick up a sandbag and hit an old man on the back of the neck with it. He would make a bosh shot and hit him in the wrong place if he did. He is a—he is a gentle creature, Mr. Enderby. He doesn’t even like killing wasps. He always tries to put them out of a window without hurting them and usually gets stung. However, it’s no good my going on like this. You’ve got to take my word for it and start on the assumption that Jim is innocent.”

“Do you think that somebody is deliberately trying to fasten the crime on him?” asked Charles Enderby in his best journalistic manner.

“I don’t think so. You see nobody knew about Jim coming down to see his uncle. Of course, one can’t be certain, but I should put that down as just a coincidence and bad luck. What we have to find is someone else with a motive for killing Captain Trevelyan. The police are quite certain that this is not what they call an ‘outside job’—I mean, it wasn’t a burglar. The broken open window was faked.”

“Did the police tell you all this?”

“Practically,” said Emily.

“What do you mean by practically?”

“The chambermaid told me, and her sister is married to Constable Graves, so, of course, she knows everything the police think.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Enderby, “it wasn’t an outside job. It was an inside one.”

“Exactly,” said Emily. “The police—that is Inspector Narracott, who, by the way, I should think is an awfully sound man, have started investigating to find who benefits by Captain Trevelyan’s death, and with Jim sticking out a mile, so to speak, they won’t bother to go on with other investigations much. Well, that’s got to be our job.”

“What a scoop it would be,” said Mr. Enderby, “if you and I discovered the real murderer. The crime expert of the Daily Wire—that’s the way I should be described. But it’s too good to be true,” he added despondently. “That sort of thing only happens in books.”

“Nonsense,” said Emily, “it happens with me.”

“You’re simply marvellous,” said Enderby again.

Emily brought out a little notebook.

“Now let’s put things down methodically. Jim himself, his brother and sister, and his Aunt Jennifer benefit equally by Captain Trevelyan’s death. Of course Sylvia—that’s Jim’s sister—wouldn’t hurt a fly, but I wouldn’t put it past her husband, he’s what I call a nasty kind of brute. You know—the artistic nasty kind, has affairs with women—all that sort of thing. Very likely to be in a hole financially. The money they’d come into would actually be Sylvia’s, but that wouldn’t matter to him. He would soon manage to get it out of her.”

“He sounds a most unpleasant person,” said Mr. Enderby.

“Oh! yes. Good-looking in a bold sort of way. Women talk about sex with him in corners. Real men hate him.”

“Well, that’s suspect No. 1,” said Mr. Enderby, also writing in a little book. “Investigate his movements on Friday—easily done under the guise of interview with popular novelist connected with the crime. Is that all right?”

“Splendid,” said Emily. “Then there’s Brian, Jim’s younger brother. He’s supposed to be in Australia, but he might quite easily have come back. I mean, people do sometimes without saying.”

“We could send him a cable.”

“We will. I suppose Aunt Jennifer is out of it. From all I’ve heard she’s a rather wonderful person. She’s got character. Still, after all, she wasn’t very far away, she was only at Exeter. She might have come over to see her brother, and he might have said something nasty about her husband whom she adores, and she might have seen red and snatched up a sandbag and biffed him one.”

“Do you really think so?” said Mr. Enderby dubiously.

“No, not really. But one never knows. Then, of course, there’s the batman. He only gets £100 under the will and he seems all right. But there again, one never knows. His wife is Mrs. Belling’s niece. You know Mrs. Belling who keeps the Three Crowns. I think I shall weep on her shoulder when I get back. She looks rather a motherly and romantic soul. I think she would be terribly sorry for me with my young man probably going to prison, and she might let slip something useful. And then, of course, there’s Sittaford House. Do you know what struck me as queer?”

“No, what?”

“These people, the Willetts. The ones that took Captain Trevelyan’s house furnished in the middle of winter. It’s an awfully queer thing to do.”

“Yes, it is odd,” agreed Mr. Enderby. “There might be something at the bottom of that—something to do with Captain Trevelyan’s past life.

“That séance business was queer too,” he added. “I’m thinking of writing that up for the paper. Get opinions from Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and a few actresses and people about it.”

“What séance business?”

Mr. Enderby recounted it with gusto. There was nothing connected with the murder that he had not managed somehow or other to hear.

“Bit odd, isn’t it?” he finished. “I mean, it makes you think and all that. May be something in these things. First time I’ve really ever come across anything authentic.”

Emily gave a slight shiver. “I hate supernatural things,” she said. “Just for once, as you say, it does look as though there was something in it. But how—how gruesome!”

“This séance business never seems very practical, does it? If the old boy could get through and say he was dead, why couldn’t he say who murdered him? It ought to be all so simple.”

“I feel there may be a clue in Sittaford,” said Emily thoughtfully.

“Yes, I think we ought to investigate there thoroughly,” said Enderby. “I’ve hired a car and I’m starting there in about half an hour’s time. You had better come along with me.”

“I will,” said Emily. “What about Major Burnaby?”

“He’s going to tramp it,” said Enderby. “Started immediately after the inquest. If you ask me, he wanted to get out of having my company on the way there. Nobody could like trudging there through all this slush.”

“Will the car be able to get up all right?”

“Oh! yes. First day a car has been able to get through though.”

“Well,” said Emily rising to her feet. “It’s about time we went back to the Three Crowns, and I will pack my suitcase and do a short weeping act on

Mrs. Belling's shoulder."

"Don't you worry," said Mr. Enderby rather fatuously. "You leave everything to me."

"That's just what I mean to do," said Emily with a complete lack of truth. "It's so wonderful to have someone you can really rely on."

Emily Trefusis was really a very accomplished young woman.

Twelve

THE ARREST

On her return to the Three Crowns, Emily had the good fortune to run right into Mrs. Belling who was standing in the hallway.

“Oh! Mrs. Belling,” she exclaimed. “I am leaving this afternoon.”

“Yes, Miss. By the four ten train to Exeter, Miss?”

“No, I am going up to Sittaford.”

“To Sittaford?”

Mrs. Belling’s countenance showed the most lively curiosity.

“Yes, and I wanted to ask you if you knew of anywhere there where I could stay.”

“You want to stay up there?”

The curiosity was heightened.

“Yes, that is—Oh! Mrs. Belling, is there somewhere I could speak to you privately for a moment?”

With something like alacrity Mrs. Belling led the way to her own private sanctum. A small comfortable room with a large fire burning.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?” began Emily, knowing well that of all openings on earth this one is the most certain to provoke interest and sympathy.

“No, indeed, Miss, that I won’t,” said Mrs. Belling her dark eyes aglitter with interest.

“You see, Mr. Pearson—you know—”

“The young gentleman that stayed here on Friday? And that the police have arrested?”

“Arrested? Do you mean really arrested?”

“Yes, Miss. Not half an hour ago.”

Emily had gone very white.

“You—you’re sure of that?”

“Oh! yes, Miss. Our Amy had it from the Sergeant.”

“It’s too awful!” said Emily. She had been expecting this, but it was none the better for that. “You see, Mrs. Belling, I—I’m engaged to him. And he didn’t do it, and, oh dear, it’s all too dreadful!”

And here Emily began to cry. She had, earlier in the day, announced her intention to Charles Enderby of doing so, but what appalled her so was with what ease the tears came. To cry at will is not an easy accomplishment. There was something much too real about these tears. It frightened her. She mustn’t really give way. Giving way wasn’t the least use to Jim. To be resolute, logical and clear-sighted—these were the qualities that were going to count in this game. Sloppy crying had never helped anyone yet.

But it was a relief all the same, to let yourself go. After all she had meant to cry. Crying would be an undeniable passport to Mrs. Belling’s sympathy and help. So why not have a good cry while she was about it? A real orgy of weeping in which all her troubles, doubts and unacknowledged fears might find vent and be swept away.

“There, there, my dear, don’t ee take on so,” said Mrs. Belling.

She put a large motherly arm round Emily’s shoulders and patted her consolingly.

“Said from the start I have that he didn’t do it. A regular nice young gentleman. A lot of chuckleheads the police are, and so I’ve said before now. Some thieving tramp is a great deal more likely. Now, don’t ee fret, my dear, it’ll all come right, you see if it don’t.”

“I am so dreadfully fond of him,” wailed Emily.

Dear Jim, dear, sweet, boyish, helpless, impractical Jim. So utterly to be depended on to do the wrong thing at the wrong moment. What possible chance had he got against that steady, resolute Inspector Narracott?

“We must save him,” she wailed.

“Of course, we will. Of course, we will,” Mrs. Belling consoled her.

Emily dabbed her eyes vigorously, gave one last sniff and gulp, and raising her head demanded fiercely:

“Where can I stay at Sittaford?”

“Up to Sittaford? You’re set on going there, my dear?”

“Yes,” Emily nodded vigorously.

“Well, now,” Mrs. Belling cogitated the matter. “There’s only one place for ee to stay. There’s not much to Sittaford. There’s the big house, Sittaford House, which Captain Trevelyan built, and that’s let now to a South African lady. And there’s the six cottages he built, and No. 5 of them cottages has got Curtis, what used to be gardener at Sittaford House, in it, and Mrs. Curtis. She lets rooms in the summer time, the Captain allowing her to do so. There’s nowhere else you could stay and that’s a fact. There’s the blacksmith’s and the post office, but Mary Hibbert, she’s got six children and her sister-in-law living with her, and the blacksmith’s wife she’s expecting her eighth, so there won’t be so much as a corner there. But how are you going to get up to Sittaford, Miss? Have you hired a car?”

“I am going to share Mr. Enderby’s.”

“Ah, and where will he be staying, I wonder?”

“I suppose he will have to be put up at Mrs. Curtis’s too. Will she have room for both of us?”

“I don’t know that that will look quite right for a young lady like you,” said Mrs. Belling.

“He’s my cousin,” said Emily.

On no account, she felt, must a sense of propriety intervene to work against her in Mrs. Belling’s mind.

The landlady’s brow cleared. “Well, that may be all right then,” she allowed grudgingly, “and likely as not if you’re not comfortable with Mrs. Curtis they would put you up at the big house.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been such an idiot,” said Emily mopping once more at her eyes.

“It’s only natural, my dear. And you feel better for it.”

“I do,” said Emily truthfully. “I feel much better.”

“A good cry and a cup of tea—there’s nothing to beat them, and a nice cup of tea you shall have at once, my dear, before you start off on that cold drive.”

“Oh, thank you, but I don’t think I really want—”

“Never mind what you want, it’s what you’re going to have,” said Mrs. Belling rising with determination and moving towards the door. “And you tell Amelia Curtis from me that she’s to look after you and see you take your food proper and see you don’t fret.”

“You are kind,” said Emily.

“And what’s more I shall keep my eyes and ears open down here,” said Mrs. Belling entering with relish into her part of the romance. “There’s many a little thing that I hear that never goes to the police. And anything I do hear I’ll pass on to you, Miss.”

“Will you really?”

“That I will. Don’t ee worry, my dear, we’ll have your young gentleman out of his trouble in no time.”

“I must go and pack,” said Emily rising.

“I’ll send the tea up to you,” said Mrs. Belling.

Emily went upstairs, packed her few belongings into her suitcase, sponged her eyes with cold water and applied a liberal allowance of powder.

“You have made yourself look a sight,” she apostrophized herself in the glass. She added more powder and a touch of rouge.

“Curious,” said Emily, “how much better I feel. It’s worth the puffy look.”

She rang the bell. The chambermaid (the sympathetic sister-in-law of Constable Graves) came promptly. Emily presented her with a pound note and begged her earnestly to pass on any information she might acquire in roundabout ways from police circles. The girl promised readily.

“Mrs. Curtis’s up to Sittaford? I will indeed, Miss. Do anything, that I will. We all feel for you, Miss, more than I can say. All the time I keep saying to myself, ‘Just fancy if it was you and Fred,’ I keep saying. I would be distracted—that I would. The least thing I hears I’ll pass it on to you, Miss.”

“You angel,” said Emily.

“Just like a sixpenny I got at Woolworth’s the other day, The Syringa Murders it was called. And do you know what led them to find the real murderer, Miss. Just a bit of common sealing wax. Your gentleman is good-looking, Miss, isn’t he? Quite unlike his picture in the papers. I’m sure I’ll do anything I can, Miss, for you and for him.”

Thus the centre of romantic attention, Emily left the Three Crowns, having duly gulped down the cup of tea prescribed by Mrs. Belling.

“By the way,” she said to Enderby as the aged Ford sprang forward, “you are my cousin, don’t forget.”

“Why?”

“They’ve got such pure minds in the country,” said Emily. “I thought it would be better.”

“Splendid. In that case,” said Mr. Enderby rising to his opportunities, “I had better call you Emily.”

“All right, cousin—what’s your name?”

“Charles.”

“All right, Charles.”

The car went upwards on the Sittaford road.

Thirteen

SITTA FORD

Emily was rather fascinated by her first view of Sittaford. Turning off the main road about two miles from Exhampton, they went upwards over a rough moorland road until they reached a village that was situated right on the edge of the moor. It consisted of a smithy, and a combined post office and sweet shop. From there they followed a lane and came to a row of newly built small granite bungalows. At the second of these the car stopped and the driver volunteered the information that this was Mrs. Curtis's.

Mrs. Curtis was a small, thin, grey-haired woman, energetic and shrewish in disposition. She was all agog with the news of the murder which had only penetrated to Sittaford that morning.

"Yes, of course I can take you in, Miss, and your cousin too, if he can just wait until I shift a few duds. You won't mind having your meals along of us, I don't suppose? Well, who would have believed it! Captain Trevelyan murdered and an inquest and all! Cut off from the world we've been since Friday morning, and this morning when the news came you could have knocked me down with a feather. 'The Captain's dead,' I said to Curtis, 'that shows you the wickedness there is in the world nowadays.' But I'm keeping you talking here, Miss. Come away in and the gentleman too. I have got the kettle on and you shall have a cup of tea immediately, for you must be perished by the drive up, though of course, it's warmer today after what it's been. Eight and ten feet the snow has been hereabout."

Drowned in this sea of talk, Emily and Charles Enderby were shown their new quarters. Emily had a small square room, scrupulously clean, looking out and up to the slope of Sittaford Beacon. Charles's room was a small slit facing the front of the house and the lane, containing a bed and a microscopic chest of drawers and washstand.

“The great thing is,” he observed after the driver of the car had disposed his suitcase upon the bed, and had been duly paid and thanked, “that we are here. If we don’t know all there is to be known about everyone living in Sittaford within the next quarter of an hour, I’ll eat my hat.”

Ten minutes later, they were sitting downstairs in the comfortable kitchen being introduced to Curtis, a rather gruff-looking, grey-haired old man, and being regaled with strong tea, bread and butter, Devonshire cream and hard-boiled eggs. While they ate and drank they listened. Within half an hour they knew everything there was to be known about the inhabitants of the small community.

First there was a Miss Percehouse, who lived in No. 4, The Cottages, a spinster of uncertain years and temper who had come down here to die, according to Mrs. Curtis, six years ago.

“But believe it or not, Miss, the air of Sittaford is that healthy that she picked up from the day she came. Wonderfully pure air for lungs it is.

“Miss Percehouse has a nephew who occasionally comes down to see her,” she went on, “and indeed he’s staying with her at the present time. Seeing to it that the money doesn’t go out of the family, that’s what he’s doing. Very dull for a young gentleman at this time of year. But there, there’s more ways than one of amusing yourself, and his coming has been a providence for the young lady at Sittaford House. Poor young thing, the idea of bringing her to that great barrack of a house in the winter time. Selfish is what some mothers are. A very pretty young lady, too. Mr. Ronald Garfield is up there as often as he can be without neglecting Miss Percehouse.”

Charles Enderby and Emily exchanged glances. Charles remembered that Ronald Garfield had been mentioned as one of the party present at the table-turning.

“The cottage this side of mine, No. 6,” continued Mrs. Curtis, “has only just been took. Gentleman of the name of Duke. That is if you would call him a gentleman. Of course, he may be and he may not. There’s no saying, folks aren’t so particular nowadays as they used to be. He’s been made free of the place in the heartiest manner. A bashful sort of gentleman he is—might be a

military gentleman from the look of him, but somehow he hasn't got the manner. Not like Major Burnaby, that you would know as a military gentleman the first time you clapped eyes on him.

"No. 3, that's Mr. Rycroft's, little elderly gentleman. They do say that he used to go after birds to outlandish parts for the British Museum. What they call a naturalist he is. Always out and roaming over the moor when the weather permits. And he has a very fine library of books. His cottage is nearly all bookcases.

"No. 2, is an invalid gentleman's, a Captain Wyatt with an Indian servant. And poor fellow he does feel the cold, he does. The servant I mean, not the Captain. Coming from warm outlandish parts, it's no wonder. The heat they keep up inside the house would frighten you. It's like walking into an oven.

"No. 1, is Major Burnaby's cottage. Lives by himself he does, and I go in to do for him early mornings. He is a very neat gentleman, he is, and very particular. He and Captain Trevelyan were as thick as thieves. Friends of a lifetime they were. And they both have the same kind of outlandish heads stuck up on the walls.

"As for Mrs. Willett and Miss Willett, that's what no one can make out. Plenty of money there. Amos Parker at Exhampton they deal with, and he tells me their weekly book comes to well over eight pounds or nine pounds. You wouldn't believe the eggs that goes into that house! Brought their maidservants from Exeter with them, they did, but they don't like it and want to leave, and I'm sure I don't blame them. Mrs. Willett, she sends them into Exeter twice a week in her car, and what with that and the living being so good, they agreed to stop on, but if you ask me it's a queer business, burying yourself in the country like this, a smart lady like that. Well, well, I suppose I had better be clearing away these tea things."

She drew a deep breath and so did Charles and Emily. The flow of information loosened with so little difficulty had almost overwhelmed them.

Charles ventured to put a question.

"Has Major Burnaby got back yet?" he asked.

Mrs. Curtis paused at once, tray in hand. “Yes, indeed, sir, came tramping in just the same as ever about half an hour before you arrived. ‘Why, sir,’ I cried to him. ‘You’ve never walked all the way from Exhampton?’ And he says in his stern way, ‘Why not? If a man has got two legs he doesn’t need four wheels. I do it once a week anyway as you know, Mrs. Curtis.’ ‘Oh, yes, sir, but this is different. What with the shock and the murder and the inquest it’s wonderful you’ve got the strength to do it.’ But he only grunted like and walked on. He looks bad though. It’s a miracle he ever got through on Friday night. Brave I call it at his age. Tramping off like that and three miles of it in a snowstorm. You may say what you like, but nowadays the young gentlemen aren’t a patch on the old ones. That Mr. Ronald Garfield he would never have done it, and it’s my opinion, and it’s the opinion of Mrs. Hibbert at the post office, and it’s the opinion of Mr. Pound, the blacksmith, that Mr. Garfield ought never to have let him go off alone the way he did. He should have gone with him. If Major Burnaby had been lost in a snowdrift, everybody would have blamed Mr. Garfield. And that’s a fact.”

She disappeared triumphantly into the scullery amid a clatter of tea things.

Mr. Curtis thoughtfully removed an aged pipe from the right side of his mouth to the left side.

“Women,” he said, “talk a lot.”

He paused and then murmured.

“And half the time they don’t know the truth of what they are talking about.”

Emily and Charles received this announcement in silence. Seeing that no more was coming, however, Charles murmured approvingly.

“That’s very true—yes, very true.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Curtis, and relapsed into a pleasant and contemplative silence.

Charles rose. "I think I'll go round and see old Burnaby," he said, "tell him the camera parade will be tomorrow morning."

"I'll come with you," said Emily. "I want to know what he really thinks about Jim and what ideas he has about the crime in general."

"Have you got any rubber boots or anything? It's awfully slushy."

"I bought some Wellingtons in Exhampton," said Emily.

"What a practical girl you are. You think of everything."

"Unfortunately," said Emily, "that's not much help to you in finding out who's done a murder. It might help one to do a murder," she added reflectively.

"Well, don't murder me," said Mr. Enderby.

They went out together. Mrs. Curtis immediately returned.

"They be gone round to the Major's," said Mr. Curtis.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Curtis. "Now, what do you think? Are they sweethearting, or are they not? A lot of harm comes of cousins marrying, so they say. Deaf and dumbs and half-wits and a lot of other evils. He's sweet on her, that you can see easily enough. As for her, she's a deep one like my Great Aunt Sarah's Belinda, she is. Got a way with her and with the men. I wonder what she's after now? Do you know what I think, Curtis?"

Mr. Curtis grunted.

"This young gentleman that the police are holding on account of the murder, it's my belief that he's the one she's set on. And she's come up here to nose about and see what she can find out. And mark my words," said Mrs. Curtis, rattling china, "if there's anything to find out she will find it!"

Fourteen

THE WILLETTTS

At the same moment that Charles and Emily started out to visit Major Burnaby, Inspector Narracott was seated in the drawing room of Sittaford House, trying to formulate an impression of Mrs. Willett.

He had not been able to interview her sooner as the roads had been impassable until this morning. He had hardly known what he had expected to find, but certainly not what he had found. It was Mrs. Willett who had taken charge of the situation, not he.

She had come rushing into the room, thoroughly businesslike and efficient. He saw a tall woman, thin-faced and keen-eyed. She was wearing rather an elaborate knitted silk jumper suit that was just over the border line of unsuitability for country wear. Her stockings were of very expensive gossamer silk, her shoes high-heeled patent leather. She wore several valuable rings and rather a large quantity of very good and expensive imitation pearls.

“Inspector Narracott?” said Mrs. Willett. “Naturally, you want to come over the house. What a shocking tragedy! I could hardly believe it. We only heard about it this morning, you know. We were terribly shocked. Sit down, won’t you, Inspector? This is my daughter, Violet.”

He had hardly noticed the girl who had followed her in, and yet, she was a very pretty girl, tall and fair with big blue eyes.

Mrs. Willett herself took a seat.

“Is there any way in which I can help you, Inspector? I knew very little of poor Captain Trevelyan, but if there is anything you can think of—”

The Inspector said slowly:

“Thank you, madam. Of course, one never knows what may be useful or what may not.”

“I quite understand. There may possibly be something in the house that may throw light upon this sad business, but I rather doubt it. Captain Trevelyan removed all his personal belongings. He even feared I should tamper with his fishing rods, poor, dear man.”

She laughed a little.

“You were not acquainted with him?”

“Before I took the house, you mean? Oh! no. I’ve asked him here several times since, but he never came. Terribly shy, poor dear. That was what was the matter with him. I’ve known dozens of men like it. They are called women haters and all sorts of silly things, and really all the time it’s only shyness. If I could have got at him,” said Mrs. Willett with determination, “I’d soon have got over all that nonsense. That sort of man only wants bringing out.”

Inspector Narracott began to understand Captain Trevelyan’s strongly defensive attitude towards his tenants.

“We both asked him,” continued Mrs. Willett. “Didn’t we, Violet?”

“Oh! yes, Mother.”

“A real simple sailor at heart,” said Mrs. Willett. “Every woman loves a sailor, Inspector Narracott.”

It occurred to Inspector Narracott at this juncture that the interview so far had been run entirely by Mrs. Willett. He was convinced that she was an exceedingly clever woman. She might be as innocent as she appeared. On the other hand she might not.

“The point I am anxious to get information about is this,” he said and paused.

“Yes, Inspector?”

“Major Burnaby, as you doubtless know, discovered the body. He was led to do so by an accident that occurred in this house.”

“You mean?”

“I mean, the table-turning. I beg your pardon—”

He turned sharply.

A faint sound had come from the girl.

“Poor Violet,” said her mother. “She was terribly upset—indeed we all were! Most unaccountable. I’m not superstitious, but really it was the most unaccountable thing.”

“It did occur then?”

Mrs. Willett opened her eyes very wide.

“Occur? Of course it occurred. At the time I thought it was a joke—a most unfeeling joke and one in very bad taste. I suspected young Ronald Garfield —”

“Oh! no, Mother. I’m sure he didn’t. He absolutely swore he didn’t.”

“I’m saying what I thought at the time, Violet. What could one think it but a joke?”

“It was curious,” said the Inspector slowly. “You were very upset, Mrs. Willett?”

“We all were. Up to then it had been, oh, just lighthearted fooling. You know the sort of thing. Good fun on a winter’s evening. And then suddenly—this! I was very angry.”

“Angry?”

“Well, naturally. I thought someone was doing it deliberately—for a joke, as I say.”

“And now?”

“Now?”

“Yes, what do you think now?”

Mrs. Willett spread her hands out expressively.

“I don’t know what to think. It—it’s uncanny.”

“And you, Miss Willett?”

“I?”

The girl started.

“I—I don’t know. I shall never forget it. I dream of it. I shall never dare to do table-turning again.”

“Mr. Rycroft would say it was genuine, I suppose,” said her mother. “He believes in all that sort of thing. Really I’m inclined to believe in it myself. What other explanation is there except that it was a genuine message from a spirit?”

The Inspector shook his head. The table-turning had been his red herring. His next remark was most casual sounding.

“Don’t you find it very bleak here in winter, Mrs. Willett?”

“Oh, we love it. Such a change. We’re South Africans, you know.”

Her tone was brisk and ordinary.

“Really? What part of South Africa?”

“Oh! the Cape. Violet has never been in England before. She is enchanted with it—finds the snow most romantic. This house is really most comfortable.”

“What led you to come to this part of the world?”

There was just gentle curiosity in his voice.

“We’ve read so many books on Devonshire, and especially on Dartmoor. We were reading one on the boat—all about Widdecombe Fair. I’ve always had a hankering to see Dartmoor.”

“What made you fix on Exhampton? It’s not a very well known little town.”

“Well—we were reading these books as I told you, and there was a boy on board who talked about Exhampton—he was so enthusiastic about it.”

“What was his name?” asked the Inspector. “Did he come from this part of the world?”

“Now, what was his name? Cullen—I think. No—it was Smythe. How stupid of me. I really can’t remember. You know how it is on board ship, Inspector, you get to know people so well and plan to meet again—and a week after you’ve landed, you can’t even be sure of their names!”

She laughed.

“But he was such a nice boy—not good-looking, reddish hair, but a delightful smile.”

“And on the strength of that you decided to take a house in these parts?” said the Inspector smiling.

“Yes, wasn’t it mad of us?”

“Clever,” thought Narracott. “Distinctly clever.” He began to realize Mrs. Willett’s methods. She always carried the war into the enemy’s country.

“So you wrote to the house agents and inquired about a house?”

“Yes—and they sent us particulars of Sittaford. It sounded just what we wanted.”

“It wouldn’t be my taste at this time of year,” said the Inspector with a laugh.

“I daresay it wouldn’t be ours if we lived in England,” said Mrs. Willett brightly.

The Inspector rose.

“How did you know the name of a house agent to write to in Exhampton?” he asked. “That must have presented a difficulty.”

There was a pause. The first pause in the conversation. He thought he caught a glimpse of vexation, more, of anger in Mrs. Willett’s eyes. He had hit upon something to which she had not thought out the answer. She turned towards her daughter.

“How did we, Violet? I can’t remember.”

There was a different look in the girl’s eyes. She looked frightened.

“Why, of course,” said Mrs. Willett. “Delfridges. Their information bureau. It’s too wonderful. I always go and inquire there about everything. I asked them the name of the best agent here and they told me.”

“Quick,” thought the Inspector. “Very quick. But not quite quick enough. I had you there, madam.”

He made a cursory examination of the house. There was nothing there. No papers, no locked drawers or cupboards.

Mrs. Willett accompanied him talking brightly. He took his leave, thanking her politely.

As he departed he caught a glimpse of the girl’s face over her shoulder. There was no mistaking the expression on her face.

It was fear he saw on her countenance. Fear written there plainly at this moment when she thought herself unobserved.

Mrs. Willett was still talking.

“Alas. We have one grave drawback here. The domestic problem, Inspector. Servants will not stand these country places. All of mine have been threatening to leave us for some time, and the news of the murder seems to have unsettled them utterly. I don’t know what I shall do. Perhaps men servants would answer the case. That is what the Registry Office in Exeter advised.”

The Inspector answered mechanically. He was not listening to her flow of talk. He was thinking of the expression he had surprised on the girl’s face.

Mrs. Willett had been clever—but not quite clever enough.

He went away cogitating on his problem.

If the Willetts had nothing to do with Captain Trevelyan’s death, why was Violet Willett afraid?

He fired his last shot. With his foot actually over the threshold of the front door he turned back.

“By the way,” he said, “you know young Pearson, don’t you?”

There was no doubt of the pause this time. A dead silence of about a second. Then Mrs. Willett spoke:

“Pearson?” she said. “I don’t think—”

She was interrupted. A queer sighing breath came from the room behind her and then the sound of a fall. The Inspector was over the threshold and into the room in a flash.

Violet Willett had fainted.

“Poor child,” cried Mrs. Willett. “All this strain and shock. That dreadful table-turning business and the murder on the top of it. She isn’t strong. Thank you so much, Inspector. Yes, on the sofa please. If you would ring

the bell. No, I don't think there is anything more you can do. Thank you so much."

The Inspector went down the drive with his lips set in a grim line.

Jim Pearson was engaged, he knew, to that extremely charming-looking girl he had seen in London.

Why then should Violet Willett faint at the mention of his name? What was the connection between Jim Pearson and the Willetts?

He paused indecisively as he emerged from the front gate. Then he took from his pocket a small notebook. In it was entered a list of the inhabitants of the six bungalows built by Captain Trevelyan with a few brief remarks against each name. Inspector Narracott's stubby forefinger paused at the entry against No. 6 The Cottages.

"Yes," he said to himself. "I'd better see him next."

He strode briskly down the lane and beat a firm rat-tat on the knocker of No. 6—the bungalow inhabited by Mr. Duke.

Fifteen

VISIT TO MAJOR BURNABY

Leading the way up the path to the Major's front door, Mr. Enderby rapped upon it in a cheery fashion. The door was flung open almost immediately and Major Burnaby, red in the face, appeared on the threshold.

"It's you, is it?" he observed with no very great fervour in his voice, and was about to go on in the same strain when he caught sight of Emily and his expression altered.

"This is Miss Trefusis" said Charles with the air of one producing the ace of trumps. "She was very anxious to see you."

"May I come in?" said Emily with her sweetest smile.

"Oh! yes. Certainly. Of course—Oh, yes, of course."

Stumbling in his speech the Major backed into the living room of his cottage and began pulling forward chairs and pushing aside tables.

Emily, as was her fashion, came straight to the point.

"You see, Major Burnaby, I am engaged to Jim—Jim Pearson, you know. And naturally I am terribly anxious about him."

In the act of pushing a table the Major paused with his mouth open.

"Oh dear," he said, "that's a bad business. My dear young lady, I am more sorry about it than I can say."

"Major Burnaby, tell me honestly. Do you yourself believe he is guilty? Oh, you needn't mind saying if you do. I would a hundred times rather people didn't lie to me."

“No, I do not think him guilty,” said the Major in a loud assertive voice. He hit a cushion once or twice vigorously, and then sat down facing Emily.

“The chap is a nice young chap. Mind you, he might be a bit weak. Don’t be offended if I say that he’s the kind of young fellow that might easily go wrong if temptation came in his way. But murder—no. And mind you, I know what I am talking about—a lot of subalterns have passed through my hands in my time. It’s the fashion to poke fun at retired army officers nowadays, but we know a thing or two all the same, Miss Trefusis.”

“I’m sure you do,” said Emily. “I’m awfully grateful to you for saying what you’ve done.”

“Have—have a whisky and soda?” said the Major. “I’m afraid there’s nothing else,” he said apologetically.

“No, thank you, Major Burnaby.”

“Some plain soda then?”

“No, thank you,” said Emily.

“I ought to be able to produce tea,” said the Major with a touch of wistfulness.

“We’ve had it,” said Charles. “At Mrs. Curtis’s,” he added.

“Major Burnaby,” said Emily, “who do you think did it—have you any idea at all?”

“No. I am damned—er—bother—if I have,” said the Major. “Took it for granted it was some chap that broke in, but now the police say that can’t be so. Well, it’s their job, and I suppose they know best. They say nobody broke in, so I suppose nobody did break in. But all the same it beats me, Miss Trefusis. Trevelyan hadn’t an enemy in the world as far as I know.”

“And you would know if anybody did,” said Emily.

“Yes, I suppose I knew more of Trevelyan than many of his relations did.”

“And you can’t think of anything—anything that would help, in any way?” asked Emily.

The Major pulled at his short moustache.

“I know what you’re thinking. Like in books there ought to be some little incident that I should remember that would be a clue. Well, I’m sorry, but there isn’t any such thing. Trevelyan just led an ordinary life. Got very few letters and wrote less. There were no female complications in his life, I am sure of that. No, it beats me, Miss Trefusis.”

All three were silent.

“What about that servant of his?” asked Charles.

“Been with him for years. Absolutely faithful.”

“He had married lately,” said Charles.

“Married a perfectly decent respectable girl.”

“Major Burnaby,” said Emily, “forgive me putting it this way—but didn’t you get the wind up rather easily about him?”

The Major rubbed his nose with the embarrassed air that always came over him when the table-turning was mentioned.

“Yes, there’s no denying it, I did. I knew the whole thing was tommy rot and yet—”

“You felt somehow it wasn’t,” said Emily helpfully.

The Major nodded.

“That’s why I wonder—” said Emily.

The two men looked at her.

“I can’t quite put what I mean in the way I want,” said Emily. “What I mean is this: You say that you don’t believe in all this table-turning business—and yet, in spite of the awful weather and what must have seemed to you the absurdity of the whole thing—you felt so uneasy that you had to set out, no matter what the weather conditions, and see for yourself that Captain Trevelyan was all right. Well, don’t you think that may have been because—because there was something in the atmosphere?”

“I mean,” she continued desperately as she saw no trace of comprehension in the Major’s face, “that there was something in someone else’s mind as well as yours. And that somehow or other you felt it.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said the Major. He rubbed his nose again. “Of course,” he added hopefully, “women do take these things seriously.”

“Women!” said Emily. “Yes,” she murmured softly to herself, “I believe somehow or other that’s it.”

She turned abruptly to Major Burnaby.

“What are they like, these Willetts?”

“Oh, well,” Major Burnaby cast about in his mind, he was clearly no good at personal description. “Well—they are very kind you know—very helpful and all that.”

“Why do they want to take a house like Sittaford House at this time of year?”

“I can’t imagine,” said the Major. “Nobody does,” he added.

“Don’t you think it’s very queer?” persisted Emily.

“Of course, it’s queer. However, there’s no accounting for tastes. That’s what the Inspector said.”

“That’s nonsense,” said Emily. “People don’t do things without a reason.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Major Burnaby cautiously. “Some people don’t. You wouldn’t, Miss Trefusis. But some people—” He sighed and shook his head.

“You are sure they hadn’t met Captain Trevelyan before?”

The Major scouted the idea. Trevelyan would have said something to him. No, he was as astonished himself as anyone could be.

“So he thought it queer?”

“Of course, I’ve just told you we all did.”

“What was Mrs. Willett’s attitude towards Captain Trevelyan?” asked Emily. “Did she try and avoid him?”

A faint chuckle came from the Major.

“No, indeed she didn’t. Pestered the life out of him always asking him to come and see them.”

“Oh!” said Emily thoughtfully. She paused and then said. “So she might—just possibly she might have taken Sittaford House just on purpose to get acquainted with Captain Trevelyan.”

“Well,” the Major seemed to turn it over in his mind. “Yes, I suppose she might have. Rather an expensive way of doing things.”

“I don’t know,” said Emily. “Captain Trevelyan wouldn’t have been an easy person to get to know otherwise.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” agreed the late Captain Trevelyan’s friend.

“I wonder,” said Emily.

“The Inspector thought of that too,” said Burnaby.

Emily felt a sudden irritation against Inspector Narracott. Everything that she thought of seemed to have already been thought of by the Inspector. It

was galling to a young woman who prided herself on being sharper than other people.

She rose and held out her hand.

“Thank you very much,” she said simply.

“I wish I could help you more,” said the Major. “I’m rather an obvious sort of person—always have been. If I were a clever chap I might be able to hit upon something that might be a clue. At any rate count on me for anything you want.”

“Thank you,” said Emily. “I will.”

“Good-bye, sir,” said Enderby. “I shall be along in the morning with my camera, you know.”

Burnaby grunted.

Emily and Charles retraced their steps to Mrs. Curtis’s.

“Come into my room, I want to talk to you,” said Emily.

She sat on the one chair and Charles sat on the bed. Emily plucked off her hat and sent it spinning into a corner of the room.

“Now, listen,” she said. “I think I’ve got a kind of starting point. I may be wrong and I may be right, at any rate it’s an idea. I think a lot hinges on this table-turning business. You’ve done table-turning, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes, now and then. Not serious, you know.”

“No, of course not. It’s the kind of thing one does on a wet afternoon, and everyone accuses everyone else of shoving. Well, if you’ve played it you know what happens. The table starts spelling out, say, a name, well, it’s a name somebody knows. Very often they recognize it at once and hope it isn’t going to be that, and all the time unconsciously they are what one calls shoving. I mean sort of recognizing things makes one give an involuntary

jerk when the next letter comes and stops the thing. And the less you want to do that sometimes the more it happens.”

“Yes, that’s true,” agreed Mr. Enderby.

“I don’t believe for a moment in spirits or anything like that. But supposing that one of those people who were playing knew that Captain Trevelyan was being murdered at that minute—”

“Oh, I say,” protested Charles, “that’s awfully far fetched.”

“Well, it needn’t be quite so crude as that. Yes, I think it must be. We are just taking a hypothesis—that’s all. We are asserting that somebody knew that Captain Trevelyan was dead and absolutely couldn’t hide their knowledge. The table betrayed them.”

“It’s awfully ingenious,” said Charles, “but I don’t believe for a minute it’s true.”

“We’ll assume that it is true,” said Emily firmly. “I am sure that in detection of crime you mustn’t be afraid to assume things.”

“Oh, I’m quite agreeable,” said Mr. Enderby. “We’ll assume that it is true—anything you like.”

“So what we have to do,” said Emily, “is to consider very carefully the people who were playing. To begin with there’s Major Burnaby and Mr. Rycroft. Well, it seems wildly unlikely that either of them should have an accomplice who was the murderer. Then there is this Mr. Duke. Well, for the moment we know nothing about him. He has only just arrived here lately and of course, he might be a sinister stranger—part of a gang or something. We will put X against his name. And now we come to the Willetts. Charles, there is something awfully mysterious about the Willetts.”

“What on earth have they got to gain from Captain Trevelyan’s death?”

“Well, on the face of it, nothing. But if my theory is correct there must be a connection somewhere. We’ve got to find what is the connection.”

“Right,” said Mr. Enderby. “And supposing it’s all a mare’s nest?”

“Well, we’ll have to start all over again,” said Emily.

“Hark!” cried Charles suddenly.

He held up his hand. Then he went over to the window and opened it, and Emily too, heard the sound which had aroused his attention. It was the far-off booming of a great bell.

As they stood listening, Mrs. Curtis’s voice called excitedly from below:

“Do you hear the bell, Miss—do you hear it?”

Emily opened the door.

“D’you hear it? Plain as plan, isn’t it? Well now, now, to think of that!”

“What is it?” asked Emily.

“It’s the bell at Princetown, Miss, near to twelve mile away. It means that a convict’s escaped. George, George, where is the man? D’you hear the bell? There’s a convict loose.”

Her voice died away as she went through the kitchen.

Charles shut the window and sat down on the bed again.

“It’s a pity that things happen all wrong,” he said dispassionately. “If only this convict had escaped on Friday, why, there would be our murderer nicely accounted for. No farther to look. Hungry man, desperate criminal breaks in. Trevelyan defends his English-man’s castle—and desperate criminal biffs him one. All so simple.”

“It would have been,” said Emily with a sigh.

“Instead of which,” said Charles, “he escapes three days too late. It’s—it’s hopelessly inartistic.”

He shook his head sadly.

Sixteen

MR. RYCROFT

Emily woke early the next morning. Being a sensible young woman, she realized there was little possibility of Mr. Enderby's collaboration until the morning was well advanced. So, feeling restless and unable to lie still she set out for a brisk walk along the lane in the opposite direction from which they had come last night.

She passed the gates of Sittaford House on her right and shortly after that the lane took a sharp turn to the right and ran steeply up hill and came out on the open moor where it degenerated into a grass track and soon petered out altogether. The morning was a fine one, cold and crisp, and the view was lovely. Emily ascended to the very top of Sittaford Tor, a pile of grey rock of a fantastic shape. From this height she looked down over an expanse of moorland, unbroken as far as she could see without any habitation or any road. Below her, on the opposite side of the Tor, were grey masses of granite boulders and rocks. After considering the scene for a minute or two she turned to view the prospect to the north from which she had come. Just below her lay Sittaford, clustering on the flank of the hill, the square grey blob of Sittaford House, and the dotted cottages beyond it. In the valley below she could see Exhampton.

"One ought," thought Emily confusedly, "to see things better when you are high up like this. It ought to be like lifting off the top of a doll's house and peering in."

She wished with all her heart that she had met the dead man even if only once. It was so hard to get an idea of people you had never seen. You had to rely on other people's judgment, and Emily had never yet acknowledged that any other person's judgment was superior to her own. Other people's impressions were no good to you. They might be just as true as yours but you couldn't act on them. You couldn't, as it were, use another person's angle of attack.

Meditating vexedly on these questions, Emily sighed impatiently and shifted her position.

She had been so lost in her own thoughts that she had been oblivious to her immediate surroundings. It was with a shock of surprise that she realized that a small elderly gentleman was standing a few feet away from her, his hat held courteously in his hand, while he breathed rather fast.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Miss Trefusis, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Emily.

“My name is Rycroft. You must forgive me speaking to you, but in this little community of ours the smallest detail is known, and your arrival here yesterday has naturally gone the round. I can assure you that everyone feels a deep sympathy with your position, Miss Trefusis. We are all, one and all, anxious to assist you in any way we can.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Emily.

“Not at all, not at all,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Beauty in distress, you will pardon my old-fashioned manner of putting it. But seriously, my dear young lady, do count on me if there is any way in which I can possibly assist you. Beautiful view from up here, is it not?”

“Wonderful,” agreed Emily. “The moor is a wonderful place.”

“You know that a prisoner must have escaped last night from Princetown.”

“Yes. Has he been recaptured?”

“Not yet, I believe. Ah, well, poor fellow, he will no doubt be recaptured soon enough. I believe I am right in saying that no one has escaped successfully from Princetown for the last twenty years.”

“Which direction is Princetown?”

Mr. Rycroft stretched out his arm and pointed southwards over the moor.

“It lies over there, about twelve miles as the crow flies over unbroken moorland. It’s sixteen miles by road.”

Emily gave a faint shiver. The idea of a desperate hunted man impressed her powerfully. Mr. Rycroft was watching her and gave a little nod.

“Yes,” he said. “I feel the same myself. It’s curious how one’s instincts rebel at the thought of a man being hunted down, and yet, these men at Princetown are all dangerous and violent criminals, the kind of men whom probably you and I would do our utmost to put there in the first place.”

He gave a little apologetic laugh.

“You must forgive me, Miss Trefusis, I am deeply interested in the study of crime. A fascinating study. Ornithology and criminology are my two subjects.” He paused and then went on:

“That’s the reason why, if you will allow me to do so, I should like to associate myself with you in this matter. To study a crime at firsthand has long been an unrealized dream of mine. Will you place your confidence in me, Miss Trefusis, and allow me to place my experience at your disposal? I have read and studied this subject deeply.”

Emily was silent for a minute. She was congratulating herself on the way events were playing into her hand. Here was firsthand knowledge being offered her of life as it had been lived at Sittaford. “Angle of attack,” Emily repeated the phrase that had crept into her mind so short a time before. She had had Major Burnaby’s angle—matter of fact—simple—direct. Taking cognizance of facts and completely oblivious of subtleties. Now, she was being offered another angle which she suspected might open up a very different field of vision. This little, shrivelled, dried-up gentleman had read and studied deeply, was well versed in human nature, had that devouring interested curiosity in life displayed by the man of reflection as opposed to the man of action.

“Please help me,” she said simply. “I am so very worried and unhappy.”

“You must be, my dear, you must be. Now, as I understand the position, Trevelyan’s eldest nephew has been arrested or detained—the evidence against him being of a somewhat simple and obvious nature. I, of course, have an open mind. You must allow me that.”

“Of course,” said Emily. “Why should you believe in his innocence when you know nothing about him?”

“Most reasonable,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Really, Miss Trefusis, you yourself are a most interesting study. By the way, your name—is it Cornish like our poor friend Trevelyan?”

“Yes,” said Emily. “My father was Cornish, my mother was Scottish.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Rycroft, “very interesting. Now to approach our little problem. On the one hand we assume that young Jim—the name is Jim, is it not? We assume that young Jim had a pressing need of money, that he came down to see his uncle, that he asked for money, that his uncle refused, that in a moment of passion he picked up a sandbag that was lying at the door and that he hit his uncle over the head. The crime was unpremeditated—was in fact a foolish irrational affair most deplorably conducted. Now, all that may be so; on the other hand he may have parted with his uncle in anger and some other person may have stepped in shortly afterwards and committed the crime. That is what you believe—and to put it a little differently, that is what I hope. I do not want your fiancé to have committed the crime, for from my point of view it is so uninteresting that he should have done so. I am therefore backing the other horse. The crime was committed by someone else. We will assume that and go at once to a most important point. Was that someone else aware of the quarrel that had just taken place? Did that quarrel, in fact, actually precipitate the murder? You see my point? Someone is meditating doing away with Captain Trevelyan and seized this opportunity, realizing that suspicion is bound to fall on young Jim.”

Emily considered the matter from this angle.

“In that case,” she said slowly—

Mr. Rycroft took the words out of her mouth.

“In that case,” he said briskly, “the murderer would have to be a person in close association with Captain Trevelyan. He would have to be domiciled in Exhampton. In all probability he would have to be in the house, either during or after the quarrel. And since we are not in a court of law and can bandy about names freely, the name of the servant, Evans, leaps to our minds as a person who could satisfy our conditions. A man who quite possibly might have been in the house, have overheard the quarrel and seized the opportunity. Our next point is to discover whether Evans benefits in any way from his master’s death.”

“I believe he gets a small legacy,” said Emily.

“That may or may not constitute a sufficient motive. We shall have to discover whether or not Evans had a pressing need of money. We must also consider Mrs. Evans—there is a Mrs. Evans of recent date, I understand. If you had studied criminology, Miss Trefusis, you would realize the curious effect caused by inbreeding, especially in country districts. There are at least four young women in Broadmoor, pleasant in manner, but with that curious kink in their dispositions that human life is of little or no account to them. No—we must not leave Mrs. Evans out of account.”

“What do you think about this table-turning business, Mr. Rycroft?”

“Now, that is very strange. Most strange. I confess, Miss Trefusis, that I am powerfully impressed by it. I am, as perhaps you may have heard, a believer in psychic things. To a certain degree I am a believer in spiritualism. I have already written out a full account and sent it up to the Society of Psychical Research. A well-authenticated and amazing case. Five people present, none of whom could have the least idea or suspicion that Captain Trevelyan was murdered.”

“You don’t think—”

Emily stopped. It was not so easy to suggest her own idea to Mr. Rycroft that one of the five people might have guilty foreknowledge, as he himself had been one of them. Not that she suspected for a moment that there was

anything whatever to connect Mr. Rycroft with the tragedy. Still she felt that the suggestion might not be wholly tactful. She pursued her object in a more roundabout manner.

“It all interested me very much, Mr. Rycroft; it is, as you say, an amazing occurrence. You don’t think that any of the people present, with the exception of yourself of course, were in any way psychic?”

“My dear young lady, I myself am not psychic. I have no powers in that direction. I am only a very deeply interested observer.”

“What about this Mr. Garfield?”

“A nice lad,” said Mr. Rycroft, “but not remarkable in any way.”

“Well off, I suppose,” said Emily.

“Stony broke, I believe,” said Mr. Rycroft. “I hope I am using that idiom correctly. He comes down here to dance attendance on an aunt, from whom he has what I call ‘expectations.’ Miss Percehouse is a very sharp lady and I think she knows what these attentions are worth. But as she has a sardonic form of humour of her own she keeps him dancing.”

“I should like to meet her,” said Emily.

“Yes, you must certainly meet her. She will no doubt insist on meeting you. Curiosity—alas, my dear Miss Trefusis—curiosity.”

“Tell me about the Willetts,” said Emily.

“Charming,” said Mr. Rycroft, “quite charming. Colonial, of course. No real poise, if you understand me. A little too lavish in their hospitality. Everything a shade on the ornate side. Miss Violet is a charming girl.”

“A funny place to come for the winter,” said Emily.

“Yes, very odd, is it not? But after all it is only logical. We ourselves living in this country long for the sunshine, hot climates, waving palm trees.

People who live in Australia or South Africa are enchanted with the idea of an old-fashioned Christmas with snow and ice.”

“I wonder which of them,” said Emily to herself, “told him that.”

She reflected that it was not necessary to bury yourself in a moorland village in order to obtain an old-fashioned Christmas with snow and ice. Clearly, Mr. Rycroft did not see anything suspicious in the Willetts’ choice of a winter resort. But that, she reflected, was perhaps natural in one who was an ornithologist and a criminologist. Sittaford clearly appeared an ideal residence to Mr. Rycroft, and he could not conceive of it as an unsuitable environment to someone else.

They had been slowly descending the slope of the hillside and were now wending their way down the lane.

“Who lives in that cottage?” asked Emily abruptly.

“Captain Wyatt—he is an invalid. Rather unsociable I fear.”

“Was he a friend of Captain Trevelyan’s?”

“Not an intimate friend in any way. Trevelyan merely made a formal visit to him every now and then. As a matter of fact Wyatt doesn’t encourage visitors. A surly man.”

Emily was silent. She was reviewing the possibility of how she herself might become a visitor. She had no intention of allowing any angle of attack to remain unexplored.

She suddenly remembered the hitherto unmentioned member of the séance.

“What about Mr. Duke?” she asked brightly.

“What about him?”

“Well, who is he?”

“Well,” said Mr. Rycroft slowly, “that is what nobody knows.”

“How extraordinary,” said Emily.

“As a matter of fact,” said Mr. Rycroft, “it isn’t. You see, Duke is such an entirely unmysterious individual. I should imagine that the only mystery about him was his social origin. Not—not quite, if you understand me. But a very solid good fellow,” he hastened to add.

Emily was silent.

“This is my cottage,” said Mr. Rycroft pausing, “perhaps you will do me the honour of coming in and inspecting it.”

“I should like to,” said Emily.

They went up the small path and entered the cottage. The interior was charming. Bookcases lined the walls.

Emily went from one to the other glancing curiously at the titles of the books. One section dealt with occult phenomena, another with modern detective fiction, but by far the greater part of the bookcase was given up to criminology and to the world’s famous trials. Books on ornithology held a comparatively small portion.

“I think, it’s all delightful,” said Emily. “I must get back now. I expect Mr. Enderby will be up and waiting for me. As a matter of fact I haven’t had breakfast yet. We told Mrs. Curtis half past nine, and I see it’s ten o’clock. I shall be dreadfully late—that’s because you’ve been so interesting—and so very helpful.”

“Anything I can do,” burbled Mr. Rycroft as Emily turned a bewitching glance on him. “You can count on me. We are collaborators.”

Emily gave him her hand and squeezed his warmly.

“It’s so wonderful,” she said, using the phrase that in the course of her short life she had found so effectual, “to feel that there’s someone on whom one can really rely.”

Seventeen

MISS PERCEHOUSE

Emily returned to find eggs and bacon, and Charles, waiting for her.

Mrs. Curtis was still agog with excitement over the escape of the convict.

“Two years it is since last one escaped,” she said, “and three days it was before they found him. Near to Moretonhampstead he was.”

“Do you think he’ll come this way?” asked Charles.

Local knowledge vetoed this suggestion.

“They never comes this way, all bare moorland it is and only small towns when you do come off the moor. He’ll make for Plymouth, that’s the most likely. But they’ll catch him long before that.”

“You could find a good hiding place among these rocks on the other side of the Tor,” said Emily.

“You’re right, Miss, and there is a hiding place there, the Pixie’s Cave they call it. As narrow an opening between two rocks as you could find, but it widens out inside. They say one of King Charles’s men hid there once for a fortnight with a serving maid from a farm bringing him food.”

“I must take a look at that Pixie’s Cave,” said Charles.

“You’ll be surprised how hard it is to find, sir. Many a picnic party in summer looks for it the whole afternoon and doesn’t find it, but if you do find it be sure you leave a pin inside it for luck.”

“I wonder,” said Charles when breakfast was over and he and Emily had strolled out into the small bit of garden, “if I ought to go off to Princetown? Amazing how things pile up once you have a bit of luck. Here I am—I start

with a simple football competition prize, and before I know where I am I run straight into an escaped convict and a murderer. Marvellous!”

“What about this photographing of Major Burnaby’s cottage?”

Charles looked up at the sky.

“H’m,” he said. “I think I shall say the weather is wrong. I have got to hang on to my *raison d’être* of being in Sittaford as long as possible, and it’s coming over misty. Er—I hope you don’t mind, I have just posted off an interview with you?”

“Oh! that’s all right,” said Emily mechanically. “What have you made me say?”

“Oh, the usual sort of things people like to hear,” said Mr. Enderby. “Our special representative records his interview with Miss Emily Trefusis, the fiancée of Mr. James Pearson who has been arrested by the police and charged with the murder of Captain Trevelyan—Then my impression of you as a high-spirited, beautiful girl.”

“Thank you,” said Emily.

“Shingled,” went on Charles.

“What do you mean by shingled?”

“You are,” said Charles.

“Well, of course I am,” said Emily. “But why mention it?”

“Women readers always like to know,” said Charles Enderby. “It was a splendid interview. You’ve no idea what fine womanly touching things you said about standing by your man, no matter if the whole world was against him.”

“Did I really say that?” said Emily wincing slightly.

“Do you mind?” said Mr. Enderby anxiously.

“Oh! no,” said Emily. “Enjoy yourself, darling.” Mr. Enderby looked slightly taken aback.

“It’s all right,” said Emily. “That’s a quotation. I had it on my bib when I was small—my Sunday bib. The weekday one had ‘Don’t be a glutton’ on it.”

“Oh! I see. I put in a very good bit about Captain Trevelyan’s sea career and just a hint at foreign idols looted and a possibility of a strange priest’s revenge—only a hint you know.”

“Well, you seem to have done your day’s good deed,” said Emily.

“What have you been up to? You were up early enough, heaven knows.”

Emily described her meeting with Mr. Rycroft.

She broke off suddenly and Enderby, glancing over his shoulder and following the direction of her eyes, became aware of a pink, healthy-looking young man leaning over the gate and making various apologetic noises to attract attention.

“I say,” said the young man, “frightfully sorry to butt in and all that. I mean, it is awfully awkward, but my aunt sent me along.”

Emily and Charles both said, “Oh,” in an inquiring tone, not being much the wiser for the explanation.

“Yes,” said the young man. “To tell the truth my aunt’s rather a Tartar. What she says goes, if you know what I mean. Of course, I think it’s frightfully bad form coming along at a time like this, but if you knew my aunt—and if you do as she wants, you will know her in a few minutes—”

“Is your aunt Miss Percehouse?” broke in Emily.

“That’s right,” said the young man much relieved. “So you know all about her? Old Mother Curtis has been talking, I suppose. She can wag a tongue, can’t she? Not that she’s a bad sort, mind you. Well, the fact is, my aunt said she wanted to see you, and I was to come along and tell you so.

Compliments, and all that, and would it be troubling you too much—she was an invalid and quite unable to get out and it would be a great kindness—well, you know the sort of thing. I needn't say it all. It's curiosity really, of course, and if you say you've got a headache, or have got letters to write, it will be quite all right and you needn't bother."

"Oh, but I should like to bother," said Emily. "I'll come with you at once. Mr. Enderby has got to go along and see Major Burnaby."

"Have I?" said Enderby in a low voice.

"You have," said Emily firmly.

She dismissed him with a brief nod and joined her new friend in the road.

"I suppose you're Mr. Garfield," she said.

"That's right. I ought to have told you."

"Oh, well," said Emily, "it wasn't very difficult to guess."

"Splendid of you coming along like this," said Mr. Garfield. "Lots of girls would have been awfully offended. But you know what old ladies are."

"You don't live down here, do you, Mr. Garfield?"

"You bet your life I don't." said Ronnie Garfield with fervour. "Did you ever see such a godforsaken spot? Not so much as the Pictures to go to. I wonder someone doesn't commit a murder to—"

He paused, appalled by what he had said.

"I say, I am sorry. I am the most unlucky devil that ever lived. Always coming out with the wrong thing. I never meant it for a moment."

"I'm sure you didn't," said Emily soothingly.

"Here we are," said Mr. Garfield. He pushed open a gate, and Emily passed through and went up the path leading to a small cottage identical with the

rest. In the living room giving on the garden was a couch, and on it was lying an elderly lady with a thin wrinkled face and with one of the sharpest and most interrogative noses that Emily had ever seen. She raised herself on an elbow with a little difficulty.

“So you’ve brought her,” she said. “Very kind of you, my dear, to come along to see an old woman. But you know what it is when you are an invalid. You must have a finger in every pie going and if you can’t go to the pie, then the pie has got to come to you. And you needn’t think it’s all curiosity—it’s more than that. Ronnie, go out and paint the garden furniture. In the shed at the end of the garden. Two basket chairs and a bench. You’ll find the paint there all ready.”

“Right oh, Aunt Caroline.”

The obedient nephew disappeared.

“Sit down,” said Miss Percehouse.

Emily sat on the chair indicated. Strange to say she had immediately felt conscious of a distinct liking and sympathy for this rather sharp-tongued middle-aged invalid. She felt indeed a kind of kinship with her.

“Here is someone,” thought Emily, “who goes straight to the point and means to have her own way and bosses everybody she can. Just like me, only I happen to be rather good-looking, and she has to do it all by force of character.”

“I understand you are the girl who is engaged to Trevelyan’s nephew,” said Miss Percehouse. “I’ve heard all about you and now I have seen you I understand exactly what you are up to. And I wish you good luck.”

“Thank you,” said Emily.

“I hate a slobbering female,” said Miss Percehouse. “I like one who gets up and does things.”

She looked at Emily sharply.

“I suppose you pity me—lying here never able to get up and walk about?”

“No,” said Emily thoughtfully. “I don’t know that I do. I suppose that one can, if one has the determination, always get something out of life. If you can’t get it in one way you get it in another.”

“Quite right,” said Miss Percehouse. “You’ve got to take life from a different angle, that’s all.”

“Angle of attack,” murmured Emily.

“What’s that you say?”

As clearly as she was able, Emily outlined the theory that she had evolved that morning and the application of it she had made to the matter in hand.

“Not bad,” said Miss Percehouse nodding her head. “Now, my dear—we will get down to business. Not being a born fool, I suppose you’ve come up to this village to find out what you can about the people here, and to see if what you find out has any bearing on the murder. Well, if there’s anything you want to know about the people here, I can tell it to you.”

Emily wasted no time. Concise and businesslike she came to the point.

“Major Burnaby?” she asked.

“Typical retired army officer, narrow-minded and limited in outlook, jealous disposition. Credulous in money matters. Kind of man who invests in a South Sea Bubble because he can’t see a yard in front of his own nose. Likes to pay his debts promptly and dislikes people who don’t wipe their feet on the mat.”

“Mr. Rycroft?” said Emily.

“Queer little man, enormous egotist. Cranky. Likes to think himself a wonderful fellow. I suppose he has offered to help you solve the case aright owing to his wonderful knowledge of criminology.”

Emily admitted that that was the case.

“Mr. Duke?” she asked.

“Don’t know a thing about the man—and yet I ought to. Most ordinary type. I ought to know—and yet I don’t. It’s queer. It’s like a name on the tip of your tongue and yet for the life of you, you can’t remember it.”

“The Willetts?” asked Emily.

“Ah! the Willetts!” Miss Percehouse hoisted herself up on an elbow again in some excitement. “What about the Willetts indeed? Now, I’ll tell you something about them, my dear. It may be useful to you, or it may not. Go over to my writing table there and pull out the little top drawer—the one to the left—that’s right. Bring me the blank envelope that’s there.”

Emily brought the envelope as directed.

“I don’t say it’s important—it probably isn’t,” said Miss Percehouse. “Everybody tells lies one way or another, and Mrs. Willett is perfectly entitled to do the same as everybody else.”

She took the envelope and slipped her hand inside.

“I will tell you all about it. When the Willetts arrived here, with their smart clothes and their maids and their innovation trunks, she and Violet came up in Forder’s car and the maids and the innovation trunks came by the station bus. And naturally, the whole thing being an event as you might say, I was looking out as they passed, and I saw a coloured label blow off from one of the trunks and dive down onto one of my borders. Now, if there is one thing I hate more than another it is a litter of paper or mess of any kind, so I sent Ronnie out to pick it up, and I was going to throw it away when it struck me it was a bright, pretty thing, and I might as well keep it for the scrapbooks I make for the children’s hospital. Well, I wouldn’t have thought about it again except for Mrs. Willett deliberately mentioning on two or three occasions that Violet had never been out of South Africa and that she herself had only been to South Africa, England, and the Riviera.”

“Yes?” said Emily.

“Exactly. Now—look at this.”

Miss Percehouse thrust a luggage label into Emily’s hand. It bore the inscription, Mendle’s Hotel, Melbourne.

“Australia,” said Miss Percehouse, “isn’t South Africa—or it wasn’t in my young days. I daresay it isn’t important, but there it is for what it is worth. And I’ll tell you another thing. I have heard Mrs. Willett calling to her daughter, and she called Cooee, and that again is more typical of Australia than South Africa. And what I say is, it is queer. Why shouldn’t you wish to admit that you come from Australia if you do?”

“It’s certainly curious,” said Emily. “And it’s curious that they should come to live here in winter time as they have.”

“That leaps to the eye,” said Miss Percehouse. “Have you met them yet?”

“No. I thought of going there this morning. Only I didn’t know quite what to say.”

“I’ll provide you with an excuse,” said Miss Percehouse briskly. “Fetch me my fountain pen and some notepaper and an envelope. That’s right. Now, let me see.” She paused deliberately, then without the least warning raised her voice in a hideous scream.

“Ronnie, Ronnie, Ronnie! Is the boy deaf? Why can’t he come when he’s called? Ronnie! Ronnie!”

Ronnie arrived at a brisk trot, paint brush in hand.

“Is there anything the matter, Aunt Caroline?”

“What should be the matter? I was calling you, that was all. Did you have any particular cake for tea when you were at the Willetts’ yesterday?”

“Cake?”

“Cake, sandwiches—anything. How slow you are, boy. What did you have to eat for tea?”

“There was coffee cake,” said Ronnie very much puzzled, “and some pâté sandwiches—”

“Coffee cake,” said Miss Percehouse. “That’ll do.” She began to write briskly. “You can go back to your painting, Ronnie. Don’t hang about, and don’t stand there with your mouth open. You had your adenoids out when you were eight years old, so there is no excuse for it.”

She continued to write:

Dear Mrs. Willett,—I hear you had the most delicious coffee cake for tea yesterday afternoon. Will you be so very kind as to give me the recipe for it? I know you’ll not mind my asking you this—an invalid has so little variety except in her diet. Miss Trefusis has kindly promised to take this note for me as Ronnie is busy this morning. Is not this news about the convict too dreadful?

Yours very sincerely,

Caroline Percehouse.

She put it in an envelope, sealed it down and addressed it.

“There you are, young woman. You will probably find the doorstep littered with reporters. A lot of them passed along the lane in Forder’s charabanc. I saw them. But you ask for Mrs. Willett and say you have brought a note from me and you’ll sail in. I needn’t tell you to keep your eyes open and make the most you can of your visit. You will do that anyway.”

“You are kind,” said Emily. “You really are.”

“I help those who can help themselves,” said Miss Percehouse. “By the way, you haven’t asked me what I think of Ronnie yet. I presume he is on your list of the village. He is a good lad in his way, but pitifully weak. I am sorry to say he would do almost anything for money. Look at what he stands from me! And he hasn’t got the brains to see that I would like him just ten times better if he stood up to me now and again, and told me to go to the devil.

“The only other person in the village is Captain Wyatt. He smokes opium, I believe. And he’s easily the worst-tempered man in England. Anything more you want to know?”

“I don’t think so,” said Emily. “What you have told me seems pretty comprehensive.”

Eighteen

EMILY VISITS SITTAFFORD HOUSE

As Emily walked briskly along the lane she noticed once more how the character of the morning was changing. The mist was closing up and round.

“What an awful place to live in England is,” thought Emily. “If it isn’t snowing or raining or blowing it’s misty. And if the sun does shine it’s so cold that you can’t feel your fingers or toes.”

She was interrupted in these reflections by a rather hoarse voice speaking rather close to her right ear.

“Excuse me,” it said, “but do you happen to have seen a bull terrier?”

Emily started and turned. Leaning over a gate was a tall thin man with a very brown complexion, bloodshot eyes and grey hair. He was propped up with a crutch one side, and was eyeing Emily with enormous interest. She had no difficulty in identifying him as Captain Wyatt, the invalid owner of No. 2 The Cottages.

“No, I haven’t,” said Emily.

“She’s got out,” said Captain Wyatt. “An affectionate creature, but an absolute fool. With all these cars and things—”

“I shouldn’t think many motors come up this lane,” said Emily.

“Charabancs do in the summer time,” said Captain Wyatt grimly. “It’s the three and sixpenny morning run from Exhampton. Ascent of Sittaford Beacon with a halt halfway up from Exhampton for light refreshments.”

“Yes, but this isn’t summer time,” said Emily.

“All the same a charabanc came along just now. Reporters, I suppose, going to have a look at Sittaford House.”

“Did you know Captain Trevelyan well?” asked Emily.

She was of the opinion that the incident of the bull terrier had been a mere subterfuge on Captain Wyatt’s part dictated by a very natural curiosity. She was, she was well aware, the principal object of attention in Sittaford at present, and it was only natural that Captain Wyatt should wish to have a look at her as well as everyone else.

“I don’t know about well,” said Captain Wyatt. “He sold me this cottage.”

“Yes,” said Emily encouragingly.

“A skinflint, that’s what he was,” said Captain Wyatt. “The arrangement was that he was to do the place up to suit the purchaser’s taste, and just because I had the window sashes in chocolate picked out in lemon, he wanted me to pay half. Said the arrangement was for uniform colour.”

“You didn’t like him,” said Emily.

“I was always having rows with him,” said Captain Wyatt. “But I always have rows with everyone,” he added as an afterthought. “In a place like this you have to teach people to leave a man alone. Always knocking at the door and dropping in and chattering. I don’t mind seeing people when I am in the mood—but it has got to be my mood, not theirs. No good Trevelyan giving me his Lord of the Manor airs and dropping in whenever he felt like it. There’s not a soul in the place comes near me now,” he added with satisfaction.

“Oh!” said Emily.

“That’s the best of having a native servant,” said Captain Wyatt. “They understand orders. Abdul!” he roared.

A tall Indian in a turban came out of the cottage and waited attentively.

“Come in and have something,” said Captain Wyatt. “And see my little cottage.”

“I’m sorry,” said Emily, “but I have to hurry on.”

“Oh, no, you haven’t,” said Captain Wyatt.

“Yes, I have,” said Emily. “I’ve got an appointment.”

“Nobody understands the art of living nowadays,” said Captain Wyatt. “Catching trains, making appointments, fixing times for everything—all nonsense. Get up with the sun, I say, have your meals when you feel like it, and never tie yourself to a time or a date. I could teach people how to live if they would listen to me.”

The results of this exalted way of living were not too hopeful, Emily reflected. Anything more like a battered wreck of a man than Captain Wyatt she had never seen. However, feeling that his curiosity had been sufficiently satisfied for the time being, she insisted once more on her appointment and went on her way.

Sittaford House had a solid oak front door, a neat bellpull, an immense wire mat, and a brilliantly polished brass letter box. It represented, as Emily could not fail to see, comfort and decorum. A neat and conventional parlourmaid answered the bell.

Emily deduced the journalist evil had been before her as the parlourmaid said at once in a distant tone, “Mrs. Willett is not seeing anyone this morning.”

“I have brought a note from Miss Percehouse,” said Emily.

This clearly altered matters. The parlourmaid’s face expressed indecision, then she shifted her ground.

“Will you come inside, please.”

Emily was ushered into what house agents describe as “a well-appointed hall,” and from there into a large drawing room. A fire was burning brightly

and there were traces of feminine occupation in the room. Some glass tulips, an elaborate workbag, a girl's hat, and a Pierrot doll with very long legs, were lying about. There were, she noticed, no photographs.

Having taken in all there was to see, Emily was warming her hands in front of the fire when the door opened and a girl about her own age came in. She was a very pretty girl, Emily noticed, smartly and expensively dressed, and she also thought that she had never seen a girl in a greater state of nervous apprehension. Not that this was apparent on the surface, however. Miss Willett was making a gallant appearance of being entirely at her ease.

"Good morning," she said advancing and shaking hands. "I'm so sorry Mother isn't down, but she's spending the morning in bed."

"Oh, I am sorry, I'm afraid I have come at an unfortunate time."

"No, of course not. The cook is writing out the recipe for that cake now. We are only too delighted for Miss Percehouse to have it. Are you staying with her?"

Emily reflected with an inward smile that this was perhaps the only house in Sittaford whose members were not exactly aware of who she was and why she was there. Sittaford House had a definite regime of employers and employed. The employed might know about her—the employers clearly did not.

"I am not exactly staying with her," said Emily. "In fact, I'm at Mrs. Curtis's."

"Of course the cottage is terribly small, and she has her nephew, Ronnie, with her, hasn't she? I suppose there wouldn't be room for you too. She's a wonderful person, isn't she? So much character, I always think, but I am rather afraid of her really."

"She's a bully, isn't she?" agreed Emily cheerfully. "But it's an awful temptation to be a bully, especially if people won't stand up to you."

Miss Willett sighed.

“I wish I could stand up to people,” she said. “We’ve had the most awful morning absolutely pestered by reporters.”

“Oh, of course,” said Emily. “This is Captain Trevelyan’s house really, isn’t it?—the man who was murdered at Exhampton.”

She was trying to determine the exact cause of Violet Willett’s nervousness. The girl was clearly on the jump. Something was frightening her—and frightening her badly. She mentioned Captain Trevelyan’s name bluntly on purpose. The girl didn’t noticeably react to it in any way, but then she was probably expecting some such reference.

“Yes, wasn’t it dreadful?”

“Do tell me—that’s if you don’t mind talking about it?”

“No—no—of course not—why should I?”

“There’s something very wrong with this girl,” thought Emily. “She hardly knows what she’s saying. What has made her get the wind up this morning particularly?”

“About that table-turning,” went on Emily. “I heard about it in a casual sort of way and it seemed to me so frightfully interesting—I mean so absolutely gruesome.”

“Girlish thrills,” she thought to herself, “that’s my line.”

“Oh, it was horrid,” said Violet. “That evening—I shall never forget it! We thought, of course, that it was somebody just fooling—only it seemed a very nasty kind of joke.”

“Yes?”

“I shall never forget when we turned the lights on—everybody looked so queer. Not Mr. Duke and Major Burnaby—they are the stolid kind, they would never like to admit that they were impressed by anything of that kind. But you could see that Major Burnaby was really awfully rattled by it. I think that actually he believed in it more than anybody else. But I thought

poor little Mr. Rycroft was going to have a heart attack or something, yet he must be used to that kind of thing because he does a lot of psychic research, and as for Ronnie, Ronnie Garfield you know—he looked as though he had seen a ghost—actually seen one. Even Mother was awfully upset—more than I have ever seen her before.”

“It must have been most spooky,” said Emily. “I wish I had been there to see.”

“It was rather horrid really. We all pretended that it was—just fun, you know, but it didn’t seem like that. And then Major Burnaby suddenly made up his mind to go over to Exhampton and we all tried to stop him, and said he would be buried in a snowdrift, but he would go. And there we sat, after he had gone, all feeling dreadful and worried. And then, last night—no, yesterday morning, we got the news.”

“You think it was Captain Trevelyan’s spirit?” said Emily in an awed voice. “Or do you think it was clairvoyance or telepathy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. But I shall never, never laugh at these things again.”

The parlourmaid entered with a folded piece of paper on a salver which she handed to Violet.

The parlourmaid withdrew and Violet unfolded the paper, glanced over it and handed it to Emily.

“There you are,” she said. “As a matter of fact you are just in time. This murder business has upset the servants. They think it’s dangerous to live in this out of the way part. Mother lost her temper with them yesterday evening and has sent them all packing. They are going after lunch. We are going to get two men instead—a houseparlourman and a kind of butler-chauffeur. I think it will answer much better.”

“Servants are silly, aren’t they?” said Emily.

“It isn’t even as if Captain Trevelyan had been killed in this house.”

“What made you think of coming to live here?” asked Emily, trying to make the question sound artless and girlishly natural.

“Oh, we thought it would be rather fun,” said Violet.

“Don’t you find it rather dull?”

“Oh, no, I love the country.”

But her eyes avoided Emily’s. Just for a moment she looked suspicious and afraid.

She stirred uneasily in her chair and Emily rose rather reluctantly to her feet.

“I must be going now,” she said. “Thank you so much, Miss Willett. I do hope your mother will be all right.”

“Oh, she’s quite well really. It’s only the servants—and all the worry.”

“Of course.”

Adroitly, unperceived by the other, Emily managed to discard her gloves on a small table. Violet Willett accompanied her to the front door and they took leave of each other with a few pleasant remarks.

The parlourmaid who had opened the door to Emily had unlocked it, but as Violet Willett closed it behind her retreating guest Emily caught no sound of the key being turned. When she reached the gate, therefore, she retraced her steps slowly.

Her visit had more than confirmed the theories she held about Sittaford House. There was something queer going on here. She didn’t think Violet Willett was directly implicated—that is unless she was a very clever actress indeed. But there was something wrong, and that something must have a connection with the tragedy. There must be some link between the Willetts and Captain Trevelyan, and in that link there might lie the clue to the whole mystery.

She came up to the front door, turned the handle very gently and passed across the threshold. The hall was deserted. Emily paused, uncertain what to do next. She had her excuse—the gloves left thoughtfully behind in the drawing room. She stood stock-still listening. There was no sound anywhere except a very faint murmur of voices from upstairs. As quietly as possible Emily crept to the foot of the stairs and stood looking up. Then, very gingerly she ascended a step at a time. This was rather more risky. She could hardly pretend that her gloves had walked of their own accord to the first floor, but she had a burning desire to overhear something of the conversation that was going on upstairs. Modern builders never made their doors fit well, in Emily's opinion. You could hear a murmur of voices down here. Therefore, if you reached the door itself you would hear plainly the conversation that was going on inside the room. Another step—one more again . . . Two women's voices—Violet and her mother without doubt.

Suddenly there was a break in the conversation—a sound of a footstep. Emily retreated rapidly.

When Violet Willett opened her mother's door and came down the stairs she was surprised to find her late guest standing in the hall peering about her in a lost dog kind of way.

"My gloves," she explained. "I must have left them. I came back for them."

"I expect they are in here," said Violet.

They went into the drawing room and there, sure enough, on a little table near where Emily had been sitting lay the missing gloves.

"Oh, thank you," said Emily. "It's so stupid of me. I am always leaving things."

"And you want gloves in this weather," said Violet. "It's so cold." Once again they parted at the hall door, and this time Emily heard the key being turned in the lock.

She went down the drive with plenty to think about, for, as that door on the upper landing had opened, she had heard distinctly one sentence spoken in

an older woman's fretful and plaintive voice.

"My God," the voice had wailed, "I can't bear it. Will tonight never come?"

Nineteen

THEORIES

Emily arrived back at the cottage to find her boyfriend absent. He had, Mrs. Curtis explained, gone off with several other young gentlemen, but two telegrams had come for the young lady. Emily took them, opened them, and put them in the pocket of her sweater, Mrs. Curtis eyeing them hungrily the while.

“Not bad news, I hope?” said Mrs. Curtis.

“Oh, no,” said Emily.

“Always gives me a turn, a telegram does,” said Mrs. Curtis.

“I know,” said Emily. “Very disturbing.”

At the moment she felt disinclined for anything but solitude. She wanted to sort out and arrange her own ideas. She went up to her own room, and taking pencil and notepaper she set to work on a system of her own. After twenty minutes of this exercise she was interrupted by Mr. Enderby.

“Hullo, hullo, hullo, there you are. Fleet Street has been hard on your tracks all morning but they have just missed you everywhere. Anyway they have had it from me that you are not to be worried. As far as you’re concerned, I am the big noise.”

He sat down on the chair—Emily was occupying the bed—and chuckled.

“Envy and malice isn’t in it!” he said. “I have been handing them out the goods. I know everyone and I am right in it. It’s too good to be true. I keep pinching myself and feeling I will wake up in a minute. I say, have you noticed the fog?”

“It won’t stop me going to Exeter this afternoon, will it?” said Emily.

“Do you want to go to Exeter?”

“Yes. I have to meet Mr. Dacres there. My solicitor, you know—the one who is undertaking Jim’s defence. He wants to see me. And I think I shall pay a visit to Jim’s Aunt Jennifer, while I am there. After all, Exeter is only half an hour away.”

“Meaning she might have nipped over by train and batted her brother over the head and nobody would have noticed her absence.”

“Oh, I know it sounds rather improbable, but one has to go into everything. Not that I want it to be Aunt Jennifer—I don’t. I would much rather it was Martin Dering. I hate the sort of man who presumes on going to be a brother-in-law and does things in public that you can’t smack his face for.”

“Is he that kind?”

“Very much that kind. He’s an ideal person for a murderer—always getting telegrams from bookmakers and losing money on horses. It’s annoying that he’s got such a good alibi. Mr. Dacres told me about it. A publisher and a literary dinner seems so very unbreakable and respectable.”

“A literary dinner,” said Enderby. “Friday night. Martin Dering—let me see—Martin Dering—why, yes—I am almost sure of it. Dash it all, I am quite sure of it, but I can clinch things by wiring to Carruthers.”

“What are you talking about?” said Emily.

“Listen. You know I came down to Exhampton on Friday evening. Well, there was a bit of information I was going to get from a pal of mine, another newspaper man, Carruthers his name is. He was coming round to see me about half past six if he could—before he went on to some literary dinner—he is rather a big bug, Carruthers, and if he couldn’t make it he would send me a line to Exhampton. Well, he didn’t make it and he did send me a line.”

“What has all this got to do with it?” said Emily.

“Don’t be so impatient, I am coming to the point. The old chap was rather screwed when he wrote it—done himself well at the dinner—after giving me the item I wanted, he went on to waste a good bit of juicy description on me. You know—about the speeches, and what asses so and so, a famous novelist and a famous playwright, were. And he said he had been rottenly placed at dinner. There was an empty seat on one side of him where Ruby McAlmott, that awful best seller woman, ought to have sat and an empty place on the other side of him where the sex specialist, Martin Dering, ought to have been, but he moved up nearer to a poet, who is very well known in Blackheath, and tried to make the best of things. Now, do you see the point?”

“Charles! Darling!” Emily became lyrical with excitement. “How marvellous. Then the brute wasn’t at the dinner at all?”

“Exactly.”

“You are sure you’ve remembered the name right?”

“I’m positive. I have torn up the letter, worse luck, but I can always wire to Carruthers to make sure. But I absolutely know that I’m not mistaken.”

“There’s the publisher still, of course,” said Emily. “The one he spent the afternoon with. But I rather think it was a publisher who was just going back to America, and if so, that looks fishy. I mean it looks as though he had selected someone who couldn’t be asked without rather a lot of trouble.”

“Do you really think we have hit it?” said Charles Enderby.

“Well, it looks like it. I think the best thing to be done is—to go straight to that nice Inspector Narracott and just tell him these new facts. I mean, we can’t tackle an American publisher who is on the Mauretania or the Berengaria or somewhere. That’s a job for the police.”

“My word if this comes off. What a scoop!” said Mr. Enderby. “If it does, I should think the Daily Wire couldn’t offer me less than—”

Emily broke ruthlessly into his dreams of advancement.

“But we mustn’t lose our heads,” she said, “and throw everything else to the wind. I must go to Exeter. I don’t suppose I shall be able to be back here until tomorrow. But I’ve got a job for you.”

“What kind of a job?”

Emily described her visit to the Willetts and the strange sentence she had overheard on leaving.

“We have got absolutely and positively to find out what is going to happen tonight. There’s something in the wind.”

“What an extraordinary thing!”

“Wasn’t it? But of course it may be a coincidence. Or it may not—but you observe that the servants are being cleared out of the way. Something queer is going to happen there tonight, and you have to be on the spot to see what it is.”

“You mean I have to spend the whole night shivering under a bush in the garden?”

“Well, you don’t mind that, do you? Journalists don’t mind what they do in a good cause.”

“Who told you that?”

“Never mind who told me, I know it. You will do it, won’t you?”

“Oh, rather,” said Charles. “I am not going to miss anything. If anything queer goes on at Sittaford House tonight, I shall be in it.”

Emily then told him about the luggage label.

“It’s odd,” said Mr. Enderby. “Australia is where the third Pearson is, isn’t it?—the youngest one. Not, of course, that that means anything, but still it—well, there might be a connection.”

“H’m,” said Emily. “I think that’s all. Have you anything to report on your side?”

“Well,” said Charles, “I’ve got an idea.”

“Yes?”

“The only thing is I don’t know how you’ll like it.”

“What do you mean—how I’ll like it?”

“You won’t fly out over it, will you?”

“I don’t suppose so. I mean I hope I can listen sensibly and quietly to anything.”

“Well, the point is,” said Charles Enderby eyeing her doubtfully, “don’t think I mean to be offensive or anything like that, but do you think that lad of yours is to be depended on for the strict truth?”

“Do you mean,” said Emily, “that he did murder him after all? You are quite welcome to that view if you like. I said to you at the beginning that that was the natural view to take, but I said we had to work on the assumption that he didn’t.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Enderby. “I am with you in assuming that he didn’t do the old boy in. What I mean is, how far is his own story of what happened true? He says that he went there, had a chat with the old fellow, and came away leaving him alive and well.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it just occurred to me, you don’t think it’s possible that he went there and actually found the old man dead? I mean, he might have got the wind up and been scared and not like to say so.”

Charles had propounded this theory rather dubiously, but he was relieved to find that Emily showed no signs of flying out at him over it. Instead, she frowned and creased her brow in thought.

“I am not going to pretend,” she said. “It is possible. I hadn’t thought of it before. I know Jim wouldn’t murder anyone, but he might quite well get rattled and tell a silly lie and then, of course, he would have to stick to it. Yes, it is quite possible.”

“The awkward thing is that you can’t go and ask him about it now. I mean they wouldn’t let you see him alone, would they?”

“I can put Mr. Dacres onto him,” said Emily. “You see your solicitor alone, I believe. The worst of Jim is that he is frightfully obstinate, if he has once said a thing he sticks to it.”

“That’s my story and I’m going to stick to it,” said Mr. Enderby comprehendingly.

“Yes. I am glad you mentioned that possibility to me, Charles, it hadn’t occurred to me. We have been looking for someone who came in after Jim had left—but if it was before—”

She paused, lost in thought. Two very different theories stretched out in opposite directions. There was the one suggested by Mr. Rycroft, in which Jim’s quarrel with his uncle was the determining point. The other theory, however, took no cognizance of Jim whatsoever. The first thing to do, Emily felt, was to see the doctor who had first examined the body. If it were possible that Captain Trevelyan had been murdered at—say—four o’clock, it might make a considerable difference to the question of alibis. And the other thing to do was to make Mr. Dacres urge most strongly on his client the absolute necessity of speaking the truth on this point.

She rose from the bed.

“Well,” she said, “you had better find out how I can get to Exhampton. The man at the smithy has a car of a kind, I believe. Will you go and settle with him about it? I’ll start immediately after lunch. There’s a train at three ten to Exeter. That will give me time to see the doctor first. What’s the time now?”

“Half past twelve,” said Mr. Enderby, consulting his watch.

“Then we will both go up and fix up about that car,” said Emily. “And there’s just one other thing I want to do before leaving Sittaford.”

“What’s that?”

“I am going to pay a call on Mr. Duke. He’s the only person in Sittaford I haven’t seen. And he was one of the people at the table-turning.”

“Oh, we’ll pass his cottage on the way to the smithy.”

Mr. Duke’s cottage was the last of the row. Emily and Charles unlatched the gate and walked up the path. And then something rather surprising occurred. For the door opened and a man came out. And that man was Inspector Narracott.

He, too, looked surprised and, Emily fancied, embarrassed.

Emily abandoned her original intention.

“I am so glad to have met you, Inspector Narracott,” she said. “There are one or two things I want to talk to you about if I may.”

“Delighted, Miss Trefusis.” He drew out a watch. “I’m afraid you will have to look sharp. I’ve a car waiting. I’ve got to go back to Exhampton almost immediately.”

“How extraordinarily fortunate,” said Emily. “You might give me a lift, will you, Inspector?”

The Inspector said rather woodenly that he would be very pleased to do so.

“You might go and get my suitcase, Charles,” said Emily. “It’s packed up and ready.”

Charles departed immediately.

“It’s a great surprise meeting you here, Miss Trefusis,” said Inspector Narracott.

“I said au revoir,” Emily reminded him.

“I didn’t notice it at the time.”

“You’ve not seen the last of me by a long way,” said Emily candidly. “You know, Inspector Narracott, you’ve made a mistake. Jim’s not the man you’re after.”

“Indeed!”

“And what’s more,” said Emily, “I believe in your heart that you agree with me.”

“What makes you think that, Miss Trefusis?”

“What were you doing in Mr. Duke’s cottage?” retaliated Emily.

Narracott looked embarrassed, and she was quick to follow it up.

“You’re doubtful, Inspector—that’s what you are—doubtful. You thought you had got the right man and now you are not so sure, and so you are making a few investigations. Well, I have got something to tell you that may help. I’ll tell it to you on the way to Exhampton.”

Footsteps sounded down the road, and Ronnie Garfield appeared. He had the air of a truant, breathless and guilty.

“I say, Miss Trefusis,” he began. “What about a walk this afternoon? While my aunt has a nap, you know.”

“Impossible,” said Emily. “I’m going away. To Exeter.”

“What, not really! For good you mean?”

“Oh, no,” said Emily. “I shall be back again tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s splendid.”

Emily took something from the pocket of her sweater and handed it to him. "Give that to your aunt, will you? It's a recipe for coffee cake, and tell her that she was just in time, the cook is leaving today and so are the other servants. Be sure to tell her, she will be interested."

A far-off scream was borne on the breeze. "Ronnie," it said, "Ronnie, Ronnie."

"There's my aunt," said Ronnie starting nervously. "I had better go."

"I think you had," said Emily. "You've got green paint on your left cheek," she called after him. Ronnie Garfield disappeared through his aunt's gate.

"Here's my boyfriend with my suitcase," said Emily. "Come on, Inspector. I'll tell you everything in the car."

Twenty

VISIT TO AUNT JENNIFER

At half past two Dr. Warren received a call from Emily. He took an immediate fancy to this businesslike and attractive girl. Her questions were blunt and to the point.

“Yes, Miss Trefusis, I see exactly what you mean. You’ll understand that contrary to the popular belief in novels it is extremely difficult to fix the time of death accurately. I saw the body at eight o’clock. I can say decidedly that Captain Trevelyan had been dead at least two hours. How much longer than that would be difficult to say. If you were to tell me that he was killed at four o’clock, I should say that it was possible, though my own opinion inclines to a later time. On the other hand he could certainly not have been dead for much longer than that. Four and a half hours would be the outside limit.”

“Thank you,” said Emily, “that’s all I wanted to know.”

She caught the three ten train at the station and drove straight to the hotel where Mr. Dacres was staying.

Their interview was businesslike and unemotional. Mr. Dacres had known Emily since she was a small child and had managed her affairs for her since she came of age.

“You must prepare yourself for a shock, Emily,” he said. “Things are much worse for Jim Pearson than we imagined.”

“Worse?”

“Yes. It’s no good beating about the bush. Certain facts have come to light which are bound to show him up in a most unfavourable light. It is those

facts which led the police actually to charge him with the crime. I should not be acting in your interests if I withheld these facts from you.”

“Please tell me,” said Emily.

Her voice was perfectly calm and composed. Whatever the inward shock she might have felt, she had no intention of making an outward display of her feelings. It was not feelings that were going to help Jim Pearson, it was brains. She must keep all her wits about her.

“There is no doubt that he was in urgent and immediate need of money. I am not going to enter into the ethics of the situation at the moment. Pearson had apparently before now occasionally borrowed money—to use a euphemism—from his firm—I may say without their knowledge. He was fond of speculating in shares, and on one occasion previously, knowing that certain dividends were to be paid into his account in a week’s time, he anticipated them by using the firm’s money to buy certain shares which he had pretty certain knowledge were bound to go up. The transaction was quite satisfactory, the money was replaced and Pearson really doesn’t seem to have had any doubts as to the honesty of the transaction. Apparently he repeated this just over a week ago. This time an unforeseen thing occurred. The books of the firm were examined at certain stated times, but for some reason or other this date was advanced, and Pearson was faced with a very unpleasant dilemma. He was quite aware of the construction that would be put on his action and he was quite unable to raise the sum of money involved. He admits himself that he had tried in various quarters and failed when as a last resource he rushed down to Devonshire to lay the matter before his uncle and persuade him to help him. This Captain Trevelyan absolutely refused to do.

“Now, my dear Emily, we shall be quite unable to prevent these facts from being brought to light. The police have already unearthed the matter. And you see, don’t you, that we have here a very pressing and urgent motive for the crime? The moment Captain Trevelyan was dead Pearson could easily have obtained the necessary sum as an advance from Mr. Kirkwood and saved himself from disaster and possibly criminal prosecution.”

“Oh, the idiot,” said Emily helplessly.

“Quite so,” said Mr. Dacres dryly. “It seems to me that our only chance lies in proving that Jim Pearson was quite unaware of the provisions of his uncle’s will.”

There was a pause while Emily considered the matter. Then she said quietly:

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. All three of them knew—Sylvia, Jim and Brian. They often discussed it and laughed and joked about the rich uncle in Devonshire.”

“Dear, dear,” said Mr. Dacres. “That’s unfortunate.”

“You don’t think him guilty, Mr. Dacres?” asked Emily.

“Curiously enough I do not,” replied the lawyer. “In some ways Jim Pearson is a most transparent young man. He hasn’t, if you will allow me to say so, Emily, a very high standard of commercial honesty, but I do not believe for one minute that his hand sandbagged his uncle.”

“Well, that’s a good thing,” said Emily. “I wish the police thought the same.”

“Quite so. Our own impressions and ideas are of no practical use. The case against him is unfortunately strong. I am not going to disguise from you, my dear child, that the outlook is bad. I should suggest Lorimer, K.C., as the defence. Forlorn hope man they call him,” he added cheerfully.

“There is one thing I should like to know,” said Emily. “You have, of course, seen Jim?”

“Certainly.”

“I want you to tell me honestly if you think he has told the truth in other respects.” She outlined to him the idea that Enderby had suggested to her.

The lawyer considered the matter carefully before replying.

“It’s my impression,” he said, “that he is speaking the truth when he describes his interview with his uncle. But there is little doubt that he has got the wind up badly, and if he went round to the window, entered that way and came across his uncle’s dead body—he might just possibly be too scared to admit the fact and have concocted this other story.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Emily. “Next time you see him, Mr. Dacres, will you urge him to speak the truth? It may make the most tremendous difference.”

“I will do so. All the same,” he said after a moment or two’s pause, “I think you are mistaken in this idea. The news of Captain Trevelyan’s death was bandied around in Exhampton about eight thirty. At that time the last train had left for Exeter, but Jim Pearson got the first train available in the morning—a thoroughly unwise proceeding, by the way, as it called attention to his movements which otherwise would not have been aroused if he had left by a train at a more conventional hour. Now if, as you suggest, he discovered his uncle’s dead body some time after half past four, I think he would have left Exhampton straight away. There’s a train which leaves shortly after six and another at a quarter to eight.”

“That’s a point,” admitted Emily, “I didn’t think of that.”

“I have questioned him narrowly about his method of entering his uncle’s house,” went on Mr. Dacres. “He says that Captain Trevelyan made him remove his boots, and leave them on the doorstep. That accounts for no wet marks being discovered in the hall.”

“He doesn’t speak of having heard any sound—anything at all—that gives him the idea that there might have been someone else in the house?”

“He didn’t mention it to me. But I will ask him.”

“Thank you,” said Emily. “If I write a note can you take it to him?”

“Subject to its being read, of course.”

“Oh, it will be a very discreet one.”

She crossed to the writing table and scribbled a few words.

“Dearest Jim,—Everything’s going to be all right, so cheer up. I am working like the worst kind of slave to find out the truth. What an idiot you’ve been, darling.

Love from

Emily.”

“There,” she said.

Mr. Dacres read it but made no comment.

“I have taken pains with my handwriting,” said Emily, “so that the prison authorities can read it easily. Now, I must be off.”

“You will allow me to offer you a cup of tea.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Dacres. I have no time to lose. I am going to see Jim’s Aunt Jennifer.”

At The Laurels, Emily was informed that Mrs. Gardner was out but would be home shortly.

Emily smiled upon the parlourmaid.

“I’ll come in and wait then.”

“Would you like to see Nurse Davis?”

Emily was always ready to see anybody. “Yes,” she said promptly.

A few minutes later Nurse Davis, starched and curious, arrived.

“How do you do,” said Emily. “I am Emily Trefusis—a kind of niece of Mrs. Gardner’s. That is, I am going to be a niece, but my fiancé, Jim Pearson, has been arrested, as I expect you know.”

“Oh, it’s been too dreadful,” said Nurse Davis. “We saw it all in the papers this morning. What a terrible business. You seem to be bearing up wonderfully, Miss Trefusis—really wonderfully.”

There was a faint note of disapproval in the nurse’s voice. Hospital nurses, she implied, were able to bear up owing to their force of character, but lesser mortals were expected to give way.

“Well, one mustn’t sag at the knees,” said Emily. “I hope you don’t mind very much. I mean, it must be awkward for you to be associated with a family that has got a murder in it.”

“It’s very unpleasant, of course,” said Nurse Davis, unbending at this proof of consideration. “But one’s duty to one’s patient comes before everything.”

“How splendid,” said Emily. “It must be wonderful for Aunt Jennifer to feel she has somebody upon whom she can rely.”

“Oh, really,” said the nurse simpering, “you are too kind. But, of course, I have had curious experiences before this. Why, at the last case I attended —” Emily listened patiently to a long and scandalous anecdote comprising complicated divorce and paternity questions. After complimenting Nurse Davis on her tact, discretion and savoir faire, Emily slid back to the topic of the Gardners.

“I don’t know Aunt Jennifer’s husband at all,” she said. “I’ve never met him. He never goes away from home, does he?”

“No, poor fellow.”

“What exactly is the matter with him?”

Nurse Davis embarked on the subject with professional gusto.

“So, really he might get well again any minute,” Emily murmured thoughtfully.

“He would be terribly weak,” said the nurse.

“Oh, of course. But it makes it seem more hopeful, doesn’t it?”

The nurse shook her head with firm professional despondency.

“I don’t suppose there will be any cure in his case.”

Emily had copied down in her little notebook the timetable of what she called Aunt Jennifer’s alibi. She now murmured tentatively:

“How queer it seems to think that Aunt Jennifer was actually at the Pictures when her brother was being killed.”

“Very sad, isn’t it?” said Nurse Davis. “Of course, she couldn’t tell—but it gives one such a shock afterwards.”

Emily cast about in her mind to find out what she wanted to know without asking a direct question.

“Didn’t she have some queer kind of vision or premonition?” she inquired. “Wasn’t it you who met her in the hall when she came in and exclaimed that she looked quite queer?”

“Oh, no,” said the nurse. “It wasn’t me. I didn’t see her until we were sitting down to dinner together, and she seemed quite her ordinary self then. How very interesting.”

“I expect I am mixing it up with something else,” said Emily.

“Perhaps it was some other relation,” suggested Nurse Davis. “I came in rather late myself. I felt rather guilty about leaving my patient so long, but he himself had urged me to go.”

She suddenly looked at her watch.

“Oh, dear. He asked me for another hot water bottle. I must see about it at once. Will you excuse me, Miss Trefusis?”

Emily excused her and going over to the fireplace she put her finger on the bell.

The slipshod maid came with rather a frightened face.

“What’s your name?” said Emily.

“Beatrice, Miss.”

“Oh, Beatrice, I may not be able to wait to see my aunt, Mrs. Gardner, after all—I wanted to ask her about some shopping she did on Friday. Do you know if she brought a big parcel back with her?”

“No, Miss, I didn’t see her come in.”

“I thought you said she came in at six o’clock.”

“Yes, Miss, she did. I didn’t see her come in, but when I went to take some hot water to her room at seven o’clock it gave me a shock to find her lying in the dark on the bed. ‘Well, ma’am,’ I said to her, ‘You gave me quite a shock.’ ‘I came in quite a long time ago. At six o’clock,’ she said. I didn’t see a big parcel anywhere,” said Beatrice trying her hardest to be helpful.

“It’s all very difficult,” thought Emily. “One has to invent so many things. I’ve already invented a premonition and a big parcel, but so far as I can see one has to invent something if one doesn’t want to sound suspicious.” She smiled sweetly and said:

“That’s all right, Beatrice, it doesn’t matter.”

Beatrice left the room. Emily took a small local timetable out of her handbag and consulted it.

“Leave Exeter, St. David’s, three ten,” she murmured, “Arrive Exhampton, three forty-two. Time allowed for going to brother’s house and murdering him—how beastly and cold-blooded it sounds—and such nonsense too—say half an hour to three quarters. What are the trains back? There’s one at four twenty-five and there’s one Mr. Dacres mentioned at six ten, that gets in at twenty-three minutes to seven. Yes, it’s actually possible either way. It’s a pity there’s nothing to suspect the nurse for. She was out all the afternoon and nobody knows where she was. Of course, I don’t really

believe anybody in this house murdered Captain Trevelyan, but in a way it's comforting to know that they could have. Hello—there's the front door."

There was a murmur of voices in the hall and the door opened and Jennifer Gardner came into the room.

"I'm Emily Trefusis," said Emily. "You know—the one who is engaged to Jim Pearson."

"So you are Emily," said Mrs. Gardner shaking hands. "Well, this is a surprise."

Suddenly Emily felt very weak and small. Rather like a little girl in the act of doing something very silly. An extraordinary person, Aunt Jennifer. Character—that was what it was. Aunt Jennifer had about enough character for two and three-quarter people instead of one.

"Have you had tea, my dear? No? Then we'll have it here. Just a moment—I must go up and see Robert first."

A strange expression flitted over her face as she mentioned her husband's name. The hard, beautiful voice softened. It was like a light over dark ripples of water.

"She adores him," thought Emily, left alone in the drawing room. "All the same there's something frightening about Aunt Jennifer. I wonder if Uncle Robert likes being adored quite as much as that."

When Jennifer Gardner returned, she had taken off her hat. Emily admired the smooth sweep of the hair back from her forehead.

"Do you want to talk about things, Emily, or don't you? If you don't I shall quite understand."

"It isn't much good talking about them, is it?"

"We can only hope," said Mrs. Gardner, "that they will find the real murderer quickly. Just press the bell, will you, Emily? I'll send nurse's tea

up to her. I don't want her chattering down here. How I hate hospital nurses."

"Is she a good one?"

"I suppose she is. Robert says she is anyway. I dislike her intensely and always have. But Robert says she's far and away the best nurse we've had."

"She's rather good-looking," said Emily.

"Nonsense. With her ugly beefy hands?"

Emily watched her aunt's long white fingers as they touched the milk jug and the sugar tongs.

Beatrice came, took the cup of tea and a plate of eatables and left the room.

"Robert has been very upset over all this," said Mrs. Gardner. "He works himself into such curious states. I suppose it's all part of his illness really."

"He didn't know Captain Trevelyan well, did he?"

Jennifer Gardner shook her head.

"He neither knew him nor cared about him. To be honest, I myself can't pretend any great sorrow over his death. He was a cruel grasping man, Emily. He knew the struggle we have had. The poverty! He knew that a loan of money at the right time might have given Robert special treatment that would have made all the difference. Well, retribution has overtaken him."

She spoke in a deep brooding voice.

"What a strange woman she is," thought Emily. "Beautiful and terrible, like something out of a Greek play."

"It may still not be too late," said Mrs. Gardner. "I wrote to the lawyers at Exhampton today, to ask them if I could have a certain sum of money in advance. The treatment I am speaking of is in some respects what they

would call a quack remedy, but it has been successful in a large number of cases. Emily—how wonderful it will be if Robert is able to walk again.”

Her face was glowing, lit up as though by a lamp.

Emily was tired. She had had a long day, little or nothing to eat, and she was worn out by suppressed emotion. The room kept going away and coming back again.

“Aren’t you feeling well, dear?”

“It’s all right,” gasped Emily, and to her own surprise, annoyance and humiliation burst into tears.

Mrs. Gardner did not attempt to rise and console her, for which Emily was grateful. She just sat silently until Emily’s tears should subside. She murmured in a thoughtful voice:

“Poor child. It’s very unlucky that Jim Pearson should have been arrested—very unlucky. I wish—something could be done about it.”

CONVERSATIONS

Left to his own devices Charles Enderby did not relax his efforts. To familiarize himself with life as lived in Sittaford village he had only to turn on Mrs. Curtis much as you would turn on the tap of a hydrant. Listening slightly dazed to a stream of anecdote, reminiscence, rumours, surmise and meticulous detail he endeavoured valiantly to sift the grain from the chaff. He then mentioned another name and immediately the force of the water was directed in that direction. He heard all about Captain Wyatt, his tropical temper, his rudeness, his quarrels with his neighbours, his occasional amazing graciousness, usually to personable young women. The life he led his Indian servant, the peculiar times he had his meals and the exact diet that composed them. He heard about Mr. Rycroft's library, his hair tonics, his insistence on strict tidiness and punctuality, his inordinate curiosity over other people's doings, his recent selling of a few old prized personal possessions, his inexplicable fondness for birds, and the prevalent idea that Mrs. Willett was setting her cap at him. He heard about Miss Percehouse and her tongue and the way she bullied her nephew, and of the rumours of the gay life that same nephew led in London. He heard all over again of Major Burnaby's friendship with Captain Trevelyan, their reminiscences of the past and their fondness for chess. He heard everything that was known about the Willetts, including the belief that Miss Violet Willett was leading on Mr. Ronnie Garfield and that she didn't really mean to have him. It was hinted that she made mysterious excursions to the moor and that she had been seen walking there with a young man. And it was doubtless for that reason, so Mrs. Curtis had surmised, that they had come to this desolate spot. Her mother had taken her right away, "to get right over it like." But there—"girls can be far more artful than ladies ever dream of." About Mr. Duke, there was curiously little to hear. He had been there only a short time and his activities seemed to be solely horticultural.

It was half past three, and, with his head spinning from the effects of Mrs. Curtis's conversation, Mr. Enderby went out for a stroll. His intention was

to cultivate the acquaintance of Miss Percehouse's nephew more closely. Prudent reconnaissance in the neighbourhood of Miss Percehouse's cottage proved unavailing, but by a stroke of good fortune he ran into that young man just as he was emerging disconsolately from the gates of Sittaford House. He had all the appearance of having been sent away with a flea in his ear.

"Hello," said Charles. "I say, isn't that Captain Trevelyan's house?"

"That's right," said Ronnie.

"I was hoping to get a snapshot of it this morning. For my paper, you know," he added. "But this weather is hopeless for photography."

Ronnie accepted this statement in all good faith without reflecting that if photography was only possible on days of brilliant sunshine, the pictures appearing in the daily papers would be few.

"It must be a very interesting job—yours," he said.

"A dog's life," said Charles faithful to the convention of never showing enthusiasm about one's work. He looked over his shoulder at Sittaford House. "Rather a gloomy place I should imagine."

"No end of a difference there since the Willetts moved in," said Ronnie. "I was down here last year about the same time, and really you would hardly take it for the same place, and yet, I don't know quite what they have done. Moved the furniture about a bit, I suppose, got cushions and things of that sort about. It's been a godsend to me their being there, I can tell you."

"Can't be a very jolly spot as a rule, I suppose," said Charles.

"Jolly? If I lived here a fortnight I should pass out altogether. How my aunt manages to cling on to life in the way she does beats me. You haven't seen her cats, have you? I had to comb one of them this morning and look at the way the brute scratched me." He held out a hand and an arm for inspection.

"Rather rough luck," said Charles.

“I should say it was. I say, are you doing any sleuthing? If so, can I help? Be the Watson to your Sherlock, or anything of that kind?”

“Any clues in Sittaford House?” inquired Charles casually. “I mean did Captain Trevelyan leave any of his things there?”

“I don’t think so. My aunt was saying he moved lock, stock and barrel. Took his elephant’s trotters and his hippopotamus’s toothy pegs and all the sporting rifles and whatnots.”

“Almost as though he didn’t mean to come back,” said Charles.

“I say—that’s an idea. You don’t think it was suicide, do you?”

“A man who can hit himself correctly on the back of the head with a sandbag would be something of an artist in the suicide world,” said Charles.

“Yes, I thought there wasn’t much in that idea. Looks as if he had a premonition though,” Ronnie’s face brightened. “Look here, what about this? Enemies on his track, he knows they’re coming, so he clears out and passes the buck, as it were, to the Willetts.”

“The Willetts were a bit of a miracle by themselves,” said Charles.

“Yes, I can’t make it out. Fancy planting yourself down here in the country like this. Violet doesn’t seem to mind—actually says she likes it. I don’t know what’s the matter with her today. I suppose it’s the domestic trouble. I can’t think why women worry so about servants. If they cut up nasty, just push them out.”

“That’s just what they have done, isn’t it?” said Charles.

“Yes, I know. But they are in a great stew about it all. Mother lying down with screaming hysterics or something and daughter snapping like a turtle. Fairly pushed me out just now.”

“They haven’t had the police here, have they?”

Ronnie stared.

“The police, no, why would they?”

“Well, I wondered. Seeing Inspector Narracott in Sittaford this morning.”

Ronnie dropped his stick with a clatter and stooped to pick it up.

“Who did you say was in Sittaford this morning—Inspector Narracott?”

“Yes.”

“Is he—is he the man in charge of the Trevelyan case?”

“That’s right.”

“What was he doing in Sittaford? Where did you see him?”

“Oh, I suppose he was just nosing about,” said Charles, “checking up Captain Trevelyan’s past life so to speak.”

“You think that’s all?”

“I suppose so.”

“He doesn’t think anyone in Sittaford had anything to do with it?”

“That would be very unlikely, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, frightfully. But then you know what the police are—always butting in on the wrong tack. At least that’s what it says in detective novels.”

“I think they are really rather an intelligent body of men,” said Charles. “Of course, the Press does a lot to help them.” he added. “But if you really read a case carefully it’s amazing the way they track down murderers with practically no evidence to go on.”

“Oh—well—it’s nice to know that, isn’t it? They have certainly got on to this man Pearson pretty quick. It seems a pretty clear case.”

“Crystal clear,” said Charles. “A good thing it wasn’t you or me, eh? Well, I must be sending off a few wires. They don’t seem very used to telegrams in this place. If you send more than half a crown’s worth at one go they seem to think you are an escaped lunatic.”

Charles sent his telegrams, bought a packet of cigarettes, a few doubtful-looking bull’s eyes and two very aged paperbacked novelettes. He then returned to the cottage, threw himself on his bed and slept peacefully, blissfully unaware that he and his affairs, particularly Miss Emily Trefusis, were being discussed in various places all around him.

It is fairly safe to say that there were only three topics of conversation at present in Sittaford. One was the murder, one was the escape of the convict, and the other was Miss Emily Trefusis and her cousin. Indeed at a certain moment, four separate conversations were going on with her as their main theme.

Conversation No. 1 was at Sittaford House, where Violet Willett and her mother had just washed up their own tea things owing to the domestic retreat.

“It was Mrs. Curtis who told me,” said Violet.

She still looked pale and wan.

“It’s almost a disease the way that woman talks,” said her mother.

“I know. It seems the girl is actually stopping there with a cousin or something. She did mention this morning that she was at Mrs. Curtis’s, but I thought that that was simply because Miss Percehouse hadn’t room for her. And now it seems that she’d never even seen Miss Percehouse till this morning!”

“I dislike that woman intensely,” said Mrs. Willett.

“Mrs. Curtis?”

“No, no, the Percehouse woman. That kind of woman is dangerous. They live for what they can find out about other people. Sending that girl along here for a recipe for coffee cake! I’d like to have sent her a poisoned cake. That would have stopped her interfering for good and all!”

“I suppose I ought to have realized—” began Violet. But her mother interrupted her.

“How could you, my dear! And anyway what harm is done?”

“Why do you think she came here?”

“I don’t suppose she had anything definite in mind. She was just spying out the land. Is Mrs. Curtis sure about her being engaged to Jim Pearson?”

“That girl told Mr. Rycroft so, I believe. Mrs. Curtis said she suspected it from the first.”

“Well, then the whole thing’s natural enough. She’s just looking about aimlessly for something that might help.”

“You didn’t see her, Mother,” said Violet. “She isn’t aimless.”

“I wish I had seen her,” said Mrs. Willett. “But my nerves were all to pieces this morning. Reaction, I suppose, after that interview with the police inspector yesterday.”

“You were wonderful, Mother. If only I hadn’t been such an utter fool—to go and faint. Oh! I’m ashamed of myself for giving the whole show away. And there were you perfectly calm and collected—not turning a hair.”

“I’m in pretty good training,” said Mrs. Willett in a hard dry voice. “If you’d been through what I’ve been through—but there, I hope you never will, my child. I trust and believe that you’ve got a happy, peaceful life ahead of you.”

Violet shook her head.

“I’m afraid—I’m afraid—”

“Nonsense—and as for saying you gave the show away by fainting yesterday—nothing of the kind. Don’t worry.”

“But that Inspector—he’s bound to think—”

“That it was the mention of Jim Pearson made you faint? Yes—he’ll think that all right. He’s no fool, that Inspector Narracott. But what if he does? He’ll suspect a connection—and he’ll look for it—and he won’t find it.”

“You think not?”

“Of course not! How can he? Trust me, Violet dear. That’s cast-iron certainty and, in a way, perhaps that faint of yours was a lucky happening. We’ll think so anyway.”

Conversation No. 2 was in Major Burnaby’s cottage. It was a somewhat one-sided one, the brunt of it being borne by Mrs. Curtis, who had been poised for departure for the last half hour, having dropped in to collect Major Burnaby’s laundry.

“Like my Great Aunt Sarah’s Belinda, that’s what I said to Curtis this morning,” said Mrs. Curtis triumphantly. “A deep one—and one that can twist all the men round her little finger.”

A great grunt from Major Burnaby.

“Engaged to one young man and carrying on with another,” said Mrs. Curtis. “That’s my Great Aunt Sarah’s Belinda all over. And not for the fun of it, mark you. It’s not just flightiness—she’s a deep one. And now young Mr. Garfield—she’ll have him roped in before you can say knife. Never have I seen a young gentleman look more like a sheep than he did this morning—and that’s a sure sign.”

She paused for breath.

“Well, well,” said Major Burnaby. “Don’t let me keep you, Mrs. Curtis.”

“Curtis will be wanting his tea and that’s a fact,” said Mrs. Curtis without moving. “I was never one to stand about gossiping. Get on with your job—

that's what I say. And talking about jobs, what do you say, sir, to a good turn out?"

"No!" said Major Burnaby with force.

"It's a month since it's been done."

"No. I like to know where to lay my hand on everything. After one of these turn outs nothing's ever put back in its place."

Mrs. Curtis sighed. She was an impassioned cleaner and turner out.

"It's Captain Wyatt as could do with a spring cleaning," she observed.

"That nasty native of his—what does he know about cleaning, I should like to know? Nasty black fellow."

"Nothing better than a native servant," said Major Burnaby. "They know their job and they don't talk."

Any hint the last sentence might have contained was lost on Mrs. Curtis. Her mind had reverted to a former topic.

"Two telegrams she got—two arriving in half an hour. Gave me quite a turn it did. But she read them as cool as anything. And then she told me she was going to Exeter and wouldn't be back till tomorrow."

"Did she take her young man with her?" inquired the Major with a gleam of hope.

"No, he's still here. A pleasant-spoken young gentleman. He and she'd make a nice pair."

Grunt from Major Burnaby.

"Well," said Mrs. Curtis. "I'll be getting along."

The Major hardly dared breathe for fear he might distract her from her purpose. But this time Mrs. Curtis was as good as her word. The door closed behind her.

With a sigh of relief the Major drew forth a pipe and began to peruse a prospectus of a certain mine which was couched in terms so blatantly optimistic that it would have aroused suspicion in any heart but that of a widow or a retired soldier.

“Twelve per cent,” murmured Major Burnaby. “That sounds pretty good. . . .”

Next door Captain Wyatt was laying down the law to Mr. Rycroft.

“Fellows like you,” he said, “don’t know anything of the world. You’ve never lived. You’ve never roughed it.”

Mr. Rycroft said nothing. It was so difficult not to say the wrong thing to Captain Wyatt that it was usually safer not to reply at all.

The Captain leaned over the side of his invalid chair.

“Where’s that bitch got to? Nice-looking girl,” he added.

The association of ideas in his mind was quite natural. It was less so to Mr. Rycroft, who looked at him in a scandalized fashion.

“What’s she doing here? That’s what I want to know?” demanded Captain Wyatt. “Abdul!”

“Sahib?”

“Where’s Bully? Has she got out again?”

“She in kitchen, Sahib.”

“Well, don’t feed her.” He sank back in his chair again and proceeded on his second tack. “What does she want here? Who’s she going to talk to in a place like this? All you old fogies will bore her stiff. I had a word with her this morning. Expect she was surprised to find a man like me in a place like this.”

He twisted his moustache.

“She’s James Pearson’s fiancée,” said Mr. Rycroft. “You know—the man who has been arrested for Trevelyan’s murder.”

Wyatt dropped a glass of whisky he was just raising to his lips with a crash upon the floor. He immediately roared for Abdul and cursed him in no measured terms for not placing a table at a convenient angle to his chair. He then resumed the conversation.

“So that’s who she is. Too good for a counter jumper like that. A girl like that wants a real man.”

“Young Pearson is very good-looking,” said Mr. Rycroft.

“Good-looking—good-looking—a girl doesn’t want a barber’s block. What does that sort of young man who works in an office every day know of life? What experience has he had of reality?”

“Perhaps the experience of being tried for murder will be sufficient reality to last him for some time,” said Mr. Rycroft dryly.

“Police sure he did it, eh?”

“They must be fairly sure or they wouldn’t have arrested him.”

“Country bumpkins,” said Captain Wyatt contemptuously.

“Not quite,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Inspector Narracott struck me this morning as an able and efficient man.”

“Where did you see him this morning?”

“He called at my house.”

“He didn’t call at mine,” said Captain Wyatt in an injured fashion.

“Well, you weren’t a close friend of Trevelyan’s or anything like that.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Trevelyan was a skinflint and I told him so to his face. He couldn’t come bossing it over me. I didn’t kowtow to him

like the rest of the people here. Always dropping in—dropping in—too much dropping in. If I don't choose to see anyone for a week, or a month, or a year, that's my business."

"You haven't seen anyone for a week now, have you?" said Mr. Rycroft.

"No, and why should I?" The irate invalid banged the table. Mr. Rycroft was aware, as usual, of having said the wrong thing. "Why the bloody hell should I? Tell me that?"

Mr. Rycroft was prudently silent. The Captain's wrath subsided.

"All the same," he growled, "if the police want to know about Trevelyan I'm the man they should have come to. I've knocked about the world, and I've got judgment. I can size a man up for what he's worth. What's the good of going to a lot of dodderers and old women? What they want is a man's judgment."

He banged the table again.

"Well," said Mr. Rycroft, "I suppose they think they know themselves what they are after."

"They inquired about me," said Captain Wyatt. "They would naturally."

"Well—er—I don't quite remember," said Mr. Rycroft cautiously.

"Why can't you remember? You're not in your dotage yet."

"I expect I was—er—rattled," said Mr. Rycroft soothingly.

"Rattled, were you? Afraid of the police? I'm not afraid of the police. Let 'em come here. That's what I say. I'll show them. Do you know I shot a cat at a hundred yards the other night?"

"Did you?" said Mr. Rycroft.

The Captain's habit of letting off a revolver at real or imaginary cats was a sore trial to his neighbours.

“Well, I’m tired,” said Captain Wyatt suddenly. “Have another drink before you go?”

Rightly interpreting this hint, Mr. Rycroft rose to his feet. Captain Wyatt continued to urge a drink upon him.

“You’d be twice the man if you drank a bit more. A man who can’t enjoy a drink isn’t a man at all.”

But Mr. Rycroft continued to decline the offer. He had already consumed one whisky and soda of most unusual strength.

“What tea do you drink?” asked Wyatt. “I don’t know anything about tea. Told Abdul to get some. Thought that girl might like to come in to tea one day. Darned pretty girl. Must do something for her. She must be bored to death in a place like this with no one to talk to.”

“There’s a young man with her,” said Mr. Rycroft.

“The young men of the present day make me sick,” said Captain Wyatt. “What’s the good of them?”

This being a difficult query to answer suitably, Mr. Rycroft did not attempt it, he took his departure.

The bull terrier bitch accompanied him to the gate and caused him acute alarm.

In No. 4 The Cottages, Miss Percehouse was speaking to her nephew, Ronald.

“If you like to moon about after a girl who doesn’t want you, that is your affair, Ronald,” she was saying. “Better stick to the Willett girl. You may have a chance there, though I think it is extremely unlikely.”

“Oh, I say,” protested Ronnie.

“The other thing I have to say is, that if there was a police officer in Sittaford I should have been informed of it. Who knows, I might have been

able to give him valuable information.”

“I didn’t know about it myself till after he had gone.”

“That is so like you, Ronnie. Absolutely typical.”

“Sorry, Aunt Caroline.”

“And when you are painting the garden furniture, there is no need to paint your face as well. It doesn’t improve it and it wastes the paint.”

“Sorry, Aunt Caroline.”

“And now,” said Miss Percehouse closing her eyes, “don’t argue with me any more. I’m tired.”

Ronnie shuffled his feet and looked uncomfortable.

“Well?” said Miss Percehouse sharply.

“Oh! nothing—only—”

“Yes?”

“Well, I was wondering if you’d mind if I blew in to Exeter tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Well, I want to meet a fellow there.”

“What kind of a fellow?”

“Oh! just a fellow.”

“If a young man wishes to tell lies, he should do so well,” said Miss Percehouse.

“Oh! I say—but—”

“Don’t apologize.”

“It’s all right then? I can go?”

“I don’t know what you mean by saying, ‘I can go?’ as though you were a small child. You are over twenty-one.”

“Yes, but what I mean is, I don’t want—”

Miss Percehouse closed her eyes again.

“I have asked you once before not to argue. I am tired and wish to rest. If the ‘fellow’ you are meeting in Exeter wears skirts and is called Emily Trefusis, more fool you—that is all I have to say.”

“But look here—”

“I am tired, Ronald. That’s enough.”

Twenty-two

NOCTURNAL ADVENTURES OF CHARLES

Charles was not looking forward with any relish to the prospect of his night's vigil. He privately considered that it was likely to be a wild goose chase. Emily, he considered, was possessed of a too vivid imagination.

He was convinced that she had read into the few words she had overheard a meaning that had its origin in her own brain. Probably sheer weariness had induced Mrs. Willett to yearn for night to come.

Charles looked out of his window and shivered. It was a piercingly cold night, raw and foggy—the last night one would wish to spend in the open hanging about and waiting for something, very nebulous in nature, to happen.

Still he dared not yield to his intense desire to remain comfortably indoors. He recalled the liquid melodiousness of Emily's voice as she said, "It's wonderful to have someone you can really rely on."

She relied on him, Charles, and she should not rely in vain. What? Fail that beautiful, helpless girl? Never.

Besides, he reflected as he donned all the spare underclothes he possessed before encasing himself in two pullovers and his overcoat, things were likely to be deucedly unpleasant if Emily on her return found out that he had not carried out his promise.

She would probably say the most unpleasant things. No, he couldn't risk it. But as for anything happening—

And anyway, when and how was it going to happen? He couldn't be everywhere at once. Probably whatever was going to happen would happen inside Sittaford House and he would never know a thing about it.

“Just like a girl,” he grumbled to himself, “waltzing off to Exeter and leaving me to do the dirty work.”

And then he remembered once more the liquid tones of Emily’s voice as she expressed her reliance on him, and he felt ashamed of his outburst.

He completed his toilet, rather after the model of Tweedledee, and effected a surreptitious exit from the cottage.

The night was even colder and more unpleasant than he had thought. Did Emily realize all he was about to suffer on her behalf? He hoped so.

His hand went tenderly to a pocket and caressed a hidden flask concealed in a near pocket.

“The boy’s best friend,” he murmured. “It would be a night like this of course.”

With suitable precautions he introduced himself into the grounds of Sittaford House. The Willetts kept no dog, so there was no fear of alarm from that quarter. A light in the gardener’s cottage showed that it was inhabited. Sittaford House itself was in darkness save for one lighted window on the first floor.

“Those two women are alone in the house,” thought Charles. “I shouldn’t care for that myself. A bit creepy!”

He supposed Emily had really overheard that sentence, “Will tonight never come?” What did it really mean?

“I wonder,” he thought to himself, “if they mean to do a flit? Well, whatever happens, little Charles is going to be here to see it.”

He circled the house at a discreet distance. Owing to the foggy nature of the night he had no fears of being observed. Everything as far as he could see appeared to be as usual. A cautious visiting of the outbuildings showed them to be locked.

“I hope something does happen,” said Charles as the hours passed. He took a prudent sip from his flask. “I’ve never known anything like this cold. ‘What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?’ can’t have been any worse than this.”

He glanced at his watch and was surprised to find that it was still only twenty minutes to twelve. He had been convinced that it must be nearly dawn.

An unexpected sound made him prick up his ears excitedly. It was the sound of a bolt being very gently drawn back in its socket, and it came from the direction of the house. Charles made a noiseless sprint from bush to bush. Yes, he had been quite right, the small side door was slowly opening. A dark figure stood on the threshold. It was peering anxiously out into the night.

“Mrs. or Miss Willett,” said Charles to himself. “The fair Violet, I think.”

After waiting a minute or two, the figure stepped out on the path and closed the door noiselessly behind her and started to walk away from the house in the opposite direction to the front drive. The path in question led up behind Sittaford House, passing through a small plantation of trees and so out on to the open moor.

The path wound quite near the bushes where Charles was concealed, so near that Charles was able to recognize the woman as she passed. He had been quite right, it was Violet Willett. She was wearing a long dark coat and had a beret on her head.

She went on up, and as quietly as possible Charles followed her. He had no fears of being seen, but he was alive to the danger of being overheard. He was particularly anxious not to alarm the girl. Owing to his care in this respect she outdistanced him. For a moment or two he was afraid lest he should lose her, but as he in his turn wound his way anxiously through the plantation of trees he saw her standing a little way ahead of him. Here the low wall which surrounded the estate was broken by a gate. Violet Willett was standing by this gate, leaning over it peering out into the night.

Charles crept up as near as he dared and waited. The time passed. The girl had a small pocket torch with her and once she switched it on for a moment or two, directing it, Charles thought, to see the time by the wristwatch she was wearing, then she leant over the gate again in the same attitude of expectant interest. Suddenly, Charles heard a low whistle twice repeated.

He saw the girl start to sudden attention. She leant farther over the gate and from her lips came the same signal—a low whistle twice repeated.

Then with startling suddenness a man's figure loomed out of the night. A low exclamation came from the girl. She moved back a pace or two, the gate swung inward and the man joined her. She spoke to him in a low hurried voice. Unable to catch what they said, Charles moved forward somewhat imprudently. A twig snapped beneath his feet. The man swung round instantly.

“What's that?” he said.

He caught sight of Charles's retreating figure.

“Hie, you stop! What are you doing here?”

With a bound he sprang after Charles. Charles turned and tackled him adroitly. The next moment they were rolling over and over together locked in a tight embrace.

The tussle was a short one. Charles's assailant was by far the heavier and stronger of the two. He rose to his feet jerking his captive with him.

“Switch on that light, Violet,” he said, “let's have a look at this fellow.”

The girl who had been standing terrified a few paces away came forward and switched on the torch obediently.

“It must be the man who is staying in the village,” she said. “A journalist.”

“A journalist, eh?” exclaimed the other. “I don't like the breed. What are you doing, you skunk, nosing round private grounds at this time of night?”

The torch wavered in Violet's hand. For the first time Charles was given a full view of his antagonist. For a few minutes he had entertained the wild idea that the visitor might have been the escaped convict. One look at the other dispelled any such fancy. This was a young man not more than twenty-four or -five years of age. Tall, good-looking and determined, with none of the hunted criminal about him.

"Now then," he said sharply, "what's your name?"

"My name is Charles Enderby," said Charles. "You haven't told me yours," he continued.

"Confound your cheek!"

A sudden flash of inspiration came to Charles. An inspired guess had saved him more than once. It was a long shot, but he believed that he was right.

"I think, however," he said quietly, "that I can guess it."

"Eh?"

The other was clearly taken aback.

"I think," said Charles, "that I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Brian Pearson from Australia. Is that so?"

There was a silence—rather a long silence. Charles had a feeling that the tables were turned.

"How the devil you knew that I can't think," said the other at last, "but you're right. My name is Brian Pearson."

"In that case," said Charles, "supposing we adjourn to the house and talk things over!"

Twenty-three

AT HAZELMOOR

Major Burnaby was doing his accounts or—to use a more Dickens-like phrase—he was looking into his affairs. The Major was an extremely methodical man. In a calf-bound book he kept a record of shares bought, shares sold and the accompanying loss or profit—usually a loss, for in common with most retired army men the Major was attracted by a high rate of interest rather than a modest percentage coupled with safety.

“These oil wells looked all right,” he was muttering. “Seems as though there ought to have been a fortune in it. Almost as bad as that diamond mine! Canadian land, that ought to be sound now.”

His cogitations were interrupted as the head of Mr. Ronald Garfield appeared at the open window.

“Hello,” said Ronnie cheerfully, “I hope I’m not butting in?”

“If you are coming in go round to the front door,” said Major Burnaby. “Mind the rock plants. I believe you are standing on them at the moment.”

Ronnie retreated with an apology and presently presented himself at the front door.

“Wipe your feet on the mat, if you don’t mind,” cried the Major.

He found young men extremely trying. Indeed, the only young man towards whom he had felt any kindness for a long time was the journalist, Charles Enderby.

“A nice young chap,” the Major had said to himself. “And very interested, too, in what I have told him about the Boer War.”

Towards Ronnie Garfield the Major felt no such kindness. Practically everything that the unfortunate Ronnie said or did managed to rub the Major up the wrong way. Still, hospitality is hospitality.

“Have a drink?” said the Major, loyal to that tradition.

“No thanks. As a matter of fact I just dropped in to see if we couldn’t get together. I wanted to go to Exhampton today and I hear Elmer is booked to take you in.”

Burnaby nodded.

“Got to go over Trevelyan’s things,” he explained. “The police have done with the place now.”

“Well, you see,” said Ronnie rather awkwardly, “I particularly wanted to go into Exhampton today. I thought if we could get together and share and share alike as it were. Eh? What about it?”

“Certainly,” said the Major. “I am agreeable. Do you a lot more good to walk,” he added. “Exercise. None of you young chaps nowadays take any exercise. A brisk six miles there and a brisk six miles back would do you all the good in the world. If it weren’t that I needed the car to bring some of Trevelyan’s things back here, I should be walking myself. Getting soft—that’s the curse of the present day.”

“Oh, well,” said Ronnie, “I don’t believe in being strenuous myself. But I’m glad we’ve settled that all right. Elmer said you were starting at eleven o’clock. Is that right?”

“That’s it.”

“Good. I’ll be there.”

Ronnie was not quite so good as his word. His idea of being on the spot was to be ten minutes late, and he found Major Burnaby fuming and fretting and not at all inclined to be placated by a careless apology.

“What a fuss old buffers make,” thought Ronnie to himself. “They have no idea what a curse they are to everybody with their punctuality, and everything done on the dot of the minute, and their cursed exercise and keeping fit.”

His mind played agreeably for a few minutes with the idea of a marriage between Major Burnaby and his aunt. Which, he wondered, would get the better of it? He thought his aunt every time. Rather amusing to think of her clapping her hands and uttering piercing cries to summon the Major to her side.

Banishing these reflections from his mind he proceeded to enter into cheerful conversation.

“Sittaford has become a pretty gay spot—what? Miss Trefusis and this chap Enderby and the lad from Australia—by the way, when did he blow in? There he was as large as life this morning and nobody knew where he had come from. It’s been worrying my aunt blue in the face.”

“He is staying with the Willetts,” said Major Burnaby tartly.

“Yes, but where did he blow in from? Even the Willetts haven’t got a private aerodrome. You know, I think there’s something deuced mysterious about this lad Pearson. He’s got what I call a nasty gleam in his eye—a very nasty glint. It’s my impression that he’s the chap who did in poor old Trevelyan.”

The Major made no reply.

“The way I look at it is this,” continued Ronnie, “fellows that go off to the Colonies are usually bad hats. Their relations don’t like them and push them out there for that reason. Very well then—there you are. The bad hat comes back, short of money, visits wealthy uncle in the neighbourhood of Christmastime, wealthy relative won’t cough up to impecunious nephew—and impecunious nephew bats him one. That’s what I call a theory.”

“You should mention it to the police,” said Major Burnaby.

“I thought you might do that,” said Mr. Garfield. “You’re Narracott’s little pal, aren’t you? By the way he hasn’t been nosing about Sittaford again, has he?”

“Not that I know about.”

“Not meeting you at the house today, is he?”

The shortness of the Major’s answers seemed to strike Ronnie at last.

“Well,” he said vaguely, “that’s that,” and relapsed into a thoughtful silence.

At Exhampton the car drew up outside the Three Crowns. Ronnie alighted and after arranging with the Major that they would rendezvous there at half past four for the return journey, he strode off in the direction of such shops as Exhampton offered.

The Major went first to see Mr. Kirkwood. After a brief conversation with him, he took the keys and started off for Hazelmoor.

He had told Evans to meet him there at twelve o’clock, and he found the faithful retainer waiting on the doorstep. With a rather grim face, Major Burnaby inserted the key into the front door and passed into the empty house, Evans at his heels. He had not been in it since the night of the tragedy, and in spite of his iron determination to show no weakness, he gave a slight shiver as he passed the drawing room.

Evans and the Major worked together in sympathy and silence. When either of them made a brief remark it was duly appreciated and understood by the other.

“Unpleasant job this, but it has to be done,” said Major Burnaby, and Evans, sorting out socks into neat piles, and counting pyjamas, responded.

“It seems rather unnatural like, but as you say, sir, it’s got to be done.”

Evans was deft and efficient at his work. Everything was neatly sorted and arranged and classified in heaps. At one o’clock they repaired to the Three Crowns for a short midday meal. When they returned to the house the

Major suddenly caught Evans by the arm as the latter closed the front door behind him.

“Hush,” he said. “Do you hear that footstep overhead? It’s—it’s in Joe’s bedroom.”

“My Gawd, sir. So it is.”

A kind of superstitious terror held them both for a minute, and then, breaking loose from it, and with an angry squaring of the shoulders, the Major strode to the foot of the stairs and shouted in a stentorian voice:

To his intense surprise and annoyance and yet, be it confessed, to his slight relief, Ronnie Garfield appeared at the top of the stairs. He looked embarrassed and sheepish.

“Hello,” he said. “I have been looking for you.”

“What do you mean, looking for me?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you that I shan’t be ready at half past four. I’ve got to go into Exeter. So don’t wait for me. I’ll have to get a car up from Exhampton.”

“How did you get into this house?” asked the Major.

“The door was open,” exclaimed Ronnie. “Naturally I thought you were here.”

The Major turned to Evans sharply.

“Didn’t you lock it when you came out?”

“No, sir, I hadn’t got the key.”

“Stupid of me,” muttered the Major.

“You don’t mind, do you?” said Ronnie. “I couldn’t see anyone downstairs so I went upstairs and had a look round.”

“Of course, it doesn’t matter,” snapped the Major, “you startled me, that’s all.”

“Well,” said Ronnie airily. “I shall be pushing along now. So long.”

The Major grunted. Ronnie came down the stairs.

“I say,” he said boyishly, “do you mind telling me—er—er—where it happened?”

The Major jerked a thumb in the direction of the drawing room.

“Oh, may I look inside?”

“If you like,” growled the Major.

Ronnie opened the drawing room door. He was absent a few minutes and then returned.

The Major had gone up the stairs, but Evans was in the hall. He had the air of a bulldog on guard; his small deep-set eyes watched Ronnie with a somewhat malicious scrutiny.

“I say,” said Ronnie. “I thought you could never wash out blood stains. I thought, however much you washed them, they always came back. Oh, of course—the old fellow was sandbagged, wasn’t he? Stupid of me. It was one of these, wasn’t it?” He took up a long narrow bolster that lay against one of the other doors. He weighed it thoughtfully and balanced it in his hand. “Nice little toy, eh?” He made a few tentative swings with it in the air.

Evans was silent.

“Well,” said Ronnie, realizing that the silence was not a wholly appreciative one, “I’d better be getting along. I’m afraid I’ve been a bit tactless, eh?” He jerked his head towards the upper story. “I forgot about them being such pals and all that. Two of a kind, weren’t they? Well, I’m really going now. Sorry if I’ve said all the wrong things.”

He walked across the hall and out through the front door. Evans stayed impassively in the hall, and only when he had heard the latch of the gate close behind Mr. Garfield did he mount the stairs and rejoin Major Burnaby. Without any word or comment he resumed where he had left off, going straight across the room and kneeling down in front of the boot cupboard.

At half past three their task was finished. One trunk of clothes and underclothes was allotted to Evans, and another was strapped up ready to be sent to the Seamen's Orphanage. Papers and bills were packed into an attaché case and Evans was given instructions to see a local firm of removers about the storage of the various sporting trophies and heads, as there was no room for them in Major Burnaby's cottage. Since Hazelmoor was only rented furnished no other questions arose.

When all this was settled Evans cleared his throat nervously once or twice and then said:

"Beg pardon, sir, but—I'll be wanting a job to look after a gentleman, same as I did to look after the Capting."

"Yes, yes, you can tell anyone to apply to me for a recommendation. That will be quite all right."

"Begging your pardon, sir, that wasn't quite what I meant. Rebecca and me, sir, we've talked it over and we was wondering if, sir—if maybe you would give us a trial?"

"Oh! but—well—I look after myself as you know. That old what's her name comes in and cleans for me once a day and cooks a few things. That's—er—about all I can afford."

"It isn't the money that matters so much, sir," said Evans quickly. "You see, sir, I was very fond of the Capting and—well, if I could do for you, sir, the same as I did for him, well, it would be almost like the same thing, if you know what I mean."

The Major cleared his throat and averted his eyes.

“Very decent of you, 'pon my word. I'll—I'll think about it.” And escaping with alacrity he almost bolted down the road. Evans stood looking after him, an understanding smile upon his face.

“Like as two peas, him and the Captin,” he murmured.

And then a puzzled expression came over his face.

“Where can they have got to?” he murmured. “It's a bit queer that. I must ask Rebecca what she thinks.”

Twenty-four

INSPECTOR NARRACOTT DISCUSSES THE CASE

“I am not entirely happy about it, sir,” said Inspector Narracott.

The Chief Constable looked at him inquiringly.

“No,” said Inspector Narracott. “I’m not nearly as happy about it as I was.”

“You don’t think we’ve got the right man?”

“I’m not satisfied. You see, to start with, everything pointed the one way but now—it’s different.”

“The evidence against Pearson remains the same.”

“Yes, but there’s a good deal of further evidence come to light, sir. There’s the other Pearson—Brian. Feeling that we had no further to look I accepted the statement that he was in Australia. Now, it turns out that he was in England all the time. It seems he arrived back in England two months ago—travelled on the same boat as these Willetts apparently. Looks as though he had got sweet on the girl on the voyage. Anyway, for whatever reason he didn’t communicate with any of his family. Neither his sister nor his brother had any idea he was in England. On Thursday of last week he left the Ormsby Hotel in Russell Square and drove to Paddington. From there until Tuesday night, when Enderby ran across him, he refuses to account for his movements in any way.”

“You pointed out to him the gravity of such a course of action?”

“Said he didn’t give a damn. He had had nothing to do with the murder and it was up to us to prove he had. The way he had employed his time was his own business and none of ours, and he declined definitely to state where he had been and what he had been doing.”

“Most extraordinary,” said the Chief Constable.

“Yes, sir. It’s an extraordinary case. You see, there’s no use getting away from the facts, this man’s far more the type than the other. There’s something incongruous about James Pearson hitting an old man on the head with a sandbag—but in a manner of speaking it might be all in the day’s work to Brian Pearson. He’s a hot-tempered, high-handed young man—and he profits to exactly the same extent, remember?”

“Yes—he came over with Mr. Enderby this morning, very bright and breezy, quite square and aboveboard, that was his attitude. But it won’t wash, sir, it won’t wash.”

“H’m—you mean—”

“It isn’t borne out by the facts. Why didn’t he come forward before? His uncle’s death was in the papers Saturday. His brother was arrested Monday. And he doesn’t give a sign of life. And he wouldn’t have either, if that journalist hadn’t run across him in the garden of Sittaford House at midnight last night.”

“What was he doing there? Enderby, I mean?”

“You know what journalists are,” said Narracott, “always nosing round. They’re uncanny.”

“They are a darned nuisance very often,” said the Chief Constable. “Though they have their uses too.”

“I fancy it was the young lady put him up to it,” said Narracott.

“The young lady?”

“Miss Emily Trefusis.”

“How did she know anything about it?”

“She was up at Sittaford nosing around. And she’s what you’d call a sharp young lady. There’s not much gets past her.”

“What was Brian Pearson’s own account of his movements?”

“Said he came to Sittaford House to see his young lady, Miss Willett, that is. She came out of the house to meet him when everyone was asleep because she didn’t want her mother to know about it. That’s their story.”

Inspector Narracott’s voice expressed distinct disbelief.

“It’s my belief, sir, that if Enderby hadn’t run him to earth, he never would have come forward. He’d have gone back to Australia and claimed his inheritance from there.”

A faint smile crossed the Chief Constable’s lips.

“How he must have cursed these pestilential prying journalists,” he murmured.

“There’s something else come to light,” continued the Inspector. “There are three Pearsons, you remember, and Sylvia Pearson is married to Martin Dering, the novelist. He told me that he lunched and spent the afternoon with an American publisher and went to a literary dinner in the evening, but now it seems that he wasn’t at the dinner at all.”

“Who says so?”

“Enderby again.”

“I think I must meet Enderby,” said the Chief Constable. “He appears to be one of the live wires of this investigation. No doubt about it, the Daily Wire does have some bright young men on their staff.”

“Well, of course, that may mean little or nothing,” continued the Inspector. “Captain Trevelyan was killed before six o’clock, so where Dering spent his evening is really of no consequence—but why should he have deliberately lied about it? I don’t like it, sir.”

“No,” agreed the Chief Constable. “It seems a little unnecessary.”

“It makes one think that the whole thing may be false. It’s a far-fetched supposition, I suppose, but Dering might have left Paddington by the twelve ten train—arrived at Exhampton some time after five, have killed the old man, got the six ten train and been back home again before midnight. At any rate it’s got to be looked into, sir. We’ve got to investigate his financial position, see if he was desperately hard up. Any money his wife came into he would have the handling of—you’ve only got to look at her to know that. We’ve got to make perfectly sure that the afternoon alibi holds water.”

“The whole thing is extraordinary,” commented the Chief Constable. “But I still think the evidence against Pearson is pretty conclusive. I see that you don’t agree with me—you’ve a feeling you’ve got hold of the wrong man.”

“The evidence is all right,” admitted Inspector Narracott, “circumstantial and all that, and any jury ought to convict on it. Still, what you say is true enough—I don’t see him as a murderer.”

“And his young lady is very active in the case,” said the Chief Constable.

“Miss Trefusis, yes, she’s a one and no mistake. A real fine young lady. And absolutely determined to get him off. She’s got hold of that journalist, Enderby, and she’s working him for all she’s worth. She’s a great deal too good for Mr. James Pearson. Beyond his good looks I wouldn’t say there was much to him in the way of character.”

“But if she’s a managing young woman that’s what she likes,” said the Chief Constable.

“Ah well,” said Inspector Narracott, “there’s no accounting for tastes. Well, you agree, sir, that I had better take up this alibi of Dering’s without any more delay.”

“Yes, get on to it at once. What about the fourth interested party in the will? There’s a fourth, isn’t there?”

“Yes, the sister. That’s perfectly all right. I have made inquiries there. She was at home at six o’clock all right, sir. I’ll get right on with the Dering business.”

It was about five hours later that Inspector Narracott found himself once more in the small sitting room of The Nook. This time Mr. Dering was at home. He couldn't be disturbed as he was writing, the maid had said at first, but the Inspector had produced an official card and bade her take it to her master without delay. Whilst waiting he strode up and down the room. His mind was working actively. Every now and then he picked up a small object from a table, looked at it almost unseeingly, and then replaced it. The cigarette box of Australian fiddleback—a present from Brian Pearson possibly. He picked up a rather battered old book. "Pride and Prejudice." He opened the cover and saw scrawled on the fly-leaf in rather faded ink the name, Martha Rycroft. Somehow, the name of Rycroft seemed familiar, but he could not for the moment remember why. He was interrupted as the door opened and Martin Dering came into the room.

The novelist was a man of middle height with thick rather heavy chestnut hair. He was good-looking in a somewhat heavy fashion, with lips that were rather full and red.

Inspector Narracott was not prepossessed by his appearance.

"Good morning, Mr. Dering. Sorry to trouble you all here again."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, Inspector, but really I can't tell you any more than you've been told already."

"We were led to understand that your brother-in-law, Mr. Brian Pearson, was in Australia. Now, we find that he has been in England for the last two months. I might have been given an inkling of that, I think. Your wife distinctly told me that he was in New South Wales."

"Brian in England!" Dering seemed genuinely astonished. "I can assure you, Inspector, that I had no knowledge of that fact—nor, I'm sure, had my wife."

"He has not communicated with you in any way?"

"No, indeed, I know for a fact that Sylvia has twice written him letters to Australia during that time."

“Oh, well, in that case I apologize, sir. But naturally I thought he would have communicated with his relations and I was a bit sore with you for holding out on me.”

“Well, as I tell you we knew nothing. Have a cigarette, Inspector? By the way, I see you’ve recaptured your escaped convict.”

“Yes, got him late Tuesday night. Rather bad luck for him the mist coming down. He walked right round in a circle. Did about twenty miles to find himself about half a mile from Princetown at the end of it.”

“Extraordinary how everyone goes round in circles in a fog. Good thing he didn’t escape on the Friday. I suppose he would have had this murder put down to him as a certainty.”

“He’s a dangerous man. Fremantle Freddy, they used to call him. Robbery with violence, assault—led the most extraordinary double life. Half the time he passed as an educated, respectable wealthy man. I am not at all sure myself that Broadmoor wasn’t the place for him. A kind of criminal mania used to come over him from time to time. He would disappear and consort with the lowest characters.”

“I suppose many people don’t escape from Princetown?”

“It’s well-nigh impossible, sir. But this particular escape was extraordinarily well planned and carried out. We haven’t nearly got to the bottom of it yet.”

“Well,” Dering rose and glanced at his watch, “if there’s nothing more, Inspector—I’m afraid I am rather a busy man—”

“Oh, but there is something more, Mr. Dering. I want to know why you told me that you were at a literary dinner at the Cecil Hotel on Friday night?”

“I—I don’t understand you, Inspector.”

“I think you do, sir. You weren’t at that dinner, Mr. Dering.”

Martin Dering hesitated. His eyes ran uncertainly from the Inspector’s face, up to the ceiling, then to the door, and then to his feet.

The Inspector waited calm and stolid.

“Well,” said Martin Dering at last, “supposing I wasn’t. What the hell has that got to do with you? What have my movements, five hours after my uncle was murdered, got to do with you or anyone else?”

“You made a certain statement to us, Mr. Dering, and I want that statement verified. Part of it has already proved to be untrue. I’ve got to check up on the other half. You say you lunched and spent the afternoon with a friend.”

“Yes—my American publisher.”

“His name?”

“Rosenkraun, Edgar Rosenkraun.”

“Ah, and his address?”

“He’s left England. He left last Saturday.”

“For New York?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’ll be on the sea at the present moment. What boat is he on?”

“I—I really can’t remember.”

“You know the line? Was it a Cunard or White Star?”

“I—I really don’t remember.”

“Ah well,” said the Inspector, “we’ll cable his firm in New York. They’ll know.”

“It was the Gargantua,” said Dering sullenly.

“Thank you, Mr. Dering, I thought you could remember if you tried. Now, your statement is that you lunched with Mr. Rosenkraun and that you spent

the afternoon with him. At what time did you leave him?"

"About five o'clock I should say."

"And then?"

"I decline to state. It's no business of yours. That's all you want surely."

Inspector Narracott nodded thoughtfully. If Rosenkraun confirmed Dering's statement then any case against Dering must fall to the ground. Whatever his mysterious activities had been that evening could not affect the case.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Dering uneasily.

"Wireless Mr. Rosenkraun on board the Gargantua."

"Damn it all," cried Dering, "you'll involve me in all sorts of publicity. Look here—"

He went across to his desk, scribbled a few words on a bit of paper, then took it to the Inspector.

"I suppose you've got to do what you're doing," he said ungraciously, "but at least you might do it in my way. It's not fair to run a chap in for a lot of trouble."

On the sheet of paper was written:

Rosenkraun S.S. "Gargantua." Please confirm my statement I was with you lunchtime until five o'clock Friday 14th. Martin Dering.

"Have the reply sent straight to you—I don't mind. But don't have it sent to Scotland Yard or a Police Station. You don't know what these Americans are like. Any hint of me being mixed up in a police case and this new contract that I've been discussing will go to the winds. Keep it a private matter, Inspector."

"I've no objection to that, Mr. Dering. All I want is the truth. I'll send this reply paid, the reply to be sent to my private address in Exeter."

“Thank you, you are a good chap. It’s not such easy going earning your living by literature, Inspector. You’ll see the answer will be all right. I did tell you a lie about the dinner, but as a matter of fact I had told my wife that that was where I had been, and I thought I might as well stick to the same story to you. Otherwise I would have let myself in for a lot of trouble.”

“If Mr. Rosenkraun confirms your statement, Mr. Dering, you will have nothing else to fear.”

“An unpleasant character,” the Inspector thought, as he left the house. “But he seems pretty certain that this American publisher will confirm the truth of his story.”

A sudden remembrance came to the Inspector, as he hopped into the train which would take him back to Devon.

“Rycroft,” he said, “of course—that’s the name of the old gentleman who lives in one of the cottages at Sittaford. A curious coincidence.”

Twenty-five

AT DELLER'S CAFÉ

Emily Trefusis and Charles Enderby were seated at a small table in Deller's Café in Exeter. It was half past three, and at that hour there was comparative peace and quiet. A few people were having a quiet cup of tea, but the restaurant on the whole was deserted.

"Well," said Charles, "what do you think of him?"

Emily frowned.

"It's difficult," she said.

After his interview with the police, Brian Pearson had lunched with them. He had been extremely polite to Emily, rather too polite in her opinion.

To that astute girl it seemed a shade unnatural. Here was a young man conducting a clandestine love affair and an officious stranger butts in. Brian Pearson had taken it like a lamb; had fallen in with Charles's suggestion of having a car and driving over to see the police. Why this attitude of meek acquiescence? It seemed to Emily entirely untypical of the natural Brian Pearson as she read his character.

"I'll see you in hell first!" would, she felt sure, have been far more his attitude.

This lamb-like demeanour was suspicious. She tried to convey something of her feelings to Enderby.

"I get you," said Enderby. "Our Brian has got something to conceal, therefore he can't be his natural high-handed self."

"That's it exactly."

“Do you think he might possibly have killed old Trevelyan?”

“Brian,” said Emily thoughtfully, “is—well, a person to be reckoned with. He is rather unscrupulous, I should think, and if he wanted anything, I don’t think he would let ordinary conventional standards stand in his way. He’s not plain tame English.”

“Putting all personal considerations on one side, he’s a more likely starter than Jim?” said Enderby.

Emily nodded.

“Much more likely. He would carry a thing through well—because he would never lose his nerve.”

“Honestly, Emily, do you think he did it?”

“I—I don’t know. He fulfils the conditions—the only person who does.”

“What do you mean by fulfils the conditions?”

“Well, (1) Motive.” She ticked off the items on her fingers. “The same motive. Twenty thousand pounds. (2) Opportunity. Nobody knows where he was on Friday afternoon, and if he was anywhere that he could say—well—surely he would say it? So we assume that he was actually in the neighbourhood of Hazelmoor on Friday.”

“They haven’t found anyone who saw him in Exhampton,” Charles pointed out, “and he’s a fairly noticeable person.”

Emily shook her head scornfully.

“He wasn’t in Exhampton. Don’t you see, Charles, if he committed the murder, he planned it beforehand. It’s only poor innocent Jim who came down like a mug and stayed there. There’s Lydford and Chagford or perhaps Exeter. He might have walked over from Lydford—that’s a main road and the snow wouldn’t have been impassable. It would have been pretty good going.”

“I suppose we ought to make inquiries all round.”

“The police are doing that,” said Emily, “and they’ll do it a lot better than we shall. All public things are much better done by the police. It’s private and personal things like listening to Mrs. Curtis and picking up a hint from Miss Percehouse and watching the Willetts—that’s where we score.”

“Or don’t, as the case may be,” said Charles.

“To go back to Brian Pearson fulfilling the conditions,” said Emily. “We’ve done two, motive and opportunity, and there’s the third—the one that in a way I think is the most important of all.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I have felt from the beginning that we couldn’t ignore that queer business of the table-turning. I have tried to look at it as logically and clear-sightedly as possible. There are just three solutions of it. (1) That it was supernatural. Well, of course, that may be so, but personally I am ruling it out. (2) That it was deliberate—someone did it on purpose, but as one can’t arrive at any conceivable reason, we can rule that out also. (3) Accidental. Someone gave himself away without meaning to do so—indeed quite against his will. An unconscious piece of self-revelation. If so, someone among those six people either knew definitely that Captain Trevelyan was going to be killed at a certain time that afternoon, or that someone was having an interview with him from which violence might result. None of those six people could have been the actual murderer, but one of them must have been in collusion with the murderer. There’s no link between Major Burnaby and anybody else, or Mr. Rycroft and anybody else, or Ronald Garfield and anybody else, but when we come to the Willetts it’s different. There’s a link between Violet Willett and Brian Pearson. Those two are on very intimate terms and that girl was all on the jump after the murder.”

“You think she knew?” said Charles.

“She or her mother—one or other of them.”

“There’s one person you haven’t mentioned,” said Charles. “Mr. Duke.”

“I know,” said Emily. “It’s queer. He’s the one person we know absolutely nothing about. I’ve tried to see him twice and failed. There seems no connection between him and Captain Trevelyan, or between him and any of Captain Trevelyan’s relations, there’s absolutely nothing to connect him with the case in any way, and yet—”

“Well?” said Charles Enderby as Emily paused.

“And yet we met Inspector Narracott coming out of his cottage. What does Inspector Narracott know about him that we don’t? I wish I knew.”

“You think—”

“Supposing Duke is a suspicious character and the police know it. Supposing Captain Trevelyan had found out something about Duke. He was particular about his tenants, remember, and supposing he was going to tell the police what he knew. And Duke arranges with an accomplice to have him killed. Oh, I know it all sounds dreadfully melodramatic put like that, and yet, after all, something of the kind might be possible.”

“It’s an idea certainly,” said Charles slowly.

They were both silent, each one deep in thought.

Suddenly Emily said:

“Do you know that queer feeling you get when somebody is looking at you? I feel now as though someone’s eyes were burning the back of my neck. Is it all fancy or is there really someone staring at me now?”

Charles moved his chair an inch or two and looked round the café in a casual manner.

“There’s a woman at a table in the window,” he reported. “Tall, dark and handsome. She’s staring at you.”

“Young?”

“No, not very young. Hello!”

“What is it?”

“Ronnie Garfield. He has just come in and he’s shaking hands with her and he’s sitting down at her table. I think she’s saying something about us.”

Emily opened her handbag. Rather ostentatiously she powdered her nose, adjusting the small pocket mirror to a convenient angle.

“It’s Aunt Jennifer,” she said softly. “They are getting up.”

“They are going,” said Charles. “Do you want to speak to her?”

“No,” said Emily. “I think it’s better for me to pretend that I haven’t seen her.”

“After all,” said Charles, “why shouldn’t Aunt Jennifer know Ronnie Garfield and ask him to tea?”

“Why should she?” said Emily.

“Why shouldn’t she?”

“Oh, for goodness sake, Charles, don’t let’s go on and on like this, should—shouldn’t—should—shouldn’t. Of course it’s all nonsense, and it doesn’t mean anything! But we were just saying that nobody else at that séance had any relation with the family, and not five minutes later we see Ronnie Garfield having tea with Captain Trevelyan’s sister.”

“It shows,” said Charles, “that you never know.”

“It shows,” said Emily, “that you are always having to begin again.”

“In more ways than one,” said Charles.

Emily looked at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing at present,” said Charles.

He put his hand over hers. She did not draw it away.

“We’ve got to put this through,” said Charles. “Afterwards—”

“Afterwards?” said Emily softly.

“I’d do anything for you, Emily,” said Charles. “Simply anything—”

“Would you?” said Emily. “That’s rather nice of you, Charles dear.”

Twenty-six

ROBERT GARDNER

It was just twenty minutes later when Emily rang the front door bell of The Laurels. It had been a sudden impulse.

Aunt Jennifer, she knew, would be still at Deller's with Ronnie Garfield. She smiled beamingly on Beatrice when the latter opened the door to her.

"It's me again," said Emily. "Mrs. Gardner's out, I know, but can I see Mr. Gardner?"

Such a request was clearly unusual. Beatrice seemed doubtful.

"Well, I don't know. I'll go up and see, shall I?"

"Yes, do," said Emily.

Beatrice went upstairs, leaving Emily alone in the hall. She returned in a few minutes to ask the young lady to please step this way.

Robert Gardner was lying on a couch by the window in a big room on the first floor. He was a big man, blue-eyed and fair-haired. He looked, Emily thought, as Tristan ought to look in the third act of Tristan and Isolde and as no Wagnerian tenor has ever looked yet.

"Hello," he said. "You are the criminal's spouse to be, aren't you?"

"That's right, Uncle Robert," said Emily. "I suppose I do call you Uncle Robert, don't I?" she asked.

"If Jennifer will allow it. What's it like having a young man languishing in prison?"

A cruel man, Emily decided. A man who would take a malicious joy in giving you sharp digs in painful places. But she was a match for him. She said smilingly:

“Very thrilling.”

“Not so thrilling for Master Jim, eh?”

“Oh, well,” said Emily, “it’s an experience, isn’t it?”

“Teach him life can’t be all beer and skittles,” said Robert Gardner maliciously. “Too young to fight in the Great War, wasn’t he? Able to live soft and take it easily. Well, well . . . He got it in the neck from another source.”

He looked at her curiously.

“What did you want to come and see me for, eh?”

There was a tinge of something like suspicion in his voice.

“If you are going to marry into a family it’s just as well to see all your relations-in-law beforehand.”

“Know the worst before it’s too late. So you really think you are going to marry young Jim, eh?”

“Why not?”

“In spite of this murder charge?”

“In spite of this murder charge.”

“Well,” said Robert Gardner, “I have never seen anybody less cast down. Anyone would think you were enjoying yourself.”

“I am. Tracking down a murderer is frightfully thrilling,” said Emily.

“Eh?”

“I said tracking down a murderer is frightfully thrilling,” said Emily.

Robert Gardner stared at her, then he threw himself back on his pillows.

“I am tired,” he said in a fretful voice. “I can’t talk any more. Nurse, where’s Nurse? Nurse, I’m tired.”

Nurse Davis had come swiftly at his call from an adjoining room. “Mr. Gardner gets tired very easily. I think you had better go now if you don’t mind, Miss Trefusis.”

Emily rose to her feet. She nodded brightly and said:

“Good-bye, Uncle Robert. Perhaps I’ll come back some day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Au revoir,” said Emily.

She was going out of the front door when she stopped.

“Oh!” she said to Beatrice. “I have left my gloves.”

“I will get them, Miss.”

“Oh, no,” said Emily. “I’ll do it.” She ran lightly up the stairs and entered without knocking.

“Oh,” said Emily. “I beg your pardon. I am so sorry. It was my gloves.” She took them up ostentatiously, and smiling sweetly at the two occupants of the room who were sitting hand in hand ran down the stairs and out of the house.

“This glove leaving is a terrific scheme,” said Emily to herself. “This is the second time it’s come off. Poor Aunt Jennifer, does she know, I wonder? Probably not. I must hurry or I’ll keep Charles waiting.”

Enderby was waiting in Elmer’s Ford at the agreed rendezvous.

“Any luck?” he asked as he tucked the rug round her.

“In a way, yes. I’m not sure.”

Enderby looked at her inquiringly.

“No,” said Emily in answer to his glance, “I’m not going to tell you about it. You see, it may have nothing whatever to do with it—and if so, it wouldn’t be fair.”

Enderby sighed.

“I call that hard,” he observed.

“I’m sorry,” said Emily firmly. “But there it is.”

“Have it your own way,” said Charles coldly.

They drove on in silence—an offended silence on Charles’s part—an oblivious one on Emily’s.

They were nearly at Exhampton when she broke the silence by a totally unexpected remark.

“Charles,” she said, “are you a bridge player?”

“Yes, I am. Why?”

“I was thinking. You know what they tell you to do when you’re assessing the value of your hand? If you’re defending—count the winners—but if you’re attacking count the losers. Now, we’re attacking in this business of ours—but perhaps we have been doing it the wrong way.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve been counting the winners, haven’t we? I mean going over the people who could have killed Captain Trevelyan, however improbable it seems. And that’s perhaps why we’ve got so terribly muddled.”

“I haven’t got muddled,” said Charles.

“Well, I have then. I’m so muddled I can’t think at all. Let’s look at it the other way round. Let’s count the losers—the people who can’t possibly have killed Captain Trevelyan.”

“Well, let’s see—” Enderby reflected. “To begin with there’s the Willetts and Burnaby and Rycroft and Ronnie—Oh! and Duke.”

“Yes,” agreed Emily. “We know none of them can have killed him. Because at the time he was killed they were all at Sittaford House and they all saw each other and they can’t all be lying. Yes, they’re all out of it.”

“As a matter of fact everyone in Sittaford is out of it,” said Enderby. “Even Elmer,” he lowered his voice in deference to the possibility of the driver hearing him. “Because the road to Sittaford was impassable for cars on Friday.”

“He could have walked,” said Emily in an equally low voice. “If Major Burnaby could have got there that evening Elmer could have started at lunchtime—got to Exhampton at five, murdered him, and walked back again.”

Enderby shook his head.

“I don’t think he could have walked back again. Remember the snow started to fall about half past six. Anyway, you’re not accusing Elmer, are you?”

“No,” said Emily, “though, of course, he might be a homicidal maniac.”

“Hush,” said Charles. “You’ll hurt his feelings if he hears you.”

“At any rate,” said Emily, “you can’t say definitely that he couldn’t have murdered Captain Trevelyan.”

“Almost,” said Charles. “He couldn’t walk to Exhampton and back without all Sittaford knowing about it and saying it was queer.”

“It certainly is a place where everyone knows everything,” agreed Emily.

“Exactly,” said Charles, “and that’s why I say that everyone in Sittaford is out of it. The only ones that weren’t at the Willetts—Miss Percehouse and Captain Wyatt are invalids. They couldn’t go ploughing through snowstorms. And dear old Curtis and Mrs. C. If any of them did it, they must have gone comfortably to Exhampton for the weekend and come back when it was all over.”

Emily laughed.

“You couldn’t be absent from Sittaford for the weekend without its being noticed, certainly,” she said.

“Curtis would notice the silence if Mrs. C was,” said Enderby.

“Of course,” said Emily, “the person it ought to be is Abdul. It would be in a book. He’d be a Lascar really, and Captain Trevelyan would have thrown his favourite brother overboard in a mutiny—something like that.”

“I decline to believe,” said Charles, “that that wretched depressed-looking native ever murdered anybody.

“I know,” he said suddenly.

“What?” said Emily eagerly.

“The blacksmith’s wife. The one who’s expecting her eighth. The intrepid woman despite her condition walked all the way to Exhampton and batted him one with the sandbag.”

“And why, pray?”

“Because, of course, although the blacksmith was the father of the preceding seven, Captain Trevelyan was the father of her coming che-ild.”

“Charles,” said Emily. “Don’t be indelicate.

“And anyway,” she added, “it would be the blacksmith who did it, not her. A really good case there. Think how that brawny arm could wield a sandbag! And his wife would never notice his absence with seven children to look after. She wouldn’t have time to notice a mere man.”

“This is degenerating into mere idiocy,” said Charles.

“It is rather,” agreed Emily. “Counting losers hasn’t been a great success.”

“What about you?” said Charles.

“Me?”

“Where were you when the crime was committed?”

“How extraordinary! I never thought of that. I was in London, of course. But I don’t know that I could prove it. I was alone in my flat.”

“There you are,” said Charles. “Motive and everything. Your young man coming into twenty thousand pounds, what more do you want?”

“You are clever, Charles,” said Emily. “I can see that really I’m a most suspicious character. I never thought of it before.”

Twenty-seven

NARRACOTT ACTS

Two mornings later Emily was seated in Inspector Narracott's office. She had come over from Sittaford that morning.

Inspector Narracott looked at her appraisingly. He admired Emily's pluck, her courageous determination not to give in and her resolute cheerfulness. She was a fighter, and Inspector Narracott admired fighters. It was his private opinion that she was a great deal too good for Jim Pearson, even if that young man was innocent of the murder.

"It's generally understood in books," he said, "that the police are intent on having a victim and don't in the least care if that victim is innocent or not as long as they have enough evidence to convict him. That's not the truth, Miss Trefusis, it's only the guilty man we want."

"Do you honestly believe Jim to be guilty, Inspector Narracott?"

"I can't give you an official answer to that, Miss Trefusis. But I'll tell you this—that we are examining not only the evidence against him but the evidence against other people very carefully."

"You mean against his brother—Brian?"

"A very unsatisfactory gentleman, Mr. Brian Pearson. Refused to answer questions or to give any information about himself, but I think—" Inspector Narracott's slow Devonshire smile widened, "I think I can make a pretty good guess at some of his activities. If I am right I shall know in another half hour. Then there's the lady's husband, Mr. Dering."

"You've seen him?" asked Emily curiously.

Inspector Narracott looked at her vivid face, and felt tempted to relax official caution. Leaning back in his chair he recounted his interview with

Mr. Dering, then from a file at his elbow he took out a copy of the wireless message he had dispatched to Mr. Rosenkraun. "That's what I sent," he said. "And here's the reply."

Emily read it.

Narracott 2 Drysdale Road Exeter. Certainly confirm Mr. Dering's statement. He was in my company all Friday afternoon. Rosenkraun.

"Oh!—bother," said Emily, selecting a milder word than she had meant to use, knowing that the police force was old-fashioned and easily shocked.

"Ye-es," said Inspector Narracott reflectively. "It's annoying, isn't it?"

And his slow Devonshire smile broke out again.

"But I am a suspicious man, Miss Trefusis. Mr. Dering's reasons sounded very plausible—but I thought it a pity to play into his hands too completely. So I sent another wireless message."

Again he handed her two pieces of paper.

The first ran:

Information wanted re murder of Captain Trevelyan. Do you support Martin Dering's statement of alibi for Friday afternoon. Divisional Inspector Narracott Exeter.

The return message showed agitation and a reckless disregard for expense.

Had no idea it was criminal case did not see Martin Dering Friday Agreed support his statement as one friend to another believed his wife was having him watched for divorce proceedings.

"Oh," said Emily. "Oh!—you are clever, Inspector."

The Inspector evidently thought that he had been rather clever. His smile was gentle and contented.

“How men do stick together,” went on Emily looking over the telegrams. “Poor Sylvia. In some ways I really think that men are beasts. That’s why,” she added, “it’s so nice when one finds a man on whom one can really rely.”

And she smiled admiringly at the Inspector.

“Now, all this is very confidential, Miss Trefusis,” the Inspector warned her. “I have gone further than I should in letting you know about this.”

“I think it’s adorable of you,” said Emily. “I shall never never forget it.”

“Well, mind,” the Inspector warned her. “Not a word to anybody.”

“You mean that I am not to tell Charles—Mr. Enderby.”

“Journalists will be journalists,” said Inspector Narracott. “However well you have got him tamed, Miss Trefusis—well, news is news, isn’t it?”

“I won’t tell him then,” said Emily. “I think I’ve got him muzzled all right, but as you say newspaper men will be newspaper men.”

“Never part with information unnecessarily. That’s my rule,” said Inspector Narracott.

A faint twinkle appeared in Emily’s eyes, her unspoken thought being that Inspector Narracott had infringed this rule rather badly during the last half hour.

A sudden recollection came into her mind, not of course that it probably mattered now. Everything seemed to be pointing in a totally different direction. But still it would be nice to know.

“Inspector Narracott!” she said suddenly. “Who is Mr. Duke?”

“Mr. Duke?”

She thought the Inspector was rather taken aback by her questions.

“You remember,” said Emily, “we met you coming out of his cottage in Sittaford.”

“Ah, yes, yes, I remember. To tell you the truth, Miss Trefusis, I thought I would like to have an independent account of that table-turning business. Major Burnaby is not a first-rate hand at description.”

“And yet,” said Emily thoughtfully, “if I had been you, I should have gone to somebody like Mr. Rycroft for it. Why Mr. Duke?”

There was a silence and then the Inspector said:

“Just a matter of opinion.”

“I wonder. I wonder if the police know something about Mr. Duke.”

Inspector Narracott didn’t answer. He had got his eyes fixed very steadily on the blotting paper.

“The man who leads a blameless life!” said Emily, “that seems to describe Mr. Duke awfully accurately, but perhaps he hasn’t always led a blameless life? Perhaps the police know that?”

She saw a faint quiver on Inspector Narracott’s face as he tried to conceal a smile.

“You like guessing, don’t you, Miss Trefusis?” he said amiably.

“When people don’t tell you things you have to guess!” retaliated Emily.

“If a man, as you say, is leading a blameless life,” Inspector Narracott said, “and if it would be an annoyance and an inconvenience for him to have his past life raked up, well, the police are capable of keeping their own counsel. We have no wish to give a man away.”

“I see,” said Emily, “but all the same—you went to see him, didn’t you? That looks as though you thought, to begin with at any rate, that he might have had a hand in it. I wish—I wish I knew who Mr. Duke really was? And what particular branch of criminology he indulged in in the past?”

She looked appealingly at Inspector Narracott but the latter preserved a wooden face, and realizing that on this point she could not hope to move him, Emily sighed and took her departure.

When she had gone the Inspector sat staring at the blotting pad, a trace of a smile still lingering on his lips. Then he rang the bell and one of his underlings entered.

“Well?” demanded Inspector Narracott.

“Quite right, sir. But it wasn’t the Duchy at Princetown, it was the hotel at Two Bridges.”

“Ah!” The Inspector took the papers the other handed to him.

“Well,” he said. “That settles it all right. Have you followed up the other young chap’s movements on Friday?”

“He certainly arrived at Exhampton by the last train, but I haven’t found out yet what time he left London. Inquiries are being made.”

Narracott nodded.

“Here is the entry from Somerset House, sir.”

Narracott unfolded it. It was the record of a marriage in 1894 between William Martin Dering and Martha Elizabeth Rycroft.

“Ah!” said the Inspector, “anything else?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Brian Pearson sailed from Australia on a Blue Funnel Boat, the Phidias. She touched at Cape Town but no passengers of the name of Willett were aboard. No mother and daughter at all from South Africa. There was a Mrs. and Miss Evans and a Mrs. and Miss Johnson from Melbourne—the latter answer the description of the Willetts.”

“H’m,” said the Inspector—“Johnson. Probably neither Johnson nor Willett is the right name. I think I’ve got them taped out all right. Anything more?”

There was nothing else it seemed.

“Well,” said Narracott, “I think we have got enough to go on with.”

Twenty-eight

BOOTS

“But, my dear young lady,” said Mr. Kirkwood, “what can you possibly expect to find at Hazelmoor? All Captain Trevelyan’s effects have been removed. The police have made a thorough search of the house. I quite understand your position and your anxiety that Mr. Pearson shall be—er—cleared if possible. But what can you do?”

“I don’t expect to find anything,” Emily replied, “or to notice anything that the police have overlooked. I can’t explain to you, Mr. Kirkwood. I want—I want to get the atmosphere of the place. Please let me have the key. There’s no harm in it.”

“Certainly there’s no harm in it,” said Mr. Kirkwood with dignity.

“Then please be kind,” said Emily.

So Mr. Kirkwood was kind and handed over the key with an indulgent smile. He did his best to come with her, which catastrophe was only averted by great tact and firmness on Emily’s part.

That morning Emily had received a letter. It was couched in the following terms:

“Dear Miss Trefusis,”—wrote Mrs. Belling. “You said as how you would like to hear if anything at all should happen that was in any way out of the common even if not important, and, as this is peculiar, though not in any way important, I thought it my duty Miss to let you know at once, hoping this will catch you by the last post tonight or the first post tomorrow. My niece she came round and said it wasn’t of any importance but peculiar which I agreed with her. The police said, and it was generally agreed that nothing was taken from Captain Trevelyan’s house and nothing was in a manner of speaking nothing that is of any value, but something there is

missing though not noticed at the time being unimportant. But it seems Miss that a pair of the Captain's boots is missing which Evans noticed when he went over the things with Major Burnaby. Though I don't suppose it is of any importance Miss I thought you would like to know. It was a pair of boots Miss the thick kind you rubs oil into and which the Captain would have worn if he had gone out in the snow but as he didn't go out in the snow it doesn't seem to make sense. But missing they are and who took them nobody knows and though I well know it's of no importance I felt it my duty to write and hoping this finds you as it leaves me at present and hoping you are not worrying too much about the young gentleman I remain Miss Yours truly—Mrs. J. Belling.”

Emily had read and re-read this letter. She had discussed it with Charles.

“Boots,” said Charles thoughtfully. “It doesn't seem to make sense.”

“It must mean something,” Emily pointed out. “I mean—why should a pair of boots be missing?”

“You don't think Evans is inventing?”

“Why should he? And after all if people do invent, they invent something sensible. Not a silly pointless thing like this.”

“Boots suggests something to do with footprints,” said Charles thoughtfully.

“I know. But footprints don't seem to enter into this case at all. Perhaps if it hadn't come on to snow again—”

“Yes, perhaps, but even then.”

“Could he have given them to some tramp,” suggested Charles, “and then the tramp did him in.”

“I suppose that's possible,” said Emily, “but it doesn't sound very like Captain Trevelyan. He might perhaps have found a man some work to do or given him a shilling, but he wouldn't have pressed his best winter boots on him.”

“Well, I give it up,” said Charles.

“I’m not going to give it up,” said Emily. “By hook or by crook I’m going to get to the bottom of it.”

Accordingly she came to Exhampton and went first to the Three Crowns, where Mrs. Belling received her with great enthusiasm.

“And your young gentleman still in prison, Miss! Well, it’s a cruel shame and none of us don’t believe it was him at least I would like to hear them say so when I am about. So you got my letter? You’d like to see Evans? Well, he lives right round the corner, 85 Fore Street it is. I wish I could come with you, but I can’t leave the place, but you can’t mistake it.”

Emily did not mistake it. Evans himself was out, but Mrs. Evans received her and invited her in. Emily sat down and induced Mrs. Evans to do so also and plunge straight into the matter on hand.

“I’ve come to talk about what your husband told Mrs. Belling. I mean about a pair of Captain Trevelyan’s boots being missing.”

“It’s an odd thing, to be sure,” said the girl.

“Your husband is quite certain about it?”

“Oh, yes. Wore these boots most of the time in winter, the Captain did. Big ones they were, and he wore a couple of pairs of socks inside them.”

Emily nodded.

“They can’t have gone to be mended or anything like that?” she suggested.

“Not without Evans knowing, they couldn’t,” said his wife boastfully.

“No, I suppose not.”

“It’s queer like,” said Mrs. Evans, “but I don’t suppose it had anything to do with the murder, do you, Miss?”

“It doesn’t seem likely,” agreed Emily.

“Have they found out anything new, Miss?” The girl’s voice was eager.

“Yes, one or two things—nothing very important.”

“Seeing as that the Inspector from Exeter was here again today, I thought as though they might.”

“Inspector Narracott?”

“Yes, that’s the one, Miss.”

“Did he come by my train?”

“No, he came by car. He went to the Three Crowns first and asked about the young gentleman’s luggage.”

“What young gentleman’s luggage?”

“The gentleman you go about with, Miss.”

Emily stared.

“They asked Tom,” went on the girl, “I was passing by just after and he told me about it. He’s a one for noticing is Tom. He remembered there were two labels on the young gentleman’s luggage, one to Exeter and one to Exhampton.”

A sudden smile illuminated Emily’s face as she pictured the crime being committed by Charles in order to provide a scoop for himself. One could, she decided, write a gruesome little story on that theme. But she admired Inspector Narracott’s thoroughness in checking every detail to do with anyone, however remote their connection with the crime. He must have left Exeter almost immediately after his interview with her. A fast car would easily beat the train, and in any case she had lunched in Exeter.

“Where did the Inspector go afterwards?” she asked.

“To Sittaford, Miss. Tom heard him tell the driver.”

“To Sittaford House?”

Brian Pearson was, she knew, still staying at Sittaford House with the Willetts.

“No, Miss, to Mr. Duke’s.”

Duke again. Emily felt irritated and baffled. Always Duke—the unknown factor. She ought, she felt, to be able to deduce him from the evidence, but he seemed to have produced the same effect on everyone—a normal, ordinary, pleasant man.

“I’ve got to see him,” said Emily to herself. “I’ll go straight there as soon as I get back to Sittaford.”

Then she had thanked Mrs. Evans, gone on to Mr. Kirkwood’s and obtained the key, and was now standing in the hall of Hazelmoor and wondering how and what she had expected to feel there.

She mounted the stairs slowly and went into the first room at the top of the stairs. This was quite clearly Captain Trevelyan’s bedroom. It had, as Mr. Kirkwood had said, been emptied of personal effects. Blankets were folded in a neat pile, the drawers were empty, there was not so much as a hanger left in the cupboard. The boot cupboard showed a row of bare shelves.

Emily sighed and then turned and went downstairs. Here was the sitting room where the dead man had lain, the snow blowing in from the open window.

She tried to visualize the scene. Whose hand had struck Captain Trevelyan down, and why? Had he been killed at five and twenty past five as everyone believed—or had Jim really lost his nerve and lied? Had he failed to make anyone hear at the front door and gone round to the window, looked in and seen his dead uncle’s body and dashed away in an agony of fear? If only she knew. According to Mr. Dacres, Jim stuck to his story. Yes—but Jim might have lost his nerve. She couldn’t be sure.

Had there been, as Mr. Rycroft had suggested, someone else in the house—someone who had overheard the quarrel and seized his chance?

If so—did that throw any light on the boot problem? Had someone been upstairs—perhaps in Captain Trevelyan's bedroom? Emily passed through the hall again. She took a quick look into the dining room; there were a couple of trunks there neatly strapped and labelled. The sideboard was bare. The silver cups were at Major Burnaby's bungalow.

She noticed, however, that the prize of three new novels, an account of which Charles had had from Evans and had reported with amusing embellishments to her, had been forgotten and lay dejectedly on a chair.

She looked round the room and shook her head. There was nothing here.

She went up the stairs again and once more entered the bedroom.

She must know why these boots were missing! Until she could concoct some theory reasonably satisfactory to herself which would account for their disappearance, she felt powerless to put them out of her mind. They were soaring to ridiculous proportions, dwarfing everything else to do with the case. Was there nothing to help her?

She took each drawer out and felt behind it. In detective stories there was always an obliging scrap of paper. But evidently in real life one could not expect such fortunate accidents, or else Inspector Narracott and his men had been wonderfully thorough. She felt for loose boards, she felt round the edge of the carpet with her fingers. She investigated the spring mattress. What she expected to find in all these places she hardly knew, but she went on looking with dogged perseverance.

And then, as she straightened her back and stood upright, her eye was caught by the one incongruous touch in this room of apple-pie order, a little pile of soot in the grate.

Emily looked at it with the fascinated gaze of a bird for a snake. She drew nearer, eyeing it. It was no logical deduction, no reasoning of cause and effect, it was simply that the sight of soot as such suggested a certain

possibility. Emily rolled up her sleeves and thrust both arms up the chimney.

A moment later she was staring with incredulous delight at a parcel wrapped neatly in newspaper. One shake detached the newspaper and there, before her, were the missing pair of boots.

“But why?” said Emily. “Here they are. But why? Why? Why? Why?”

She stared at them. She turned them over. She examined them outside and inside and the same question beat monotonously in her brain. Why?

Granted that someone had removed Captain Trevelyan’s boots and hidden them up the chimney. Why had they done so?

“Oh!” cried Emily desperately, “I shall go mad!”

She put the boots carefully in the middle of the floor, and drawing up a chair opposite them she sat down. And then deliberately she set herself to think out things from the beginning, going over every detail that she knew herself or had learned by hearsay from other people. She considered every actor in the drama and outside the drama.

And suddenly, a queer nebulous idea began to take shape—an idea suggested by that pair of innocent boots that stood there dumbly on the floor.

“But if so,” said Emily,—“if so—”

She picked up the boots in her hand and hurried downstairs. She pushed open the dining room door and went to the cupboard in the corner. Here was Captain Trevelyan’s motley array of sporting trophies and sporting outfits, all the things he had not trusted within reach of the female tenants. The skis, the sculls, the elephant’s foot, the tusks, the fishing rods—everything still waiting for Messrs. Young and Peabody to pack them expertly for store.

Emily bent down boots in hand.

In a minute or two she stood upright, flushed, incredulous.

“So that was it,” said Emily. “So that was it.”

She sank into a chair. There was still much that she did not understand.

After some minutes she rose to her feet. She spoke aloud.

“I know who killed Captain Trevelyan,” she said. “But I don’t know why. I still can’t think why. But I mustn’t lose time.”

She hurried out of Hazelmoor. To find a car to drive her to Sittaford was the work of a few minutes. She ordered it to take her to Mr. Duke’s bungalow. Here she paid the man and then walked up the path as the car drove away.

She lifted the knocker and gave a loud rat-tat.

After a moment or two’s interval the door was opened by a big burly man with a rather impassive face.

For the first time, Emily met Mr. Duke face to face.

“Mr. Duke?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I am Miss Trefusis. May I come in, please?”

There was a momentary hesitation. Then he stood aside to let her pass. Emily walked into the living room. He closed the front door and followed her.

“I want to see Inspector Narracott,” said Emily. “Is he here?”

Again there was a pause. Mr. Duke seemed uncertain how to answer. At last he appeared to make up his mind. He smiled—a rather curious smile.

“Inspector Narracott is here,” he said. “What do you want to see him about?”

Emily took the parcel she was carrying and unwrapped it. She took out a pair of boots and placed them on the table in front of him.

“I want,” she said, “to see him about those boots.”

Twenty-nine

THE SECOND SÉANCE

“Hullo, hullo, hullo,” said Ronnie Garfield.

Mr. Rycroft, slowly ascending the steep slope of the lane from the post office, paused, till Ronnie overtook him.

“Been to the local Harrods, eh?” said Ronnie. “Old Mother Hibbert.”

“No,” said Mr. Rycroft. “I have been for a short walk along past the forge. Very delightful weather today.”

Ronnie looked up at the blue sky.

“Yes, a bit of a difference from last week. By the way, you’re going to the Willetts’, I suppose?”

“I am. You also?”

“Yes. Our bright spot in Sittaford—the Willetts. Mustn’t let yourself get downhearted, that’s their motto. Carry on as usual. My aunt says it is unfeeling of them to ask people to tea so soon after the funeral and all that, but that’s all bunkum. She just says that because she’s feeling rattled about the Emperor of Peru.”

“The Emperor of Peru?” said Mr. Rycroft surprised.

“One of the blinking cats. It’s turned out to be an Empress instead and Aunt Caroline’s naturally annoyed about it. She doesn’t like these sex problems—so, as I say, she got her feelings off her chest by making catty remarks about the Willetts. Why shouldn’t they ask people to tea? Trevelyan wasn’t a relation, or anything like that.”

“Very true,” said Mr. Rycroft turning his head and examining a bird which flew past and in which he thought he recognized a rare species.

“How annoying,” he murmured. “I haven’t got my glasses with me.”

“Eh! I say, talking of Trevelyan, do you think Mrs. Willett can have known the old boy better than she says?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because of the change in her. Have you ever seen anything like it? She’s aged about twenty years in the last week. You must have noticed it.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Rycroft. “I have noticed it.”

“Well, there you are. Trevelyan’s death must have been the most frightful shock to her in some way or other. Queer if she turned out to be the old man’s long lost wife whom he deserted in his youth and didn’t recognize.”

“I hardly think that likely, Mr. Garfield.”

“Bit too much of a movie stunt, eh? All the same very odd things happen. I’ve read some really amazing things in the Daily Wire—things you wouldn’t credit if a newspaper didn’t print them.”

“Are they any more to be credited on that account?” inquired Mr. Rycroft acidly.

“You have got a down on young Enderby, haven’t you?” said Ronnie.

“I dislike ill-bred nosing into affairs that do not concern you,” said Mr. Rycroft.

“Yes, but then they do concern him,” Ronnie persisted. “I mean nosing about is the poor chap’s job. He seems to have tamed old Burnaby all right. Funny, the old boy can hardly bear the sight of me. I’m like a red rag to a bull to him.”

Mr. Rycroft did not reply.

“By Jove,” said Ronnie again glancing up at the sky. “Do you realize it’s Friday? Just a week ago today at about this time we were trudging up to the Willetts’ just as we are now. But a bit of a change in the weather.”

“A week ago,” said Mr. Rycroft. “It seems infinitely longer.”

“More like a bally year, doesn’t it? Hullo, Abdul.”

They were passing Captain Wyatt’s gate over which the melancholy Indian was leaning.

“Good afternoon, Abdul,” said Mr. Rycroft. “How’s your master?”

The Indian shook his head.

“Master bad today, Sahib. Not see anyone. Not see anyone for long time.”

“You know,” said Ronnie as they passed on, “that chap could murder Wyatt quite easily and no one would know. He could go on for weeks shaking his head and saying the master wouldn’t see anyone and no one would think it the least odd.”

Mr. Rycroft admitted the truth of the statement.

“But there would still be the problem of the disposal of the body,” he pointed out.

“Yes, that’s always the snag, isn’t it? Inconvenient thing, a human body.”

They passed Major Burnaby’s cottage. The Major was in his garden looking sternly at a weed which was growing where no weed should be.

“Good afternoon, Major,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Are you also coming to Sittaford House?”

Burnaby rubbed his nose.

“Don’t think so. They sent a note asking me. But—well—I don’t feel like it. Expect you’ll understand.”

Mr. Rycroft bowed his head in token of understanding.

“All the same,” he said. “I wish you’d come. I’ve got a reason.”

“A reason. What sort of reason?”

Mr. Rycroft hesitated. It was clear that the presence of Ronnie Garfield constrained him. But Ronnie, completely oblivious of the fact, stood his ground listening with ingenuous interest.

“I’d like to try an experiment,” he said at last slowly.

“What sort of experiment?” demanded Burnaby. Mr. Rycroft hesitated.

“I’d rather not tell you beforehand. But if you come I’ll ask you to back me up in anything I suggest.”

Burnaby’s curiosity was aroused.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll come. You can count on me. Where’s my hat?”

He rejoined them in a minute, hat on head, and all three turned in at the gates of Sittaford House.

“Hear you are expecting company, Rycroft,” said Burnaby conversationally.

A shade of vexation passed over the older man’s face.

“Who told you that?”

“That chattering magpie of a woman, Mrs. Curtis. She’s clean and she’s honest, but her tongue never stops, and she pays no attention to whether you listen or whether you don’t.”

“It’s quite true,” admitted Mr. Rycroft. “I am expecting my niece, Mrs. Dering, and her husband, tomorrow.”

They had arrived at the front door by now, and on pressing the bell it was opened to them by Brian Pearson.

As they removed their overcoats in the hall, Mr. Rycroft observed the tall broad-shouldered young man with an interested eye.

“Fine specimen,” he thought. “Very fine specimen. Strong temper. Curious angle of the jaw. Might be a nasty customer to tackle in certain circumstances. What you might call a dangerous young man.”

A queer feeling of unreality stole over Major Burnaby as he entered the drawing room, and Mrs. Willett rose to greet him.

“Splendid of you to turn out.”

The same words as last week. The same blazing fire on the hearth. He fancied, but was not sure, the same gowns on the two women.

It did give one a queer feeling. As though it were last week again—as though Joe Trevelyan hadn’t died—as though nothing had happened or were changed. Stop, that was wrong. The Willett woman had changed. A wreck, that was the only way of describing her. No longer the prosperous determined woman of the world, but a broken nervy creature making an obvious and pathetic effort to appear as usual.

“But I’m hanged if I can see what Joe’s death meant to her,” thought the Major.

For the hundredth time he registered the impression that there was something deuced odd about the Willetts.

As usual, he awoke to the realization that he was being silent and that someone was speaking to him.

“Our last little gathering, I am afraid,” Mrs. Willett was saying.

“What’s that?” Ronnie Garfield looked up suddenly.

“Yes.” Mrs. Willett shook her head with a would-be smile. “We have got to forego the rest of the winter in Sittaford. Personally, of course, I love it—the snow and the tors and the wildness of it all. But the domestic problem! The domestic problem is too difficult—it defeats me!”

“I thought you were going to get a chauffeur-butler and a handyman,” said Major Burnaby.

A sudden shiver shook Mrs. Willett’s frame.

“No,” she said, “I—I have to give up that idea.”

“Dear, dear,” said Mr. Rycroft. “This is a great blow to us all. Very sad indeed. We will sink back into our little rut after you have gone. When do you go, by the way?”

“On Monday, I expect,” said Mrs. Willett. “Unless I can get away tomorrow. It’s so very awkward with no servants. Of course, I must arrange things with Mr. Kirkwood. I took the house for four months.”

“You are going to London?” inquired Mr. Rycroft.

“Yes, probably, to start with anyway. Then I expect we shall go abroad to the Riviera.”

“A great loss,” said Mr. Rycroft bowing gallantly.

Mrs. Willett gave a queer aimless little titter.

“Too kind of you, Mr. Rycroft. Well, shall we have tea?”

Tea was laid ready. Mrs. Willett poured out. Ronnie and Brian handed things. A queer kind of embarrassment lay over the party.

“What about you?” said Burnaby abruptly to Brian Pearson. “You off too?”

“To London, yes. Naturally I shan’t go abroad till this business is over.”

“This business?”

“I mean until my brother is cleared of this ridiculous charge.”

He flung the words at them defiantly in such a challenging manner that nobody knew quite what to say. Major Burnaby relieved the situation.

“Never have believed he did it. Not for a moment,” he said.

“None of us think so,” said Violet, flinging him a grateful glance.

The tinkle of a bell broke the ensuing pause.

“That’s Mr. Duke,” said Mrs. Willett. “Let him in, Brian.”

Young Pearson had gone to the window.

“It’s not Duke,” he said. “It’s that damned journalist.”

“Oh! dear,” said Mrs. Willett. “Well, I suppose we must let him in all the same.”

Brian nodded and reappeared in a few minutes with Charles Enderby.

Enderby entered with his usual ingenuous air of beaming satisfaction. The idea that he might not be welcome did not seem to occur to him.

“Hullo, Mrs. Willett, how are you? Thought I’d just drop in and see how things were. I wondered where everyone in Sittaford had got to. Now, I see.”

“Have some tea, Mr. Enderby?”

“Awfully kind of you. I will. I see Emily isn’t here. I suppose she’s with your aunt, Mr. Garfield.”

“Not that I know of,” said Ronnie staring. “I thought she’d gone to Exhampton.”

“Ah! but she’s back from there. How do I know? A little bird told me. The Curtis bird, to be accurate. Saw the car pass the post office and go up the lane and come back empty. She is not in No. 5 and she’s not in Sittaford House. Puzzle—where is she? Failing Miss Percehouse, she must be sipping tea with that determined lady killer, Captain Wyatt.”

“She may have gone up Sittaford Beacon to see the sunset,” suggested Mr. Rycroft.

“Don’t think so,” said Burnaby. “Should have seen her pass. I’ve been in the garden for the last hour.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a very vital problem,” said Charles cheerfully. “I mean I don’t think she’s been kidnapped or murdered or anything.”

“That’s a pity from the point of view of your paper, isn’t it?” sneered Brian.

“Even for copy, I wouldn’t sacrifice Emily,” said Charles. “Emily,” he added thoughtfully, “is unique.”

“Very charming,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Very charming. We are—er—collaborators, she and I?”

“Has everyone finished?” said Mrs. Willett. “What about some bridge?”

“Er—one moment,” said Mr. Rycroft.

He cleared his throat importantly. Everyone looked at him.

“Mrs. Willett, I am, as you know, deeply interested in psychic phenomena. A week ago today, in this very room, we had an amazing, indeed an awe-inspiring experience.”

There was a faint sound from Violet Willett. He turned to her.

“I know, my dear Miss Willett, I know. The experience upset you, it was upsetting. I do not deny it. Now, ever since the crime the police force have been seeking the murderer of Captain Trevelyan. They have made an arrest. But some of us, at least, in this room, do not believe that Mr. James Pearson is the guilty party. What I propose is this, that we repeat the experiment of last Friday, though approaching it this time in a rather different spirit.”

“No,” cried Violet.

“Oh! I say,” said Ronnie. “That’s a bit too thick. I’m not going to join in anyway.”

Mr. Rycroft took no notice of him.

“Mrs. Willett, what do you say?”

She hesitated.

“Frankly, Mr. Rycroft, I do not like the idea. I don’t like it at all. That miserable business last week made a most disagreeable impression on me. It will take me a long time to forget it.”

“What are you getting at exactly?” asked Enderby interestedly. “Do you propose that the spirits should tell us the name of Captain Trevelyan’s murderer? That seems a pretty tall order.”

“It was a pretty tall order, as you call it, when last week a message came through saying that Captain Trevelyan was dead.”

“That’s true,” agreed Enderby. “But—well—you know this idea of yours might have consequences you haven’t considered.”

“Such as?”

“Supposing a name was mentioned? Could you be sure that someone present did not deliberately—”

He paused and Ronnie Garfield tendered the word.

“Shove. That’s what he means. Supposing somebody goes and shoves.”

“This is a serious experiment, sir,” said Mr. Rycroft warmly. “Nobody would do such a thing.”

“I don’t know,” said Ronnie dubiously. “I wouldn’t put it past them. I don’t mean myself. I swear I wouldn’t, but suppose everyone turns on me and says I have. Jolly awkward, you know.”

“Mrs. Willett, I am in earnest,” the little old gentleman disregarded Ronnie. “I beg of you, let us make the experiment.”

She wavered.

“I don’t like it. I really don’t. I—” She looked round her uneasily, as though for a way of escape. “Major Burnaby, you were Captain Trevelyan’s friend. What do you say?”

The Major’s eyes met those of Mr. Rycroft. This, he understood, was the contingency which the latter had foreshadowed.

“Why not?” he said gruffly.

It had all the decision of a casting vote.

Ronnie went into the adjoining room and brought the small table which had been used before. He set it in the middle of the floor and chairs were drawn up round it. No one spoke. The experiment was clearly not popular.

“That is correct, I think,” said Mr. Rycroft. “We are about to repeat the experiment of last Friday under precisely similar conditions.”

“Not precisely similar,” objected Mrs. Willett. “Mr. Duke is missing.”

“True,” said Mr. Rycroft. “A pity he is not here. A great pity. Well—er—we must consider him as replaced by Mr. Pearson.”

“Don’t take part in it, Brian. I beg of you. Please don’t,” cried Violet.

“What does it matter? It’s all nonsense anyway.”

“That is quite the wrong spirit,” said Mr. Rycroft severely.

Brian Pearson did not reply, but took his place beside Violet.

“Mr. Enderby,” began Mr. Rycroft, but Charles interrupted him.

“I was not in on this. I’m a journalist and you mistrust me. I’ll take notes in shorthand of any phenomena—that’s the word, isn’t it?—that occur.”

Matters were settled like that. The other six took their places round the table. Charles turned off the lights and sat down on the fender.

“One minute,” he said. “What’s the time?” He peered at his wristwatch in the firelight.

“That’s odd,” he said.

“What’s odd?”

“It’s just twenty-five minutes past five.”

Violet uttered a little cry.

Mr. Rycroft said severely:

“Silence.”

The minutes passed. A very different atmosphere this to the one a week ago. There was no muffled laughter, no whispered comments—only silence, broken at last by a slight crack from the table.

Mr. Rycroft’s voice rose.

“Is there anyone there?”

Another faint crack—somehow an eerie sound in that darkened room.

“Is there anyone there?”

Not a crack this time but a deafening tremendous rap.

Violet screamed and Mrs. Willett gave a cry.

Brian Pearson’s voice rose reassuringly.

“It’s all right. That’s a knock at the front door. I’ll go and open it.”

He strode from the room.

Still nobody spoke.

Suddenly the door flew open, the lights were switched on.

In the doorway stood Inspector Narracott. Behind him were Emily Trefusis and Mr. Duke.

Narracott took a step into the room and spoke.

“John Burnaby I charge you with the murder of Joseph Trevelyan on Friday the 14th instant, and I hereby warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and may be used in evidence.”

Thirty

EMILY EXPLAINS

It was a crowd of people almost too surprised for words that crowded round Emily Trefusis.

Inspector Narracott had led his prisoner from the room.

Charles Enderby found his voice first.

“For heaven’s sake, cough it up, Emily,” he said. “I want to get to the telegraph office. Every moment’s vital.”

“It was Major Burnaby who killed Captain Trevelyan.”

“Well, I saw Narracott arrest him. And I suppose Narracott’s sane—hasn’t gone off his nut suddenly. But how can Burnaby have killed Trevelyan? I mean how is it humanly possible? If Trevelyan was killed at five and twenty past five—”

“He wasn’t. He was killed at about a quarter to six.”

“Well, but even then—”

“I know. You’d never guess unless you just happened to think of it. Skis—that’s the explanation—skis.”

“Skis?” repeated everyone.

Emily nodded.

“Yes. He deliberately engineered that table-turning. It wasn’t an accident and done unconsciously as we thought, Charles. It was the second alternative that we rejected—done on purpose. He saw it was going to snow before very long. That would make it perfectly safe and wipe out all tracks.

He created the impression that Captain Trevelyan was dead—got everyone all worked up. Then he pretended to be very upset and insisted on starting off for Exhampton.

“He went home, buckled on his skis (they were kept in a shed in the garden with a lot of other tackle) and started. He was an expert on skis. It’s all down hill to Exhampton—a wonderful run. It would only take about ten minutes.

“He arrived at the window and rapped. Captain Trevelyan let him in, all unsuspecting. Then, when Captain Trevelyan’s back was turned he seized his opportunity, picked up that sandbag thing and—and killed him. Ugh! It makes me sick to think of it.”

She shuddered.

“It was all quite easy. He had plenty of time. He must have wiped and cleaned the skis and then put them into the cupboard in the dining room, pushed in among all the other things. Then, I suppose he forced the window and pulled out all the drawers and things—to make it look as though someone had broken in.

“Then just before eight o’clock, all he had to do was to go out, make a detour on to the road higher up and come puffing and panting into Exhampton as though he’d walked all the way from Sittaford. So long as no one suspected about the skis, he’d be perfectly safe. The doctor couldn’t fail to say that Captain Trevelyan had been dead at least two hours. And, as I say, so long as no one thought of skis, Major Burnaby would have a perfect alibi.”

“But they were friends—Burnaby and Trevelyan,” said Mr. Rycroft. “Old friends—they’ve always been friends. It’s incredible.”

“I know,” said Emily. “That’s what I thought. I couldn’t see why. I puzzled and I puzzled and at last I had to come to Inspector Narracott and Mr. Duke.”

She paused and looked at the impassive Mr. Duke.

“May I tell them?” she said.

Mr. Duke smiled.

“If you like, Miss Trefusis.”

“Anyway—no, perhaps you’d rather I didn’t. I went to them, and we got the thing clear. Do you remember telling me, Charles, that Evans mentioned that Captain Trevelyan used to send in solutions of competitions in his name? He thought Sittaford House was too grand an address. Well—that’s what he did in the Football Competition that you gave Major Burnaby five thousand pounds for. It was Captain Trevelyan’s solution really, and he sent it in in Burnaby’s name. No. 1, The Cottages, Sittaford, sounded much better, he thought. Well, you see what happened? On Friday morning Major Burnaby got the letter saying he’d won five thousand pounds (and by the way, that ought to have made us suspicious. He told you he never got the letter—that nothing had come through on Friday owing to the weather. That was a lie. Friday morning was the last day things did come through). Where was I? Oh!—Major Burnaby getting the letter. He wanted that five thousand—wanted it badly. He’d been investing in some rotten shares or other and had lost a terrible lot of money.

“The idea must have come into his head quite suddenly, I should think. Perhaps when he realized it was going to snow that evening. If Trevelyan were dead—he could keep that money and no one would ever know.”

“Amazing,” murmured Mr. Rycroft. “Quite amazing. I never dreamed—But my dear young lady, how did you learn all this? What put you on the right track?”

For answer, Emily explained Mrs. Belling’s letter, and told how she had discovered the boots in the chimney.

“It was looking at them that put it into my mind. They were ski boots, you see, and they made me think of skis. And suddenly I wondered if perhaps—I rushed downstairs to the cupboard, and sure enough there were two pairs of skis there. One pair was longer than the other. And the boots fitted the long pair—but they didn’t fit the other. The toe clip things were adjusted for

a much smaller pair of boots. The shorter pair of skis belonged to a different person.”

“He ought to have hidden the skis somewhere else,” said Mr. Rycroft with artistic disapproval.

“No—no,” said Emily. “Where else could he hide them? It was a very good place really. In a day or two the whole collection would have been stored, and in the meantime it wasn’t likely that the police would bother whether Captain Trevelyan had had one or two pairs of skis.”

“But why did he hide the boots?”

“I suppose,” said Emily, “that he was afraid the police might do exactly what I did—The sight of ski boots might have suggested skis to them. So he stuffed them up the chimney. And that’s really, of course, where he made his mistake, because Evans noticed that they’d gone and I got to know of it.”

“Did he deliberately mean to fasten the crime on Jim?” demanded Brian Pearson angrily.

“Oh! no. That was just Jim’s usual idiotic luck. He was an idiot, poor lamb.”

“He’s all right now,” said Charles. “You needn’t worry about him. Have you told me everything, Emily, because if so, I want to rush to the telegraph office. You’ll excuse me, everybody.”

He dashed out of the room.

“The live wire,” said Emily.

Mr. Duke spoke in his deep voice.

“You’ve been rather a live wire yourself, Miss Trefusis.”

“You have,” said Ronnie admiringly.

“Oh! dear,” said Emily suddenly and dropped limply on a chair.

“What you need is a pick-me-up,” said Ronnie. “A cocktail, eh?”

Emily shook her head.

“A little brandy,” suggested Mr. Rycroft solicitously.

“A cup of tea,” suggested Violet.

“I’d like a spot of face powder,” said Emily wistfully. “I’ve left my powder puff in the car. And I know I’m simply shining with excitement.”

Violet led her upstairs in search of this sedative to the nerves.

“That’s better,” said Emily dabbing her nose firmly. “What a nice kind. I feel much better now. Have you got any lipstick? I feel almost human.”

“You’ve been wonderful,” said Violet. “So brave.”

“Not really,” said Emily. “Underneath this camouflage I’ve been as wobbly as a jelly, with a sort of sick feeling in my middle.”

“I know,” said Violet. “I’ve felt much the same myself. I have been so terrified this last few days—about Brian, you know. They couldn’t hang him for murdering Captain Trevelyan, of course, but if once he had said where he was during that time, they would soon have ferreted out that it was he who engineered Father’s escape.”

“What’s that?” said Emily pausing in her facial repairs.

“Father was the convict who escaped. That’s why we came here. Mother and I. Poor Father, he’s always—been queer at times. Then he does these dreadful things. We met Brian on the way over from Australia, and he and I—well—he and I—”

“I see,” said Emily helpfully. “Of course you did.”

“I told him everything and between us we concocted a plan. Brian was wonderful. We had got plenty of money fortunately, and Brian made all the plans. It’s awfully hard to get away from Princetown, you know, but Brian engineered it. Really it was a kind of miracle. The arrangement was that after Father got away he was to go straight across country here and hide in the Pixie’s Cave and then later he and Brian were to be our two menservants. You see with our arriving so long beforehand we imagined we would be quite free from suspicion. It was Brian who told us about this place, and suggested us offering a big rent to Captain Trevelyan.”

“I’m awfully sorry,” said Emily—“I mean that it all went wrong.”

“It’s broken Mother up completely,” said Violet. “I think Brian’s wonderful. It isn’t everybody who would want to marry a convict’s daughter. But I don’t think it’s really Father’s fault, he had an awful kick on the head from a horse about fifteen years ago, and since then he has been a bit queer. Brian says if he had a good counsel he would have got off. But don’t let’s talk about me any more.”

“Can’t anything be done?”

Violet shook her head.

“He’s very ill—the exposure, you know. That awful cold. It’s pneumonia. I can’t help feeling that if he dies—well—it may be best for him really. It sounds dreadful to say so, but you know what I mean.”

“Poor Violet,” said Emily. “It is a rotten shame.”

The girl shook her head.

“I’ve got Brian,” she said. “And you’ve got—”

She stopped embarrassed.

“Ye-es,” said Emily thoughtfully, “That’s just it.”

Thirty-one

THE LUCKY MAN

Ten minutes later Emily was hurrying down the lane. Captain Wyatt, leaning over his gate, tried to arrest her progress.

“Hi,” he said, “Miss Trefusis. What’s all this I hear?”

“It’s all true,” said Emily hurrying on.

“Yes, but look here. Come in—have a glass of wine or a cup of tea. There’s plenty of time. No need to hurry. That’s the worst of you civilized people.”

“We’re awful, I know,” said Emily and sped on.

She burst in on Miss Percehouse with the explosive force of a bomb.

“I’ve come to tell you all about it,” said Emily.

And straightaway she poured forth the complete story. It was punctuated by various ejaculations of “Bless us,” “You don’t say so?” “Well, I declare,” from Miss Percehouse.

When Emily had finished her narrative, Miss Percehouse raised herself on her elbow and wagged a finger portentously.

“What did I say?” she demanded. “I told you Burnaby was a jealous man. Friends indeed! For more than twenty years Trevelyan has done everything a bit better than Burnaby. He skied better, and he climbed better, and he shot better, and he did crossword puzzles better. Burnaby wasn’t a big enough man to stand it. Trevelyan was rich and he was poor.

“It’s been going on a long time. I can tell you it’s a difficult thing to go on really liking a man who can do everything just a little bit better than you

can. Burnaby was a narrow-minded, small-natured man. He let it get on his nerves.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Emily. “Well, I had to come and tell you. It seemed so unfair you should be out of everything. By the way, did you know that your nephew knew my Aunt Jennifer? They were having tea together at Deller’s on Wednesday.”

“She’s his godmother,” said Miss Percehouse. “So that’s the ‘fellow’ he wanted to see in Exeter. Borrowing money, if I know Ronnie. I’ll speak to him.”

“I forbid you to bite anyone on a joyful day like this,” said Emily. “Good-bye. I must fly. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“What have you got to do, young woman? I should say you’d done your bit.”

“Not quite. I must go up to London and see Jim’s Insurance Company people and persuade them not to prosecute him over that little matter of the borrowed money.”

“H’m,” said Miss Percehouse.

“It’s all right,” said Emily. “Jim will keep straight enough in future. He’s had his lesson.”

“Perhaps. And you think you’ll be able to persuade them?”

“Yes,” said Emily firmly.

“Well,” said Miss Percehouse. “Perhaps you will. And after that?”

“After that,” said Emily. “I’ve finished. I’ll have done all I can for Jim.”

“Then suppose we say—what next?” said Miss Percehouse.

“You mean?”

“What next? Or if you want it put clearer: Which of them?”

“Oh!” said Emily.

“Exactly. That’s what I want to know. Which of them is to be the unfortunate man?”

Emily laughed. Bending over she kissed the old lady.

“Don’t pretend to be an idiot,” she said. “You know perfectly well which it is.”

Miss Percehouse chuckled.

Emily ran lightly out of the house and down to the gate just as Charles came racing up the lane.

He caught her by both hands.

“Emily darling!”

“Charles! Isn’t everything marvellous?”

“I shall kiss you,” said Mr. Enderby, and did.

“I’m a made man, Emily,” he said. “Now, look here, darling, what about it?”

“What about what?”

“Well—I mean—well, of course, it wouldn’t have been playing the game with poor old Pearson in prison and all the rest of it. But he’s cleared now and—well, he has got to take his medicine just like anybody else.”

“What are you talking about?” said Emily.

“You know well enough I am crazy about you,” said Mr. Enderby, “and you like me. Pearson was just a mistake. What I mean is—well—you and I, we

are made for each other. All this time, we have known it, both of us, haven't we? Do you like a Registry Office or a Church, or what?"

"If you are referring to marriage," said Emily, "there's nothing doing."

"What—but I say—"

"No," said Emily.

"But—Emily—"

"If you will have it," said Emily. "I love Jim. Passionately!"

Charles stared at her in speechless bewilderment.

"You can't!"

"I can! And I do! And I always have! And I always shall!"

"You—you made me think—"

"I said," said Emily demurely, "that it was wonderful to have someone one could rely on."

"Yes, but I thought—"

"I can't help what you thought."

"You are an unscrupulous devil, Emily."

"I know, Charles darling. I know. I'm everything you like to call me. But never mind. Think how great you are going to be. You've got your scoop! Exclusive news for the Daily Wire. You're a made man. What's a woman anyway? Less than the dust. No really strong man wants a woman. She only hampers him by clinging to him like the ivy. Every great man is one who is independent of women. A career—there's nothing so fine, so absolutely satisfying to a man, as a great career. You are a strong man, Charles, one who can stand alone—"

“Will you stop talking, Emily? It’s like a talk to Young Men on the Wireless! You’ve broken my heart. You don’t know how lovely you looked as you came into that room with Narracott. Just like something triumphant and avenging off an arch.”

A footstep crunched on the lane, and Mr. Duke appeared.

“Oh! There you are, Mr. Duke,” said Emily. “Charles, I want to tell you. This is Ex-Chief-Inspector Duke of Scotland Yard.”

“What?” cried Charles recognizing the famous name. “Not the Inspector Duke?”

“Yes,” said Emily. “When he retired, he came here to live, and being nice and modest he didn’t want his renown to get about. I see now why Inspector Narracott twinkled so when I wanted him to tell me what kind of crimes Mr. Duke had committed.”

Mr. Duke laughed.

Charles wavered. There was a short tussle between the lover and the journalist. The journalist won.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Inspector,” he said. “Now, I wonder if we could persuade you to do us a short article, say eight hundred words, on the Trevelyan case.”

Emily stepped quickly up the lane and into Mrs. Curtis’s cottage. She ran up to her bedroom and pulled out her suitcase. Mrs. Curtis had followed her up.

“You’re not going, Miss?”

“I am. I’ve got a lot to do—London, and my young man.”

Mrs. Curtis drew nearer.

“Just tell me, Miss, which of ’em is it?”

Emily was throwing clothes haphazard into the suitcase.

“The one in prison, of course. There’s never been any other.”

“Ah! You don’t think, Miss, that maybe you’re making a mistake. You’re sure the other young gentleman is worth as much as this one?”

“Oh! no,” said Emily. “He isn’t. This one will get on.” She glanced out of the window where Charles was still holding Ex-Chief-Inspector Duke in earnest parley. “He’s the kind of young man who’s simply born to get on—but I don’t know what would happen to the other one if I weren’t there to look after him. Look where he would be now if it weren’t for me!”

“And you can’t say more than that, Miss,” said Mrs. Curtis.

She retreated downstairs to where her lawful spouse was sitting and staring into vacancy.

“The living image of my Great Aunt Sarah’s Belinda she is,” said Mrs. Curtis. “Threw herself away she did on that miserable George Plunket down at the Three Cows. Mortgaged and all it was. And in two years she had the mortgage paid off and the place a going concern.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Curtis, and shifted his pipe slightly.

“He was a handsome fellow, George Plunket,” said Mrs. Curtis reminiscently.

“Ah!” said Mr. Curtis.

“But after he married Belinda he never so much as looked at another woman.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Curtis.

“She never gave him the chance,” said Mrs. Curtis.

“Ah!” said Mr. Curtis.

Why Didn't They Ask Evans? (1934)

By Agatha Christie

One

THE ACCIDENT

Bobby Jones teed up his ball, gave a short preliminary waggle, took the club back slowly, then brought it down and through with the rapidity of lightning.

Did the ball fly down the fairway straight and true, rising as it went and soaring over the bunker to land within an easy mashie shot of the fourteenth green?

No, it did not. Badly topped, it scudded along the ground and embedded itself firmly in the bunker!

There were no eager crowds to groan with dismay. The solitary witness of the shot manifested no surprise. And that is easily explained—for it was not the American-born master of the game who had played the shot, but merely the fourth son of the Vicar of Marchbolt—a small seaside town on the coast of Wales.

Bobby uttered a decidedly profane ejaculation.

He was an amiable-looking young man of about eight and twenty. His best friend could not have said that he was handsome, but his face was an eminently likeable one, and his eyes had the honest brown friendliness of a dog's.

“I get worse every day,” he muttered dejectedly.

“You press,” said his companion.

Dr. Thomas was a middle-aged man with grey hair and a red cheerful face. He himself never took a full swing. He played short straight shots down the middle, and usually beat more brilliant but more erratic players.

Bobby attacked his ball fiercely with a niblick. The third time was successful. The ball lay a short distance from the green which Dr. Thomas had reached with two creditable iron shots.

“Your hole,” said Bobby.

They proceeded to the next tee.

The doctor drove first—a nice straight shot, but with no great distance about it.

Bobby sighed, teed his ball, reteed it, waggled his club a long time, took back stiffly, shut his eyes, raised his head, depressed his right shoulder, did everything he ought not to have done—and hit a screamer down the middle of the course.

He drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The well-known golfer’s gloom passed from his eloquent face to be succeeded by the equally well-known golfer’s exultation.

“I know now what I’ve been doing,” said Bobby—quite untruthfully.

A perfect iron shot, a little chip with a mashie and Bobby lay dead. He achieved a birdie four and Dr. Thomas was reduced to one up.

Full of confidence, Bobby stepped on to the sixteenth tee. He again did everything he should not have done, and this time no miracle occurred. A terrific, a magnificent, an almost superhuman slice happened! The ball went round at right angles.

“If that had been straight—whew!” said Dr. Thomas.

“If,” said Bobby bitterly. “Hullo, I thought I heard a shout! Hope the ball didn’t hit anyone.”

He peered out to the right. It was a difficult light. The sun was on the point of setting, and, looking straight into it, it was hard to see anything distinctly. Also there was a slight mist rising from the sea. The edge of the cliff was a few hundred yards away.

“The footpath runs along there,” said Bobby. “But the ball can’t possibly have travelled as far as that. All the same, I did think I heard a cry. Did you?”

But the doctor had heard nothing.

Bobby went after his ball. He had some difficulty in finding it, but ran it to earth at last. It was practically unplayable—embedded in a furze bush. He had a couple of hacks at it, then picked it up and called out to his companion that he gave up the hole.

The doctor came over towards him since the next tee was right on the edge of the cliff.

The seventeenth was Bobby’s particular bugbear. At it you had to drive over a chasm. The distance was not actually so great, but the attraction of the depths below was overpowering.

They had crossed the footpath which now ran inland to their left, skirting the very edge of the cliff.

The doctor took an iron and just landed on the other side.

Bobby took a deep breath and drove. The ball scudded forward and disappeared over the lip of the abyss.

“Every single dashed time,” said Bobby bitterly. “I do the same dashed idiotic thing.”

He skirted the chasm, peering over. Far below the sea sparkled, but not every ball was lost in its depths. The drop was sheer at the top, but below it shelved gradually.

Bobby walked slowly along. There was, he knew, one place where one could scramble down fairly easily. Caddies did so, hurling themselves over the edge and reappearing triumphant and panting with the missing ball.

Suddenly Bobby stiffened and called to his companion.

“I say, doctor, come here. What do you make of that?”

Some forty feet below was a dark heap of something that looked like old clothes.

The doctor caught his breath.

“By Jove,” he said. “Somebody’s fallen over the cliff. We must get down to him.”

Side by side the two men scrambled down the rock, the more athletic Bobby helping the other. At last they reached the ominous dark bundle. It was a man of about forty, and he was still breathing, though unconscious.

The doctor examined him, touching his limbs, feeling his pulse, drawing down the lids of his eyes. He knelt down beside him and completed his examination. Then he looked up at Bobby, who was standing there feeling rather sick, and slowly shook his head.

“Nothing to be done,” he said. “His number’s up, poor fellow. His back’s broken. Well, well. I suppose he wasn’t familiar with the path, and when the mist came up he walked over the edge. I’ve told the council more than once there ought to be a railing just here.”

He stood up again.

“I’ll go off and get help,” he said. “Make arrangements to have the body got up. It’ll be dark before we know where we are. Will you stay here?”

Bobby nodded.

“There’s nothing to be done for him, I suppose?” he asked.

The doctor shook his head.

“Nothing. It won’t be long—the pulse is weakening fast. He’ll last another twenty minutes at most. Just possible he may recover consciousness before the end; but very likely he won’t. Still—”

“Rather,” said Bobby quickly. “I’ll stay. You get along. If he does come to, there’s no drug or anything—” he hesitated.

The doctor shook his head.

“There’ll be no pain,” he said. “No pain at all.”

Turning away, he began rapidly to climb up the cliff again. Bobby watched him till he disappeared over the top with a wave of his hand.

Bobby moved a step or two along the narrow ledge, sat down on a projection in the rock and lit a cigarette. The business had shaken him. Up to now he had never come in contact with illness or death.

What rotten luck there was in the world! A swirl of mist on a fine evening, a false step—and life came to an end. Fine healthy-looking fellow too—probably never known a day’s illness in his life. The pallor of approaching death couldn’t disguise the deep tan of the skin. A man who had lived an out-of-door life—abroad, perhaps. Bobby studied him more closely—the crisp curling chestnut hair just touched with grey at the temples, the big nose, the strong jaw, the white teeth just showing through the parted lips. Then the broad shoulders and the fine sinewy hands. The legs were twisted at a curious angle. Bobby shuddered and brought his eyes up again to the face. An attractive face, humorous, determined, resourceful. The eyes, he thought, were probably blue—

And just as he reached that point in his thoughts, the eyes suddenly opened.

They were blue—a clear deep blue. They looked straight at Bobby. There was nothing uncertain or hazy about them. They seemed completely conscious. They were watchful and at the same time they seemed to be asking a question.

Bobby got up quickly and came towards the man. Before he got there, the other spoke. His voice was not weak—it came out clear and resonant.

“Why didn’t they ask Evans?” he said.

And then a queer little shudder passed over him, the eyelids dropped, the jaw fell . . .

The man was dead.

Two

CONCERNING FATHERS

Bobby knelt down beside him, but there was no doubt. The man was dead. A last moment of consciousness, that sudden question, and then—the end.

Rather apologetically, Bobby put his hand into the dead man's pocket and, drawing out a silk handkerchief, he spread it reverently over the dead face. There was nothing more he could do.

Then he noticed that in his action he had jerked something else out of the pocket. It was a photograph and in the act of replacing it he glanced at the pictured face.

It was a woman's face, strangely haunting in quality. A fair woman with wide-apart eyes. She seemed little more than a girl, certainly under thirty, but it was the arresting quality of her beauty rather than the beauty itself that seized upon the boy's imagination. It was the kind of face, he thought, not easy to forget.

Gently and reverently, he replaced the photograph in the pocket from which it had come, then he sat down again to wait for the doctor's return.

The time passed very slowly—or at least so it seemed to the waiting boy. Also, he had just remembered something. He had promised his father to play the organ at the evening service at six o'clock and it was now ten minutes to six. Naturally, his father would understand the circumstances, but all the same he wished that he had remembered to send a message by the doctor. The Rev. Thomas Jones was a man of extremely nervous temperament. He was, par excellence, a fusser, and when he fussed, his digestive apparatus collapsed and he suffered agonizing pain. Bobby, though he considered his father a pitiful old ass, was nevertheless extremely fond of him. The Rev. Thomas, on the other hand, considered his fourth son

a pitiful young ass, and with less tolerance than Bobby sought to effect improvement in the young man.

“The poor old gov’nor,” thought Bobby. “He’ll be ramping up and down. He won’t know whether to start the service or not. He’ll work himself up till he gets that pain in the tummy, and then he won’t be able to eat his supper. He won’t have the sense to realize that I wouldn’t let him down unless it were quite unavoidable—and, anyway, what does it matter? But he’ll never see it that way. Nobody over fifty has got any sense—they worry themselves to death about tuppenny-ha’peny things that don’t matter. They’ve been brought up all wrong, I suppose, and now they can’t help themselves. Poor old Dad, he’s got less sense than a chicken!”

He sat there thinking of his father with mingled affection and exasperation. His life at home seemed to him to be one long sacrifice to his father’s peculiar ideas. To Mr. Jones, the same time seemed to be one long sacrifice on his part, ill-understood or appreciated by the younger generation. So many ideas on the same subject differ.

What an age the doctor was! Surely he might have been back by this time?

Bobby got up and stamped his feet moodily. At that moment he heard something above him and looked up, thankful that help was at hand and his own services no longer needed.

But it was not the doctor. It was a man in plus fours whom Bobby did not know.

“I say,” said the newcomer. “Is anything the matter? Has there been an accident? Can I help in any way?”

He was a tall man with a pleasant tenor voice. Bobby could not see him very clearly for it was now fast growing dusk.

He explained what had happened whilst the stranger made shocked comments.

“There’s nothing I can do?” he asked. “Get help or anything?”

Bobby explained that help was on the way and asked if the other could see any signs of its arriving.

“There’s nothing at present.”

“You see,” went on Bobby, “I’ve got an appointment at six.”

“And you don’t like to leave—”

“No, I don’t quite,” said Bobby. “I mean, the poor chap’s dead and all that, and of course one can’t do anything, but all the same—”

He paused, finding it, as usual, difficult to put confused emotions into words.

The other, however, seemed to understand.

“I know,” he said. “Look here, I’ll come down—that is, if I can see my way—and I’ll stay till these fellows arrive.”

“Oh, would you?” said Bobby gratefully. “You see, it’s my father. He’s not a bad sort really, and things upset him. Can you see your way? A bit more to the left—now to the right—that’s it. It’s not really difficult.”

He encouraged the other with directions until the two men were face to face on the narrow plateau. The newcomer was a man of about thirty-five. He had a rather indecisive face which seemed to be calling for a monocle and a little moustache.

“I’m a stranger down here,” he explained. “My name’s Bassington-ffrench, by the way. Come down to see about a house. I say, what a beastly thing to happen! Did he walk over the edge?”

Bobby nodded.

“Bit of mist got up,” he explained. “It’s a dangerous bit of path. Well, so long. Thanks very much. I’ve got to hurry. It’s awfully good of you.”

“Not at all,” the other protested. “Anybody would do the same. Can’t leave the poor chap lying—well, I mean, it wouldn’t be decent somehow.”

Bobby was scrambling up the precipitous path. At the top he waved his hand to the other then set off at a brisk run across country. To save time, he vaulted the churchyard wall instead of going round to the gate on the road—a proceeding observed by the Vicar from the vestry window and deeply disapproved of by him.

It was five minutes past six, but the bell was still tolling.

Explanations and recriminations were postponed until after the service. Breathless, Bobby sank into his seat and manipulated the stops of the ancient organ. Association of ideas led his fingers into Chopin’s funeral march.

Afterwards, more in sorrow than in anger (as he expressly pointed out), the Vicar took his son to task.

“If you cannot do a thing properly, my dear Bobby,” he said, “it is better not to do it at all. I know that you and all your young friends seem to have no idea of time, but there is One whom we should not keep waiting. You offered to play the organ of your own accord. I did not coerce you. Instead, faint-hearted, you preferred playing a game—”

Bobby thought he had better interrupt before his father got too well away.

“Sorry, Dad,” he said, speaking cheerfully and breezily as was his habit no matter what the subject. “Not my fault this time. I was keeping guard over a corpse.”

“You were what?”

“Keeping guard over a blighter who stepped over the cliff. You know—the place where the chasm is—by the seventeenth tee. There was a bit of mist just then, and he must have gone straight on and over.”

“Good heavens,” cried the Vicar. “What a tragedy! Was the man killed outright?”

“No. He was unconscious. He died just after Dr. Thomas had gone off. But of course I felt I had to squat there—couldn’t just push off and leave him. And then another fellow came along so I passed the job of chief mourner on to him and legged it here as fast as I could.”

The Vicar sighed.

“Oh, my dear Bobby,” he said. “Will nothing shake your deplorable callousness? It grieves me more than I can say. Here you have been brought face to face with death—with sudden death. And you can joke about it! It leaves you unmoved. Everything—everything, however solemn, however sacred, is merely a joke to your generation.”

Bobby shuffled his feet.

If his father couldn’t see that, of course, you joked about a thing because you had felt badly about it—well, he couldn’t see it! It wasn’t the sort of thing you could explain. With death and tragedy about you had to keep a stiff upper lip.

But what could you expect? Nobody over fifty understood anything at all. They had the most extraordinary ideas.

“I expect it was the War,” thought Bobby loyally. “It upset them and they never got straight again.”

He felt ashamed of his father and sorry for him.

“Sorry, Dad,” he said with a clear-eyed realization that explanation was impossible.

The Vicar felt sorry for his son—he looked abashed—but he also felt ashamed of him. The boy had no conception of the seriousness of life. Even his apology was cheery and impenitent.

They moved towards the Vicarage, each making enormous efforts to find excuses for the other.

The Vicar thought: “I wonder when Bobby will find something to do . . . ?”

Bobby thought: “Wonder how much longer I can stick it down here . . . ?”

Yet they were both extremely fond of each other.

Three

A RAILWAY JOURNEY

Bobby did not see the immediate sequel of his adventure. On the following morning he went up to town, there to meet a friend who was thinking of starting a garage and who fancied Bobby's cooperation might be valuable.

After settling things to everybody's satisfaction, Bobby caught the 11:30 train home two days later. He caught it, true, but only by a very narrow margin. He arrived at Paddington when the clock announced the time to be 11:28, dashed down the subway, emerged on No. 3 Platform just as the train was moving and hurled himself at the first carriage he saw, heedless of indignant ticket collectors and porters in his immediate rear.

Wrenching open the door, he fell in on his hands and knees, picked himself up. The door was shut with a slam by an agile porter and Bobby found himself looking at the sole occupant of the compartment.

It was a first-class carriage and in the corner facing the engine sat a dark girl smoking a cigarette. She had on a red skirt, a short green jacket and a brilliant blue beret, and despite a certain resemblance to an organ grinder's monkey (she had long, sorrowful dark eyes and a puckered-up face) she was distinctly attractive.

In the midst of an apology, Bobby broke off.

"Why, it's you, Frankie!" he said. "I haven't seen you for ages."

"Well, I haven't seen you. Sit down and talk."

Bobby grinned.

"My ticket's the wrong colour."

"That doesn't matter," said Frankie kindly. "I'll pay the difference for you."

“My manly indignation rises at the thought,” said Bobby. “How could I let a lady pay for me?”

“It’s about all we seem to be good for these days,” said Frankie.

“I will pay the difference myself,” said Bobby heroically as a burly figure in blue appeared at the door from the corridor.

“Leave it to me,” said Frankie.

She smiled graciously at the ticket collector, who touched his hat as he took the piece of white cardboard from her and punched it.

“Mr. Jones has just come in to talk to me for a bit,” she said. “That won’t matter, will it?”

“That’s all right, your ladyship. The gentleman won’t be staying long, I expect.” He coughed tactfully. “I shan’t be round again till after Bristol,” he added significantly.

“What can be done with a smile,” said Bobby as the official withdrew.

Lady Frances Derwent shook her head thoughtfully.

“I’m not so sure it’s the smile,” she said. “I rather think it’s father’s habit of tipping everybody five shillings whenever he travels that does it.”

“I thought you’d given up Wales for good, Frankie.”

Frances sighed.

“My dear, you know what it is. You know how mouldy parents can be. What with that and the bathrooms in the state they are, and nothing to do and nobody to see—and people simply won’t come to the country to stay nowadays! They say they’re economizing and they can’t go so far. Well, I mean, what’s a girl to do?”

Bobby shook his head, sadly recognizing the problem.

“However,” went on Frankie, “after the party I went to last night, I thought even home couldn’t be worse.”

“What was wrong with the party?”

“Nothing at all. It was just like any other party, only more so. It was to start at the Savoy at half past eight. Some of us rolled up about a quarter past nine and, of course, we got entangled with other people, but we got sorted out about ten. And we had dinner and then after a bit we went on to the Marionette—there was a rumour it was going to be raided, but nothing happened—it was just moribund, and we drank a bit and then we went on to the Bullring and that was even deader, and then we went to a coffee stall, and then we went to a fried-fish place, and then we thought we’d go and breakfast with Angela’s uncle and see if he’d be shocked, but he wasn’t—only bored, and then we sort of fizzled home. Honestly, Bobby, it isn’t good enough.”

“I suppose not,” said Bobby, stifling a pang of envy.

Never in his wildest moments did he dream of being able to be a member of the Marionette or the Bullring.

His relationship with Frankie was a peculiar one.

As children, he and his brothers had played with the children at the Castle. Now that they were all grown-up, they seldom came across each other. When they did, they still used Christian names. On the rare occasions when Frankie was at home, Bobby and his brothers would go up and play tennis. But Frankie and her two brothers were not asked to the Vicarage. It seemed to be tacitly recognized that it would not be amusing for them. On the other hand, extra men were always wanted for tennis. There may have been a trace of constraint in spite of the Christian names. The Derwents were, perhaps, a shade more friendly than they need have been as though to show that “there was no difference.” The Jones, on their side, were a shade formal, as though determined not to claim more friendship than was offered them. The two families had now nothing in common save certain childish memories. Yet Bobbie was very fond of Frankie and was always pleased on the rare occasions when Fate threw them together.

“I’m so tired of everything,” said Frankie in a weary voice. “Aren’t you?”

Bobby considered.

“No, I don’t think I am.”

“My dear, how wonderful,” said Frankie.

“I don’t mean I’m hearty,” said Bobby, anxious not to create a painful impression. “I just can’t stand people who are hearty.”

Frankie shuddered at the mere mention of the word.

“I know,” she murmured. “They’re dreadful.”

They looked at each other sympathetically.

“By the way,” said Frankie suddenly. “What’s all this about a man falling over the cliffs?”

“Dr. Thomas and I found him,” said Bobby. “How did you know about it, Frankie?”

“Saw it in the paper. Look.”

She indicated with her finger a small paragraph headed: “Fatal Accident in Sea Mist.”

The victim of the tragedy at Marchbolt was identified late last night by means of a photograph which he was carrying. The photograph proved to be that of Mrs. Leo Cayman. Mrs. Cayman was communicated with and journeyed at once to Marchbolt, where she identified the deceased as her brother, Alex Pritchard. Mr. Pritchard had recently returned from Siam. He had been out of England for ten years and was just starting upon a walking tour. The inquest will be held at Marchbolt tomorrow.

Bobby’s thoughts flew back to the strangely haunting face of the photograph.

“I believe I shall have to give evidence at the inquest,” he said.

“How thrilling. I shall come and hear you.”

“I don’t suppose there will be anything thrilling about it,” said Bobby. “We just found him, you know.”

“Was he dead?”

“No, not then. He died about a quarter of an hour later. I was alone with him.”

He paused.

“Rather grim,” said Frankie with that immediate understanding that Bobby’s father had lacked.

“Of course he didn’t feel anything—”

“No?”

“But all the same—well—you see, he looked awfully alive—that sort of person—rather a rotten way to finish—just stepping off a cliff in a silly little bit of mist.”

“I get you, Steve,” said Frankie, and again the queer phrase represented sympathy and understanding.

“Did you see the sister?” she asked presently.

“No. I’ve been up in town two days. Had to see a friend of mine about a garage business we’re going in for. You remember him. Badger Beadon.”

“Do I?”

“Of course you do. You must remember good old Badger. He squints.”

Frankie wrinkled her brows.

“He’s got an awfully silly kind of laugh—haw haw haw—like that,” continued Bobby helpfully.

Still Frankie wrinkled her brows.

“Fell off his pony when we were kids,” continued Bobby. “Stuck in the mud head down, and we had to pull him out by the legs.”

“Oh!” said Frankie in a flood of recollection. “I know now. He stammered.”

“He still does,” said Bobby proudly.

“Didn’t he run a chicken farm and it went bust?” inquired Frankie.

“That’s right.”

“And then he went into a stockbroker’s office and they fired him after a month?”

“That’s it.”

“And then they sent him to Australia and he came back?”

“Yes.”

“Bobby,” said Frankie. “You’re not putting any money into this business venture, I hope?”

“I haven’t got any money to put,” said Bobby.

“That’s just as well,” said Frankie.

“Naturally,” went on Bobby. “Badger has tried to get hold of someone with a little capital to invest. But it isn’t so easy as you’d think.”

“When you look round you,” said Frankie, “you wouldn’t believe people had any sense at all—but they have.”

The point of these remarks seemed at last to strike Bobby.

“Look here, Frankie,” he said. “Badger’s one of the best—one of the very best.”

“They always are,” said Frankie.

“Who are?”

“The ones who go to Australia and come back again. How did he get hold of the money to start this business?”

“An aunt or something died and left him a garage for six cars with three rooms over and his people stumped up a hundred pounds to buy secondhand cars with. You’d be surprised what bargains there are to be had in secondhand cars.”

“I bought one once,” said Frankie. “It’s a painful subject. Don’t let’s talk of it. What did you want to leave the Navy for? They didn’t axe you, did they? Not at your age.”

Bobby flushed.

“Eyes,” he said gruffly.

“You always had trouble with your eyes, I remember.”

“I know. But I just managed to scrape through. Then foreign service—the strong light, you know—that rather did for them. So—well—I had to get out.”

“Grim,” murmured Frankie, looking out of the window.

There was an eloquent pause.

“All the same, it’s a shame,” burst out Bobby. “My eyes aren’t really bad—they won’t get any worse, they say. I could have carried on perfectly.”

“They look all right,” said Frankie.

She looked straight into their honest brown depths.

“So you see,” said Bobby, “I’m going in with Badger.”

Frankie nodded.

An attendant opened the door and said, “First luncheon.”

“Shall we?” said Frankie.

They passed along to the dining car.

Bobby made a short strategic retreat during the time when the ticket collector might be expected.

“We don’t want him to strain his conscience too much,” he said.

But Frankie said she didn’t expect ticket collectors had any consciences.

It was just after five o’clock when they reached Sileham, which was the station for Marchbolt.

“The car’s meeting me,” said Frankie. “I’ll give you a lift.”

“Thanks. That will save me carrying this beastly thing for two miles.”

He kicked his suitcase disparagingly.

“Three miles, not two,” said Frankie.

“Two miles if you go by the footpath over the links.”

“The one where—”

“Yes—where that fellow went over.”

“I suppose nobody pushed him over, did they?” asked Frankie as she handed her dressing case to her maid.

“Pushed him over? Good Lord, no. Why?”

“Well, it would make it much more exciting, wouldn’t it?” said Frankie idly.

Four

THE INQUEST

The inquest on the body of Alex Pritchard was held on the following day. Dr. Thomas gave evidence as to the finding of the body.

“Life was not then extinct?” asked the coroner.

“No, deceased was still breathing. There was, however, no hope of recovery. The—”

Here the doctor became highly technical. The coroner came to the rescue of the jury:

“In ordinary everyday language, the man’s back was broken?”

“If you like to put it that way,” said Dr. Thomas sadly.

He described how he had gone off to get help, leaving the dying man in Bobby’s charge.

“Now as to the cause of this disaster, what is your opinion, Dr. Thomas?”

“I should say that in all probability (failing any evidence as to his state of mind, that is to say) the deceased stepped inadvertently over the edge of the cliff. There was a mist rising from the sea, and at that particular point the path turns abruptly inland. Owing to the mist the deceased may not have noticed the danger and walked straight on—in which case two steps would take him over the edge.”

“There were no signs of violence? Such as might have been administered by a third party?”

“I can only say that all the injuries present are fully explained by the body striking the rocks fifty or sixty feet below.”

“There remains the question of suicide?”

“That is, of course, perfectly possible. Whether the deceased walked over the edge or threw himself over is a matter on which I can say nothing.”

Robert Jones was called next.

Bobby explained that he had been playing golf with the doctor and had sliced his ball towards the sea. A mist was rising at the time and it was difficult to see. He thought he heard a cry, and for a moment wondered if his ball could have hit anybody coming along the footpath. He had decided, however, that it could not possibly have travelled so far.

“Did you find the ball?”

“Yes, it was about a hundred yards short of the footpath.”

He then described how they had driven from the next tee and how he himself had driven into the chasm.

Here the coroner stopped him since his evidence would have been a repetition of the doctor’s. He questioned him closely, however, as to the cry he had heard or thought he heard.

“It was just a cry.”

“A cry for help?”

“Oh, no. Just a sort of shout, you know. In fact I wasn’t quite sure I heard it.”

“A startled kind of cry?”

“That’s more like it,” said Bobby gratefully. “Sort of noise a fellow might let out if a ball hit him unexpectedly.”

“Or if he took a step into nothingness when he thought he was on a path?”

“Yes.”

Then, having explained that the man actually died about five minutes after the doctor left to get help, Bobby's ordeal came to an end.

The coroner was by now anxious to get on with a perfectly straightforward business.

Mrs. Leo Cayman was called.

Bobby gave a gasp of acute disappointment. Where was the face of the photo that had tumbled from the dead man's pocket? Photographers, thought Bobby disgustedly, were the worst kind of liars. The photo obviously must have been taken some years ago, but even then it was hard to believe that that charming wide-eyed beauty could have become this brazen-looking woman with plucked eyebrows and obviously dyed hair. Time, thought Bobby suddenly, was a very frightening thing. What would Frankie, for instance, look like in twenty years' time? He gave a little shiver.

Meanwhile, Amelia Cayman, of 17 St. Leonard's Gardens, Paddington, was giving evidence.

Deceased was her only brother, Alexander Pritchard. She had last seen her brother the day before the tragedy when he had announced his intention of going for a walking tour in Wales. Her brother had recently returned from the East.

"Did he seem in a happy and normal state of mind?"

"Oh, quite. Alex was always cheerful."

"So far as you know, he had nothing on his mind?"

"Oh! I'm sure he hadn't. He was looking forward to his trip."

"There have been no money troubles—or other troubles of any kind in his life recently?"

"Well, really I couldn't say as to that," said Mrs. Cayman. "You see, he'd only just come back, and before that I hadn't seen him for ten years and he

was never one much for writing. But he took me out to theatres and lunches in London and gave me one or two presents, so I don't think he could have been short of money, and he was in such good spirits that I don't think there could have been anything else."

"What was your brother's profession, Mrs. Cayman?"

The lady seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Well, I can't say I rightly know. Prospecting—that's what he called it. He was very seldom in England."

"You know of no reason which should cause him to take his own life?"

"Oh, no; and I can't believe that he did such a thing. It must have been an accident."

"How do you explain the fact that your brother had no luggage with him—not even a knapsack?"

"He didn't like carrying a knapsack. He meant to post parcels alternate days. He posted one the day before he left with his night things and a pair of socks, only he addressed it to Derbyshire instead of Denbighshire, so it only got here today."

"Ah! That clears up a somewhat curious point."

Mrs. Cayman went on to explain how she had been communicated with through the photographers whose name was on the photo her brother had carried. She had come down with her husband to Marchbolt and had at once recognized the body as that of her brother.

As she said the last words she sniffed audibly and began to cry.

The coroner said a few soothing words and dismissed her.

Then he address the jury. Their task was to state how this man came by his death. Fortunately, the matter appeared to be quite simple. There was no suggestion that Mr. Pritchard had been worried or depressed or in a state of

mind where he would be likely to take his own life. On the contrary, he had been in good health and spirits and had been looking forward to his holiday. It was unfortunately the case that when a sea mist was rising the path along the cliff was a dangerous one and possibly they might agree with him that it was time something was done about it.

The jury's verdict was prompt.

“We find that the deceased came to his death by misadventure and we wish to add a rider that in our opinion the Town Council should immediately take steps to put a fence or rail on the sea side of the path where it skirts the chasm.”

The coroner nodded approval.

The inquest was over.

Five

MR. AND MRS. CAYMAN

On arriving back at the Vicarage about half an hour later, Bobby found that his connection with the death of Alex Pritchard was not yet quite over. He was informed that Mr. and Mrs. Cayman had called to see him and were in the study with his father. Bobby made his way there and found his father bravely making suitable conversation without, apparently, much enjoying his task.

“Ah!” he said with some slight relief. “Here is Bobby.”

Mr. Cayman rose and advanced towards the young man with outstretched hand. Mr. Cayman was a big florid man with a would-be hearty manner and a cold and somewhat shifty eye that rather belied the manner. As for Mrs. Cayman, though she might be considered attractive in a bold, coarse fashion, she had little now in common with that early photograph of herself, and no trace of that wistful expression remained. In fact, Bobby reflected, if she had not recognized her own photograph, it seemed doubtful if anyone else would have done so.

“I came down with the wife,” said Mr. Cayman, enclosing Bobby’s hand in a firm and painful grip. “Had to stand by, you know; Amelia’s naturally upset.”

Mrs. Cayman sniffed.

“We came round to see you,” continued Mr. Cayman. “You see, my poor wife’s brother died, practically speaking, in your arms. Naturally, she wanted to know all you could tell her of his last moments.”

“Absolutely,” said Bobby unhappily. “Oh, absolutely.”

He grinned nervously and was immediately aware of his father's sigh—a sigh of Christian resignation.

“Poor Alex,” said Mrs. Cayman, dabbing her eyes. “Poor, poor Alex.”

“I know,” said Bobby. “Absolutely grim.”

He wriggled uncomfortably.

“You see,” said Mrs. Cayman, looking hopefully at Bobby, “if he left any last words or messages, naturally I want to know.”

“Oh, rather,” said Bobby. “But as a matter of fact he didn't.”

“Nothing at all?”

Mrs. Cayman looked disappointed and incredulous. Bobby felt apologetic.

“No—well—as a matter of fact, nothing at all.”

“It was best so,” said Mr. Cayman solemnly. “To pass away unconscious—without pain—why, you must think of it as a mercy, Amelia.”

“I suppose I must,” said Mrs. Cayman. “You don't think he felt any pain?”

“I'm sure he didn't,” said Bobby.

Mrs. Cayman sighed deeply.

“Well, that's something to be thankful for. Perhaps I did hope he'd left a last message, but I can see that it's best as it is. Poor Alex. Such a fine out-of-door man.”

“Yes, wasn't he?” said Bobby. He recalled the bronze face, the deep blue eyes. An attractive personality, that of Alex Pritchard, attractive even so near death. Strange that he should be the brother of Mrs. Cayman and the brother-in-law of Mr. Cayman. He had been worthy, Bobby felt, of better things.

“Well, we’re very much indebted to you, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Cayman.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Bobby. “I mean—well, couldn’t do anything else—I mean—”

He floundered hopelessly.

“We shan’t forget it,” said Mr. Cayman. Bobby suffered once more that painful grip. He received a flabby hand from Mrs. Cayman. His father made further adieus. Bobby accompanied the Caymans to the front door.

“And what do you do with yourself, young man?” inquired Cayman.
“Home on leave—something of that kind?”

“I spend most of my time looking for a job,” said Bobby. He paused. “I was in the Navy.”

“Hard times—hard times nowadays,” said Mr. Cayman, shaking his head.
“Well, I wish you luck, I’m sure.”

“Thank you very much,” said Bobby politely.

He watched them down the weed-grown drive.

Standing there, he fell into a brown study. Various ideas flashed chaotically through his mind—confused reflections—the photograph—that girl’s face with the wide-apart eyes and the misty hair—and ten or fifteen years later Mrs. Cayman with her heavy makeup, her plucked eyebrows, those wide-apart eyes sunk in between folds of flesh till they looked like pig’s eyes, and her violent henna-tinted hair. All traces of youth and innocence had vanished. The pity of things! It all came, perhaps, of marrying a hearty boulder like Mr. Cayman. If she had married someone else she might possibly have grown older gracefully. A touch of grey in her hair, eyes still wide apart looking out from a smooth pale face. But perhaps anyway—

Bobby sighed and shook his head.

“That’s the worst of marriage,” he said gloomily.

“What did you say?”

Bobby awoke from meditation to become aware of Frankie, whose approach he had not heard.

“Hullo,” he said.

“Hullo. Why marriage? And whose?”

“I was making a reflection of a general nature,” said Bobby.

“Namely—?”

“On the devastating effects of marriage.”

“Who is devastated?”

Bobby explained. He found Frankie unsympathetic.

“Nonsense. The woman’s exactly like her photograph.”

“When did you see her? Were you at the inquest?”

“Of course I was at the inquest. What do you think? There’s little enough to do down here. An inquest is a perfect godsend. I’ve never been to one before. I was thrilled to the teeth. Of course, it would have been better if it had been a mysterious poisoning case, with the analyst’s reports and all that sort of thing; but one mustn’t be too exacting when these simple pleasures come one’s way. I hoped up to the end for a suspicion of foul play, but it all seemed most regrettably straightforward.”

“What bloodthirsty instincts you have, Frankie.”

“I know. It’s probably atavism (however do you pronounce it?—I’ve never been sure). Don’t you think so? I’m sure I’m atavistic. My nickname at school was Monkey Face.”

“Do monkeys like murder?” queried Bobby.

“You sound like a correspondence in a Sunday paper,” said Frankie. “Our correspondents’ views on this subject are solicited.”

“You know,” said Bobby, reverting to the original topic, “I don’t agree with you about the female Cayman. Her photograph was lovely.”

“Touched up—that’s all,” interrupted Frankie.

“Well, then, it was so much touched up that you wouldn’t have known them for the same person.”

“You’re blind,” said Frankie. “The photographer had done all that the art of photography could do, but it was still a nasty bit of work.”

“I absolutely disagree with you,” said Bobby coldly. “Anyway, where did you see it?”

“In the local Evening Echo.”

“It probably reproduced badly.”

“It seems to me you’re absolutely batty,” said Frankie crossly, “over a painted-up raddled bitch—yes, I said bitch—like the Cayman.”

“Frankie,” said Bobby, “I’m surprised at you. In the Vicarage drive, too. Semi-holy ground, so to speak.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been so ridiculous.”

There was a pause, then Frankie’s sudden fit of temper abated.

“What is ridiculous,” she said, “is to quarrel about the damned woman. I came to suggest a round of golf. What about it?”

“OK, chief,” said Bobby happily.

They set off amicably together and their conversation was of such things as slicing and pulling and how to perfect a chip shot on to the green.

The recent tragedy passed quite out of mind until Bobby, holing a long putt at the eleventh to halve the hole, suddenly gave an exclamation.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I’ve just remembered something.”

“What?”

“Well, these people, the Caymans—they came round and asked if the fellow had said anything before he died—and I told them he hadn’t.”

“Well?”

“And now I’ve just remembered that he did.”

“Not one of your brightest mornings, in fact.”

“Well, you see, it wasn’t the sort of thing they meant. That’s why, I suppose, I didn’t think of it.”

“What did he say?” asked Frankie curiously.

“He said: ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ ”

“What a funny thing to say. Nothing else?”

“No. He just opened his eyes and said that—quite suddenly—and then died, poor chap.”

“Oh, well,” said Frankie, turning it over in her mind. “I don’t see that you need worry. It wasn’t important.”

“No, of course not. Still, I wish I’d just mentioned it. You see, I said he’d said nothing at all.”

“Well, it amounts to the same thing,” said Frankie. “I mean, it isn’t like —‘Tell Gladys I always loved her,’ or ‘The will is in the walnut bureau,’ or any of the proper romantic Last Words there are in books.”

“You don’t think it’s worth writing about it to them?”

“I shouldn’t bother. It couldn’t be important.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Bobby and turned his attention with renewed vigour to the game.

But the matter did not really dismiss itself from his mind. It was a small point but it fretted him. He felt very faintly uncomfortable about it. Frankie’s point of view was, he felt sure, the right and sensible one. The thing was of no importance—let it go. But his conscience continued to reproach him faintly. He had said that the dead man had said nothing. That wasn’t true. It was all very trivial and silly but he couldn’t feel quite comfortable about it.

Finally, that evening, on an impulse, he sat down and wrote to Mr. Cayman.

Dear Mr. Cayman, I have just remembered that your brother-in-law did actually say something before he died. I think the exact words were, “Why didn’t they ask Evans?” I apologize for not mentioning this this morning, but I attached no importance to the words at the time and so, I suppose, they slipped my memory.

Yours truly,

Robert Jones.

On the next day but one he received a reply:

Dear Mr. Jones (wrote Mr. Cayman), Your letter of 6th instant to hand. Many thanks for repeating my poor brother-in-law’s last words so punctiliously in spite of their trivial character. What my wife hoped was that her brother might have left her some last message. Still, thank you for being so conscientious.

Yours faithfully,

Leo Cayman.

Bobby felt snubbed.

Six

END OF A PICNIC

On the following day Bobby received a letter of quite a different nature:

It's all fixed, old boy, (wrote Badger in an illiterate scrawl which reflected no credit on the expensive public school which had educated him). Actually got five cars yesterday for fifteen pounds the lot—an Austin, two Morrisises and a couple of Rovers. At the moment they won't actually go, but we can tinker them up sufficiently, I think. Dash it all, a car's a car, after all. So long as it takes the purchaser home without breaking down, that's all they can expect. I thought of opening up Monday week and am relying on you, so don't let me down, will you, old boy? I must say old Aunt Carrie was a sport. I once broke the window of an old boy next door to her who'd been rude to her about her cats and she never got over it. Sent me a fiver every Christmas—and now this.

We're bound to succeed. The thing's a dead cert. I mean, a car's a car after all. You can pick 'em up for nothing. Put a lick of paint on and that's all the ordinary fool notices. The thing will go with a Bang. Now don't forget. Monday week. I'm relying on you.

Yours ever,

Badger.

Bobby informed his father that he would be going up to town on Monday week to take up a job. The description of the job did not rouse the Vicar to anything like enthusiasm. He had, it may be pointed out, come across Badger Beadon in the past. He merely treated Bobby to a long lecture on the advisability of not making himself liable for anything. Not an authority on financial or business matters, his advice was technically vague, but its meaning unmistakable.

On the Wednesday of that week Bobby received another letter. It was addressed in a foreign slanting handwriting. Its contents were somewhat surprising to the young man.

It was from the firm of Henriquez and Dallo in Buenos Aires and, to put it concisely, it offered Bobby a job in the firm with a salary of a thousand a year.

For the first minute or two the young man thought he must be dreaming. A thousand a year. He reread the letter more carefully. There was mention of an ex-Naval man being preferred. A suggestion that Bobby's name had been put forward by someone (someone not named). That acceptance must be immediate, and that Bobby must be prepared to start for Buenos Aires within a week.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Bobby, giving vent to his feelings in a somewhat unfortunate manner.

"Bobby!"

"Sorry, Dad. Forgot you were there."

Mr. Jones cleared his throat.

"I should like to point out to you—"

Bobby felt that this process—usually a long one—must at all costs be avoided. He achieved this course by a simple statement:

"Someone's offered me a thousand a year."

The Vicar remained openmouthed, unable for the moment to make any comment.

"That's put him off his drive all right," thought Bobby with satisfaction.

"My dear Bobby, did I understand you to say that someone had offered you a thousand a year? A thousand?"

“Holed it in one, Dad,” said Bobby.

“It’s impossible,” said the Vicar.

Bobby was not hurt by this frank incredulity. His estimate of his own monetary value differed little from that of his father.

“They must be complete mutts,” he agreed heartily.

“Who—er—are these people?”

Bobby handed him the letter. The Vicar, fumbling for his pince-nez, peered at it suspiciously. Finally he perused it twice.

“Most remarkable,” he said at last. “Most remarkable.”

“Lunatics,” said Bobby.

“Ah! my boy,” said the Vicar. “It is after all, a great thing to be an Englishman. Honesty. That’s what we stand for. The Navy has carried that ideal all over the world. An Englishman’s world! This South American firm realizes the value of a young man whose integrity will be unshaken and of whose fidelity his employers will be assured. You can always depend on an Englishman to play the game—”

“And keep a straight bat,” said Bobby.

The Vicar looked at his son doubtfully. The phrase, an excellent one, had actually been on the tip of his tongue, but there was something in Bobby’s tone that struck him as not quite sincere.

The young man, however, appeared to be perfectly serious.

“All the same, Dad,” he said, “why me?”

“What do you mean—why you?”

“There are a lot of Englishmen in England,” said Bobby. “Hearty fellows, full of cricketing qualities. Why pick on me?”

“Probably your late commanding officer may have recommended you.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” said Bobby doubtfully. “It doesn’t matter, anyway, since I can’t take the job.”

“Can’t take it? My dear boy, what do you mean?”

“Well, I’m fixed up, you see. With Badger.”

“Badger? Badger Beadon. Nonsense, my dear Bobby. This is serious.”

“It’s a bit hard, I own,” said Bobby with a sigh.

“Any childish arrangement you have made with young Beadon cannot count for a moment.”

“It counts with me.”

“Young Beadon is completely irresponsible. He has already, I understand, been a source of considerable trouble and expense to his parents.”

“He’s not had much luck. Badger’s so infernally trusting.”

“Luck—luck! I should say that young man had never done a hand’s turn in his life.”

“Nonsense, Dad. Why, he used to get up at five in the morning to feed those beastly chickens. It wasn’t his fault they all got the roop or the croup, or whatever it was.”

“I have never approved of this garage project. Mere folly. You must give it up.”

“Can’t sir. I’ve promised. I can’t let old Badger down. He’s counting on me.”

The discussion proceeded. The Vicar, biased by his views on the subject of Badger, was quite unable to regard any promise made to that young man as binding. He looked on Bobby as obstinate and determined at all costs to

lead an idle life in company with one of the worse possible companions. Bobby, on the other hand, stolidly repeated without originality that he “couldn’t let old Badger down.”

The Vicar finally left the room in anger and Bobby then and there sat down to write to the firm of Henriquez and Dallo, refusing their offer.

He sighed as he did so. He was letting a chance go here which was never likely to occur again. But he saw no alternative.

Later, on the links, he put the problem to Frankie. She listened attentively.

“You’d have had to go to South America?”

“Yes.”

“Would you have liked that?”

“Yes, why not?”

Frankie sighed.

“Anyway,” she said with decision. “I think you did quite right.”

“About Badger, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I couldn’t let the old bird down, could I?”

“No, but be careful the old bird, as you call him, doesn’t let you in.”

“Oh! I shall be careful. Anyway, I shall be all right. I haven’t got any assets.”

“That must be rather fun,” said Frankie.

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. It just sounded rather nice and free and irresponsible. I suppose, though, when I come to think of it, that I haven’t got any assets much, either. I mean, Father gives me an allowance and I’ve got lots of houses to live in and clothes and maids and some hideous family jewels and a good deal of credits at shops; but that’s all the family really. It’s not me.”

“No, but all the same—” Bobby paused.

“Oh, it’s quite different, I know.”

“Yes,” said Bobby. “It’s quite different.”

He felt suddenly very depressed.

They walked in silence to the next tee.

“I’m going to town tomorrow,” said Frankie, as Bobby teed up his ball.

“Tomorrow? Oh—and I was going to suggest you should come for a picnic.”

“I’d have liked to. However, it’s arranged. You see, Father’s got the gout again.”

“You ought to stay and minister to him,” said Bobby.

“He doesn’t like being ministered to. It annoys him frightfully. He likes the second footman best. He’s sympathetic and doesn’t mind having things thrown at him and being called a damned fool.”

Bobby topped his drive and it trickled into the bunker.

“Hard lines,” said Frankie and drove a nice straight ball that sailed over it.

“By the way,” she remarked. “We might do something together in London. You’ll be up soon?”

“On Monday. But—well—it’s no good, is it?”

“What do you mean—no good?”

“Well, I mean I shall be working as a mechanic most of the time. I mean—”

“Even then,” said Frankie, “I suppose you’re just as capable of coming to a cocktail party and getting tight as any other of my friends.”

Bobby merely shook his head.

“I’ll give a beer and sausage party if you prefer it,” said Frankie encouragingly.

“Oh, look here, Frankie, what’s the good? I mean, you can’t mix your crowds. Your crowd’s a different crowd from mine.”

“I assure you,” said Frankie, “that my crowd is a very mixed one.”

“You’re pretending not to understand.”

“You can bring Badger if you like. There’s friendship for you.”

“You’ve got some sort of prejudice against Badger.”

“I daresay it’s his stammer. People who stammer always make me stammer, too.”

“Look here, Frankie, it’s no good and you know it isn’t. It’s all right down here. There’s not much to do and I suppose I’m better than nothing. I mean you’re always awfully decent to me and all that, and I’m grateful. But I mean I know I’m just nobody—I mean—”

“When you’ve quite finished expressing your inferiority complex,” said Frankie coldly, “perhaps you’ll try getting out of the bunker with a niblick instead of a putter.”

“Have I—oh! damn!” He replaced the putter in his bag and took out the niblick. Frankie watched with malicious satisfaction as he hacked at the ball five times in succession. Clouds of sand rose round them.

“Your hole,” said Bobby, picking up the ball.

“I think it is,” said Frankie. “And that gives me the match.”

“Shall we play the bye?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Of course. I suppose you have.”

They walked together in silence to the clubhouse.

“Well,” said Frankie, holding out her hand. “Goodbye, my dear. It’s been too marvellous to have you to make use of while I’ve been down here. See something of you again, perhaps, when I’ve nothing better to do.”

“Look here, Frankie—”

“Perhaps you’ll condescend to come to my coster party. I believe you can get pearl buttons quite cheaply at Woolworth’s.”

“Frankie—”

His words were drowned in the noise of the Bentley’s engine which Frankie had just started. She drove away with an airy wave of her hand.

“Damn!” said Bobby in a heartfelt tone.

Frankie, he considered, had behaved outrageously. Perhaps he hadn’t put things very tactfully, but, dash it all, what he had said was true enough.

Perhaps, though, he shouldn’t have put it into words.

The next three days seemed interminably long.

The Vicar had a sore throat which necessitated his speaking in a whisper when he spoke at all. He spoke very little and was obviously bearing his fourth son’s presence as a Christian should. Once or twice he quoted Shakespeare to the effect that a serpent’s tooth, etc.

On Saturday Bobby felt that he could bear the strain of home life no longer. He got Mrs. Roberts, who, with her husband, “ran” the Vicarage, to give him a packet of sandwiches, and, supplementing this with a bottle of beer which he bought in Marchbolt, he set off for a solitary picnic.

He had missed Frankie abominably these last few days. These older people were the limit . . . They harped on things so.

Bobby stretched himself out on a bracken bank and debated with himself whether he should eat his lunch first and go to sleep afterwards, or sleep first and eat afterwards.

While he was cogitating, the matter was settled for him by his falling asleep without noticing it.

When he awoke it was half past three! Bobby grinned as he thought how his father would disapprove of this way of spending a day. A good walk across country—twelve miles or so—that was the kind of thing that a healthy young man should do. It led inevitably to that famous remark: “And now, I think, I’ve earned my lunch.”

“Idiotic,” thought Bobby. “Why earn lunch by doing a lot of walking you don’t particularly want to do? What’s the merit in it? If you enjoy it, then it’s pure self-indulgence, and if you don’t enjoy it you’re a fool to do it.”

Whereupon he fell upon his unearned lunch and ate it with gusto. With a sigh of satisfaction he unscrewed the bottle of beer. Unusually bitter beer, but decidedly refreshing . . .

He lay back again, having tossed the empty beer bottle into a clump of heather.

He felt rather god-like lounging there. The world was at his feet. A phrase, but a good phrase. He could do anything—anything if he tried! Plans of great splendour and daring initiative flashed through his mind.

Then he grew sleepy again. Lethargy stole over him.

He slept. . . .

Heavy, numbing sleep . . .

Seven

AN ESCAPE FROM DEATH

Driving her large green Bentley, Frankie drew up to the kerb outside a large old-fashioned house over the doorway of which was inscribed “St. Asaph’s.”

Frankie jumped out and, turning, extracted a large bunch of lilies. Then she rang the bell. A woman in nurse’s dress answered the door.

“Can I see Mr. Jones?” inquired Frankie.

The nurse’s eyes took in the Bentley, the lilies and Frankie with intense interest.

“What name shall I say?”

“Lady Frances Derwent.”

The nurse was thrilled and her patient went up in her estimation.

She guided Frankie upstairs into a room on the first floor.

“You’ve a visitor to see you, Mr. Jones. Now, who do you think it is? Such a nice surprise for you.”

All this is the “bright” manner usual to nursing homes.

“Gosh!” said Bobby, very much surprised. “If it isn’t Frankie!”

“Hullo, Bobby, I’ve brought the usual flowers. Rather a graveyard suggestion about them, but the choice was limited.”

“Oh, Lady Frances,” said the nurse, “they’re lovely. I’ll put them into water.”

She left the room.

Frankie sat down in an obvious visitor's chair.

"Well, Bobby," she said. "What's all this?"

"You may well ask," said Bobby. "I'm the complete sensation of this place. Eight grains of morphia, no less. They're going to write about me in the Lancet and the BMJ."

"What's the BMJ?" interrupted Frankie.

"The British Medical Journal."

"All right. Go ahead. Rattle off some more initials."

"Do you know, my girl, that half a grain is a fatal dose? I ought to be dead about sixteen times over. It's true that recovery has been known after sixteen grains—still, eight is pretty good, don't you think? I'm the hero of this place. They've never had a case like me before."

"How nice for them."

"Isn't it? Gives them something to talk about to all the other patients."

The nurse reentered, bearing lilies in vases.

"It's true, isn't it, nurse?" demanded Bobby. "You've never had a case like mine?"

"Oh! you oughtn't to be here at all," said the nurse. "In the churchyard you ought to be. But it's only the good die young, they say." She giggled at her own wit and went out.

"There you are," said Bobby. "You'll see, I shall be famous all over England."

He continued to talk. Any signs of inferiority complex that he had displayed at his last meeting with Frankie had now quite disappeared. He took a firm

and egotistical pleasure in recounting every detail of his case.

“That’s enough,” said Frankie, quelling him. “I don’t really care terribly for stomach pumps. To listen to you one would think nobody had ever been poisoned before.”

“Jolly few have been poisoned with eight grains of morphia and got over it,” Bobby pointed out. “Dash it all, you’re not sufficiently impressed.”

“Pretty sickening for the people who poisoned you,” said Frankie.

“I know. Waste of perfectly good morphia.”

“It was in the beer, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. You see, someone found me sleeping like the dead, tried to wake me and couldn’t. Then they got alarmed, carried me to a farmhouse and sent for a doctor—”

“I know all the next part,” said Frankie hastily.

“At first they had the idea that I’d taken the stuff deliberately. Then when they heard my story, they went off and looked for the beer bottle and found it where I’d thrown it and had it analysed—the dregs of it were quite enough for that, apparently.”

“No clue as to how the morphia got in the bottle?”

“None whatever. They’ve interviewed the pub where I bought it and opened other bottles and everything’s been quite all right.”

“Someone must have put the stuff in the beer while you were asleep?”

“That’s it. I remember that the paper across the top wasn’t still sticking properly.”

Frankie nodded thoughtfully.

“Well,” she said. “It shows that what I said in the train that day was quite right.”

“What did you say?”

“That that man—Pritchard—had been pushed over the cliff.”

“That wasn’t in the train. You said that at the station,” said Bobby feebly.

“Same thing.”

“But why—”

“Darling—it’s obvious. Why should anyone want to put you out of the way? You’re not the heir to a fortune or anything.”

“I may be. Some great aunt I’ve never heard of in New Zealand or somewhere may have left me all her money.”

“Nonsense. Not without knowing you. And if she didn’t know you, why leave money to a fourth son? Why, in these hard times even a clergyman mightn’t have a fourth son! No, it’s all quite clear. No one benefits by your death, so that’s ruled out. Then there’s revenge. You haven’t seduced a chemist’s daughter, by any chance?”

“Not that I can remember,” said Bobby with dignity.

“I know. One seduces so much that one can’t keep count. But I should say offhand that you’ve never seduced anyone at all.”

“You’re making me blush, Frankie. And why must it be a chemist’s daughter, anyway?”

“Free access to morphia. It’s not so easy to get hold of morphia.”

“Well, I haven’t seduced a chemist’s daughter.”

“And you haven’t got any enemies that you know of?”

Bobby shook his head.

“Well, there you are,” said Frankie triumphantly. “It must be the man who was pushed over the cliff. What do the police think?”

“They think it must have been a lunatic.”

“Nonsense. Lunatics don’t wander about with unlimited supplies of morphia looking for odd bottles of beer to put it into. No, somebody pushed Pritchard over the cliff. A minute or two later you come along and he thinks you saw him do it and so determines to put you out of the way.”

“I don’t think that will hold water, Frankie.”

“Why not?”

“Well, to begin with, I didn’t see anything.”

“Yes, but he didn’t know that.”

“And if I had seen anything, I should have said so at the inquest.”

“I suppose that’s so,” said Frankie unwillingly.

She thought for a minute or two.

“Perhaps he thought you’d seen something that you didn’t think was anything but which really was something. That sounds pure gibberish, but you get the idea?”

Bobby nodded.

“Yes, I see what you mean, but it doesn’t seem very probable, somehow.”

“I’m sure that cliff business had something to do with this. You were on the spot—the first person to be there—”

“Thomas was there, too,” Bobby reminded her. “And nobody’s tried to poison him.”

“Perhaps they’re going to,” said Frankie cheerfully. “Or perhaps they’ve tried and failed.”

“It all seems very far-fetched.”

“I think it’s logical. If you get two out of the way things happening in a stagnant pond like Marchbolt—wait—there’s a third thing.”

“What?”

“That job you were offered. That, of course, is quite a small thing, but it was odd, you must admit. I’ve never heard of a foreign firm that specialized in seeking out undistinguished ex-Naval officers.”

“Did you say undistinguished?”

“You hadn’t got into the BMJ, then. But you see my point. You’ve seen something you weren’t meant to see—or so they (whoever they are) think. Very well. They first try to get rid of you by offering you a job abroad. Then, when that fails, they try to put you out of the way altogether.”

“Isn’t that rather drastic? And anyway a great risk to take?”

“Oh! but murderers are always frightfully rash. The more murders they do, the more murders they want to do.”

“Like *The Third Bloodstain*,” said Bobby, remembering one of his favourite works of fiction.

“Yes, and in real life, too—Smith and his wives and Armstrong and people.”

“Well, but, Frankie, what on earth is it I’m supposed to have seen?”

“That, of course, is the difficulty,” admitted Frankie. “I agree that it can’t have been the actual pushing, because you would have told about that. It must be something about the man himself. Perhaps he had a birthmark or double-jointed fingers or some strange physical peculiarity.”

“Your mind is running on Dr. Thorndyke, I see. It couldn’t be anything like that because whatever I saw the police would see as well.”

“So they would. That was an idiotic suggestion. It’s very difficult, isn’t it?”

“It’s a pleasing theory,” said Bobby. “And it makes me feel important, but all the same, I don’t believe it’s much more than a theory.”

“I’m sure I’m right.” Frankie rose. “I must be off now. Shall I come and see you again tomorrow?”

“Oh! Do. The arch chatter of the nurses gets very monotonous. By the way, you’re back from London very soon?”

“My dear, as soon as I heard about you, I tore back. It’s most exciting to have a romantically poisoned friend.”

“I don’t know whether morphia is so very romantic,” said Bobby reminiscently.

“Well, I’ll come tomorrow. Do I kiss you or don’t I?”

“It’s not catching,” said Bobby encouragingly.

“Then I’ll do my duty to the sick thoroughly.”

She kissed him lightly.

“See you tomorrow.”

The nurse came in with Bobby’s tea as she went out.

“I’ve seen her pictures in the papers often. She’s not so very like them, though. And, of course, I’ve seen her driving about in her car, but I’ve never seen her before close to, so to speak. Not a bit haughty, is she?”

“Oh, no!” said Bobby. “I should never call Frankie haughty.”

“I said to Sister, I said, she’s as natural as anything. Not a bit stuck up. I said to Sister, she’s just like you or me, I said.”

Silently dissenting violently from this view, Bobby returned no reply. The nurse, disappointed by his lack of response, left the room.

Bobby was left to his own thoughts.

He finished his tea. Then he went over in his mind the possibilities of Frankie’s amazing theory, and ended by deciding reluctantly against it. He then cast about for other distractions.

His eye was caught by the vases of lilies. Frightfully sweet of Frankie to bring him all these flowers, and of course they were lovely, but he wished it had occurred to her to bring him a few detective stories instead. He cast his eye over the table beside him. There was a novel of Ouida’s and a copy of John Halifax, Gentleman and last week’s Marchbolt Weekly Times. He picked up John Halifax, Gentleman.

After five minutes he put it down. To a mind nourished on The Third Bloodstain, The Case of the Murdered Archduke and The Strange Adventure of the Florentine Dagger, John Halifax, Gentleman, lacked pep.

With a sigh he picked up last week’s Marchbolt Weekly Times.

A moment or two later he was pressing the bell beneath his pillow with a vigour which brought a nurse into the room at a run.

“Whatever’s the matter, Mr. Jones? Are you taken bad?”

“Ring up the Castle,” cried Bobby. “Tell Lady Frances she must come back here at once.”

“Oh, Mr. Jones. You can’t send a message like that.”

“Can’t I?” said Bobby. “If I were allowed to get up from this blasted bed you’d soon see whether I could or couldn’t. As it is, you’ve got to do it for me.”

“But she’ll hardly be back.”

“You don’t know that Bentley.”

“She won’t have had her tea.”

“Now look here, my dear girl,” said Bobby, “don’t stand there arguing with me. Ring up as I tell you. Tell her she’s got to come here at once because I’ve got something very important to say to her.”

Overborne, but unwilling, the nurse went. She took some liberties with Bobby’s message.

If it was no inconvenience to Lady Frances, Mr. Jones wondered if she would mind coming as he had something he would like to say to her, but, of course, Lady Frances was not to put herself out in any way.

Lady Frances replied curtly that she would come at once.

“Depend upon it,” said the nurse to her colleagues, “she’s sweet on him! That’s what it is.”

Frankie arrived all agog.

“What’s this desperate summons?” she demanded.

Bobby was sitting up in bed, a bright red spot in each cheek. In his hand he waved the copy of the Marchbolt Weekly Times.

“Look at this, Frankie.”

Frankie looked.

“Well,” she demanded.

“This is the picture you meant when you said it was touched up but quite like the Cayman woman.”

Bobby's finger pointed to a somewhat blurred reproduction of a photograph. Underneath it were the words: "PORTRAIT FOUND ON THE DEAD MAN AND BY WHICH HE WAS IDENTIFIED. MRS. AMELIA CAYMAN, THE DEAD MAN'S SISTER."

"That's what I said, and it's true, too. I can't see anything to rave over in it."

"No more than I."

"But you said—"

"I know I said. But you see, Frankie"—Bobby's voice became very impressive—"this isn't the photograph that I put back in the dead man's pocket. . . ."

They looked at each other.

"Then in that case," began Frankie slowly.

"Either there must have been two photographs—"

"—Which isn't likely—"

"Or else—"

They paused.

"That man—what's his name?" said Frankie.

"Bassington-ffrench!" said Bobby.

"I'm quite sure!"

Eight

RIDDLE OF A PHOTOGRAPH

They stared at each other as they tried to adjust themselves to the altered situation.

“It couldn’t be anyone else,” said Bobby. “He was the only person who had the chance.”

“Unless, as we said, there were two photographs.”

“We agreed that that wasn’t likely. If there had been two photographs they’d have tried to identify him by means of both of them—not only one.”

“Anyway, that’s easily found out,” said Frankie. “We can ask the police. We’ll assume for the moment that there was just the one photograph, the one you saw that you put back again in his pocket. It was there when you left him, and it wasn’t there when the police came, therefore the only person who could have taken it away and put the other one in its place was this man Bassington-ffrench. What was he like, Bobby?”

Bobby frowned in the effort of remembrance.

“A sort of nondescript fellow. Pleasant voice. A gentleman and all that. I really didn’t notice him particularly. He said that he was a stranger down here—and something about looking for a house.”

“We can verify that, anyway,” said Frankie. “Wheeler & Owen are the only house agents.” Suddenly she gave a shiver. “Bobby, have you thought? If Pritchard was pushed over—Bassington-ffrench must be the man who did it. . . .”

“That’s pretty grim,” said Bobby. “He seemed such a nice pleasant sort of fellow. But you know, Frankie, we can’t be sure he really was pushed over.”

“You have been all along.”

“No, I just wanted it to be that way because it made things more exciting. But now it’s more or less proved. If it was murder everything fits in. Your unexpected appearance which upsets the murderer’s plans. Your discovery of the photograph and, in consequence, the need to put you out of the way.”

“There’s a flaw there,” said Bobby.

“Why?” You were the only person who saw that photograph. As soon as Bassington-ffrench was left alone with the body he changed the photograph which only you had seen.”

But Bobby continued to shake his head.

“No, that won’t do. Let’s grant for the moment that that photograph was so important that I had to be ‘got out of the way,’ as you put it. Sounds absurd but I suppose it’s just possible. Well, then, whatever was going to be done would have to be done at once. The fact that I went to London and never saw the Marchbolt Weekly Times or the other papers with the photograph in it was just pure chance—a thing nobody could count on. The probability was that I should say at once, ‘That isn’t the photograph I saw.’ Why wait till after the inquest when everything was nicely settled?”

“There’s something in that,” admitted Frankie.

“And there’s another point. I can’t be absolutely sure, of course, but I could almost swear that when I put the photograph back in the dead man’s pocket Bassington-ffrench wasn’t there. He didn’t arrive till about five or ten minutes later.”

“He might have been watching you all the time,” argued Frankie.

“I don’t see very well how he could,” said Bobby slowly. “There’s really only one place where you can see down to exactly the spot we were. Farther round, the cliff bulges and then recedes underneath, so that you can’t see over. There’s just the one place and when Bassington-ffrench did arrive

there I heard him at once. Footsteps echo down below. He may have been near at hand, but he wasn't looking over till then—I'll swear."

"Then you think that he didn't know about your seeing the photograph?"

"I don't see how he could have known."

"And he can't have been afraid you'd seen him doing it—the murder, I mean—because, as you say, that's absurd. You'd never have held your tongue about it. It looks as though it must have been something else altogether."

"Only I don't see what it could have been."

"Something they didn't know about till after the inquest. I don't know why I say 'they.' "

"Why not? After all, the Caymans must have been in it, too. It's probably a gang. I like gangs."

"That's a low taste," said Frankie absently. "A single-handed murder is much higher-class. Bobby!"

"Yes?"

"What was it Pritchard said—just before he died? You know, you told me about it that day on the links. That funny question?"

" 'Why didn't they ask Evans?' "

"Yes. Suppose that was it?"

"But that's ridiculous."

"It sounds so, but it might be important, really. Bobby, I'm sure it's that. Oh, no, I'm being an idiot—you never told the Caymans about it?"

"I did, as a matter of fact," said Bobby slowly.

“You did?”

“Yes. I wrote to them that evening. Saying, of course, that it was probably quite unimportant.”

“And what happened?”

“Cayman wrote back, politely agreeing, of course, that there was nothing in it, but thanking me for taking the trouble. I felt rather snubbed.”

“And two days later you got this letter from a strange firm bribing you to go to South America?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” said Frankie, “I don’t know what more you want. They try that first; you turn it down, and the next thing is that they follow you round and seize a good moment to empty a lot of morphia into your bottle of beer.”

“Then the Caymans are in it?”

“Of course the Caymans are in it!”

“Yes,” said Bobby thoughtfully. “If your reconstruction is correct, they must be in it. According to our present theory, it goes like this. Dead man X is deliberately pushed over cliff—presumably by BF (pardon these initials). It is important that X should not be correctly identified, so portrait of Mrs. C is put in his pocket and portrait of fair unknown removed. (Who was she, I wonder?)”

“Keep to the point,” said Frankie sternly.

“Mrs. C waits for photographs to appear and turns up as grief-stricken sister and identifies X as her brother from foreign parts.”

“You don’t believe he could really have been her brother?”

“Not for a moment! You know, it puzzled me all along. The Caymans were a different class altogether. The dead man was—well, it sounds a most

awful thing to say and just like some deadly old retired Anglo-Indian, but the dead man was a pukka sahib.”

“And the Caymans most emphatically weren’t?”

“Most emphatically.”

“And then, just when everything has gone off well from the Caymans’ point of view—body successfully identified, verdict of accidental death, everything in the garden lovely—you come along and mess things up,” mused Frankie.

“ ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ ” Bobby repeated the phrase thoughtfully. “You know, I can’t see what on earth there can be in that to put the wind up anybody.”

“Ah! that’s because you don’t know. It’s like making crossword puzzles. You write down a clue and you think it’s too idiotically simple and that everyone will guess it straight off, and you’re frightfully surprised when they simply can’t get it in the least. ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ must have been a most frightfully significant phrase to them, and they couldn’t realize that it meant nothing at all to you.”

“More fools they.”

“Oh, quite so. But it’s just possible they thought that if Pritchard said that, he might have said something more which would also recur to you in due time. Anyway, they weren’t going to take chances. You were safer out of the way.”

“They took a lot of risk. Why didn’t they engineer another ‘accident?’ ”

“No, no. That would have been stupid. Two accidents within a week of each other? It might have suggested a connection between the two, and then people would have begun inquiring into the first one. No, I think there’s a kind of bald simplicity about their method which is really rather clever.”

“And yet you said just now that morphia wasn’t easy to get hold of.”

“No more it isn’t. You have to sign poison books and things. Oh! of course, that’s a clue. Whoever did it had easy access to supplies of morphia.”

“A doctor, a hospital nurse, or a chemist,” suggested Bobby.

“Well, I was thinking more of illicitly imported drugs.”

“You can’t mix up too many different sorts of crime,” said Bobby.

“You see, the strong point would be the absence of motive. Your death doesn’t benefit anyone. So what will the police think?”

“A lunatic,” said Bobby. “And that’s what they do think.”

“You see? It’s awfully simple, really.”

Bobby began to laugh suddenly.

“What’s amusing you?”

“Just the thought of how sick-making it must be for them! All that morphia—enough to kill five or six people—and here I am still alive and kicking.”

“One of Life’s little ironies that one can’t foresee,” agreed Frankie.

“The question is—what do we do next?” said Bobby practically.

“Oh! lots of things,” said Frankie promptly.

“Such as . . . ?”

“Well—finding out about the photograph—that there was only one, not two. And about Bassington-french’s house hunting.”

“That will probably be quite all right and aboveboard.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Look here, Frankie, think a minute. Bassington-ffrench must be above suspicion. He must be all clear and aboveboard. Not only must there be nothing to connect him in any way with the dead man, but he must have a proper reason for being down here. He may have invented house hunting on the spur of the moment, but I bet he carried out something of the kind. There must be no suggestion of a ‘mysterious stranger seen in the neighbourhood of the accident.’ I fancy that Bassington-ffrench is his own name and that he’s the sort of person who would be quite above suspicion.”

“Yes,” said Frankie thoughtfully. “That’s a very good deduction. There will be nothing whatever to connect Bassington-ffrench with Alex Pritchard. Now, if we knew who the dead man really was—”

“Ah, then it might be different.”

“So it was very important that the body should not be recognized—hence all the Cayman camouflage. And yet it was taking a big risk.”

“You forget that Mrs. Cayman identified him as soon as was humanly possible. After that, even if there had been pictures of him in the papers (you know how blurry these things are) people would only say: ‘Curious, this man Pritchard, who fell over a cliff, is really extraordinarily like Mr. X.’ ”

“There must be more to it than that,” said Frankie shrewdly. “X must have been a man who wouldn’t easily be missed. I mean, he couldn’t have been the sort of family man whose wife or relations would go to the police at once and report him missing.”

“Good for you, Frankie. No, he must have been just going abroad or perhaps just come back (he was marvellously tanned—like a big-game hunter—he looked that sort of person) and he can’t have had any very near relations who knew all about his movements.”

“We’re deducing beautifully,” said Frankie. “I hope we’re not deducing all wrong.”

“Very likely,” said Bobby. “But I think what we’ve said so far is fairly sound sense—granted, that is, the wild improbability of the whole thing.”

Frankie waved away the wild improbability with an airy gesture.

“The thing is—what to do next,” she said. “It seems to me we’ve got three angles of attack.”

“Go on, Sherlock.”

“The first is you. They’ve made one attempt on your life. They’ll probably try again. This time we might get what they call ‘a line’ on them. Using you as a decoy, I mean.”

“No thank you, Frankie,” said Bobby with feeling. “I’ve been very lucky this time, but I mightn’t be so lucky again if they changed the attack to a blunt instrument. I was thinking of taking a great deal of care of myself in the future. The decoy idea can be washed out.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” said Frankie with a sigh. “Young men are sadly degenerate nowadays. Father says so. They don’t enjoy being uncomfortable and doing dangerous and unpleasant things any longer. It’s a pity.”

“A great pity,” said Bobby, but he spoke with firmness. “What’s the second plan of campaign?”

“Working from the ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ clue,” said Frankie. “Presumably the dead man came down here to see Evans, whoever he was. Now, if we could find Evans—”

“How many Evanses,” Bobby interrupted, “do you think there are in Marchbolt?”

“Seven hundred, I should think,” admitted Frankie.

“At least! We might do something that way, but I’m rather doubtful.”

“We could list all the Evanses and visit the likely ones.”

“And ask them—what?”

“That’s the difficulty,” said Frankie.

“We need to know a little more,” said Bobby. “Then that idea of yours might come in useful. What’s No. 3?”

“This man Bassington-french. There we have got something tangible to go upon. It’s an uncommon name. I’ll ask Father. He knows all these county family names and their various branches.”

“Yes,” said Bobby. “We might do something that way.”

“At any rate, we are going to do something?”

“Of course we are. Do you think I’m going to be given eight grains of morphia and do nothing about it?”

“That’s the spirit,” said Frankie.

“And besides that,” said Bobby, “there’s the indignity of the stomach pump to be washed out.”

“That’s enough,” said Frankie. “You’ll be getting morbid and indecent again if I don’t stop you.”

“You have no true womanly sympathy,” said Bobby.

Nine

CONCERNING MR. BASSINGTON-FFRENCH

Frankie lost no time in setting to work. She attacked her father that same evening.

“Father,” she said, “do you know any Bassington-ffrenches?”

Lord Marchington, who was reading a political article, did not quite take in the question.

“It’s not the French so much as the Americans,” he said severely. “All this tomfoolery and conferences—wasting the nation’s time and money—”

Frankie abstracted her mind until Lord Marchington, running like a railway train along an accustomed line, came, as it were, to a halt at a station.

“The Bassington-ffrenches,” repeated Frankie.

“What about ’em?” said Lord Marchington.

Frankie didn’t know what about them. She made a statement, knowing well enough that her father enjoyed contradiction.

“They’re a Yorkshire family, aren’t they?”

“Nonsense—Hampshire. There’s the Shropshire branch, of course, and then there’s the Irish lot. Which are your friends?”

“I’m not sure,” said Frankie, accepting the implication of friendship with several unknown people.

“Not sure? What do you mean? You must be sure.”

“People drift about so nowadays,” said Frankie.

“Drift—drift—that’s about all they do. In my days we asked people. Then one knew where one was—fellow said he was the Hampshire branch—very well, your grandmother married my second cousin. It made a link.”

“It must have been too sweet,” said Frankie, “But there really isn’t time for genealogical and geographical research nowadays.”

“No—you’ve no time nowadays for anything but drinking these poisonous cocktails.”

Lord Marchington gave a sudden yelp of pain as he moved his gouty leg, which some free imbibing of the family port had not improved.

“Are they well off?” asked Frankie.

“The Bassington-ffrenches? Couldn’t say. The Shropshire lot have been hard hit, I believe—death duties, and one thing or another. One of the Hampshire ones married an heiress. An American woman.”

“One of them was down here the other day,” said Frankie. “Looking for a house, I believe.”

“Funny idea. What should anyone want with a house down here?”

That, thought Frankie, was the question.

On the following day she walked into the office of Messrs. Wheeler & Owen, House and Estate Agents.

Mr. Owen himself sprang up to receive her. Frankie gave him a gracious smile and dropped into a chair.

“And what can we have the pleasure of doing for you, Lady Frances? You don’t want to sell the Castle, I suppose. Ha! Ha!” Mr. Owen laughed at his own wit.

“I wish we could,” said Frankie. “No, as a matter of fact, I believe a friend of mine was down here the other day—a Mr. Bassington-ffrench. He was looking for a house.”

“Ah! yes, indeed. I remember the name perfectly. Two small f ’s.”

“That’s right,” said Frankie.

“He was making inquiries about various small properties with a view to purchase. He was obliged to return to town the next day, so could not view many of the houses, but I understand he is in no great hurry. Since he left, one or two suitable properties have come into the market and I have sent him on particulars, but have had no reply.”

“Did you write to London—or to the—er—country address?” inquired Frankie.

“Let me see now.” He called to a junior clerk. “Frank, Mr. Bassington-ffrench’s address.”

“Roger Bassington-ffrench, Esq., Merroway Court, Staverley, Hants,” said the junior clerk glibly.

“Ah!” said Frankie. “Then it wasn’t my Mr. Bassington-ffrench. This must be his cousin. I thought it was odd his being here and not looking me up.”

“Quite so—quite so,” said Mr. Owen intelligently.

“Let me see, it must have been the Wednesday he came to see you.”

“That’s right. Just before six-thirty. We close at six-thirty. I remember particularly because it was the day when that sad accident happened. Man fell over the cliff. Mr. Bassington-ffrench had actually stayed by the body till the police came. He looked quite upset when he came in here. Very sad tragedy, that, and high time something was done about that bit of path. The Town Council have been criticized very freely, I can tell you, Lady Frances. Most dangerous. Why we haven’t had more accidents than we have I can’t imagine.”

“Extraordinary,” said Frankie.

She left the office in a thoughtful mood. As Bobby had prophesied, all Mr. Bassington-ffrench’s actions seemed clear and above board. He was one of

the Hampshire Bassington-ffrenches, he had given his proper address, he had actually mentioned his part in the tragedy to the house agent. Was it possible that, after all, Mr. Bassington-ffrench was the completely innocent person he seemed?

Frankie had a qualm of doubt. Then she refused it.

“No,” she said to herself. “A man who wants to buy a little place would either get here earlier in the day, or else stay over the next day. You wouldn’t go into a house agent’s at six-thirty in the evening and go up to London the following day. Why make the journey at all? Why not write?”

No, she decided, Bassington-ffrench was the guilty party.

Her next call was the police station.

Inspector Williams was an old acquaintance, having succeeded in tracking down a maid with a false reference who had absconded with some of Frankie’s jewellery.

“Good afternoon, Inspector.”

“Good afternoon, your Ladyship. Nothing wrong, I hope.”

“Not as yet, but I’m thinking of holding up a bank soon, because I’m getting so short of money.”

The inspector gave a rumbling laugh in acknowledgement of this witticism.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve come to ask questions out of sheer curiosity,” said Frankie.

“Is that so, Lady Frances?”

“Now do tell me this, Inspector—the man who fell over the cliff—Pritchard, or whatever his name was—”

“Pritchard, that’s right.”

“He had only one photograph on him, didn’t he? Somebody told me he had three!”

“One’s right,” said the inspector. “Photograph of his sister it was. She came down and identified him.”

“How absurd to say there were three!”

“Oh! That’s easy, your Ladyship. These newspaper reporters don’t mind how much they exaggerate and as often as not they get the whole thing wrong.”

“I know,” said Frankie. “I’ve heard the wildest stories.” She paused a moment then drew freely on her imagination. “I’ve heard that his pockets were stuffed with papers proving him to be a Bolshevik agent, and there’s another story that his pockets were full of dope, and another again about his having pockets full of counterfeit bank notes.”

The inspector laughed heartily.

“That’s a good one.”

“I suppose really he had just the usual things in his pockets?”

“And very few at that. A handkerchief, not marked. Some loose change, a packet of cigarettes and a couple of treasury notes—loose, not in a case. No letters. We’d have had a job to identify him if it hadn’t been for the photo. Providential, you might call it.”

“I wonder,” said Frankie.

In view of her private knowledge, she considered providential a singularly inappropriate word. She changed the conversation.

“I went to see Mr. Jones, the Vicar’s son, yesterday. The one who’s been poisoned. What an extraordinary thing that was.”

“Ah!” said the inspector. “Now that is extraordinary, if you like. Never heard of anything like it happening before. A nice young gentleman without

an enemy in the world, or so you'd say. You know, Lady Frances, there are some queer customers going about. All the same, I never heard of a homicidal maniac who acted just this way."

"Is there any clue at all to who did it?"

Frankie was all wide-eyed inquiry.

"It's so interesting to hear all this," she added.

The inspector swelled with gratification. He enjoyed this friendly conversation with an Earl's daughter. Nothing stuck up or snobbish about Lady Frances.

"There was a car seen in the vicinity," said the inspector. "Dark-blue Talbot saloon. A man on Lock's Corner reported dark-blue Talbot, No. GG 8282, passed going direction St. Botolph's."

"And you think?"

"GG 8282 is the number of the Bishop of Botolph's car."

Frankie toyed for a minute or two with the idea of a homicidal bishop who offered sacrifices of clergymen's sons, but rejected it with a sigh.

"You don't suspect the Bishop, I suppose?" she said.

"We've found out that the Bishop's car never left the Palace garage that afternoon."

"So it was a false number."

"Yes. We've got that to go on all right."

With expressions of admiration, Frankie took her leave. She made no damping remark, but she thought to herself:

"There must be a large number of dark-blue Talbots in England."

On her return home she took a directory of Marchbolt from its place on the writing table in the library and removed it to her own room. She worked over it for some hours.

The result was not satisfactory.

There were four hundred and eighty-two Evanses in Marchbolt.

“Damn!” said Frankie.

She began to make plans for the future.

Ten

PREPARATIONS FOR AN ACCIDENT

A week later Bobby had joined Badger in London. He had received several enigmatical communications from Frankie, most in such an illegible scrawl that he was quite unable to do more than guess at their meaning. However, their general purport seemed to be that Frankie had a plan and that he (Bobby) was to do nothing until he heard from her. This was as well, for Bobby would certainly have had no leisure to do anything, since the unlucky Badger had already succeeded in embroiling himself and his business in every way ingenuity could suggest, and Bobby was kept busy disentangling the extraordinary mess his friend seemed to have got into.

Meanwhile, the young man remained very strictly on his guard. The effect of eight grains of morphia was to render their taker extremely suspicious of food and drink and had also induced him to bring to London a Service revolver, the possession of which was extremely irksome to him.

He was just beginning to feel that the whole thing had been an extravagant nightmare when Frankie's Bentley roared down the Mews and drew up outside the garage. Bobby, in grease-stained overalls, came out to receive it. Frankie was at the wheel and beside her sat a rather gloomy-looking young man.

"Hullo, Bobby," said Frankie. "This is George Arbuthnot. He's a doctor, and we shall need him."

Bobby winced slightly as he and George Arbuthnot made faint recognitions of each other's presence.

"Are you sure we're going to need a doctor?" he asked. "Aren't you being a bit pessimistic?"

“I didn’t mean we should need him in that way,” said Frankie. “I need him for a scheme that I’ve got on. Look here, is there anywhere we can go and talk?”

Bobby looked round him.

“Well, there’s my bedroom,” he said doubtfully.

“Excellent,” said Frankie.

She got out of the car and she and George Arbuthnot followed Bobby up some outside steps and into a microscopic bedroom.

“I don’t know,” said Bobby, looking round dubiously, “if there’s anywhere to sit.”

There was not. The only chair was loaded with, apparently, the whole of Bobby’s wardrobe.

“The bed will do,” said Frankie.

She plumped down on it. George Arbuthnot did the same and the bed groaned protestingly.

“I’ve got everything planned out,” said Frankie. “To begin with, we want a car. One of yours will do.”

“Do you mean you want to buy one of our cars?”

“Yes.”

“That’s really very nice of you, Frankie,” said Bobby, with warm appreciation. “But you needn’t. I really do draw the line at sticking my friends.”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” said Frankie. “It isn’t like that at all. I know what you mean—it’s like buying perfectly appalling clothes and hats from one’s friends who are just starting in business. A nuisance, but it’s got to be done. But this isn’t like that at all. I really need a car.”

“What about the Bentley?”

“The Bentley’s no good.”

“You’re mad,” said Bobby.

“No, I’m not. The Bentley’s no good for what I want it for.”

“What’s that?”

“Smashing it up.”

Bobby groaned and put a hand to his head.

“I don’t seem very well this morning.”

George Arbuthnot spoke for the first time. His voice was deep and melancholy.

“She means,” he said, “that’s she going to have an accident.”

“How does she know?” said Bobby wildly.

Frankie gave an exasperated sigh.

“Somehow or other,” she said, “we seem to have started wrong. Now just listen quietly, Bobby, and try and take in what I’m going to say. I know your brains are practically negligible, but you ought to be able to understand if you really concentrate.”

She paused, then resumed.

“I am on the trail of Bassington-ffrench.”

“Hear, hear.”

“Bassington-ffrench—our particular Bassington-ffrench—lives at Merroway Court at the village of Staverley in Hampshire. Merroway Court

belongs to Bassington-ffrench's brother, and our Bassington-ffrench lives there with his brother and his wife."

"Whose wife?"

"The brother's wife, of course. That isn't the point. The point is how are you or I or both of us is going to worm ourselves into the household. I've been down and reconnoitred the ground. Staverley's a mere village. Strangers arriving there to stay would stick out a mile. It would be the sort of thing that simply isn't done. So I've evolved a plan. This is what is going to happen: Lady Frances Derwent, driving her car more recklessly than well, crashes into the wall near the gates of Merroway Court. Complete wreckage of the car, less complete wreckage of Lady Frances, who is carried to the house, suffering from concussion and shock and must emphatically not be moved."

"Who says so?"

"George. Now you see where George comes in. We can't risk a strange doctor saying there is nothing the matter with me. Or perhaps some officious person might pick up my prostrate form and take it to some local hospital. No, what happens is this: George is passing, also in a car (you'd better sell us a second one), sees the accident, leaps out and takes charge. 'I am a doctor. Stand back, everybody' (That is, if there is anybody to stand back). 'We must take her into that house—what is it, Merroway Court? That will do. I must be able to make a thorough examination.' I am carried to the best spare room, the Bassington-ffrenches either sympathetic or bitterly resisting, but in any case, George will overbear them. George makes his examination and emerges with his verdict. Happily, it is not as serious as he thought. No bones broken, but danger of concussion. I must on no account be moved for two or three days. After that, I shall be able to return to London.

"And then George departs and it's up to me to ingratiate myself with the household."

"And where do I come in?"

“You don’t.”

“But look here—”

“My dear child, do remember that Bassington-french knows you. He doesn’t know me from Adam. And I’m in a frightfully strong position, because I’ve got a title. You see how useful that is. I’m not just a stray young woman gaining admission to the house for mysterious purposes. I am an earl’s daughter and therefore highly respectable. And George is a real doctor and everything is quite above suspicion.”

“Oh! I suppose it’s all right,” said Bobby unhappily.

“It’s a remarkably well-planned scheme, I think,” said Frankie with pride.

“And I don’t do anything at all?” asked Bobby.

He still felt injured—much like a dog who has been unexpectedly deprived of a bone. This, he felt, was his own particular crime, and now he was being ousted.

“Of course you do, darling. You grow a moustache.”

“Oh! I grow a moustache, do I?”

“Yes. How long will it take?”

“Two or three weeks, I expect.”

“Heavens! I’d no idea it was such a slow process. Can’t you speed it up?”

“No. Why can’t I wear a false one?”

“They always look so false and they twist or come off or smell of spirit gum. Wait a minute, though, I believe there is a kind you can get stuck on hair by hair, so to speak, that absolutely defies detection. I expect a theatrical wigmaker would do it for you.”

“He’d probably think I was trying to escape from justice.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks.”

“Once I’ve got the moustache, what do I do?”

“Put on a chauffeur’s uniform and drive the Bentley down to Staverley.”

“Oh, I see.”

Bobby brightened.

“You see my idea is this,” said Frankie: “Nobody looks at a chauffeur in the way they look at a person. In any case, Bassington-ffrench only saw you for a minute or two and he must have been too rattled wondering if he could change the photograph in time to look at you much. You were just a young golfing ass to him. It isn’t like the Caymans who sat opposite you and talked to you and who were deliberately trying to sum you up. I’d bet anything that seeing you in chauffeur’s uniform, Bassington-ffrench wouldn’t recognize you even without the moustache. He might just possibly think that your face reminded him of somebody—no more than that. And with the moustache it ought to be perfectly safe. Now tell me, what do you think of the plan?”

Bobby turned it over in his mind.

“To tell you the truth, Frankie,” he said generously, “I think it’s pretty good.”

“In that case,” said Frankie briskly. “Let’s go and buy some cars. I say, I think George has broken your bed.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Bobby hospitably. “It was never a particularly good bed.”

They descended to the garage, where a nervous-looking young man with a curious lack of chin and an agreeable smile greeted them with a vague “Haw, haw, haw!” His general appearance was slightly marred by the fact that his eyes had a distinct disinclination to look in the same direction.

“Hullo, Badger,” said Bobby. “You remember Frankie, don’t you?”

Badger clearly didn't, but he said, "Haw, haw, haw!" again in an amiable manner.

"Last time I saw you," said Frankie, "you were head downward in the mud and we had to pull you out by the legs."

"No, not really?" said Badger. "Why, that m-m-must have been W-w-w-wales."

"Quite right," said Frankie. "It was."

"I always was a p-p-putrid r-r-r-rider," said Badger. "I s-s-s-still am," he added mournfully.

"Frankie wants to buy a car," said Bobby.

"Two cars," said Frankie. "George has got to have one, too. He's crashed his at the moment."

"We can hire him one," said Bobby.

"Well, come and look at what we've got in s-s-stock," said Badger.

"They look very smart," said Frankie, dazzled by lurid hues of scarlet and apple-green.

"They look all right," said Bobby darkly.

"That's r-r-r-remarkably good value in a s-s-secondhand Chrysler," said Badger.

"No, not that one," said Bobby. "Whatever she buys has got to go at least forty miles."

Badger cast his partner a look of reproach.

"The Standard is pretty much on its last legs," mused Bobby. "But I think it would just get you there. The Essex is a bit too good for the job. She'll go at least two hundred before breaking down."

“All right,” said Frankie. “I’ll have the Standard.”

Badger drew his colleague a little aside.

“W-w-what do you think about p-p-price?” he murmured. “Don’t want to s-s-stick a friend of yours too much. T-t-t-ten pounds?”

“Ten pounds is all right,” said Frankie, entering the discussion. “I’ll pay for it now.”

“Who is she really?” asked Badger in a loud whisper.

Bobby whispered back.

“F-f-f-first time I ever knew anyone with a t-t-t-title who c-c-could pay cash,” said Badger with respect.

Bobby followed the other two out to the Bentley.

“When is this business going to take place?” he demanded.

“The sooner the better,” said Frankie. “We thought tomorrow afternoon.”

“Look here, can’t I be there? I’ll put on a beard if you like.”

“Certainly not,” said Frankie. “A beard would probably ruin everything by falling off at the wrong moment. But I don’t see why you shouldn’t be a motorcyclist—with a lot of cap and goggles. What do you think, George?”

George Arbuthnot spoke for the second time:

“All right,” he said, “the more the merrier.”

His voice was even more melancholy than before.

Eleven

THE ACCIDENT HAPPENS

The rendezvous for the great accident party was fixed at a spot about a mile from Staverley village where the road to Staverley branched off from the main road to Andover.

All three arrived there safely, though Frankie's Standard had shown unmistakable signs of decrepitude at every hill.

The time fixed had been one o'clock.

"We don't want to be interrupted when we're staging the thing," Frankie had said. "Hardly anything ever goes down this road, I should imagine, but at lunch time we ought to be perfectly safe."

They proceeded for half a mile on the side road and then Frankie pointed out the place she had selected for the accident to take place.

"It couldn't be better in my opinion," she said. "Straight down this hill and then, as you see, the road gives a sudden very sharp turn round that bulging bit of wall. The wall is actually the wall of Merroway Court. If we start the car and let it run down the hill it will crash straight into the wall and something pretty drastic ought to happen to it."

"I should say so," Bobby agreed. "But someone ought to be on the lookout at the corner to be sure someone isn't coming round it in the opposite direction."

"Quite right," said Frankie. "We don't want to involve anybody else in a mess and perhaps maim them for life. George can take his car down there and turn it as though he were coming from the other direction. Then when he waves a handkerchief it will show that all is clear."

“You’re looking very pale, Frankie,” said Bobby anxiously. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m made up pale,” explained Frankie. “Ready for the concussion. You don’t want me to be carried into the house blooming with health.”

“How wonderful women are,” said Bobby appreciatively. “You look exactly like a sick monkey.”

“I think you’re very rude,” said Frankie. “Now, then, I shall go and prospect at the gate into Merroway Court. It’s just this side of the bulge. There’s no lodge, fortunately. When George waves his handkerchief and I wave mine, you start her off.”

“Right,” said Bobby. “I’ll stay on the running board to guide her until the pace gets too hot and then I’ll jump off.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” said Frankie.

“I shall be extremely careful not to. It would complicate matters to have a real accident on the spot of the faked one.”

“Well, start off, George,” said Frankie.

George nodded, jumped into the second car and ran slowly down the hill. Bobby and Frankie stood looking after him.

“You’ll—look after yourself, won’t you, Frankie?” said Bobby with a sudden gruffness. “I mean—don’t go doing anything foolish.”

“I shall be all right. Most circumspect. By the way, I don’t think I’d better write to you direct. I’ll write to George or my maid or someone or other to pass on to you.”

“I wonder if George is going to be a success in his profession.”

“Why shouldn’t he?”

“Well, he doesn’t seem to have acquired a chatty bedside manner yet.”

“I expect that will come,” said Frankie. “I’d better be going now. I’ll let you know when I want you to come down with the Bentley.”

“I’ll get busy with the moustache. So long, Frankie.”

“They looked at each other for a moment, and then Frankie nodded and began to walk down the hill.

George had turned the car and then backed it round the bulge.

Frankie disappeared for a moment then reappeared in the road, waving a handkerchief. A second handkerchief waved from the bottom of the road at the turn.

Bobby put the car into third gear, then, standing on the footboard, he released the brake. The car moved grudgingly forward, impeded by being in gear. The slope, however, was sufficiently steep. The engine started. The car gathered way. Bobby steadied the steering wheel. At the last possible moment he jumped off.

The car went on down the hill and crashed into the wall with considerable force. All was well—the accident had taken place successfully.

Bobby saw Frankie run quickly to the scene of the crime and plop down amid the wreckage. George in his car came round the corner and pulled up.

With a sigh Bobby mounted his motorcycle and rode away in the direction of London.

At the scene of the accident things were busy.

“Shall I roll about in the road a bit,” asked Frankie, “to get myself dusty?”

“You might as well,” said George. “Here, give me your hat.”

He took it and inflicted a terrific dent on it. Frankie gave a faint anguished cry.

“That’s the concussion,” explained George. “Now, then, lie doggo just where you are. I think I heard a bicycle bell.”

Sure enough, at that moment, a boy of about seventeen came whistling round the corner. He stopped at once, delighted with the pleasurable spectacle that met his eyes.

“Ooer!” he ejaculated, “ ’as there been an accident?”

“No,” said George sarcastically. “The young lady ran her car into the wall on purpose.”

Accepting, as he was meant to do, this remark as irony rather than the simple truth which it was, the boy said with relish:

“Looks bad, don’t she? Is she dead?”

“Not yet,” said George. “She must be taken somewhere at once. I’m a doctor. What’s this place in here?”

“Merroway Court. Belongs to Mr. Bassington-ffrench. He’s a JP, he is.”

“She must be carried there at once,” said George authoritatively. “Here, leave your bicycle and lend me a hand.”

Only too willing, the boy propped his bicycle against the wall and came to assist. Between them George and the boy carried Frankie up the drive to a pleasant old-fashioned-looking manor house.

Their approach had been observed, for an elderly butler came out to meet them.

“There’s been an accident,” said George curtly. “Is there a room I can carry this lady into? She must be attended to at once.”

The butler went back into the hall in a flustered way. George and the boy followed him up closely, still carrying the limp body of Frankie. The butler had gone into a room on the left and from there a woman emerged. She was

tall, with red hair, and about thirty years of age. Her eyes were a light clear blue.

She dealt with the situation quickly.

“There is a spare bedroom on the ground floor,” she said. “Will you bring her in there? Ought I to telephone for a doctor?”

“I am a doctor,” explained George. “I was passing in my car and saw the accident occur.”

“Oh! how very fortunate. Come this way, will you?”

She showed them the way into a pleasant bedroom with windows giving on the garden.

“Is she badly hurt?” she inquired.

“I can’t tell yet.”

Mrs. Bassington-french took the hint and retired. The boy accompanied her and launched out into a description of the accident as though he had been an actual witness of it.

“Run smack into the wall she did. Car’s all smashed up. There she was lying on the ground with her hat all dented in. The gentleman, he was passing in his car—”

He proceeded ad lib till got rid of with a half crown.

Meanwhile Frankie and George were conversing in careful whispers.

“George, darling, this won’t blight your career, will it? They won’t strike you off the register, or whatever it is, will they?”

“Probably,” said George gloomily. “That is, if it ever comes out.”

“It won’t,” said Frankie. “Don’t worry, George. I shan’t let you down.” She added thoughtfully: “You did it very well. I’ve never heard you talk so

much before.”

George sighed. He looked at his watch.

“I shall give my examination another three minutes,” he said.

“What about the car?”

“I’ll arrange with a garage to have that cleared up.”

“Good.”

George continued to study his watch. Finally he said with an air of relief:

“Time.”

“George,” said Frankie, “you’ve been an angel. I don’t know why you did it.”

“No more do I,” said George. “Damn fool thing to do.”

He nodded to her.

“Bye bye. Enjoy yourself.”

“I wonder if I shall,” said Frankie.

She was thinking of that cool impersonal voice with the slight American accent.

George went in search of the owner of it, whom he found waiting for him in the drawing room.

“Well,” he said abruptly. “I’m glad to say it’s not so bad as I feared. Concussion very slight and already passing off. She ought to stay quietly where she is for a day or so, though.” He paused. “She seems to be a Lady Frances Derwent.”

“Oh, fancy!” said Mrs. Bassington-ffrench. “Then I know some cousins of hers—the Draycotts—quite well.”

“I don’t know if it’s inconvenient for you to have her here,” said George. “But if she could stay where she is for a day or two . . .” Here George paused.

“Oh, of course. That will be all right, Dr.—?”

“Arbuthnot. By the way, I’ll see to the car business. I shall be passing a garage.”

“Thank you very much, Dr. Arbuthnot. How very lucky you happened to be passing. I suppose a doctor ought to see her tomorrow just to see she’s getting on all right.”

“Don’t think it’s necessary,” said George. “All she needs is quiet.”

“But I should feel happier. And her people ought to know.”

“I’ll attend to that,” said George. “And as to the doctoring business—well, it seems she’s a Christian Scientist and won’t have doctors at any price. She wasn’t too pleased at finding me in attendance.”

“Oh, dear!” said Mrs. Bassington-ffrench.

“But she’ll be quite all right,” said George reassuringly. “You can take my word for it.”

“If you really think so, Dr. Arbuthnot,” said Mrs. Bassington-ffrench rather doubtfully.

“I do,” said George. “Goodbye. Dear me. I left one of my instruments in the bedroom.”

He came rapidly into the room and up to the bedside.

“Frankie,” he said in a quick whisper. “You’re a Christian Scientist. Don’t forget.”

“But why?”

“I had to do it. Only way.”

“All right,” said Frankie. “I won’t forget.”

Twelve

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

“Well, here I am,” thought Frankie. “Safely in the enemy’s camp. Now, it’s up to me.”

There was a tap on the door and Mrs. Bassington-ffrench entered.

Frankie raised herself a little on her pillows.

“I’m so frightfully sorry,” she said in a faint voice. “Causing you all this bother.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Bassington-ffrench. Frankie heard anew that cool attractive drawling voice with a slight American accent, and remembered that Lord Marchington had said that one of the Hampshire Bassington-ffrenches had married an American heiress. “Dr. Arbuthnot says you will be quite all right in a day or two if you just keep quiet.”

Frankie felt that she ought at this point to say something about “error” or “mortal mind,” but was frightened of saying the wrong thing.

“He seems nice,” she said. “He was very kind.”

“He seemed a most capable young man,” said Mrs. Bassington-ffrench. “It was very fortunate that he just happened to be passing.”

“Yes, wasn’t it? Not, of course, that I really needed him.”

“But you mustn’t talk,” continued her hostess. “I’ll send my maid along with some things for you and then she can get you properly into bed.”

“It’s frightfully kind of you.”

“Not at all.”

Frankie felt a momentary qualm as the other woman withdrew.

“A nice kind creature,” she said to herself. “And beautifully unsuspecting.”

For the first time she felt that she was playing a mean trick on her hostess. Her mind had been so taken up with the vision of a murderous Bassington-ffrench pushing an unsuspecting victim over a precipice that lesser characters in the drama had not entered her imagination.

“Oh, well,” thought Frankie, “I’ve got to go through with it now. But I wish she hadn’t been so nice about it.”

She spent a dull afternoon and evening lying in her darkened room. Mrs. Bassington-ffrench looked in once or twice to see how she was but did not stay.

The next day, however, Frankie admitted the daylight and expressed a desire for company and her hostess came and sat with her for some time. They discovered many mutual acquaintances and friends and by the end of the day, Frankie felt, with a guilty qualm, that they had become friends.

Mrs. Bassington-ffrench referred several times to her husband and to her small boy, Tommy. She seemed a simple woman, deeply attached to her home, and yet, for some reason or other, Frankie fancied that she was not quite happy. There was an anxious expression in her eyes sometimes that did not agree with a mind at peace with itself.

On the third day Frankie got up and was introduced to the master of the house.

He was a big man, heavy jowled, with a kindly but rather abstracted air. He seemed to spend a good deal of his time shut up in his study. Yet Frankie judged him to be very fond of his wife, though interesting himself very little in her concerns.

Tommy, the small boy, was seven, and a healthy, mischievous child. Sylvia Bassington-ffrench obviously adored him.

“It’s so nice down here,” said Frankie with a sigh.

She was lying out on a long chair in the garden.

“I don’t know whether it’s the bang on the head, or what it is, but I just don’t feel I want to move. I’d like to lie here for days and days.”

“Well, do,” said Sylvia Bassington-ffrench in her calm, incurious tones. “No, really, I mean it. Don’t hurry back to town. You see,” she went on, “it’s a great pleasure to me to have you here. You’re so bright and amusing. It quite cheers me up.”

“So she needs cheering up,” flashed across Frankie’s mind.

At the same time she felt ashamed of herself.

“I feel we really have become friends,” continued the other woman.

Frankie felt still more ashamed.

It was a mean thing she was doing—mean—mean—mean. She would give it up! Go back to town—

Her hostess went on:

“It won’t be too dull here. Tomorrow my brother-in-law is coming back. You’ll like him, I’m sure. Everyone likes Roger.”

“He lives with you?”

“Off and on. He’s a restless creature. He calls himself the ne’er-do-weel of the family, and perhaps it’s true in a way. He never sticks to a job for long—in fact I don’t believe he’s ever done any real work in his life. But some people just are like that—especially in old families. And they’re usually people with a great charm of manner. Roger is wonderfully sympathetic. I don’t know what I should have done without him this spring when Tommy was ill.”

“What was the matter with Tommy?”

“He had a bad fall from the swing. It must have been tied on to a rotten branch and the branch gave way. Roger was very upset because he was swinging the child at the time—you know, giving him high ones, such as children love. We thought at first Tommy’s spine was hurt, but it turned out to be a very slight injury and he’s quite all right now.”

“He certainly looks it,” said Frankie, smiling, as she heard faint yells and whoops in the distance.

“I know. He seems in perfect condition. It’s such a relief. He’s had bad luck in accidents. He was nearly drowned last winter.”

“Was he really?” said Frankie thoughtfully.

She no longer meditated returning to town. The feeling of guilt had abated.

Accidents!

Did Roger Bassington-ffrench specialize in accidents, she wondered.

She said:

“If you’re sure you mean it, I’d love to stay a little longer. But won’t your husband mind my butting in like this?”

“Henry?” Mrs. Bassington-ffrench’s lips curled in a strange expression. “No, Henry won’t mind. Henry never minds anything—nowadays.”

Frankie looked at her curiously.

“If she knew me better she’d tell me something,” she thought to herself. “I believe there are lots of odd things going on in this household.”

Henry Bassington-ffrench joined them for tea and Frankie studied him closely. There was certainly something odd about the man. His type was an obvious one—a jovial, sport-loving, simple country gentleman. But such a man ought not to sit twitching nervously, his nerves obviously on edge, now sunk in an abstraction from which it was impossible to rouse him, now giving out bitter and sarcastic replies to anything said to him. Not that he

was always like that. Later that evening, at dinner, he showed out in quite a new light. He joked, laughed, told stories, and was, for a man of his abilities, quite brilliant. Too brilliant, Frankie felt. The brilliance was just as unnatural and out of character.

“He has such queer eyes,” she thought. “They frighten me a little.”

And yet surely she did not suspect Henry Bassington-ffrench of anything? It was his brother, not he, who had been in Marchbolt on that fatal day.

As to the brother, Frankie looked forward to seeing him with eager interest. According to her and to Bobby, the man was a murderer. She was going to meet a murderer face to face.

She felt momentarily nervous.

Yet, after all, how could he guess?

How could he, in any way, connect her with a successfully accomplished crime?

“You’re making a bogey for yourself out of nothing,” she said to herself.

Roger Bassington-ffrench arrived just before tea on the following afternoon.

Frankie did not meet him till tea time. She was still supposed to “rest” in the afternoon.

When she came out on to the lawn where tea was laid, Sylvia said smiling:

“Here is our invalid. This is my brother-in-law, Lady Frances Derwent.”

Frankie saw a tall, slender young man of something over thirty with very pleasant eyes. Although she could see what Bobby meant by saying he ought to have a monocle and a toothbrush moustache, she herself was more inclined to notice the intense blue of his eyes. They shook hands.

He said: “I’ve been hearing all about the way you tried to break down the park wall.”

“I’ll admit,” said Frankie, “that I’m the world’s worst driver. But I was driving an awful old rattletrap. My own car was laid up and I bought a cheap one secondhand.”

“She was rescued from the ruins by a very good-looking young doctor,” said Sylvia.

“He was rather sweet,” agreed Frankie.

Tommy arrived at this moment and flung himself upon his uncle with squeaks of joy.

“Have you brought me a Hornby train? You said you would. You said you would.”

“Oh, Tommy! You mustn’t ask for things,” said Sylvia.

“That’s all right, Sylvia. It was a promise. I’ve got your train all right, old man.” He looked casually at his sister-in-law. “Isn’t Henry coming to tea?”

“I don’t think so.” The constrained note was in her voice. “He isn’t feeling awfully well today, I imagine.”

Then she said impulsively:

“Oh, Roger, I’m glad you’re back.”

He put his hand on her arm for a minute.

“That’s all right, Sylvia, old girl.”

After tea, Roger played trains with his nephew.

Frankie watched them, her mind in a turmoil.

Surely this wasn’t the sort of man to push people over cliffs! This charming young man couldn’t be a cold-blooded murderer!

But, then—she and Bobby must have been wrong all along. Wrong, that is, about this part of it.

She felt sure now that it wasn't Bassington-ffrench who had pushed Pritchard over the cliff.

Then who was it?

She was still convinced he had been pushed over. Who had done it? And who had put the morphia in Bobby's beer?

With the thought of morphia suddenly the explanation of Henry Bassington-ffrench's peculiar eyes came to her, with their pinpoint pupils.

Was Henry Bassington-ffrench a drug fiend?

Thirteen

ALAN CARSTAIRS

Strangely enough, she received confirmation of this theory no later than the following day, and it came from Roger.

They had been playing a single at tennis against each other and were sitting afterwards sipping iced drinks.

They had been talking about various indifferent subjects and Frankie had become more and more sensible of the charm of someone who had, like Roger Bassington-ffrench, travelled about all over the world. The family ne'er-do-weel, she could not help thinking, contrasted very favourably with his heavy, serious-minded brother.

A pause had fallen while these thoughts were passing through Frankie's mind. It was broken by Roger—speaking this time in an entirely different tone of voice.

“Lady Frances, I'm going to do a rather peculiar thing. I've known you less than twenty-four hours, but I feel instinctively that you're the one person I can ask advice from.”

“Advice?” said Frankie, surprised.

“Yes. I can't make up my mind between two different courses of action.”

He paused. He was leaning forward, swinging a racquet between his knees, a light frown on his forehead. He looked worried and upset.

“It's about my brother, Lady Frances.”

“Yes?”

“He is taking drugs. I am sure of it.”

“What makes you think so?” asked Frankie.

“Everything. His appearance. His extraordinary changes of mood. And have you noticed his eyes? The pupils are like pinpoints.”

“I had noticed that,” admitted Frankie. “What do you think it is?”

“Morphia or some form of opium.”

“Has it been going on for long?”

“I date the beginning of it from about six months ago. I remember that he complained of sleeplessness a good deal. How he first came to take the stuff, I don’t know, but I think it must have begun soon after then.”

“How does he get hold of it?” inquired Frankie practically.

“I think it comes to him by post. Have you noticed that he is particularly nervous and irritable some days at tea time?”

“Yes, I have.”

“I suspect that that is when he has finished up his supply and is waiting for more. Then, after the six o’clock post has come, he goes into his study and emerges for dinner in quite a different mood.”

Frankie nodded. She remembered that unnatural brilliance of conversation sometimes at dinner.

“But where does the supply come from?” she asked.

“Ah, that I don’t know. No reputable doctor would give it to him. There are, I suppose, various sources where one could get it in London by paying a big price.”

Frankie nodded thoughtfully.

She was remembering having said to Bobby something about a gang of drug smugglers and his replying that one could not mix up too many

crimes. It was queer that so soon in their investigations they should have come upon the traces of such a thing.

It was queerer that it should be the chief suspect who should draw her attention to the fact. It made her more inclined than ever to acquit Roger Bassington-Ffrench of the charge of murder.

And yet there was the inexplicable matter of the changed photograph. The evidence against him, she reminded herself, was still exactly what it had been. On the other side was only the personality of the man himself. And everyone always said that murderers were charming people!

She shook off these reflections and turned to her companion.

“Why exactly are you telling me this?” she asked frankly.

“Because I don’t know what to do about Sylvia,” he said simply.

“You think she doesn’t know?”

“Of course she doesn’t know. Ought I to tell her?”

“It’s very difficult—”

“It is difficult. That’s why I thought you might be able to help me. Sylvia has taken a great fancy to you. She doesn’t care much for any of the people round about, but she liked you at once, she tells me. What ought I to do, Lady Frances? By telling her I shall add a great burden to her life.”

“If she knew she might have some influence,” suggested Frankie.

“I doubt it. When it’s a case of drug-taking, nobody, even the nearest and dearest, has any influence.”

“That’s rather a hopeless point of view, isn’t it?”

“It’s a fact. There are ways, of course. If Henry would only consent to go in for a cure—there’s a place actually near here. Run by a Dr. Nicholson.”

“But he’d never consent, would he?”

“He might. You can catch a morphia taker in a mood of extravagant remorse sometimes when they’d do anything to cure themselves. I’m inclined to think that Henry might be got to that frame of mind more easily if he thought Sylvia didn’t know—if her knowing was held over him as a kind of threat. If the cure was successful (they’d call it ‘nerves,’ of course) she never need know.”

“Would he have to go away for the cure?”

“The place I mean is about three miles from here, the other side of the village. It’s run by a Canadian—Dr. Nicholson. A very clever man, I believe. And, fortunately, Henry likes him. Hush—here comes Sylvia.”

Mrs. Bassington-French joined them, observing:

“Have you been very energetic?”

“Three sets,” said Frankie. “And I was beaten every time.”

“You play a very good game,” said Roger.

“I’m terribly lazy about tennis,” said Sylvia. “We must ask the Nicholsons over one day. She’s very fond of a game. Why—what is it?” She had caught the glance the other two had exchanged.

“Nothing—only I happened to be talking about the Nicholsons to Lady Frances.”

“You’d better call her Frankie like I do,” said Sylvia. “Isn’t it odd how whenever one talks of any person or thing, somebody else does the same immediately afterwards?”

“They are Canadians, aren’t they?” inquired Frankie.

“He is, certainly. I rather fancy she is English, but I’m not sure. She’s a very pretty little thing—quite charming with the most lovely big wistful eyes.

Somehow or other, I fancy she isn't terribly happy. It must be a depressing life."

"He runs a kind of sanatorium, doesn't he?"

"Yes—nerve cases and people who take drugs. He's very successful, I believe. He's rather an impressive man."

"You like him?"

"No," said Sylvia abruptly, "I don't." And rather vehemently, after a moment or two, she added: "Not at all."

Later on, she pointed out to Frankie a photograph of a charming large-eyed woman which stood on the piano.

"That's Moira Nicholson. An appealing face, isn't it? A man who came down here with some friends of ours some time ago was quite struck with it. He wanted an introduction to her, I think."

She laughed.

"I'll ask them to dinner tomorrow night. I'd like to know what you think of him."

"Him?"

"Yes. As I told you, I dislike him, and yet he's quite an attractive-looking man."

Something in her tone made Frankie look at her quickly, but Sylvia Bassington-Ffrench had turned away and was taking some dead flowers out of a vase.

"I must collect my ideas," thought Frankie, as she drew a comb through her thick dark hair when dressing for dinner that night. "And," she added resolutely, "it's time I made a few experiments."

Was, or was not, Roger Bassington-ffrench the villain she and Bobby assumed him to be?

She and Bobby had agreed that whoever had tried to put the latter out of the way must have easy access to morphia. Now in a way this held good for Roger Bassington-ffrench. If his brother received supplies of morphia by post, it would be easy enough for Roger to abstract a packet and use it for his own purposes.

“Mem.,” wrote Frankie on a sheet of paper: “(1) Find out where Roger was on the 16th—day when Bobby was poisoned.”

She thought she saw her way to doing that fairly clearly.

“(2),” she wrote. “Produce picture of dead man and observe reactions if any. Also note if R.B.F. admits being in Marchbolt then.”

She felt slightly nervous over the second resolution. It meant coming out into the open. On the other hand, the tragedy had happened in her own part of the world, and to mention it casually would be the most natural thing in the world.

She crumpled up the sheet of paper and burnt it.

She managed to introduce the first point fairly naturally at dinner.

“You know,” she said frankly to Roger. “I can’t help feeling that we’ve met before. And it wasn’t very long ago, either. It wasn’t, by any chance, at that party of Lady Shane’s at Claridges. On the 16th it was.”

“It couldn’t have been on the 16th,” said Sylvia quickly. “Roger was here then. I remember, because we had a children’s party that day and what I should have done without Roger I simply don’t know.”

She gave a grateful glance at her brother-in-law and he smiled back at her.

“I don’t feel I’ve ever met you before,” he said thoughtfully to Frankie, and added: “I’m sure if I had I’d remember it.”

He said it rather nicely.

“One point settled,” thought Frankie. “Roger Bassington-ffrench was not in Wales on the day that Bobby was poisoned.”

The second point came up fairly easily later. Frankie led the talk to country places, the dullness thereof, and the interest aroused by any local excitement.

“We had a man fall over the cliff last month,” she remarked. “We were all thrilled to the core. I went to the inquest full of excitement, but it was all rather dull, really.”

“Was that a place called Marchbolt?” asked Sylvia suddenly.

Frankie nodded.

“Derwent Castle is only about seven miles from Marchbolt,” she explained.

“Roger, that must have been your man,” cried Sylvia.

Frankie looked inquiringly at him.

“I was actually in at the death,” said Roger. “I stayed with the body till the police came.”

“I thought one of the Vicar’s sons did that,” said Frankie.

“He had to go off to play the organ or something—so I took over.”

“How perfectly extraordinary,” said Frankie. “I did hear somebody else had been there, too, but I never heard the name. So it was you?”

There was a general atmosphere of “How curious. Isn’t the world small?” Frankie felt she was doing this rather well.

“Perhaps that’s where you saw me before—in Marchbolt?” suggested Roger.

“I wasn’t there actually at the time of the accident,” said Frankie. “I came back from London a couple of days afterwards. Were you at the inquest?”

“No. I went back to London the morning after the tragedy.”

“He had some absurd idea of buying a house down there,” said Sylvia.

“Utter nonsense,” said Henry Bassington-ffrench.

“Not at all,” said Roger good-humouredly.

“You know perfectly well, Roger, that as soon as you’d bought it, you’d get a fit of wanderlust and go off abroad again.”

“Oh, I shall settle down some day, Sylvia.”

“When you do you’d better settle down near us,” said Sylvia. “Not go off to Wales.”

Roger laughed. Then he turned to Frankie.

“Any points of interest about the accident? It didn’t turn out to be suicide or anything?”

“Oh, no, it was all painfully aboveboard and some appalling relations came and identified the man. He was on a walking tour, it seems. Very sad, really, because he was awfully good-looking. Did you see his picture in the papers?”

“I think I did,” said Sylvia vaguely. “But I don’t remember.”

“I’ve got a cutting upstairs from our local paper.”

Frankie was all eagerness. She ran upstairs and came down with the cutting in her hand. She gave it to Sylvia. Roger came and looked over Sylvia’s shoulder.

“Don’t you think he’s good-looking?” she demanded in a rather schoolgirl manner.

“He is, rather,” said Sylvia. “He looks very like that man, Alan Carstairs, don’t you think so, Roger? I believe I remembered saying so at the time.”

“He’s got quite a look of him here,” agreed Roger. “But there wasn’t much real resemblance, you know.”

“You can’t tell from newspaper pictures, can you?” said Sylvia, as she handed the cutting back.

Frankie agreed that you couldn’t.

The conversation passed to other matters.

Frankie went to bed undecided. Everyone seemed to have reacted with perfect naturalness. Roger’s house-hunting stunt had been no secret.

The only thing she had succeeded in getting was a name. The name of Alan Carstairs.

Fourteen

DR. NICHOLSON

Frankie attacked Sylvia the following morning.

She started by saying carelessly:

“What was that man’s name you mentioned last night? Alan Carstairs, was it? I feel sure I’ve heard that name before.”

“I daresay you have. He’s rather a celebrity in his way, I believe. He’s a Canadian—a naturalist and big game hunter and explorer. I don’t really know him. Some friends of ours, the Rivingtons, brought him down here one day for lunch. A very attractive man—big and bronzed and nice blue eyes.”

“I was sure I’d heard of him.”

“He’d never been over to this country before, I believe. Last year he went on a tour through Africa with that millionaire man, John Savage—the one who thought he had cancer and killed himself in that tragic way. Carstairs has been all over the world. East Africa, South America—simply everywhere, I believe.”

“Sounds a nice adventurous person,” said Frankie.

“Oh, he was. Distinctly attractive.”

“Funny—his being so like the man who fell over the cliff at Marchbolt,” said Frankie.

“I wonder if everyone has a double.”

They compared instances, citing Adolf Beck and referring lightly to the Lyons Mail. Frankie was careful to make no further references to Alan

Carstairs. To show too much interest in him would be fatal.

In her own mind, however, she felt she was getting on now. She was quite convinced that Alan Carstairs had been the victim of the cliff tragedy at Marchbolt. He fulfilled all the conditions. He had no intimate friends or relations in this country and his disappearance was unlikely to be noticed for some time. A man who frequently ran off to East Africa and South America was not likely to be missed at once. Moreover, Frankie noted, although Sylvia Bassington-ffrench had commented on the resemblance in the newspaper reproduction, it had not occurred to her for a moment that it actually was the man.

That, Frankie thought, was rather an interesting bit of psychology.

We seldom suspect people who are “news” of being people we have usually seen or met.

Very good, then. Alan Carstairs was the dead man. The next step was to learn more about Alan Carstairs. His connection with the Bassington-ffrenches seemed to have been of the slightest. He had been brought down there quite by chance by friends. What was the name? Rivington. Frankie stored it in her memory for future use.

That certainly was a possible avenue of inquiry. But it would be well to go slowly. Inquiries about Alan Carstairs must be very discreetly made.

“I don’t want to be poisoned or knocked on the head,” thought Frankie with a grimace. “They were ready enough to bump off Bobby for practically nothing at all—”

Her thoughts flew off at a tangent to that tantalizing phrase that had started the whole business.

Evans! Who was Evans? Where did Evans fit in?

“A dope gang,” decided Frankie. Perhaps some relation of Carstairs was victimized, and he was determined to bust it up. Perhaps he came to England for that purpose. Evans may have been one of the gang who had

retired and gone to Wales to live. Carstairs had bribed Evans to give the others away and Evans had consented and Carstairs went there to see him, and someone followed him and killed him.

Was that somebody Roger Bassington-french? It seemed very unlikely. The Caymans, now, were far more what Frankie imagined a gang of dope smugglers would be likely to be.

And yet—that photograph. If only there was some explanation of that photograph.

That evening, Dr. Nicholson and his wife were expected to dinner. Frankie was finishing dressing when she heard their car drive up to the front door. Her window faced that way and she looked out.

A tall man was just alighting from the driver's seat of a dark-blue Talbot.

Frankie withdrew her head thoughtfully.

Carstairs had been a Canadian. Dr. Nicholson was a Canadian. And Dr. Nicholson had a dark-blue Talbot.

Absurd to build anything upon that, of course, but wasn't it just faintly suggestive?

Dr. Nicholson was a big man with a manner that suggested great reserves of power. His speech was slow, on the whole he said very little, but contrived somehow to make every word sound significant. He wore strong glasses and behind them his very pale-blue eyes glittered reflectively.

His wife was a slender creature of perhaps twenty-seven, pretty, indeed beautiful. She seemed, Frankie, thought, slightly nervous and chattered rather feverishly as though to conceal the fact.

"You had an accident, I hear, Lady Frances," said Dr. Nicholson as he took his seat beside her at the dinner table.

Frankie explained the catastrophe. She wondered why she should feel so nervous doing so. The doctor's manner was simple and interested. Why

should she feel as though she were rehearsing a defence to a charge that had never been made. Was there any earthly reason why the doctor should disbelieve in her accident?

“That was too bad,” he said, as she finished, having, perhaps, made a more detailed story of it than seemed strictly necessary. “But you seem to have made a very good recovery.”

“We won’t admit she’s cured yet. We’re keeping her with us,” said Sylvia.

The doctor’s gaze went to Sylvia. Something like a very faint smile came to his lips but passed almost immediately.

“I should keep her with you as long as possible,” he said gravely.

Frankie was sitting between her host and Dr. Nicholson. Henry Bassington-french was decidedly moody tonight. His hands twitched, he ate next to nothing and he took no part in the conversation.

Mrs. Nicholson, opposite, had a difficult time with him, and turned to Roger with obvious relief. She talked to him in a desultory fashion, but Frankie noticed that her eyes were never long absent from her husband’s face.

Dr. Nicholson was talking about life in the country.

“Do you know what a culture is, Lady Frances?”

“Do you mean book learning?” asked Frankie, rather puzzled.

“No, no. I was referring to germs. They develop, you know, in specially prepared serum. The country, Lady Frances, is a little like that. There is time and space and infinite leisure—suitable conditions, you see, for development.”

“Do you mean bad things?” asked Frankie puzzled.

“That depends, Lady Frances, on the kind of germ cultivated.”

Idiotic conversation, thought Frankie, and why should it make me feel creepy, but it does!

She said flippantly:

“I expect I’m developing all sorts of dark qualities.”

He looked at her and said calmly:

“Oh, no, I don’t think so, Lady Frances. I think you would always be on the side of law and order.”

Was there a faint emphasis on the word law?

Suddenly, across the table, Mrs. Nicholson said:

“My husband prides himself on summing up character.”

Dr. Nicholson nodded his head gently.

“Quite right, Moira. Little things interest me.” He turned to Frankie again. “I had heard of your accident, you know. One thing about it intrigued me very much.”

“Yes?” said Frankie, her heart beating suddenly.

“The doctor who was passing—the one who brought you in here.”

“Yes?”

“He must have had a curious character—to turn his car before going to the rescue.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course not. You were unconscious. But young Reeves, the message boy, came from Staverley on his bicycle and no car passed him, yet he comes round the corner, finds the smash, and the doctor’s car pointing the same way he was going—towards London. You see the point? The doctor did not

come from the direction of Staveley so he must have come the other way, down the hill. But in that case his car should have been pointing towards Staverley. But it wasn't. Therefore he must have turned it."

"Unless he had come from Staverley some time before," said Frankie.

"Then his car would have been standing there as you came down the hill. Was it?"

The pale-blue eyes were looking at her very intently through the thick glasses.

"I don't remember," said Frankie. "I don't think so."

"You sound like a detective, Jasper," said Mrs. Nicholson. "And all about nothing at all."

"Little things interest me," said Nicholson.

He turned to his hostess, and Frankie drew a breath of relief.

Why had he catechized her like that? How had he found out all about the accident? "Little things interest me," he had said. Was that all there was to it?

Frankie remembered the dark-blue Talbot saloon, and the fact that Carstairs had been a Canadian. It seemed to her that Dr. Nicholson was a sinister man.

She kept out of his way after dinner, attaching herself to the gentle, fragile Mrs. Nicholson. She noticed that all the time Mrs. Nicholson's eyes still watched her husband. Was it love, Frankie wondered, or fear?

Nicholson devoted himself to Sylvia and at half past ten he caught his wife's eye and they rose to go.

"Well," said Roger after they had gone, "what do you think of our Dr. Nicholson? A very forceful personality, hasn't he?"

“I’m like Sylvia,” said Frankie. “I don’t think I like him very much. I like her better.”

“Good-looking, but rather a little idiot,” said Roger. “She either worships him or is scared to death of him—I don’t know which.”

“That’s just what I wondered,” agreed Frankie.

“I don’t like him,” said Sylvia, “but I must admit that he’s got a lot of—of force. I believe he’s cured drugtakers in the most marvellous way. People whose relations despaired utterly. They’ve gone there as a last hope and come out absolutely cured.”

“Yes,” cried Henry Bassington-ffrench suddenly. “And do you know what goes on there? Do you know the awful suffering and mental torment? A man’s used to a drug and they cut him off it—cut him off it—till he goes raving mad for the lack of it and beats his head against the wall. That’s what he does—your ‘forceful’ doctor tortures people—tortures them—sends them to Hell—drives them mad. . . .”

He was shaking violently. Suddenly he turned and left the room.

Sylvia Bassington-ffrench looked startled.

“What is the matter with Henry?” she said wonderingly. “He seems very upset.”

Frankie and Roger dared not look at each other.

“He’s not looked well all evening,” ventured Frankie.

“No. I noticed that. He’s very moody lately. I wish he hadn’t given up riding. Oh, by the way, Dr. Nicholson invited Tommy over tomorrow, but I don’t like him going there very much—not with all those queer nerve cases and dope-takers.”

“I don’t suppose the doctor would allow him to come into contact with them,” said Roger. “He seems very fond of children.”

“Yes, I think it’s a disappointment he hasn’t got any of his own. Probably to her, too. She looks very sad—and terribly delicate.”

“She’s like a sad Madonna,” said Frankie.

“Yes, that describes her very well.”

“If Dr. Nicholson is so fond of children I suppose he came to your children’s party?” said Frankie carelessly.

“Unfortunately he was away for a day or two just then. I think he had to go to London for some conference.”

“I see.”

They went up to bed. Before she went to sleep, Frankie wrote to Bobby.

Fifteen

A DISCOVERY

Bobby had had an irksome time. His forced inaction was exceedingly trying. He hated staying quietly in London and doing nothing.

He had been rung up on the telephone by George Arbuthnot who, in a few laconic words, told him that all had gone well. A couple of days later, he had a letter from Frankie, delivered to him by her maid, the letter having gone under cover to her at Lord Marchington's town house.

Since then he had heard nothing.

"Letter for you," called out Badger.

Bobby came forward excitedly but the letter was one addressed in his father's handwriting, and postmarked Marchbolt.

At that moment, however, he caught sight of the neat black-gowned figure of Frankie's maid approaching down the Mews. Five minutes later he was tearing open Frankie's second letter.

Dear Bobby (wrote Frankie), I think it's about time you came down. I've given them instructions at home that you're to have the Bentley whenever you ask for it. Get a chauffeur's livery—dark-green ours always are. Put it down to father at Harrods. It's best to be correct in details. Concentrate on making a good job of the moustache. It makes a frightful difference to anyone's face.

Come down here and ask for me. You might bring me an ostensible note from Father. Report that the car is now in working order again. The garage here only holds two cars and as it's got the family Daimler and Roger Bassington-french's two-seater in it, it is fortunately full up, so you will go to Staverley and put up there.

Get what local information you can when there—particularly about a Dr. Nicholson who runs a place for dope patients. Several suspicious circumstances about him—he has a dark-blue Talbot saloon, he was away from home on the 16th when your beer was doctored, and he takes altogether too detailed an interest in the circumstances of my accident.

I think I've identified the corpse!!!

Au revoir, my fellow sleuth.

Love from your successfully concussed,

Frankie.

P.S. I shall post this myself.

Bobby's spirits rose with a bound.

Discarding his overalls and breaking the news of his immediate departure to Badger, he was about to hurry off when he remembered that he had not yet opened his father's letter. He did so with a rather qualified enthusiasm since the Vicar's letters were actuated by a spirit of duty rather than pleasure and breathed an atmosphere of Christian forbearance which was highly depressing.

The Vicar gave conscientious news of doings in Marchbolt, describing his own troubles with the organist and commenting on the unchristian spirit of one of his churchwardens. The rebinding of the hymn books was also touched upon. And the Vicar hoped that Bobby was sticking manfully to his job and trying to make good, and remained his ever affectionate father.

There was a postscript:

By the way, someone called who asked for your address in London. I was out at the time and he did not leave his name. Mrs. Roberts describes him as a tall, stooping gentleman with pince-nez. He seemed very sorry to miss you and very anxious to see you again.

A tall, stooping man with pince-nez. Bobby ran over in his mind anyone of his acquaintance likely to fit that description but could think of nobody.

Suddenly a quick suspicion darted into his mind. Was this the forerunner of a new attempt upon his life? Were these mysterious enemies, or enemy, trying to track him down?

He sat still and did some serious thinking. They, whoever they were, had only just discovered that he had left the neighbourhood. All unsuspecting, Mrs. Roberts had given his new address.

So that already they, whoever they were, might be keeping a watch upon the place. If he went out he would be followed—and just as things were at the moment that would never do.

“Badger,” said Bobby.

“Yes, old lad.”

“Come here.”

The next five minutes were spent in genuine hard work. At the end of ten minutes Badger could repeat his instructions by heart.

When he was word perfect, Bobby got into a two-seater Fiat dating from 1902 and drove dashing down the Mews. He parked the Fiat in St. James’s Square and walked straight from there to his club. There he did some telephoning and a couple of hours later certain parcels were delivered to him. Finally, about half past three, a chauffeur in dark green livery walked to St. James’s Square and went rapidly up to a large Bentley which had been parked there about half an hour previously. The parking attendant nodded to him—the gentleman who had left the car had remarked, stammering slightly as he did so, that his chauffeur would be fetching it shortly.

Bobby let in the clutch and drew neatly out. The abandoned Fiat still stood demurely awaiting its owner. Bobby, despite the intense discomfort of his

upper lip, began to enjoy himself. He headed north, not south, and, before long, the powerful engine was forging ahead on the Great North Road.

It was only an extra precaution that he was taking. He was pretty sure that he was not being followed. Presently he turned off to the left and made his way by circuitous roads to Hampshire.

It was just after tea that the Bentley purred up the drive of Merroway Court, a stiff and correct chauffeur at the wheel.

“Hullo,” said Frankie lightly. “There’s the car.”

She went out to the front door. Sylvia and Roger came with her.

“Is everything all right, Hawkins?”

The chauffeur touched his cap.

“Yes, m’lady. She’s been thoroughly overhauled.”

“That’s all right, then.”

The chauffeur produced a note.

“From his lordship, m’lady.”

Frankie took it.

“You’ll put up at the—what is it—Anglers’ Arms in Staverley, Hawkins. I’ll telephone in the morning if I want the car.”

“Very good, your ladyship.”

Bobby backed, turned and sped down the drive.

“I’m so sorry we haven’t room here,” said Sylvia. “It’s a lovely car.”

“You get some pace out of that,” said Roger.

“I do,” admitted Frankie.

She was satisfied that no faintest quiver of recognition had shown on Roger’s face. She would have been surprised if it had. She would not have recognized Bobby herself had she met him casually. The small moustache had a perfectly natural appearance, and that, with the stiff demeanour so uncharacteristic of the natural Bobby, completed the disguise enhanced by the chauffeur’s livery.

The voice, too, had been excellent, and quite unlike Bobby’s own. Frankie began to think that Bobby was far more talented than she had given him credit for being.

Meanwhile Bobby had successfully taken up his quarters at the Anglers’ Arms.

It was up to him to create the part of Edward Hawkins, chauffeur to Lady Frances Derwent.

As to the behaviour of chauffeurs in private life, Bobby was singularly ill-informed, but he imagined that a certain haughtiness would not come amiss. He tried to feel himself a superior being and to act accordingly. The admiring attitude of various young women employed in the Anglers’ Arms had a distinctly encouraging effect and he soon found that Frankie and her accident had provided the principal topic of conversation in Staverley ever since it had happened. Bobby unbent towards the landlord, a stout, genial person of the name of Thomas Askew, and permitted information to leak from him.

“Young Reeves, he was there and saw it happen,” declared Mr. Askew.

Bobby blessed the natural mendacity of the young. The famous accident was now vouched for by an eye witness.

“Thought his last moment had come, he did,” went on Mr. Askew. “Straight for him down the hill it come—and then took the wall instead. A wonder the young lady wasn’t killed.”

“Her ladyship takes some killing,” said Bobby.

“Had many accidents, has she?”

“She’s been lucky,” said Bobby. “But I assure you, Mr. Askew, that when her ladyship’s taken over the wheel from me as she sometimes does—well, I’ve made sure my last hour has come.”

Several persons present shook their heads wisely and said they didn’t wonder and it’s just what they would have thought.

“Very nice little place you have here, Mr. Askew,” said Bobby kindly and condescendingly. “Very nice and snug.”

Mr. Askew expressed gratification.

“Merroway Court the only big place in the neighbourhood?”

“Well, there’s the Grange, Mr. Hawkins. Not that you’d call that a place exactly. There’s no family living there. No, it had been empty for years until this American doctor took it.”

“An American doctor?”

“That’s it—Nicholson his name is. And if you ask me, Mr. Hawkins, there are some very queer goings on there.”

The barmaid at this point remarked that Dr. Nicholson gave her the shivers, he did.

“Goings on, Mr. Askew?” said Bobby. “Now, what do you mean by goings on?”

Mr. Askew shook his head darkly.

“There’s those there that don’t want to be there. Put away by their relations. I assure you, Mr. Hawkins, the moanings and the shrieks and the groans that go on there you wouldn’t believe.”

“Why don’t the police interfere?”

“Oh, well, you see, it’s supposed to be all right. Nerve cases, and such like. Loonies that aren’t so very bad. The gentleman’s a doctor and it’s all right, so to speak—” Here the landlord buried his face in a pint pot and emerged again to shake his head in a very doubtful fashion.

“Ah!” said Bobby in a dark and meaning way. “If we knew everything that went on in these places . . .”

And he, too, applied himself to a pewter pot.

The barmaid chimed in eagerly.

“That’s what I say, Mr. Hawkins. What goes on there? Why, one night a poor young creature escaped—in her nightgown she was—and the doctor and a couple of nurses out looking for her. ‘Oh! don’t let them take me back!’ That’s what she was crying out. Pitiful it was. And about her being rich really and her relations having her put away. But they took her back, they did, and the doctor he explained that she’d got a persecution mania—that’s what he called it. Kind of thinking everyone was against her. But I’ve often wondered—yes, I have. I’ve often wondered. . . .”

“Ah!” said Mr. Askew. “It’s easy enough to say—”

Somebody present said that there was no knowing what went on in places. And somebody else said that was right.

Finally the meeting broke up and Bobby announced his intention of going for a stroll before turning in.

The Grange was, he knew, on the other side of the village from Merroway Court, so he turned his footsteps in that direction. What he had heard that evening seemed to him worthy of attention. A lot of it could, of course, be discounted. Villages are usually prejudiced against newcomers, and still more so if the newcomer is of a different nationality. If Nicholson ran a place for curing drugtakers, in all probability there would be strange sounds issuing from it—groans and even shrieks might be heard without any

sinister reason for them, but all the same, the story of the escaping girl struck Bobby unpleasantly.

Supposing the Grange were really a place where people were kept against their will? A certain amount of genuine cases might be taken as camouflage.

At this point in his meditations Bobby arrived at a high wall with an entrance of wrought iron gates. He stepped up to the gates and tried one gently. It was locked. Well, after all, why not?

And yet somehow, the touch of that locked gate gave him a faintly sinister feeling. The place was like a prison.

He moved a little farther along the road measuring the wall with his eye. Would it be possible to climb over? The wall was smooth and high and presented no accommodating crannies. He shook his head. Suddenly he came upon a little door. Without much real hope he tried it. To his surprise it yielded. It was not locked.

“Bit of an oversight here,” thought Bobby with a grin.

He slipped through, closing the door softly behind him.

He found himself on a path leading through a shrubbery. He followed the path which twisted a good deal—in fact, it reminded Bobby of the one in Alice Through the Looking Glass.

Suddenly, without any warning, the path gave a sharp turn and emerged into an open space close to the house. It was a moonlit night and the space was clearly lit. Bobby had stepped full into the moonlight before he could stop himself.

At the same moment a woman’s figure came round the corner of the house. She was treading very softly, glancing from side to side with—or so it seemed to the watching Bobby—the nervous alertness of a hunted animal. Suddenly she stopped dead and stood, swaying as though she would fall.

Bobby rushed forward and caught her. Her lips were white and it seemed to him that never had he seen such an awful fear on any human countenance.

“It’s all right,” he said reassuringly in a very low voice. “It’s quite all right.”

The girl, for she was little more, moaned faintly, her eyelids half-closed.

“I’m so frightened,” she murmured. “I’m so terribly frightened.”

“What’s the matter?” said Bobby.

The girl only shook her head and repeated faintly:

“I’m so frightened. I’m so horribly frightened.”

Suddenly some sound seemed to come to her ears. She sprang upright, away from Bobby. Then she turned to him.

“Go away,” she said. “Go away at once.”

“I want to help you,” said Bobby.

“Do you?” She looked at him for a minute or two, a strange searching and moving glance. It was as though she explored his soul.

Then she shook her head.

“No one can help me.”

“I can,” said Bobby. “I’d do anything. Tell me what it is that frightens you so.”

She shook her head.

“Not now. Oh! quick—they’re coming! You can’t help me unless you go now. At once—at once.”

Bobby yielded to her urgency.

With a whispered: "I'm at the Anglers' Arms," he plunged back along the path. The last he saw of her was an urgent gesture bidding him hurry.

Suddenly he heard footsteps on the path in front of him. Someone was coming along the path from the little door. Bobby plunged abruptly into the bushes at the side of the path.

He had not been mistaken. A man was coming along the path. He passed close to Bobby but it was too dark for the young man to see his face.

When he had passed, Bobby resumed his retreat. He felt that he could do nothing more that night.

Anyway, his head was in a whirl.

For he had recognized the girl—recognized her beyond any possible doubt.

She was the original of the photograph which had so mysteriously disappeared.

Sixteen

BOBBY BECOMES A SOLICITOR

“Mr. Hawkins?”

“Yes,” said Bobby, his voice slightly muffled owing to a large mouthful of bacon and eggs.

“You’re wanted on the telephone.”

Bobby took a hasty gulp of coffee, wiped his mouth and rose. The telephone was in a small dark passage. He took up the receiver.

“Hullo,” said Frankie’s voice.

“Hullo, Frankie,” said Bobby incautiously.

“This is Lady Frances Derwent speaking,” said the voice coldly. “Is that Hawkins?”

“Yes, m’lady.”

“I shall want the car at ten o’clock to take me up to London.”

“Very good, your ladyship.”

Bobby replaced the receiver.

“When does one say, ‘my lady,’ and when does one say, ‘your ladyship?’” he cogitated. “I ought to know, but I don’t. It’s the sort of thing that will lead a real chauffeur or butler to catch me out.”

At the other end, Frankie hung up the receiver and turned to Roger Bassington-ffrench.

“It’s a nuisance,” she observed lightly, “to have to go up to London today. All owing to Father’s fuss.”

“Still,” said Roger, “you’ll be back this evening?”

“Oh, yes!”

“I’d half thought of asking you if you’d give me a lift to town,” said Roger carelessly.

Frankie paused for an infinitesimal second before her answer—given with an apparent readiness.

“Why, of course,” she said.

“But on second thoughts I don’t think I will go up today,” went on Roger. “Henry’s looking even odder than usual. Somehow I don’t very much like leaving Sylvia alone with him.”

“I know,” said Frankie.

“Are you driving yourself?” asked Roger casually as they moved away from the telephone.

“Yes, but I shall take Hawkins. I’ve got some shopping to do as well and it’s a nuisance if you’re driving yourself—you can’t leave the car anywhere.”

“Yes, of course.”

He said no more, but when the car came around, Bobby at the wheel very stiff and correct of demeanour, he came out on the doorstep to see her off.

“Goodbye,” said Frankie.

Under the circumstances she did not think of holding out a hand, but Roger took hers and held it a minute.

“You are coming back?” he said with curious insistence.

Frankie laughed.

“Of course. I only meant good-bye till this evening.”

“Don’t have any more accidents.”

“I’ll let Hawkins drive if you like.”

She sprang in beside Bobby, who touched his cap. The car moved off down the drive, Roger still standing on the step looking after it.

“Bobby,” said Frankie, “do you think it possible that Roger might fall for me?”

“Has he?” inquired Bobby.

“Well, I just wondered.”

“I expect you know the symptoms pretty well,” said Bobby.

But he spoke absently. Frankie shot him a quick glance.

“Has anything—happened?” she asked.

“Yes, it has. Frankie, I’ve found the original of the photograph!”

“You mean—the one—the one you talked so much about—the one that was in the dead man’s pocket?”

“Yes.”

“Bobby! I’ve got a few things to tell you, but nothing to this. Where did you find her?”

Bobby jerked his head back over his shoulder.

“In Dr. Nicholson’s nursing home.”

“Tell me.”

Carefully and meticulously Bobby described the events of the previous night. Frankie listened breathlessly.

“Then we are on the right track,” she said. “And Dr. Nicholson is mixed up in all this! I’m afraid of that man.”

“What is he like?”

“Oh! big and forceful—and he watches you. Very intently behind glasses. And you feel he knows all about you.”

“When did you meet him?”

“He came to dinner.”

She described the dinner party and Dr. Nicholson’s insistent dwelling on the details of her “accident.”

“I felt he was suspicious,” she ended up.

“It’s certainly queer his going into details like that,” said Bobby. “What do you think is at the bottom of all this business, Frankie?”

“Well, I’m beginning to think that your suggestion of a dope gang, which I was so haughty about at the time, isn’t such a bad guess after all.”

“With Dr. Nicholson at the head of the gang?”

“Yes. This nursing home business would be a very good cloak for that sort of thing. He’d have a certain supply of drugs on the premises quite legitimately. While pretending to cure drug cases, he might really be supplying them with the stuff.”

“That seems plausible enough,” agreed Bobby.

“I haven’t told you yet about Henry Bassington-ffrench.”

Bobby listened attentively to her description of her host’s idiosyncracies.

“His wife doesn’t suspect?”

“I’m sure she doesn’t.”

“What is she like? Intelligent?”

“I never thought exactly. No, I suppose she isn’t very. And yet in some ways she seems quite shrewd. A frank, pleasant woman.”

“And our Bassington-french?”

“There I’m puzzled,” said Frankie slowly. “Do you think, Bobby, that just possibly we might be all wrong about him?”

“Nonsense,” said Bobby. “We worked it all out and decided that he must be the villain of the piece.”

“Because of the photograph?”

“Because of the photograph. No one else could have changed that photograph for the other.”

“I know,” said Frankie. “But that one incident is all that we have against him.”

“It’s quite enough.”

“I suppose so. And yet—”

“Well?”

“I don’t know, but I have a queer sort of feeling that he’s innocent—that he’s not concerned in the matter at all.”

Bobby looked at her coldly.

“Did you say that he had fallen for you or that you had fallen for him?” he inquired politely.

Frankie flushed.

“Don’t be so absurd, Bobby. I just wondered if there couldn’t be some innocent explanation, that’s all.”

“I don’t see that there can be. Especially now that we’ve actually found the girl in the neighbourhood. That seems to clinch matters. If we only had some inkling as to who the dead man was—”

“Oh, but I have. I told you so in my letter. I’m nearly sure that the murdered man was somebody called Alan Carstairs.”

Once more she plunged into narrative.

“You know,” said Bobby, “we really are getting on. Now we must try, more or less, to reconstruct the crime. Let’s spread out our facts and see what sort of a job we can make of it.”

He paused for a moment and the car slackened speed as though in sympathy. Then he pressed his foot down once more on the accelerator and at the same time spoke.

“First, we’ll assume that you are right about Alan Carstairs. He certainly fulfils the conditions. He’s the right sort of man, he led a wandering life, he had very few friends and acquaintances in England, and if he disappeared he wasn’t likely to be missed or sought after.

“So far, good. Alan Carstairs comes down to Staverley with these people—what did you say their name was—?”

“Rivington. There’s a possible channel of inquiry there. In fact, I think we ought to follow it up.”

“We will. Very well, Carstairs comes down to Staverley with the Rivingtons. Now, is there anything in that?”

“You mean did he get them to bring him down here deliberately?”

“That’s what I mean. Or was it just a casual chance? Was he brought down here by them and did he then come across the girl by accident just as I did? I presume he knew her before or he wouldn’t have had her photograph on him.”

“The alternative being,” said Frankie thoughtfully, “that he was already on the track of Nicholson and his gang.”

“And used the Rivingtons as a means of getting to this part of the world naturally?”

“That’s quite a possible theory,” said Frankie. “He may have been on the track of this gang.”

“Or simply on the track of the girl.”

“The girl?”

“Yes. She may have been abducted. He may have come over to England to find her.”

“Well, but if he had tracked her down to Staverley, why should he go off to Wales?”

“Obviously, there’s a lot we don’t know yet,” said Bobby.

“Evans,” said Frankie thoughtfully. “We don’t get any clues as to Evans. The Evans part of it must have to do with Wales.”

They were both silent for a moment or two. Then Frankie woke up to her surroundings.

“My dear, we’re actually at Putney Hill. It seems like five minutes. Where are we going and what are we doing?”

“That’s for you to say. I don’t even know why we’ve come up to town.”

“The journey to town was only an excuse for getting a talk with you. I couldn’t very well risk being seen walking the lanes at Staverley deep in

conversation with my chauffeur. I used the pseudo-letter from Father as an excuse for driving up to town and talking to you on the way and even that was nearly wrecked by Bassington-ffrench coming too.”

“That would have torn it severely.”

“Not really. We’d have dropped him wherever he liked and then we’d have gone on to Brook Street and talked there. I think we’d better do that, anyway. Your garage place may be watched.”

Bobby agreed and related the episode of the inquiries made about him at Marchbolt.

“We’ll go to the Derwents’ town residence,” said Frankie. “There’s no one there but my maid and a couple of caretakers.”

They drove to Brook Street. Frankie rang the bell and was admitted, Bobby remaining outside. Presently Frankie opened the door again and beckoned him in. They went upstairs to the big drawing room and pulled up some of the blinds and removed the swathing from one of the sofas.

“There’s one other thing I forgot to tell you,” said Frankie. “On the 16th, the day you were poisoned, Bassington-ffrench was at Staverley, but Nicholson was away—supposedly at a conference in London. And his car is a dark-blue Talbot.”

“And he has access to morphia,” said Bobby.

They exchanged significant glances.

“It’s not exactly evidence, I suppose,” said Bobby, “but it fits in nicely.”

Frankie went to a side table and returned with a telephone directory.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m looking up the name Rivington.”

She turned pages rapidly.

“A. Rivington & Sons, Builders. B. A. C. Rivington, Dental Surgeon. D. Rivington, Shooters Hill, I think not. Miss Florence Rivington. Col. H. Rivington, D.S.O.—that’s more like it—Tite Street, Chelsea.”

She continued her search.

“There’s M. R. Rivington, Onslow Square. He’s possible. And there’s a William Rivington at Hampstead. I think Onslow Square and Tite Street are the most likely ones. The Rivingtons, Bobby, have got to be seen without delay.”

“I think you’re right. But what are we going to say? Think up a few good lies, Frankie. I’m not much good at that sort of thing.”

Frankie reflected for a minute or two.

“I think,” she said, “that’ll you have to go. Do you feel you could be the junior partner of a solicitors’ firm?”

That seems a most gentlemanly rôle,” said Bobby. “I was afraid you might think of something much worse than that. All the same, it’s not quite in character, is it?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, solicitors never do make personal visits, do they? Surely they always write letters at six and eightpence a time, or else write and ask someone to keep an appointment at their office.”

“This particular firm of solicitors is unconventional,” said Frankie. “Wait a minute.”

She left the room and returned with a card.

“Mr. Frederick Spragge,” she said, handing it to Bobby. “You are a young member of the firm of Spragge, Spragge, Jenkinson and Spragge, of Bloomsbury Square.”

“Did you invent that firm, Frankie?”

“Certainly not. They’re Father’s solicitors.”

“And suppose they have me up for impersonation?”

“That’s all right. There isn’t any young Spragge. The only Spragge is about a hundred, and anyway he eats out of my hand. I’ll fix him if things go wrong. He’s a great snob—he loves lords and dukes, however little money he makes out of them.”

“What about clothes? Shall I ring up Badger to bring some along?”

Frankie looked doubtful.

“I don’t want to insult your clothes, Bobby,” she said. “Or throw your poverty in your teeth, or anything like that. But will they carry conviction? I think, myself, that we’d better raid Father’s wardrobe. His clothes won’t fit you too badly.”

A quarter of an hour later, Bobby, attired in a morning coat and striped trousers of exquisitely correct cut and passable fit, stood surveying himself in Lord Marchington’s pier glass.

“Your father does himself well in clothes,” he remarked graciously. “With the might of Savile Row behind me, I feel a great increase of confidence.”

“I suppose you’ll have to stick to your moustache,” said Frankie.

“It’s sticking to me,” said Bobby. “It’s a work of art that couldn’t be repeated in a hurry.”

“You’d better keep it, then. Though it’s more legal-looking to be clean-shaven.”

“It’s better than a beard,” said Bobby. “Now, then, Frankie, do you think your father could lend me a hat?”

Seventeen

MRS. RIVINGTON TALKS

“Supposing,” said Bobby, pausing on the doorstep, “that Mr. M. R. Rivington of Onslow Square is himself a solicitor? That would be a blow.”

“You’d better try the Tite Street colonel first,” said Frankie. “He won’t know anything about solicitors.”

Accordingly, Bobby took a taxi to Tite Street. Colonel Rivington was out. Mrs. Rivington, however, was at home. Bobby delivered over to the smart parlourmaid his card on which he had written: “From Messrs Spragge, Spragge, Jenkinson & Spragge. Very Urgent.”

The card and Lord Marchington’s clothes produced their effect upon the parlourmaid. She did not for an instant suspect that Bobby had come to sell miniatures or tout for insurances. He was shown into a beautifully and expensively furnished drawing room and presently Mrs. Rivington, beautifully- and expensively-dressed and made-up, came into the room.

“I must apologize for troubling you, Mrs. Rivington,” said Bobby. “But the matter was rather urgent and we wished to avoid the delay of letters.”

That any solicitor could ever wish to avoid delay seemed so transparently impossible that Bobby for a moment wondered anxiously whether Mrs. Rivington would see through the pretence.

Mrs. Rivington, however, was clearly a woman of more looks than brains who accepted things as they were presented to her.

“Oh, do sit down!” she said. “I got the telephone message just now from your office saying that you were on your way here.”

Bobby mentally applauded Frankie for this last-minute flash of brilliance.

He sat down and endeavoured to look legal.

“It is about our client, Mr. Alan Carstairs,” he said.

“Oh, yes?”

“He may have mentioned that we were acting for him.”

“Did he now? I believe he did,” said Mrs. Rivington, opening very large blue eyes. She was clearly of a suggestible type. “But of course, I know about you. You acted for Dolly Maltravers, didn’t you, when she shot that dreadful dressmaker man? I suppose you know all the details?”

She looked at him with frank curiosity. It seemed to Bobby that Mrs. Rivington was going to be easy meat.

“We know a lot that never comes into court,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, I suppose you must.” Mrs. Rivington looked at him enviously. “Tell me, did she really—I mean, was she dressed as that woman said?”

“The story was contradicted in court,” said Bobby solemnly. He slightly dropped the corner of his eyelid.

“Oh, I see,” breathed Mrs. Rivington, enraptured.

“About Mr. Carstairs,” said Bobby, feeling that he had now established friendly relations and could get on with his job. “He left England very suddenly, as perhaps you know?”

Mrs. Rivington shook her head.

“Has he left England? I didn’t know. We haven’t seen him for some time.”

“Did he tell you how long he expected to be over here?”

“He said he might be here for a week or two or it might be six months or a year.”

“Where was he staying?”

“At the Savoy.”

“And you saw him last—when?”

“Oh, about three weeks or a month ago. I can’t remember.”

“You took him down to Staverley one day?”

“Of course! I believe that’s the last time we saw him. He rang up to know when he could see us. He’d just arrived in London and Hubert was very put out because we were going up to Scotland the next day, and we were going down to Staverley to lunch and dining out with some dreadful people that we couldn’t get rid of, and he wanted to see Carstairs because he liked him so much, and so I said: ‘My dear, let’s take him down to the Bassington-ffrenches with us. They won’t mind.’ And we did. And, of course, they didn’t.”

She came breathlessly to a pause.

“Did he tell you his reasons for being in England?” asked Bobby.

“No. Did he have any? Oh yes, I know. We thought it was something to do with that millionaire man, that friend of his, who had such a tragic death. Some doctor told him he had cancer and he killed himself. A very wicked thing for a doctor to do, don’t you think so? And they’re often quite wrong. Our doctor said the other day that my little girl had measles and it turned out to be a sort of heat rash. I told Hubert I should change him.”

Ignoring Mrs. Rivington’s treatment of doctors as though they were library books, Bobby returned to the point.

“Did Mr. Carstairs know the Bassington-ffrenches?”

“Oh, no! But I think he liked them. Though he was very queer and moody on the way back. I suppose something that had been said must have upset him. He’s a Canadian, you know, and I often think Canadians are so touchy.”

“You don’t know what it was that upset him?”

“I haven’t the least idea. The silliest things do it sometimes, don’t they?”

“Did he take any walks in the neighbourhood?” asked Bobby.

“Oh, no! What a very odd idea!” She stared at him.

Bobby tried again.

“Was there a party? Did he meet any of the neighbours?”

“No, it was just ourselves and them. But it’s odd your saying that—”

“Yes,” said Bobby eagerly, as she paused.

“Because he asked a most frightful lot of questions about some people who lived near there.”

“Do you remember the name?”

“No, I don’t. It wasn’t anyone very interesting—some doctor or other.”

“Dr. Nicholson?”

“I believe that was the name. He wanted to know all about him and his wife and when they came there—all sorts of things. It seemed so odd when he didn’t know them, and he wasn’t a bit a curious man as a rule. But, of course, perhaps he was only making conversation, and couldn’t think of anything to say. One does do things like that sometimes.”

Bobby agreed that one did and asked how the subject of the Nicholsons had come up, but that Mrs. Rivington was unable to tell him. She had been out with Henry Bassington-ffrench in the garden and had come in to find the others discussing the Nicholsons.

So far, the conversation had proceeded easily, Bobby pumping the lady without any camouflage, but she now displayed a sudden curiosity.

“But what is it you want to know about Mr. Carstairs?” she asked.

“I really wanted his address,” explained Bobby. “As you know, we act for him and we’ve just had a rather important cable from New York—you know, there’s rather a serious fluctuation in the dollar just now—”

Mrs. Rivington nodded with desperate intelligence.

“And so,” continued Bobby rapidly, “we wanted to get in touch with him—to get his instructions—and he hasn’t left an address—and, having heard him mention he was a friend of yours, I thought you might possibly have news of him.”

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Rivington, completely satisfied. “What a pity. But he’s always rather a vague man, I should think.”

“Oh, distinctly so,” said Bobby. “Well,” he rose, “I apologize for taking up so much of your time.”

“Oh, not at all,” said Mrs. Rivington. “And it’s so interesting to know that Dolly Maltravers really did—as you say she did.”

“I said nothing at all,” said Bobby.

“Yes, but then lawyers are so discreet, aren’t they?” said Mrs. Rivington with a little gurgle of laughter.

“So that’s all right,” thought Bobby, as he walked away down Tite Street. “I seem to have taken Dolly Whatsername’s character away for good, but I daresay she deserves it, and that charming idiot of a woman will never wonder why, if I wanted Carstairs’ address, I didn’t simply ring up and ask for it!”

Back in Brook Street he and Frankie discussed the matter from every angle.

“It looks as though it were really pure chance that took him to the Bassington-ffrenches,” said Frankie thoughtfully.

“I know. But evidently when he was down there some chance remark directed his attention to the Nicholsons.”

“So that, really, it is Nicholson who is at the heart of the mystery, not the Bassington-ffrenches?”

Bobby looked at her.

“Still intent on whitewashing your hero,” he inquired coldly.

“My dear, I’m only pointing out what it looks like. It’s the mention of Nicholson and his nursing home that excited Carstairs. Being taken down to the Bassington-ffrenches was a pure matter of chance. You must admit that.”

“It seems like it.”

“Why only ‘seems?’ ”

“Well, there is just one other possibility. In some way, Carstairs may have found out that the Rivingtons were going down to lunch with the Bassington-ffrenches. He may have overheard some chance remark in a restaurant—at the Savoy, perhaps. So he rings them up, very urgent to see them, and what he hopes may happen does happen. They’re very booked-up and they suggest his coming down with them—their friends won’t mind and they do so want to see him. That is possible, Frankie.”

“It is possible, I suppose. But it seems a very roundabout method of doing things.”

“No more roundabout than your accident,” said Bobby.

“My accident was vigorous direct action,” said Frankie coldly.

Bobby removed Lord Marchington’s clothes and replaced them where he had found them. Then he donned his chauffeur’s uniform once more and they were soon speeding back to Staverley.

“If Roger has fallen for me,” said Frankie demurely, “he’ll be pleased I’ve come back so soon. He’ll think I can’t bear to be away from him for long.”

“I’m not sure that you can bear it, either,” said Bobby. “I’ve always heard that really dangerous criminals were singularly attractive.”

“Somehow I can’t believe he is a criminal.”

“So you remarked before.”

“Well, I feel like that.”

“You can’t get over the photograph.”

“Damn the photograph!” said Frankie.

Bobby drove up the drive in silence. Frankie sprang out and went into the house without a backward glance. Bobby drove away.

The house seemed very silent. Frankie glanced at the clock. It was half past two.

“They don’t expect me back for hours yet,” she thought. “I wonder where they are?”

She opened the door of the library and went in, stopping suddenly on the threshold.

Dr. Nicholson was sitting on the sofa, holding both Sylvia Bassington-Ffrench’s hands in his.

Sylvia jumped to her feet and came across the room towards Frankie.

“He’s been telling me,” she said.

Her voice was stifled. She put both hands to her face as though to hide it from view.

“It’s too terrible,” she sobbed, and, brushing past Frankie, she ran out of the room.

Dr. Nicholson had risen. Frankie advanced a step or two towards him. His eyes, watchful as ever, met hers.

“Poor lady,” he said suavely. “It has been a great shock to her.”

The muscles at the corner of his mouth twitched. For a moment or two Frankie fancied that he was amused. And then, quite suddenly, she realized that it was quite a different emotion.

The man was angry. He was holding himself in, hiding his anger behind a suave bland mask, but the emotion was there. It was all he could do to hold that emotion in.

There was a moment’s pause.

“It was best that Mrs. Bassington-french should know the truth,” said the doctor. “I want her to induce her husband to place himself in my hands.”

“I’m afraid,” said Frankie gently, “that I interrupted you.” She paused. “I came back sooner than I meant.”

Eighteen

THE GIRL OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

On Bobby's return to the inn he was greeted with the information that someone was waiting to see him.

"It's a lady. You'll find her in Mr. Askew's little sitting room."

Bobby made his way there slightly puzzled. Unless she had flown there on wings he could not see how Frankie could possibly have got to the Anglers' Arms ahead of him, and that his visitor could be anyone else but Frankie never occurred to him.

He opened the door of the small room which Mr. Askew kept as his private sitting room. Sitting bolt upright in a chair was a slender figure dressed in black—the girl of the photograph.

Bobby was so astonished that for a moment or two he could not speak. Then he noticed that the girl was terribly nervous. Her small hands were trembling and closed and unclosed themselves on the arm of the chair. She seemed too nervous even to speak, but her large eyes held a kind of terrified appeal.

"So it's you?" said Bobby at last. He shut the door behind him and came forward to the table.

Still the girl did not speak—still those large, terrified eyes looked into his. At last words came—a mere hoarse whisper.

"You said—you said—you'd help me. Perhaps I shouldn't have come—"

Here Bobby broke in, finding words and assurance at the same time.

"Shouldn't have come? Nonsense. You did quite right to come. Of course, you should have come. And I'll do anything—anything in the world—to

help you. Don't be frightened. You're quite safe now."

The colour rose a little in the girl's face. She said abruptly:

"Who are you? You're—you're—not a chauffeur. I mean, you may be a chauffeur, but you're not one really."

Bobby understood her meaning in spite of the confused form of words in which she had cloaked them.

"One does all sorts of jobs nowadays," he said. "I used to be in the Navy. As a matter of fact, I'm not exactly a chauffeur—but that doesn't matter now. But, anyway, I assure you you can trust me and—and tell me all about it."

Her flush had deepened.

"You must think me mad," she murmured. "You must think me quite mad."

"No, no."

"Yes—coming here like this. But I was so frightened—so terribly frightened—" Her voice died away. Her eyes widened as though they saw some vision of terror.

Bobby seized her hand firmly.

"Look here," he said, "it's quite all right. Everything's going to be all right. You're safe now—with—with a friend. Nothing shall happen to you."

He felt the answering pressure of her fingers.

"When you stepped out into the moonlight the other night," she said in a low, hurried voice, "it was—it was like a dream—a dream of deliverance. I didn't know who you were or where you came from, but it gave me hope and I determined to come and find you—and—tell you."

"That's right," said Bobby encouragingly. "Tell me. Tell me everything."

She drew her hand away suddenly.

“If I do, you’ll think I’m mad—that I’ve gone wrong in my head from being in that place with those others.”

“No, I shan’t. I shan’t, really.”

“You will. It sounds mad.”

“I shall know it isn’t. Tell me. Please tell me.”

She drew a little farther away from him, sitting very upright, her eyes staring straight in front of her.

“It’s just this,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m going to be murdered.”

Her voice was dry and hoarse. She was speaking with obvious self-restraint but her hands were trembling.

“Murdered?”

“Yes, that sounds mad, doesn’t it? Like—what do they call it?—persecution mania.”

“No,” said Bobby. “You don’t sound mad at all—just frightened. Tell me, who wants to murder you and why?”

She was silent a minute or two, twisting and untwisting her hands. Then she said in a low voice:

“My husband.”

“Your husband?” Thoughts whirled round in Bobby’s head: “Who are you —” he said abruptly.

It was her turn to look surprised.

“Don’t you know?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

She said: “I’m Moira Nicholson. My husband is Dr. Nicholson.”

“Then you’re not a patient there?”

“A patient? Oh, no!” Her face darkened suddenly. “I suppose you think I speak like one.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that at all.” He was at pains to reassure her.

“Honestly, I didn’t mean it that way. I was only surprised at finding you married—and—all that. Now, go on with what you’re telling me—about your husband wanting to murder you.”

“It sounds mad, I know. But it isn’t—it isn’t! I see it in his eyes when he looks at me. And queer things have happened—accidents.”

“Accidents?” said Bobby sharply.

“Yes. Oh! I know it sounds hysterical and as though I was making it all up —”

“Not a bit,” said Bobby. “It sounds perfectly reasonable. Go on. About these accidents.”

“They were just accidents. He backed the car not seeing I was there—I just jumped aside in time—and some stuff that was in the wrong bottle—oh, stupid things—and things that people would think quite all right, but they weren’t—they were meant. I know it. And it’s wearing me out—watching for them—being on my guard—trying to save my life.”

She swallowed convulsively.

“Why does your husband want to do away with you?” asked Bobby.

Perhaps he hardly expected a definite answer—but the answer came promptly:

“Because he wants to marry Sylvia Bassington-ffrench.”

“What? But she’s married already.”

“I know. But he’s arranging for that.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly. But I know that he’s trying to get Mr. Bassington-ffrench brought to the Grange as a patient.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know, but I think something would happen.”

She shuddered.

“He’s got some hold over Mr. Bassington-ffrench. I don’t know what it is.”

“Bassington-ffrench takes morphia,” said Bobby.

“Is that it? Jasper gives it to him, I suppose.”

“It comes by post.”

“Perhaps Jasper doesn’t do it directly—he’s very cunning. Mr. Bassington-ffrench mayn’t know it comes from Jasper—but I’m sure it does. And then Jasper would have him at the Grange and pretend to cure him—and once he was there—”

She paused and shivered.

“All sorts of things happen at the Grange,” she said. “Queer things. People come there to get better—and they don’t get better—they get worse.”

As she spoke, Bobby was aware of a glimpse into a strange, evil atmosphere. He felt something of the terror that had enveloped Moira Nicholson’s life so long.

He said abruptly:

“You say your husband wants to marry Mrs. Bassington-ffrench?”

Moira nodded.

“He’s crazy about her.”

“And she?”

“I don’t know,” said Moira slowly. “I can’t make up my mind. On the surface she seems fond of her husband and little boy and content and peaceful. She seems a very simple woman. But sometimes I fancy that she isn’t so simple as she seems. I’ve even wondered sometimes whether she is an entirely different woman from what we all think she is . . . whether, perhaps, she isn’t playing a part and playing it very well . . . But, really, I think, that’s nonsense—foolish imagination on my part . . . When you’ve lived at a place like the Grange your mind gets distorted and you do begin imagining things.”

“What about the brother Roger?” asked Bobby.

“I don’t know much about him. He’s nice, I think, but he’s the sort of person who would be very easily deceived. He’s quite taken in by Jasper, I know. Jasper is working on him to persuade Mr. Bassington-ffrench to come to the Grange. I believe he thinks it’s all his own idea.” She leaned forward suddenly and caught Bobby’s sleeve. “Don’t let him come to the Grange,” she implored. “If he does, something awful will happen. I know it will.”

Bobby was silent a minute or two, turning over the amazing story in his mind.

“How long have you been married to Nicholson?” he said at last.

“Just over a year—” She shivered.

“Haven’t you ever thought of leaving him?”

“How could I? I’ve nowhere to go. I’ve no money. If anyone took me in, what sort of story could I tell? A fantastic tale that my husband wanted to

murder me? Who would believe me?”

“Well, I believe you,” said Bobby.

He paused a moment, as though making up his mind to a certain course of action. Then he went on:

“Look here,” he said bluntly. “I’m going to ask you a question straight out. Did you know a man called Alan Carstairs?”

He saw the colour come up in her cheeks.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Because it’s rather important that I should know. My idea is that you did know Alan Carstairs, that perhaps at some time or other you gave him your photograph.”

She was silent a moment, her eyes downcast. Then she lifted her head and looked him in the face.

“That’s quite true,” she said.

“You knew him before you were married?”

“Yes.”

“Has he been down here to see you since you were married?”

She hesitated, then said:

“Yes, once.”

“About a month ago would that be?”

“Yes. I suppose it would be about a month.”

“He knew you were living down here?”

“I don’t know how he knew—I hadn’t told him. I had never even written to him since my marriage.”

“But he found out and came here to see you. Did your husband know that?”

“No.”

“You think not. But he might have known all the same?”

“I suppose he might, but he never said anything.”

“Did you discuss your husband at all with Carstairs? Did you tell him of your fears as to your safety?”

She shook her head.

“I hadn’t begun to suspect then.”

“But you were unhappy?”

“Yes.”

“And you told him so?”

“No. I tried not to show in any way that my marriage hadn’t been a success.”

“But he might have guessed it all the same,” said Bobby gently.

“I suppose he might,” she admitted in a low voice.

“Do you think—I don’t know how to put it—but do you think that he knew anything about your husband—that he suspected, for instance, that this nursing home place mightn’t be quite what it seemed to be?”

Her brows furrowed as she tried to think.

“It’s possible,” she said at last. “He asked one or two rather peculiar questions—but—no. I don’t think he can really have known anything about

it.”

Bobby was silent again for a few minutes. Then he said:

“Would you call your husband a jealous man?”

Rather to his surprise, she answered:

“Yes. Very jealous.”

“Jealous, for instance, of you.”

“You mean even though he doesn’t care? But, yes, he would be jealous, just the same. I’m his property, you see. He’s a queer man—a very queer man.”

She shivered.

Then she asked suddenly:

“You’re not connected with the police in any way, are you?”

“I? Oh, no!”

“I wondered, I mean—”

Bobby looked down at his chauffeur’s livery.

“It’s rather a long story,” he said.

“You are Lady Frances Derwent’s chauffeur, aren’t you? So the landlord here said. I met her at dinner the other night.”

“I know.” He paused. “We’ve got to get hold of her,” he said. “And it’s a bit difficult for me to do. Do you think you could ring up and ask to speak to her and then get her to come and meet you somewhere outdoors?”

“I suppose I could—” said Moira slowly.

“I know it must seem frightfully odd to you. But it won’t when I’ve explained. We must get hold of Frankie as soon as possible. It’s essential.”

Moira rose.

“Very well,” she said.

With her hand on the door handle she hesitated.

“Alan,” she said, “Alan Carstairs. Did you say you’d seen him?”

“I have seen him,” said Bobby slowly. “But not lately.”

And he thought, with a shock:

“Of course—she doesn’t know he’s dead. . . .”

He said:

“Ring up Lady Frances. Then I’ll tell you everything.”

Nineteen

A COUNCIL OF THREE

Moira returned a few minutes later.

“I got her,” she said. “I’ve asked her to come and meet me at a little summerhouse down near the river. She must have thought it very odd, but she said she’d come.”

“Good,” said Bobby. “Now, just where is this place exactly?”

Moira described it carefully, and the way to get to it.

“That’s all right,” said Bobby. “You go first. I’ll follow on.”

They adhered to this programme, Bobby lingering to have a word with Mr. Askew.

“Odd thing,” he said casually, “that lady, Mrs. Nicholson, I used to work for an uncle of hers. Canadian gentleman.”

Moira’s visit to him might, he felt, give rise to gossip, and the last thing he wanted was for gossip of that kind to get about and possibly find its way to Dr. Nicholson’s ears.

“So that’s it, is it?” said Mr. Askew. “I rather wondered.”

“Yes,” said Bobby. “She recognized me, and came along to hear what I was doing now. A nice, pleasant-spoken lady.”

“Very pleasant, indeed. She can’t have much of a life living at the Grange.”

“It wouldn’t be my fancy,” agreed Bobby.

Feeling that he had achieved his object, he strolled out into the village and with an aimless air betook himself in the direction indicated by Moira.

He reached the rendezvous successfully and found her there waiting for him. Frankie had not yet put in an appearance.

Moira's glance was frankly inquiring, and Bobby felt he must attempt the somewhat difficult task of explanation.

"There's an awful lot I've got to tell you," he said, and stopped awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"To begin with," said Bobby plunging, "I'm not really a chauffeur, although I do work in a garage in London. And my name isn't Hawkins—it's Jones—Bobby Jones. I come from Marchbolt in Wales."

Moira was listening attentively, but clearly the mention of Marchbolt meant nothing to her. Bobby set his teeth and went bravely to the heart of the matter.

"Look here, I'm afraid I'm going to give you rather a shock. This friend of yours—Alan Carstairs—he's, well—you've got to know—he's dead."

He felt the start she gave and tactfully he averted his eyes from her face. Did she mind very much? Had she been—dash it all—keen on the fellow?

She was silent a moment or two, then she said in a low, thoughtful voice:

"So that's why he never came back? I wondered."

Bobby ventured to steal a look at her. His spirits rose. She looked sad and thoughtful—but that was all.

"Tell me about it," she said.

Bobby complied.

“He fell over the cliff at Marchbolt—the place where I live. I and the doctor there happened to be the ones to find him.” He paused and then added: “He had your photograph in his pocket.”

“Did he?” She gave a sweet, rather sad smile. “Dear Alan, he was—very faithful.”

There was silence for a moment or two and then she asked:

“When did this happen?”

“About a month ago. October 3rd to be exact.”

“That must have been just after he came down here.”

“Yes. Did he mention that he was going to Wales?”

She shook her head.

“You don’t know anyone called Evans, do you?” said Bobby.

“Evans?” Moira frowned, trying to think. “No, I don’t think so. It’s a very common name, of course, but I can’t remember anybody. What is he?”

“That’s just what we don’t know. Oh! hullo, here’s Frankie.”

Frankie came hurrying along the path. Her face, at the sight of Bobby and Mrs. Nicholson sitting chatting together, was a study in conflicting expressions.

“Hullo, Frankie,” said Bobby. “I’m glad you’ve come. We’ve got to have a great powwow. To begin with it’s Mrs. Nicholson who is the original of the photograph.”

“Oh!” said Frankie blankly.

She looked at Moira and suddenly laughed.

“My dear,” she said to Bobby, “now I see why the sight of Mrs. Cayman at the inquest was such a shock to you!”

“Exactly,” said Bobby.

What a fool he had been. However could he have imagined for one moment that any space of time could have turned a Moira Nicholson into an Amelia Cayman.

“Lord, what a fool I’ve been!” he exclaimed.

Moira was looking bewildered.

“There’s such an awful lot to tell,” said Bobby, “and I don’t quite know how to put it all.”

He described the Caymans and their identification of the body.

“But I don’t understand,” said Moira, bewildered. “Whose body was it really, her brother’s or Alan Carstairs?”

“That’s where the dirty work comes in,” explained Bobby.

“And then,” continued Frankie, “Bobby was poisoned.”

“Eight grains of morphia,” said Bobby reminiscently.

“Don’t start on that,” said Frankie. “You’re capable of going on for hours on the subject and it’s really very boring to other people. Let me explain.”

She took a long breath.

“You see,” she said, “those Cayman people came to see Bobby after the inquest to ask him if the brother (supposed) had said anything before he died, and Bobby said, ‘No.’ But afterwards he remembered that he had said something about a man called Evans, so he wrote and told them so, and a few days afterwards he got a letter offering him a job in Peru or somewhere and when he wouldn’t take it, the next thing was that someone put a lot of morphia—”

“Eight grains,” said Bobby.

“—in his beer. Only, having a most extraordinary inside or something, it didn’t kill him. And so then we saw at once that Pritchard—or Carstairs, you know—must have been pushed over the cliff.”

“But why?” asked Moira.

“Don’t you see? Why, it seems perfectly clear to us. I expect I haven’t told it very well. Anyway, we decided that he had been and that Roger Bassington-ffrench had probably done it.”

“Roger Bassington-ffrench?” Moira spoke in tones of the liveliest amusement.

“We worked it out that way. You see, he was there at the time, and your photograph disappeared, and he seemed to be the only man who could have taken it.”

“I see,” said Moira thoughtfully.

“And then,” continued Frankie, “I happened to have an accident just here. An amazing coincidence, wasn’t it?” She looked hard at Bobby with an admonishing eye. “So I telephoned to Bobby and suggested that he should come down here pretending to be my chauffeur and we’d look into the matter.”

“So now you see how it was,” said Bobby, accepting Frankie’s one discreet departure from the truth. “And the final climax was when last night I strolled into the grounds of the Grange and ran right into you—the original of the mysterious photograph.”

“You recognized me very quickly,” said Moira, with a faint smile.

“Yes,” said Bobby. “I would have recognized the original of that photograph anywhere.”

For no particular reason, Moira blushed.

Then an idea seemed to strike her and she looked sharply from one to the other.

“Are you telling me the truth?” she asked. “Is it really true that you came down here—by accident? Or did you come because—because”—her voice quavered in spite of herself—“you suspected my husband?”

Bobby and Frankie looked at each other. Then Bobby said:

“I give you my word of honour that we’d never even heard of your husband till we came down here.”

“Oh, I see.” She turned to Frankie. “I’m sorry, Lady Frances, but, you see, I remembered that evening when we came to dinner. Jasper went on and on at you—asking you things about your accident. I couldn’t think why. But I think now that perhaps he suspected it wasn’t genuine.”

“Well, if you really want to know, it wasn’t,” said Frankie. “Whoof—now I feel better! It was all camouflaged very carefully. But it was nothing to do with your husband. The whole thing was staged because we wanted to—to—what does one call it?—get a line on Roger Bassington-ffrench.”

“Roger?” Moira frowned and smiled perplexedly.

“It seems absurd,” she said frankly.

“All the same facts are facts,” said Bobby.

“Roger—oh, no.” She shook her head. “He might be weak—or wild. He might get into debt, or get mixed up in a scandal—but pushing someone over a cliff—no, I simply can’t imagine it.”

“Do you know,” said Frankie, “I can’t very well imagine it either.”

“But he must have taken that photograph,” said Bobby stubbornly. “Listen, Mrs. Nicholson, while I go over the facts.”

He did so slowly and carefully. When he had finished, she nodded her head comprehendingly.

“I see what you mean. It seems very queer.” She paused a minute and then said unexpectedly: “Why don’t you ask him?”

Twenty

COUNCIL OF TWO

For a moment, the bold simplicity of the question quite took their breath away. Both Frankie and Bobby started to speak at once:

“That’s impossible—” began Bobby, just as Frankie said: “That would never do.”

Then they both stopped dead as the possibilities of the idea sank in.

“You see,” said Moira eagerly, “I do see what you mean. It does seem as though Roger must have taken that photograph, but I don’t believe for one moment that he pushed Alan over. Why should he? He didn’t even know him. They’d only met once—at lunch down here. They’d never come across each other in any way. There’s no motive.”

“Then who did push him over?” asked Frankie bluntly.

A shadow crossed Moira’s face.

“I don’t know,” she said constrainedly.

“Look here,” said Bobby. “Do you mind if I tell Frankie what you told me. About what you’re afraid of.”

Moira turned her head away.

“If you like. But it sounds so melodramatic and hysterical. I can’t believe it myself this minute.”

And indeed the bald statement, made unemotionally in the open air of the quiet English countryside, did seem curiously lacking in reality.

Moira got up abruptly.

“I really feel I’ve been terribly silly,” she said, her lip trembling. “Please don’t pay any attention to what I said, Mr. Jones. It was just—nerves. Anyway, I must be going now. Good-bye.”

She moved rapidly away. Bobby sprang up to follow her, but Frankie pushed him firmly back.

“Stay there, idiot, leave this to me.”

She went rapidly off after Moira. She returned a few minutes later.

“Well?” queried Bobby anxiously.

“That’s all right. I calmed her down. It was a bit hard on her having her private fears blurted out in front of her to a third person. I made her promise we’d have a meeting—all three of us—again soon. Now that you’re not hampered by her being there, tell us all about it.”

Bobby did so. Frankie listened attentively. Then she said:

“It fits in with two things. First of all, I came back just now to find Nicholson holding both Sylvia Bassington-ffrench’s hands—and didn’t he look daggers at me! If looks could kill I feel sure he’d have made me a corpse then and there.”

“What’s the second thing?” asked Bobby.

“Oh, just an incident. Sylvia described how Moira’s photograph had made a great impression on some stranger who had come to the house. Depend upon it, that was Carstairs. He recognized the photograph, Mrs. Bassington-ffrench tells him that it is a portrait of a Mrs. Nicholson, and that explains how he came to find out where she was. But you know, Bobby, I don’t see yet where Nicholson comes in. Why should he want to do away with Alan Carstairs?”

“You think it was him and not Bassington-ffrench? Rather a coincidence if he and Bassington-ffrench should both be in Marchbolt on the same day.”

“Well, coincidences do happen. But if it was Nicholson, I don’t yet see the motive. Was Carstairs on the track of Nicholson as the head of a dope gang? Or is your new lady friend the motive for the murder?”

“It might be both,” suggested Bobby. “He may know that Carstairs and his wife had an interview, and he may have believed that his wife gave him away somehow.”

“Now, that is a possibility,” said Frankie. “But the first thing is to make sure about Roger Bassington-ffrench. The only thing we’ve got against him is the photograph business. If he can clear that up satisfactorily—”

“You’re going to tackle him on the subject? Frankie, is that wise? If he is the villain of the piece, as we decided he must be, it means that we’re going to show him our hand.”

“Not quite—not the way I shall do it. After all, in every other way he’s been perfectly straightforward and aboveboard. We’ve taken that to be super-cunning—but suppose it just happens to be innocence? If he can explain the photograph—and I shall be watching him when he does explain—and if there’s the least sign of hesitation of guilt I shall see it—as I say, if he can explain the photograph—then he may be a very valuable ally.”

“How do you mean, Frankie?”

“My dear, your little friend may be an emotional scaremonger who likes to exaggerate, but supposing she isn’t—that all she says is gospel truth—that her husband wants to get rid of her and marry Sylvia. Don’t you realize that, in that case, Henry Bassington-ffrench is in mortal danger too. At all costs we’ve got to prevent him being sent to the Grange. And at present Roger Bassington-ffrench is on Nicholson’s side.”

“Good for you, Frankie,” said Bobby quietly. “Go ahead with your plan.”

Frankie got up to go, but before departing she paused for a moment.

“Isn’t it odd?” she said. “We seem, somehow, to have got in between the covers of a book. We’re in the middle of someone else’s story. It’s a

frightfully queer feeling.”

“I know what you mean,” said Bobby. “There is something rather uncanny about it. I should call it a play rather than a book. It’s as though we’d walked on to the stage in the middle of the second act and we haven’t really got parts in the play at all, but we have to pretend, and what makes it so frightfully hard is that we haven’t the faintest idea what the first act was about.”

Frankie nodded eagerly.

“I’m not even so sure it’s the second act—I think it’s more like the third. Bobby, I’m sure we’ve got to go back a long way . . . And we’ve got to be quick because I fancy the play is frightfully near the final curtain.”

“With corpses strewn everywhere,” said Bobby. “And what brought us into the show was a regular cue—five words—quite meaningless as far as we are concerned.”

“ ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ Isn’t it odd, Bobby, that though we’ve found out a good deal and more and more characters come into the thing, we never get any nearer to the mysterious Evans?”

“I’ve got an idea about Evans. I’ve a feeling that Evans doesn’t really matter at all—that although he’s been the starting point as it were, yet in himself he’s probably quite inessential. It will be like that story of Wells where a prince built a marvellous palace or temple round the tomb of his beloved. And when it was finished there was just one little thing that jarred. So he said: ‘Take it away.’ And the thing was actually the tomb itself.”

“Sometimes,” said Frankie, “I don’t believe there is an Evans.”

Saying which, she nodded to Bobby and retraced her steps towards the house.

Twenty-one

ROGER ANSWERS A QUESTION

Fortune favoured her, for she fell in with Roger not far from the house.

“Hullo,” he said. “You’re back early from London.”

“I wasn’t in the mood for London,” said Frankie.

“Have you been to the house yet?” he asked. His face grew grave.

“Nicholson, I find, has been telling Sylvia the truth about poor old Henry. Poor girl, she’s taken it hard. It seems she had absolutely no suspicion.”

“I know,” said Frankie. “They were both together in the library when I came in. She was—very upset.”

“Look here, Frankie,” said Roger. “Henry has absolutely got to be cured. It isn’t as though this drug habit had a real hold on him. He hasn’t been taking it so very long. And he’s got every incentive in the world to make him keen on being cured—Sylvia, Tommy, his home. He’s got to be made to see the position clearly. Nicholson is just the man to put the thing through. He was talking to me the other day. He’s had some amazing successes—even with people who have been slaves for years to the beastly stuff. If Henry will only consent to go to the Grange—”

Frankie interrupted.

“Look here,” she said. “There’s something I want to ask you. Just a question. I hope you won’t think I’m simply frightfully impertinent.”

“What is it?” asked Roger, his attention arrested.

“Do you mind telling me if you took a photograph out of that man’s pocket—the one who fell over the cliff at Marchbolt?”

She was studying him closely, watching every detail of his expression. She was satisfied with what she saw.

Slight annoyance, a trace of embarrassment—no flash of guilt or dismay.

“Now, how on earth did you come to guess that?” he said. “Or did Moira tell you—but, then, she doesn’t know?”

“You did, then?”

“I suppose I’ll have to admit it.”

“Why?”

Roger seemed embarrassed again.

“Well, look at it as I did. Here I am, mounting guard over a strange dead body. Something is sticking out of his pocket. I look at it. By an amazing coincidence it’s the photograph of a woman I know—a married woman—and a woman who I guess is not too happily married. What’s going to happen? An inquest. Publicity. Possibly the wretched girl’s name in all the papers. I acted on impulse. Took the photo and tore it up. I daresay I acted wrongly, but Moira Nicholson is a nice little soul and I didn’t want her to get landed in a mess.”

Frankie drew a deep breath.

“So that was it,” she said. “If you only knew—”

“Knew what?” said Roger puzzled.

“I don’t know that I can tell you just now,” said Frankie. “I may later. It’s all rather complicated. I can quite see why you took the photograph, but was there any objection to your saying you recognized the man? Oughtn’t you to have told the police who he was?”

“Recognized him?” said Roger. He looked bewildered.

“How could I recognize him? I didn’t know him.”

“But you’d met him down here—only about a week before.”

“My dear girl, are you quite mad?”

“Alan Carstairs—you did meet Alan Carstairs?”

“Ah, yes! Man who came down with the Rivingtons. But the dead man wasn’t Alan Carstairs.”

“But he was!”

They stared at each other, then Frankie said with a renewal of suspicion:

“Surely you must have recognized him?”

“I never saw his face,” said Roger.

“What?”

“No. There was a handkerchief spread over it.”

Frankie stared at him. Suddenly she remembered that in Bobby’s first account of the tragedy he had mentioned putting a handkerchief over the face of the dead man.

“You never thought of looking?” went on Frankie.

“No. Why should I?”

“Of course,” thought Frankie, “if I’d found a photograph of somebody I knew in a dead person’s pocket, I should simply have had to look at the person’s face. How beautifully incurious men are!”

“Poor little thing,” she said. “I’m so terribly sorry for her.”

“Who do you mean—Moira Nicholson? Why are you so sorry for her?”

“Because she’s frightened,” said Frankie slowly.

“She always looks half-scared to death. What is she frightened of?”

“Her husband.”

“I don’t know that I’d care to be up against Jasper Nicholson myself,” admitted Roger.

“She’s sure he’s trying to murder her,” said Frankie abruptly.

“Oh, my dear!” He looked at her incredulously.

“Sit down,” said Frankie. “I’m going to tell you a lot of things. I’ve got to prove to you that Dr. Nicholson is a dangerous criminal.”

“A criminal?”

Roger’s tone was frankly incredulous.

“Wait till you’ve heard the whole story.”

She gave him a clear and careful narrative of all that had occurred since the day Bobby and Dr. Thomas had found the body. She only kept back the fact that her accident had not been genuine, but she let it appear that she had lingered at Merroway Court through her intense desire to get to the bottom of the mystery.

She could complain of no lack of interest on the part of her listener. Roger seemed quite fascinated by the story.

“Is this really true?” he demanded. “All this about the fellow Jones being poisoned and all that?”

“Absolute gospel truth, my dear.”

“Sorry for my incredulity—but the facts do take a bit of swallowing, don’t they?”

He was silent a minute, frowning.

“Look here,” he said at last. “Fantastic as the whole thing sounds, I think you must be right in your first deduction. This man, Alex Pritchard, or Alan Carstairs, must have been murdered. If he wasn’t there seems no point in the attack upon Jones. Whether the key word to the situation is the phrase ‘Why didn’t they ask Evans?’ or not doesn’t seem to me to matter much since you’ve no clue to who Evans is or as to what he was to have been asked. Let’s put it that the murderer or murderers assumed that Jones was in possession of some knowledge, whether he knew it himself or not, which was dangerous to them. So, accordingly, they tried to eliminate him, and probably would try again if they got on his track. So far that seems sense—but I don’t see by what process of reasoning you fix on Nicholson as the criminal.”

“He’s such a sinister man, and he’s got a dark-blue Talbot and he was away from here on the day that Bobby was poisoned.”

“That’s all pretty thin as evidence.”

“There are all the things Mrs. Nicholson told Bobby.”

She recited them, and once again they sounded melodramatic and unsubstantial repeated aloud against the background of the peaceful English landscape.

Roger shrugged his shoulders.

“She thinks he supplies Henry with the drug—but that’s pure conjecture, she’s not a particle of evidence that he does so. She thinks he wants to get Henry to the Grange as a patient—well, that’s a very natural wish for a doctor to have. A doctor wants as many patients as he can get. She thinks he’s in love with Sylvia. Well, as to that, of course, I can’t say.”

“If she thinks so, she’s probably right,” interrupted Frankie. “A woman would know all right about her own husband.”

“Well, granting that that’s the case, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the man’s a dangerous criminal. Lots of respectable citizens fall in love with other people’s wives.”

“There’s her belief that he wants to murder her,” urged Frankie.

Roger looked at her quizzically.

“You take that seriously?”

“She believes it, anyhow.”

Roger nodded and lit a cigarette.

“The question is, how much attention to pay that belief of hers,” he said.

“It’s a creepy sort of place, the Grange, full of queer customers. Living there would be inclined to upset a woman’s balance, especially if she were of the timid nervous type.”

“Then you don’t think it’s true?”

“I don’t say that. She probably believes quite honestly that he is trying to kill her—but is there any foundation in fact for that belief? There doesn’t seem to be.”

Frankie remembered with curious clearness Moira saying, “It’s just nerves.” And somehow the mere fact that she had said that seemed to Frankie to point to the fact that it was not nerves, but she found it difficult to know how to explain her point of view to Roger.

Meanwhile the young man was going on:

“Mind you, if you could show that Nicholson had been in Marchbolt on the day of the cliff tragedy that would be very different, or if we could find any definite motive linking him with Carstairs, but it seems to me you’re ignoring the real suspects.”

“What real suspects?”

“The—what did you call them—Haymans?”

“Caymans.”

“That’s it. Now, they are undoubtedly in it up to the hilt. First, there’s the false identification of the body. Then there’s their insistence on the point of whether the poor fellow said anything before he died. And I think it’s logical to assume, as you did, that the Buenos Aires offer came from, or was arranged for, by them.”

“It’s a bit annoying,” said Frankie, “to have the most strenuous efforts made to get you out of the way because you know something—and not to know yourself what the something you know is. Bother—what a mess one gets into with words.”

“Yes,” said Roger grimly, “that was a mistake on their part. A mistake that it’s going to take them all their time to remedy.”

“Oh!” cried Frankie. “I’ve just thought of something. Up to now, you see, I’ve been assuming that the photograph of Mrs. Cayman was substituted for the one of Moira Nicholson.”

“I can assure you,” said Roger gravely, “that I have never treasured the likeness of a Mrs. Cayman against my heart. She sounds a most repulsive creature.”

“Well, she was handsome in a way,” admitted Frankie. “A sort of bold, coarse, vampish way. But the point is this: Carstairs must have had her photograph on him as well as Mrs. Nicholson’s.”

Roger nodded.

“And you think—” he suggested.

“I think one was love and the other was business! Carstairs was carrying about the Cayman’s photograph for a reason. He wanted it identified by somebody, perhaps. Now, listen—what happens? Someone, the male Cayman perhaps, is following him and, seeing a good opportunity, steals up behind him in the mist and gives him a shove. Carstairs goes over the cliff with a startled cry. Male Cayman makes off as fast as he can; he doesn’t know who may be about. We’ll say that he doesn’t know that Alan Carstairs

is carrying about that photograph. What happens next? The photograph is published—”

“Consternation in the Cayman ménage,” said Roger helpfully.

“Exactly. What is to be done? The bold thing—grasp the nettle. Who knows Carstairs as Carstairs? Hardly anyone in this country. Down goes Mrs. Cayman, weeping crocodile tears and recognizing body as that of a convenient brother. They also do a little hocus pocus of posting parcels to bolster up the walking tour theory.”

“You know, Frankie. I think that’s positively brilliant,” said Roger with admiration.

“I think it’s pretty good myself,” said Frankie. “And you’re quite right. We ought to get busy on the track of the Caymans. I can’t think why we haven’t done so before.”

This was not quite true, since Frankie knew quite well the reason—namely that they had been on the track of Roger himself. However, she felt it would be tactless, just at this stage, to reveal the fact.

“What are we going to do about Mrs. Nicholson?” she asked abruptly.

“What do you mean—do about her?”

“Well, the poor thing is terrified to death. I do think you’re callous about her, Roger.”

“I’m not, really, but people who can’t help themselves always irritate me.”

“Oh! but do be fair. What can she do? She’s no money and nowhere to go.”

Roger said unexpectedly:

“If you were in her place, Frankie, you’d find something to do.”

“Oh!” Frankie was rather taken aback.

“Yes, you would. If you really thought somebody was trying to murder you, you wouldn’t just stay there tamely waiting to be murdered. You’d run away and make a living somehow, or you’d murder the other person first! You’d do something.”

Frankie tried to think what she would do.

“I’d certainly do something,” she said thoughtfully.

“The truth of the matter is that you’ve got guts and she hasn’t,” said Roger with decision.

Frankie felt complimented. Moira Nicholson was not really the type of woman she admired and she had also felt just slightly ruffled by Bobby’s absorption in her. “Bobby,” she thought to herself, “likes them helpless.” And she remembered the curious fascination that the photograph had had for him from the start of the affair.

“Oh, well,” thought Frankie, “at any rate, Roger’s different.”

Roger, it was clear, did not like them helpless. Moira, on the other hand, clearly did not think very much of Roger. She had called him weak and had scouted the possibility of his having the guts to murder anyone. He was weak, perhaps—but undeniably he had charm. She had felt it from the first moment of arriving at Merroway Court.

Roger said quietly:

“If you liked, Frankie, you could make anything you chose of a man. . . .”

Frankie felt a sudden little thrill—and at the same time an acute embarrassment. She changed the subject hastily.

“About your brother,” she said. “Do you still think he should go to the Grange?”

Twenty-two

ANOTHER VICTIM

“No,” said Roger. “I don’t. After all, there are heaps of other places where he can be treated. The really important thing is to get Henry to agree.”

“Do you think that will be difficult?” asked Frankie.

“I’m afraid it may be. You heard him the other night. On the other hand, if we just catch him in the repentant mood, that’s very different. Hullo—here comes Sylvia.”

Mrs. Bassington-french emerged from the house and looked about her, then seeing Roger and Frankie, she walked across the grass towards them.

They could see that she was looking terribly worried and strained.

“Roger,” she began, “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.” Then, as Frankie made a movement to leave them—“No, my dear, don’t go. Of what use are concealments? In any case, I think you know all there is to know. You’ve suspected this business for some time, haven’t you?”

Frankie nodded.

“While I’ve been blind—blind—” said Sylvia bitterly. “Both of you saw what I never even suspected. I only wondered why Henry had changed so to all of us. It made me very unhappy, but I never suspected the reason.”

She paused, then went on again with a slight change of tone.

“As soon as Dr. Nicholson had told me the truth, I went straight to Henry. I’ve only just left him now.” She paused, swallowing a sob.

“Roger—it’s going to be all right. He’s agreed. He will go to the Grange and put himself in Dr. Nicholson’s hands tomorrow.”

“Oh! no—” The exclamation came from Roger and Frankie simultaneously. Sylvia looked at them—astonished.

Roger spoke awkwardly.

“Do you know, Sylvia, I’ve been thinking it over, and I don’t believe the Grange would be a good plan, after all.”

“You think he can fight it by himself?” asked Sylvia doubtfully.

“No, I don’t. But there are other places—places not—so—well, not so near at hand. I’m convinced that staying in this district would be a mistake.”

“I’m sure of it,” said Frankie, coming to his rescue.

“Oh! I don’t agree,” said Sylvia. “I couldn’t bear him to go away somewhere. And Dr. Nicholson has been so kind and understanding. I shall feel happy about Henry being under his charge.”

“I thought you didn’t like Nicholson, Sylvia,” said Roger.

“I’ve changed my mind.” She spoke simply. “Nobody could have been nicer or kinder than he was this afternoon. My silly prejudice against him has quite vanished.”

There was a moment’s silence. The position was awkward. Neither Roger nor Sylvia knew quite what to say next.

“Poor Henry,” said Sylvia. “He broke down. He was terribly upset at my knowing. He agreed that he must fight this awful craving for my sake and Tommy’s, but he said I hadn’t a conception of what it meant. I suppose I haven’t, though Dr. Nicholson explained very fully. It becomes a kind of obsession—people aren’t responsible for their actions—so he said. Oh, Roger, it seems so awful. But Dr. Nicholson was really kind. I trust him.”

“All the same, I think it would be better—” began Roger.

Sylvia turned on him.

“I don’t understand you, Roger. Why have you changed your mind? Half an hour ago you were all for Henry’s going to the Grange.”

“Well—I’ve—I’ve had time to think the matter over since—”

Again Sylvia interrupted.

“Anyway, I’ve made up my mind. Henry shall go to the Grange and nowhere else.”

They confronted her in silence, then Roger said:

“Do you know, I think I will ring up Nicholson. He will be home now. I’d like—just to have a talk with him about matters.”

Without waiting for her reply he turned away and went rapidly into the house. The two women stood looking after him.

“I cannot understand Roger,” said Sylvia impatiently. “About a quarter of an hour ago he was positively urging me to arrange for Henry to go to the Grange.”

Her tone held a distinct note of anger.

“All the same,” said Frankie, “I agree with him. I’m sure I’ve read somewhere that people ought always to go for a cure somewhere far away from their homes.”

“I think that’s just nonsense,” said Sylvia.

Frankie felt in a dilemma. Sylvia’s unexpected obstinacy was making things difficult, and also she seemed suddenly to have become as violently pro-Nicholson as she formerly had been against him. It was very hard to know what arguments to use. Frankie considered telling the whole story to Sylvia—but would Sylvia believe it? Even Roger had not been very impressed by the theory of Dr. Nicholson’s guilt. Sylvia, with her newfound partisanship where the doctor was concerned, would probably be even less so. She might even go and repeat the whole thing to him. It was certainly difficult.

An aeroplane passed low overhead in the gathering dusk, filling the air with its loud beat of engines. Both Sylvia and Frankie stared up at it, glad of the respite it afforded, since neither of them quite knew what to say next. It gave Frankie time to collect her thoughts, and Sylvia time to recover from her fit of sudden anger.

As the aeroplane disappeared over the trees and its roar receded into the distance, Sylvia turned abruptly to Frankie.

“It’s been so awful—” she said brokenly. “And you all seem to want to send Henry far away from me.”

“No, no,” said Frankie. “It wasn’t that at all.”

She cast about for a minute.

“It was only that I thought he ought to have the best treatment. And I do think that Dr. Nicholson is rather—well, rather a quack.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Sylvia. “I think he’s a very clever man and just the kind of man Henry needs.”

She looked defiantly at Frankie. Frankie marvelled at the hold Dr. Nicholson had acquired over her in such a short time. All her former distrust of the man seemed to have vanished completely.

At a loss what to say or do next, Frankie relapsed into silence. Presently Roger came out again from the house. He seemed slightly breathless.

“Nicholson isn’t in yet,” he said. “I left a message.”

“I don’t see why you want to see Dr. Nicholson so urgently,” said Sylvia. “You suggested this plan, and it’s all arranged and Henry has consented.”

“I think I’ve got some say in the matter, Sylvia,” said Roger gently. “After all, I’m Henry’s brother.”

“You suggested the plan yourself,” said Sylvia obstinately.

“Yes, but I’ve heard a few things about Nicholson since.”

“What things? Oh! I don’t believe you.”

She bit her lip, turned away and plunged into the house.

Roger looked at Frankie.

“This is a bit awkward,” he said.

“Very awkward, indeed.”

“Once Sylvia has made her mind up she can be obstinate as the devil.”

“What are we going to do?”

They sat down again on the garden seat and went into the matter carefully. Roger agreed with Frankie that to tell the whole story to Sylvia would be a mistake. The best plan, in his opinion, would be to tackle the doctor.

“But what are you going to say exactly?”

“I don’t know that I shall say much—but I shall hint a good deal. At any rate, I agree with you about one thing—Henry mustn’t go to the Grange. Even if we come right out into the open, we’ve got to stop that.”

“We give the whole show away if we do,” Frankie reminded him.

“I know. That’s why we’ve got to try everything else first. Curse Sylvia, why must she turn obstinate just at this minute?”

“It shows the power of the man,” Frankie said.

“Yes. You know, it inclines me to believe that, evidence or no evidence, you may be right about him after all—what’s that?”

They both sprang up.

“It sounded like a shot,” said Frankie. “From the house.”

They looked at each other, then raced towards the building. They went in by the french window of the drawing room and passed through into the hall. Sylvia Bassington-ffrench was standing there, her face white as paper.

“Did you hear?” she said. “It was a shot—from Henry’s study.”

She swayed and Roger put an arm round her to steady her. Frankie went to the study door and turned the handle.

“It’s locked,” she said.

“The window,” said Roger.

He deposited Sylvia, who was in a half-fainting condition, on a convenient settee and raced out again through the drawing room, Frankie on his heels. They went round the house till they came to the study window. It was closed, but they put their faces close to the glass and peered in. The sun was setting and there was not much light—but they could see plainly enough.

Henry Bassington-ffrench was lying sprawled out across his desk. There was a bullet wound plainly visible in the temple and a revolver lay on the floor, where it had dropped from his hand.

“He’s shot himself,” said Frankie. “How ghastly! . . .”

“Stand back a little,” said Roger. “I’m going to break the window.”

He wrapped his hand in his coat and struck the pane of glass a heavy blow that shattered it. Roger picked out the pieces carefully, then he and Frankie stepped into the room. As they did so, Mrs. Bassington-ffrench and Dr. Nicholson came hurrying along the terrace.

“Here’s the doctor,” said Sylvia. “He’s just come. Has—has anything happened to Henry?”

Then she saw the sprawling figure and uttered a cry.

Roger stepped quickly out again through the window and Dr. Nicholson thrust Sylvia into his arms.

“Take her away,” he said briefly. “Look after her. Give her some brandy if she’ll take it. Don’t let her see more than you can help.”

He himself stepped through the window and joined Frankie.

He shook his head slowly.

“This is a tragic business,” he said. “Poor fellow. So he felt he couldn’t face the music. Too bad. Too bad.”

He bent over the body then straightened himself up again.

“Nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous. I wonder if he wrote something first. They usually do.”

Frankie advanced till she stood beside them. A piece of paper with a few scrawled words on it, evidently freshly written, lay at Bassington-ffrench’s elbow. Their purport was clear enough.

I feel this is the best way out, (Henry Bassington-ffrench had written). This fatal habit has taken too great a hold on me for me to fight it now. Want to do the best I can for Sylvia—Sylvia and Tommy. God bless you both, my dears. Forgive me. . . .

Frankie felt a lump rise in her throat.

“We mustn’t touch anything,” said Dr. Nicholson. “There will have to be an inquest, of course. We must ring up the police.”

In obedience to his gesture, Frankie went towards the door. Then she stopped.

“The key’s not in the lock,” she said.

“No? Perhaps it’s in his pocket.”

He knelt down, investigating delicately. From the dead man’s coat pocket he drew out a key.

He tried it in the lock and it fitted. Together they passed out into the hall.
Dr. Nicholson went straight to the telephone.

Frankie, her knees shaking under her, felt suddenly sick.

Twenty-three

MOIRA DISAPPEARS

Frankie rang up Bobby about an hour later.

“Is that Hawkins? Hullo, Bobby—have you heard what has happened? You have. Quick, we must meet somewhere. Early tomorrow morning would be best, I think. I’ll stroll out before breakfast. Say eight o’clock—the same place we met today.”

She rang off as Bobby uttered his third respectful “Yes, your ladyship,” for the benefit of any curious ears.

Bobby arrived at the rendezvous first, but Frankie did not keep him waiting long. She looked pale and upset.

“Hullo, Bobby, isn’t it awful? I haven’t been able to sleep all night.”

“I haven’t heard any details,” said Bobby. “Just that Mr. Bassington-ffrench had shot himself. That’s right, I suppose?”

“Yes. Sylvia had been talking to him—persuading him to agree to a course of treatment and he said he would. Afterwards, I suppose, his courage must have failed him. He went into his study, locked the door, wrote a few words on a sheet of paper—and—shot himself. Bobby, it’s too ghastly. It’s—it’s grim.”

“I know,” said Bobby quietly.

They were both silent for a little.

“I shall have to leave today, of course,” said Frankie presently.

“Yes, I suppose you will. How is she—Mrs. Bassington-ffrench, I mean?”

“She’s collapsed, poor soul. I haven’t seen her since we—we found the body. The shock to her must have been awful.”

Bobby nodded.

“You’d better bring the car round about eleven,” continued Frankie.

Bobby did not answer. Frankie looked at him impatiently.

“What’s the matter with you, Bobby? You look as though you were miles away.”

“Sorry. As a matter of fact—”

“Yes?”

“Well, I was just wondering. I suppose—well, I suppose it’s all right?”

“What do you mean—all right?”

“I mean it’s quite certain that he did commit suicide?”

“Oh!” said Frankie. “I see.” She thought a minute. “Yes,” she said, “it was suicide all right.”

“You’re quite sure? You see, Frankie, we have Moira’s word for it that Nicholson wanted two people out of the way. Well, here’s one of them gone.”

Frankie thought again, but once more she shook her head.

“It must be suicide,” she said. “I was in the garden with Roger when we heard the shot. We both ran straight in through the drawing room to the hall. The study door was locked on the inside. We went round to the window. That was fastened also and Roger had to smash it. It wasn’t till then that Nicholson appeared upon the scene.”

Bobby reflected upon this information.

“It looks all right,” he agreed. “But Nicholson seems to have appeared on the scene very suddenly.”

“He’d left a stick behind earlier in the afternoon and had come back for it.”

Bobby was frowning with the process of thought.

“Listen, Frankie. Suppose that actually Nicholson shot Bassington-ffrench —”

“Having induced him first to write a suicide’s letter of farewell?”

“I should think that would be the easiest thing in the world to fake. Any alteration in handwriting would be put down to agitation.”

“Yes, that’s true. Go on with your theory.”

“Nicholson shoots Bassington-ffrench, leaves the farewell letter, and nips out locking the door—to appear again a few minutes later as though he had just arrived.”

Frankie shook her head regretfully.

“It’s a good idea—but it won’t work. To begin with, the key was in Henry Bassington-ffrench’s pocket—”

“Who found it there?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, Nicholson did.”

“There you are. What’s easier for him than to pretend to find it there.”

“I was watching him—remember. I’m sure the key was in the pocket.”

“That’s what one says when one watches a conjurer. You see the rabbit being put into the hat! If Nicholson is a high-class criminal, a simple little bit of sleight of hand like that would be child’s play to him.”

“Well, you may be right about that, but honestly, Bobby, the whole thing’s impossible. Sylvia Bassington-ffrench was actually in the house when the shot was fired. The moment she heard it she ran out into the hall. If Nicholson had fired the shot and come out through the study door she would have been bound to see him. Besides, she told us that he actually came up the drive to the front door. She saw him coming as we ran round the house and went to meet him and brought him round to the study window. No, Bobby, I hate to say it, but the man has an alibi.”

“On principle, I distrust people who have alibis,” said Bobby.

“So do I. But I don’t see how you can get round this one.”

“No. Sylvia Bassington-ffrench’s word ought to be good enough.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Well,” said Bobby with a sigh. “I suppose we’ll have to leave it at suicide. Poor devil. What’s the next angle of attack, Frankie?”

“The Caymans,” said Frankie. “I can’t think how we’ve been so remiss as not to have looked them up before. You’ve kept the address Cayman wrote from, haven’t you?”

“Yes. It’s the same they gave at the inquest. 17 St. Leonard’s Gardens, Paddington.”

“Don’t you agree that we’ve rather neglected that channel of inquiry?”

“Absolutely. All the same, you know, Frankie, I’ve got a very shrewd idea that you’ll find the birds flown. I should imagine that the Caymans weren’t exactly born yesterday.”

“Even if they have gone off, I may find out something about them.”

“Why—I?”

“Because, once again, I don’t think you’d better appear in the matter. It’s like coming down here when we thought Roger was the bad man of the

show. You are known to them and I am not.”

“And how do you propose to make their acquaintance?” asked Bobby.

“I shall be something political,” said Frankie. “Canvassing for the Conservative Party. I shall arrive with leaflets.”

“Good enough,” said Bobby. “But, as I said before, I think you’ll find the birds flown. Now there’s another thing that requires to be thought of—Moira.”

“Goodness,” said Frankie, “I’d forgotten all about her.”

“So I noticed,” said Bobby with a trace of coldness in his manner.

“You’re right,” said Frankie thoughtfully. “Something must be done about her.”

Bobby nodded. The strange haunting face came up before his eyes. There was something tragic about it. He had always felt that from the first moment when he had taken the photograph from Alan Carstairs’ pocket.

“If you’d seen her that night when I first went to the Grange!” he said. “She was crazy with fear—and I tell you, Frankie, she’s right. It’s not nerves or imagination, or anything like that. If Nicholson wants to marry Sylvia Bassington-French, two obstacles have got to go. One’s gone. I’ve a feeling that Moira’s life is hanging by a hair and that any delay may be fatal.”

Frankie was sobered by the earnestness of his words.

“My dear, you’re right,” she said. “We must act quickly. What shall we do?”

“We must persuade her to leave the Grange—at once.”

Frankie nodded.

“I tell you what,” she said. “She’d better go down to Wales—to the Castle. Heaven knows, she ought to be safe enough there.”

“If you can fix that, Frankie, nothing could be better.”

“Well, it’s simple enough. Father never notices who goes or comes. He’ll like Moira—nearly any man would—she’s so feminine. It’s extraordinary how men like helpless women.”

“I don’t think Moira is particularly helpless,” said Bobby.

“Nonsense. She’s like a little bird that sits and waits to be eaten by a snake without doing anything about it.”

“What could she do?”

“Heaps of things,” said Frankie vigorously.

“Well, I don’t see it. She’s got no money, no friends—”

“My dear, don’t drone on as though you were recommending a case to the Girls’ Friendly Society.”

“Sorry,” said Bobby.

There was an offended pause.

“Well,” said Frankie, recovering her temper. “As you were. I think we’d better get on to this business as soon as possible.”

“So do I,” said Bobby. “Really, Frankie, it’s awfully decent of you to—”

“That’s all right,” said Frankie interrupting him. “I don’t mind befriending the girl so long as you don’t drivel on about her as though she had no hands or feet or tongue or brains.”

“I simply don’t know what you mean,” said Bobby.

“Well, we needn’t talk about it,” said Frankie. “Now, my idea is that whatever we’re going to do we’d better do it quickly. Is that a quotation?”

“It’s a paraphrase of one. Go on, Lady Macbeth.”

“You know, I’ve always thought,” said Frankie, suddenly digressing wildly from the matter in hand, “that Lady Macbeth incited Macbeth to do all those murders simply and solely because she was so frightfully bored with life—and incidentally with Macbeth. I’m sure he was one of those meek, inoffensive men who drive their wives distracted with boredom. But, having once committed a murder for the first time in his life, he felt the hell of a fine fellow and began to develop ego mania as a compensation for his former inferiority complex.”

“You ought to write a book on the subject, Frankie.”

“I can’t spell. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, rescue of Moira. You’d better bring the car round at half past ten. I’ll drive over to the Grange, ask for Moira and, if Nicholson’s there when I see her, I’ll remind her of her promise to come and stay with me and carry her off then and there.”

“Excellent, Frankie. I’m glad we’re not going to waste any time. I’ve a horror of another accident happening.”

“Half past ten, then,” said Frankie.

By the time she got back to Merroway Court, it was half past nine. Breakfast had just been brought in and Roger was pouring himself out some coffee. He looked ill and worn.

“Good morning,” said Frankie. “I slept awfully badly. In the end I got up about seven and went for a walk.”

“I’m frightfully sorry you should have been let in for all this worry,” said Roger.

“How’s Sylvia?”

“They gave her an opiate last night. She’s still asleep, I believe. Poor girl, I’m most terribly sorry for her. She was simply devoted to Henry.”

“I know.”

Frankie paused and then explained her plans for departure.

“I suppose you’ll have to go,” said Roger resentfully. “The inquest’s on Friday. I’ll let you know if you’re wanted for it. It all depends on the coroner.”

He swallowed a cup of coffee and a piece of toast and then went off to attend to the many things requiring his attention. Frankie felt very sorry for him. The amount of gossip and curiosity created by a suicide in a family she could imagine only too well. Tommy appeared and she devoted herself to amusing the child.

Bobby brought the car round at half past ten; Frankie’s luggage was brought down. She said good-bye to Tommy and left a note for Sylvia. The Bentley drove away.

They covered the distance to the Grange in a very short time. Frankie had never been there before and the big iron gates and the overgrown shrubbery depressed her spirits.

“It’s a creepy place,” she observed. “I don’t wonder Moira gets the horrors here.”

They drove up to the front door and Bobby got down and rang the bell. It was not answered for some minutes. Finally a woman in nurse’s kit opened it.

“Mrs. Nicholson?” said Bobby.

The woman hesitated, then withdrew into the hall and opened the door wider. Frankie jumped out of the car and passed into the house. The door closed behind her. It had a nasty echoing clang as it shut. Frankie noticed that it had heavy bolts and bars across it. Quite irrationally she felt afraid—as though she was here, in this sinister house, a prisoner.

“Nonsense,” she told herself. “Bobby’s outside in the car. I’ve come here openly. Nothing can happen to me.” And, shaking off the ridiculous feeling, she followed the nurse upstairs and along a passage. The nurse threw open a door and Frankie passed into a small sitting room daintily furnished with

cheerful chintzes and flowers in the vases. Her spirits rose. Murmuring something, the nurse withdrew.

About five minutes passed and the door opened and Dr. Nicholson came in.

Frankie was quite unable to control a slight nervous start, but she masked it by a welcoming smile and shook hands.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning, Lady Frances. You have not come to bring me bad news of Mrs. Bassington-french, I hope?”

“She was still asleep when I left,” said Frankie.

“Poor lady. Her own doctor is, of course, looking after her.”

“Oh! yes.” She paused, then said: “I’m sure you’re busy. I mustn’t take up your time, Dr. Nicholson. I really called to see your wife.”

“To see Moira? That was very kind of you.”

Was it only fancy, or did the pale-blue eyes behind the strong glasses harden ever so slightly.

“Yes,” he repeated. “That was very kind.”

“If she isn’t up yet,” said Frankie, smiling pleasantly, “I’ll sit down and wait.”

“Oh! she’s up,” said Dr. Nicholson.

“Good,” said Frankie. “I want to persuade her to come to me for a visit. She’s practically promised to.” She smiled again.

“Why, now, that’s really very kind of you, Lady Frances—very kind, indeed. I’m sure Moira would have enjoyed that very much.”

“Would have?” asked Frankie sharply.

Dr. Nicholson smiled, showing his fine set of even white teeth.

“Unfortunately, my wife went away this morning.”

“Went away?” said Frankie blankly. “Where?”

“Oh! just for a little change. You know what women are, Lady Frances. This is rather a gloomy place for a young woman. Occasionally Moira feels she must have a little excitement and then off she goes.”

“You don’t know where she has gone?” said Frankie.

“London, I imagine. Shops and theatres. You know the sort of thing.”

Frankie felt that his smile was the most disagreeable thing she had ever come across.

“I am going up to London today,” she said lightly. “Will you give me her address?”

“She usually stays at the Savoy,” said Dr. Nicholson. “But in any case I shall probably hear from her in a day or so. She’s not a very good correspondent, I’m afraid, and I believe in perfect liberty between husband and wife. But I think the Savoy is the most likely place for you to find her.”

He held the door open and Frankie found herself shaking hands with him and being ushered to the front door. The nurse was standing there to let her out. The last thing Frankie heard was Dr. Nicholson’s voice, suave and, perhaps, just a trifle ironical.

“So very kind of you to think of asking my wife to stay, Lady Frances.”

Twenty-four

ON THE TRACK OF THE CAYMANS

Bobby had some ado to preserve his impassive chauffeur's demeanour as Frankie came out alone.

She said: "Back to Staverly, Hawkins," for the benefit of the nurse.

The car swept down the drive and out through the gates. Then, when they came to an empty bit of road, Bobby pulled up and looked inquiringly at his companion.

"What about it?" he asked.

Rather pale, Frankie replied:

"Bobby, I don't like it. Apparently, she's gone away."

"Gone away? This morning?"

"Or last night."

"Without a word to us?"

"Bobby, I just don't believe it. The man was lying—I'm sure of it."

Bobby had gone very pale. He murmured:

"Too late! Idiots that we've been! We should never have let her go back there yesterday."

"You don't think she's—dead, do you?" whispered Frankie in a shaky voice.

"No," said Bobby in a violent voice, as though to reassure himself.

They were both silent for a minute or two, then Bobby stated his deductions in a calmer tone.

“She must be still alive, because of the disposing of the body and all that. Her death would have to seem natural and accidental. No, she’s either been spirited away somewhere against her will, or else—and this is what I believe—she’s still there.”

“At the Grange?”

“At the Grange.”

“Well,” said Frankie, “what are we going to do?”

Bobby thought for a minute.

“I don’t think you can do anything,” he said at last. “You’d better go back to London. You suggested trying to trace the Caymans. Go on with that.”

“Oh, Bobby!”

“My dear, you can’t be of any use down here. You’re known—very well-known by now. You’ve announced that you’re going—what can you do? You can’t stay on at Merroway. You can’t come and stay at the Anglers’ Arms. You’d set every tongue in the neighbourhood wagging. No, you must go. Nicholson may suspect, but he can’t be sure that you know anything. You go back to town and I’ll stay.”

“At the Anglers’ Arms?”

“No, I think your chauffeur will now disappear. I shall take up my headquarters at Ambledover—that’s ten miles away—and if Moira’s still in that beastly house I shall find her.”

Frankie demurred a little.

“Bobby, you will be careful?”

“I shall be cunning as the serpent.”

With a rather heavy heart Frankie gave in. What Bobby said was certainly sensible enough. She herself could do no further good down here. Bobby drove her up to town and Frankie, letting herself into the Brook Street house, felt suddenly forlorn.

She was not one, however, to let the grass grow under her feet. At three o'clock that afternoon, a fashionably- but soberly-dressed young woman with pince-nez and an earnest frown might have been seen approaching St. Leonard's Gardens, a sheaf of pamphlets and papers in her hand.

St. Leonard's Gardens, Paddington, was a distinctly gloomy collection of houses, most of them in a somewhat dilapidated condition. The place had a general air of having seen "better days" a long time ago.

Frankie walked along, looking up at the numbers. Suddenly she came to a halt with a grimace of vexation.

No. 17 had a board up announcing that it was to be sold or let unfurnished.

Frankie immediately removed the pince-nez and the earnest air.

It seemed that the political canvasser would not be required.

The names of several house agents were given. Frankie selected two and wrote them down. Then, having determined on her plan of campaign, she proceeded to put it into action.

The first agents were Messrs. Gordon & Porter of Praed Street.

"Good morning," said Frankie. "I wonder if you can give me the address of a Mr. Cayman? He was until recently at 17 St. Leonard's Gardens."

"That's right," said the young man to whom Frankie had addressed herself. "Only there a short time, though, wasn't he? We act for the owners, you see. Mr. Cayman took it on a quarterly tenancy as he might have to take up a post abroad any moment. I believe he's actually done so."

"Then you haven't got his address?"

“I’m afraid not. He settled up with us and that was all.”

“But he must have had some address originally when he took the house.”

“A hotel—I think it was the G.W.R., Paddington Station, you know.”

“References,” suggested Frankie.

“He paid the quarter’s rent in advance and a deposit to cover the electric light and gas.”

“Oh!” said Frankie, feeling despairing.

She saw the young man looking rather curiously at her. House agents are adept at summing up the “class” of clients. He obviously found Frankie’s interest in the Caymans rather unexpected.

“He owes me a good deal of money,” said Frankie mendaciously.

The young man’s face immediately assumed a shocked expression.

Thoroughly sympathetic with beauty in distress, he hunted up files of correspondence and did all he could, but no trace of Mr. Cayman’s present or late abode could be found.

Frankie thanked him and departed. She took a taxi to the next firm of house agents. She wasted no time in repeating the process. The first agents were the ones who had let Cayman the house. These people would be merely concerned to let it again on behalf of the owner. Frankie asked for an order to view.

This time, to counteract the expression of surprise that she saw appear on the clerk’s face, she explained that she wanted a cheap property to open as a hostel for girls. The surprised expression disappeared, and Frankie emerged with the key of 17 Leonard’s Gardens, the keys of two more “properties” which she had no wish to see, and an order to view yet a fourth.

It was a bit of luck, Frankie thought, that the clerk had not wished to accompany her, but perhaps they only did that when it was a question of a

furnished tenancy.

The musty smell of a closed-up house assailed Frankie's nostrils as she unlocked and pushed open the front door of No. 17.

It was an unappetising house, cheaply decorated, and with blistered, dirty paint. Frankie went over it methodically from garret to basement. The house had not been cleaned up on departure. There were bits of string, old newspapers and some odd nails and tools. But of personal matter, Frankie could not find so much as the scrap of a torn-up letter.

The only thing that struck her as having a possible significance was an ABC railway guide which lay open on one of the window seats. There was nothing to indicate that any of the names of the open page were of special significance, but Frankie copied the lot down in a little notebook as a poor substitute for all she had hoped to find.

As far as tracing the Caymans was concerned, she had drawn a blank.

She consoled herself with the reflection that this was only to be expected. If Mr. and Mrs. Cayman were associated with the wrong side of the law they would take particularly good care that no one should be able to trace them. It was at least a kind of negative confirmatory evidence.

Still Frankie felt definitely disappointed as she handed back the keys to the house agents and uttered mendacious statements as to communicating with them in a few days.

She walked down towards the Park feeling rather depressed and wondered what on earth she was going to do next. These fruitless meditations were interrupted by a sharp and violent squall of rain. No taxi was in sight and Frankie hurriedly preserved a favourite hat by hurrying into the tube which was close at hand. She took a ticket to Piccadilly Circus and bought a couple of papers at the bookstall.

When she had entered the train—almost empty at this time of day—she resolutely banished thoughts of the vexing problem and, opening her paper, strove to concentrate her attention on its contents.

She read desultory snippets here and there.

Number of road deaths. Mysterious disappearance of a schoolgirl. Lady Peterhampton's party at Claridge's. Sir John Milkington's convalescence after his accident yachting—the Astradora—the famous yacht which had belonged to the late Mr. John Savage, the millionaire. Was she an unlucky boat? The man who had designed her had met with a tragic death—Mr. Savage had committed suicide—Sir John Milkington had just escaped death by a miracle.

Frankie lowered the paper, frowning in an effort of remembrance.

Twice before, the name of Mr. John Savage had been mentioned—once by Sylvia Bassington-Ffrench when she was speaking of Alan Carstairs, and once by Bobby when he was repeating the conversation he had had with Mrs. Rivington.

Alan Carstairs had been a friend of John Savage's. Mrs. Rivington had had a vague idea that Carstairs' presence in England had something to do with the death of Savage. Savage had—what was it?—he had committed suicide because he thought he had cancer.

Supposing—supposing Alan Carstairs had not been satisfied with the account of his friend's death. Supposing he had come over to inquire into the whole thing? Supposing that here, in the circumstances surrounding Savage's death—was the first act of the drama that she and Bobby were acting in.

“It's possible,” thought Frankie. “Yes, it's possible.”

She thought deeply, wondering how best to attack this new phase of the matter. She had no idea as to who had been John Savage's friends or intimates.

Then an idea struck her—his will. If there had been something suspicious about the way he met his death, his will would give a possible clue.

Somewhere in London, Frankie knew, was a place where you went and read wills if you paid a shilling. But she couldn't remember where it was.

The train drew up at a station and Frankie saw that it was the British Museum. She had overshot Oxford Circus, where she meant to have changed, by two stations.

She jumped up and left the train. As she emerged into the street an idea came to her. Five minutes' walk brought her to the office of Messrs. Spragge, Spragge, Jenkinson & Spragge.

Frankie was received with deference and was at once ushered into the private fastness of Mr. Spragge, the senior member of the firm.

Mr. Spragge was exceedingly genial. He had a rich mellow persuasive voice which his aristocratic clients had found extremely soothing when they had come to him to be extricated from some mess. It was rumoured that Mr. Spragge knew more discreditable secrets about noble families than any other man in London.

"This is a pleasure indeed, Lady Frances," said Mr. Spragge. "Do sit down. Now are you sure that chair is quite comfortable? Yes, yes. The weather is very delightful just now, is it not? A St. Martin's summer. And how is Lord Marchington? Well, I trust?"

Frankie answered these and other inquiries in a suitable manner.

Then Mr. Spragge removed his pince-nez from his nose and became more definitely the legal guide and adviser.

"And now, Lady Frances," he said. "What is it gives me the pleasure of seeing you in my—hm—dingy office this afternoon?"

"Blackmail?" said his eyebrows. "Indiscreet letters? An entanglement with an undesirable young man? Sued by your dressmaker?"

But the eyebrows asked these questions in a very discreet manner as befitted a solicitor of Mr. Spragge's experience and income.

“I want to look at a will,” said Frankie. “And I don’t know where you go and what you do. But there is somewhere you can pay a shilling, isn’t there?”

“Somerset House,” said Mr. Spragge. “But what will is it? I think I can possibly tell you anything you want to know about—er—wills in your family. I may say that I believe our firm has had the honour of drawing them up for many years past.”

“It isn’t a family will,” said Frankie.

“No?” said Mr. Spragge.

And so strong was his almost hypnotic power of drawing confidences out of his clients that Frankie, who had not meant to do so, succumbed to the manner and told him.

“I wanted to see the will of Mr. Savage—John Savage.”

“In-deed?” A very real astonishment showed in Mr. Spragge’s voice. He had not expected this. “Now that is very extraordinary—very extraordinary indeed.”

There was something so unusual in his voice that Frankie looked at him in surprise.

“Really,” said Mr. Spragge. “Really, I do not know what to do. Perhaps, Lady Frances, you can give me your reasons for wanting to see that will?”

“No,” said Frankie slowly. “I’m afraid I can’t.”

It struck her that Mr. Spragge was, for some reason, behaving quite unlike his usual benign omniscient self. He looked actually worried.

“I really believe,” said Mr. Spragge, “that I ought to warn you.”

“Warn me?” said Frankie.

“Yes. The indications are vague, very vague—but clearly there is something afoot. I would not, for the world, have you involved in any questionable business.”

As far as that went, Frankie could have told him that she was already involved up to the neck in a business of which he would have decidedly disapproved. But she merely stared at him inquiringly.

“The whole thing is rather an extraordinary coincidence,” Mr. Spragge was going on. “Something is clearly afoot—clearly. But what it is I am not at present at liberty to say.”

Frankie continued to look inquiring.

“A piece of information has just come to my knowledge,” continued Mr. Spragge. His chest swelled with indignation. “I have been impersonated, Lady Frances. Deliberately impersonated. What do you say to that?”

But for just one panic-stricken minute Frankie could say nothing at all.

Twenty-five

MR. SPRAGGE TALKS

At last she stammered:

“How did you find out?”

It was not at all what she meant to say. She could, in fact, have bitten out her tongue for stupidity a moment later, but the words had been said, and Mr. Spragge would have been no lawyer had he failed to perceive that they contained an admission.

“So you know something of this business, Lady Frances?”

“Yes,” said Frankie.

She paused, drew a deep breath and said:

“The whole thing is really my doing, Mr. Spragge.”

“I am amazed,” said Mr. Spragge.

There was a struggle in his voice, the outraged lawyer was at war with the fatherly family solicitor.

“How did this come about?” he asked.

“It was just a joke,” said Frankie weakly. “We—we wanted something to do.”

“And who,” demanded Mr. Spragge, “had the idea of passing himself off as Me?”

Frankie looked at him, her wits working once more, made a rapid decision.

“It was the young Duke of No—” She broke off: “I really mustn’t mention names. It isn’t fair.”

But she knew that the tide had turned in her favour. It was doubtful if Mr. Spragge could have forgiven a mere vicar’s son such audacity, but his weakness for noble names led him to look softly on the impertinences of a duke. His benign manner returned.

“Oh! you Bright Young People—You Bright Young People,” he murmured, wagging a forefinger. “What trouble you land yourselves in. You would be surprised, Lady Frances, at the amount of legal complication that may ensue from an apparently harmless practical joke determined upon on the spur of the moment. Just high spirits—but sometimes extremely difficult to settle out of court.”

“I think you’re too marvellous, Mr. Spragge,” said Frankie earnestly. “I do, really. Not one person in a thousand would have taken it as you have done. I feel really terribly ashamed.”

“No, no, Lady Frances,” said Mr. Spragge paternally.

“Oh, but I do. I suppose it was the Rivington woman—what exactly did she tell you?”

“I think I have the letter here. I opened it only half an hour ago.”

Frankie held out a hand and Mr. Spragge put the letter into it with the air of one saying: “There, see for yourself what your foolishness has led you into.”

Dear Mr. Spragge (Mrs. Rivington had written), It’s really too stupid of me, but I’ve just remembered something that might have helped you the day you called on me. Alan Carstairs mentioned that he was going to a place called Chipping Somerton. I don’t know whether this will be any help to you.

I was so interested in what you told me about the Maltravers case. With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Edith Rivington.

“You can see that the matter might have been very grave,” said Mr. Spragge severely, but with a severity tempered by benevolence. “I took it that some extremely questionable business was afoot. Whether connected with the Maltravers case or with my client, Mr. Carstairs—”

Frankie interrupted him.

“Was Alan Carstairs a client of yours?” she inquired excitedly.

“He was. He consulted me when he was last in England a month ago. You know Mr. Carstairs, Lady Frances?”

“I think I may say I do,” said Frankie.

“A most attractive personality,” said Mr. Spragge. “He brought quite a breath of the—er—wide open spaces into my office.”

“He came to consult you about Mr. Savage’s will, didn’t he?” said Frankie.

“Ah!” said Mr. Spragge. “So it was you who advised him to come to me? He couldn’t remember just who it was. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more for him.”

“Just what did you advise him to do?” asked Frankie. “Or would it be unprofessional to tell me?”

“Not in this case,” said Mr. Spragge smiling. “My opinion was that there was nothing to be done—nothing, that is, unless Mr. Savage’s relatives were prepared to spend a lot of money on fighting the case—which I gather they were not prepared, or indeed in a position, to do. I never advise bringing a case into court unless there is every hope of success. The law, Lady Frances, is an uncertain animal. It has twists and turns that surprise the nonlegal mind. Settle out of court has always been my motto.”

“The whole thing was very curious,” said Frankie thoughtfully.

She had a little of the sensation of walking barefoot over a floor covered with tin tacks. At any minute she might step on one—and the game would be up.

“Such cases are less uncommon than you might think,” said Mr. Spragge.

“Cases of suicide?” inquired Frankie.

“No, no, I meant cases of undue influence. Mr. Savage was a hardheaded business man, and yet he was clearly as wax in this woman’s hands. I’ve no doubt she knew her business thoroughly.”

“I wish you’d tell me the whole story properly,” said Frankie boldly. “Mr. Carstairs was—well, was so heated, that I never seemed to get the thing clearly.”

“The case was extremely simple,” said Mr. Spragge. “I can run over the facts to you—they are accessible to everyone—so there is no objection to my doing so.”

“Then tell me all about it,” said Frankie.

“Mr. Savage happened to be travelling back from the United States to England in November of last year. He was, as you know, an extremely wealthy man with no near relations. On this voyage he made the acquaintance of a certain lady—a—er—Mrs. Templeton. Nothing much is known about Mrs. Templeton except that she was a very good-looking woman and had a husband somewhere conveniently in the background.”

“The Caymans,” thought Frankie.

“These ocean trips are dangerous,” went on Mr. Spragge, smiling and shaking his head. “Mr. Savage was clearly very much attracted. He accepted the lady’s invitation to come down and stay at her little cottage at Chipping Somerton. Exactly how often he went there I have not been able to ascertain, but there is no doubt that he came more and more under this Mrs. Templeton’s influence.

“Then came the tragedy. Mr. Savage had for some time been uneasy about his state of health. He feared that he might be suffering from a certain disease—”

“Cancer?” said Frankie.

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact, cancer. The subject became quite an obsession with him. He was staying with the Templetons at the time. They persuaded him to go up to London and consult a specialist. He did so. Now here, Lady Frances, I preserve an open mind. That specialist—a very distinguished man who has been at the top of his profession for many years—swore at the inquest that Mr. Savage was not suffering from cancer and that he had told him so, but that Mr. Savage was so obsessed by his own belief that he could not accept the truth when he was told it. Now, strictly without prejudice, Lady Frances, and knowing the medical profession, I think things may have gone a little differently.

“If Mr. Savage’s symptoms puzzled the doctor he may have spoken seriously, pulled a long face, spoken of certain expensive treatments and while reassuring him as to cancer yet have conveyed the impression that something was seriously wrong. Mr. Savage, having heard that doctors usually conceal from a patient the fact that he is suffering from that disease, would interpret this according to his own lights. The doctor’s reassuring words were not true—he had got the disease he thought he had.

“Anyway, Mr. Savage came back to Chipping Somerton in a state of great mental distress. He saw ahead of him a painful and lingering death. I understand some members of his family had died of cancer and he determined not to go through what he had seen them suffer. He sent for a solicitor—a very reputable member of an eminently respectable firm—and the latter drew up a will there and then which Mr. Savage signed and which he then delivered over to the solicitor for safekeeping. On that same evening Mr. Savage took a large overdose of chloral, leaving a letter behind in which he explained that he preferred a quick and painless death to a long and painful one.

“By his will Mr. Savage left the sum of seven hundred thousand pounds free of legacy duty to Mrs. Templeton and the remainder to certain specified

charities.”

Mr. Spragge leaned back in his chair. He was now enjoying himself.

“The jury brought in the usual sympathetic verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind, but I do not think that we can argue from that that he was necessarily of unsound mind when he made the will. I do not think that any jury would take it so. The will was made in the presence of a solicitor in whose opinion the deceased was undoubtedly sane and in possession of his senses. Nor do I think we can prove undue influence. Mr. Savage did not disinherit anyone near and dear to him—his only relatives were distant cousins whom he seldom saw. They actually lived in Australia, I believe.”

Mr. Spragge paused.

“Mr. Carstairs’ contention was that such a will was completely uncharacteristic of Mr. Savage. Mr. Savage had no liking for organized charities and had always held very strong opinions as to money passing by blood relationship. However, Mr. Carstairs had no documentary proof of these assertions and, as I pointed out to him, men change their opinions. In contesting such a will, there would be the charitable organizations to deal with as well as Mrs. Templeton. Also, the will had been admitted to probate.”

“There was no fuss made at the time?” asked Frankie.

“As I say, Mr. Savage’s relatives were not living in this country and they knew very little about the matter. It was Mr. Carstairs who took the matter up. He returned from a trip into the interior of Africa, gradually learnt the details of this business and came over to this country to see if something could be done about it. I was forced to tell him that in my view there was nothing to be done. Possession is nine points of the law, and Mrs. Templeton was in possession. Moreover, she had left the country and gone, I believe, to the South of France to live. She refused to enter into any communication on the matter. I suggested getting counsel’s opinion but Mr. Carstairs decided that it was not necessary and took my view that there was nothing to be done—or, alternatively, that whatever might have been done

at the time, and in my opinion that was exceedingly doubtful, it was now too late to do it.”

“I see,” said Frankie. “And nobody knows anything about this Mrs. Templeton?”

Mr. Spragge shook his head and pursed his lips.

“A man like Mr. Savage, with his knowledge of life, ought to have been less easily taken in—but—” Mr. Spragge shook his head sadly as a vision of innumerable clients who ought to have known better and who had come to him to have their cases settled out of court passed across his mind.

Frankie rose.

“Men are extraordinary creatures,” she said.

She held out a hand.

“Good-bye, Mr. Spragge,” she said. “You’ve been wonderful—simply wonderful. I feel too ashamed.”

“You Bright Young People must be more careful,” said Mr. Spragge, shaking his head at her.

“You’ve been an angel,” said Frankie.

She squeezed his hand fervently and departed.

Mr. Spragge sat down again before his table.

He was thinking.

“The young Duke of—”

There were only two dukes who could be so described.

Which was it?

He picked up a Peerage.

Twenty-six

NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

The inexplicable absence of Moira worried Bobby more than he cared to admit. He told himself repeatedly that it was absurd to jump to conclusions—that it was fantastic to imagine that Moira had been done away with in a house full of possible witnesses—that there was probably some perfectly simple explanation and that at the worst she could only be a prisoner in the Grange.

That she had left Staverley of her own free will Bobby did not for one minute believe. He was convinced that she would never have gone off like that without sending him a word of explanation. Besides, she had stated emphatically that she had nowhere to go.

No, the sinister Dr. Nicholson was at the bottom of this. Somehow or other he must have become aware of Moira's activities and this was his counter move. Somewhere within the sinister walls of the Grange Moira was a prisoner, unable to communicate with the outside world.

But she might not remain a prisoner long. Bobby believed implicitly every word Moira had uttered. Her fears were neither the result of a vivid imagination nor yet of nerves. They were simple stark truth.

Nicholson meant to get rid of his wife. Several times his plans had miscarried. Now, by communicating her fears to others, she had forced his hand. He must act quickly or not at all. Would he have the nerve to act?

Bobby believed he would. He must know that, even if these strangers had listened to his wife's fears, they had no evidence. Also, he would believe that he had only Frankie to deal with. It was possible that he had suspected her from the first—his pertinent questioning as to her "accident" seemed to point to that—but as Lady Frances' chauffeur, Bobby did not believe that he himself was suspected of being anything other than he appeared to be.

Yes, Nicholson would act. Moira's body would probably be found in some district far from Staverley. It might, perhaps, be washed up by the sea. Or it might be found at the foot of a cliff. The thing would appear to be, Bobby was almost sure, an "accident." Nicholson specialized in accidents.

Nevertheless, Bobby believed that the planning and carrying out of such an accident would need time—not much time, but a certain amount.

Nicholson's hand was being forced—he had to act quicker than he had anticipated. It seemed reasonable to suppose that twenty-four hours at least must elapse before he could put any plan into operation.

Before that interval had elapsed, Bobby meant to have found Moira if she were in the Grange.

After he had left Frankie in Brook Street, he started to put his plans into operation. He judged it wise to give the Mews a wide berth. For all he knew, a watch might be being kept on it. As Hawkins, he believed himself to be still unsuspected. Now Hawkins in turn was about to disappear.

That evening, a young man with a moustache, dressed in a cheap dark-blue suit, arrived at the bustling little town of Ambledrove. The young man put up at an hotel near the station, registering as George Parker. Having deposited his suitcase there he strolled out and entered into negotiations for hiring a motorcycle.

At ten o'clock that evening a motorcyclist in cap and goggles passed through the village of Staverley, and came to a halt at a deserted part of the road not far from the Grange.

Hastily shoving the bicycle behind some convenient bushes, Bobby looked up and down the road. It was quite deserted.

Then he sauntered along the wall till he came to the little door. As before, it was unlocked. With another look up and down the road to make sure he was not observed, Bobby slipped quietly inside. He put his hand into the pocket of his coat where a bulge showed the presence of his service revolver. The feel of it was reassuring.

Inside the grounds of the Grange everything seemed quiet.

Bobby grinned to himself as he recalled bloodcurdling stories where the villain of the piece kept a cheetah or some excited beast of prey about the place to deal with intruders.

Dr. Nicholson seemed content with mere bolts and bars and even there he seemed to be somewhat remiss. Bobby felt certain that that little door should not have been left open. As the villain of the piece, Dr. Nicholson seemed regrettably careless.

“No tame pythons,” thought Bobby. “No cheetahs, no electrically-charged wires—the man is shamefully behind the times.”

He made these reflections more to cheer himself up than for any other reason. Every time he thought of Moira a queer constriction seemed to tighten around his heart.

Her face rose in the air before him—the trembling lips—the wide, terrified eyes. It was just about here he had first seen her in the flesh. A little thrill ran through him as he remembered how he had put his arm round her to steady her. . . .

Moira—where was she now? What had that sinister doctor done with her? If only she were still alive . . .

“She must be,” said Bobby grimly between set lips. “I’m not going to think anything else.”

He made a careful reconnaissance round the house. Some of the upstairs windows had lights in them and there was one lighted window on the ground floor.

Towards this window Bobby crept. The curtains were drawn across it, but there was a slight chink between them. Bobby put a knee on the windowsill and hoisted himself noiselessly up. He peered through the slits.

He could see a man's arm and shoulder moving along as though writing. Presently the man shifted his position and his profile came into view. It was Dr. Nicholson.

It was a curious position. Quite unconscious that he was being watched, the doctor wrote steadily on. A queer sort of fascination stole over Bobby. The man was so near him that, but for the intervening glass, he could have stretched out his arm and touched him.

For the first time, Bobby felt, he was really seeing the man. It was a forceful profile, the big, bold nose, the jutting chin, the crisp, well-shaven line of the jaw. The ears, Bobby noted, were small and laid flat to the head and the lobe of the ear was actually joined to the cheek. He had an idea that ears like these were said to have some special significance.

The doctor wrote on—calm and unhurried. Now pausing for a moment or two as though to think of the right word—then setting to once more. His pen moved over the paper, precisely and evenly. Once he took off his prince-nez, polished them and put them on again.

At last with a sigh Bobby let himself slide noiselessly to the ground. From the look of it, Nicholson would be writing for some time to come. Now was the moment to gain admission to the house.

If Bobby could force an entrance by an upstairs window while the doctor was writing in his study he could explore the building at his leisure later in the night.

He made a circuit of the house again and singled out a window on the first floor. The sash was open at the top but there was no light in the room, so that it was probably unoccupied at the moment. Moreover, a very convenient tree seemed to promise an easy means of access.

In another minute, Bobby was swarming up the tree. All went well and he was just stretching out his hand to take a grip of the window ledge when an ominous crack came from the branch he was on and the next minute the bough, a rotten one, had snapped and Bobby was pitchforked head first into a clump of hydrangea bushes below, which fortunately broke his fall.

The window of Nicholson's study was farther along on the same side of the house. Bobby heard an exclamation in the doctor's voice and the window was flung up. Bobby, recovering from the first shock of his fall, sprang up, disentangled himself from the hydrangeas and bolted across the dark patch of shadow into the pathway leading to the little door. He went a short way along it, then dived into the bushes.

He heard the sound of voices and saw lights moving near the trampled and broken hydrangeas. Bobby kept still and held his breath. They might come along the path. If so, finding the door open, they would probably conclude that anyone had escaped that way and would not prosecute the search further.

However, the minutes passed and nobody came. Presently Bobby heard Nicholson's voice raised in a question. He did not hear the words but he heard an answer given in a hoarse, rather uneducated voice.

"All present and correct, sir. I've made the rounds."

The sounds gradually died down, the lights disappeared. Everyone seemed to have returned to the house.

Very cautiously, Bobby came out of his hiding place. He emerged on to the path, listening. All was still. He took a step or two towards the house.

And then out of the darkness something struck him on the back of the neck. He fell forward . . . into darkness.

Twenty-seven

“MY BROTHER WAS MURDERED”

On Friday morning the green Bentley drew up outside the Station Hotel at Ambledover.

Frankie had wired Bobby under the name they had agreed upon—George Parker—that she would be required to give evidence at the inquest on Henry Bassington-french and would call in at Ambledover on the way down from London.

She had expected a wire in reply appointing some rendezvous, but nothing had come, so she had come to the hotel.

“Mr. Parker, miss?” said the boots. “I don’t think there’s any gentleman of that name stopping here, but I’ll see.”

He returned a few minutes later.

“Came here Wednesday evening, miss. Left his bag and said he mightn’t be in till late. His bag’s still here but he hasn’t been back to fetch it.”

Frankie felt suddenly rather sick. She clutched at a table for support. The man was looking at her sympathetically.

“Feeling bad, miss?” he inquired.

Frankie shook her head.

“It’s all right,” she managed to say. “He didn’t leave any message?”

The man went away again and returned, shaking his head.

“There’s a telegram come for him,” he said. “That’s all.”

He looked at her curiously.

“Anything I can do, miss?” he asked.

Frankie shook her head.

At the moment she only wanted to get away. She must have time to think what to do next.

“It’s all right,” she said and, getting into the Bentley, she drove away.

The man nodded his head wisely as he looked after her.

“He’s done a bunk, he has,” he said to himself. “Disappointed her. Given her the slip. A fine rakish piece of goods she is. Wonder what he was like?”

He asked the young lady in the reception office, but the young lady couldn’t remember.

“A couple of nobs,” said the boots wisely. “Going to get married on the quiet—and he’s hooked it.”

Meanwhile, Frankie was driving in the direction of Staverley, her mind a maze of conflicting emotions.

Why had Bobby not returned to the Station Hotel? There could only be two reasons: either he was on the trail—and that trail had taken him away somewhere, or else—or else something had gone wrong. The Bentley swerved dangerously. Frankie recovered control just in time.

She was being an idiot—imagining things. Of course, Bobby was all right. He was on the trail—that was all—on the trail.

But why, asked another voice, hadn’t he sent her a word of reassurance?

That was more difficult to explain, but there were explanations. Difficult circumstances—no time or opportunity—Bobby would know that she, Frankie, wouldn’t get the wind up about him. Everything was all right—bound to be.

The inquest passed like a dream. Roger was there and Sylvia—looking quite beautiful in her widow's weeds. She made an impressive figure and a moving one. Frankie found herself admiring her as though she were admiring a performance at a theatre.

The proceedings were very tactfully conducted. The Bassington-frenches were popular locally and everything was done to spare the feelings of the widow and the brother of the dead man.

Frankie and Roger gave their evidence—Dr. Nicholson gave his—the dead man's farewell letter was produced. The thing seemed over in no time and the verdict given—"Suicide while of Unsound Mind."

The "sympathetic" verdict, as Mr. Spragge had called it.

The two events connected themselves in Frankie's mind.

Two suicides while of Unsound Mind. Was there—could there be a connection between them?

That this suicide was genuine enough she knew, for she had been on the scene. Bobby's theory of murder had had to be dismissed as untenable. Dr. Nicholson's alibi was cast iron—vouched for by the widow herself.

Frankie and Dr. Nicholson remained behind after the other people departed, the coroner having shaken hands with Sylvia and uttered a few words of sympathy.

"I think there are some letters for you, Frankie, dear," said Sylvia. "You won't mind if I leave you now and go and lie down. It's all been so awful."

She shivered and left the room. Nicholson went with her, murmuring something about a sedative.

Frankie turned to Roger.

"Roger, Bobby's disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

“Yes!”

“Where and how?”

Frankie explained in a few rapid words.

“And he’s not been seen since?” said Roger.

“No. What do you think?”

“I don’t like the sound of it,” said Roger slowly.

Frankie’s heart sank.

“You don’t think—?”

“Oh! it may be all right, but—sh, here comes Nicholson.”

The doctor entered the room with his noiseless tread. He was rubbing his hands together and smiling.

“That went off very well,” he said. “Very well, indeed. Dr. Davidson was most tactful and considerate. We may consider ourselves very lucky to have had him as our local coroner.”

“I suppose so,” said Frankie mechanically.

“It makes a lot of difference, Lady Frances. The conduct of an inquest is entirely in the hands of the coroner. He has wide powers. He can make things easy or difficult as he pleases. In this case everything went off perfectly.”

“A good stage performance, in fact,” said Frankie in a hard voice.

Nicholson looked at her in surprise.

“I know what Lady Frances is feeling,” said Roger. “I feel the same. My brother was murdered, Dr. Nicholson.”

He was standing behind the other and did not see, as Frankie did, the startled expression that sprang into the doctor's eyes.

"I mean what I say," said Roger, interrupting Nicholson as he was about to reply. "The law may not regard it as such, but murder it was. The criminal brutes who induced my brother to become a slave to that drug murdered him just as truly as if they had struck him down."

He had moved a little and his angry eyes now looked straight into the doctor's.

"I mean to get even with them," he said; and the words sounded like a threat.

Dr. Nicholson's pale-blue eyes fell before his. He shook his head sadly.

"I cannot say I disagree with you," he said. "I know more about drug-taking than you do, Mr. Bassington-french. To induce a man to take drugs is indeed a most terrible crime."

Ideas were whirling through Frankie's head—one idea in particular.

"It can't be," she was saying to herself. "That would be too monstrous. And yet—his whole alibi depends on her word. But in that case—"

She roused herself to find Nicholson speaking to her.

"You came down by car, Lady Frances? No accident this time?"

Frankie felt she simply hated that smile.

"No," she said. "I think it's a pity to go in too much for accidents—don't you?"

She wondered if she had imagined it, or whether his eyelids really flickered for a moment.

"Perhaps your chauffeur drove you this time?"

“My chauffeur,” said Frankie, “has disappeared.”

She looked straight at Nicholson.

“Indeed?”

“He was last seen heading for the Grange,” went on Frankie.

Nicholson raised his eyebrows.

“Really? Have I—some attraction in the kitchen?” His voice sounded amused. “I can hardly believe it.”

“At any rate that is where he was last seen,” said Frankie.

“You sound quite dramatic,” said Nicholson. “Possibly you are paying too much attention to local gossip. Local gossip is very unreliable. I have heard the wildest stories.” He paused. His voice altered slightly in tone. “I have even had a story brought to my ears that my wife and your chauffeur had been seen talking together down by the river.” Another pause. “He was, I believe, a very superior young man, Lady Frances.”

“Is that it?” thought Frankie. “Is he going to pretend that his wife has run off with my chauffeur? Is that his little game?”

Aloud she said:

“Hawkins is quite above the average chauffeur.”

“So it seems,” said Nicholson.

He turned to Roger.

“I must be going. Believe me, all my sympathies are with you and Mrs. Bassington-French.”

Roger went out into the hall with him. Frankie followed. On the hall table were a couple of letters addressed to her. One was a bill. The other—

Her heart gave a leap.

The other was in Bobby's handwriting.

Nicholson and Roger were on the doorstep.

She tore it open.

Dear Frankie (wrote Bobby), I'm on the trail at last. Follow me as soon as possible to Chipping Somerton. You'd better come by train and not by car. The Bentley is too noticeable. The trains aren't too good but you can get there all right. You're to come to a house called Tudor Cottage. I'll explain to you just exactly how to find it. Don't ask the way. (Here followed some minute directions.) Have you got that clear? Don't tell anyone. (This was heavily underlined.) No one at all.

Yours ever,

Bobby.

Frankie crushed the letter excitedly in the palm of her hand.

So it was all right.

Nothing dreadful had overtaken Bobby.

He was on the trail—and by a coincidence on the same trail as herself. She had been to Somerset House to look up the will of John Savage. Rose Emily Templeton was given as the wife of Edgar Templeton of Tudor Cottage, Chipping Somerton. And that again had fitted in with the open ABC in the St. Leonard's Gardens house. Chipping Somerton had been one of the stations on the open page. The Caymans had gone to Chipping Somerton.

Everything was falling into place. They were nearing the end of the chase.

Roger Bassington-Barnes turned and came towards her.

"Anything interesting in your letter?" he inquired casually. For a moment Frankie hesitated. Surely Bobby had not meant Roger when he adjured her

to tell nobody?

Then she remembered the heavy underlining—remembered, too, her own recent monstrous idea. If that were true, Roger might betray them both in all innocence. She dared not hint to him her own suspicions. . . .

So she made up her mind and spoke.

“No,” she said. “Nothing at all.”

She was to repent her decision bitterly before twenty-four hours had passed.

More than once in the course of the next few hours did she bitterly regret Bobby’s dictum that the car was not to be used. Chipping Somerton was no very great distance as the crow flies but it involved changing three times, with a long dreary wait at a country station each time, and to one of Frankie’s impatient temperament, this slow method of procedure was extremely hard to endure with fortitude.

Still, she felt bound to admit that there was something in what Bobby had said. The Bentley was a noticeable car.

Her excuses for leaving it at Merroway had been of the flimsiest order, but she had been unable to think of anything brilliant on the spur of the moment.

It was getting dark when Frankie’s train, an extremely deliberate and thoughtful train, drew into the little station of Chipping Somerton. To Frankie it seemed more like midnight. The train seemed to her to have been ambling on for hours and hours.

It was just beginning to rain, too, which was additionally trying.

Frankie buttoned up her coat to her neck, took a last look at Bobby’s letter by the light of the station lamp, got the directions clearly in her head and set off.

The instructions were quite easy to follow. Frankie saw the lights of the village ahead and turned off to the left up a lane which led steeply uphill. At

the top of the lane she took the right-hand fork and presently saw the little cluster of houses that formed the village lying below her and a belt of pine trees ahead. Finally, she came to a neat wooden gate and, striking a match, saw Tudor Cottage written on it.

There was no one about. Frankie slipped up the latch and passed inside. She could make out the outlines of the house behind a belt of pine trees. She took up her post within the trees where she could get a clear view of the house. Then, heart beating a little faster, she gave the best imitation she could of the hoot of an owl. A few minutes passed and nothing happened. She repeated the call.

The door of the cottage opened and she saw a figure in chauffeur's dress peer cautiously out. Bobby! He made a beckoning gesture then withdrew inside, leaving the door ajar.

Frankie came out from the trees and up to the door. There was no light in any window. Everything was perfectly dark and silent.

Frankie stepped gingerly over the threshold into a dark hall. She stopped, peering about her.

"Bobby?" she whispered.

It was her nose that gave her warning. Where had she known that smell before—that heavy, sweet odour?

Just as her brain gave the answer "Chloroform," strong arms seized her from behind. She opened her mouth to scream and a wet pad was clapped over it. The sweet, cloying smell filled her nostrils.

She fought desperately, twisting and turning, kicking. But it was of no avail. Despite the fight she put up, she felt herself succumbing. There was a drumming in her ears, she felt herself choking. And then she knew no more.

. . .

Twenty-eight

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

When Frankie came to herself, the immediate reactions were depressing. There is nothing romantic about the aftereffects of chloroform. She was lying on an extremely hard wooden floor and her hands and feet were tied. She managed to roll herself over and her head nearly collided violently with a battered coal box. Various distressing events then occurred.

A few minutes later, Frankie was able, if not to sit up, at least to take notice.

Close at hand she heard a faint groan. She peered about her. As far as she could make out, she seemed to be in a kind of attic. The only light came from a skylight in the roof, and at this moment there was very little of that. In a few minutes it would be quite dark. There were a few broken pictures lying against the wall, a dilapidated iron bed and some broken chairs, and the coal scuttle before mentioned.

The groan seemed to have come from the corner.

Frankie's bonds were not very tight. They permitted motion of a somewhat crablike type. She wormed her way across the dusty floor.

"Bobby!" she ejaculated.

Bobby it was, also tied hand and foot. In addition, he had a piece of cloth bound round his mouth.

This he had almost succeeded in working loose. Frankie came to his assistance. In spite of being bound together, her hands were still of some use and a final vigorous pull with her teeth finally did the job.

Rather stiffly, Bobby managed to ejaculate:

"Frankie!"

“I’m glad we’re together,” said Frankie. “But it does look as though we’d been had for mugs.”

“I suppose,” said Bobby gloomily, “it’s what they call a ‘fair cop.’ ”

“How did they get you?” demanded Frankie. “Was it after you wrote that letter to me?”

“What letter? I never wrote any letter.”

“Oh! I see,” said Frankie, her eyes opening. “What an idiot I have been! And all that stuff in it about not telling a soul.”

“Look here, Frankie, I’ll tell you what happened to me and then you carry on the good work and tell me what happened to you.”

He described his adventures at the Grange and their sinister sequel.

“I came to in this beastly hole,” he said. “There was some food and drink on a tray. I was frightfully hungry and I had some. I think it must have been doped for I fell asleep almost immediately. What day is it?”

“Friday.”

“And I was knocked out on Wednesday evening. Dash it all, I’ve been pretty well unconscious all the time. Now tell me what happened to you?”

Frankie recounted her adventures, beginning with the story she had heard from Mr. Spragge and carrying on until she thought she recognized Bobby’s figure in the doorway.

“And then they chloroformed me,” she finished. “And oh, Bobby, I’ve just been sick in a coal bucket!”

“I call that very resourceful of you, Frankie,” said Bobby approvingly. “With your hands tied and everything? The thing is: what are we going to do now? We’ve had it our own way for a long time, but now the tables are turned.”

“If only I’d told Roger about your letter,” lamented Frankie. “I did think of it and wavered—and then I decided to do exactly what you said and tell nobody at all.”

“With the result that no one knows where we are,” said Bobby gravely. “Frankie, my dear, I’m afraid I’ve landed you in a mess.”

“We got a bit too sure of ourselves,” said Frankie sombrely.

“The only thing I can’t make out is why they didn’t knock us both on the head straight away,” mused Bobby. “I don’t think Nicholson would stick at a little trifle like that.”

“He’s got a plan,” said Frankie with a slight shiver.

“Well, we’d better have one, too. We’ve got to get out of this, Frankie. How are we going to do it?”

“We can shout,” said Frankie.

“Ye-es,” said Bobby. “Somebody might be passing and hear. But from the fact that Nicholson didn’t gag you I should say that the chances in that direction are pretty poor. Your hands are more loosely tied than mine. Let’s see if I can get them undone with my teeth.”

The next five minutes were spent in a struggle that did credit to Bobby’s dentist.

“Extraordinary how easy these things sound in books,” he panted. “I don’t believe I’m making the slightest impression.”

“You are,” said Frankie. “It’s loosening. Look out! There’s somebody coming.”

She rolled away from him. A step could be heard mounting a stair, a heavy, ponderous tread. A gleam of light appeared under the door. Then there was the sound of a key being turned in the lock. The door swung slowly open.

“And how are my two little birds?” said the voice of Dr. Nicholson.

He carried a candle in one hand and, though he was wearing a hat pulled down over his eyes and a heavy overcoat with the collar turned up, his voice would have betrayed him anywhere. His eyes glittered palely behind the strong glasses.

He shook his head at them playfully.

“Unworthy of you, my dear young lady,” he said, “to fall into the trap so easily.”

Neither Bobby nor Frankie made any reply. The honours of the situation so obviously lay with Nicholson that it was difficult to know what to say.

Nicholson put the candle down on a chair.

“At any rate,” he said, “let me see if you are comfortable.”

He examined Bobby’s fastenings, nodded his head approvingly and passed on to Frankie. There he shook his head.

“As they truly used to say to me in my youth,” he remarked, “fingers were made before forks—and teeth were used before fingers. Your young friend’s teeth, I see, have been active.”

A heavy, brokenbacked oak chair was standing in a corner.

Nicholson picked up Frankie, deposited her on the chair and tied her securely to it.

“Not too uncomfortable, I trust?” he said. “Well, it isn’t for long.”

Frankie found her tongue.

“What are you going to do with us?” she demanded.

Nicholson walked to the door and picked up his candle.

“You taunted me, Lady Frances, with being too fond of accidents. Perhaps I am. At any rate, I am going to risk one more accident.”

“What do you mean?” said Bobby.

“Shall I tell you? Yes, I think I will. Lady Frances Derwent, driving her car, her chauffeur beside her, mistakes a turning and takes a disused road leading to a quarry. The car crashes over the edge. Lady Frances and her chauffeur are killed.”

There was a slight pause, then Bobby said:

“But we mightn’t be. Plans go awry sometimes. One of yours did down in Wales.”

“Your tolerance of morphia was certainly very remarkable—and from our point of view—regrettable,” said Nicholson. “But you need have no anxiety on my behalf this time. You and Lady Frances will be quite dead when your bodies are discovered.”

Bobby shivered in spite of himself. There had been a queer note in Nicholson’s voice—it was the tone of an artist contemplating a masterpiece.

“He enjoys this,” thought Bobby. “Really enjoys it.”

He was not going to give Nicholson further cause for enjoyment than he could help. He said in a casual tone of voice:

“You’re making a mistake—especially where Lady Frances is concerned.”

“Yes,” said Frankie. “In that very clever letter you forged you told me to tell nobody. Well, I made just one exception. I told Roger Bassington-ffrench. He knows all about you. If anything happens to us, he will know who is responsible for it. You’d better let us go and clear out of the country as fast as you can.”

Nicholson was silent for a moment. Then he said:

“A good bluff—but I call it.”

He turned to the door.

“What about your wife, you swine?” cried Bobby. “Have you murdered her, too?”

“Moirá is still alive,” said Nicholson. “How much longer she will remain so, I do not really know. It depends on circumstances.”

He made them a mocking little bow.

“Au revoir,” he said. “It will take me a couple of hours to complete my arrangements. You may enjoy talking the matter over. I shall not gag you unless it becomes necessary. You understand? Any calls for help and I return and deal with the matter.”

He went out and closed and locked the door behind him.

“It isn’t true,” said Bobby. “It can’t be true. These things don’t happen.”

But he could not help feeling that they were going to happen—and to him and Frankie.

“In books there’s always an eleventh-hour rescue,” said Frankie, trying to speak hopefully.

But she was not feeling very hopeful. In fact, her morale was decidedly low.

“The whole thing’s so impossible,” said Bobby as though pleading with someone. “So fantastic. Nicholson himself was absolutely unreal. I wish an eleventh-hour rescue was possible, but I can’t see who’s going to rescue us.”

“If only I’d told Roger,” wailed Frankie.

“Perhaps in spite of everything, Nicholson believes you have,” suggested Bobby.

“No,” said Frankie. “The suggestion didn’t go down at all. The man’s too damned clever.”

“He’s been too clever for us,” said Bobby gloomily. “Frankie, do you know what annoys me most about this business?”

“No. What?”

“That even now, when we’re going to be hurled into the next world, we still don’t know who Evans is.”

“Let’s ask him,” said Frankie. “You know—a last-minute boon. He can’t refuse to tell us. I agree with you that I simply can’t die without having my curiosity satisfied.”

There was a silence, then Bobby said:

“Do you think we ought to yell for help—a sort of last chance? It’s about the only chance we’ve got.”

“Not yet,” said Frankie. “In the first place, I don’t believe anyone would hear—he’d never risk it otherwise—and in the second place, I feel I just can’t bear waiting here to be killed without being able to speak or be spoken to. Let’s leave shouting till the last possible moment. It’s—it’s so comforting having you to talk to.” Her voice wavered a little over the last words.

“I’ve got you into an awful mess, Frankie.”

“Oh! that’s all right. You couldn’t have kept me out. I wanted to come in. Bobby, do you think he’ll really pull it off? Us, I mean.”

“I’m terribly afraid he will. He’s so damnably efficient.”

“Bobby, do you believe now that it was he who killed Henry Bassington-ffrench?”

“If it were possible—”

“It is possible—granted one thing: that Sylvia Bassington-ffrench is in it, too.”

“Frankie!”

“I know. I was just as horrified when the idea occurred to me. But it fits. Why was Sylvia so dense about the morphia—why did she resist so obstinately when we wanted her to send her husband somewhere else instead of the Grange? And then she was in the house when the shot was fired—”

“She might have done it herself.”

“Oh! no, surely.”

“Yes, she might. And then have given the key of the study to Nicholson to put in Henry’s pocket.”

“It’s all crazy,” said Frankie in a hopeless voice. “Like looking through a distorting mirror. All the people who seemed most all right are really all wrong—all the nice, everyday people. There ought to be some way of telling criminals—eyebrows or ears or something.”

“My God!” cried Bobby.

“What is it?”

“Frankie, that wasn’t Nicholson who came here just now.”

“Have you gone quite mad? Who was it then?”

“I don’t know—but it wasn’t Nicholson. All along I felt there was something wrong, but couldn’t spot it, and your saying ears has given me the clue. When I was watching Nicholson the other evening through the window I especially noticed his ears—the lobes are joined to the face. But this man tonight—his ears weren’t like that.”

“But what does it mean?” Frankie asked hopelessly.

“This is a very clever actor impersonating Nicholson.”

“But why—and who could it be?”

“Bassington-ffrench,” breathed Bobby. “Roger Bassington-ffrench! We spotted the right man at the beginning and then, like idiots, we went astray after red herrings.”

“Bassington-ffrench,” whispered Frankie. “Bobby, you’re right. It must be him. He was the only person there when I taunted Nicholson about accidents.”

“Then it really is all up,” said Bobby. “I’ve still had a kind of sneaking hope that possibly Roger Bassington-ffrench might nose out our trail by some miracle but now the last hope’s gone. Moira’s a prisoner, you and I are tied hand and foot. Nobody else has the least idea where we are. The game’s up, Frankie.”

As he finished speaking there was a sound overhead. The next minute, with a terrific crash, a heavy body fell through the skylight.

It was too dark to see anything.

“What the devil—” began Bobby.

From amidst a pile of broken glass, a voice spoke.

“B-b-b-bobby,” it said.

“Well, I’m damned!” said Bobby. “It’s Badger!”

Twenty-nine

BADGER'S STORY

There was not a minute to be lost. Already sounds could be heard on the floor below.

“Quick, Badger, you fool!” said Bobby. “Pull one of my boots off! Don’t argue or ask questions! Haul it off somehow. Chuck it down in the middle there and crawl under that bed! Quick, I tell you!”

Steps were ascending the stairs. The key turned.

Nicholson—the pseudo Nicholson—stood in the doorway, candle in hand.

He saw Bobby and Frankie as he had left them, but in the middle of the floor was a pile of broken glass and in the middle of the broken glass was a boot!

Nicholson stared in amazement from the boot to Bobby. Bobby’s left foot was bootless.

“Very clever, my young friend,” he said dryly. “Extremely acrobatic.”

He came over to Bobby, examined the ropes that bound him and tied a couple of extra knots. He looked at him curiously.

“I wish I knew how you managed to throw that boot through the skylight. It seems almost incredible. A touch of the Houdini about you, my friend.”

He looked at them both, up at the broken skylight, then shrugging his shoulders, he left the room.

“Quick, Badger.”

Badger crawled out from under the bed. He had a pocket knife and with its aid he soon cut the other two free.

“That’s better,” said Bobby, stretching himself. “Whew! I’m stiff! Well, Frankie, what about our friend Nicholson?”

“You’re right,” said Frankie. “It’s Roger Bassington-ffrench. Now that I know he’s Roger playing the part of Nicholson I can see it. But it’s a pretty good performance all the same.”

“Entirely voice and pince-nez,” said Bobby.

“I was at Oxford with a B-b-b-bassington-ffrench,” said Badger. “M-m-m-marvellous actor. B-b-b-bad hat, though. B-b-b-bad business about forging his p-p-pater’s n-n-n-name to a cheque. Old m-m-man hushed it up.”

In the minds of both Bobby and Frankie was the same thought. Badger, whom they had judged it wiser not to take into their confidence, could all along have given them valuable information!

“Forgery,” said Frankie thoughtfully. “That letter from you, Bobby, was remarkably well-done. I wonder how he knew your handwriting?”

“If he’s in with the Caymans he probably saw my letter about the Evans business.”

The voice of Badger rose plaintively.

“W-w-w-what are we going to do next?” he inquired.

“We’re going to take up a comfortable position behind this door,” said Bobby. “And when our friend returns, which I imagine won’t be for a little while yet, you and I are going to spring on him from behind and give him the surprise of his life. How about it, Badger? Are you game?”

“Oh! absolutely.”

“As for you, Frankie, when you hear his step you’d better get back on to your chair. He’ll see you as soon as he opens the door and will come in

without any suspicion.”

“All right,” said Frankie. “And once you and Badger have got him down I’ll join in and bite his ankles or something.”

“That’s the true womanly spirit,” said Bobby approvingly. “Now, let’s all sit close together on the floor here and hear all about things. I want to know what miracle brought Badger through that skylight.”

“Well, you s-s-see,” said Badger, “after you w-w-went off, I got into a bit of a m-m-mess.”

He paused. Gradually the story was extracted: a tale of liabilities, creditors and bailiffs—a typical Badger catastrophe. Bobby had gone off leaving no address, only saying that he was driving the Bentley down to Staverley. So to Staverley came Badger.

“I thought p-p-perhaps you m-m-might be able to let have a f-f-fiver,” he explained.

Bobby’s heart smote him. To aid Badger in his enterprise he had come to London and had promptly deserted his post to go off sleuthing with Frankie. And even now the faithful Badger uttered no word of reproach.

Badger had no wish to endanger Bobby’s mysterious enterprises, but he was of the opinion that a car like the green Bentley would not be difficult to find in a place the size of Staverley.

As a matter of fact, he came across the car before he got to Staverley, for it was standing outside a pub—empty.

“S-s-so I thought,” went on Badger, “that I’d give you a little s-s-s-surprise, don’t you know? There were some r-r-rugs and things in the b-b-back and nobody about. I g-g-got in and p-p-p-pulled them over me. I thought I’d give you the s-s-surprise of your life.”

What actually happened was that a chauffeur in green livery had emerged from the pub and that Badger, peering from his place of concealment, was

thunderstruck to perceive that this chauffeur was not Bobby. He had an idea that the face was in some way familiar to him but couldn't place the man. The stranger got into the car and drove off.

Badger was in a predicament. He did not know what to do next. Explanations and apologies were difficult, and in any case it is not easy to explain to someone who is driving a car at sixty miles an hour. Badger decided to lie low and sneak out of the car when it stopped.

The car finally reached its destination—Tudor Cottage. The chauffeur drove it into the garage and left it there, but, on going out, he shut the garage doors. Badger was a prisoner. There was a small window at one side of the garage and through this about half an hour later Badger had observed Frankie's approach, her whistle and her admission into the house.

The whole business puzzled Badger greatly. He began to suspect that something was wrong. At any rate, he determined to have a look round for himself and see what it was all about.

With the help of some tools lying about in the garage he succeeded in picking the lock of the garage door and set out on a tour of inspection. The windows on the ground floor were all shuttered, but he thought that by getting on to the roof he might manage to have a look into some of the upper windows. The roof presented no difficulties. There was a convenient pipe running up the garage and from the garage roof to the roof of the cottage was an easy climb. In the course of his prowling, Badger had come upon the skylight. Nature and Badger's weight had done the rest.

Bobby drew a long breath as the narrative came to an end.

"All the same," he said reverently, "you are a miracle—a singularly beautiful miracle! But for you, Badger, my lad, Frankie and I would have been little corpses in about an hour's time."

He gave Badger a condensed account of the activities of himself and Frankie. Towards the end he broke off.

“Someone’s coming. Get to your post, Frankie. Now, then, this is where our playacting Bassington-ffrench gets the surprise of his life.”

Frankie arranged herself in a depressed attitude on the broken chair. Badger and Bobby stood ready behind the door.

The steps came up the stairs, a line of candlelight showed underneath the door. The key was put in the lock and turned, the door swung open. The light of the candle disclosed Frankie drooping dejectedly on her chair. Their gaoler stepped through the doorway.

Then, joyously, Badger and Bobby sprang.

The proceedings were short and decisive. Taken utterly by surprise, the man was knocked down, the candle flew wide and was retrieved by Frankie, and a few seconds later the three friends stood looking down with malicious pleasure at a figure securely bound with the same ropes as had previously secured two of them.

“Good evening, Mr. Bassington-ffrench,” said Bobby—and if the exultation in his voice was a little crude, who shall blame him? “It’s a nice night for the funeral.”

Thirty

ESCAPE

The man on the floor stared up at them. His pince-nez had flown off and so had his hat. There could be no further attempt at disguise. Slight traces of makeup were visible about the eyebrows, but otherwise the face was the pleasant, slightly vacuous face of Roger Bassington-ffrench.

He spoke in his own agreeable tenor voice, its note that of pleasant soliloquy.

“Very interesting,” he said. “I really knew quite well that no man tied up as you were could have thrown a boot through that skylight. But because the boot was there among the broken glass I took it for cause and effect and assumed that, though it was impossible, the impossible had been achieved. An interesting light on the limitations of the brain.”

As nobody spoke, he went on still in the same reflective voice:

“So, after all, you’ve won the round. Most unexpected and extremely regrettable. I thought I’d got you all fooled nicely.”

“So you had,” said Frankie. “You forged that letter from Bobby, I suppose?”

“I have a talent that way,” said Roger modestly.

“And Bobby?”

Lying on his back, smiling agreeably, Roger seemed to take a positive pleasure in enlightening them.

“I knew he’d go to the Grange. I only had to wait about in the bushes near the path. I was just behind him there when he retreated after rather clumsily falling off a tree. I let the hubbub die down and then got him neatly on the back of the neck with a sandbag. All I had to do was to carry him out to

where my car was waiting, shove him in the dickey and drive him here. I was at home again before morning.”

“And Moira?” demanded Bobby. “Did you entice her away somehow?”

Roger chuckled. The question seemed to amuse him.

“Forgery is a very useful art, my dear Jones,” he said.

“You swine,” said Bobby.

Frankie intervened. She was still full of curiosity, and their prisoner seemed in an obliging mood.

“Why did you pretend to be Dr. Nicholson?” she asked.

“Why did I, now?” Roger seemed to be asking the question of himself.

“Partly, I think, the fun of seeing whether I could spoof you both. You were so very sure that poor old Nicholson was in it up to the neck.” He laughed and Frankie blushed. “Just because he cross-questioned you a bit about the details of your accident—in his pompous way. It was an irritating fad of his—accuracy in details.”

“And really,” said Frankie slowly, “he was quite innocent?”

“As a child unborn,” said Roger. “But he did me a good turn. He drew my attention to that accident of yours. That and another incident made me realize that you mightn’t be quite the innocent young thing you seemed to be. And then I was standing by you when you telephoned one morning and heard your chauffeur’s voice say ‘Frankie.’ I’ve got pretty good hearing. I suggested coming up to town with you and you agreed—but you were very relieved when I changed my mind. After that—” He stopped and, as far as he was able, shrugged his bound shoulders. “It was rather fun seeing you all get worked up about Nicholson. He’s a harmless old ass, but he does look exactly like a scientific super-criminal on the films. I thought I might as well keep the deception up. After all, you never know. The best-laid plans go wrong, as my present predicament shows.”

“There’s one thing you must tell me,” said Frankie. “I’ve been driven nearly mad with curiosity. Who is Evans?”

“Oh!” said Bassington-ffrench. “So you don’t know that?”

He laughed—and laughed again.

“That’s rather amusing,” he said. “It shows what a fool one can be.”

“Meaning us?” asked Frankie.

“No,” said Roger. “In this case, meaning me. Do you know, if you don’t know who Evans is, I don’t think I shall tell you. I’ll keep that to myself as my own little secret.”

The position was a curious one. They had turned the tables on Bassington-ffrench and yet, in some peculiar way, he had robbed them of their triumph. Lying on the floor, bound and a prisoner, it was he who dominated the situation.

“And what are your plans now, may I ask?” he inquired.

Nobody had as yet evolved any plans. Bobby rather doubtfully murmured something about police.

“Much the best thing to do,” said Roger cheerfully. “Ring them up and hand me over to them. The charge will be abduction, I suppose. I can’t very well deny that.” He looked at Frankie. “I shall plead a guilty passion.”

Frankie reddened.

“What about murder?” she asked.

“My dear, you haven’t any evidence. Positively none. Think it over and you’ll see you haven’t.

“Badger,” said Bobby, “you’d better stay here and keep an eye on him. I’ll go down and ring the police.”

“You’d better be careful,” said Frankie. “We don’t know how many of them there may be in the house.”

“No one but me,” said Roger. “I was carrying this through single-handed.”

“I’m not prepared to take your word for that,” said Bobby gruffly.

He bent over and tested the knots.

“He’s all right,” he said. “Safe as houses. We’d better all go down together. We can lock the door.”

“Terribly distrustful, aren’t you, my dear chap,” said Roger. “There’s a pistol in my pocket if you’d like it. It may make you feel happier and it’s certainly no good to me in my present position.”

Ignoring the other’s mocking tone, Bobby bent down and extracted the weapon.

“Kind of you to mention it,” he said. “If you want to know it does make me feel happier.”

“Good,” said Roger. “It’s loaded.”

Bobby took the candle and they filed out of the attic, leaving Roger lying on the floor. Bobby locked the door and put the key in his pocket. He held the pistol in his hand.

“I’ll go first,” he said. “We’ve got to be quite sure and not make a mess of things now.”

“He’s a qu-qu-queer chap, isn’t he?” said Badger with a jerk of his head backwards in the direction of the room they had left.

“He’s a damned good loser,” said Frankie.

Even now she was not quite free from the charm of that very remarkable young man, Roger Bassington-ffrench.

A rather rickety flight of steps led down to the main landing. Everything was quiet. Bobby looked over the banisters. The telephone was in the hall below.

“We’d better look into these rooms first,” he said. “We don’t want to be taken in the rear.”

Badger flung open each door in turn. Of the four bedrooms, three were empty. In the fourth a slender figure was lying on the bed.

“It’s Moira,” cried Frankie.

The others crowded in. Moira was lying like one dead, except that her breast moved up and down ever so slightly.

“Is she asleep?” asked Bobby.

“She’s drugged I think,” said Frankie.

She looked round. A hypodermic syringe lay on a little enamel tray on a table near the window. There was also a little spirit lamp and a type of morphia hypodermic needle.

“She’ll be all right, I think,” she said. “But we ought to get a doctor.”

“Let’s go down and telephone,” said Bobby.

They adjourned to the hall below. Frankie had a half fear that the telephone wires might be cut, but her fears proved quite unfounded. They got through to the police station quite easily, but found a good deal of difficulty in explaining matters. The local police station was highly disposed to regard the summons as a practical joke.

However, they were convinced at last, and Bobby replaced the receiver with a sigh. He had explained that they also wanted a doctor and the police constable promised to bring one along.

Ten minutes later a car arrived with an inspector and a constable and an elderly man who had his profession stamped all over him.

Bobby and Frankie received them and, after explaining matters once more in a somewhat perfunctory fashion, led the way to the attic. Bobby unlocked the door—then stood dumbfounded in the doorway. In the middle of the floor was a heap of severed ropes. Underneath the broken skylight a chair had been placed on the bed, which had been dragged out till it was under the skylight.

Of Roger Bassington-ffrench there was no sign.

Bobby, Badger and Frankie were dumbfounded.

“Talk of Houdini,” said Bobby. “He must have out-Houdinied Houdini. How the devil did he cut these cords?”

“He must have had a knife in his pocket,” said Frankie.

“Even then, how could he get at it? Both hands were bound together behind his back.”

The inspector coughed. All his former doubts had returned. He was more strongly disposed than ever to regard the whole thing as a hoax.

Frankie and Bobby found themselves telling a long story which sounded more impossible every minute.

The doctor was their salvation.

On being taken to the room where Moira was lying, he declared at once that she had been drugged with morphia or some preparation of opium. He did not consider her condition serious and thought she would awake naturally in four or five hours’ time.

He suggested taking her off then and there to a good nursing home in the neighbourhood.

To this Bobby and Frankie agreed, not seeing what else could be done. Having given their own names and addresses to the inspector, who appeared to disbelieve utterly in Frankie’s, they themselves were allowed to leave

Tudor Cottage and with the assistance of the inspector succeeded in gaining admission to the Seven Stars in the village.

Here, still feeling that they were regarded as criminals, they were only too thankful to go to their rooms—a double one for Bobby and Badger, and a very minute single one for Frankie.

A few minutes after they had all retired, a knock came on Bobby's door.

It was Frankie.

“I've thought of something,” she said. “If that fool of a police inspector persists in thinking that we made all this up, at any rate I've got evidence that I was chloroformed.”

“Have you? Where?”

“In the coal bucket,” said Frankie with decision.

Thirty-one

FRANKIE ASKS A QUESTION

Exhausted by all her adventures, Frankie slept late the next morning. It was half past ten when she came down to the small coffee room to find Bobby waiting for her.

“Hullo, Frankie, here you are at last.”

“Don’t be so horribly vigorous, my dear,” Frankie subsided into a chair.

“What will you have? They’ve got haddock and eggs and bacon and cold ham.”

“I shall have some toast and weak tea,” said Frankie, quelling him. “What is the matter with you?”

“It must be the sandbagging,” said Bobby. “It’s probably broken up adhesions in the brain. I feel absolutely full of pep and vim and bright ideas and a longing to dash out and do things.”

“Well, why not dash?” said Frankie languidly.

“I have dashed, I’ve been with Inspector Hammond for the last half hour. We’ll have to let it go as a practical joke, Frankie, for the moment.”

“Oh, but, Bobby—”

“I said for the moment. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this, Frankie. We’re on the right spot and all we’ve got to do is to get down to it. We don’t want Roger Bassington-french for abduction. We want him for murder.”

“And we’ll get him,” said Frankie, with a revival of spirit.

“That’s more like it,” said Bobby approvingly. “Drink some more tea.”

“How’s Moira?”

“Pretty bad. She came round in the most awful state of nerves. Scared stiff apparently. She’s gone up to London—to a nursing home place in Queen’s Gate. She says she’ll feel safe there. She was terrified here.”

“She never did have much nerve,” said Frankie.

“Well, anyone might be scared stiff with a queer, cold-blooded murderer like Roger Bassington-ffrench loose in the neighbourhood.”

“He doesn’t want to murder her. We’re the ones he’s after.”

“He’s probably too busy taking care of himself to worry about us for the moment,” said Bobby. “Now, Frankie, we’ve got to get down to it. The start of the whole thing must be John Savage’s death and will. There’s something wrong about it. Either that will was forged or Savage was murdered or something.”

“It’s quite likely the will was forged if Bassington-ffrench was concerned,” said Frankie thoughtfully. “Forgery seems to be his speciality.”

“It may have been forgery and murder. We’ve got to find out.”

Frankie nodded.

“I’ve got the notes I made after looking at the will. The witnesses were Rose Chudleigh, cook, and Albert Mere, gardener. They ought to be quite easy to find. Then there are the lawyers who drew it up—Elford and Leigh—a very respectable firm as Mr. Spragge said.”

“Right, we’ll start from there. I think you’d better take the lawyers. You’ll get more out of them than I would. I’ll hunt up Rose Chudleigh and Albert Mere.”

“What about Badger?”

“Badger never gets up till lunch time—you needn’t worry about him.”

“We must get his affairs straightened out for him sometime,” said Frankie. “After all, he did save my life.”

“They’ll soon get tangled again,” said Bobby. “Oh! by the way, what do you think of this?”

He held out a dirty piece of cardboard for her inspection. It was a photograph.

“Mr. Cayman,” said Frankie immediately. “Where did you get it?”

“Last night. It had slipped down behind the telephone.”

“Then it seems pretty clear who Mr. and Mrs. Templeton were. Wait a minute.”

A waitress had just approached, bearing toast. Frankie displayed the photograph.

“Do you know who that is?” she asked.

The waitress regarded the photograph, her head a little on one side.

“Now, I’ve seen the gentleman—but I can’t quite call to mind. Oh! yes, it’s the gentleman who had Tudor Cottage—Mr. Templeton. They’ve gone away now—somewhere abroad, I believe.”

“What sort of man was he?” asked Frankie.

“I really couldn’t say. They didn’t come down here very often—just weekends now and then. Nobody saw much of him. Mrs. Templeton was a very nice lady. But they hadn’t had Tudor Cottage very long—only about six months—when a very rich gentleman died and left Mrs. Templeton all his money and they went to live abroad. They never sold Tudor Cottage, though. I think they sometimes lend it to people for weekends. But I don’t suppose with all that money they’ll ever come back here and live in it themselves.”

“They had a cook called Rose Chudleigh, didn’t they?” asked Frankie.

But the girl seemed uninterested in cooks. Being left a fortune by a rich gentleman was what really stirred her imagination. In answer to Frankie's question she replied that she couldn't say, she was sure, and withdrew carrying an empty toast rack.

"That's all plain sailing," said Frankie. "The Caymans have given up coming here, but they keep the place on for the convenience of the gang."

They agreed to divide the labour as Bobby had suggested. Frankie went off in the Bentley, having smartened herself up by a few local purchases, and Bobby went off in quest of Albert Mere, the gardener.

They met at lunch time.

"Well?" demanded Bobby.

Frankie shook her head.

"Forgery's out of the question." She spoke in a dispirited voice. "I spent a long time with Mr. Elford—he's rather an old dear. He'd got wind of our doings last night and was wild to hear a few details. I don't suppose they get much excitement down here. Anyway, I soon got him eating out of my hand. Then I discussed the Savage case—pretended I'd met some of the Savage relations and that they'd hinted at forgery. At that my old dear bristled up—absolutely out of the question! It wasn't a question of letters or anything like that. He saw Mr. Savage himself and Mr. Savage insisted on the will being drawn up then and there. Mr. Elford wanted to go away and do it properly—you know how they do—sheets and sheets all about nothing —"

"I don't know," said Bobby. "I've never made any wills."

"I have—two. The second was this morning. I had to have some excuse for seeing a lawyer."

"Who did you leave your money to?"

"You."

“That was a bit thoughtless, wasn’t it? If Roger Bassington-ffrench succeeded in bumping you off I should probably be hanged for it!”

“I never thought of that,” said Frankie. “Well, as I was saying, Mr. Savage was so nervous and wrought up that Mr. Elford wrote out the will then and there and the servant and the gardener came and witnessed it, and Mr. Elford took it away with him for safe keeping.”

“That does seem to knock out forgery,” agreed Bobby.

“I know. You can’t have forgery when you’ve actually seen the man sign his name. As to the other business—murder, it’s going to be hard to find out anything about that now. The doctor who was called in has died since. The man we saw last night is a new man—he’s only been here about two months.”

“We seem to have rather an unfortunate number of deaths,” said Bobby.

“Why, who else is dead?”

“Albert Mere.”

“Do you think they’ve all been put out of the way?”

“That seems rather wholesale. We might give Albert Mere the benefit of the doubt—he was seventy-two, poor old man.”

“All right,” said Frankie. “I’ll allow you Natural Causes in his case. Any luck with Rose Chudleigh?”

“Yes. After she left the Templetons she went to the north of England to a place, but she’s come back and married a man down here whom it seems she’s been walking out with for the last seventeen years. Unfortunately she’s a bit of a nitwit. She doesn’t seem to remember anything about anyone. Perhaps you could do something with her.”

“I’ll have a go,” said Frankie. “I’m rather good with nitwits. Where’s Badger, by the way?”

“Good Lord! I’ve forgotten all about him,” said Bobby. He got up and left the room, returning a few minutes later.

“He was still asleep,” he explained. “He’s getting up now. A chambermaid seems to have called him four times but it didn’t make any impression.”

“Well, we’d better go and see the nitwit,” said Frankie, rising. “And then I must buy a toothbrush and a nightgown and a sponge and a few other necessities of civilized existence. I was so close to Nature last night that I didn’t think about any of them. I just stripped off my outer covering and fell upon the bed.”

“I know,” said Bobby. “So did I.”

“Let’s go and talk to Rose Chudleigh,” said Frankie.

Rose Chudleigh, now Mrs. Pratt, lived in a small cottage that seemed to be overflowing with china dogs and furniture. Mrs. Pratt herself was a bovine-looking woman of ample proportions, with fishlike eyes and every indication of adenoids.

“You see, I’ve come back,” said Bobby breezily.

Mrs. Pratt breathed hard and looked at them both incuriously.

“We were so interested to hear that you had lived with Mrs. Templeton,” explained Frankie.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mrs. Pratt.

“She’s living abroad now, I believe,” continued Frankie, trying to give an impression of being an intimate of the family.

“I’ve heard so,” agreed Mrs. Pratt.

“You were with her some time, weren’t you?” asked Frankie.

“Were I which, ma’am?”

“With Mrs. Templeton some time,” said Frankie, speaking slowly and clearly.

“I wouldn’t say that, ma’am. Only two months.”

“Oh! I thought you’d been with her longer than that.”

“That was Gladys, ma’am. The house parlourmaid. She was there six months.”

“There were two of you?”

“That’s right. House parlourmaid she was and I was cook.”

“You were there when Mr. Savage died, weren’t you?”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am.”

“You were there when Mr. Savage died?”

“Mr. Templeton didn’t die—at least I haven’t heard so. He went abroad.”

“Not Mr. Templeton—Mr. Savage,” said Bobby.

Mrs. Pratt looked at him vacantly.

“The gentleman who left her all the money,” said Frankie.

A gleam of something like intelligence passed across Mrs. Pratt’s face.

“Oh! yes, ma’am, the gentleman there was the inquest on.”

“That’s right,” said Frankie, delighted with her success. “He used to come and stay quite often, didn’t he?”

“I couldn’t say as to that, ma’am. I’d only just come, you see. Gladys would know.”

“But you had to witness his will, didn’t you?”

Mrs. Pratt looked blank.

“You went and saw him sign a paper and you had to sign it, too.”

Again the gleam of intelligence.

“Yes, ma’am. Me and Albert. I’d never done such a thing before and I didn’t like it. I said to Gladys I don’t like signing a paper and that’s a fact, and Gladys, she said it must be all right because Mr. Elford was there and he was a very nice gentleman as well as being a lawyer.”

“What happened exactly?” asked Bobby.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Who called you to sign your name?” asked Frankie.

“The mistress, sir. She came into the kitchen and said would I go outside and call Albert and would we both come up to the best bedroom (which she’d moved out of for Mr.—the gentleman—the night before) and there was the gentleman sitting up in bed—he’d come back from London and gone straight to bed—and a very ill-looking gentleman he was. I hadn’t seen him before. But he looked something ghastly, and Mr. Elford was there, too, and he spoke very nice and said there was nothing to be afraid of and I was to sign my name where the gentleman had signed his, and I did and put ‘cook’ after it and the address and Albert did the same and I went down to Gladys all of a tremble and said I’d never seen a gentleman look so like death, and Gladys said he’d looked all right the night before, and that it must have been something in London that had upset him. He’d gone up to London very early before anyone was up. And then I said about not liking to write my name to anything, and Gladys said it was all right because Mr. Elford was there.”

“And Mr. Savage—the gentleman died—when?”

“Next morning as ever was, ma’am. He shut himself up in his room that night and wouldn’t let anyone go near him, and when Gladys called him in the morning he was all stiff and dead and a letter propped up by his bedside.

‘To the Coroner,’ it said. Oh! it gave Gladys a regular turn. And then there was an inquest and everything. About two months later Mrs. Templeton told me she was going abroad to live. But she got me a very good place up north with big wages and she gave me a nice present and everything. A very nice lady, Mrs. Templeton.”

Mrs. Pratt was by now thoroughly enjoying her own loquacity.

Frankie rose.

“Well,” she said. “It’s been very nice to hear all this.” She slipped a note out of her purse. “You must let me leave you a—er—little present. I’ve taken up so much of your time.”

“Well, thank you kindly, I’m sure, ma’am. Good day to you and your good gentleman.”

Frankie blushed and retreated rather rapidly. Bobby followed her after a few minutes. He looked preoccupied.

“Well,” he said. “We seem to have got at all she knows.”

“Yes,” said Frankie. “And it hangs together. There seems no doubt that Savage did make that will, and I suppose his fear of cancer was genuine enough. They couldn’t very well bribe a Harley Street doctor. I suppose they just took advantage of his having made that will to do away with him quickly before he changed his mind. But how we or anyone else can prove they did make away with him I can’t see.”

“I know. We may suspect that Mrs. T gave him ‘something to make him sleep,’ but we can’t prove it. Bassington-ffrench may have forged the letter to the coroner, but that again we can’t prove by now. I expect the letter is destroyed long ago after being put in as evidence at the inquest.”

“So we come back to the old problem—what on earth are Bassington-ffrench and Co. so afraid of our discovering?”

“Nothing strikes you as odd particularly?”

“No, I don’t think so—at least only one thing. Why did Mrs. Templeton send out for the gardener to come and witness the will when the house parlourmaid was in the house. Why didn’t they ask the parlourmaid?”

“It’s odd your saying that, Frankie,” said Bobby.

His voice sounded so queer that Frankie looked at him in surprise.

“Why?”

“Because I stayed behind to ask Mrs. Pratt for Gladys’s name and address.”

“Well?”

“The parlourmaid’s name was Evans!”

Thirty-two

EVANS

Frankie gasped.

Bobby's voice rose excitedly.

"You see, you've asked the same question that Carstairs asked. Why didn't they ask the parlourmaid? Why didn't they ask Evans?"

"Oh! Bobby, we're getting there at last!"

"The same thing must have struck Carstairs. He was nosing round, just as we were, looking for something fishy—and this point struck him just as it struck us. And, moreover, I believe he came to Wales for that reason. Gladys Evans is a Welsh name—Evans was probably a Welsh girl. He was following her to Marchbolt. And someone was following him—and so, he never got to her."

"Why didn't they ask Evans?" said Frankie. "There must be a reason. It's such a silly little point—and yet it's important. With a couple of maids in the house, why send out for a gardener?"

"Perhaps because both Chudleigh and Albert Mere were chumps, whereas Evans was rather a sharp girl."

"It can't be only that. Mr. Elford was there and he's quite shrewd. Oh! Bobby, the whole situation is there—I know it is. If we could just get at the reason. Evans. Why Chudleigh and Mere and not Evans?"

Suddenly she stopped and put both hands over her eyes.

"It's coming," she said. "Just a sort of flicker. It'll come in a minute."

She stayed dead still for a minute or two, then removed her hands and looked at her companion with an odd flicker in her eyes.

“Bobby,” she said, “if you’re staying in a house with two servants which do you tip?”

“The house parlourmaid, of course,” said Bobby, surprised. “One never tips a cook. One never sees her, for one thing.”

“No, and she never sees you. At least she might catch a glimpse of you if you were there some time. But a house parlourmaid waits on you at dinner and calls you and hands you coffee.”

“What are you getting at, Frankie?”

“They couldn’t have Evans witnessing that will—because Evans would have known that it wasn’t Mr. Savage who was making it.”

“Good Lord, Frankie, what do you mean? Who was it then?”

“Bassington-ffrench, of course! Don’t you see, he impersonated Savage? I bet it was Bassington-ffrench who went to that doctor and made all that fuss about having cancer. Then the lawyer is sent for—a stranger who doesn’t know Mr. Savage but who will be able to swear that he saw Mr. Savage sign that will and it’s witnessed by two people, one of whom hadn’t seen him before and the other an old man who was probably pretty blind and who probably had never seen Savage either. Now do you see?”

“But where was the real Savage all that time?”

“Oh! he arrived all right and then I suspect they drugged him and put him in the attic, perhaps, and kept him there for twelve hours while Bassington-ffrench did his impersonation stunt. Then he was put back in his bed and given chloral and Evans finds him dead in the morning.”

“My God, I believe you’ve hit it, Frankie. But can we prove it?”

“Yes—no—I don’t know. Supposing Rose Chudleigh—Pratt, I mean—was shown a photograph of the real Savage? Would she be able to say, ‘that

wasn't the man who signed the will?' ”

“I doubt it,” said Bobby. “She is such a nitwit.”

“Chosen for that purpose, I expect. But there's another thing. An expert ought to be able to detect that the signature is a forgery.”

“They didn't before.”

“Because nobody ever raised the question. There didn't seem any possible moment when the will could have been forged. But now it's different.”

“One thing we must do,” said Bobby. “Find Evans. She may be able to tell us a lot. She was with the Templetons for six months, remember,”

Frankie groaned.

“That's going to make it even more difficult.”

“How about the post office?” suggested Bobby.

They were just passing it. In appearance it was more of a general store than a post office.

Frankie darted inside and opened the campaign. There was no one else in the shop except the postmistress—a young woman with an inquisitive nose.

Frankie bought a two-shilling book of stamps, commented on the weather and then said:

“But I expect you always have better weather here than we do in my part of the world. I live in Wales—Marchbolt. You wouldn't believe the rain we have.”

The young woman with the nose said that they had a good deal of rain themselves and last Bank Holiday it had rained something cruel.

Frankie said:

“There’s someone in Marchbolt who comes from this part of the world. I wonder if you know her. Her name was Evans—Gladys Evans.”

The young woman was quite unsuspecting.

“Why, of course,” she said. She was in service here. At Tudor Cottage. But she didn’t come from these parts. She came from Wales and she went back there and married—Roberts her name is now.”

“That’s right,” said Frankie. “You can’t give me her address, I suppose? I borrowed a raincoat from her and forgot to give it back. If I had her address I’d post it to her.”

“Well now,” the other replied, “I believe I can. I get a p.c. from her now and again. She and her husband have gone into service together. Wait a minute now.”

She went away and rummaged in a corner. Presently she returned with a piece of paper in her hand.

“Here you are,” she said, pushing it across the counter.

Bobby and Frankie read it together. It was the last thing in the world they expected.

“Mrs. Roberts,
The Vicarage,
Marchbolt,
Wales.”

Thirty-three

SENSATION IN THE ORIENT CAFÉ

How Bobby and Frankie got out of the post office without disgracing themselves neither of them ever knew.

Outside, with one accord, they looked at each other and shook with laughter.

“At the Vicarage—all the time!” gasped Bobby.

“And I looked through four hundred and eighty Evans,” lamented Frankie.

“Now I see why Bassington-french was so amused when he realized we didn’t know in the least who Evans was!”

“And of course it was dangerous from their point of view. You and Evans were actually under the same roof.”

“Come on,” said Bobby. “Marchbolt’s the next place.”

“Like where the rainbow ends,” said Frankie. “Back to the dear old home.”

“Dash it all,” said Bobby, “we must do something about Badger. Have you any money, Frankie?”

Frankie opened her bag and took out a handful of notes.

“Give these to him and tell him to make some arrangement with his creditors and that Father will buy the garage and put him in as manager.”

“All right,” said Bobby. “The great thing is to get off quickly.”

“Why this frightful haste?”

“I don’t know—but I’ve a feeling something might happen.”

“How awful. Let’s go ever so quickly.”

“I’ll settle Badger. You go and start the car.”

“I shall never buy that toothbrush,” said Frankie.

Five minutes saw them speeding out of Chipping Somerton. Bobby had no occasion to complain of lack of speed.

Nevertheless, Frankie suddenly said:

“Look here, Bobby, this isn’t quick enough.”

Bobby glanced at the speedometer needle, which was, at the moment, registering eighty, and remarked dryly:

“I don’t see what more we can do.”

“We can take an air taxi,” said Frankie. “We’re only about seven miles from Medeshot Aerodrome.”

“My dear girl!” said Bobby.

“If we do that we’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

“Good,” said Bobby. “Let’s take an air taxi.”

The whole proceedings were beginning to take on the fantastic character of a dream. Why this wild hurry to get to Marchbolt? Bobby didn’t know. He suspected that Frankie didn’t know either. It was just a feeling.

At Medeshot Frankie asked for Mr. Donald King and an untidy-looking young man was produced who appeared languidly surprised at the sight of her.

“Hullo, Frankie,” he said. “I haven’t seen you for an age. What do you want?”

“I want an air taxi,” said Frankie. “You do that sort of thing, don’t you?”

“Oh! yes. Where do you want to go?”

“I want to get home quickly,” said Frankie.

Mr. Donald King raised his eyebrows.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“Not quite,” said Frankie. “But it’s the main idea.”

“Oh! well, we can soon fix you up.”

“I’ll give you a cheque,” said Frankie.

Five minutes later they were off.

“Frankie,” said Bobby. “Why are we doing this?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Frankie. “But I feel we must. Don’t you?”

“Curiously enough, I do. But I don’t know why. After all our Mrs. Roberts won’t fly away on a broomstick.”

“She might. Remember, we don’t know what Bassington-ffrench is up to.”

“That’s true,” said Bobby thoughtfully.

It was growing late when they reached their destination. The plane landed them in the Park and five minutes later Bobby and Frankie were driving into Marchbolt in Lord Marchington’s Chrysler.

They pulled up outside the Vicarage gate, the Vicarage drive not lending itself to the turning of expensive cars.

Then jumping out they ran up the drive.

“I shall wake up soon,” thought Bobby. “What are we doing and why?”

A slender figure was standing on the doorstep. Frankie and Bobby recognized her at the same minute.

“Moira!” cried Frankie.

Moira turned. She was swaying slightly.

“Oh! I’m so glad to see you. I don’t know what to do.”

“But what on earth brings you here?”

“The same thing that has brought you, I expect.”

“You have found out who Evans is?” asked Bobby.

Moira nodded.

“Yes, it’s a long story—”

“Come inside,” said Bobby.

But Moira shrank back.

“No, no,” she said hurriedly. “Let’s go somewhere and talk. There’s something I must tell you—before we go into the house. Isn’t there a café or some place like that in the town? Somewhere where we could go?”

“All right,” said Bobby, moving unwillingly away from the door. “But why —”

Moira stamped her foot.

“You’ll see when I tell you. Oh! do come. There’s not a minute to lose.”

They yielded to her urgency. About halfway down the main street was the Orient Café—a somewhat grand name not borne out by the interior decoration. The three of them filed in. It was a slack moment—half past six.

They sat down at a small table in the corner and Bobby ordered three coffees.

“Now then?” he said.

“Wait till she’s brought the coffee,” said Moira.

The waitress returned and listlessly deposited three cups of tepid coffee in front of them.

“Now then,” said Bobby.

“I hardly know where to begin,” said Moira. “It was in the train going to London. Really, the most amazing coincidence. I went along the corridor and—”

She broke off. Her seat faced the door and she leant forward, staring.

“He must have followed me,” she said.

“Who?” cried Frankie and Bobby together.

“Bassington-ffrench,” whispered Moira.

“You’ve seen him?”

“He’s outside. I saw him with a woman with red hair.”

“Mrs. Cayman,” cried Frankie.

She and Bobby jumped and ran to the door. A protest came from Moira but neither of them heeded it. They looked up and down the street but Bassington-ffrench was nowhere in sight.

Moira joined them.

“Has he gone?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Oh! do be careful. He’s dangerous—horribly dangerous.”

“He can’t do anything so long as we’re all together,” said Bobby.

“Brace up, Moira,” said Frankie. “Don’t be such a rabbit.”

“Well, we can’t do anything for the moment,” said Bobby, leading the way back to the table. “Go on with what you were telling us, Moira.”

He picked up his cup of coffee. Frankie lost her balance and fell against him and the coffee poured over the table.

“Sorry,” said Frankie.

She stretched over the adjoining table which was laid for possible diners. There was a cruet on it with two glass stoppered bottles containing oil and vinegar.

The oddity of Frankie’s proceedings riveted Bobby’s attention. She took the vinegar bottle, emptied out the vinegar into the slop bowl and began to pour coffee into it from her cup.

“Have you gone batty, Frankie?” asked Bobby. “What the devil are you doing?”

“Taking a sample of this coffee for George Arbuthnot to analyse,” said Frankie.

She turned to Moira.

“The game’s up, Moira! The whole thing came to me in a flash as we stood at the door just now! When I jogged Bobby’s elbow and made him spill his coffee I saw your face. You put something in our cups when you sent us running to the door to look for Bassington-ffrench. The game’s up, Mrs. Nicholson or Templeton or whatever you like to call yourself.”

“Templeton?” cried Bobby.

“Look at her face,” cried Frankie. “If she denies it ask her to come to the Vicarage and see if Mrs. Roberts doesn’t identify her.”

Bobby did look at her. He saw that face, that haunting, wistful face transformed by a demoniac rage. That beautiful mouth opened and a stream of foul and hideous curses poured out.

She fumbled in her handbag.

Bobby was still dazed but he acted in the nick of time.

It was his hand that struck the pistol up.

The bullet passed over Frankie's head and buried itself in the wall of the Orient Café.

For the first time in its history one of the waitresses hurried.

With a wild scream she shot out into the street calling: "Help! Murder! Police!"

Thirty-four

LETTER FROM SOUTH AMERICA

It was some weeks later.

Frankie had just received a letter. It bore the stamp of one of the less well-known South American republics.

After reading it through, she passed it to Bobby.

It ran as follows:

Dear Frankie, Really, I congratulate you! You and your young naval friend have shattered the plans of a lifetime. I had everything so nicely arranged.

Would you really like to hear all about it? My lady friend has given me away so thoroughly (spite, I'm afraid—women are invariable spiteful!) that my most damaging admissions won't do me any further harm. Besides, I am starting life again. Roger Bassington-french is dead.

I fancy I've always been what they call a "wrong 'un." Even at Oxford I had a little lapse. Stupid, because it was bound to be found out. The Pater didn't let me down. But he sent me to the Colonies.

I fell in with Moira and her lot fairly soon. She was the real thing. She was an accomplished criminal by the time she was fifteen. When I met her things were getting a bit too hot for her. The American police were on her trail.

She and I liked each other. We decided to make a match of it but we'd a few plans to carry through first.

To begin with, she married Nicholson. By doing so she removed herself to another world and the police lost sight of her. Nicholson was just coming

over to England to start a place for nerve patients. He was looking for a suitable house to buy cheap. Moira got him on to the Grange.

She was still working in with her gang in the dope business. Without knowing it, Nicholson was very useful to her.

I had always had two ambitions. I wanted to be the owner of Merroway and I wanted to command an immense amount of money. A Bassington-french played a great part in the reign of Charles II. Since then the family has dwindled down to mediocrity. I felt capable of playing a great part again. But I had to have money.

Moira made several trips across to Canada to “see her people.” Nicholson adored her and believed anything she told him. Most men did. Owing to the complications of the drug business she travelled under various names. She was travelling as Mrs. Templeton when she met Savage. She knew all about Savage and his enormous wealth and she went all out for him. He was attracted, but he wasn’t attracted enough to lose his common sense.

However, we concocted a plan. You know pretty well the story of that. The man you know as Cayman acted the part of the unfeeling husband. Savage was induced to come down and stay at Tudor Cottage more than once. The third time he came our plans were laid. I needn’t go into all that—you know it. The whole thing went with a bang. Moira cleared the money and went off ostensibly abroad—in reality back to Staverley and the Grange.

In the meantime, I was perfecting my own plans. Henry and young Tommy had to be got out of the way. I had bad luck over Tommy. A couple of perfectly good accidents went wrong. I wasn’t going to fool about with accidents in Henry’s case. He had a good deal of rheumatic pain after an accident in the hunting field. I introduced him to morphia. He took it in all good faith. Henry was a simple soul. He soon became an addict. Our plan was that he should go to the Grange for treatment and should there either “commit suicide” or get hold of an overdose of morphia. Moira would do the business. I shouldn’t be connected with it in any way.

And then that fool Carstairs began to be active. It seems that Savage had written him a line on board ship mentioning Mrs. Templeton and even

enclosing a snapshot of her. Carstairs went on a shooting trip soon afterwards. When he came back from the wilds and heard the news of Savage's death and will, he was frankly incredulous. The story didn't ring true to him. He was certain that Savage wasn't worried about his death and he didn't believe he had any special fear of cancer. Also the wording of the will sounded to him highly uncharacteristic. Savage was a hardheaded business man and while he might be quite ready to have an affair with a pretty woman, Carstairs didn't believe he would leave a vast sum of money to her and the rest to charity. The charity touch was my idea. It sounded so respectable and unfishy.

Carstairs came over here, determined to look into the business. He began to poke about.

And straightaway we had a piece of bad luck. Some friends brought him down to lunch and he saw a picture of Moira on the piano, and recognized it as the woman of the snapshot that Savage had sent him. He went down to Chipping Somerton and started to poke about there.

Moira and I began to get the wind up—I sometimes think unnecessarily. But Carstairs was a shrewd chap.

I went down to Chipping Somerton after him. He failed to trace the cook—Rose Chudleigh. She'd gone to the north, but he tracked down Evans, found out her married name and started off for Marchbolt.

Things were getting serious. If Evans identified Mrs. Templeton and Mrs. Nicholson as one and the same person matters were going to become difficult. Also, she'd been in the house some time and we weren't sure quite how much she might know.

I decided that Carstairs had got to be suppressed. He was making a serious nuisance of himself. Chance came to my aid. I was close behind him when the mist came up. I crept up nearer and a sudden push did the job.

But I was still in a dilemma. I didn't know what incriminating matter he might have on him. However, your young naval friend played into my hands very nicely. I was left alone with the body for a short time—quite

enough for my purpose. He had a photograph of Moira—he'd got it from the photographers—presumably for identification. I removed that and any letters or identifying matter. Then I planted the photograph of one of the gang.

All went well. The pseudo sister and brother-in-law came down and identified him. All seemed to have gone off satisfactorily. And then your friend Bobby upset things. It seemed that Carstairs had recovered consciousness before he died and that he had been saying things. He'd mentioned Evans—and Evans was actually in service at the Vicarage.

I admit we were getting rattled by now. We lost our heads a bit. Moira insisted that he must be put out of the way. We tried one plan which failed. Then Moira said she'd see to it. She went down to Marchbolt in the car. She seized a chance very neatly—slipped some morphia into his beer when he was asleep. But the young devil didn't succumb. That was pure bad luck.

As I told you, it was Nicholson's cross-questioning that made me wonder if you were just what you seemed. But imagine the shock that Moira had when she was creeping out to meet me one evening and came face to face with Bobby! She recognized him at once—she'd had a good look when he was asleep that day. No wonder she was so scared she nearly passed out. Then she realized that it wasn't her he suspected and she rallied and played up.

She came to the inn and told him a few tall stories. He swallowed them like a lamb. She pretended that Alan Carstairs was an old lover and she piled it on thick about her fear of Nicholson. Also she did her best to disabuse you of your suspicions concerning me. I did the same to you and disparaged her as a weak, helpless creature—Moira, who had the nerve to put any number of people out of the way without turning a hair!

The position was serious. We'd got the money. We were getting on well with the Henry plan. I was in no hurry for Tommy. I could afford to wait a bit. Nicholson could easily be got out of the way when the time came. But you and Bobby were a menace. You'd got your suspicions fixed on the Grange.

It may interest you to know that Henry didn't commit suicide. I killed him! When I was talking to you in the garden I saw there was no time to waste—and I went straight in and saw to things.

The aeroplane that came over gave me my chance. I went into the study, sat down by Henry who was writing and said: "Look here, old man—" and shot him! The noise of the plane drowned the sound. Then I wrote a nice affecting letter, wiped off my fingerprints from the revolver, pressed Henry's hand round it and let it drop to the floor. I put the key of the study in Henry's pocket and went out, locking the door from the outside with the dining room key which fits the lock.

I won't go into details of the neat little squib arrangement in the chimney which was timed to go off four minutes later.

Everything went beautifully. You and I were in the garden together and heard the "shot." A perfect suicide! The only person who laid himself open to suspicion was poor old Nicholson. The ass came back for a stick or something!

Of course Bobby's knight errantry was a bit difficult for Moira. So she just went off to the cottage. We fancied that Nicholson's explanation of his wife's absence would be sure to make you suspicious.

Where Moira really showed her mettle was at the cottage. She realized from the noise upstairs that I'd been knocked out, and she quickly injected a large dose of morphia into herself and lay down on the bed. After you all went down to telephone she nipped up to the attic and cut me free. Then the morphia took effect and by the time the doctor arrived she was genuinely off in a hypnotic sleep.

But all the same her nerve was going. She was afraid you'd get on to Evans and get the hang of how Savage's will and suicide was worked. Also she was afraid that Carstairs had written to Evans before he came to Marchbolt. She pretended to go up to a London nursing home. Instead, she hurried down to Marchbolt—and met you on the doorstep! Then her one idea was to get you both out of the way. Her methods were crude to the last degree, but I believe she'd have got away with it. I doubt if the waitress would have

been able to remember much about what the woman who came in with you was like. Moira would have got away back to London and lain low in a nursing home. With you and Bobby out of the way the whole thing would have died down.

But you spotted her—and she lost her head. And then at the trial she dragged me into it!

Perhaps I was getting a little tired of her. . . .

But I had no idea that she knew it.

You see, she had got the money—my money! Once I had married her I might have got tired of her. I like variety.

So here I am starting life again. . . .

And all owing to you and that extremely objectionable young man Bobby Jones.

But I've no doubt I shall make good!

Or ought it to be bad, not good?

I haven't reformed yet.

But if at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.

Goodbye, my dear—or, perhaps au revoir. One never knows, does one?

Your affectionate enemy, the bold, bad villain of the piece,

Roger Bassington-ffrench.

Thirty-five

NEWS FROM THE VICARAGE

Bobby handed back the letter and with a sigh Frankie took it.

“He’s really a very remarkable person,” she said.

“You always had a fancy for him,” said Bobby coldly.

“He had charm,” said Frankie. “So had Moira,” she added.

Bobby blushed.

“It was very queer that all the time the clue to the whole thing should have been in the Vicarage,” he said. “You do know, don’t you, Frankie, that Carstairs had actually written to Evans—to Mrs. Roberts, that is?”

Frankie nodded.

“Telling her that he was coming to see her and that he wanted information about Mrs. Templeton whom he had reason to believe was a dangerous international crook wanted by the police.

“And then when he’s pushed over the cliff she doesn’t put two and two together,” said Bobby bitterly.

“That’s because the man who went over the cliff was Pritchard,” said Frankie. “That identification was a very clever bit of work. If a man called Pritchard is pushed over, how could it be a man called Carstairs? That’s how the ordinary mind works.”

“The funny thing is that she recognized Cayman,” went on Bobby. “At least she caught a glimpse of him when Roberts was letting him in and asked him who it was. And he said it was Mr. Cayman and she said, ‘Funny, he’s the dead spit of a gentleman I used to be in service with.’ ”

“Can you beat it?” said Frankie.

“Even Bassington-french gave himself away once or twice,” she continued. “But like an idiot I never spotted it.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, when Sylvia said that the picture in the paper was very like Carstairs he said there wasn’t much likeness really—showing he’d seen the dead man. And then later he said to me that he never saw the dead man’s face.”

“How on earth did you spot Moira, Frankie?”

“I think it was the description of Mrs. Templeton,” said Frankie dreamily. “Everyone said she was ‘such a nice lady.’ Now that didn’t seem to fit with the Cayman woman. No servant would describe her a ‘nice lady.’ And then we got to the Vicarage and Moira was there and it suddenly came to me—Suppose Moira was Mrs. Templeton?”

“Very bright of you.”

“I’m very sorry for Sylvia,” said Frankie. “With Moira dragging Roger into it, it’s been a terrible lot of publicity for her. But Dr. Nicholson has stuck by her and I shouldn’t be at all surprised if they ended by making a match of it.”

“Everything seems to have ended very fortunately,” said Bobby. “Badger’s doing well at the garage—thanks to your father, and also thanks to your father, I’ve got this perfectly marvellous job.”

“Is it a marvellous job?”

“Managing a coffee estate out in Kenya on a whacking big screw? I should think so. It’s just the sort of thing I used to dream about.”

He paused.

“People come out to Kenya a good deal on trips,” he said with intention.

“Quite a lot of people live out there,” said Frankie demurely.

“Oh! Frankie, you wouldn’t?” He blushed, stammered, recovered himself.
“W-w-would you?”

“I would,” said Frankie. “I mean, I will.”

“I’ve been keen about you always,” said Bobby in a stifled voice. “I used to be miserable—knowing, I mean, that it was no good.”

“I suppose that’s what made you so rude that day on the golf links?”

“Yes, I was feeling pretty grim.”

“H’m,” said Frankie. “What about Moira?”

Bobby looked uncomfortable.

“Her face did sort of get me,” he admitted.

“It’s a better face than mine,” said Frankie generously.

“It isn’t—but it sort of ‘haunted’ me. And then, when we were up in the attic and you were so plucky about things—well, Moira just faded out. I was hardly interested in what happened to her. It was you—only you. You were simply splendid! So frightfully plucky.”

“I wasn’t feeling plucky inside,” said Frankie. “I was all shaking. But I wanted you to admire me.”

“I did, darling. I do. I always have. I always shall. Are you sure you won’t hate it out in Kenya?”

“I shall adore it. I was fed up with England.”

“Frankie.”

“Bobby.”

“If you will come in here,” said the Vicar, opening the door and ushering in the advance guard of the Dorcas Society.

He shut the door precipitately and apologized.

“My—er—one of my sons. He is—er—engaged.”

A member of the Dorcas Society said archly that it looked like it.

“A good boy,” said the Vicar. “Inclined at one time not to take life seriously. But he has improved very much of late. He is going out to manage a coffee estate in Kenya.”

Said one member of the Dorcas Society to another in a whisper:

“Did you see? It was Lady Frances Derwent he was kissing?”

In an hour’s time the news was all over Marchbolt.

And Then There Were None (1939)

By Agatha Christie

Epigraph

Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;

One choked his little self and then there were Nine.

Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;

One overslept himself and then there were Eight.

Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;

One said he'd stay there and then there were Seven.

Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks;

One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six.

Six little soldier boys playing with a hive;

A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five.

Five little soldier boys going in for law;

One got in Chancery and then there were Four.

Four little soldier boys going out to sea;

A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the Zoo;

A big bear hugged one and then there were Two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun;

One got frizzled up and then there was One.

One little soldier boy left all alone;

He went and hanged himself

And then there were None.

Frank Green, 1869

One

I

In the corner of a first-class smoking carriage, Mr. Justice Wargrave, lately retired from the bench, puffed at a cigar and ran an interested eye through the political news in *The Times*.

He laid the paper down and glanced out of the window. They were running now through Somerset. He glanced at his watch—another two hours to go.

He went over in his mind all that had appeared in the papers about Soldier Island. There had been its original purchase by an American millionaire who was crazy about yachting—and an account of the luxurious modern house he had built on this little island off the Devon coast. The unfortunate fact that the new third wife of the American millionaire was a bad sailor had led to the subsequent putting up of the house and island for sale. Various glowing advertisements of it had appeared in the papers. Then came the first bald statement that it had been bought—by a Mr. Owen. After that the rumours of the gossip writers had started. Soldier Island had really been bought by Miss Gabrielle Turl, the Hollywood film star! She wanted to spend some months there free from all publicity! *Busy Bee* had hinted delicately that it was to be an abode for Royalty??! Mr. Merryweather had had it whispered to him that it had been bought for a honeymoon—Young Lord L—had surrendered to Cupid at last! Jonas knew for a fact that it had been purchased by the Admiralty with a view to carrying out some very hush-hush experiments!

Definitely, Soldier Island was news!

From his pocket Mr. Justice Wargrave drew out a letter. The handwriting was practically illegible but words here and there stood out with unexpected clarity. Dearest Lawrence ... such years since I heard anything of you ... must come to Soldier Island ... the most enchanting place ... so much to talk over ... old days ... communion with nature ... bask in sunshine ... 12.40 from Paddington ... meet you at Oakbridge ... and his correspondent signed herself with a flourish his ever Constance Culmington.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cast back in his mind to remember when exactly he had last seen Lady Constance Culmington. It must be seven—no, eight years ago. She had then been going to Italy to bask in the sun and be at one with Nature and the contadini. Later, he had heard, she had proceeded to Syria where she proposed to bask in a yet stronger sun and live at one with Nature and the bedouin.

Constance Culmington, he reflected to himself, was exactly the sort of woman who would buy an island and surround herself with mystery! Nodding his head in gentle approval of his logic, Mr. Justice Wargrave allowed his head to nod....

He slept....

II

Vera Claythorne, in a third-class carriage with five other travellers in it, leaned her head back and shut her eyes. How hot it was travelling by train today! It would be nice to get to the sea! Really a great piece of luck getting this job. When you wanted a holiday post it nearly always meant looking after a swarm of children—

secretarial holiday posts were much more difficult to get. Even the agency hadn't held out much hope.

And then the letter had come.

"I have received your name from the Skilled Women's Agency together with their recommendation. I understand they know you personally. I shall be glad to pay you the salary you ask and shall expect you to take up your duties on August 8th. The train is the 12.40 from Paddington and you will be met at Oakbridge station. I enclose five £1 notes for expenses.

Yours truly,
Una Nancy Owen."

And at the top was the stamped address, Soldier Island, Sticklehaven, Devon....

Soldier Island! Why, there had been nothing else in the papers lately! All sorts of hints and interesting rumours. Though probably they were mostly untrue. But the house had certainly been built by a millionaire and was said to be absolutely the last word in luxury.

Vera Claythorne, tired by a recent strenuous term at school, thought to herself, "Being a games mistress in a third-class school isn't much of a catch ... If only I could get a job at some decent school."

And then, with a cold feeling round her heart, she thought: "But I'm lucky to have even this. After all, people don't like a Coroner's Inquest, even if the Coroner did acquit me of all blame!"

He had even complimented her on her presence of mind and courage, she remembered. For an inquest it couldn't have gone

better. And Mrs. Hamilton had been kindness itself to her—only Hugo—but she wouldn't think of Hugo!

Suddenly, in spite of the heat in the carriage she shivered and wished she wasn't going to the sea. A picture rose clearly before her mind. Cyril's head, bobbing up and down, swimming to the rock ... up and down—up and down ... and herself, swimming in easy practised strokes after him—cleaving her way through the water but knowing, only too surely, that she wouldn't be in time....

The sea—its deep warm blue—mornings spent lying out on the sands—Hugo—Hugo who had said he loved her....

She must not think of Hugo....

She opened her eyes and frowned across at the man opposite her. A tall man with a brown face, light eyes set rather close together and an arrogant, almost cruel mouth.

She thought to herself:

I bet he's been to some interesting parts of the world and seen some interesting things....

III

Philip Lombard, summing up the girl opposite in a mere flash of his quick moving eyes thought to himself:

“Quite attractive—a bit schoolmistressy perhaps.”

A cool customer, he should imagine—and one who could hold her own—in love or war. He'd rather like to take her on....

He frowned. No, cut out all that kind of stuff. This was business. He'd got to keep his mind on the job.

What exactly was up, he wondered? That little Jew had been damned mysterious.

"Take it or leave it, Captain Lombard."

He had said thoughtfully:

"A hundred guineas, eh?"

He had said it in a casual way as though a hundred guineas was nothing to him. A hundred guineas when he was literally down to his last square meal! He had fancied, though, that the little Jew had not been deceived—that was the damnable part about Jews, you couldn't deceive them about money—they knew!

He said in the same casual tone:

"And you can't give me any further information?"

Mr. Isaac Morris had shaken his little bald head very positively.

"No, Captain Lombard, the matter rests there. It is understood by my client that your reputation is that of a good man in a tight place. I am empowered to hand you one hundred guineas in return for which you will travel to Sticklehaven, Devon. The nearest station is Oakbridge, you will be met there and motored to Sticklehaven where a motor launch will convey you to Soldier Island. There you will hold yourself at the disposal of my client."

Lombard had said abruptly:

“For how long?”

“Not longer than a week at most.”

Fingering his small moustache, Captain Lombard said:

“You understand I can’t undertake anything—illegal?”

He had darted a very sharp glance at the other as he had spoken. There had been a very faint smile on the thick Semitic lips of Mr. Morris as he answered gravely:

“If anything illegal is proposed, you will, of course, be at perfect liberty to withdraw.”

Damn the smooth little brute, he had smiled! It was as though he knew very well that in Lombard’s past actions legality had not always been a *sine qua non*....

Lombard’s own lips parted in a grin.

By Jove, he’d sailed pretty near the wind once or twice! But he’d always got away with it! There wasn’t much he drew the line at really....

No, there wasn’t much he’d draw the line at. He fancied that he was going to enjoy himself at Soldier Island....

IV

In a non-smoking carriage Miss Emily Brent sat very upright as was her custom. She was sixty-five and she did not approve of

lounging. Her father, a Colonel of the old school, had been particular about deportment.

The present generation was shamelessly lax—in their carriage, and in every other way....

Enveloped in an aura of righteousness and unyielding principles, Miss Brent sat in her crowded third-class carriage and triumphed over its discomfort and its heat. Everyone made such a fuss over things nowadays! They wanted injections before they had teeth pulled—they took drugs if they couldn't sleep—they wanted easy chairs and cushions and the girls allowed their figures to slop about anyhow and lay about half naked on the beaches in summer.

Miss Brent's lips set closely. She would like to make an example of certain people.

She remembered last year's summer holiday. This year, however, it would be quite different. Soldier Island....

Mentally she re-read the letter which she had already read so many times.

“Dear Miss Brent,

I do hope you remember me? We were together at Belhaven Guest House in August some years ago, and we seemed to have so much in common.

I am starting a guest house of my own on an island off the coast of Devon. I think there is really an opening for a place where there is good plain cooking and a nice old-fashioned type of person. None of this nudity and gramophones half the night. I shall be very glad

if you could see your way to spending your summer holiday on Soldier Island—quite free—as my guest. Would early in August suit you? Perhaps the 8th.

Yours sincerely,
U.N.O—.”

What was the name? The signature was rather difficult to read. Emily Brent thought impatiently: “So many people write their signatures quite illegibly.”

She let her mind run back over the people at Belhaven. She had been there two summers running. There had been that nice middle-aged woman—Miss—Miss—now what was her name?—her father had been a Canon. And there had been a Mrs. Olton—Ormen—No, surely it was Oliver! Yes—Oliver.

Soldier Island! There had been things in the paper about Soldier Island—something about a film star—or was it an American millionaire?

Of course often those places went very cheap— islands didn’t suit everybody. They thought the idea was romantic but when they came to live there they realized the disadvantages and were only too glad to sell.

Emily Brent thought to herself: “I shall be getting a free holiday at any rate.”

With her income so much reduced and so many dividends not being paid, that was indeed something to take into consideration. If only she could remember a little more about Mrs.—or was it Miss—Oliver?

V

General Macarthur looked out of the carriage window. The train was just coming into Exeter, where he had to change. Damnable, these slow branch line trains! This place, Soldier Island, was really no distance at all as the crow flies.

He hadn't got it clear who this fellow Owen was. A friend of Spoof Leggard's, apparently—and of Johnnie Dyer's.

“—One or two of your old cronies are coming—would like to have a talk over old times.”

Well, he'd enjoy a chat about old times. He'd had a fancy lately that fellows were rather fighting shy of him. All owing to that damned rumour! By God, it was pretty hard—nearly thirty years ago now! Armitage had talked, he supposed. Damned young pup! What did he know about it? Oh, well, no good brooding about these things! One fancied things sometimes—fancied a fellow was looking at you queerly.

This Soldier Island, now, he'd be interested to see it. A lot of gossip flying about. Looked as though there might be something in the rumour that the Admiralty or the War Office or the Air Force had got hold of it....

Young Elmer Robson, the American millionaire, had actually built the place. Spent thousands on it, so it was said. Every mortal luxury....

Exeter! And an hour to wait! And he didn't want to wait. He wanted to get on....

VI

Dr. Armstrong was driving his Morris across Salisbury Plain. He was very tired ... Success had its penalties. There had been a time when he had sat in his consulting room in Harley Street, correctly apparelled, surrounded with the most up to date appliances and the most luxurious furnishings and waited—waited through the empty days for his venture to succeed or fail....

Well, it had succeeded! He'd been lucky! Lucky and skilful of course. He was a good man at his job—but that wasn't enough for success. You had to have luck as well. And he'd had it! An accurate diagnosis, a couple of grateful women patients—women with money and position—and word had got about. "You ought to try Armstrong—quite a young man—but so clever—Pam had been to all sorts of people for years and he put his finger on the trouble at once!" The ball had started rolling.

And now Dr. Armstrong had definitely arrived. His days were full. He had little leisure. And so, on this August morning, he was glad that he was leaving London and going to be for some days on an island off the Devon coast. Not that it was exactly a holiday. The letter he had received had been rather vague in its terms, but there was nothing vague about the accompanying cheque. A whacking fee. These Owens must be rolling in money. Some little difficulty, it seemed, a husband who was worried about his wife's health and wanted a report on it without her being alarmed. She wouldn't hear of seeing a doctor. Her nerves—

Nerves! The doctor's eyebrows went up. These women and their nerves! Well, it was good for business after all. Half the women who consulted him had nothing the matter with them but boredom,

but they wouldn't thank you for telling them so! And one could usually find something.

"A slightly uncommon condition of the (some long word) nothing at all serious—but it needs just putting right. A simple treatment."

Well, medicine was mostly faith-healing when it came to it. And he had a good manner—he could inspire hope and belief.

Lucky that he'd managed to pull himself together in time after that business ten—no, fifteen years ago. It had been a near thing, that! He'd been going to pieces. The shock had pulled him together. He'd cut out drink altogether. By Jove, it had been a near thing, though....

With a devastating ear-splitting blast on the horn an enormous Super-Sports Dalmain car rushed past him at eighty miles an hour. Dr. Armstrong nearly went into the hedge. One of these young fools who tore round the country. He hated them. That had been a near shave, too. Damned young fool!

VII

Tony Marston, roaring down into Mere, thought to himself:

"The amount of cars crawling about the roads is frightful. Always something blocking your way. And they will drive in the middle of the road! Pretty hopeless driving in England, anyway.... Not like France where you really could let out...."

Should he stop here for a drink, or push on? Heaps of time! Only another hundred miles and a bit to go. He'd have a gin and ginger beer. Fizzing hot day!

This island place ought to be rather good fun—if the weather lasted. Who were these Owens, he wondered? Rich and stinking, probably. Badger was rather good at nosing people like that out. Of course, he had to, poor old chap, with no money of his own....

Hope they'd do one well in drinks. Never knew with these fellows who'd made their money and weren't born to it. Pity that story about Gabrielle Turl having bought Soldier Island wasn't true. He'd like to have been in with that film star crowd.

Oh, well, he supposed there'd be a few girls there....

Coming out of the hotel, he stretched himself, yawned, looked up at the blue sky and climbed into the Dalmain.

Several young women looked at him admiringly—his six feet of well-proportioned body, his crisp hair, tanned face, and intensely blue eyes.

He let in the clutch with a roar and leapt up the narrow street. Old men and errand boys jumped for safety. The latter looked after the car admiringly.

Anthony Marston proceeded on his triumphal progress.

VIII

Mr. Blore was in the slow train from Plymouth. There was only one other person in his carriage, an elderly seafaring gentleman with a bleary eye. At the present moment he had dropped off to sleep.

Mr. Blore was writing carefully in a little notebook.

“That’s the lot,” he muttered to himself. “Emily Brent, Vera Claythorne, Dr. Armstrong, Anthony Marston, old Justice Wargrave, Philip Lombard, General Macarthur, C.M.G., D.S.O. Manservant and wife: Mr. and Mrs. Rogers.”

He closed the notebook and put it back in his pocket. He glanced over at the corner and the slumbering man.

“Had one over the eight,” diagnosed Mr. Blore accurately.

He went over things carefully and conscientiously in his mind.

“Job ought to be easy enough,” he ruminated. “Don’t see how I can slip up on it. Hope I look all right.”

He stood up and scrutinized himself anxiously in the glass. The face reflected there was of a slightly military cast with a moustache. There was very little expression in it. The eyes were grey and set rather close together.

“Might be a Major,” said Mr. Blore. “No, I forgot. There’s that old military gent. He’d spot me at once.”

“South Africa,” said Mr. Blore, “that’s my line! None of these people have anything to do with South Africa, and I’ve just been reading that travel folder so I can talk about it all right.”

Fortunately there were all sorts and types of colonials. As a man of means from South Africa, Mr. Blore felt that he could enter into any society unchallenged.

Soldier Island. He remembered Soldier Island as a boy ... Smelly sort of rock covered with gulls—stood about a mile from the coast.

Funny idea to go and build a house on it! Awful in bad weather!
But millionaires were full of whims!

The old man in the corner woke up and said:

“You can’t never tell at sea—never!”

Mr. Blore said soothingly, “That’s right. You can’t.”

The old man hiccupped twice and said plaintively:

“There’s a squall coming.”

Mr. Blore said:

“No, no, mate, it’s a lovely day.”

The old man said angrily:

“There’s a squall ahead. I can smell it.”

“Maybe you’re right,” said Mr. Blore pacifically.

The train stopped at a station and the old fellow rose unsteadily.

“Thish where I get out.” He fumbled with the window. Mr. Blore helped him.

The old man stood in the doorway. He raised a solemn hand and blinked his bleary eyes.

“Watch and pray,” he said. “Watch and pray. The day of judgment is at hand.”

He collapsed through the doorway on to the platform. From a recumbent position he looked up at Mr. Blore and said with immense dignity:

“I’m talking to you, young man. The day of judgment is very close at hand.”

Subsiding on to his seat Mr. Blore thought to himself: He’s nearer the day of judgment than I am!

But there, as it happens, he was wrong....

Two

I

Outside Oakbridge station a little group of people stood in momentary uncertainty. Behind them stood porters with suitcases. One of these called, “Jim!”

The driver of one of the taxis stepped forward.

“You’m for Soldier Island, maybe?” he asked in a soft Devon voice. Four voices gave assent—and then immediately afterwards gave quick surreptitious glances at each other.

The driver said, addressing his remarks to Mr. Justice Wargrave as the senior member of the party:

“There are two taxis here, sir. One of them must wait till the slow train from Exeter gets in—a matter of five minutes—there’s one gentleman coming by that. Perhaps one of you wouldn’t mind waiting? You’d be more comfortable that way.”

Vera Claythorne, her own secretarial position clear in her mind, spoke at once.

“I’ll wait,” she said, “if you will go on?” She looked at the other three, her glance and voice had that slight suggestion of command in it that comes from having occupied a position of authority. She might have been directing which tennis sets the girls were to play in.

Miss Brent said stiffly, "Thank you," bent her head and entered one of the taxis, the door of which the driver was holding open.

Mr. Justice Wargrave followed her.

Captain Lombard said:

"I'll wait with Miss—"

"Claythorne," said Vera.

"My name is Lombard, Philip Lombard."

The porters were piling luggage on the taxi. Inside, Mr. Justice Wargrave said with due legal caution:

"Beautiful weather we are having."

Miss Brent said:

"Yes, indeed."

A very distinguished old gentleman, she thought to herself. Quite unlike the usual type of man in seaside guest houses. Evidently Mrs. or Miss Oliver had good connections....

Mr. Justice Wargrave inquired:

"Do you know this part of the world well?"

"I have been to Cornwall and to Torquay, but this is my first visit to this part of Devon."

The judge said:

“I also am unacquainted with this part of the world.”

The taxi drove off.

The driver of the second taxi said:

“Like to sit inside while you’re waiting?”

Vera said decisively:

“Not at all.”

Captain Lombard smiled. He said:

“That sunny wall looks more attractive. Unless you’d rather go inside the station?”

“No, indeed. It’s so delightful to get out of that stuffy train.”

He answered:

“Yes, travelling by train is rather trying in this weather.”

Vera said conventionally:

“I do hope it lasts—the weather, I mean. Our English summers are so treacherous.”

With a slight lack of originality Lombard asked:

“Do you know this part of the world well?”

“No, I’ve never been here before.” She added quickly, conscientiously determined to make her position clear at once, “I

haven't even seen my employer yet."

"Your employer?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Owen's secretary."

"Oh, I see." Just imperceptibly his manner changed. It was slightly more assured—easier in tone. He said: "Isn't that rather unusual?"

Vera laughed.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Her own secretary was suddenly taken ill and she wired to an agency for a substitute and they sent me."

"So that was it. And suppose you don't like the post when you've got there?"

Vera laughed again.

"Oh, it's only temporary—a holiday post. I've got a permanent job at a girls' school. As a matter of fact, I'm frightfully thrilled at the prospect of seeing Soldier Island. There's been such a lot about it in the papers. Is it really very fascinating?"

Lombard said:

"I don't know. I haven't seen it."

"Oh, really? The Owens are frightfully keen on it, I suppose. What are they like? Do tell me."

Lombard thought: Awkward, this—am I supposed to have met them or not? He said quickly:

“There’s a wasp crawling up your arm. No—keep quite still.” He made a convincing pounce. “There. It’s gone!”

“Oh, thank you. There are a lot of wasps about this summer.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s the heat. Who are we waiting for, do you know?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

The loud drawn-out scream of an approaching train was heard. Lombard said:

“That will be the train now.”

It was a tall soldierly old man who appeared at the exit from the platform. His grey hair was clipped close and he had a neatly trimmed white moustache.

His porter, staggering slightly under the weight of the solid leather suitcase, indicated Vera and Lombard.

Vera came forward in a competent manner. She said:

“I am Mrs. Owen’s secretary. There is a car here waiting.” She added, “This is Mr. Lombard.”

The faded blue eyes, shrewd in spite of their age, sized up Lombard. For a moment a judgment showed in them—had there been any one to read it.

“Good-looking fellow. Something just a little wrong about him....”

The three of them got into the waiting taxi. They drove through the sleepy streets of little Oakbridge and continued about a mile on the main Plymouth road. Then they plunged into a maze of cross-country lanes, steep, green and narrow.

General Macarthur said:

“Don’t know this part of Devon at all. My little place is in East Devon—just on the borderline of Dorset.”

Vera said:

“It really is lovely here. The hills and the red earth and everything so green and luscious-looking.”

Philip Lombard said critically:

“It’s a bit shut in ... I like open country myself. Where you can see what’s coming....”

General Macarthur said to him:

“You’ve seen a bit of the world, I fancy?”

Lombard shrugged his shoulders disparagingly.

“I’ve knocked about here and there, sir.”

He thought to himself: “He’ll ask me now if I was old enough to be in the War. These old boys always do.”

But General Macarthur did not mention the War.

II

They came up over a steep hill and down a zigzag track to Sticklehaven—a mere cluster of cottages with a fishing boat or two drawn up on the beach.

Illuminated by the setting sun, they had their first glimpse of Soldier Island jutting up out of the sea to the south.

Vera said, surprised:

“It’s a long way out.”

She had pictured it differently, close to shore, crowned with a beautiful white house. But there was no house visible, only the boldly silhouetted rock with its faint resemblance to a giant head. There was something sinister about it. She shivered faintly.

Outside a little inn, the Seven Stars, three people were sitting. There was the hunched elderly figure of the judge, the upright form of Miss Brent, and a third man—a big bluff man who came forward and introduced himself.

“Thought we might as well wait for you,” he said. “Make one trip of it. Allow me to introduce myself. Name’s Davis. Natal, South Africa’s my natal spot, ha, ha!”

He laughed breezily.

Mr. Justice Wargrave looked at him with active malevolence. He seemed to be wishing that he could order the court to be cleared. Miss Emily Brent was clearly not sure if she liked Colonials.

“Any one care for a little nip before we embark?” asked Mr. Davis hospitably.

Nobody assenting to this proposition, Mr. Davis turned and held up a finger.

“Mustn’t delay, then. Our good host and hostess will be expecting us,” he said.

He might have noticed that a curious constraint came over the other members of the party. It was as though the mention of their host and hostess had a curiously paralysing effect upon the guests.

In response to Davis’s beckoning finger, a man detached himself from a nearby wall against which he was leaning and came up to them. His rolling gait proclaimed him as a man of the sea. He had a weather-beaten face and dark eyes with a slightly evasive expression. He spoke in his soft Devon voice.

“Will you be ready to be starting for the island, ladies and gentlemen? The boat’s waiting. There’s two gentlemen coming by car but Mr. Owen’s orders was not to wait for them as they might arrive at any time.”

The party got up. Their guide led them along a small stone jetty. Alongside it a motorboat was lying.

Emily Brent said:

“That’s a very small boat.”

The boat’s owner said persuasively:

“She’s a fine boat that, Ma’am. You could go to Plymouth in her as easy as winking.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said sharply:

“There are a good many of us.”

“She’d take double the number, sir.”

Philip Lombard said in his pleasant easy voice:

“It’s quite all right. Glorious weather—no swell.”

Rather doubtfully, Miss Brent permitted herself to be helped into the boat. The others followed suit. There was as yet no fraternizing among the party. It was as though each member of it was puzzled by the other members.

They were just about to cast loose when their guide paused, boat-hook in hand.

Down the steep track into the village a car was coming. A car so fantastically powerful, so superlatively beautiful that it had all the nature of an apparition. At the wheel sat a young man, his hair blown back by the wind. In the blaze of the evening light he looked, not a man, but a young God, a Hero God out of some Northern Saga.

He touched the horn and a great roar of sound echoed from the rocks of the bay.

It was a fantastic moment. In it, Anthony Marston seemed to be something more than mortal. Afterwards more than one of those present remembered that moment.

III

Fred Narracott sat by the engine thinking to himself that this was a queer lot. Not at all his idea of what Mr. Owen's guests were likely to be. He'd expected something altogether more classy. Tugged up women and gentlemen in yachting costume and all very rich and important looking.

Not at all like Mr. Elmer Robson's parties. A faint grin came to Fred Narracott's lips as he remembered the millionaire's guests. That had been a party if you like—and the drink they'd got through!

This Mr. Owen must be a very different sort of gentleman. Funny, it was, thought Fred, that he'd never yet set eyes on Owen—or his Missus either. Never been down here yet he hadn't. Everything ordered and paid for by that Mr. Morris. Instructions always very clear and payment prompt, but it was odd, all the same. The papers said there was some mystery about Owen. Mr. Narracott agreed with them.

Perhaps after all, it was Miss Gabrielle Turl who had bought the island. But that theory departed from him as he surveyed his passengers. Not this lot—none of them looked likely to have anything to do with a film star.

He summed them up dispassionately.

One old maid—the sour kind—he knew them well enough. She was a tartar he could bet. Old military gentleman—real Army look about him. Nice-looking young lady—but the ordinary kind, not glamorous—no Hollywood touch about her. That bluff cheery gent—he wasn't a real gentleman. Retired tradesman, that's what he is, thought Fred Narracott. The other gentleman, the lean hungry-

looking gentleman with the quick eyes, he was a queer one, he was. Just possible he might have something to do with the pictures.

No, there was only one satisfactory passenger in the boat. The last gentleman, the one who had arrived in the car (and what a car! A car such as had never been seen in Sticklehaven before. Must have cost hundreds and hundreds, a car like that). He was the right kind. Born to money, he was. If the party had been all like him ... he'd understand it....

Queer business when you came to think of it—the whole thing was queer—very queer....

IV

The boat churned its way round the rock. Now at last the house came into view. The south side of the island was quite different. It shelved gently down to the sea. The house was there facing south—low and square and modern looking with rounded windows letting in all the light.

An exciting house—a house that lived up to expectation!

Fred Narracott shut off the engine, they nosed their way gently into a little natural inlet between rocks.

Philip Lombard said sharply:

“Must be difficult to land here in dirty weather.”

Fred Narracott said cheerfully:

“Can’t land on Soldier Island when there’s a southeasterly. Sometimes ’tis cut off for a week or more.”

Vera Claythorne thought:

“The catering must be very difficult. That’s the worst of an island. All the domestic problems are so worrying.”

The boat grated against the rocks. Fred Narracott jumped out and he and Lombard helped the others to alight. Narracott made the boat fast to a ring in the rock. Then he led the way up steps cut in the cliff.

General Macarthur said:

“Ha! delightful spot!”

But he felt uneasy. Damned odd sort of place.

As the party ascended the steps and came out on a terrace above, their spirits revived. In the open doorway of the house a correct butler was awaiting them, and something about his gravity reassured them. And then the house itself was really most attractive, the view from the terrace magnificent....

The butler came forward bowing slightly. He was a tall lank man, grey-haired and very respectable. He said:

“Will you come this way, please.”

In the wide hall drinks stood ready. Rows of bottles. Anthony Marston’s spirits cheered up a little. He’d just been thinking this was a rum kind of show. None of his lot! What could old Badger

have been thinking about to let him in for this? However, the drinks were all right. Plenty of ice, too.

What was it the butler chap was saying?

Mr. Owen—unfortunately delayed—unable to get here till tomorrow. Instructions—everything they wanted—if they would like to go to their rooms? ... dinner would be at eight o'clock....

V

Vera had followed Mrs. Rogers upstairs. The woman had thrown open a door at the end of a passage and Vera had walked into a delightful bedroom with a big window that opened wide upon the sea and another looking east. She uttered a quick exclamation of pleasure.

Mrs. Rogers was saying:

“I hope you’ve got everything you want, Miss?”

Vera looked round. Her luggage had been brought up and had been unpacked. At one side of the room a door stood open into a pale blue-tiled bathroom.

She said quickly:

“Yes, everything, I think.”

“You’ll ring the bell if you want anything, Miss?”

Mrs. Rogers had a flat monotonous voice. Vera looked at her curiously. What a white bloodless ghost of a woman! Very

respectable-looking, with her hair dragged back from her face and her black dress. Queer light eyes that shifted the whole time from place to place.

Vera thought:

“She looks frightened of her own shadow.”

Yes, that was it—frightened!

She looked like a woman who walked in mortal fear....

A little shiver passed down Vera’s back. What on earth was the woman afraid of?

She said pleasantly:

“I’m Mrs. Owen’s new secretary. I expect you know that.”

Mrs. Rogers said:

“No, Miss, I don’t know anything. Just a list of the ladies and gentlemen and what rooms they were to have.”

Vera said:

“Mrs. Owen didn’t mention me?”

Mrs. Rogers’ eyelashes flickered.

“I haven’t seen Mrs. Owen—not yet. We only came here two days ago.”

Extraordinary people, these Owens, thought Vera. Aloud she said:

“What staff is there here?”

“Just me and Rogers, Miss.”

Vera frowned. Eight people in the house—ten with the host and hostess—and only one married couple to do for them.

Mrs. Rogers said:

“I’m a good cook and Rogers is handy about the house. I didn’t know, of course, that there was to be such a large party.”

Vera said:

“But you can manage?”

“Oh yes, Miss, I can manage. If there’s to be large parties often perhaps Mrs. Owen could get extra help in.”

Vera said, “I expect so.”

Mrs. Rogers turned to go. Her feet moved noiselessly over the ground. She drifted from the room like a shadow.

Vera went over to the window and sat down on the window seat. She was faintly disturbed. Everything—somehow—was a little queer. The absence of the Owens, the pale ghostlike Mrs. Rogers. And the guests! Yes, the guests were queer, too. An oddly assorted party.

Vera thought:

“I wish I’d seen the Owens ... I wish I knew what they were like.”

She got up and walked restlessly about the room.

A perfect bedroom decorated throughout in the modern style. Off-white rugs on the gleaming parquet floor—faintly tinted walls—a long mirror surrounded by lights. A mantelpiece bare of ornaments save for an enormous block of white marble shaped like a bear, a piece of modern sculpture in which was inset a clock. Over it, in a gleaming chromium frame, was a big square of parchment—a poem.

She stood in front of the fireplace and read it. It was the old nursery rhyme that she remembered from her childhood days.

Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;

One choked his little self and then there were Nine.

Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;

One overslept himself and then there were Eight.

Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;

One said he'd stay there and then there were Seven.

Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks;

One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six.

Six little soldier boys playing with a hive;

A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five.

Five little soldier boys going in for law;

One got in Chancery and then there were Four.

Four little soldier boys going out to sea;

A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the Zoo;

A big bear hugged one and then there were Two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun;

One got frizzled up and then there was One.

One little soldier boy left all alone;

He went and hanged himself and then there were None.

Vera smiled. Of course! This was Soldier Island!

She went and sat again by the window looking out to sea.

How big the sea was! From here there was no land to be seen anywhere—just a vast expanse of blue water rippling in the evening sun.

The sea ... So peaceful today—sometimes so cruel ... The sea that dragged you down to its depths. Drowned ... Found drowned ... Drowned at sea ... Drowned—drowned—drowned....

No, she wouldn't remember ... She would not think of it!

All that was over....

VI

Dr. Armstrong came to Soldier Island just as the sun was sinking into the sea. On the way across he had chatted to the boatman—a local man. He was anxious to find out a little about these people who owned Soldier Island, but the man Narracott seemed curiously ill-informed, or perhaps unwilling to talk.

So Dr. Armstrong chatted instead of the weather and of fishing.

He was tired after his long motor drive. His eyeballs ached. Driving west you were driving against the sun.

Yes, he was very tired. The sea and perfect peace—that was what he needed. He would like, really, to take a long holiday. But he couldn't afford to do that. He could afford it financially, of course, but he couldn't afford to drop out. You were soon forgotten nowadays. No, now that he had arrived, he must keep his nose to the grindstone.

He thought:

“All the same, this evening, I'll imagine to myself that I'm not going back—that I've done with London and Harley Street and all the rest of it.”

There was something magical about an island—the mere word suggested fantasy. You lost touch with the world—an island was a world of its own. A world, perhaps, from which you might never return.

He thought:

“I’m leaving my ordinary life behind me.”

And, smiling to himself, he began to make plans, fantastic plans for the future. He was still smiling when he walked up the rock-cut steps.

In a chair on the terrace an old gentleman was sitting and the sight of him was vaguely familiar to Dr. Armstrong. Where had he seen that frog-like face, that tortoise-like neck, that hunched up attitude—yes and those pale shrewd little eyes? Of course—old Wargrave. He’d given evidence once before him. Always looked half asleep, but was shrewd as could be when it came to a point of law. Had great power with a jury—it was said he could make their minds up for them any day of the week. He’d got one or two unlikely convictions out of them. A hanging judge, some people said.

Funny place to meet him ... here—out of the world.

VII

Mr. Justice Wargrave thought to himself:

“Armstrong? Remember him in the witness-box. Very correct and cautious. All doctors are damned fools. Harley Street ones are the worst of the lot.” And his mind dwelt malevolently on a recent interview he had had with a suave personage in that very street.

Aloud he grunted:

“Drinks are in the hall.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“I must go and pay my respects to my host and hostess.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave closed his eyes again, looking decidedly reptilian, and said:

“You can’t do that.”

Dr. Armstrong was startled.

“Why not?”

The judge said:

“No host and hostess. Very curious state of affairs. Don’t understand this place.”

Dr. Armstrong stared at him for a minute. When he thought the old gentleman had actually gone to sleep, Wargrave said suddenly:

“D’you know Constance Culmington?”

“Er—no, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“It’s of no consequence,” said the judge. “Very vague woman—and practically unreadable handwriting. I was just wondering if I’d come to the wrong house.”

Dr. Armstrong shook his head and went on up to the house.

Mr. Justice Wargrave reflected on the subject of Constance Culmington. Undependable like all women.

His mind went on to the two women in the house, the tight-lipped old maid and the girl. He didn’t care for the girl, cold-blooded

young hussy. No, three women, if you counted the Rogers woman. Odd creature, she looked scared to death. Respectable pair and knew their job.

Rogers coming out on the terrace that minute, the judge asked him:

“Is Lady Constance Culmington expected, do you know?”

Rogers stared at him.

“No, sir, not to my knowledge.”

The judge’s eyebrows rose. But he only grunted.

He thought:

“Soldier Island, eh? There’s a fly in the ointment.”

VIII

Anthony Marston was in his bath. He luxuriated in the steaming water. His limbs had felt cramped after his long drive. Very few thoughts passed through his head. Anthony was a creature of sensation—and of action.

He thought to himself:

“Must go through with it, I suppose,” and thereafter dismissed everything from his mind.

Warm steaming water—tired limbs—presently a shave—a cocktail—dinner.

And after—?

IX

Mr. Blore was tying his tie. He wasn't very good at this sort of thing.

Did he look all right? He supposed so.

Nobody had been exactly cordial to him ... Funny the way they all eyed each other—as though they knew....

Well, it was up to him.

He didn't mean to bungle his job.

He glanced up at the framed nursery rhyme over the mantelpiece.

Neat touch, having that there!

He thought:

Remember this island when I was a kid. Never thought I'd be doing this sort of a job in a house here. Good thing, perhaps, that one can't foresee the future.

X

General Macarthur was frowning to himself.

Damn it all, the whole thing was deuced odd! Not at all what he'd been led to expect....

For two pins he'd make an excuse and get away ... Throw up the whole business....

But the motorboat had gone back to the mainland.

He'd have to stay.

That fellow Lombard now, he was a queer chap.

Not straight. He'd swear the man wasn't straight.

XI

As the gong sounded, Philip Lombard came out of his room and walked to the head of the stairs. He moved like a panther, smoothly and noiselessly. There was something of the panther about him altogether. A beast of prey—pleasant to the eye.

He was smiling to himself.

A week—eh?

He was going to enjoy that week.

XII

In her bedroom, Emily Brent, dressed in black silk ready for dinner, was reading her Bible.

Her lips moved as she followed the words:

“The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. The wicked shall be turned into hell.”

Her lips tight closed. She shut the Bible.

Rising, she pinned a cairngorm brooch at her neck, and went down to dinner.

Three

I

Dinner was drawing to a close.

The food had been good, the wine perfect. Rogers waited well.

Every one was in better spirits. They had begun to talk to each other with more freedom and intimacy.

Mr. Justice Wargrave, mellowed by the excellent port, was being amusing in a caustic fashion, Dr. Armstrong and Tony Marston were listening to him. Miss Brent chatted to General Macarthur, they had discovered some mutual friends. Vera Claythorne was asking Mr. Davis intelligent questions about South Africa. Mr. Davis was quite fluent on the subject. Lombard listened to the conversation. Once or twice he looked up quickly, and his eyes narrowed. Now and then his eyes played round the table, studying the others.

Anthony Marston said suddenly:

“Quaint, these things, aren’t they?”

In the centre of the round table, on a circular glass stand, were some little china figures.

“Soldiers,” said Tony. “Soldier Island. I suppose that’s the idea.”

Vera leaned forward.

“I wonder. How many are there? Ten?”

“Yes—ten there are.”

Vera cried:

“What fun! They’re the ten little soldier boys of the nursery rhyme, I suppose. In my bedroom the rhyme is framed and hung up over the mantelpiece.”

Lombard said:

“In my room, too.”

“And mine.”

“And mine.”

Everybody joined in the chorus. Vera said:

“It’s an amusing idea, isn’t it?”

Mr. Justice Wargrave grunted:

“Remarkably childish,” and helped himself to port.

Emily Brent looked at Vera Claythorne. Vera Claythorne looked at Miss Brent. The two women rose.

In the drawing room the French windows were open on to the terrace and the sound of the sea murmuring against the rocks came up to them.

Emily Brent said, “Pleasant sound.”

Vera said sharply, "I hate it."

Miss Brent's eyes looked at her in surprise. Vera flushed. She said, more composedly:

"I don't think this place would be very agreeable in a storm."

Emily Brent agreed.

"I've no doubt the house is shut up in winter," she said. "You'd never get servants to stay here for one thing."

Vera murmured:

"It must be difficult to get servants anyway."

Emily Brent said:

"Mrs. Oliver has been lucky to get these two. The woman's a good cook."

Vera thought:

"Funny how elderly people always get names wrong."

She said:

"Yes, I think Mrs. Owen has been very lucky indeed."

Emily Brent had brought a small piece of embroidery out of her bag. Now, as she was about to thread her needle, she paused.

She said sharply:

“Owen? Did you say Owen?”

“Yes.”

Emily Brent said sharply:

“I’ve never met anyone called Owen in my life.”

Vera stared.

“But surely—”

She did not finish her sentence. The door opened and the men joined them. Rogers followed them into the room with the coffee tray.

The judge came and sat down by Emily Brent. Armstrong came up to Vera. Tony Marston strolled to the open window. Blore studied with naïve surprise a statuette in brass—wondering perhaps if its bizarre angularities were really supposed to be the female figure. General Macarthur stood with his back to the mantelpiece. He pulled at his little white moustache. That had been a damned good dinner! His spirits were rising. Lombard turned over the pages of Punch that lay with other papers on a table by the wall.

Rogers went round with the coffee tray. The coffee was good—really black and very hot.

The whole party had dined well. They were satisfied with themselves and with life. The hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes past nine. There was a silence—a comfortable replete silence.

Into that silence came The Voice. Without warning, inhuman, penetrating....

“Ladies and gentlemen! Silence please!”

Everyone was startled. They looked round—at each other, at the walls. Who was speaking?

The Voice went on—a high clear voice:

“You are charged with the following indictments:

“Edward George Armstrong, that you did upon the 14th day of March, 1925, cause the death of Louisa Mary Clees.

“Emily Caroline Brent, that upon the 5th of November, 1931, you were responsible for the death of Beatrice Taylor.

“William Henry Blore, that you brought about the death of James Stephen Landor on October 10th, 1928.

“Vera Elizabeth Claythorne, that on the 11th day of August, 1935, you killed Cyril Ogilvie Hamilton.

“Philip Lombard, that upon a date in February, 1932, you were guilty of the death of twenty-one men, members of an East African tribe.

“John Gordon Macarthur, that on the 4th of January, 1917, you deliberately sent your wife’s lover, Arthur Richmond, to his death.

“Anthony James Marston, that upon the 14th day of November last, you were guilty of the murder of John and Lucy Combes.

“Thomas Rogers and Ethel Rogers, that on the 6th of May, 1929, you brought about the death of Jennifer Brady.

“Lawrence John Wargrave, that upon the 10th day of June, 1930, you were guilty of the murder of Edward Seton.

“Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defence?”

II

The voice had stopped.

There was a moment's petrified silence and then a resounding crash! Rogers had dropped the coffee tray!

At the same moment, from somewhere outside the room there came a scream and the sound of a thud.

Lombard was the first to move. He leapt to the door and flung it open. Outside, lying in a huddled mass, was Mrs. Rogers.

Lombard called:

“Marston.”

Anthony sprang to help him. Between them, they lifted up the woman and carried her into the drawing room.

Dr. Armstrong came across quickly. He helped them to lift her on to the sofa and bent over her. He said quickly:

“It's nothing. She's fainted, that's all. She'll be round in a minute.”

Lombard said to Rogers:

“Get some brandy.”

Rogers, his face white, his hands shaking, murmured:

“Yes, sir,” and slipped quickly out of the room.

Vera cried out:

“Who was that speaking? Where was he? It sounded—it sounded —”

General Macarthur spluttered out:

“What’s going on here? What kind of a practical joke was that?”

His hand was shaking. His shoulders sagged. He looked suddenly ten years older.

Blore was mopping his face with a handkerchief.

Only Mr. Justice Wargrave and Miss Brent seemed comparatively unmoved. Emily Brent sat upright, her head held high. In both cheeks was a spot of hard colour. The judge sat in his habitual pose, his head sunk down into his neck. With one hand he gently scratched his ear. Only his eyes were active, darting round and round the room, puzzled, alert with intelligence.

Again it was Lombard who acted. Armstrong being busy with the collapsed woman, Lombard was free once more to take the initiative.

He said:

“That voice? It sounded as though it were in the room.”

Vera cried:

“Who was it? Who was it? It wasn’t one of us.”

Like the judge, Lombard’s eyes wandered slowly round the room. They rested a minute on the open window, then he shook his head decisively. Suddenly his eyes lighted up. He moved forward swiftly to where a door near the fireplace led into an adjoining room.

With a swift gesture, he caught the handle and flung the door open. He passed through and immediately uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

He said:

“Ah, here we are.”

The others crowded after him. Only Miss Brent remained alone sitting erect in her chair.

Inside the second room a table had been brought up close to the wall which adjoined the drawing room. On the table was a gramophone—an old-fashioned type with a large trumpet attached. The mouth of the trumpet was against the wall, and Lombard, pushing it aside indicated where two or three small holes had been unobtrusively bored through the wall.

Adjusting the gramophone he replaced the needle on the record and immediately they heard again “You are charged with the following indictments—”

Vera cried:

“Turn it off! Turn it off! It’s horrible!”

Lombard obeyed.

Dr. Armstrong said, with a sigh of relief:

“A disgraceful and heartless practical joke, I suppose.”

The small clear voice of Mr. Justice Wargrave murmured:

“So you think it’s a joke, do you?”

The doctor stared at him.

“What else could it be?”

The hand of the judge gently stroked his upper lip.

He said:

“At the moment I’m not prepared to give an opinion.”

Anthony Marston broke in. He said:

“Look here, there’s one thing you’ve forgotten. Who the devil turned the thing on and set it going?”

Wargrave murmured:

“Yes, I think we must inquire into that.”

He led the way back into the drawing room. The others followed.

Rogers had just come in with a glass of brandy. Miss Brent was bending over the moaning form of Mrs. Rogers.

Adroitly Rogers slipped between the two women.

“Allow me, Madam, I’ll speak to her. Ethel—Ethel—it’s all right. All right, do you hear? Pull yourself together.”

Mrs. Rogers’ breath came in quick gasps. Her eyes, staring frightened eyes, went round and round the ring of faces. There was urgency in Rogers’ tone.

“Pull yourself together, Ethel.”

Dr. Armstrong spoke to her soothingly:

“You’ll be all right now, Mrs. Rogers. Just a nasty turn.” She said:

“Did I faint, sir?”

“Yes.”

“It was the voice—that awful voice—like a judgment—”

Her face turned green again, her eyelids fluttered.

Dr. Armstrong said sharply:

“Where’s that brandy?”

Rogers had put it down on a little table. Someone handed it to the doctor and he bent over the gasping woman with it.

“Drink this, Mrs. Rogers.”

She drank, choking a little and gasping. The spirit did her good. The colour returned to her face. She said:

“I’m all right now. It just—gave me a turn.”

Rogers said quickly:

“Of course it did. It gave me a turn, too. Fair made me drop that tray. Wicked lies, it was! I’d like to know—”

He was interrupted. It was only a cough—a dry little cough but it had the effect of stopping him in full cry. He stared at Mr. Justice Wargrave and the latter coughed again. Then he said:

“Who put on that record on the gramophone. Was it you, Rogers?”

Rogers cried:

“I didn’t know what it was. Before God, I didn’t know what it was, sir. If I had I’d never have done it.”

The judge said dryly:

“That is probably true. But I think you’d better explain, Rogers.”

The butler wiped his face with a handkerchief. He said earnestly:

“I was just obeying orders, sir, that’s all.”

“Whose orders?”

“Mr. Owen’s.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“Let me get this quite clear. Mr. Owen’s orders were—what exactly?”

Rogers said:

“I was to put a record on the gramophone. I’d find the record in the drawer and my wife was to start the gramophone when I’d gone into the drawing room with the coffee tray.”

The judge murmured:

“A very remarkable story.”

Rogers cried:

“It’s the truth, sir. I swear to God it’s the truth. I didn’t know what it was—not for a moment. It had a name on it—I thought it was just a piece of music.”

Wargrave looked at Lombard.

“Was there a title on it?”

Lombard nodded. He grinned suddenly, showed his white pointed teeth. He said:

“Quite right, sir. It was entitled Swan Song....”

III

General Macarthur broke out suddenly. He exclaimed:

“The whole thing is preposterous—preposterous! Slinging accusations about like this! Something must be done about it. This

fellow Owen whoever he is—”

Emily Brent interrupted. She said sharply:

“That’s just it, who is he?”

The judge interposed. He spoke with the authority that a lifetime in the courts had given him. He said:

“That is exactly what we must go into very carefully. I should suggest that you get your wife to bed first of all, Rogers. Then come back here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“I’ll give you a hand, Rogers.”

Leaning on the two men, Mrs. Rogers tottered out of the room. When they had gone Tony Marston said:

“Don’t know about you, sir, but I could do with a drink.”

Lombard said:

“I agree.”

Tony said:

“I’ll go and forage.”

He went out of the room.

He returned a second or two later.

“Found them all waiting on a tray outside ready to be brought in.”

He set down his burden carefully. The next minute or two was spent in dispensing drinks. General Macarthur had a stiff whisky and so did the judge. Every one felt the need of a stimulant. Only Emily Brent demanded and obtained a glass of water.

Dr. Armstrong reentered the room.

“She’s all right,” he said. “I’ve given her a sedative to take. What’s that, a drink? I could do with one.”

Several of the men refilled their glasses. A moment or two later Rogers reentered the room.

Mr. Justice Wargrave took charge of the proceedings. The room became an impromptu court of law.

The judge said:

“Now then, Rogers, we must get to the bottom of this. Who is this Mr. Owen?”

Rogers stared.

“He owns this place, sir.”

“I am aware of that fact. What I want you to tell me is what you yourself know about the man.”

Rogers shook his head.

“I can’t say, sir. You see, I’ve never seen him.”

There was a faint stir in the room.

General Macarthur said:

“You’ve never seen him? What d’yer mean?”

“We’ve only been here just under a week, sir, my wife and I. We were engaged by letter, through an agency. The Regina Agency in Plymouth.”

Blore nodded.

“Old established firm,” he volunteered.

Wargrave said:

“Have you got that letter?”

“The letter engaging us? No, sir. I didn’t keep it.”

“Go on with your story. You were engaged, as you say, by letter.”

“Yes, sir. We were to arrive on a certain day. We did. Everything was in order here. Plenty of food in stock and everything very nice. Just needed dusting and that.”

“What next?”

“Nothing, sir. We got orders—by letter again—to prepare the rooms for a house party, and then yesterday by the afternoon post I got another letter from Mr. Owen. It said he and Mrs. Owen were

detained and to do the best we could, and it gave the instructions about dinner and coffee and putting on the gramophone record.”

The judge said sharply:

“Surely you’ve got that letter?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it here.”

He produced it from a pocket. The judge took it.

“H’m,” he said. “Headed Ritz Hotel and typewritten.”

With a quick movement Blore was beside him.

He said:

“If you’ll just let me have a look.”

He twitched it out of the other’s hand, and ran his eye over it. He murmured:

“Coronation machine. Quite new—no defects. Ensign paper—the most widely used make. You won’t get anything out of that. Might be fingerprints, but I doubt it.”

Wargrave stared at him with sudden attention.

Anthony Marston was standing beside Blore looking over his shoulder. He said:

“Got some fancy Christian names, hasn’t he? Ulick Norman Owen. Quite a mouthful.”

The old judge said with a slight start:

“I am obliged to you, Mr. Marston. You have drawn my attention to a curious and suggestive point.”

He looked round at the others and thrusting his neck forward like an angry tortoise, he said:

“I think the time has come for us all to pool our information. It would be well, I think, for everybody to come forward with all the information they have regarding the owner of this house.” He paused and then went on: “We are all his guests. I think it would be profitable if each one of us were to explain exactly how that came about.”

There was a moment’s pause and then Emily Brent spoke with decision.

“There’s something very peculiar about all this,” she said. “I received a letter with a signature that was not very easy to read. It purported to be from a woman I had met at a certain summer resort two or three years ago. I took the name to be either Ogden or Oliver. I am acquainted with a Mrs. Oliver and also with a Miss Ogden. I am quite certain that I have never met, or become friendly with any one of the name of Owen.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“You have that letter, Miss Brent?”

“Yes, I will fetch it for you.”

She went away and returned a minute later with the letter.

The judge read it. He said:

“I begin to understand ... Miss Claythorne?”

Vera explained the circumstances of her secretarial engagement.

The judge said:

“Marston?”

Anthony said:

“Got a wire. From a pal of mine. Badger Berkeley. Surprised me at the time because I had an idea the old horse had gone to Norway. Told me to roll up here.”

Again Wargrave nodded. He said:

“Dr. Armstrong?”

“I was called in professionally.”

“I see. You had no previous acquaintanceship with the family?”

“No. A colleague of mine was mentioned in the letter.”

The judge said:

“To give verisimilitude ... Yes, and that colleague, I presume, was momentarily out of touch with you?”

“Well—er—yes.”

Lombard, who had been staring at Blore, said suddenly:

“Look here, I’ve just thought of something—”

The judge lifted a hand.

“In a minute—”

“But I—”

“We will take one thing at a time, Mr. Lombard. We are at present inquiring into the causes which have resulted in our being assembled here tonight. General Macarthur?”

Pulling at his moustache, the General muttered:

“Got a letter—from this fellow Owen—mentioned some old pals of mine who were to be here—hoped I’d excuse informal invitation. Haven’t kept the letter, I’m afraid.”

Wargrave said: “Mr. Lombard?”

Lombard’s brain had been active. Was he to come out in the open, or not? He made up his mind.

“Same sort of thing,” he said. “Invitation, mention of mutual friends—I fell for it all right. I’ve torn up the letter.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave turned his attention to Mr. Blore. His forefinger stroked his upper lip and his voice was dangerously polite.

He said:

“Just now we had a somewhat disturbing experience. An apparently disembodied voice spoke to us all by name, uttering

certain precise accusations against us. We will deal with those accusations presently. At the moment I am interested in a minor point. Amongst the names recited was that of William Henry Blore. But as far as we know there is no one named Blore amongst us. The name of Davis was not mentioned. What have you to say about that, Mr. Davis?"

Blore said sulkily:

"Cat's out of the bag, it seems. I suppose I'd better admit that my name isn't Davis."

"You are William Henry Blore?"

"That's right."

"I will add something," said Lombard. "Not only are you here under a false name, Mr. Blore, but in addition I've noticed this evening that you're a first-class liar. You claim to have come from Natal, South Africa. I know South Africa and Natal and I'm prepared to swear that you've never set foot in South Africa in your life."

All eyes were turned on Blore. Angry suspicious eyes. Anthony Marston moved a step nearer to him. His fists clenched themselves.

"Now then, you swine," he said. "Any explanation?"

Blore flung back his head and set his square jaw.

"You gentlemen have got me wrong," he said. "I've got my credentials and you can see them. I'm an ex-CID man. I run a detective agency in Plymouth. I was put on this job."

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked:

“By whom?”

“This man Owen. Enclosed a handsome money order for expenses and instructed me as to what he wanted done. I was to join the house party, posing as a guest. I was given all your names. I was to watch you all.”

“Any reason given?”

Blore said bitterly:

“Mrs. Owen’s jewels. Mrs. Owen my foot! I don’t believe there’s any such person.”

Again the forefinger of the judge stroked his lip, this time appreciatively.

“Your conclusions are, I think, justified,” he said. “Ulick Norman Owen! In Miss Brent’s letter, though the signature of the surname is a mere scrawl the Christian names are reasonably clear—Una Nancy—in either case you notice, the same initials. Ulick Norman Owen—Una Nancy Owen—each time, that is to say, U. N. Owen. Or by a slight stretch of fancy, UNKNOWN!”

Vera cried:

“But this is fantastic—mad!”

The judge nodded gently.

He said:

“Oh, yes. I’ve no doubt in my own mind that we have been invited here by a madman—probably a dangerous homicidal lunatic.”

Four

I

There was a moment's silence. A silence of dismay and bewilderment. Then the judge's small clear voice took up the thread once more.

"We will now proceed to the next stage of our inquiry. First however, I will just add my own credentials to the list."

He took a letter from his pocket and tossed it on to the table.

"This purports to be from an old friend of mine, Lady Constance Culmington. I have not seen her for some years. She went to the East. It is exactly the kind of vague incoherent letter she would write, urging me to join her here and referring to her host and hostess in the vaguest of terms. The same technique, you will observe. I only mention it because it agrees with the other evidence—from all of which emerges one interesting point. Whoever it was who enticed us here, that person knows or has taken the trouble to find out a good deal about us all. He, whoever he may be, is aware of my friendship for Lady Constance—and is familiar with her epistolary style. He knows something about Dr. Armstrong's colleagues and their present whereabouts. He knows the nickname of Mr. Marston's friend and the kind of telegrams he sends. He knows exactly where Miss Brent was two years ago for her holiday and the kind of people she met there. He knows all about General Macarthur's old cronies."

He paused. Then he said:

“He knows, you see, a good deal. And out of his knowledge concerning us, he has made certain definite accusations.”

Immediately a babel broke out.

General Macarthur shouted:

“A pack of dam’ lies! Slander!”

Vera cried out:

“It’s iniquitous!” Her breath came fast. “Wicked!”

Rogers said hoarsely:

“A lie—a wicked lie ... we never did—neither of us....”

Anthony Marston growled:

“Don’t know what the damned fool was getting at!”

The upraised hand of Mr. Justice Wargrave calmed the tumult.

He said, picking his words with care:

“I wish to say this. Our unknown friend accuses me of the murder of one Edward Seton. I remember Seton perfectly well. He came up before me for trial in June of the year 1930. He was charged with the murder of an elderly woman. He was very ably defended and made a good impression on the jury in the witness-box. Nevertheless, on the evidence, he was certainly guilty. I summed up accordingly, and the jury brought in a verdict of Guilty. In passing sentence of death I concurred with the verdict. An appeal was lodged on the grounds of misdirection. The appeal was

rejected and the man was duly executed. I wish to say before you all that my conscience is perfectly clear on the matter. I did my duty and nothing more. I passed sentence on a rightly convicted murderer.”

Armstrong was remembering now. The Seton case! The verdict had come as a great surprise. He had met Matthews, KC on one of the days of the trial dining at a restaurant. Matthews had been confident. “Not a doubt of the verdict. Acquittal practically certain.” And then afterwards he had heard comments: “Judge was dead against him. Turned the jury right round and they brought him in guilty. Quite legal, though. Old Wargrave knows his law. It was almost as though he had a private down on the fellow.”

All these memories rushed through the doctor’s mind. Before he could consider the wisdom of the question he had asked impulsively:

“Did you know Seton at all? I mean previous to the case.”

The hooded reptilian eyes met his. In a clear cold voice the judge said:

“I knew nothing of Seton previous to the case.”

Armstrong said to himself:

“The fellow’s lying—I know he’s lying.”

II

Vera Claythorne spoke in a trembling voice.

She said:

“I’d like to tell you. About that child—Cyril Hamilton. I was nursery governess to him. He was forbidden to swim out far. One day, when my attention was distracted, he started off. I swam after him ... I couldn’t get there in time ... It was awful ... But it wasn’t my fault. At the inquest the Coroner exonerated me. And his mother—she was so kind. If even she didn’t blame me, why should—why should this awful thing be said? It’s not fair—not fair....”

She broke down, weeping bitterly.

General Macarthur patted her shoulder.

He said:

“There there, my dear. Of course it’s not true. Fellow’s a madman. A madman! Got a bee in his bonnet! Got hold of the wrong end of the stick all round.”

He stood erect, squaring his shoulders. He barked out:

“Best really to leave this sort of thing unanswered. However, feel I ought to say—no truth—no truth whatever in what he said about—er—young Arthur Richmond. Richmond was one of my officers. I sent him on a reconnaissance. He was killed. Natural course of events in wartime. Wish to say resent very much—slur on my wife. Best woman in the world. Absolutely—Cæsar’s wife!”

General Macarthur sat down. His shaking hand pulled at his moustache. The effort to speak had cost him a good deal.

Lombard spoke. His eyes were amused. He said:

“About those natives—”

Marston said:

“What about them?”

Philip Lombard grinned.

“Story’s quite true! I left ’em! Matter of self-preservation. We were lost in the bush. I and a couple of other fellows took what food there was and cleared out.”

General Macarthur said sternly:

“You abandoned your men—left them to starve?”

Lombard said:

“Not quite the act of a pukka sahib, I’m afraid. But self-preservation’s a man’s first duty. And natives don’t mind dying, you know. They don’t feel about it as Europeans do.”

Vera lifted her face from her hands. She said, staring at him:

“You left them—to die?”

Lombard answered:

“I left them to die.”

His amused eyes looked into her horrified ones.

Anthony Marston said in a slow puzzled voice:

“I’ve just been thinking—John and Lucy Combes. Must have been a couple of kids I ran over near Cambridge. Beastly bad luck.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said acidly:

“For them, or for you?”

Anthony said:

“Well, I was thinking—for me—but of course, you’re right, sir, it was damned bad luck on them. Of course it was a pure accident. They rushed out of some cottage or other. I had my licence suspended for a year. Beastly nuisance.”

Dr. Armstrong said warmly:

“This speeding’s all wrong—all wrong! Young men like you are a danger to the community.”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“Speed’s come to stay. English roads are hopeless, of course. Can’t get up a decent pace on them.”

He looked round vaguely for his glass, picked it up off a table and went over to the side table and helped himself to another whisky and soda. He said over his shoulder:

“Well, anyway it wasn’t my fault. Just an accident!”

III

The manservant, Rogers, had been moistening his lips and twisting his hands. He said now in a low deferential voice:

“If I might just say a word, sir.”

Lombard said:

“Go ahead, Rogers.”

Rogers cleared his throat and passed his tongue once more over his dry lips.

“There was a mention, sir, of me and Mrs. Rogers. And of Miss Brady. There isn’t a word of truth in it, sir. My wife and I were with Miss Brady till she died. She was always in poor health, sir, always from the time we came to her. There was a storm, sir, that night—the night she was taken bad. The telephone was out of order. We couldn’t get the doctor to her. I went for him, sir, on foot. But he got there too late. We’d done everything possible for her, sir. Devoted to her, we were. Anyone will tell you the same. There was never a word said against us. Not a word.”

Lombard looked thoughtfully at the man’s twitching face, his dry lips, the fright in his eyes. He remembered the crash of the falling coffee tray. He thought, but did not say: “Oh yeah?”

Blore spoke—spoke in his hearty bullying official manner.

He said:

“Came into a little something at her death, though? Eh?”

Rogers drew himself up. He said stiffly:

“Miss Brady left us a legacy in recognition of our faithful services. And why not, I’d like to know?”

Lombard said:

“What about yourself, Mr. Blore?”

“What about me?”

“Your name was included in the list.”

Blore went purple.

“Landor, you mean? That was the bank robbery—London and Commercial.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave stirred. He said:

“I remember. It didn’t come before me, but I remember the case. Landor was convicted on your evidence. You were the police officer in charge of the case?”

Blore said:

“I was.”

“Landor got penal servitude for life and died on Dartmoor a year later. He was a delicate man.”

Blore said:

“He was a crook. It was he who knocked out the night watchman. The case was quite clear against him.”

Wargrave said slowly:

“You were complimented, I think, on your able handling of the case.”

Blore said sulkily:

“I got my promotion.”

He added in a thick voice.

“I was only doing my duty.”

Lombard laughed—a sudden ringing laugh. He said:

“What a duty-loving law-abiding lot we all seem to be! Myself excepted. What about you, doctor—and your little professional mistake? Illegal operation, was it?”

Emily Brent glanced at him in sharp distaste and drew herself away a little.

Dr. Armstrong, very much master of himself, shook his head good-humouredly.

“I’m at a loss to understand the matter,” he said. “The name meant nothing to me when it was spoken. What was it—Clees? Close? I really can’t remember having a patient of that name, or being connected with a death in any way. The thing’s a complete mystery to me. Of course, it’s a long time ago. It might possibly be one of my operation cases in hospital. They come too late, so many of these people. Then, when the patient dies, they always consider it’s the surgeon’s fault.”

He sighed, shaking his head.

He thought:

Drunk—that's what it was—drunk ... And I operated! Nerves all to pieces—hands shaking. I killed her all right. Poor devil—elderly woman—simple job if I'd been sober. Lucky for me there's loyalty in our profession. The Sister knew, of course—but she held her tongue. God, it gave me a shock! Pulled me up. But who could have known about it—after all these years?

IV

There was a silence in the room. Everybody was looking, covertly or openly, at Emily Brent. It was a minute or two before she became aware of the expectation. Her eyebrows rose on her narrow forehead. She said:

“Are you waiting for me to say something? I have nothing to say.”

The judge said: “Nothing, Miss Brent?”

“Nothing.”

Her lips closed tightly.

The judge stroked his face. He said mildly:

“You reserve your defence?”

Miss Brent said coldly:

“There is no question of defence. I have always acted in accordance with the dictates of my conscience. I have nothing with which to reproach myself.”

There was an unsatisfied feeling in the air. But Emily Brent was not one to be swayed by public opinion. She sat unyielding.

The judge cleared his throat once or twice. Then he said: "Our inquiry rests there. Now Rogers, who else is there on this island besides ourselves and you and your wife?"

"Nobody, sir. Nobody at all."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir."

Wargrave said:

"I am not yet clear as to the purpose of our Unknown host in getting us to assemble here. But in my opinion this person, whoever he may be, is not sane in the accepted sense of the word.

"He may be dangerous. In my opinion it would be well for us to leave this place as soon as possible. I suggest that we leave tonight."

Rogers said:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but there's no boat on the island."

"No boat at all?"

"No, sir."

"How do you communicate with the mainland?"

“Fred Narracott, he comes over every morning, sir. He brings the bread and the milk and the post, and takes the orders.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“Then in my opinion it would be well if we all left tomorrow morning as soon as Narracott’s boat arrives.”

There was a chorus of agreement with only one dissentient voice. It was Anthony Marston who disagreed with the majority.

“A bit unsporting, what?” he said. “Ought to ferret out the mystery before we go. Whole thing’s like a detective story. Positively thrilling.”

The judge said acidly:

“At my time of life, I have no desire for ‘thrills’ as you call them.”

Anthony said with a grin:

“The legal life’s narrowing! I’m all for crime! Here’s to it.”

He picked up his drink and drank it off at a gulp.

Too quickly, perhaps. He choked—choked badly. His face contorted, turned purple. He gasped for breath—then slid down off his chair, the glass falling from his hand.

Five

I

It was so sudden and so unexpected that it took every one's breath away. They remained stupidly staring at the crumpled figure on the ground.

Then Dr. Armstrong jumped up and went over to him, kneeling beside him. When he raised his head his eyes were bewildered.

He said in a low awe-struck whisper:

“My God! he's dead.”

They didn't take it in. Not at once.

Dead? Dead? That young Norse God in the prime of his health and strength. Struck down all in a moment. Healthy young men didn't die like that, choking over a whisky and soda....

No, they couldn't take it in.

Dr. Armstrong was peering into the dead man's face. He sniffed at the blue twisted lips. Then he picked up the glass from which Anthony Marston had been drinking.

General Macarthur said:

“Dead? D'you mean the fellow just choked and—and died?”

The physician said:

“You can call it choking if you like. He died of asphyxiation right enough.”

He was sniffing now at the glass. He dipped a finger into the dregs and very cautiously just touched the finger with the tip of his tongue.

His expression altered.

General Macarthur said:

“Never knew a man could die like that—just of a choking fit!”

Emily Brent said in a clear voice:

“In the midst of life we are in death.”

Dr. Armstrong stood up. He said brusquely:

“No, a man doesn’t die of a mere choking fit. Marston’s death wasn’t what we call a natural death.”

Vera said almost in a whisper:

“Was there—something—in the whisky?”

Armstrong nodded.

“Yes. Can’t say exactly. Everything points to one of the cyanides. No distinctive smell of Prussic Acid, probably Potassium Cyanide. It acts pretty well instantaneously.”

The judge said sharply:

“It was in his glass?”

“Yes.”

The doctor strode to the table where the drinks were. He removed the stopper from the whisky and smelt and tasted it. Then he tasted the soda water. He shook his head.

“They’re both all right.”

Lombard said:

“You mean—he must have put the stuff in his glass himself?”

Armstrong nodded with a curiously dissatisfied expression. He said:

“Seems like it.”

Blore said:

“Suicide, eh? That’s a queer go.”

Vera said slowly:

“You’d never think that he would kill himself. He was so alive. He was—oh—enjoying himself! When he came down the hill in his car this evening he looked—he looked—oh I can’t explain!”

But they knew what she meant. Anthony Marston, in the height of his youth and manhood, had seemed like a being who was immortal. And now, crumpled and broken, he lay on the floor.

Dr. Armstrong said:

“Is there any possibility other than suicide?”

Slowly every one shook their heads. There could be no other explanation. The drinks themselves were untampered with. They had all seen Anthony Marston go across and help himself. It followed therefore that any cyanide in the drink must have been put there by Anthony Marston himself.

And yet—why should Anthony Marston commit suicide?

Blore said thoughtfully:

“You know, doctor, it doesn’t seem right to me. I shouldn’t have said Mr. Marston was a suicidal type of gentleman.”

Armstrong answered:

“I agree.”

II

They had left it like that. What else was there to say?

Together Armstrong and Lombard had carried the inert body of Anthony Marston to his bedroom and had laid him there covered over with a sheet.

When they came downstairs again, the others were standing in a group, shivering a little, though the night was not cold.

Emily Brent said:

“We’d better go to bed. It’s late.”

It was past twelve o'clock. The suggestion was a wise one—yet every one hesitated. It was as though they clung to each other's company for reassurance.

The judge said:

“Yes, we must get some sleep.”

Rogers said:

“I haven't cleared yet—in the dining room.”

Lombard said curtly:

“Do it in the morning.”

Armstrong said to him:

“Is your wife all right?”

“I'll go and see, sir.”

He returned a minute or two later.

“Sleeping beautiful, she is.”

“Good,” said the doctor. “Don't disturb her.”

“No, sir. I'll just put things straight in the dining room and make sure everything's locked up right, and then I'll turn in.”

He went across the hall into the dining room.

The others went upstairs, a slow unwilling procession.

If this had been an old house, with creaking wood, and dark shadows, and heavily panelled walls, there might have been an eerie feeling. But this house was the essence of modernity. There were no dark corners—no possible sliding panels—it was flooded with electric light—everything was new and bright and shining. There was nothing hidden in this house, nothing concealed. It had no atmosphere about it.

Somehow, that was the most frightening thing of all....

They exchanged good-nights on the upper landing. Each of them went into his or her own room, and each of them automatically, almost without conscious thought, locked the door....

III

In his pleasant softly tinted room, Mr. Justice Wargrave removed his garments and prepared himself for bed.

He was thinking about Edward Seton.

He remembered Seton very well. His fair hair, his blue eyes, his habit of looking you straight in the face with a pleasant air of straightforwardness. That was what had made so good an impression on the jury.

Llewellyn, for the Crown, had bungled it a bit. He had been overvehement, had tried to prove too much.

Matthews, on the other hand, for the Defence, had been good. His points had told. His cross-examinations had been deadly. His handling of his client in the witness-box had been masterly.

And Seton had come through the ordeal of cross-examination well. He had not got excited or overvehement. The jury had been impressed. It had seemed to Matthews, perhaps, as though everything had been over bar the shouting.

The judge wound up his watch carefully and placed it by the bed.

He remembered exactly how he had felt sitting there—listening, making notes, appreciating everything, tabulating every scrap of evidence that told against the prisoner.

He'd enjoyed that case! Matthews' final speech had been first-class. Llewellyn, coming after it, had failed to remove the good impression that the defending counsel had made.

And then had come his own summing up....

Carefully, Mr. Justice Wargrave removed his false teeth and dropped them into a glass of water. The shrunken lips fell in. It was a cruel mouth now, cruel and predatory.

Hooding his eyes, the judge smiled to himself.

He'd cooked Seton's goose all right!

With a slightly rheumatic grunt, he climbed into bed and turned out the electric light.

IV

Downstairs in the dining room, Rogers stood puzzled.

He was staring at the china figures in the centre of the table.

He muttered to himself:

“That’s a rum go! I could have sworn there were ten of them.”

V

General Macarthur tossed from side to side.

Sleep would not come to him.

In the darkness he kept seeing Arthur Richmond’s face.

He’d liked Arthur—he’d been damned fond of Arthur. He’d been pleased that Leslie liked him too.

Leslie was so capricious. Lots of good fellows that Leslie would turn up her nose at and pronounce dull. “Dull!” Just like that.

But she hadn’t found Arthur Richmond dull. They’d got on well together from the beginning. They’d talked of plays and music and pictures together. She’d teased him, made fun of him, ragged him. And he, Macarthur, had been delighted at the thought that Leslie took quite a motherly interest in the boy.

Motherly indeed! Damn’ fool not to remember that Richmond was twenty-eight to Leslie’s twenty-nine.

He’d loved Leslie. He could see her now. Her heart-shaped face, and her dancing deep grey eyes, and the brown curling mass of her hair. He’d loved Leslie and he’d believed in her absolutely.

Out there in France, in the middle of all the hell of it, he’d sat thinking of her, taken her picture out of the breast pocket of his

tunic.

And then—he'd found out!

It had come about exactly in the way things happened in books. The letter in the wrong envelope. She'd been writing to them both and she'd put her letter to Richmond in the envelope addressed to her husband. Even now, all these years after, he could feel the shock of it—the pain....

God, it had hurt!

And the business had been going on some time. The letter made that clear. Weekends! Richmond's last leave....

Leslie—Leslie and Arthur!

God damn the fellow! Damn his smiling face, his brisk "Yes, sir." Liar and hypocrite! Stealer of another man's wife!

It had gathered slowly—that cold murderous rage.

He'd managed to carry on as usual—to show nothing. He'd tried to make his manner to Richmond just the same.

Had he succeeded? He thought so. Richmond hadn't suspected. Inequalities of temper were easily accounted for out there, where men's nerves were continually snapping under the strain.

Only young Armitage had looked at him curiously once or twice. Quite a young chap, but he'd had perceptions, that boy.

Armitage, perhaps, had guessed—when the time came.

He'd sent Richmond deliberately to death. Only a miracle could have brought him through unhurt. That miracle didn't happen. Yes, he'd sent Richmond to his death and he wasn't sorry. It had been easy enough. Mistakes were being made all the time, officers being sent to death needlessly. All was confusion, panic. People might say afterwards "Old Macarthur lost his nerve a bit, made some colossal blunders, sacrificed some of his best men." They couldn't say more.

But young Armitage was different. He'd looked at his commanding officer very oddly. He'd known, perhaps, that Richmond was being deliberately sent to death.

(After the War was over—had Armitage talked?)

Leslie hadn't known. Leslie had wept for her lover (he supposed) but her weeping was over by the time he'd come back to England. He'd never told her that he'd found her out. They'd gone on together—only, somehow, she hadn't seemed very real anymore. And then, three or four years later she'd got double pneumonia and died.

That had been a long time ago. Fifteen years—sixteen years?

And he'd left the Army and come to live in Devon—bought the sort of little place he'd always meant to have. Nice neighbours—pleasant part of the world. There was a bit of shooting and fishing. He'd gone to church on Sundays. (But not the day that the lesson was read about David putting Uriah in the forefront of the battle. Somehow he couldn't face that. Gave him an uncomfortable feeling.)

Everybody had been very friendly. At first, that is. Later, he'd had an uneasy feeling that people were talking about him behind his back. They eyed him differently, somehow. As though they'd heard something—some lying rumour....

(Armitage? Supposing Armitage had talked.)

He'd avoided people after that—withdrawn into himself. Unpleasant to feel that people were discussing you.

And all so long ago. So—so purposeless now. Leslie had faded into the distance and Arthur Richmond too. Nothing of what had happened seemed to matter anymore.

It made life lonely, though. He'd taken to shunning his old Army friends.

(If Armitage had talked, they'd know about it.)

And now—this evening—a hidden voice had blared out that old hidden story.

Had he dealt with it all right? Kept a stiff upper lip? Betrayed the right amount of feeling—indignation, disgust—but no guilt, no discomfiture? Difficult to tell.

Surely nobody could have taken the accusation seriously. There had been a pack of other nonsense, just as far-fetched. That charming girl—the voice had accused her of drowning a child! Idiotic! Some madman throwing crazy accusations about!

Emily Brent, too—actually a niece of old Tom Brent of the Regiment. It had accused her of murder! Any one could see with

half an eye that the woman was as pious as could be—the kind that was hand and glove with parsons.

Damned curious business the whole thing! Crazy, nothing less.

Ever since they had got here—when was that? Why, damn it, it was only this afternoon! Seemed a good bit longer than that.

He thought: “I wonder when we shall get away again.”

Tomorrow, of course, when the motorboat came from the mainland.

Funny, just this minute he didn't want much to get away from the island ... To go back to the mainland, back to his little house, back to all the troubles and worries. Through the open window he could hear the waves breaking on the rocks—a little louder now than earlier in the evening. Wind was getting up, too.

He thought: Peaceful sound. Peaceful place....

He thought: Best of an island is once you get there—you can't go any farther ... you've come to the end of things....

He knew, suddenly, that he didn't want to leave the island.

VI

Vera Claythorne lay in bed, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling.

The light beside her was on. She was frightened of the dark.

She was thinking:

“Hugo ... Hugo ... Why do I feel you’re so near to me tonight? ... Somewhere quite close....

“Where is he really? I don’t know. I never shall know. He just went away—right away—out of my life.”

It was no good trying not to think of Hugo. He was close to her. She had to think of him—to remember....

Cornwall....

The black rocks, the smooth yellow sand. Mrs. Hamilton, stout, good-humoured. Cyril, whining a little always, pulling at her hand.

“I want to swim out to the rock, Miss Claythorne. Why can’t I swim out to the rock?”

Looking up—meeting Hugo’s eyes watching her.

The evenings after Cyril was in bed....

“Come out for a stroll, Miss Claythorne.”

“I think perhaps I will.”

The decorous stroll down to the beach. The moonlight—the soft Atlantic air.

And then, Hugo’s arms round her.

“I love you. I love you. You know I love you, Vera?”

Yes, she knew.

(Or thought she knew.)

“I can’t ask you to marry me. I’ve not got a penny. It’s all I can do to keep myself. Queer, you know, once, for three months I had the chance of being a rich man to look forward to. Cyril wasn’t born until three months after Maurice died. If he’d been a girl....”

If the child had been a girl, Hugo would have come into everything. He’d been disappointed, he admitted.

“I hadn’t built on it, of course. But it was a bit of a knock. Oh well, luck’s luck! Cyril’s a nice kid. I’m awfully fond of him.” And he was fond of him, too. Always ready to play games or amuse his small nephew. No rancour in Hugo’s nature.

Cyril wasn’t really strong. A puny child—no stamina. The kind of child, perhaps, who wouldn’t live to grow up....

And then—?

“Miss Claythorne, why can’t I swim to the rock?”

Irritating whiney repetition.

“It’s too far, Cyril.”

“But, Miss Claythorne....”

Vera got up. She went to the dressing table and swallowed three aspirins.

She thought:

“I wish I had some proper sleeping stuff.”

She thought:

“If I were doing away with myself I’d take an overdose of veronal—something like that—not cyanide!”

She shuddered as she remembered Anthony Marston’s convulsed purple face.

As she passed the mantelpiece, she looked up at the framed doggerel.

“Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;

One choked his little self and then there were Nine.”

She thought to herself:

“It’s horrible—just like us this evening....”

Why had Anthony Marston wanted to die?

She didn’t want to die.

She couldn’t imagine wanting to die....

Death was for—the other people....

Six

I

Dr. Armstrong was dreaming....

It was very hot in the operating room....

Surely they'd got the temperature too high? The sweat was rolling down his face. His hands were clammy. Difficult to hold the scalpel firmly....

How beautifully sharp it was....

Easy to do a murder with a knife like that. And of course he was doing a murder....

The woman's body looked different. It had been a large unwieldy body. This was a spare meagre body. And the face was hidden.

Who was it that he had to kill?

He couldn't remember. But he must know! Should he ask Sister?

Sister was watching him. No, he couldn't ask her. She was suspicious, he could see that.

But who was it on the operating table?

They shouldn't have covered up the face like that....

If he could only see the face....

Ah! that was better. A young probationer was pulling off the handkerchief.

Emily Brent, of course. It was Emily Brent that he had to kill. How malicious her eyes were! Her lips were moving. What was she saying?

“In the midst of life we are in death....”

She was laughing now. No, nurse, don’t put the handkerchief back. I’ve got to see. I’ve got to give the anaesthetic. Where’s the ether? I must have brought the ether with me. What have you done with the ether, Sister? Châteauneuf-du-Pape? Yes, that will do quite as well.

Take the handkerchief away, nurse.

Of course! I knew it all the time! It’s Anthony Marston! His face is purple and convulsed. But he’s not dead—he’s laughing. I tell you he’s laughing! He’s shaking the operating table.

Look out, man, look out. Nurse, steady it—steady it—

With a start Dr. Armstrong woke up. It was morning. Sunlight was pouring into the room.

And someone was leaning over him—shaking him. It was Rogers. Rogers, with a white face, saying: “Doctor—doctor!”

Dr. Armstrong woke up completely.

He sat up in bed. He said sharply:

“What is it?”

“It’s the wife, doctor. I can’t get her to wake. My God! I can’t get her to wake. And—and she don’t look right to me.”

Dr. Armstrong was quick and efficient. He wrapped himself in his dressing gown and followed Rogers.

He bent over the bed where the woman was lying peacefully on her side. He lifted the cold hand, raised the eyelid. It was some few minutes before he straightened himself and turned from the bed.

Rogers whispered:

“Is—she—is she—?”

He passed a tongue over dry lips.

Armstrong nodded.

“Yes, she’s gone.”

His eyes rested thoughtfully on the man before him. Then they went to the table by the bed, to the washstand, then back to the sleeping woman.

Rogers said:

“Was it—was it—’er ’eart, doctor?”

Dr. Armstrong was a minute or two before replying. Then he said:

“What was her health like normally?”

Rogers said:

“She was a bit rheumaticky.”

“Any doctor been attending her recently?”

“Doctor?” Rogers stared. “Not been to a doctor for years—neither of us.”

“You’d no reason to believe she suffered from heart trouble?”

“No, doctor. I never knew of anything.”

Armstrong said:

“Did she sleep well?”

Now Rogers’ eyes evaded his. The man’s hands came together and turned and twisted uneasily. He muttered:

“She didn’t sleep extra well—no.”

The doctor said sharply:

“Did she take things to make her sleep?”

Rogers stared at him, surprised.

“Take things? To make her sleep? Not that I knew of. I’m sure she didn’t.”

Armstrong went over to the washstand.

There were a certain number of bottles on it. Hair lotion, lavender water, cascara, glycerine of cucumber for the hands, a mouth-wash, toothpaste and some Elliman’s.

Rogers helped by pulling out the drawers of the dressing table. From there they moved on to the chest of drawers. But there was no sign of sleeping draughts or tablets.

Rogers said:

“She didn’t have nothing last night, sir, except what you gave her....”

II

When the gong sounded for breakfast at nine o’clock it found everyone up and awaiting the summons.

General Macarthur and the judge had been pacing the terrace outside, exchanging desultory comments on the political situation.

Vera Claythorne and Philip Lombard had been up to the summit of the island behind the house. There they had discovered William Henry Blore, standing staring at the mainland.

He said:

“No sign of that motorboat yet. I’ve been watching for it.”

Vera said smiling:

“Devon’s a sleepy county. Things are usually late.”

Philip Lombard was looking the other way, out to sea.

He said abruptly:

“What d’you think of the weather?”

Glancing up at the sky, Blore remarked:

“Looks all right to me.”

Lombard pursed up his mouth into a whistle.

He said:

“It will come on to blow before the day’s out.”

Blore said:

“Squally—eh?”

From below them came the boom of a gong.

Philip Lombard said:

“Breakfast? Well, I could do with some.”

As they went down the steep slope Blore said to Lombard in a ruminating voice:

“You know, it beats me—why that young fellow wanted to do himself in! I’ve been worrying about it all night.”

Vera was a little ahead. Lombard hung back slightly. He said:

“Got any alternative theory?”

“I’d want some proof. Motive, to begin with. Well-off I should say he was.”

Emily Brent came out of the drawing room window to meet them.

She said sharply:

“Is the boat coming?”

“Not yet,” said Vera.

They went into breakfast. There was a vast dish of eggs and bacon on the sideboard and tea and coffee.

Rogers held the door open for them to pass in, then shut it from the outside.

Emily Brent said:

“That man looks ill this morning.”

Dr. Armstrong, who was standing by the window, cleared his throat. He said:

“You must excuse any—er—shortcomings this morning. Rogers has had to do the best he can for breakfast single-handed. Mrs. Rogers has—er—not been able to carry on this morning.”

Emily Brent said sharply:

“What’s the matter with the woman?”

Dr. Armstrong said easily:

“Let us start our breakfast. The eggs will be cold. Afterwards, there are several matters I want to discuss with you all.”

They took the hint. Plates were filled, coffee and tea was poured. The meal began.

Discussion of the island was, by mutual consent, tabooed. They spoke instead in a desultory fashion of current events. The news from abroad, events in the world of sport, the latest reappearance of the Loch Ness monster.

Then, when plates were cleared, Dr. Armstrong moved back his chair a little, cleared his throat importantly and spoke.

He said:

“I thought it better to wait until you had had your breakfast before telling you of a sad piece of news. Mrs. Rogers died in her sleep.”

There were startled and shocked ejaculations.

Vera exclaimed:

“How awful! Two deaths on this island since we arrived!”

Mr. Justice Wargrave, his eyes narrowed, said in his small precise clear voice:

“H’m—very remarkable—what was the cause of death?”

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders.

“Impossible to say offhand.”

“There must be an autopsy?”

“I certainly couldn’t give a certificate. I have no knowledge whatsoever of the woman’s state of health.”

Vera said:

“She was a very nervous-looking creature. And she had a shock last night. It might have been heart failure, I suppose?”

Dr. Armstrong said dryly:

“Her heart certainly failed to beat—but what caused it to fail is the question.”

One word fell from Emily Brent. It fell hard and clear into the listening group.

“Conscience!” she said.

Armstrong turned to her.

“What exactly do you mean by that, Miss Brent?”

Emily Brent, her lips tight and hard, said:

“You all heard. She was accused, together with her husband, of having deliberately murdered her former employer—an old lady.”

“And you think?”

Emily Brent said:

“I think that the accusation was true. You all saw her last night. She broke down completely and fainted. The shock of having her wickedness brought home to her was too much for her. She literally died of fear.”

Dr. Armstrong shook his head doubtfully.

“It is a possible theory,” he said. “One cannot adopt it without more exact knowledge of her state of health. If there was cardiac weakness—”

Emily Brent said quietly:

“Call it if you prefer, an Act of God.”

Everyone looked shocked. Mr. Blore said uneasily:

“That’s carrying things a bit far, Miss Brent.”

She looked at them with shining eyes. Her chin went up. She said:

“You regard it as impossible that a sinner should be struck down by the wrath of God! I do not!”

The judge stroked his chin. He murmured in a slightly ironic voice:

“My dear lady, in my experience of ill-doing, Providence leaves the work of conviction and chastisement to us mortals—and the process is often fraught with difficulties. There are no short cuts.”

Emily Brent shrugged her shoulders.

Blore said sharply:

“What did she have to eat and drink last night after she went up to bed?”

Armstrong said:

“Nothing.”

“She didn’t take anything? A cup of tea? A drink of water? I’ll bet you she had a cup of tea. That sort always does.”

“Rogers assures me she had nothing whatsoever.”

“Ah,” said Blore. “But he might say so!”

His tone was so significant that the doctor looked at him sharply.

Philip Lombard said:

“So that’s your idea?”

Blore said aggressively:

“Well, why not? We all heard that accusation last night. May be sheer moonshine—just plain lunacy! On the other hand, it may not. Allow for the moment that it’s true. Rogers and his Missus polished off that old lady. Well, where does that get you? They’ve been feeling quite safe and happy about it—”

Vera interrupted. In a low voice she said:

“No, I don’t think Mrs. Rogers ever felt safe.”

Blore looked slightly annoyed at the interruption.

“Just like a woman,” his glance said.

He resumed:

“That’s as may be. Anyway there’s no active danger to them as far as they know. Then, last night, some unknown lunatic spills the beans. What happens? The woman cracks—she goes to pieces.

Notice how her husband hung over her as she was coming round. Not all husbandly solicitude! Not on your life! He was like a cat on hot bricks. Scared out of his life as to what she might say.

“And there’s the position for you! They’ve done a murder and got away with it. But if the whole thing’s going to be raked up, what’s going to happen? Ten to one, the woman will give the show away. She hasn’t got the nerve to stand up and brazen it out. She’s a living danger to her husband, that’s what she is. He’s all right. He’ll lie with a straight face till kingdom comes—but he can’t be sure of her! And if she goes to pieces, his neck’s in danger! So he slips something into a cup of tea and makes sure that her mouth is shut permanently.”

Armstrong said slowly:

“There was no empty cup by her bedside—there was nothing there at all. I looked.”

Blore snorted.

“Of course there wouldn’t be! First thing he’d do when she’d drunk it would be to take that cup and saucer away and wash it up carefully.”

There was a pause. Then General Macarthur said doubtfully:

“It may be so. But I should hardly think it possible that a man would do that—to his wife.”

Blore gave a short laugh.

He said:

“When a man’s neck’s in danger, he doesn’t stop to think too much about sentiment.”

There was a pause. Before any one could speak, the door opened and Rogers came in.

He said, looking from one to the other:

“Is there anything more I can get you?”

Mr. Justice Wargrave stirred a little in his chair. He asked:

“What time does the motorboat usually come over?”

“Between seven and eight, sir. Sometimes it’s a bit after eight. Don’t know what Fred Narracott can be doing this morning. If he’s ill he’d send his brother.”

Philip Lombard said:

“What’s the time now?”

“Ten minutes to ten, sir.”

Lombard’s eyebrows rose. He nodded slowly to himself.

Rogers waited a minute or two.

General Macarthur spoke suddenly and explosively:

“Sorry to hear about your wife, Rogers. Doctor’s just been telling us.”

Rogers inclined his head.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

He took up the empty bacon dish and went out. Again there was a silence.

III

On the terrace outside Philip Lombard said:

“About this motorboat—”

Blore looked at him.

Blore nodded his head.

He said:

“I know what you’re thinking, Mr. Lombard. I’ve asked myself the same question. Motorboat ought to have been here nigh on two hours ago. It hasn’t come? Why?”

“Found the answer?” asked Lombard.

“It’s not an accident—that’s what I say. It’s part and parcel of the whole business. It’s all bound up together.”

Philip Lombard said:

“It won’t come, you think?”

A voice spoke behind him—a testy impatient voice.

“The motorboat’s not coming,” it said.

Blore turned his square shoulder slightly and viewed the last speaker thoughtfully.

“You think not too, General?”

General Macarthur said sharply:

“Of course it won’t come. We’re counting on the motorboat to take us off the island. That’s the meaning of the whole business. We’re not going to leave the island... None of us will ever leave ... It’s the end, you see—the end of everything....”

He hesitated, then he said in a low strange voice:

“That’s peace—real peace. To come to the end—not to have to go on ... Yes, peace....”

He turned abruptly and walked away. Along the terrace, then down the slope towards the sea—obliquely—to the end of the island where loose rocks went out into the water.

He walked a little unsteadily, like a man who was only half awake.

Blore said:

“There goes another one who’s barmy! Looks as though it’ll end with the whole lot going that way.”

Philip Lombard said:

“I don’t fancy you will, Blore.”

The ex-Inspector laughed.

“It would take a lot to send me off my head.” He added dryly:
“And I don’t think you’ll be going that way either, Mr. Lombard.”

Philip Lombard said:

“I feel quite sane at the minute, thank you.”

IV

Dr. Armstrong came out on to the terrace. He stood there hesitating. To his left were Blore and Lombard. To his right was Wargrave, slowly pacing up and down, his head bent down.

Armstrong, after a moment of indecision, turned towards the latter.

But at that moment Rogers came quickly out of the house.

“Could I have a word with you, sir, please?”

Armstrong turned.

He was startled at what he saw.

Rogers’ face was working. Its colour was greyish green. His hands shook.

It was such a contrast to his restraint of a few minutes ago that Armstrong was quite taken aback.

“Please sir, if I could have a word with you. Inside, sir.”

The doctor turned back and reentered the house with the frenzied butler. He said:

“What’s the matter, man, pull yourself together.”

“In here, sir, come in here.”

He opened the dining room door. The doctor passed in. Rogers followed him and shut the door behind him.

“Well,” said Armstrong, “what is it?”

The muscles of Rogers’ throat were working. He was swallowing. He jerked out:

“There’s things going on, sir, that I don’t understand.”

Armstrong said sharply:

“Things? What things?”

“You’ll think I’m crazy, sir. You’ll say it isn’t anything. But it’s got to be explained, sir. It’s got to be explained. Because it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, man, tell me what it is. Don’t go on talking in riddles.”

Rogers swallowed again.

He said:

“It’s those little figures, sir. In the middle of the table. The little china figures. Ten of them, there were. I’ll swear to that, ten of them.”

Armstrong said:

“Yes, ten. We counted them last night at dinner.”

Rogers came nearer.

“That’s just it, sir. Last night, when I was clearing up, there wasn’t but nine, sir. I noticed it and thought it queer. But that’s all I thought. And now, sir, this morning. I didn’t notice when I laid the breakfast. I was upset and all that.

“But now, sir, when I came to clear away. See for yourself if you don’t believe me.

“There’s only eight, sir! Only eight! It doesn’t make sense, does it? Only eight....”

Seven

I

After breakfast, Emily Brent had suggested to Vera Claythorne that they should walk to the summit again and watch for the boat. Vera had acquiesced.

The wind had freshened. Small white crests were appearing on the sea. There were no fishing boats out—and no sign of the motorboat.

The actual village of Sticklehaven could not be seen, only the hill above it, a jutting out cliff of red rock concealed the actual little bay.

Emily Brent said:

“The man who brought us out yesterday seemed a dependable sort of person. It is really very odd that he should be so late this morning.”

Vera did not answer. She was fighting down a rising feeling of panic.

She said to herself angrily:

“You must keep cool. This isn’t like you. You’ve always had excellent nerves.”

Aloud she said after a minute or two:

“I wish he would come. I—I want to get away.”

Emily Brent said dryly:

“I’ve no doubt we all do.”

Vera said:

“It’s all so extraordinary ... There seems no—no meaning in it all.”

The elderly woman beside her said briskly:

“I’m very annoyed with myself for being so easily taken in. Really that letter is absurd when one comes to examine it. But I had no doubts at the time—none at all.”

Vera murmured mechanically: “I suppose not.”

“One takes things for granted too much,” said Emily Brent.

Vera drew a deep shuddering breath.

She said:

“Do you really think—what you said at breakfast?”

“Be a little more precise, my dear. To what in particular are you referring?”

Vera said in a low voice:

“Do you really think that Rogers and his wife did away with that old lady?”

Emily Brent gazed thoughtfully out to sea. Then she said:

“Personally, I am quite sure of it. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

Emily Brent said:

“Everything goes to support the idea. The way the woman fainted. And the man dropped the coffee tray, remember. Then the way he spoke about it—it didn’t ring true. Oh, yes, I’m afraid they did it.”

Vera said:

“The way she looked—scared of her own shadow! I’ve never seen a woman look so frightened ... She must have been always haunted by it....”

Miss Brent murmured:

“I remember a text that hung in my nursery as a child. ‘Be sure thy sin will find thee out.’ It’s very true, that. Be sure thy sin will find thee out.”

Vera scrambled to her feet. She said:

“But, Miss Brent—Miss Brent—in that case—”

“Yes, my dear?”

“The others? What about the others?”

“I don’t quite understand you.”

“All the other accusations—they—they weren’t true? But if it’s true about the Rogerses—” She stopped, unable to make her chaotic thought clear.

Emily Brent’s brow, which had been frowning perplexedly, cleared.

She said:

“Ah, I understand you now. Well, there is that Mr. Lombard. He admits to having abandoned twenty men to their deaths.”

Vera said: “They were only natives....”

Emily Brent said sharply:

“Black or white, they are our brothers.”

Vera thought:

“Our black brothers—our black brothers. Oh, I’m going to laugh. I’m hysterical. I’m not myself....”

Emily Brent continued thoughtfully.

“Of course, some of the other accusations were very far fetched and ridiculous. Against the judge, for instance, who was only doing his duty in his public capacity. And the ex-Scotland Yard man. My own case, too.”

She paused and then went on:

“Naturally, considering the circumstances, I was not going to say anything last night. It was not a fit subject to discuss before gentlemen.”

“No?”

Vera listened with interest. Miss Brent continued serenely.

“Beatrice Taylor was in service with me. Not a nice girl—as I found out too late. I was very much deceived in her. She had nice manners and was very clean and willing. I was very pleased with her. Of course, all that was the sheerest hypocrisy! She was a loose girl with no morals. Disgusting! It was some time before I found out that she was what they call ‘in trouble.’” She paused, her delicate nose wrinkling itself in distaste. “It was a great shock to me. Her parents were decent folk, too, who had brought her up very strictly. I’m glad to say they did not condone her behaviour.”

Vera said, staring at Miss Brent:

“What happened?”

“Naturally I did not keep her an hour under my roof. No one shall ever say that I condoned immorality.”

Vera said in a lower voice:

“What happened—to her?”

Miss Brent said:

“The abandoned creature, not content with having one sin on her conscience, committed a still graver sin. She took her own life.”

Vera whispered, horror-struck:

“She killed herself?”

“Yes, she threw herself into the river.”

Vera shivered.

She stared at the calm delicate profile of Miss Brent. She said:

“What did you feel like when you knew she’d done that? Weren’t you sorry? Didn’t you blame yourself?”

Emily Brent drew herself up.

“I? I had nothing with which to reproach myself.”

Vera said:

“But if your—hardness—drove her to it.”

Emily Brent said sharply:

“Her own action—her own sin—that was what drove her to it. If she had behaved like a decent modest young woman none of this would have happened.”

She turned her face to Vera. There was no self-reproach, no uneasiness in those eyes. They were hard and self-righteous. Emily Brent sat on the summit of Soldier Island, encased in her own armour of virtue.

The little elderly spinster was no longer slightly ridiculous to Vera.

Suddenly—she was terrible.

II

Dr. Armstrong came out of the dining room and once more came out on the terrace.

The judge was sitting in a chair now, gazing placidly out to sea.

Lombard and Blore were over to the left, smoking but not talking.

As before, the doctor hesitated for a moment. His eye rested speculatively on Mr. Justice Wargrave. He wanted to consult with someone. He was conscious of the judge's acute logical brain. But nevertheless, he wavered. Mr. Justice Wargrave might have a good brain but he was an elderly man. At this juncture, Armstrong felt what was needed was a man of action.

He made up his mind.

"Lombard, can I speak to you for a minute?"

Philip started.

"Of course."

The two men left the terrace. They strolled down the slope towards the water. When they were out of earshot Armstrong said:

"I want a consultation."

Lombard's eyebrows went up. He said:

"My dear fellow, I've no medical knowledge."

"No, no, I mean as to the general situation."

"Oh, that's different."

Armstrong said:

“Frankly, what do you think of the position?”

Lombard reflected a minute. Then he said:

“It’s rather suggestive, isn’t it?”

“What are your ideas on the subject of that woman? Do you accept Blore’s theory?”

Philip puffed smoke into the air. He said:

“It’s perfectly feasible—taken alone.”

“Exactly.”

Armstrong’s tone sounded relieved. Philip Lombard was no fool.

The latter went on:

“That is, accepting the premise that Mr. and Mrs. Rogers have successfully got away with murder in their time. And I don’t see why they shouldn’t. What do you think they did exactly? Poisoned the old lady?”

Armstrong said slowly:

“It might be simpler than that. I asked Rogers this morning what this Miss Brady had suffered from. His answer was enlightening. I don’t need to go into medical details, but in a certain form of cardiac trouble, amyl nitrite is used. When an attack comes on an ampoule of amyl nitrite is broken and it is inhaled. If amyl nitrite were withheld—well, the consequences might easily be fatal.”

Philip Lombard said thoughtfully:

“As simple as that. It must have been—rather tempting.”

The doctor nodded.

“Yes, no positive action. No arsenic to obtain and administer—nothing definite—just—negation! And Rogers hurried through the night to fetch a doctor and they both felt confident that no one could ever know.”

“And even if any one knew, nothing could ever be proved against them,” added Philip Lombard.

He frowned suddenly.

“Of course—that explains a good deal.”

Armstrong said, puzzled:

“I beg your pardon.”

Lombard said:

“I mean—it explains Soldier Island. There are crimes that cannot be brought home to their perpetrators. Instance the Rogerses’. Another instance, old Wargrave, who committed his murder strictly within the law.”

Armstrong said sharply: “You believe that story?”

Philip Lombard smiled.

“Oh, yes, I believe it. Wargrave murdered Edward Seton all right, murdered him as surely as if he’d stuck a stiletto through him! But he was clever enough to do it from the judge’s seat in wig and gown. So in the ordinary way you can’t bring his little crime home to him.”

A sudden flash passed like lightning through Armstrong’s mind.

“Murder in Hospital. Murder on the Operating table. Safe—yes, safe as houses!”

Philip Lombard was saying:

“Hence—Mr. Owen—hence—Soldier Island!”

Armstrong drew a deep breath.

“Now we’re getting down to it. What’s the real purpose of getting us all here?”

Philip Lombard said:

“What do you think?”

Armstrong said abruptly:

“Let’s go back a minute to this woman’s death. What are the possible theories? Rogers killed her because he was afraid she would give the show away. Second possibility: she lost her nerve and took an easy way out herself.”

Philip Lombard said:

“Suicide, eh?”

“What do you say to that?”

Lombard said:

“It could have been—yes—if it hadn’t been for Marston’s death. Two suicides within twelve hours is a little too much to swallow! And if you tell me that Anthony Marston, a young bull with no nerves and precious little brains, got the wind up over having mowed down a couple of kids and deliberately put himself out of the way—well, the idea’s laughable! And anyway, how did he get hold of the stuff? From all I’ve ever heard, potassium cyanide isn’t the kind of stuff you take about with you in your waistcoat pocket. But that’s your line of country.”

Armstrong said:

“Nobody in their senses carries potassium cyanide. It might be done by someone who was going to take a wasps’ nest.”

“The ardent gardener or landowner, in fact? Again, not Anthony Marston. It strikes me that that cyanide is going to need a bit of explaining. Either Anthony Marston meant to do away with himself before he came here, and therefore came prepared—or else—.”

Armstrong prompted him.

“Or else?”

Philip Lombard grinned.

“Why make me say it? When it’s on the tip of your own tongue. Anthony Marston was murdered, of course.”

III

Dr. Armstrong drew a deep breath.

“And Mrs. Rogers?”

Lombard said slowly:

“I could believe in Anthony’s suicide (with difficulty) if it weren’t for Mrs. Rogers. I could believe in Mrs. Rogers’ suicide (easily) if it weren’t for Anthony Marston. I can believe that Rogers put his wife out of the way—if it were not for the unexpected death of Anthony Marston. But what we need is a theory to explain two deaths following rapidly on each other.”

Armstrong said:

“I can perhaps give you some help towards that theory.”

And he repeated the facts that Rogers had given him about the disappearance of the two little china figures.

Lombard said:

“Yes, little china figures ... There were certainly ten last night at dinner. And now there are eight, you say?”

Dr. Armstrong recited:

“Ten little soldier boys going out to dine;

One went and choked himself and then there were Nine.

“Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;

One overslept himself and then there were Eight.”

The two men looked at each other. Philip Lombard grinned and flung away his cigarette.

“Fits too damned well to be a coincidence! Anthony Marston dies of asphyxiation or choking last night after dinner, and Mother Rogers oversleeps herself with a vengeance.”

“And therefore?” said Armstrong.

Lombard took him up.

“And therefore another kind of soldier. The Unknown Soldier! X! Mr. Owen! U. N. Owen! One Unknown Lunatic at Large!”

“Ah!” Armstrong breathed a sigh of relief. “You agree. But you see what it involves? Rogers swore that there was no one but ourselves and he and his wife on the island.”

“Rogers is wrong! Or possibly Rogers is lying!”

Armstrong shook his head.

“I don’t think he’s lying. The man’s scared. He’s scared nearly out of his senses.”

Philip Lombard nodded.

He said:

“No motorboat this morning. That fits in. Mr. Owen’s little arrangements again to the fore. Soldier Island is to be isolated until Mr. Owen has finished his job.”

Armstrong had gone pale. He said:

“You realize—the man must be a raving maniac!”

Philip Lombard said, and there was a new ring in his voice:

“There’s one thing Mr. Owen didn’t realize.”

“What’s that?”

“This island’s more or less a bare rock. We shall make short work of searching it. We’ll soon ferret out U. N. Owen, Esq.”

Dr. Armstrong said warningly:

“He’ll be dangerous.”

Philip Lombard laughed.

“Dangerous? Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf? I’ll be dangerous when I get hold of him!”

He paused and said:

“We’d better rope in Blore to help us. He’ll be a good man in a pinch. Better not tell the women. As for the others, the General’s ga-ga, I think, and old Wargrave’s forte is masterly inactivity. The three of us can attend to this job.”

Eight

I

Blore was easily roped in. He expressed immediate agreement with their arguments.

“What you’ve said about those china figures, sir, makes all the difference. That’s crazy, that is! There’s only one thing. You don’t think this Owen’s idea might be to do the job by proxy, as it were?”

“Explain yourself, man.”

“Well, I mean like this. After the racket last night this young Marston gets the wind up and poisons himself. And Rogers, he gets the wind up too and bumps off his wife! All according to U.N.O’s plan.”

Armstrong shook his head. He stressed the point about the cyanide. Blore agreed.

“Yes, I’d forgotten that. Not a natural thing to be carrying about with you. But how did it get into his drink, sir?”

Lombard said:

“I’ve been thinking about that. Marston had several drinks that night. Between the time he had his last one and the time he finished the one before it, there was quite a gap. During that time his glass was lying about on some table or other. I think—though I can’t be sure, it was on the little table near the window. The window was

open. Somebody could have slipped a dose of the cyanide into the glass.”

Blore said unbelievably:

“Without our all seeing him, sir?”

Lombard said dryly:

“We were all—rather concerned elsewhere.”

Armstrong said slowly:

“That’s true. We’d all been attacked. We were walking about, moving about the room. Arguing, indignant, intent on our own business. I think it could have been done....”

Blore shrugged his shoulders.

“Fact is, it must have been done! Now then, gentlemen, let’s make a start. Nobody’s got a revolver, by any chance? I suppose that’s too much to hope for.”

Lombard said:

“I’ve got one.” He patted his pocket.

Blore’s eyes opened very wide. He said in an overcasual tone:

“Always carry that about with you, sir?”

Lombard said:

“Usually. I’ve been in some tight places, you know.”

“Oh,” said Blore and added: “Well, you’ve probably never been in a tighter place than you are today! If there’s a lunatic hiding on this island, he’s probably got a young arsenal on him—to say nothing of a knife or dagger or two.”

Armstrong coughed.

“You may be wrong there, Blore. Many homicidal lunatics are very quiet unassuming people. Delightful fellows.”

Blore said:

“I don’t feel this one is going to be of that kind, Dr. Armstrong.”

II

The three men started on their tour of the island.

It proved unexpectedly simple. On the northwest side, towards the coast, the cliffs fell sheer to the sea below, their surface unbroken.

On the rest of the island there were no trees and very little cover. The three men worked carefully and methodically, beating up and down from the highest point to the water’s edge, narrowly scanning the least irregularity in the rock which might point to the entrance to a cave. But there were no caves.

They came at last, skirting the water’s edge, to where General Macarthur sat looking out to sea. It was very peaceful here with the lap of the waves breaking over the rocks. The old man sat very upright, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

He paid no attention to the approach of the searchers. His oblivion of them made one at least faintly uncomfortable.

Blore thought to himself:

“ ’Tisn’t natural—looks as though he’d gone into a trance or something.”

He cleared his throat and said in a would-be conversational tone:

“Nice peaceful spot you’ve found for yourself, sir.”

The General frowned. He cast a quick look over his shoulder. He said:

“There is so little time—so little time. I really must insist that no one disturbs me.”

Blore said genially:

“We won’t disturb you. We’re just making a tour of the island so to speak. Just wondered, you know, if someone might be hiding on it.”

The General frowned and said:

“You don’t understand—you don’t understand at all. Please go away.”

Blore retreated. He said, as he joined the other two:

“He’s crazy ... It’s no good talking to him.”

Lombard asked with some curiosity:

“What did he say?”

Blore shrugged his shoulders.

“Something about there being no time and that he didn’t want to be disturbed.”

Dr. Armstrong frowned.

He murmured:

“I wonder now....”

III

The search of the island was practically completed. The three men stood on the highest point looking over towards the mainland. There were no boats out. The wind was freshening.

Lombard said:

“No fishing boats out. There’s a storm coming. Damned nuisance you can’t see the village from here. We could signal or do something.”

Blore said:

“We might light a bonfire tonight.”

Lombard said, frowning:

“The devil of it is that that’s all probably been provided for.”

“In what way, sir?”

“How do I know? Practical joke, perhaps. We’re to be marooned here, no attention is to be paid to signals, etc. Possibly the village has been told there’s a wager on. Some damn’ fool story anyway.”

Blore said dubiously:

“Think they’d swallow that?”

Lombard said dryly:

“It’s easier of belief than the truth! If the village were told that the island was to be isolated until Mr. Unknown Owen had quietly murdered all his guests—do you think they’d believe that?”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“There are moments when I can’t believe it myself. And yet—”

Philip Lombard, his lips curling back from his teeth said:

“And yet—that’s just it! You’ve said it, doctor!”

Blore was gazing down into the water.

He said:

“Nobody could have clambered down here, I suppose?”

Armstrong shook his head.

“I doubt it. It’s pretty sheer. And where could he hide?”

Blore said:

“There might be a hole in the cliff. If we had a boat now, we could row round the island.”

Lombard said:

“If we had a boat, we’d all be halfway to the mainland by now!”

“True enough, sir.”

Lombard said suddenly:

“We can make sure of this cliff. There’s only one place where there could be a recess—just a little to the right below here. If you fellows can get hold of a rope, you can let me down to make sure.”

Blore said:

“Might as well be sure. Though it seems absurd—on the face of it! I’ll see if I can get hold of something.”

He started off briskly down to the house.

Lombard stared up at the sky. The clouds were beginning to mass themselves together. The wind was increasing.

He shot a sideways look at Armstrong. He said:

“You’re very silent, doctor. What are you thinking?”

Armstrong said slowly:

“I was wondering exactly how mad old Macarthur was....”

IV

Vera had been restless all the morning. She had avoided Emily Brent with a kind of shuddering aversion.

Miss Brent herself had taken a chair just round the corner of the house so as to be out of the wind. She sat there knitting.

Every time Vera thought of her she seemed to see a pale drowned face with seaweed entangled in the hair ... A face that had once been pretty—impudently pretty perhaps—and which was now beyond the reach of pity or terror.

And Emily Brent, placid and righteous, sat knitting.

On the main terrace, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat huddled in a porter's chair. His head was poked down well into his neck.

When Vera looked at him, she saw a man standing in the dock—a young man with fair hair and blue eyes and a bewildered frightened face. Edward Seton. And in imagination she saw the judge's old hands put the black cap on his head and begin to pronounce sentence....

After a while Vera strolled slowly down to the sea. She walked along towards the extreme end of the island where an old man sat staring out to the horizon.

General Macarthur stirred at her approach. His head turned—there was a queer mixture of questioning and apprehension in his look. It startled her. He stared intently at her for a minute or two.

She thought to herself:

“How queer. It's almost as though he knew....”

He said:

“Ah, it’s you! You’ve come....”

Vera sat down beside him. She said:

“Do you like sitting here looking out to sea?”

He nodded his head gently.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s pleasant. It’s a good place, I think, to wait.”

“To wait?” said Vera sharply. “What are you waiting for?”

He said gently:

“The end. But I think you know that, don’t you? It’s true, isn’t it? We’re all waiting for the end.”

She said unsteadily:

“What do you mean?”

General Macarthur said gravely:

“None of us are going to leave the island. That’s the plan. You know it, of course, perfectly. What, perhaps, you can’t understand is the relief!”

Vera said wonderingly:

“The relief?”

He said:

“Yes. Of course, you’re very young ... you haven’t got to that yet. But it does come! The blessed relief when you know that you’ve done with it all—that you haven’t got to carry the burden any longer. You’ll feel that too, someday....”

Vera said hoarsely:

“I don’t understand you.”

Her fingers worked spasmodically. She felt suddenly afraid of this quiet old soldier.

He said musingly:

“You see, I loved Leslie. I loved her very much....”

Vera said questioningly:

“Was Leslie your wife?”

“Yes, my wife ... I loved her—and I was very proud of her. She was so pretty—and so gay.”

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

“Yes, I loved Leslie. That’s why I did it.”

Vera said:

“You mean—” and paused.

General Macarthur nodded his head gently.

“It’s not much good denying it now—not when we’re all going to die. I sent Richmond to his death. I suppose, in a way, it was murder. Curious. Murder—and I’ve always been such a law-abiding man! But it didn’t seem like that at the time. I had no regrets. ‘Serves him damned well right!’—that’s what I thought. But afterwards—”

In a hard voice, Vera said:

“Well, afterwards?”

He shook his head vaguely. He looked puzzled and a little distressed.

“I don’t know. I—don’t know. It was all different, you see. I don’t know if Leslie ever guessed ... I don’t think so. But, you see, I didn’t know about her anymore. She’d gone far away where I couldn’t reach her. And then she died—and I was alone....”

Vera said:

“Alone—alone—” and the echo of her voice came back to her from the rocks.

General Macarthur said:

“You’ll be glad, too, when the end comes.”

Vera got up. She said sharply:

“I don’t know what you mean!”

He said:

“I know, my child. I know....”

“You don’t. You don’t understand at all....”

General Macarthur looked out to sea again. He seemed unconscious of her presence behind him.

He said very gently and softly:

“Leslie ...?”

V

When Blore returned from the house with a rope coiled over his arm, he found Armstrong where he had left him staring down into the depths.

Blore said breathlessly:

“Where’s Mr. Lombard?”

Armstrong said carelessly:

“Gone to test some theory or other. He’ll be back in a minute. Look here, Blore, I’m worried.”

“I should say we were all worried.”

The doctor waved an impatient hand.

“Of course—of course. I don’t mean it that way. I’m thinking of old Macarthur.”

“What about him, sir?”

Dr. Armstrong said grimly:

“What we’re looking for is a madman. What price Macarthur?”

Blore said incredulously:

“You mean he’s homicidal?”

Armstrong said doubtfully:

“I shouldn’t have said so. Not for a minute. But, of course, I’m not a specialist in mental diseases. I haven’t really had any conversation with him—I haven’t studied him from that point of view.”

Blore said doubtfully:

“Ga-ga, yes! But I wouldn’t have said—”

Armstrong cut in with a slight effort as of a man who pulls himself together.

“You’re probably right! Damn it all, there must be someone hiding on the island! Ah! here comes Lombard.”

They fastened the rope carefully.

Lombard said:

“I’ll help myself all I can. Keep a lookout for a sudden strain on the rope.”

After a minute or two, while they stood together watching Lombard’s progress, Blore said:

“Climbs like a cat, doesn’t he?”

There was something odd in his voice.

Dr. Armstrong said:

“I should think he must have done some mountaineering in his time.”

“Maybe.”

There was a silence and the ex-Inspector said:

“Funny sort of cove altogether. D’you know what I think?”

“What?”

“He’s a wrong ’un!”

Armstrong said doubtfully:

“In what way?”

Blore grunted. Then he said:

“I don’t know—exactly. But I wouldn’t trust him a yard.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“I suppose he’s led an adventurous life.”

Blore said:

“I bet some of his adventures have had to be kept pretty dark.” He paused and then went on: “Did you happen to bring a revolver along with you, doctor?”

Armstrong stared.

“Me? Good Lord, no. Why should I?”

Blore said:

“Why did Mr. Lombard?”

Armstrong said doubtfully:

“I suppose—habit.”

Blore snorted.

A sudden pull came on the rope. For some moments they had their hands full. Presently, when the strain relaxed, Blore said:

“There are habits and habits! Mr. Lombard takes a revolver to out of the way places, right enough, and a primus and a sleeping-bag and a supply of bug powder no doubt! But habit wouldn’t make him bring the whole outfit down here! It’s only in books people carry revolvers around as a matter of course.”

Dr. Armstrong shook his head perplexedly.

They leaned over and watched Lombard’s progress. His search was thorough and they could see at once that it was futile. Presently he came up over the edge of the cliff. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“Well,” he said. “We’re up against it. It’s the house or nowhere.”

VI

The house was easily searched. They went through the few out-buildings first and then turned their attention to the building itself. Mrs. Rogers’ yard measure discovered in the kitchen dresser assisted them. But there were no hidden spaces left unaccounted for. Everything was plain and straightforward, a modern structure devoid of concealments. They went through the ground floor first. As they mounted to the bedroom floor, they saw through the landing window Rogers carrying out a tray of cocktails to the terrace.

Philip Lombard said lightly:

“Wonderful animal, the good servant. Carries on with an impassive countenance.”

Armstrong said appreciatively:

“Rogers is a first-class butler, I’ll say that for him!”

Blore said:

“His wife was a pretty good cook, too. That dinner—last night—”

They turned in to the first bedroom.

Five minutes later they faced each other on the landing. No one hiding—no possible hiding place.

Blore said:

“There’s a little stair here.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“It leads up to the servants’ room.”

Blore said:

“There must be a place under the roof—for cisterns, water tank, etc. It’s the best chance—and the only one!”

And it was then, as they stood there, that they heard the sound from above. A soft furtive footfall overhead.

They all heard it. Armstrong grasped Blore’s arm. Lombard held up an admonitory finger.

“Quiet—listen.”

It came again—someone moving softly, furtively, overhead.

Armstrong whispered:

“He’s actually in the bedroom itself. The room where Mrs. Rogers’ body is.”

Blore whispered back:

“Of course! Best hidingplace he could have chosen! Nobody likely to go there. Now then—quiet as you can.”

They crept stealthily upstairs.

On the little landing outside the door of the bedroom they paused again. Yes, someone was in the room. There was a faint creak from within.

Blore whispered:

“Now.”

He flung open the door and rushed in, the other two close behind him.

Then all three stopped dead.

Rogers was in the room, his hands full of garments.

VII

Blore recovered himself first. He said:

“Sorry—er—Rogers. Heard someone moving about in here, and thought—well—”

He stopped.

Rogers said:

“I’m sorry, gentlemen. I was just moving my things. I take it there will be no objection if I take one of the vacant guest chambers on the floor below? The smallest room.”

It was to Armstrong that he spoke and Armstrong replied:

“Of course. Of course. Get on with it.”

He avoided looking at the sheeted figure lying on the bed.

Rogers said:

“Thank you, sir.”

He went out of the room with his arm full of belongings and went down the stairs to the floor below.

Armstrong moved over to the bed and, lifting the sheet, looked down on the peaceful face of the dead woman. There was no fear there now. Just emptiness.

Armstrong said:

“Wish I’d got my stuff here. I’d like to know what drug it was.”

Then he turned to the other two.

“Let’s get finished. I feel it in my bones we’re not going to find anything.”

Blore was wrestling with the bolts of a low manhole.

He said:

“That chap moves damned quietly. A minute or two ago we saw him in the garden. None of us heard him come upstairs.”

Lombard said:

“I suppose that’s why we assumed it must be a stranger moving about up here.”

Blore disappeared into a cavernous darkness. Lombard pulled a torch from his pocket and followed.

Five minutes later three men stood on an upper landing and looked at each other. They were dirty and festooned with cobwebs and their faces were grim.

There was no one on the island but their eight selves.

Nine

I

Lombard said slowly:

“So we’ve been wrong—wrong all along! Built up a nightmare of superstition and fantasy all because of the coincidence of two deaths!”

Armstrong said gravely:

“And yet, you know, the argument holds. Hang it all, I’m a doctor, I know something about suicides. Anthony Marston wasn’t a suicidal type.”

Lombard said doubtfully:

“It couldn’t, I suppose, have been an accident?”

Blore snorted, unconvinced.

“Damned queer sort of accident,” he grunted.

There was a pause, then Blore said:

“About the woman—” and stopped.

“Mrs. Rogers?”

“Yes. It’s possible, isn’t it, that that might have been an accident?”

Philip Lombard said:

“An accident? In what way?”

Blore looked slightly embarrassed. His red-brick face grew a little deeper in hue. He said, almost blurting out the words:

“Look here, doctor, you did give her some dope, you know.”

Armstrong stared at him.

“Dope? What do you mean?”

“Last night. You said yourself you’d given her something to make her sleep.”

“Oh that, yes. A harmless sedative.”

“What was it exactly?”

“I gave her a mild dose of trional. A perfectly harmless preparation.”

Blore grew redder still. He said:

“Look here—not to mince matters—you didn’t give her an overdose, did you?”

Dr. Armstrong said angrily:

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Blore said:

“It’s possible, isn’t it, that you may have made a mistake? These things do happen once in a while.”

Armstrong said sharply:

“I did nothing of the sort. The suggestion is ridiculous.” He stopped and added in a cold biting tone: “Or do you suggest that I gave her an overdose on purpose?”

Philip Lombard said quickly:

“Look here, you two, got to keep our heads. Don’t let’s start slinging accusations about.”

Blore said sullenly:

“I only suggested the doctor had made a mistake.”

Dr. Armstrong smiled with an effort. He said, showing his teeth in a somewhat mirthless smile:

“Doctors can’t afford to make mistakes of that kind, my friend.”

Blore said deliberately:

“It wouldn’t be the first you’ve made—if that gramophone record is to be believed!”

Armstrong went white. Philip Lombard said quickly and angrily to Blore:

“What’s the sense of making yourself offensive? We’re all in the same boat. We’ve got to pull together. What about your own pretty little spot of perjury?”

Blore took a step forward, his hands clenched. He said in a thick voice:

“Perjury, be damned! That’s a foul lie! You may try and shut me up, Mr. Lombard, but there’s things I want to know—and one of them is about you!”

Lombard’s eyebrows rose.

“About me?”

“Yes. I want to know why you brought a revolver down here on a pleasant social visit?”

Lombard said:

“You do, do you?”

“Yes, I do, Mr. Lombard.”

Lombard said unexpectedly:

“You know, Blore, you’re not nearly such a fool as you look.”

“That’s as may be. What about that revolver?”

Lombard smiled.

“I brought it because I expected to run into a spot of trouble.”

Blore said suspiciously:

“You didn’t tell us that last night.”

Lombard shook his head.

“You were holding out on us?” Blore persisted.

“In a way, yes,” said Lombard.

“Well, come on, out with it.”

Lombard said slowly:

“I allowed you all to think that I was asked here in the same way as most of the others. That’s not quite true. As a matter of fact I was approached by a little Jew-boy—Morris his name was. He offered me a hundred guineas to come down here and keep my eyes open—said I’d got a reputation for being a good man in a tight place.”

“Well?” Blore prompted impatiently.

Lombard said with a grin:

“That’s all.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“But surely he told you more than that?”

“Oh no, he didn’t. Just shut up like a clam. I could take it or leave it—those were his words. I was hard up. I took it.”

Blore looked unconvinced. He said:

“Why didn’t you tell us all this last night?”

“My dear man—” Lombard shrugged eloquent shoulders. “How was I to know that last night wasn’t exactly the eventuality I was here to cope with? I lay low and told a noncommittal story.”

Dr. Armstrong said shrewdly:

“But now—you think differently?”

Lombard’s face changed. It darkened and hardened. He said:

“Yes. I believe now that I’m in the same boat as the rest of you. That hundred guineas was just Mr. Owen’s little bit of cheese to get me into the trap along with the rest of you.”

He said slowly:

“For we are in a trap—I’ll take my oath on that! Mrs. Rogers’ death! Tony Marston’s! The disappearing soldier boys on the dinner table! Oh yes, Mr. Owen’s hand is plainly seen—but where the devil is Mr. Owen himself?”

Downstairs the gong pealed a solemn call to lunch.

II

Rogers was standing by the dining room door. As the three men descended the stairs he moved a step or two forward. He said in a low anxious voice:

“I hope lunch will be satisfactory. There is cold ham and cold tongue, and I’ve boiled some potatoes. And there’s cheese and biscuits, and some tinned fruits.”

Lombard said:

“Sounds all right. Stores are holding out, then?”

“There is plenty of food, sir—of a tinned variety. The larder is very well stocked. A necessity, that, I should say, sir, on an island where one may be cut off from the mainland for a considerable period.”

Lombard nodded.

Rogers murmured as he followed the three men into the dining room:

“It worries me that Fred Narracott hasn’t been over today. It’s peculiarly unfortunate, as you might say.”

“Yes,” said Lombard, “peculiarly unfortunate describes it very well.”

Miss Brent came into the room. She had just dropped a ball of wool and was carefully rewinding the end of it.

As she took her seat at table she remarked:

“The weather is changing. The wind is quite strong and there are white horses on the sea.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave came in. He walked with a slow measured tread. He darted quick looks from under his bushy eyebrows at the other occupants of the dining room. He said:

“You have had an active morning.”

There was a faint malicious pleasure in his voice.

Vera Claythorne hurried in. She was a little out of breath.

She said quickly:

“I hope you didn’t wait for me. Am I late?”

Emily Brent said:

“You’re not the last. The General isn’t here yet.”

They sat round the table.

Rogers addressed Miss Brent.

“Will you begin, Madam, or will you wait?”

Vera said:

“General Macarthur is sitting right down by the sea. I don’t expect he would hear the gong there anyway”—she hesitated—“he’s a little vague today, I think.”

Rogers said quickly:

“I will go down and inform him luncheon is ready.”

Dr. Armstrong jumped up.

“I’ll go,” he said. “You others start lunch.”

He left the room. Behind him he heard Rogers’ voice.

“Will you take cold tongue or cold ham, Madam?”

III

The five people sitting round the table seemed to find conversation difficult. Outside, sudden gusts of wind came up and died away.

Vera shivered a little and said:

“There is a storm coming.”

Blore made a contribution to the discourse. He said conversationally:

“There was an old fellow in the train from Plymouth yesterday. He kept saying a storm was coming. Wonderful how they know weather, these old salts.”

Rogers went round the table collecting the meat plates.

Suddenly, with the plates held in his hands, he stopped.

He said in an odd scared voice:

“There’s somebody running....”

They could all hear it—running feet along the terrace.

In that minute, they knew—knew without being told....

As by common accord, they all rose to their feet. They stood looking towards the door.

Dr. Armstrong appeared, his breath coming fast.

He said:

“General Macarthur—”

“Dead!” The word burst from Vera explosively.

Armstrong said:

“Yes, he’s dead....”

There was a pause—a long pause.

Seven people looked at each other and could find no words to say.

IV

The storm broke just as the old man’s body was borne in through the door.

The others were standing in the hall.

There was a sudden hiss and roar as the rain came down.

As Blore and Armstrong passed up the stairs with their burden, Vera Claythorne turned suddenly and went into the deserted dining room.

It was as they had left it. The sweet course stood ready on the sideboard untasted.

Vera went up to the table. She was there a minute or two later when Rogers came softly into the room.

He started when he saw her. Then his eyes asked a question.

He said:

“Oh, Miss, I—I just came to see....”

In a loud harsh voice that surprised herself Vera said:

“You’re quite right, Rogers. Look for yourself. There are only seven....”

V

General Macarthur had been laid on his bed.

After making a last examination Armstrong left the room and came downstairs. He found the others assembled in the drawing room.

Miss Brent was knitting. Vera Claythorne was standing by the window looking out at the hissing rain. Blore was sitting squarely in a chair, his hands on his knees. Lombard was walking restlessly up and down. At the far end of the room Mr. Justice Wargrave was sitting in a grandfather chair. His eyes were half closed.

They opened as the doctor came into the room. He said in a clear penetrating voice:

“Well, doctor?”

Armstrong was very pale. He said:

“No question of heart failure or anything like that. Macarthur was hit with a life preserver or some such thing on the back of the head.”

A little murmur went round, but the clear voice of the judge was raised once more.

“Did you find the actual weapon used?”

“No.”

“Nevertheless you are sure of your facts?”

“I am quite sure.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said quietly:

“We know now exactly where we are.”

There was no doubt now who was in charge of the situation. This morning Wargrave had sat huddled in his chair on the terrace refraining from any overt activity. Now he assumed command with the ease born of a long habit of authority. He definitely presided over the court.

Clearing his throat, he once more spoke.

“This morning, gentlemen, whilst I was sitting on the terrace, I was an observer of your activities. There could be little doubt of your purpose. You were searching the island for an unknown murderer?”

“Quite right, sir,” said Philip Lombard.

The judge went on.

“You had come, doubtless, to the same conclusion that I had—namely that the deaths of Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers were neither accidental nor were they suicides. No doubt you also reached a certain conclusion as to the purpose of Mr. Owen in enticing us to this island?”

Blore said hoarsely:

“He’s a madman! A loony.”

The judge coughed.

“That almost certainly. But it hardly affects the issue. Our main preoccupation is this—to save our lives.”

Armstrong said in a trembling voice:

“There’s no one on the island, I tell you. No one!”

The judge stroked his jaw.

He said gently:

“In the sense you mean, no. I came to that conclusion early this morning. I could have told you that your search would be fruitless. Nevertheless I am strongly of the opinion that ‘Mr. Owen’ (to give him the name he himself has adopted) is on the island. Very much so. Given the scheme in question which is neither more nor less than the execution of justice upon certain individuals for offences which the law cannot touch, there is only one way in which that scheme could be accomplished. Mr. Owen could only come to the island in one way.

“It is perfectly clear. Mr. Owen is one of us....”

VI

“Oh, no, no, no....”

It was Vera who burst out—almost in a moan. The judge turned a keen eye on her.

He said:

“My dear young lady, this is no time for refusing to look facts in the face. We are all in grave danger. One of us is U. N. Owen. And we do not know which of us. Of the ten people who came to this island three are definitely cleared. Anthony Marston, Mrs. Rogers, and General Macarthur have gone beyond suspicion. There are seven of us left. Of those seven, one is, if I may so express myself, a bogus little soldier boy.”

He paused and looked round.

“Do I take it that you all agree?”

Armstrong said:

“It’s fantastic—but I suppose you’re right.”

Blore said:

“Not a doubt of it. And if you ask me, I’ve a very good idea—”

A quick gesture of Mr. Justice Wargrave’s hand stopped him. The judge said quietly:

“We will come to that presently. At the moment all I wish to establish is that we are in agreement on the facts.”

Emily Brent, still knitting, said:

“Your argument seems logical. I agree that one of us is possessed by a devil.”

Vera murmured:

“I can’t believe it ... I can’t....”

Wargrave said:

“Lombard?”

“I agree, sir, absolutely.”

The judge nodded his head in a satisfied manner. He said:

“Now let us examine the evidence. To begin with, is there any reason for suspecting one particular person? Mr. Blore, you have, I think, something to say.”

Blore was breathing hard. He said:

“Lombard’s got a revolver. He didn’t tell the truth—last night. He admits it.”

Philip Lombard smiled scornfully.

He said:

“I suppose I’d better explain again.”

He did so, telling the story briefly and succinctly.

Blore said sharply:

“What’s to prove it? There’s nothing to corroborate your story.”

The judge coughed.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “we are all in that position. There is only our own word to go upon.”

He leaned forward.

“You have none of you yet grasped what a very peculiar situation this is. To my mind there is only one course of procedure to adopt. Is there any one whom we can definitely eliminate from suspicion on the evidence which is in our possession?”

Dr. Armstrong said quickly:

“I, am a well-known professional man. The mere idea that I can be suspected of—”

Again a gesture of the judge’s hand arrested a speaker before he finished his speech. Mr. Justice Wargrave said in his small clear voice:

“I too, am a well-known person! But, my dear sir, that proves less than nothing! Doctors have gone mad before now. Judges have gone mad. So,” he added, looking at Blore, “have policemen!”

Lombard said:

“At any rate, I suppose you’ll leave the women out of it.”

The judge’s eyebrows rose. He said in the famous “acid” tones that Counsel knew so well:

“Do I understand you to assert that women are not subject to homicidal mania?”

Lombard said irritably:

“Of course not. But all the same, it hardly seems possible—”

He stopped. Mr. Justice Wargrave still in the same thin sour voice addressed Armstrong.

“I take it, Dr. Armstrong, that a woman would have been physically capable of striking the blow that killed poor Macarthur?”

The doctor said calmly:

“Perfectly capable—given a suitable instrument, such as a rubber truncheon or cosh.”

“It would require no undue exertion of force?”

“Not at all.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave wriggled his tortoise-like neck. He said:

“The other two deaths have resulted from the administration of drugs. That, no one will dispute, is easily compassed by a person of the smallest physical strength.”

Vera cried angrily:

“I think you’re mad!”

His eyes turned slowly till they rested on her. It was the dispassionate stare of a man well used to weighing humanity in the

balance. She thought:

“He’s just seeing me as a—as a specimen. And—” the thought came to her with real surprise, “he doesn’t like me much!”

In a measured tone the judge was saying:

“My dear young lady, do try and restrain your feelings. I am not accusing you.” He bowed to Miss Brent. “I hope, Miss Brent, that you are not offended by my insistence that all of us are equally under suspicion?”

Emily Brent was knitting. She did not look up. In a cold voice she said:

“The idea that I should be accused of taking a fellow creature’s life—not to speak of the lives of three fellow creatures—is of course, quite absurd to any one who knows anything of my character. But I quite appreciate the fact that we are all strangers to one another and that, in those circumstances, nobody can be exonerated without the fullest proof. There is, as I have said, a devil amongst us.”

The judge said:

“Then we are agreed. There can be no elimination on the ground of character or position alone.”

Lombard said: “What about Rogers?”

The judge looked at him unblinkingly.

“What about him?”

Lombard said:

“Well, to my mind, Rogers seems pretty well ruled out.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“Indeed, and on what grounds?”

Lombard said:

“He hasn’t got the brains for one thing. And for another his wife was one of the victims.”

The judge’s heavy eyebrows rose once more. He said:

“In my time, young man, several people have come before me accused of the murders of their wives—and have been found guilty.”

“Oh! I agree. Wife murder is perfectly possible—almost natural, let’s say! But not this particular kind! I can believe in Rogers killing his wife because he was scared of her breaking down and giving him away, or because he’d taken a dislike to her, or because he wanted to link up with some nice little bit rather less long in the tooth. But I can’t see him as the lunatic Mr. Owen dealing out crazy justice and starting on his own wife for a crime they both committed.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“You are assuming hearsay to be evidence. We do not know that Rogers and his wife conspired to murder their employer. That may have been a false statement, made so that Rogers should appear to

be in the same position as ourselves. Mrs. Rogers' terror last night may have been due to the fact that she realized her husband was mentally unhinged."

Lombard said:

"Well, have it your own way. U. N. Owen is one of us. No exceptions allowed. We all qualify."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"My point is that there can be no exceptions allowed on the score of character, position, or probability. What we must now examine is the possibility of eliminating one or more persons on the facts. To put it simply, is there among us one or more persons who could not possibly have administered either cyanide to Anthony Marston, or an overdose of sleeping draught to Mrs. Rogers, and who had no opportunity of striking the blow that killed General Macarthur?"

Blore's rather heavy face lit up. He leant forward.

"Now you're talking, sir!" he said. "That's the stuff! Let's go into it. As regards young Marston I don't think there's anything to be done. It's already been suggested that someone from outside slipped something into the dregs of his glass before he refilled it for the last time. A person actually in the room could have done that even more easily. I can't remember if Rogers was in the room, but any of the rest of us could certainly have done it."

He paused, then went on:

"Now take the woman Rogers. The people who stand out there are her husband and the doctor. Either of them could have done it as

easy as winking—”

Armstrong sprang to his feet. He was trembling.

“I protest—this is absolutely uncalled for! I swear that the dose I gave the woman was perfectly—”

“Dr. Armstrong.”

The small sour voice was compelling. The doctor stopped with a jerk in the middle of his sentence. The small cold voice went on:

“Your indignation is very natural. Nevertheless you must admit that the facts have got to be faced. Either you or Rogers could have administered a fatal dose with the greatest ease. Let us now consider the position of the other people present. What chance had I, had Inspector Blore, had Miss Brent, had Miss Claythorne, had Mr. Lombard of administering poison? Can any one of us be completely and entirely eliminated?” He paused. “I think not.”

Vera said angrily:

“I was nowhere near the woman! All of you can swear to that.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave waited a minute, then he said:

“As far as my memory serves me the facts were these—will any one please correct me if I make a misstatement? Mrs. Rogers was lifted on to the sofa by Anthony Marston and Mr. Lombard and Dr. Armstrong went to her. He sent Rogers for brandy. There was then a question raised as to where the voice we had just heard had come from. We all went into the next room with the exception of Miss

Brent who remained in this room—alone with the unconscious woman.”

A spot of colour came into Emily Brent’s cheeks. She stopped knitting. She said:

“This is outrageous!”

The remorseless small voice went on:

“When we returned to this room, you, Miss Brent, were bending over the woman on the sofa.”

Emily Brent said:

“Is common humanity a criminal offence?”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“I am only establishing facts. Rogers then entered the room with the brandy which, of course, he could quite well have doctored before entering the room. The brandy was administered to the woman and shortly afterwards her husband and Dr. Armstrong assisted her up to bed where Dr. Armstrong gave her a sedative.”

Blore said:

“That’s what happened. Absolutely. And that lets out the judge, Mr. Lombard, myself and Miss Claythorne.”

His voice was loud and jubilant. Mr. Justice Wargrave, bringing a cold eye to bear upon him, murmured:

“Ah, but does it? We must take into account every possible eventuality.”

Blore stared. He said:

“I don’t get you.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“Upstairs in her room, Mrs. Rogers is lying in bed. The sedative that the doctor has given her begins to take effect. She is vaguely sleepy and acquiescent. Supposing that at that moment there is a tap on the door and someone enters bringing her, shall we say, a tablet, or a draught, with the message that ‘The doctor says you’re to take this.’ Do you imagine for one minute that she would not have swallowed it obediently without thinking twice about it?”

There was a silence. Blore shifted his feet and frowned. Philip Lombard said:

“I don’t believe in that story for a minute. Besides none of us left this room for hours afterwards. There was Marston’s death and all the rest of it.”

The judge said:

“Someone could have left his or her bedroom—later.”

Lombard objected:

“But then Rogers would have been up there.”

Dr. Armstrong stirred.

“No,” he said. “Rogers went downstairs to clear up in the dining room and pantry. Anyone could have gone up to the woman’s bedroom then without being seen.”

Emily Brent said:

“Surely, doctor, the woman would have been fast asleep by then under the influence of the drug you had administered?”

“In all likelihood, yes. But it is not a certainty. Until you have prescribed for a patient more than once you cannot tell their reaction to different drugs. There is, sometimes, a considerable period before a sedative takes effect. It depends on the personal idiosyncrasy of the patient towards that particular drug.”

Lombard said:

“Of course you would say that, doctor. Suits your book—eh?”

Again Armstrong’s face darkened with anger.

But again that passionless cold little voice stopped the words on his lips.

“No good result can come from recrimination. Facts are what we have to deal with. It is established, I think, that there is a possibility of such a thing as I have outlined occurring. I agree that its probability value is not high; though there again, it depends on who that person might have been. The appearance of Miss Brent or of Miss Claythorne on such an errand would have occasioned no surprise in the patient’s mind. I agree that the appearance of myself, or of Mr. Blore, or of Mr. Lombard would have been, to say the

least of it, unusual, but I still think the visit would have been received without the awakening of any real suspicion.”

Blore said:

“And that gets us—where?”

VII

Mr. Justice Wargrave, stroking his lip and looking quite passionless and inhuman, said:

“We have now dealt with the second killing, and have established the fact that no one of us can be completely exonerated from suspicion.”

He paused and went on.

“We come now to the death of General Macarthur. That took place this morning. I will ask anyone who considers that he or she has an alibi to state it in so many words. I myself will state at once that I have no valid alibi. I spent the morning sitting on the terrace and meditating on the singular position in which we all find ourselves.

“I sat on that chair on the terrace for the whole morning until the gong went, but there were, I should imagine, several periods during the morning when I was quite unobserved and during which it would have been possible for me to walk down to the sea, kill the General, and return to my chair. There is only my word for the fact that I never left the terrace. In the circumstances that is not enough. There must be proof.”

Blore said:

“I was with Mr. Lombard and Dr. Armstrong all the morning. They’ll bear me out.”

Dr. Armstrong said:

“You went to the house for a rope.”

Blore said:

“Of course, I did. Went straight there and straight back. You know I did.”

Armstrong said:

“You were a long time....”

Blore turned crimson. He said:

“What the hell do you mean by that, Dr. Armstrong?”

Armstrong repeated:

“I only said you were a long time.”

“Had to find it, didn’t I? Can’t lay your hands on a coil of rope all in a minute.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“During Inspector Blore’s absence, were you two gentlemen together?”

Armstrong said hotly:

“Certainly. That is, Lombard went off for a few minutes. I remained where I was.”

Lombard said with a smile:

“I wanted to test the possibilities of heliographing to the mainland. Wanted to find the best spot. I was only absent a minute or two.”

Armstrong nodded. He said:

“That’s right. Not long enough to do a murder, I assure you.”

The judge said:

“Did either of you two glance at your watches?”

“Well, no.”

Philip Lombard said:

“I wasn’t wearing one.”

The judge said evenly:

“A minute or two is a vague expression.”

He turned his head to the upright figure with the knitting lying on her lap.

“Miss Brent?”

Emily Brent said:

“I took a walk with Miss Claythorne up to the top of the island. Afterwards I sat on the terrace in the sun.”

The judge said:

“I don’t think I noticed you there.”

“No, I was round the corner of the house to the east. It was out of the wind there.”

“And you sat there till lunchtime?”

“Yes.”

“Miss Claythorne?”

Vera answered readily and clearly:

“I was with Miss Brent early this morning. After that I wandered about a bit. Then I went down and talked to General Macarthur.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave interrupted. He said:

“What time was that?”

Vera for the first time was vague. She said:

“I don’t know. About an hour before lunch, I think—or it might have been less.”

Blore asked:

“Was it after we’d spoken to him or before?”

Vera said:

“I don’t know. He—he was very queer.”

She shivered.

“In what way was he queer?” the judge wanted to know.

Vera said in a low voice:

“He said we were all going to die—he said he was waiting for the end. He—he frightened me....”

The judge nodded. He said:

“What did you do next?”

“I went back to the house. Then, just before lunch, I went out again and up behind the house. I’ve been terribly restless all day.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave stroked his chin. He said:

“There remains Rogers. Though I doubt if his evidence will add anything to our sum of knowledge.”

Rogers, summoned before the court, had very little to tell. He had been busy all the morning about household duties and with the preparation of lunch. He had taken cocktails on to the terrace before lunch and had then gone up to remove his things from the attic to another room. He had not looked out of the window during the morning and had seen nothing that could have any bearing upon the death of General Macarthur. He would swear definitely that

there had been eight china figures upon the dining table when he laid the table for lunch.

At the conclusion of Rogers' evidence there was a pause.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cleared his throat.

Lombard murmured to Vera Claythorne:

“The summing up will now take place!”

The judge said:

“We have inquired into the circumstances of these three deaths to the best of our ability. Whilst probability in some cases is against certain people being implicated, yet we cannot say definitely that any one person can be considered as cleared of all complicity. I reiterate my positive belief that of the seven persons assembled in this room one is a dangerous and probably insane criminal. There is no evidence before us as to who that person is. All we can do at the present juncture is to consider what measures we can take for communicating with the mainland for help, and in the event of help being delayed (as is only too possible given the state of the weather) what measures we must adopt to ensure our safety.

“I would ask you all to consider this carefully and to give me any suggestions that may occur to you. In the meantime I warn everybody to be upon his or her guard. So far the murderer has had an easy task, since his victims have been unsuspecting. From now on, it is our task to suspect each and every one amongst us. Forewarned is forearmed. Take no risks and be alert to danger. That is all.”

Philip Lombard murmured beneath his breath:

“The court will now adjourn....”

Ten

I

Do you believe it?” Vera asked.

She and Philip Lombard sat on the windowsill of the living room. Outside the rain poured down and the wind howled in great shuddering gusts against the windowpanes.

Philip Lombard cocked his head slightly on one side before answering. Then he said:

“You mean, do I believe that old Wargrave is right when he says it’s one of us?”

“Yes.”

Philip Lombard said slowly:

“It’s difficult to say. Logically, you know, he’s right, and yet—”

Vera took the words out of his mouth.

“And yet it seems so incredible!”

Philip Lombard made a grimace.

“The whole thing’s incredible! But after Macarthur’s death there’s no more doubt as to one thing. There’s no question now of accidents or suicides. It’s definitely murder. Three murders up to date.”

Vera shivered. She said:

“It’s like some awful dream. I keep feeling that things like this can’t happen!”

He said with understanding:

“I know. Presently a tap will come on the door, and early morning tea will be brought in.”

Vera said:

“Oh, how I wish that could happen!”

Philip Lombard said gravely:

“Yes, but it won’t! We’re all in the dream! And we’ve got to be pretty much upon our guard from now on.”

Vera said, lowering her voice:

“If—if it is one of them—which do you think it is?”

Philip Lombard grinned suddenly. He said:

“I take it you are excepting our two selves? Well, that’s all right. I know very well that I’m not the murderer, and I don’t fancy that there’s anything insane about you, Vera. You strike me as being one of the sanest and most levelheaded girls I’ve come across. I’d stake my reputation on your sanity.”

With a slightly wry smile, Vera said:

“Thank you.”

He said: “Come now, Miss Vera Claythorne, aren’t you going to return the compliment?”

Vera hesitated a minute, then she said:

“You’ve admitted, you know, that you don’t hold human life particularly sacred, but all the same I can’t see you as—as the man who dictated that gramophone record.”

Lombard said:

“Quite right. If I were to commit one or more murders it would be solely for what I could get out of them. This mass clearance isn’t my line of country. Good, then we’ll eliminate ourselves and concentrate on our five fellow prisoners. Which of them is U. N. Owen. Well, at a guess, and with absolutely nothing to go upon, I’d plump for Wargrave!”

“Oh!” Vera sounded surprised. She thought a minute or two and then said, “Why?”

“Hard to say exactly. But to begin with, he’s an old man and he’s been presiding over courts of law for years. That is to say, he’s played God Almighty for a good many months every year. That must go to a man’s head eventually. He gets to see himself as all powerful, as holding the power of life and death—and it’s possible that his brain might snap and he might want to go one step farther and be Executioner and Judge Extraordinary.”

Vera said slowly:

“Yes, I suppose that’s possible....”

Lombard said:

“Who do you plump for?”

Without any hesitation Vera answered:

“Dr. Armstrong.”

Lombard gave a low whistle.

“The doctor, eh? You know, I should have put him last of all.”

Vera shook her head.

“Oh no! Two of the deaths have been poison. That rather points to a doctor. And then you can’t get over the fact that the only thing we are absolutely certain Mrs. Rogers had was the sleeping draught that he gave her.”

Lombard admitted:

“Yes, that’s true.”

Vera persisted:

“If a doctor went mad, it would be a long time before any one suspected. And doctors overwork and have a lot of strain.”

Philip Lombard said:

“Yes, but I doubt if he could have killed Macarthur. He wouldn’t have had time during that brief interval when I left him—not, that is, unless he fairly hared down there and back again, and I doubt if he’s in good enough training to do that and show no signs of it.”

Vera said:

“He didn’t do it then. He had an opportunity later.”

“When?”

“When he went down to call the General to lunch.”

Philip whistled again very softly. He said:

“So you think he did it then? Pretty cool thing to do.”

Vera said impatiently:

“What risk was there? He’s the only person here with medical knowledge. He can swear the body’s been dead at least an hour and who’s to contradict him?”

Philip looked at her thoughtfully.

“You know,” he said, “that’s a clever idea of yours. I wonder—”

II

“Who is it, Mr. Blore? That’s what I want to know. Who is it?”

Rogers’ face was working. His hands were clenched round the polishing leather that he held in his hand.

Ex-Inspector Blore said:

“Eh, my lad, that’s the question!”

“One of us, ’is lordship said. Which one? That’s what I want to know. Who’s the fiend in ’uman form?”

“That,” said Blore, “is what we all would like to know.”

Rogers said shrewdly:

“But you’ve got an idea, Mr. Blore. You’ve got an idea, ’aven’t you?”

“I may have an idea,” said Blore slowly. “But that’s a long way from being sure. I may be wrong. All I can say is that if I’m right the person in question is a very cool customer—a very cool customer indeed.”

Rogers wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He said hoarsely:

“It’s like a bad dream, that’s what it is.”

Blore said, looking at him curiously:

“Got any ideas yourself, Rogers?”

The butler shook his head. He said hoarsely:

“I don’t know. I don’t know at all. And that’s what’s frightening the life out of me. To have no idea....”

III

Dr. Armstrong said violently:

“We must get out of here—we must—we must! At all costs!”

Mr. Justice Wargrave looked thoughtfully out of the smoking room window. He played with the cord of his eyeglasses. He said:

“I do not, of course, profess to be a weather prophet. But I should say that it is very unlikely that a boat could reach us—even if they knew of our plight—in under twenty-four hours—and even then only if the wind drops.”

Dr. Armstrong dropped his head in his hands and groaned.

He said:

“And in the meantime we may all be murdered in our beds?”

“I hope not,” said Mr. Justice Wargrave. “I intend to take every possible precaution against such a thing happening.”

It flashed across Dr. Armstrong’s mind that an old man like the judge was far more tenacious of life than a younger man would be. He had often marvelled at that fact in his professional career. Here was he, junior to the judge by perhaps twenty years, and yet with a vastly inferior sense of self-preservation.

Mr. Justice Wargrave was thinking:

“Murdered in our beds! These doctors are all the same—they think in clichés. A thoroughly commonplace mind.”

The doctor said:

“There have been three victims already, remember.”

“Certainly. But you must remember that they were unprepared for the attack. We are forewarned.”

Dr. Armstrong said bitterly:

“What can we do? Sooner or later—”

“I think,” said Mr. Justice Wargrave, “that there are several things we can do.”

Armstrong said:

“We’ve no idea, even, who it can be—”

The judge stroked his chin and murmured:

“Oh, you know, I wouldn’t quite say that.”

Armstrong stared at him.

“Do you mean you know?”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said cautiously:

“As regards actual evidence, such as is necessary in court, I admit that I have none. But it appears to me, reviewing the whole business, that one particular person is sufficiently clearly indicated. Yes, I think so.”

Armstrong stared at him.

He said:

“I don’t understand.”

IV

Miss Brent was upstairs in her bedroom.

She took up her Bible and went to sit by the window.

She opened it. Then, after a minute's hesitation, she set it aside and went over to the dressing table. From a drawer in it she took out a small black-covered notebook.

She opened it and began writing.

“A terrible thing has happened. General Macarthur is dead. (His cousin married Elsie MacPherson.) There is no doubt but that he was murdered. After luncheon the judge made us a most interesting speech. He is convinced that the murderer is one of us. That means that one of us is possessed by a devil. I had already suspected that. Which of us is it? They are all asking themselves that. I alone know....”

She sat for some time without moving. Her eyes grew vague and filmy. The pencil straggled drunkenly in her fingers. In shaking loose capitals she wrote:

THE MURDERER'S NAME IS BEATRICE TAYLOR....

Her eyes closed.

Suddenly, with a start, she awoke. She looked down at the notebook. With an angry exclamation she scored through the vague unevenly scrawled characters of the last sentence.

She said in a low voice:

“Did I write that? Did I? I must be going mad....”

V

The storm increased. The wind howled against the side of the house.

Everyone was in the living room. They sat listlessly huddled together. And, surreptitiously, they watched each other.

When Rogers brought in the tea tray, they all jumped. He said:

“Shall I draw the curtains? It would make it more cheerful like.”

Receiving an assent to this, the curtains were drawn and the lamps turned on. The room grew more cheerful. A little of the shadow lifted. Surely, by tomorrow, the storm would be over and someone would come—a boat would arrive....

Vera Claythorne said:

“Will you pour out tea, Miss Brent?”

The elder woman replied:

“No, you do it, dear. That teapot is so heavy. And I have lost two skeins of my grey knitting wool. So annoying.”

Vera moved to the tea table. There was a cheerful rattle and clink of china. Normality returned.

Tea! Bless ordinary everyday afternoon tea! Philip Lombard made a cheery remark. Blore responded. Dr. Armstrong told a humorous

story. Mr. Justice Wargrave, who ordinarily hated tea, sipped approvingly.

Into this relaxed atmosphere came Rogers.

And Rogers was upset. He said nervously and at random:

“Excuse me, sir, but does any one know what’s become of the bathroom curtain?”

Lombard’s head went up with a jerk.

“The bathroom curtain? What the devil do you mean, Rogers?”

“It’s gone, sir, clean vanished. I was going round drawing all the curtains and the one in the lav—bathroom wasn’t there any longer.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked:

“Was it there this morning?”

“Oh yes, sir.”

Blore said:

“What kind of a curtain was it?”

“Scarlet oilsilk, sir. It went with the scarlet tiles.”

Lombard said:

“And it’s gone?”

“Gone, sir.”

They stared at each other.

Blore said heavily:

“Well—after all—what of it? It’s mad—but so’s everything else. Anyway it doesn’t matter. You can’t kill anybody with an oilsilk curtain. Forget about it.”

Rogers said:

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

He went out shutting the door behind him.

Inside the room, the pall of fear had fallen anew.

Again, surreptitiously, they watched each other.

VI

Dinner came, was eaten, and cleared away. A simple meal, mostly out of tins.

Afterwards, in the living room, the strain was almost too great to be borne.

At nine o’clock, Emily Brent rose to her feet.

She said:

“I’m going to bed.”

Vera said:

“I’ll go to bed too.”

The two women went up the stairs and Lombard and Blore came with them. Standing at the top of the stairs, the two men watched the women go into their respective rooms and shut the doors. They heard the sound of two bolts being shot and the turning of two keys.

Blore said with a grin:

“No need to tell ’em to lock their doors!”

Lombard said:

“Well, they’re all right for the night, at any rate!”

He went down again and the other followed him.

VII

The four men went to bed an hour later. They went up together. Rogers, from the dining room where he was setting the table for breakfast, saw them go up. He heard them pause on the landing above.

Then the judge’s voice spoke.

“I need hardly advise you, gentlemen, to lock your doors.”

Blore said:

“And what’s more, put a chair under the handle. There are ways of turning locks from the outside.”

Lombard murmured:

“My dear Blore, the trouble with you is you know too much!”

The judge said gravely:

“Good night, gentlemen. May we all meet safely in the morning!”

Rogers came out of the dining room and slipped halfway up the stairs. He saw four figures pass through four doors and heard the turning of four locks and the shooting of four bolts.

He nodded his head.

“That’s all right,” he muttered.

He went back into the dining room. Yes, everything was ready for the morning. His eye lingered on the centre plaque of looking glass and the seven little china figures.

A sudden grin transformed his face.

He murmured:

“I’ll see no one plays tricks tonight, at any rate.”

Crossing the room he locked the door to the pantry. Then going through the other door to the hall he pulled the door to, locked it and slipped the key into his pocket.

Then, extinguishing the lights, he hurried up the stairs and into his new bedroom.

There was only one possible hiding place in it, the tall wardrobe, and he looked into that immediately. Then, locking and bolting the door, he prepared for bed.

He said to himself:

“No more china-soldier tricks tonight. I’ve seen to that....”

Eleven

I

Philip Lombard had the habit of waking at daybreak. He did so on this particular morning. He raised himself on an elbow and listened. The wind had somewhat abated but was still blowing. He could hear no sound of rain....

At eight o'clock the wind was blowing more strongly, but Lombard did not hear it. He was asleep again.

At nine-thirty he was sitting on the edge of his bed looking at his watch. He put it to his ear. Then his lips drew back from his teeth in that curious wolf-like smile characteristic of the man.

He said very softly:

"I think the time has come to do something about this."

At twenty-five minutes to ten he was tapping on the closed door of Blore's room.

The latter opened it cautiously. His hair was tousled and his eyes were still dim with sleep.

Philip Lombard said affably:

"Sleeping the clock round? Well, shows you've got an easy conscience."

Blore said shortly:

“What’s the matter?”

Lombard answered:

“Anybody called you—or brought you any tea? Do you know what time it is?”

Blore looked over his shoulder at a small travelling clock by his bedside.

He said:

“Twenty-five to ten. Wouldn’t have believed I could have slept like that. Where’s Rogers?”

Philip Lombard said:

“It’s a case of echo answers where.”

“What d’you mean?” asked the other sharply.

Lombard said:

“I mean that Rogers is missing. He isn’t in his room or anywhere else. And there’s no kettle on and the kitchen fire isn’t even lit.”

Blore swore under his breath. He said:

“Where the devil can he be? Out on the island somewhere? Wait till I get some clothes on. See if the others know anything.”

Philip Lombard nodded. He moved along the line of closed doors.

He found Armstrong up and nearly dressed. Mr. Justice Wargrave, like Blore, had to be roused from sleep. Vera Claythorne was dressed. Emily Brent's room was empty.

The little party moved through the house. Rogers' room, as Philip Lombard had already ascertained, was untenanted. The bed had been slept in, and his razor and sponge and soap were wet.

Lombard said:

“He got up all right.”

Vera said in a low voice which she tried to make firm and assured:

“You don't think he's—hiding somewhere—waiting for us?”

Lombard said:

“My dear girl, I'm prepared to think anything of anyone! My advice is that we keep together until we find him.”

Armstrong said:

“He must be out on the island somewhere.”

Blore, who had joined them, dressed, but still unshaved, said:

“Where's Miss Brent got to—that's another mystery?”

But as they arrived in the hall, Emily Brent came in through the front door. She had on a mackintosh. She said:

“The sea is as high as ever. I shouldn't think any boat could put out today.”

Blore said:

“Have you been wandering about the island alone, Miss Brent? Don’t you realize that that’s an exceedingly foolish thing to do?”

Emily Brent said:

“I assure you, Mr. Blore, that I kept an extremely sharp look out.”

Blore grunted. He said:

“Seen anything of Rogers?”

Miss Brent’s eyebrows rose.

“Rogers? No, I haven’t seen him this morning. Why?”

Mr. Justice Wargrave, shaved, dressed and with his false teeth in position, came down the stairs. He moved to the open dining room door. He said:

“Ha, laid the table for breakfast, I see.”

Lombard said:

“He might have done that last night.”

They all moved inside the room, looking at the neatly set plates and cutlery. At the row of cups on the sideboard. At the felt mats placed ready for the coffee urn.

It was Vera who saw it first. She caught the judge’s arm and the grip of her athletic fingers made the old gentleman wince.

She cried out:

“The soldiers! Look!”

There were only six china figures in the middle of the table.

II

They found him shortly afterwards.

He was in the little washhouse across the yard. He had been chopping sticks in preparation for lighting the kitchen fire. The small chopper was still in his hand. A bigger chopper, a heavy affair, was leaning against the door—the metal of it stained a dull brown. It corresponded only too well with the deep wound in the back of Rogers’ head....

III

“Perfectly clear,” said Armstrong. “The murderer must have crept up behind him, swung the chopper once and brought it down on his head as he was bending over.”

Blore was busy on the handle of the chopper and the flour sifter from the kitchen.

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked:

“Would it have needed great force, doctor?”

Armstrong said gravely:

“A woman could have done it if that’s what you mean.” He gave a quick glance around. Vera Claythorne and Emily Brent had retired

to the kitchen. “The girl could have done it easily—she’s an athletic type. In appearance Miss Brent is fragile-looking, but that type of woman has often a lot of wiry strength. And you must remember that anyone who’s mentally unhinged has a good deal of unsuspected strength.”

The judge nodded thoughtfully.

Blore rose to his knees with a sigh. He said:

“No fingerprints. Handle was wiped afterwards.”

A sound of laughter was heard—they turned sharply. Vera Claythorne was standing in the yard. She cried out in a high shrill voice, shaken with wild bursts of laughter:

“Do they keep bees on this island? Tell me that. Where do we go for honey? Ha! ha!”

They stared at her uncomprehendingly. It was as though the sane well-balanced girl had gone mad before their eyes. She went on in that high unnatural voice:

“Don’t stare like that! As though you thought I was mad. It’s sane enough what I’m asking. Bees, hives, bees! Oh, don’t you understand? Haven’t you read that idiotic rhyme? It’s up in all your bedrooms—put there for you to study! We might have come here straightaway if we’d had sense. Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks. And the next verse. I know the whole thing by heart, I tell you! Six little soldier boys playing with a hive. And that’s why I’m asking—do they keep bees on this island?—isn’t it funny?—isn’t it damned funny ...?”

She began laughing wildly again. Dr. Armstrong strode forward. He raised his hand and struck her a flat blow on the cheek.

She gasped, hiccupped—and swallowed. She stood motionless a minute, then she said:

“Thank you ... I’m all right now.”

Her voice was once more calm and controlled—the voice of the efficient games mistress.

She turned and went across the yard into the kitchen saying: “Miss Brent and I are getting you breakfast. Can you—bring some sticks to light the fire?”

The marks of the doctor’s hand stood out red on her cheek.

As she went into the kitchen Blore said:

“Well, you dealt with that all right, doctor.”

Armstrong said apologetically:

“Had to! We can’t cope with hysteria on the top of everything else.”

Philip Lombard said:

“She’s not a hysterical type.”

Armstrong agreed.

“Oh no. Good healthy sensible girl. Just the sudden shock. It might happen to anybody.”

Rogers had chopped a certain amount of firewood before he had been killed. They gathered it up and took it into the kitchen. Vera and Emily Brent were busy, Miss Brent was raking out the stove. Vera was cutting the rind off the bacon.

Emily Brent said:

“Thank you. We’ll be as quick as we can—say half an hour to three-quarters. The kettle’s got to boil.”

IV

Ex-Inspector Blore said in a low hoarse voice to Philip Lombard:

“Know what I’m thinking?”

Philip Lombard said:

“As you’re just about to tell me, it’s not worth the trouble of guessing.”

Ex-Inspector Blore was an earnest man. A light touch was incomprehensible to him. He went on heavily:

“There was a case in America. Old gentleman and his wife—both killed with an axe. Middle of the morning. Nobody in the house but the daughter and the maid. Maid, it was proved, couldn’t have done it. Daughter was a respectable middle-aged spinster. Seemed incredible. So incredible that they acquitted her. But they never found any other explanation.” He paused. “I thought of that when I saw the axe—and then when I went into the kitchen and saw her there so neat and calm. Hadn’t turned a hair! That girl, coming all

over hysterical—well, that’s natural—the sort of thing you’d expect—don’t you think so?”

Philip Lombard said laconically:

“It might be.”

Blore went on.

“But the other! So neat and prim—wrapped up in that apron—Mrs. Rogers’ apron, I suppose—saying: ‘Breakfast will be ready in half an hour or so.’ If you ask me that woman’s as mad as a hatter! Lots of elderly spinsters go that way—I don’t mean go in for homicide on the grand scale, but go queer in their heads. Unfortunately it’s taken her this way. Religious mania—thinks she’s God’s instrument, something of that kind! She sits in her room, you know, reading her Bible.”

Philip Lombard sighed and said:

“That’s hardly proof positive of an unbalanced mentality, Blore.”

But Blore went on, ploddingly, perseveringly:

“And then she was out—in her mackintosh, said she’d been down to look at the sea.”

The other shook his head.

He said:

“Rogers was killed as he was chopping firewood—that is to say first thing when he got up. The Brent wouldn’t have needed to

wander about outside for hours afterwards. If you ask me, the murderer of Rogers would take jolly good care to be rolled up in bed snoring.”

Blore said:

“You’re missing the point, Mr. Lombard. If the woman was innocent she’d be too dead scared to go wandering about by herself. She’d only do that if she knew that she had nothing to fear. That’s to say if she herself is the criminal.”

Philip Lombard said:

“That’s a good point ... yes, I hadn’t thought of that.”

He added with a faint grin:

“Glad you don’t still suspect me.”

Blore said rather shamefacedly:

“I did start by thinking of you—that revolver—and the queer story you told—or didn’t tell. But I’ve realized now that that was really a bit too obvious.” He paused and said: “Hope you feel the same about me.”

Philip said thoughtfully:

“I may be wrong, of course, but I can’t feel that you’ve got enough imagination for this job. All I can say is, if you’re the criminal, you’re a damned fine actor and I take my hat off to you.” He lowered his voice. “Just between ourselves, Blore, and taking into account that we’ll probably both be a couple of stiffes before

another day is out, you did indulge in that spot of perjury, I suppose?”

Blore shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He said at last:

“Doesn’t seem to make much odds now. Oh well, here goes, Landor was innocent right enough. The gang had got me squared and between us we got him put away for a stretch. Mind you, I wouldn’t admit this—”

“If there were any witnesses,” finished Lombard with a grin. “It’s just between you and me. Well, I hope you made a tidy bit out of it.”

“Didn’t make what I should have done. Mean crowd, the Purcell gang. I got my promotion, though.”

“And Landor got penal servitude and died in prison.”

“I couldn’t know he was going to die, could I?” demanded Blore.

“No, that was your bad luck.”

“Mine? His, you mean.”

“Yours, too. Because, as a result of it, it looks as though your own life is going to be cut unpleasantly short.”

“Me?” Blore stared at him. “Do you think I’m going to go the way of Rogers and the rest of them? Not me! I’m watching out for myself pretty carefully, I can tell you.”

Lombard said:

“Oh well—I’m not a betting man. And anyway if you were dead I wouldn’t get paid.”

“Look here, Mr. Lombard, what do you mean?”

Philip Lombard showed his teeth. He said:

“I mean, my dear Blore, that in my opinion you haven’t got a chance!”

“What?”

“Your lack of imagination is going to make you absolutely a sitting target. A criminal of the imagination of U. N. Owen can make rings round you any time he—or she—wants to.”

Blore’s face went crimson. He demanded angrily:

“And what about you?”

Philip Lombard’s face went hard and dangerous.

He said:

“I’ve a pretty good imagination of my own. I’ve been in tight places before now and got out of them! I think—I won’t say more than that but I think I’ll get out of this one.”

V

The eggs were in the frying pan. Vera, toasting bread, thought to herself:

“Why did I make a hysterical fool of myself? That was a mistake. Keep calm, my girl, keep calm.”

After all, she’d always prided herself on her levelheadedness!

“Miss Claythorne was wonderful—kept her head—started off swimming after Cyril at once.”

Why think of that now? All that was over—over ... Cyril had disappeared long before she got near the rock. She had felt the current take her, sweeping her out to sea. She had let herself go with it—swimming quietly, floating—till the boat arrived at last....

They had praised her courage and her sangfroid....

But not Hugo. Hugo had just—looked at her....

God, how it hurt, even now, to think of Hugo....

Where was he? What was he doing? Was he engaged—married?

Emily Brent said sharply:

“Vera, that toast is burning.”

“Oh sorry, Miss Brent, so it is. How stupid of me.”

Emily Brent lifted out the last egg from the sizzling fat.

Vera, putting a fresh piece of bread on the toasting fork, said curiously:

“You’re wonderfully calm, Miss Brent.”

Emily Brent said, pressing her lips together:

“I was brought up to keep my head and never to make a fuss.”

Vera thought mechanically:

“Repressed as a child ... That accounts for a lot....”

She said:

“Aren’t you afraid?”

She paused and then added:

“Or don’t you mind dying?”

Dying! It was as though a sharp little gimlet had run into the solid congealed mess of Emily Brent’s brain. Dying? But she wasn’t going to die! The others would die—yes—but not she, Emily Brent. This girl didn’t understand! Emily wasn’t afraid, naturally—none of the Brents were afraid. All her people were Service people. They faced death unflinchingly. They led upright lives just as she, Emily Brent, had led an upright life ... She had never done anything to be ashamed of ... And so, naturally, she wasn’t going to die....

“The Lord is mindful of his own.” “Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day....” It was daylight now—there was no terror. “We shall none of us leave this island.” Who had said that? General Macarthur, of course, whose cousin had married Elsie MacPherson. He hadn’t seemed to care. He had seemed—actually—to welcome the idea! Wicked! Almost impious to feel that way. Some people thought so little of death that

they actually took their own lives. Beatrice Taylor... Last night she had dreamed of Beatrice—dreamt that she was outside pressing her face against the window and moaning, asking to be let in. But Emily Brent hadn't wanted to let her in. Because, if she did, something terrible would happen....

Emily came to herself with a start. That girl was looking at her very strangely. She said in a brisk voice:

“Everything's ready, isn't it? We'll take the breakfast in.”

VI

Breakfast was a curious meal. Every one was very polite.

“May I get you some more coffee, Miss Brent?”

“Miss Claythorne, a slice of ham?”

“Another piece of toast?”

Six people, all outwardly self-possessed and normal.

And within? Thoughts that ran round in a circle like squirrels in a cage....

“What next? What next? Who? Which?”

“Would it work? I wonder. It's worth trying. If there's time. My God, if there's time....”

“Religious mania, that's the ticket ... Looking at her, though, you can hardly believe it ... Suppose I'm wrong....”

“It’s crazy—everything’s crazy. I’m going crazy. Wool disappearing—red silk curtains—it doesn’t make sense. I can’t get the hang of it....”

“The damned fool, he believed every word I said to him. It was easy ... I must be careful, though, very careful.”

“Six of those little china figures ... only six—how many will there be by tonight? ...”

“Who’ll have the last egg?”

“Marmalade?”

“Thanks, can I cut you some bread?”

Six people, behaving normally at breakfast....

Twelve

I

The meal was over.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cleared his throat. He said in a small authoritative voice:

“It would be advisable, I think, if we met to discuss the situation. Shall we say in half an hour’s time in the drawing room?”

Every one made a sound suggestive of agreement.

Vera began to pile plates together.

She said:

“I’ll clear away and wash up.”

Philip Lombard said:

“We’ll bring the stuff out to the pantry for you.”

“Thanks.”

Emily Brent, rising to her feet sat down again. She said:

“Oh dear.”

The judge said:

“Anything the matter, Miss Brent?”

Emily said apologetically:

“I’m sorry. I’d like to help Miss Claythorne, but I don’t know how it is. I feel just a little giddy.”

“Giddy, eh?” Dr. Armstrong came towards her. “Quite natural. Delayed shock. I can give you something to—”

“No!”

The word burst from her lips like an exploding shell.

It took every one aback. Dr. Armstrong flushed a deep red.

There was no mistaking the fear and suspicion in her face. He said stiffly:

“Just as you please, Miss Brent.”

She said:

“I don’t wish to take anything—anything at all. I will just sit here quietly till the giddiness passes off.”

They finished clearing away the breakfast things.

Blore said:

“I’m a domestic sort of man. I’ll give you a hand, Miss Claythorne.”

Vera said: “Thank you.”

Emily Brent was left alone sitting in the dining room.

For a while she heard a faint murmur of voices from the pantry.

The giddiness was passing. She felt drowsy now, as though she could easily go to sleep.

There was a buzzing in her ears—or was it a real buzzing in the room?

She thought:

“It’s like a bee—a bumble bee.”

Presently she saw the bee. It was crawling up the windowpane.

Vera Claythorne had talked about bees this morning.

Bees and honey....

She liked honey. Honey in the comb, and strain it yourself through a muslin bag. Drip, drip, drip....

There was somebody in the room ... somebody all wet and dripping ...Beatrice Taylor come from the river....

She had only to turn her head and she would see her.

But she couldn’t turn her head....

If she were to call out....

But she couldn’t call out....

There was no one else in the house. She was all alone....

She heard footsteps—soft dragging footsteps coming up behind her. The stumbling footsteps of the drowned girl....

There was a wet dank smell in her nostrils....

On the windowpane the bee was buzzing—buzzing....

And then she felt the prick.

The bee sting on the side of her neck....

II

In the drawing room they were waiting for Emily Brent.

Vera Claythorne said:

“Shall I go and fetch her?”

Blore said quickly:

“Just a minute.”

Vera sat down again. Every one looked inquiringly at Blore. He said:

“Look here, everybody, my opinion’s this: we needn’t look farther for the author of these deaths than the dining room at this minute. I’d take my oath that woman’s the one we’re after!”

Armstrong said:

“And the motive?”

“Religious mania. What do you say, doctor?”

Armstrong said:

“It’s perfectly possible. I’ve nothing to say against it. But of course we’ve no proof.”

Vera said:

“She was very odd in the kitchen when we were getting breakfast. Her eyes—” She shivered.

Lombard said:

“You can’t judge her by that. We’re all a bit off our heads by now!”

Blore said:

“There’s another thing. She’s the only one who wouldn’t give an explanation after that gramophone record. Why? Because she hadn’t any to give.”

Vera stirred in her chair. She said:

“That’s not quite true. She told me—afterwards.”

Wargrave said:

“What did she tell you, Miss Claythorne?”

Vera repeated the story of Beatrice Taylor.

Mr. Justice Wargrave observed:

“A perfectly straightforward story. I personally should have no difficulty in accepting it. Tell me, Miss Claythorne, did she appear to be troubled by a sense of guilt or a feeling of remorse for her attitude in the matter?”

“None whatever,” said Vera. “She was completely unmoved.”

Blore said:

“Hearts as hard as flints, these righteous spinsters! Envy, mostly!”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“It is now five minutes to eleven. I think we should summon Miss Brent to join our conclave.”

Blore said:

“Aren’t you going to take any action?”

The judge said:

“I fail to see what action we can take. Our suspicions are, at the moment, only suspicions. I will, however, ask Dr. Armstrong to observe Miss Brent’s demeanour very carefully. Let us now go into the dining room.”

They found Emily Brent sitting in the chair in which they had left her. From behind they saw nothing amiss, except that she did not seem to hear their entrance into the room.

And then they saw her face—suffused with blood, with blue lips and starting eyes.

Blore said:

“My God, she’s dead!”

III

The small quiet voice of Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“One more of us acquitted—too late!”

Armstrong was bent over the dead woman. He sniffed the lips, shook his head, peered into the eyelids.

Lombard said impatiently:

“How did she die, doctor? She was all right when we left her here!”

Armstrong’s attention was riveted on a mark on the right side of the neck.

He said:

“That’s the mark of a hypodermic syringe.”

There was a buzzing sound from the window. Vera cried:

“Look—a bee—a bumble bee. Remember what I said this morning!”

Armstrong said grimly:

“It wasn’t that bee that stung her! A human hand held the syringe.”

The judge asked:

“What poison was injected?”

Armstrong answered:

“At a guess, one of the cyanides. Probably potassium cyanide, same as Anthony Marston. She must have died almost immediately by asphyxiation.”

Vera cried:

“But that bee? It can’t be coincidence?”

Lombard said grimly:

“Oh no, it isn’t coincidence! It’s our murderer’s touch of local colour! He’s a playful beast. Likes to stick to his damnable nursery jingle as closely as possible!”

For the first time his voice was uneven, almost shrill. It was as though even his nerves, seasoned by a long career of hazards and dangerous undertakings, had given out at last.

He said violently:

“It’s mad!—absolutely mad—we’re all mad!”

The judge said calmly:

“We have still, I hope, our reasoning powers. Did any one bring a hypodermic syringe to this house?”

Dr. Armstrong, straightening himself, said in a voice that was not too well assured:

“Yes, I did.”

Four pairs of eyes fastened on him. He braced himself against the deep hostile suspicion of those eyes. He said:

“Always travel with one. Most doctors do.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said calmly:

“Quite so. Will you tell us, doctor, where that syringe is now?”

“In the suitcase in my room.”

Wargrave said:

“We might, perhaps, verify that fact.”

The five of them went upstairs, a silent procession.

The contents of the suitcase were turned out on the floor.

The hypodermic syringe was not there.

IV

Armstrong said violently:

“Somebody must have taken it!”

There was silence in the room.

Armstrong stood with his back to the window. Four pairs of eyes were on him, black with suspicion and accusation. He looked from Wargrave to Vera and repeated helplessly—weakly:

“I tell you someone must have taken it.”

Blore was looking at Lombard who returned his gaze.

The judge said:

“There are five of us here in this room. One of us is a murderer. The position is fraught with grave danger. Everything must be done in order to safeguard the four of us who are innocent. I will now ask you, Dr. Armstrong, what drugs you have in your possession.”

Armstrong replied:

“I have a small medicine case here. You can examine it. You will find some sleeping stuff—trional and sulphonal tablets—a packet of bromide, bicarbonate of soda, aspirin. Nothing else. I have no cyanide in my possession.”

The judge said:

“I have, myself, some sleeping tablets—sulphonal, I think they are. I presume they would be lethal if a sufficiently large dose were given. You, Mr. Lombard, have in your possession a revolver.”

Philip Lombard said sharply:

“What if I have?”

“Only this. I propose that the doctor’s supply of drugs, my own sulphonal tablets, your revolver and anything else of the nature of drugs or firearms should be collected together and placed in a safe place. That after this is done, we should each of us submit to a search—both of our persons and of our effects.”

Lombard said:

“I’m damned if I’ll give up my revolver!”

Wargrave said sharply:

“Mr. Lombard, you are a very strongly built and powerful young man, but ex-Inspector Blore is also a man of powerful physique. I do not know what the outcome of a struggle between you would be but I can tell you this. On Blore’s side, assisting him to the best of our ability will be myself, Dr. Armstrong and Miss Claythorne. You will appreciate therefore, that the odds against you if you choose to resist will be somewhat heavy.”

Lombard threw his head back. His teeth showed in what was almost a snarl.

“Oh, very well, then. Since you’ve got it all taped out.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave nodded his head.

“You are a sensible young man. Where is this revolver of yours?”

“In the drawer of the table by my bed.”

“Good.”

“I’ll fetch it.”

“I think it would be desirable if we went with you.”

Philip said with a smile that was still nearer a snarl:

“Suspicious devil, aren’t you?”

They went along the corridor to Lombard’s room.

Philip strode across to the bed table and jerked open the drawer.

Then he recoiled with an oath.

The drawer of the bed table was empty.

V

“Satisfied?” asked Lombard.

He had stripped to the skin and he and his room had been meticulously searched by the other three men. Vera Claythorne was outside in the corridor.

The search proceeded methodically. In turn, Armstrong, the judge, and Blore submitted to the same test.

The four men emerged from Blore’s room and approached Vera. It was the judge who spoke.

“I hope you will understand, Miss Claythorne, that we can make no exceptions. That revolver must be found. You have, I presume, a bathing dress with you?”

Vera nodded.

“Then I will ask you to go into your room and put it on and then come out to us here.”

Vera went into her room and shut the door. She reappeared in under a minute dressed in a tight-fitting silk rucked bathing dress.

Wargrave nodded approval.

“Thank you, Miss Claythorne. Now if you will remain here, we will search your room.”

Vera waited patiently in the corridor until they emerged. Then she went in, dressed, and came out to where they were waiting.

The judge said:

“We are now assured of one thing. There are no lethal weapons or drugs in the possession of any of us five. That is one point to the good. We will now place the drugs in a safe place. There is, I think, a silver chest, is there not, in the pantry?”

Blore said:

“That’s all very well, but who’s to have the key? You, I suppose.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave made no reply.

He went down to the pantry and the others followed him. There was a small case there designed for the purpose of holding silver and plate. By the judge’s directions, the various drugs were placed in this and it was locked. Then, still on Wargrave’s instructions, the

chest was lifted into the plate cupboard and this in turn was locked. The judge then gave the key of the chest to Philip Lombard and the key of the cupboard to Blore.

He said:

“You two are the strongest physically. It would be difficult for either of you to get the key from the other. It would be impossible for any of us three to do so. To break open the cupboard—or the plate chest—would be a noisy and cumbersome proceeding and one which could hardly be carried out without attention being attracted to what was going on.”

He paused, then went on:

“We are still faced by one very grave problem. What has become of Mr. Lombard’s revolver?”

Blore said:

“Seems to me its owner is the most likely person to know that.”

A white dint showed in Philip Lombard’s nostrils. He said:

“You damned pig-headed fool! I tell you it’s been stolen from me!”

Wargrave asked:

“When did you see it last?”

“Last night. It was in the drawer when I went to bed—ready in case anything happened.”

The judge nodded.

He said:

“It must have been taken this morning during the confusion of searching for Rogers or after his dead body was discovered.”

Vera said:

“It must be hidden somewhere about the house. We must look for it.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave’s finger was stroking his chin. He said:

“I doubt if our search will result in anything. Our murderer has had plenty of time to devise a hiding place. I do not fancy we shall find that revolver easily.”

Blore said forcefully:

“I don’t know where the revolver is, but I’ll bet I know where something else is—that hypodermic syringe. Follow me.”

He opened the front door and led the way round the house.

A little distance away from the dining room window he found the syringe. Beside it was a smashed china figure—a sixth broken soldier boy.

Blore said in a satisfied voice:

“Only place it could be. After he’d killed her, he opened the window and threw out the syringe and picked up the china figure from the table and followed on with that.”

There were no prints on the syringe. It had been carefully wiped.

Vera said in a determined voice:

“Now let us look for the revolver.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“By all means. But in doing so let us be careful to keep together. Remember, if we separate, the murderer gets his chance.”

They searched the house carefully from attic to cellars, but without result. The revolver was still missing.

Thirteen

I

One of us ... One of us ... One of us....”

Three words, endlessly repeated, dinning themselves hour after hour into receptive brains.

Five people—five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide their state of nervous tension.

There was little pretence now—no formal veneer of conversation. They were five enemies linked together by a mutual instinct of self-preservation.

And all of them, suddenly, looked less like human beings. They were reverting to more bestial types. Like a wary old tortoise, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat hunched up, his body motionless, his eyes keen and alert. Ex-Inspector Blore looked coarser and clumsier in build. His walk was that of a slow padding animal. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him. He was like a beast at bay ready to charge its pursuers. Philip Lombard’s senses seemed heightened, rather than diminished. His ears reacted to the slightest sound. His step was lighter and quicker, his body was lithe and graceful. And he smiled often, his lips curling back from his long white teeth.

Vera Claythorne was very quiet. She sat most of the time huddled in a chair. Her eyes stared ahead of her into space. She looked

dazed. She was like a bird that has dashed its head against glass and that has been picked up by a human hand. It crouches there, terrified, unable to move, hoping to save itself by its immobility.

Armstrong was in a pitiable condition of nerves. He twitched and his hands shook. He lighted cigarette after cigarette and stubbed them out almost immediately. The forced inaction of their position seemed to gall him more than the others. Every now and then he broke out into a torrent of nervous speech.

“We—we shouldn’t just sit here doing nothing! There must be something—surely, surely there is something that we can do? If we lit a bonfire—?”

Blore said heavily:

“In this weather?”

The rain was pouring down again. The wind came in fitful gusts. The depressing sound of the pattering rain nearly drove them mad.

By tacit consent, they had adopted a plan of campaign. They all sat in the big drawing room. Only one person left the room at a time. The other four waited till the fifth returned.

Lombard said:

“It’s only a question of time. The weather will clear. Then we can do something—signal—light fires—make a raft—something!”

Armstrong said with a sudden cackle of laughter:

“A question of time—time? We can’t afford time! We shall all be dead....”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said and his small clear voice was heavy with passionate determination:

“Not if we are careful. We must be very careful....”

The midday meal had been duly eaten—but there had been no conventional formality about it. All five of them had gone to the kitchen. In the larder they had found a great store of tinned foods. They had opened a tin of tongue and two tins of fruit. They had eaten standing round the kitchen table. Then, herding close together, they had returned to the drawing room—to sit there—sit, watching each other.

And by now the thoughts that ran through their brains were abnormal, feverish, diseased....

“It’s Armstrong ... I saw him looking at me sideways just then ... his eyes are mad ... quite mad ... Perhaps he isn’t a doctor at all ... That’s it, of course!... He’s a lunatic, escaped from some doctor’s house—pretending to be a doctor ... It’s true ... shall I tell them? ... Shall I scream out? ... No, it won’t do to put him on his guard ... Besides he can seem so sane ... What time is it? ... Only a quarter past three!... Oh, God, I shall go mad myself ... Yes, it’s Armstrong... He’s watching me now....”

“They won’t get me! I can take care of myself ... I’ve been in tight places before ... Where the hell is that revolver Who took it? ... Who’s got it? ... Nobody’s got it—we know that. We were all searched ... Nobody can have it ... But someone knows where it is....”

“They’re going mad ... They’ll all go mad ... Afraid of death ... we’re all afraid of death ... I’m afraid of death ... Yes, but that doesn’t stop death coming ... ‘The hearse is at the door, sir.’ Where did I read that? The girl ... I’ll watch the girl. Yes, I’ll watch the girl....”

“Twenty to four ... only twenty to four ... perhaps the clock has stopped ... I don’t understand—no, I don’t understand ... This sort of thing can’t happen ... it is happening... Why don’t we wake up? Wake up—Judgment Day—no, not that! If only I could think ... My head—something’s happening in my head—it’s going to burst—it’s going to split ... This sort of thing can’t happen ... What’s the time? Oh, God, it’s only a quarter to four.”

“I must keep my head ... I must keep my head ... If only I keep my head ... It’s all perfectly clear—all worked out. But nobody must suspect. It may do the trick. It must! Which one? That’s the question—which one? I think—yes, I rather think—yes—him.”

When the clock struck five they all jumped.

Vera said:

“Does anyone—want tea?”

There was a moment’s silence. Blore said:

“I’d like a cup.”

Vera rose. She said:

“I’ll go and make it. You can all stay here.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said gently:

“I think, my dear young lady, we would all prefer to come and watch you make it.”

Vera stared, then gave a short rather hysterical laugh.

She said:

“Of course! You would!”

Five people went into the kitchen. Tea was made and drunk by Vera and Blore. The other three had whisky—opening a fresh bottle and using a siphon from a nailed up case.

The judge murmured with a reptilian smile:

“We must be very careful....”

They went back again to the drawing room. Although it was summer the room was dark. Lombard switched on the lights but they did not come on. He said:

“Of course! The engine’s not been run today since Rogers hasn’t been there to see to it.”

He hesitated and said:

“We could go out and get it going, I suppose.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

“There are packets of candles in the larder, I saw them, better use those.”

Lombard went out. The other four sat watching each other.

He came back with a box of candles and a pile of saucers. Five candles were lit and placed about the room.

The time was a quarter to six.

II

At twenty past six, Vera felt that to sit there longer was unbearable. She would go to her room and bathe her aching head and temples in cold water.

She got up and went towards the door. Then she remembered and came back and got a candle out of the box. She lighted it, let a little wax pour into a saucer and stuck the candle firmly to it. Then she went out of the room, shutting the door behind her and leaving the four men inside. She went up the stairs and along the passage to her room.

As she opened her door, she suddenly halted and stood stock still.

Her nostrils quivered.

The sea ... The smell of the sea at St. Tredennick.

That was it. She could not be mistaken. Of course, one smelt the sea on an island anyway, but this was different. It was the smell there had been on the beach that day—with the tide out and the rocks covered with seaweed drying in the sun.

“Can I swim out to the island, Miss Claythorne?”

“Why can’t I swim out to the island? ...”

Horrid whiney spoilt little brat! If it weren’t for him, Hugo would be rich ... able to marry the girl he loved....

Hugo....

Surely—surely—Hugo was beside her? No, waiting for her in the room....

She made a step forward. The draught from the window caught the flame of the candle. It flickered and went out....

In the dark she was suddenly afraid....

“Don’t be a fool,” Vera Claythorne urged herself. “It’s all right. The others are downstairs. All four of them. There’s no one in the room. There can’t be. You’re imagining things, my girl.”

But that smell—that smell of the beach at St. Tredennick ... That wasn’t imagined. It was true.

And there was someone in the room ... She had heard something—surely she had heard something....

And then, as she stood there, listening—a cold, clammy hand touched her throat—a wet hand, smelling of the sea....

III

Vera screamed. She screamed and screamed—screams of the utmost terror—wild desperate cries for help.

She did not hear the sounds from below, of a chair being overturned, of a door opening, of men's feet running up the stairs. She was conscious only of supreme terror.

Then, restoring her sanity, lights flickered in the doorway—candles—men hurrying into the room.

“What the devil?” “What’s happened?” “Good God, what is it?”

She shuddered, took a step forward, collapsed on the floor.

She was only half aware of someone bending over her, of someone forcing her head down between her knees.

Then at a sudden exclamation, a quick “My God, look at that!” her senses returned. She opened her eyes and raised her head. She saw what it was the men with the candles were looking at.

A broad ribbon of wet seaweed was hanging down from the ceiling. It was that which in the darkness had swayed against her throat. It was that which she had taken for a clammy hand, a drowned hand come back from the dead to squeeze the life out of her!

She began to laugh hysterically. She said:

“It was seaweed—only seaweed—and that’s what the smell was....”

And then the faintness came over her once more—waves upon waves of sickness. Again someone took her head and forced it between her knees.

Aeons of time seemed to pass. They were offering her something to drink—pressing the glass against her lips. She smelt brandy.

She was just about to gulp the spirit gratefully down when, suddenly, a warning note—like an alarm bell—sounded in her brain. She sat up, pushing the glass away.

She said sharply: “Where did this come from?”

Blore’s voice answered. He stared a minute before speaking. He said:

“I got it from downstairs.”

Vera cried:

“I won’t drink it....”

There was a moment’s silence, then Lombard laughed.

He said with appreciation:

“Good for you, Vera. You’ve got your wits about you—even if you have been scared half out of your life. I’ll get a fresh bottle that hasn’t been opened.”

He went swiftly out.

Vera said uncertainly:

“I’m all right now. I’ll have some water.”

Armstrong supported her as she struggled to her feet. She went over to the basin, swaying and clutching at him for support. She let

the cold tap run and then filled the glass.

Blore said resentfully:

“That brandy’s all right.”

Armstrong said:

“How do you know?”

Blore said angrily:

“I didn’t put anything in it. That’s what you’re getting at I suppose.”

Armstrong said:

“I’m not saying you did. You might have done, or someone might have tampered with the bottle for just this emergency.”

Lombard came swiftly back into the room.

He had a new bottle of brandy in his hands and a corkscrew.

He thrust the sealed bottle under Vera’s nose.

“There you are, my girl. Absolutely no deception.” He peeled off the tin foil and drew the cork. “Lucky there’s a good supply of spirits in the house. Thoughtful of U. N. Owen.”

Vera shuddered violently.

Armstrong held the glass while Philip poured the brandy into it. He said:

“You’d better drink this, Miss Claythorne. You’ve had a nasty shock.”

Vera drank a little of the spirit. The colour came back to her face.

Philip Lombard said with a laugh:

“Well, here’s one murder that hasn’t gone according to plan!”

Vera said almost in a whisper:

“You think—that was what was meant?”

Lombard nodded.

“Expected you to pass out through fright! Some people would have, wouldn’t they, doctor?”

Armstrong did not commit himself. He said doubtfully:

“H’m, impossible to say. Young healthy subject—no cardiac weakness. Unlikely. On the other hand—”

He picked up the glass of brandy that Blore had brought. He dipped a finger in it, tasted it gingerly. His expression did not alter. He said dubiously: “H’m, tastes all right.”

Blore stepped forward angrily. He said:

“If you’re saying that I tampered with that, I’ll knock your ruddy block off.”

Vera, her wits revived by the brandy, made a diversion by saying:

“Where’s the judge?”

The three men looked at each other.

“That’s odd... Thought he came up with us.”

Blore said:

“So did I... What about it, doctor, you came up the stairs behind me?”

Armstrong said:

“I thought he was following me ... Of course, he’d be bound to go slower than we did. He’s an old man.”

They looked at each other again.

Lombard said:

“It’s damned odd....”

Blore cried:

“We must look for him.”

He started for the door. The others followed him, Vera last.

As they went down the stairs Armstrong said over his shoulder:

“Of course he may have stayed in the living room.”

They crossed the hall. Armstrong called out loudly:

“Wargrave, Wargrave, where are you?”

There was no answer. A deadly silence filled the house apart from the gentle patter of the rain.

Then in the entrance to the drawing room door, Armstrong stopped dead. The others crowded up and looked over his shoulder.

Somebody cried out.

Mr. Justice Wargrave was sitting in his high-backed chair at the end of the room. Two candles burnt on either side of him. But what shocked and startled the onlookers was the fact that he sat there robed in scarlet with a judge’s wig upon his head....

Dr. Armstrong motioned to the others to keep back. He himself walked across to the silent staring figure, reeling a little as he walked like a drunken man.

He bent forward, peering into the still face. Then, with a swift movement he raised the wig. It fell to the floor revealing the high bald forehead with, in the very middle, a round stained mark from which something had trickled.

Dr. Armstrong lifted the lifeless hand and felt for the pulse. Then he turned to the others.

He said—and his voice was expressionless, dead, far away....

“He’s been shot....”

Blore said:

“God—the revolver!”

The doctor said, still in the same lifeless voice:

“Got him through the head. Instantaneous.”

Vera stooped to the wig. She said, and her voice shook with horror:

“Miss Brent’s missing grey wool....”

Blore said:

“And the scarlet curtain that was missing from the bathroom....”

Vera whispered:

“So this is what they wanted them for....”

Suddenly Philip Lombard laughed—a high unnatural laugh.

“Five little soldier boys going in for law; one got in Chancery and then there were Four. That’s the end of Mr. Bloody Justice Wargrave. No more pronouncing sentence for him! No more putting on of the black cap! Here’s the last time he’ll ever sit in court! No more summing up and sending innocent men to death. How Edward Seton would laugh if he were here! God, how he’d laugh!”

His outburst shocked and startled the others.

Vera cried:

“Only this morning you said he was the one!”

Philip Lombard's face changed—sobered.

He said in a low voice:

“I know I did ... Well, I was wrong. Here's one more of us who's been proved innocent—too late!”

Fourteen

I

They had carried Mr. Justice Wargrave up to his room and laid him on the bed.

Then they had come down again and had stood in the hall looking at each other.

Blore said heavily:

“What do we do now?”

Lombard said briskly:

“Have something to eat. We’ve got to eat, you know.”

Once again they went into the kitchen. Again they opened a tin of tongue. They ate mechanically, almost without tasting.

Vera said:

“I shall never eat tongue again.”

They finished the meal. They sat round the kitchen table staring at each other.

Blore said:

“Only four of us now ...Who’ll be the next?”

Armstrong stared. He said, almost mechanically:

“We must be very careful—” and stopped.

Blore nodded.

“That’s what he said ... and now he’s dead!”

Armstrong said:

“How did it happen, I wonder?”

Lombard swore. He said:

“A damned clever doublecross! That stuff was planted in Miss Claythorne’s room and it worked just as it was intended to. Everyone dashes up there thinking she’s being murdered. And so—in the confusion—someone—caught the old boy off his guard.”

Blore said:

“Why didn’t anyone hear the shot?”

Lombard shook his head.

“Miss Claythorne was screaming, the wind was howling, we were running about and calling out. No, it wouldn’t be heard.” He paused. “But that trick’s not going to work again. He’ll have to try something else next.”

Blore said:

“He probably will.”

There was an unpleasant tone in his voice. The two men eyed each other.

Armstrong said:

“Four of us, and we don’t know which....”

Blore said:

“I know....”

Vera said:

“I haven’t the least doubt....”

Armstrong said slowly:

“I suppose I do know really....”

Philip Lombard said:

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea now....”

Again they all looked at each other....

Vera staggered to her feet. She said:

“I feel awful. I must go to bed ... I’m dead beat.”

Lombard said:

“Might as well. No good sitting watching each other.”

Blore said:

“I’ve no objection....”

The doctor murmured:

“The best thing to do—although I doubt if any of us will sleep.”

They moved to the door. Blore said:

“I wonder where that revolver is now?...”

II

They went up the stairs.

The next move was a little like a scene in a farce.

Each one of the four stood with a hand on his or her bedroom door handle. Then, as though at a signal, each one stepped into the room and pulled the door shut. There were sounds of bolts and locks, of the moving of furniture.

Four frightened people were barricaded in until morning.

III

Philip Lombard drew a breath of relief as he turned from adjusting a chair under the door handle.

He strolled across to the dressing table.

By the light of the flickering candle he studied his face curiously.

He said softly to himself:

“Yes, this business has got you rattled all right.”

His sudden wolf-like smile flashed out.

He undressed quickly.

He went over to the bed, placing his wristwatch on the table by the bed.

Then he opened the drawer of the table.

He stood there, staring down at the revolver that was inside it....

IV

Vera Claythorne lay in bed.

The candle still burned beside her.

And yet she could not summon the courage to put it out.

She was afraid of the dark....

She told herself again and again: “You’re all right until morning. Nothing happened last night. Nothing will happen tonight. Nothing can happen. You’re locked and bolted in. No one can come near you....”

And she thought suddenly:

“Of course! I can stay here! Stay here locked in! Food doesn’t really matter! I can stay here—safely—till help comes! Even if it’s a day—or two days....”

Stay here. Yes, but could she stay here? Hour after hour—with no one to speak to, with nothing to do but think....

She'd begin to think of Cornwall—of Hugo—of—of what she'd said to Cyril.

Horrid whiney little boy, always pestering her....

“Miss Claythorne, why can't I swim out to the rock? I can. I know I can.”

Was it her voice that had answered?

“Of course, you can, Cyril, really. I know that.”

“Can I go then, Miss Claythorne?”

“Well, you see, Cyril, your mother gets so nervous about you. I'll tell you what. Tomorrow you can swim out to the rock. I'll talk to your mother on the beach and distract her attention. And then, when she looks for you, there you'll be standing on the rock waving to her! It will be a surprise!”

“Oh, good egg, Miss Claythorne! That will be a lark!”

She'd said it now. Tomorrow! Hugo was going to Newquay. When he came back—it would be all over.

Yes, but supposing it wasn't? Supposing it went wrong? Cyril might be rescued in time. And then—then he'd say, “Miss Claythorne said I could.” Well, what of it? One must take some risk! If the worst happened she'd brazen it out. “How can you tell such a wicked lie, Cyril? Of course, I never said any such thing!”

They'd believe her all right. Cyril often told stories. He was an untruthful child. Cyril would know, of course. But that didn't matter ... and anyway nothing would go wrong. She'd pretend to swim out after him. But she'd arrive too late ... Nobody would ever suspect....

Had Hugo suspected? Was that why he had looked at her in that queer far-off way?... Had Hugo known?

Was that why he had gone off after the inquest so hurriedly?

He hadn't answered the one letter she had written to him....

Hugo....

Vera turned restlessly in bed. No, no, she mustn't think of Hugo. It hurt too much! That was all over, over and done with ... Hugo must be forgotten.

Why, this evening, had she suddenly felt that Hugo was in the room with her?

She stared up at the ceiling, stared at the big black hook in the middle of the room.

She'd never noticed that hook before.

The seaweed had hung from that.

She shivered as she remembered that cold clammy touch on her neck.

She didn't like that hook on the ceiling. It drew your eyes, fascinated you ... a big black hook....

V

Ex-Inspector Blore sat on the side of his bed.

His small eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, were alert in the solid mass of his face. He was like a wild boar waiting to charge.

He felt no inclination to sleep.

The menace was coming very near now ... Six out of ten!

For all his sagacity, for all his caution and astuteness, the old judge had gone the way of the rest.

Blore snorted with a kind of savage satisfaction.

What was it the old geezer had said?

"We must be very careful...."

Self-righteous smug old hypocrite. Sitting up in court feeling like God Almighty. He'd got his all right ... No more being careful for him.

And now there were four of them. The girl, Lombard, Armstrong and himself.

Very soon another of them would go ... But it wouldn't be William Henry Blore. He'd see to that all right.

(But the revolver ... What about the revolver? That was the disturbing factor—the revolver!)

Blore sat on his bed, his brow furrowed, his little eyes creased and puckered while he pondered the problem of the revolver....

In the silence he could hear the clocks strike downstairs.

Midnight.

He relaxed a little now—even went so far as to lie down on his bed. But he did not undress.

He lay there thinking. Going over the whole business from the beginning, methodically, painstakingly, as he had been wont to do in his police officer days. It was thoroughness that paid in the end.

The candle was burning down. Looking to see if the matches were within easy reach of his hand, he blew it out.

Strangely enough, he found the darkness disquieting. It was as though a thousand age-old fears woke and struggled for supremacy in his brain. Faces floated in the air—the judge's face crowned with that mockery of grey wool—the cold dead face of Mrs. Rogers—the convulsed purple face of Anthony Marston.

Another face—pale, spectacled, with a small straw-coloured moustache.

A face that he had seen sometime or other—but when? Not on the island. No, much longer ago than that.

Funny that he couldn't put a name to it ... Silly sort of face really—fellow looked a bit of a mug.

Of course!

It came to him with a real shock.

Landor!

Odd to think he'd completely forgotten what Landor looked like. Only yesterday he'd been trying to recall the fellow's face, and hadn't been able to.

And now here it was, every feature clear and distinct, as though he had seen it only yesterday.

Landor had had a wife—a thin slip of a woman with a worried face. There'd been a kid, too, a girl about fourteen. For the first time, he wondered what had become of them.

(The revolver. What had become of the revolver? That was much more important.)

The more he thought about it the more puzzled he was ... He didn't understand this revolver business.

Somebody in the house had got that revolver....

Downstairs a clock struck one.

Blore's thoughts were cut short. He sat up on the bed, suddenly alert. For he had heard a sound—a very faint sound—somewhere outside his bedroom door.

There was someone moving about in the darkened house.

The perspiration broke out on his forehead. Who was it, moving secretly and silently along the corridors? Someone who was up to no good, he'd bet that!

Noiselessly, in spite of his heavy build, he dropped off the bed and with two strides was standing by the door listening.

But the sound did not come again. Nevertheless Blore was convinced that he was not mistaken. He had heard a footfall just outside his door. The hair rose slightly on his scalp. He knew fear again....

Someone creeping about stealthily in the night.

He listened—but the sound was not repeated.

And now a new temptation assailed him. He wanted, desperately, to go out and investigate. If he could only see who it was prowling about in the darkness.

But to open his door would be the action of a fool. Very likely that was exactly what the other was waiting for. He might even have meant Blore to hear what he had heard, counting on him coming out to investigate.

Blore stood rigid—listening. He could hear sounds everywhere now, cracks, rustles, mysterious whispers—but his dogged, realistic brain knew them for what they were—the creations of his own heated imagination.

And then suddenly he heard something that was not imagination. Footsteps, very soft, very cautious, but plainly audible to a man listening with all his ears as Blore was listening.

They came softly along the corridor (both Lombard's and Armstrong's rooms were farther from the stairhead than his). They passed his door without hesitating or faltering.

And as they did so, Blore made up his mind.

He meant to see who it was! The footsteps had definitely passed his door going to the stairs. Where was the man going?

When Blore acted, he acted quickly, surprisingly so for a man who looked so heavy and slow. He tiptoed back to the bed, slipped matches into his pocket, detached the plug of the electric lamp by his bed and picked it up, winding the flex round it. It was a chromium affair with a heavy ebonite base—a useful weapon.

He sprinted noiselessly across the room, removed the chair from under the door handle and with precaution unlocked and unbolted the door. He stepped out into the corridor. There was a faint sound in the hall below. Blore ran noiselessly in his stockinged feet to the head of the stairs.

At that moment he realized why it was he had heard all these sounds so clearly. The wind had died down completely and the sky must have cleared. There was faint moonlight coming in through the landing window and it illuminated the hall below.

Blore had an instantaneous glimpse of a figure just passing out through the front door.

In the act of running down the stairs in pursuit, he paused.

Once again, he had nearly made a fool of himself! This was a trap, perhaps, to lure him out of the house!

But what the other man didn't realize was that he had made a mistake, had delivered himself neatly into Blore's hands.

For, of the three tenanted rooms upstairs, one must now be empty. All that had to be done was to ascertain which!

Blore went swiftly back along the corridor.

He paused first at Dr. Armstrong's door and tapped. There was no answer.

He waited a minute, then went on to Philip Lombard's room.

Here the answer came at once.

"Who's there?"

"It's Blore. I don't think Armstrong is in his room. Wait a minute."

He went on to the door at the end of the corridor. Here he tapped again.

"Miss Claythorne. Miss Claythorne."

Vera's voice, startled, answered him.

"Who is it? What's the matter?"

"It's all right, Miss Claythorne. Wait a minute. I'll come back."

He raced back to Lombard's room. The door opened as he did so. Lombard stood there. He held a candle in his left hand. He had pulled on his trousers over his pyjamas. His right hand rested in the pocket of his pyjama jacket. He said sharply:

“What the hell's all this?”

Blore explained rapidly. Lombard's eyes lit up.

“Armstrong—eh? So he's our pigeon!” He moved along to Armstrong's door. “Sorry, Blore, but I don't take anything on trust.”

He rapped sharply on the panel.

“Armstrong—Armstrong.”

There was no answer.

Lombard dropped to his knees and peered through the keyhole. He inserted his little finger gingerly into the lock.

He said:

“Key's not in the door on the inside.”

Blore said:

“That means he locked it on the outside and took it with him.”

Philip nodded.

“Ordinary precaution to take. We'll get him, Blore... This time, we'll get him! Half a second.”

He raced along to Vera's room.

"Vera."

"Yes."

"We're hunting Armstrong. He's out of his room. Whatever you do, don't open your door. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"If Armstrong comes along and says that I've been killed, or Blore's been killed, pay no attention. See? Only open your door if both Blore and I speak to you. Got that?"

Vera said:

"Yes. I'm not a complete fool."

Lombard said:

"Good."

He joined Blore. He said:

"And now—after him! The hunt's up!"

Blore said:

"We'd better be careful. He's got a revolver, remember."

Philip Lombard racing down the stairs chuckled.

He said:

“That’s where you’re wrong.” He undid the front door, remarking, “Latch pushed back—so he could get in again easily.”

He went on:

“I’ve got that revolver!” He took it half out of his pocket as he spoke. “Found it put back in my drawer tonight.”

Blore stopped dead on the doorstep. His face changed. Philip Lombard saw it.

“Don’t be a damned fool, Blore! I’m not going to shoot you! Go back and barricade yourself in if you like! I’m off after Armstrong.”

He started off into the moonlight. Blore, after a minute’s hesitation, followed him.

He thought to himself:

“I suppose I’m asking for it. After all—”

After all he had tackled criminals armed with revolvers before now. Whatever else he lacked, Blore did not lack courage. Show him the danger and he would tackle it pluckily. He was not afraid of danger in the open, only of danger undefined and tinged with the supernatural.

VI

Vera, left to await results, got up and dressed.

She glanced over once or twice at the door. It was a good solid door. It was both bolted and locked and had an oak chair wedged under the handle.

It could not be broken open by force. Certainly not by Dr. Armstrong. He was not a physically powerful man.

If she were Armstrong intent on murder, it was cunning that she would employ, not force.

She amused herself by reflecting on the means he might employ.

He might, as Philip had suggested, announce that one of the other two men was dead. Or he might possibly pretend to be mortally wounded himself, might drag himself groaning to her door.

There were other possibilities. He might inform her that the house was on fire. More, he might actually set the house on fire ... Yes, that would be a possibility. Lure the other two men out of the house, then, having previously laid a trail of petrol, he might set light to it. And she, like an idiot, would remain barricaded in her room until it was too late.

She crossed over to the window. Not too bad. At a pinch one could escape that way. It would mean a drop—but there was a handy flower bed.

She sat down and picking up her diary began to write in it in a clear flowing hand.

One must pass the time.

Suddenly she stiffened to attention. She had heard a sound. It was, she thought, a sound like breaking glass. And it came from somewhere downstairs.

She listened hard, but the sound was not repeated.

She heard, or thought she heard, stealthy sounds of footsteps, the creak of stairs, the rustle of garments—but there was nothing definite and she concluded, as Blore had done earlier, that such sounds had their origin in her own imagination.

But presently she heard sounds of a more concrete nature. People moving about downstairs—the murmur of voices. Then the very decided sound of someone mounting the stairs—doors opening and shutting—feet going up to the attics overhead. More noises from there.

Finally the steps came along the passage. Lombard's voice said:

“Vera. You all right?”

“Yes. What happened?”

Blore's voice said:

“Will you let us in?”

Vera went to the door. She removed the chair, unlocked the door and slid back the bolt. She opened the door. The two men were breathing hard, their feet and the bottom of their trousers were soaking wet.

She said again:

“What’s happened?”

Lombard said:

“Armstrong’s disappeared....”

VII

Vera cried:

“What?”

Lombard said:

“Vanished clean off the island.”

Blore concurred:

“Vanished—that’s the word! Like some damned conjuring trick.”

Vera said impatiently:

“Nonsense! He’s hiding somewhere!”

Blore said:

“No, he isn’t! I tell you, there’s nowhere to hide on this island. It’s as bare as your hand! There’s moonlight outside. As clear as day it is. And he’s not to be found.”

Vera said:

“He doubled back to the house.”

Blore said:

“We thought of that. We’ve searched the house, too. You must have heard us. He’s not here, I tell you. He’s gone—clean vanished, vamoosed....”

Vera said incredulously:

“I don’t believe it.”

Lombard said:

“It’s true, my dear.”

He paused and then said:

“There’s one other little fact. A pane in the dining room window has been smashed—and there are only three little soldier boys on the table.”

Fifteen

I

Three people sat eating breakfast in the kitchen.

Outside, the sun shone. It was a lovely day. The storm was a thing of the past.

And with the change in the weather, a change had come in the mood of the prisoners on the island.

They felt now like people just awakening from a nightmare. There was danger, yes, but it was danger in daylight. That paralysing atmosphere of fear that had wrapped them round like a blanket yesterday while the wind howled outside was gone.

Lombard said:

“We’ll try heliographing today with a mirror from the highest point of the island. Some bright lad wandering on the cliff will recognize SOS when he sees it, I hope. In the evening we could try a bonfire—only there isn’t much wood—and anyway they might just think it was song and dance and merriment.”

Vera said:

“Surely someone can read Morse. And then they’ll come to take us off. Long before this evening.”

Lombard said:

“The weather’s cleared all right, but the sea hasn’t gone down yet. Terrific swell on! They won’t be able to get a boat near the island before tomorrow.”

Vera cried:

“Another night in this place!”

Lombard shrugged his shoulders.

“May as well face it! Twenty-four hours will do it, I think. If we can last out that, we’ll be all right.”

Blore cleared his throat. He said:

“We’d better come to a clear understanding. What’s happened to Armstrong?”

Lombard said:

“Well, we’ve got one piece of evidence. Only three little soldier boys left on the dinner table. It looks as though Armstrong had got his quietus.”

Vera said:

“Then why haven’t you found his dead body?”

Blore said:

“Exactly.”

Lombard shook his head. He said:

“It’s damned odd—no getting over it.”

Blore said doubtfully:

“It might have been thrown into the sea.”

Lombard said sharply:

“By whom? You? Me? You saw him go out of the front door. You come along and find me in my room. We go out and search together. When the devil had I time to kill him and carry his body round the island?”

Blore said:

“I don’t know. But I do know one thing.”

Lombard said:

“What’s that?”

Blore said:

“The revolver. It was your revolver. It’s in your possession now. There’s nothing to show that it hasn’t been in your possession all along.”

“Come now, Blore, we were all searched.”

“Yes, you’d hidden it away before that happened. Afterwards you just took it back again.”

“My good blockhead, I swear to you that it was put back in my drawer. Greatest surprise I ever had in my life when I found it

there.”

Blore said:

“You ask us to believe a thing like that! Why the devil should Armstrong, or anyone else for that matter, put it back?”

Lombard raised his shoulders hopelessly.

“I haven’t the least idea. It’s just crazy. The last thing one would expect. There seems no point in it.”

Blore agreed.

“No, there isn’t. You might have thought of a better story.”

“Rather proof that I’m telling the truth, isn’t it?”

“I don’t look at it that way.”

Philip said:

“You wouldn’t.”

Blore said:

“Look here, Mr. Lombard, if you’re an honest man, as you pretend
—”

Philip murmured:

“When did I lay claims to being an honest man? No, indeed, I never said that.”

Blore went on stolidly:

“If you’re speaking the truth—there’s only one thing to be done. As long as you have that revolver, Miss Claythorne and I are at your mercy. The only fair thing is to put that revolver with the other things that are locked up—and you and I will hold the two keys still.”

Philip Lombard lit a cigarette.

As he puffed smoke, he said:

“Don’t be an ass.”

“You won’t agree to that?”

“No, I won’t. That revolver’s mine. I need it to defend myself—and I’m going to keep it.”

Blore said:

“In that case we’re bound to come to one conclusion.”

“That I’m U.N. Owen? Think what you damned well please. But I’ll ask you, if that’s so, why I didn’t pot you with the revolver last night? I could have, about twenty times over.”

Blore shook his head.

He said:

“I don’t know—and that’s a fact. You must have had some reason.”

Vera had taken no part in the discussion. She stirred now and said:

“I think you’re both behaving like a pair of idiots.”

Lombard looked at her.

“What’s this?”

Vera said:

“You’ve forgotten the nursery rhyme. Don’t you see there’s a clue there?”

She recited in a meaning voice:

“Four little soldier boys going out to sea;

A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.”

She went on:

“A red herring—that’s the vital clue. Armstrong’s not dead... He took away the china soldier to make you think he was. You may say what you like—Armstrong’s on the island still. His disappearance is just a red herring across the track....”

Lombard sat down again.

He said:

“You know, you may be right.”

Blore said:

“Yes, but if so, where is he? We’ve searched the place. Outside and inside.”

Vera said scornfully:

“We all searched for the revolver, didn’t we, and couldn’t find it? But it was somewhere all the time!”

Lombard murmured:

“There’s a slight difference in size, my dear, between a man and a revolver.”

Vera said:

“I don’t care—I’m sure I’m right.”

Blore murmured:

“Rather giving himself away, wasn’t it? Actually mentioning a red herring in the verse. He could have written it up a bit different.”

Vera cried:

“But don’t you see, he’s mad? It’s all mad! The whole thing of going by the rhyme is mad! Dressing up the judge, killing Rogers when he was chopping sticks—drugging Mrs. Rogers so that she overslept herself—arranging for a bumble bee when Miss Brent died! It’s like some horrible child playing a game. It’s all got to fit in.”

Blore said:

“Yes, you’re right.” He thought a minute. “At any rate there’s no zoo on the island. He’ll have a bit of trouble getting over that.”

Vera cried:

“Don’t you see? We’re the Zoo... Last night, we were hardly human anymore. We’re the Zoo....”

II

They spent the morning on the cliffs, taking it in turns to flash a mirror at the mainland.

There were no signs that any one saw them. No answering signals. The day was fine, with a slight haze. Below, the sea heaved in a gigantic swell. There were no boats out.

They had made another abortive search of the island. There was no trace of the missing physician.

Vera looked up at the house from where they were standing.

She said, her breath coming with a slight catch in it:

“One feels safer here, out in the open ... Don’t let’s go back into the house again.”

Lombard said:

“Not a bad idea. We’re pretty safe here, no one can get at us without our seeing him a long time beforehand.”

Vera said:

“We’ll stay here.”

Blore said:

“Have to pass the night somewhere. We’ll have to go back to the house then.”

Vera shuddered.

“I can’t bear it. I can’t go through another night!”

Philip said:

“You’ll be safe enough—locked in your room.”

Vera murmured: “I suppose so.”

She stretched out her hands, murmuring:

“It’s lovely—to feel the sun again....”

She thought:

“How odd ... I’m almost happy. And yet I suppose I’m actually in danger ... Somehow—now—nothing seems to matter ... not in daylight ... I feel full of power—I feel that I can’t die....”

Blore was looking at his wristwatch. He said:

“It’s two o’clock. What about lunch?”

Vera said obstinately:

“I’m not going back to the house. I’m going to stay here—in the open.”

“Oh come now, Miss Claythorne. Got to keep your strength up, you know.”

Vera said:

“If I even see a tinned tongue, I shall be sick! I don’t want any food. People go days on end with nothing sometimes when they’re on a diet.”

Blore said:

“Well, I need my meals regular. What about you, Mr. Lombard?”

Philip said:

“You know, I don’t relish the idea of tinned tongue particularly. I’ll stay here with Miss Claythorne.”

Blore hesitated. Vera said:

“I shall be quite all right. I don’t think he’ll shoot me as soon as your back is turned if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

Blore said:

“It’s all right if you say so. But we agreed we ought not to separate.”

Philip said:

“You’re the one who wants to go into the lion’s den. I’ll come with you if you like.”

“No, you won’t,” said Blore. “You’ll stay here.”

Philip laughed.

“So you’re still afraid of me? Why, I could shoot you both this very minute if I liked.”

Blore said:

“Yes, but that wouldn’t be according to plan. It’s one at a time, and it’s got to be done in a certain way.”

“Well,” said Philip, “you seem to know all about it.”

“Of course,” said Blore, “it’s a bit jumpy going up to the house alone—”

Philip said softly:

“And therefore, will I lend you my revolver? Answer, no, I will not! Not quite so simple as that, thank you.”

Blore shrugged his shoulders and began to make his way up the steep slope to the house.

Lombard said softly:

“Feeding time at the Zoo! The animals are very regular in their habits!”

Vera said anxiously:

“Isn’t it very risky, what he’s doing?”

“In the sense you mean—no, I don’t think it is! Armstrong’s not armed, you know, and anyway Blore is twice a match for him in physique and he’s very much on his guard. And anyway it’s a sheer

impossibility that Armstrong can be in the house. I know he's not there."

"But—what other solution is there?"

Philip said softly:

"There's Blore."

"Oh—do you really think—?"

"Listen, my girl. You heard Blore's story. You've got to admit that if it's true, I can't possibly have had anything to do with Armstrong's disappearance. His story clears me. But it doesn't clear him. We've only his word for it that he heard footsteps and saw a man going downstairs and out at the front door. The whole thing may be a lie. He may have got rid of Armstrong a couple of hours before that."

"How?"

Lombard shrugged his shoulders.

"That we don't know. But if you ask me, we've only one danger to fear—and that danger is Blore! What do we know about the man? Less than nothing! All this ex-policeman story may be bunkum! He may be anybody—a mad millionaire—a crazy businessman—an escaped inmate of Broadmoor. One thing's certain. He could have done every one of these crimes."

Vera had gone rather white. She said in a slightly breathless voice:

"And supposing he gets—us?"

Lombard said softly, patting the revolver in his pocket:

“I’m going to take very good care he doesn’t.”

Then he looked at her curiously.

“Touching faith in me, haven’t you, Vera? Quite sure I wouldn’t shoot you?”

Vera said:

“One has got to trust someone ... As a matter of fact I think you’re wrong about Blore. I still think it’s Armstrong.”

She turned to him suddenly:

“Don’t you feel—all the time—that there’s someone. Someone watching and waiting?”

Lombard said slowly:

“That’s just nerves.”

Vera said eagerly:

“Then you have felt it?”

She shivered. She bent a little closer.

“Tell me—you don’t think—” she broke off, went on: “I read a story once—about two judges that came to a small American town—from the Supreme Court. They administered justice—Absolute Justice. Because—they didn’t come from this world at all....”

Lombard raised his eyebrows.

He said:

“Heavenly visitants, eh? No, I don’t believe in the supernatural. This business is human enough.”

Vera said in a low voice:

“Sometimes—I’m not sure....”

Lombard looked at her. He said:

“That’s conscience ...” After a moment’s silence he said very quietly: “So you did drown that kid after all?”

Vera said vehemently:

“I didn’t! I didn’t! You’ve no right to say that!”

He laughed easily.

“Oh yes, you did, my good girl! I don’t know why. Can’t imagine. There was a man in it probably. Was that it?”

A sudden feeling of lassitude, of intense weariness, spread over Vera’s limbs. She said in a dull voice:

“Yes—there was a man in it....”

Lombard said softly:

“Thanks. That’s what I wanted to know....”

Vera sat up suddenly. She exclaimed:

“What was that? It wasn’t an earthquake?”

Lombard said:

“No, no. Queer, though—a thud shook the ground. And I thought—did you hear a sort of cry? I did.”

They stared up at the house.

Lombard said:

“It came from there. We’d better go up and see.”

“No, no, I’m not going.”

“Please yourself. I am.”

Vera said desperately:

“All right. I’ll come with you.”

They walked up the slope to the house. The terrace was peaceful and innocuous-looking in the sunshine. They hesitated there a minute, then instead of entering by the front door, they made a cautious circuit of the house.

They found Blore. He was spreadeagled on the stone terrace on the east side, his head crushed and mangled by a great block of white marble.

Philip looked up. He said:

“Whose is that window just above?”

Vera said in a low shuddering voice:

“It’s mine—and that’s the clock from my mantelpiece... I remember now. It was—shaped like a bear.”

She repeated and her voice shook and quavered:

“It was shaped like a bear....”

III

Philip grasped her shoulder.

He said, and his voice was urgent and grim:

“This settles it. Armstrong is in hiding somewhere in that house. I’m going to get him.”

But Vera clung to him. She cried:

“Don’t be a fool. It’s us now! We’re next! He wants us to look for him! He’s counting on it!”

Philip stopped. He said thoughtfully:

“There’s something in that.”

Vera cried:

“At any rate you do admit now I was right.”

He nodded.

“Yes—you win! It’s Armstrong all right. But where the devil did he hide himself? We went over the place with a fine-tooth comb.”

Vera said urgently:

“If you didn’t find him last night, you won’t find him now... That’s common sense.”

Lombard said reluctantly:

“Yes, but—”

“He must have prepared a secret place beforehand—naturally—of course it’s just what he would do. You know, like a Priest’s Hole in old manor houses.”

“This isn’t an old house of that kind.”

“He could have had one made.”

Philip Lombard shook his head. He said:

“We measured the place—that first morning. I’ll swear there’s no space unaccounted for.”

Vera said:

“There must be....”

Lombard said:

“I’d like to see—”

Vera cried:

“Yes, you’d like to see! And he knows that! He’s in there—waiting for you.”

Lombard said, half bringing out the revolver from his pocket:

“I’ve got this, you know.”

“You said Blore was all right—that he was more than a match for Armstrong. So he was physically, and he was on the look out too. But what you don’t seem to realize is that Armstrong is mad! And a madman has all the advantages on his side. He’s twice as cunning as any one sane can be.”

Lombard put back the revolver in his pocket. He said:

“Come on, then.”

IV

Lombard said at last:

“What are we going to do when night comes?”

Vera didn’t answer. He went on accusingly:

“You haven’t thought of that?”

She said helplessly:

“What can we do? Oh, my God, I’m frightened....”

Philip Lombard said thoughtfully:

“It’s fine weather. There will be a moon. We must find a place—up by the top cliffs perhaps. We can sit there and wait for morning. We mustn’t go to sleep... We must watch the whole time. And if any one comes up toward us, I shall shoot!”

He paused:

“You’ll be cold, perhaps, in that thin dress?”

Vera said with a raucous laugh:

“Cold? I should be colder if I were dead!”

Philip Lombard said quietly:

“Yes, that’s true....”

Vera moved restlessly.

She said:

“I shall go mad if I sit here any longer. Let’s move about.”

“All right.”

They paced slowly up and down, along the line of the rocks overlooking the sea. The sun was dropping towards the west. The light was golden and mellow. It enveloped them in a golden glow.

Vera said, with a sudden nervous little giggle:

“Pity we can’t have a bathe....”

Philip was looking down towards the sea. He said abruptly:

“What’s that, there? You see—by that big rock? No—a little farther to the right.”

Vera stared. She said:

“It looks like somebody’s clothes!”

“A bather, eh?” Lombard laughed. “Queer. I suppose it’s only seaweed.”

Vera said:

“Let’s go and look.”

“It is clothes,” said Lombard as they drew nearer. “A bundle of them. That’s a boot. Come on, let’s scramble along here.”

They scrambled over the rocks.

Vera stopped suddenly. She said:

“It’s not clothes—it’s a man....”

The man was wedged between two rocks, flung there by the tide earlier in the day.

Lombard and Vera reached it in a last scramble. They bent down.

A purple discoloured face—a hideous drowned face....

Lombard said:

“My God! it’s Armstrong....”

Sixteen

I

Aeons passed ... worlds spun and whirled ... Time was motionless ... It stood still—it passed through a thousand ages....

No, it was only a minute or so ...

Two people were standing looking down on a dead man....

Slowly, very slowly, Vera Claythorne and Philip Lombard lifted their heads and looked into each other's eyes....

II

Lombard laughed.

He said:

“So that's it, is it, Vera?”

Vera said:

“There's no one on the island—no one at all—except us two....”

Her voice was a whisper—nothing more.

Lombard said:

“Precisely. So we know where we are, don't we?”

Vera said:

“How was it worked—that trick with the marble bear?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“A conjuring trick, my dear—a very good one....”

Their eyes met again.

Vera thought:

“Why did I never see his face properly before? A wolf—that’s what it is—a wolf ’s face ... Those horrible teeth....”

Lombard said, and his voice was a snarl—dangerous—menacing:

“This is the end, you understand. We’ve come to the truth now. And it’s the end....”

Vera said quietly:

“I understand....”

She stared out to sea. General Macarthur had stared out to sea—when—only yesterday? Or was it the day before? He too had said, “This is the end....”

He had said it with acceptance—almost with welcome.

But to Vera the words—the thought—brought rebellion.

No, it should not be the end.

She looked down at the dead man. She said:

“Poor Dr. Armstrong....”

Lombard sneered.

He said:

“What’s this? Womanly pity?”

Vera said:

“Why not? Haven’t you any pity?”

He said:

“I’ve no pity for you. Don’t expect it!”

Vera looked down again at the body. She said:

“We must move him. Carry him up to the house.”

“To join the other victims, I suppose? All neat and tidy. As far as I’m concerned he can stay where he is.”

Vera said:

“At any rate let’s get him out of the reach of the sea.”

Lombard laughed. He said:

“If you like.”

He bent—tugging at the body. Vera leaned against him, helping him. She pulled and tugged with all her might.

Lombard panted:

“Not such an easy job.”

They managed it, however, drawing the body clear of high water mark.

Lombard said as he straightened up:

“Satisfied?”

Vera said:

“Quite.”

Her tone warned him. He spun round. Even as he clapped his hand to his pocket he knew that he would find it empty.

She had moved a yard or two away and was facing him, revolver in hand.

Lombard said:

“So that’s the reason for your womanly solicitude! You wanted to pick my pocket.”

She nodded.

She held it steadily and unwaveringly.

Death was very near to Philip Lombard now. It had never, he knew, been nearer.

Nevertheless he was not beaten yet.

He said authoritatively:

“Give that revolver to me.”

Vera laughed.

Lombard said:

“Come on, hand it over.”

His quick brain was working. Which way—which method—talk her over—lull her into security or a swift dash—

All his life Lombard had taken the risky way. He took it now.

He spoke slowly, argumentatively:

“Now look here, my dear girl, you just listen—”

And then he sprang. Quick as a panther—as any other feline creature....

Automatically Vera pressed the trigger....

Lombard’s leaping body stayed poised in mid-spring then crashed heavily to the ground.

Vera came warily forward, the revolver ready in her hand.

But there was no need of caution.

Philip Lombard was dead—shot through the heart....

III

Relief possessed Vera—enormous exquisite relief.

At last it was over.

There was no more fear—no more steeling of her nerves....

She was alone on the island....

Alone with nine dead bodies....

But what did that matter? She was alive....

She sat there—exquisitely happy—exquisitely at peace ...

No more fear....

IV

The sun was setting when Vera moved at last. Sheer reaction had kept her immobile. There had been no room in her for anything but the glorious sense of safety.

She realized now that she was hungry and sleepy. Principally sleepy. She wanted to throw herself on her bed and sleep and sleep and sleep....

Tomorrow, perhaps, they would come and rescue her—but she didn't really mind. She didn't mind staying here. Not now that she

was alone....

Oh! blessed, blessed peace....

She got to her feet and glanced up at the house.

Nothing to be afraid of any longer! No terrors waiting for her! Just an ordinary well-built modern house. And yet, a little earlier in the day, she had not been able to look at it without shivering....

Fear—what a strange thing fear was....

Well, it was over now. She had conquered—had triumphed over the most deadly peril. By her own quick-wittedness and adroitness she had turned the tables on her would-be destroyer.

She began to walk up towards the house.

The sun was setting, the sky to the west was streaked with red and orange. It was beautiful and peaceful....

Vera thought....

“The whole thing might be a dream....”

How tired she was—terribly tired. Her limbs ached, her eyelids were dropping. Not to be afraid anymore ... To sleep. Sleep ... sleep ... sleep....

To sleep safely since she was alone on the island. One little soldier boy left all alone.

She smiled to herself.

She went in at the front door. The house, too, felt strangely peaceful.

Vera thought:

“Ordinarily one wouldn’t care to sleep where there’s a dead body in practically every bedroom!”

Should she go to the kitchen and get herself something to eat?

She hesitated a moment, then decided against it. She was really too tired....

She paused by the dining room door. There were still three little china figures in the middle of the table.

Vera laughed.

She said:

“You’re behind the times, my dears.”

She picked up two of them and tossed them out through the window. She heard them crash on the stone of the terrace.

The third little figure she picked up and held in her hand. She said:

“You can come with me. We’ve won, my dear! We’ve won!”

The hall was dim in the dying light.

Vera, the little soldier clasped in her hand, began to mount the stairs. Slowly, because her legs were suddenly very tired.

“One little soldier boy left all alone.” How did it end? Oh, yes! “He got married and then there were none.”

Married ... Funny, how she suddenly got the feeling again that Hugo was in the house....

Very strong. Yes, Hugo was upstairs waiting for her.

Vera said to herself:

“Don’t be a fool. You’re so tired that you’re imagining the most fantastic things....”

Slowly up the stairs....

At the top of them something fell from her hand making hardly any noise on the soft pile carpet. She did not notice that she had dropped the revolver. She was only conscious of clasping a little china figure.

How very quiet the house was. And yet—it didn’t seem like an empty house....

Hugo, upstairs, waiting for her....

“One little soldier boy left all alone.” What was the last line again? Something about being married—or was it something else?

She had come now to the door of her room. Hugo was waiting for her inside—she was quite sure of it.

She opened the door....

She gave a gasp....

What was that—hanging from the hook in the ceiling? A rope with a noose all ready? And a chair to stand upon—a chair that could be kicked away....

That was what Hugo wanted....

And of course that was the last line of the rhyme.

“He went and hanged himself and then there were None....”

The little china figure fell from her hand. It rolled unheeded and broke against the fender.

Like an automaton Vera moved forward. This was the end—here where the cold wet hand (Cyril’s hand, of course) had touched her throat....

“You can go to the rock, Cyril....”

That was what murder was—as easy as that!

But afterwards you went on remembering....

She climbed up on the chair, her eyes staring in front of her like a sleepwalker’s ... She adjusted the noose round her neck.

Hugo was there to see she did what she had to do.

She kicked away the chair....

Epilogue

Sir Thomas Legge, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard, said irritably:

“But the whole thing’s incredible!”

Inspector Maine said respectfully:

“I know, sir.”

The AC went on:

“Ten people dead on an island and not a living soul on it. It doesn’t make sense!”

Inspector Maine said stolidly:

“Nevertheless, it happened, sir.”

Sir Thomas Legge said:

“Dam’ it all, Maine, somebody must have killed ’em.”

“That’s just our problem, sir.”

“Nothing helpful in the doctor’s report?”

“No, sir. Wargrave and Lombard were shot, the first through the head, the second through the heart. Miss Brent and Marston died of cyanide poisoning. Mrs. Rogers died of an overdose of chloral. Rogers’ head was split open. Blore’s head was crushed in.

Armstrong died of drowning. Macarthur's skull was fractured by a blow on the back of the head and Vera Claythorne was hanged."

The AC winced. He said:

"Nasty business—all of it."

He considered for a minute or two. He said irritably:

"Do you mean to say that you haven't been able to get anything helpful out of the Sticklehaven people? Dash it, they must know something."

Inspector Maine shrugged his shoulders.

"They're ordinary decent seafaring folk. They know that the island was bought by a man called Owen—and that's about all they do know."

"Who provisioned the island and made all the necessary arrangements?"

"Man called Morris. Isaac Morris."

"And what does he say about it all?"

"He can't say anything, sir, he's dead."

The AC frowned.

"Do we know anything about this Morris?"

"Oh yes, sir, we know about him. He wasn't a very savoury gentleman, Mr. Morris. He was implicated in that share-pushing

fraud of Bennito's three years ago—we're sure of that though we can't prove it. And he was mixed up in the dope business. And again we can't prove it. He was a very careful man, Morris."

"And he was behind this island business?"

"Yes, sir, he put through the sale—though he made it clear that he was buying Soldier Island for a third party, unnamed."

"Surely there's something to be found out on the financial angle, there?"

Inspector Maine smiled.

"Not if you knew Morris! He can wangle figures until the best chartered accountant in the country wouldn't know if he was on his head or his heels! We've had a taste of that in the Bennito business. No, he covered his employer's tracks all right."

The other man sighed. Inspector Maine went on:

"It was Morris who made all the arrangements down at Sticklehaven. Represented himself as acting for 'Mr. Owen.' And it was he who explained to the people down there that there was some experiment on—some bet about living on a 'desert island' for a week—and that no notice was to be taken of any appeal for help from out there."

Sir Thomas Legge stirred uneasily. He said:

"And you're telling me that those people didn't smell a rat? Not even then?"

Maine shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“You’re forgetting, sir, that Soldier Island previously belonged to young Elmer Robson, the American. He had the most extraordinary parties down there. I’ve no doubt the local people’s eyes fairly popped out over them. But they got used to it and they’d begun to feel that anything to do with Soldier Island would necessarily be incredible. It’s natural, that, sir, when you come to think of it.”

The Assistant Commissioner admitted gloomily that he supposed it was.

Maine said:

“Fred Narracott—that’s the man who took the party out there—did say one thing that was illuminating. He said he was surprised to see what sort of people these were. ‘Not at all like Mr. Robson’s parties.’ I think it was the fact that they were all so normal and so quiet that made him override Morris’s orders and take out a boat to the island after he’d heard about the SOS signals.”

“When did he and the other men go?”

“The signals were seen by a party of boy scouts on the morning of the 11th. There was no possibility of getting out there that day. The men got there on the afternoon of the 12th at the first moment possible to run a boat ashore there. They’re all quite positive that nobody could have left the island before they got there. There was a big sea on after the storm.”

“Couldn’t someone have swum ashore?”

“It’s over a mile to the coast and there were heavy seas and big breakers inshore. And there were a lot of people, boy scouts and others on the cliffs looking out towards the island and watching.”

The AC sighed. He said:

“What about that gramophone record you found in the house? Couldn’t you get hold of anything there that might help?”

Inspector Maine said:

“I’ve been into that. It was supplied by a firm that do a lot of theatrical stuff and film effects. It was sent to U. N. Owen Esq., c/o Isaac Morris, and was understood to be required for the amateur performance of a hitherto unacted play. The typescript of it was returned with the record.”

Legge said:

“And what about the subject matter, eh?”

Inspector Maine said gravely:

“I’m coming to that, sir.”

He cleared his throat.

“I’ve investigated those accusations as thoroughly as I can.

“Starting with the Rogerses who were the first to arrive on the island. They were in service with a Miss Brady who died suddenly. Can’t get anything definite out of the doctor who attended her. He says they certainly didn’t poison her, or anything like that, but his

personal belief is that there was some funny business—that she died as the result of neglect on their part. Says it's the sort of thing that's quite impossible to prove.

“Then there is Mr. Justice Wargrave. That's OK. He was the judge who sentenced Seton.

“By the way, Seton was guilty—unmistakably guilty. Evidence turned up later, after he was hanged, which proved that beyond any shadow of doubt. But there was a good deal of comment at the time—nine people out of ten thought Seton was innocent and that the judge's summing up had been vindictive.

“The Claythorne girl, I find, was governess in a family where a death occurred by drowning. However, she doesn't seem to have had anything to do with it, and as a matter of fact she behaved very well, swam out to the rescue and was actually carried out to sea and only just rescued in time.”

“Go on,” said the AC with a sigh.

Maine took a deep breath.

“Dr. Armstrong now. Well-known man. Had a consulting-room in Harley Street. Absolutely straight and aboveboard in his profession. Haven't been able to trace any record of an illegal operation or anything of that kind. It's true that there was a woman called Clees who was operated on by him way back in 1925 at Leithmore, when he was attached to the hospital there. Peritonitis and she died on the operating table. Maybe he wasn't very skilful over the op—after all he hadn't much experience—but after all clumsiness isn't a criminal offence. There was certainly no motive.

“Then there’s Miss Emily Brent. Girl, Beatrice Taylor, was in service with her. Got pregnant, was turned out by her mistress and went and drowned herself. Not a nice business—but again not criminal.”

“That,” said the AC, “seems to be the point. U. N. Owen dealt with cases that the law couldn’t touch.”

Maine went stolidly on with his list.

“Young Marston was a fairly reckless car driver—had his licence endorsed twice and he ought to have been prohibited from driving in my opinion. That’s all there is to him. The two names John and Lucy Combes were those of two kids he knocked down and killed near Cambridge. Some friends of his gave evidence for him and he was let off with a fine.

“Can’t find anything definite about General Macarthur. Fine record—war service—all the rest of it. Arthur Richmond was serving under him in France and was killed in action. No friction of any kind between him and the General. They were close friends as a matter of fact. There were some blunders made about that time—commanding officers sacrificed men unnecessarily—possibly this was a blunder of that kind.”

“Possibly,” said the AC.

“Now, Philip Lombard. Lombard has been mixed up in some very curious shows abroad. He’s sailed very near the law once or twice. Got a reputation for daring and for not being overscrupulous. Sort of fellow who might do several murders in some quiet out of the way spot.

“Then we come to Blore.” Maine hesitated. “He of course was one of our lot.”

The other man stirred.

“Blore,” said the Assistant Commissioner forcibly, “was a bad hat!”

“You think so, sir?”

The AC said:

“I always thought so. But he was clever enough to get away with it. It’s my opinion that he committed black perjury in the Landor case. I wasn’t happy about it at the time. But I couldn’t find anything. I put Harris on to it and he couldn’t find anything but I’m still of the opinion that there was something to find if we’d known how to set about it. The man wasn’t straight.”

There was a pause, then Sir Thomas Legge said:

“And Isaac Morris is dead, you say? When did he die?”

“I thought you’d soon come to that, sir. Isaac Morris died on the night of August 8th. Took an overdose of sleeping stuff—one of the barbiturates, I understand. There wasn’t anything to show whether it was accident or suicide.”

Legge said slowly:

“Care to know what I think, Maine?”

“Perhaps I can guess, sir.”

Legge said heavily:

“That death of Morris’s is a damned sight too opportune!”

Inspector Maine nodded. He said:

“I thought you’d say that, sir.”

The Assistant Commissioner brought down his fist with a bang on the table. He cried out:

“The whole thing’s fantastic—impossible. Ten people killed on a bare rock of an island—and we don’t know who did it, or why, or how.”

Maine coughed. He said:

“Well, it’s not quite like that, sir. We do know why, more or less. Some fanatic with a bee in his bonnet about justice. He was out to get people who were beyond the reach of the law. He picked ten people—whether they were really guilty or not doesn’t matter—”

The Commissioner stirred. He said sharply:

“Doesn’t it? It seems to me—”

He stopped. Inspector Maine waited respectfully. With a sigh Legge shook his head.

“Carry on,” he said. “Just for a minute I felt I’d got somewhere. Got, as it were, the clue to the thing. It’s gone now. Go ahead with what you were saying.”

Maine went on:

“There were ten people to be—executed, let’s say. They were executed. U. N. Owen accomplished his task. And somehow or other he spirited himself off that island into thin air.”

The AC said:

“First-class vanishing trick. But you know, Maine, there must be an explanation.”

Maine said:

“You’re thinking, sir, that if the man wasn’t on the island, he couldn’t have left the island, and according to the account of the interested parties he never was on the island. Well, then the only explanation possible is that he was actually one of the ten.”

The AC nodded.

Maine said earnestly:

“We thought of that, sir. We went into it. Now, to begin with, we’re not quite in the dark as to what happened on Soldier Island. Vera Claythorne kept a diary, so did Emily Brent. Old Wargrave made some notes—dry legal cryptic stuff, but quite clear. And Blore made notes too. All those accounts tally. The deaths occurred in this order. Marston, Mrs. Rogers, Macarthur, Rogers, Miss Brent, Wargrave. After his death Vera Claythorne’s diary states that Armstrong left the house in the night and that Blore and Lombard had gone after him. Blore has one more entry in his notebook. Just two words. ‘Armstrong disappeared.’

“Now, sir, it seemed to me, taking everything into account, that we might find here a perfectly good solution. Armstrong was drowned,

you remember. Granting that Armstrong was mad, what was to prevent him having killed off all the others and then committed suicide by throwing himself over the cliff, or perhaps while trying to swim to the mainland?

“That was a good solution—but it won’t do. No, sir, it won’t do. First of all there’s the police surgeon’s evidence. He got to the island early on the morning of August 13. He couldn’t say much to help us. All he could say was that all the people had been dead at least thirty-six hours and probably a good deal longer. But he was fairly definite about Armstrong. Said he must have been from eight to ten hours in the water before his body was washed up. That works out at this, that Armstrong must have gone into the sea sometime during the night of the 10th–11th—and I’ll explain why. We found the point where the body was washed up—it had been wedged between two rocks and there were bits of cloth, hair, etc., on them. It must have been deposited there at high water on the 11th—that’s to say round about 11 o’clock a.m. After that, the storm subsided, and succeeding high water marks are considerably lower.

“You might say, I suppose, that Armstrong managed to polish off the other three before he went into the sea that night. But there’s another point and one you can’t get over. Armstrong’s body had been dragged above high water mark. We found it well above the reach of any tide. And it was laid out straight on the ground—all neat and tidy.

“So that settles one point definitely. Someone was alive on the island after Armstrong was dead.”

He paused and then went on.

“And that leaves—just what exactly? Here’s the position early on the morning of the 11th. Armstrong has ‘disappeared’ (drowned). That leaves us three people. Lombard, Blore and Vera Claythorne. Lombard was shot. His body was down by the sea—near Armstrong’s. Vera Claythorne was found hanged in her own bedroom. Blore’s body was on the terrace. His head was crushed in by a heavy marble clock that it seems reasonable to suppose fell on him from the window above.”

The AC said sharply:

“Whose window?”

“Vera Claythorne’s. Now, sir, let’s take each of these cases separately. First Philip Lombard. Let’s say he pushed over that lump of marble on to Blore—then he doped Vera Claythorne and strung her up. Lastly, he went down to the seashore and shot himself.

“But if so, who took away the revolver from him? For that revolver was found up in the house just inside the door at the top of the stairs—Wargrave’s room.”

The AC said:

“Any fingerprints on it?”

“Yes, sir, Vera Claythorne’s.”

“But, man alive, then—”

“I know what you’re going to say, sir. That it was Vera Claythorne. That she shot Lombard, took the revolver back to the house,

toppled the marble block on to Blore and then—hanged herself.

“And that’s quite all right—up to a point. There’s a chair in her bedroom and on the seat of it there are marks of seaweed same as on her shoes. Looks as though she stood on the chair, adjusted the rope round her neck and kicked away the chair.

“But that chair wasn’t found kicked over. It was, like all the other chairs, neatly put back against the wall. That was done after Vera Claythorne’s death—by someone else.

“That leaves us with Blore and if you tell me that after shooting Lombard and inducing Vera Claythorne to hang herself he then went out and pulled down a whacking great block of marble on himself by tying a string to it or something like that—well, I simply don’t believe you. Men don’t commit suicide that way—and what’s more Blore wasn’t that kind of man. We knew Blore—and he was not the man that you’d ever accuse of a desire for abstract justice.”

The Assistant Commissioner said:

“I agree.”

Inspector Maine said:

“And therefore, sir, there must have been someone else on the island. Someone who tidied up when the whole business was over. But where was he all the time—and where did he go to? The Sticklehaven people are absolutely certain that no one could have left the island before the rescue boat got there. But in that case—”

He stopped.

The Assistant Commissioner said:

“In that case—”

He sighed. He shook his head. He leaned forward.

“But in that case,” he said, “who killed them?”

A Manuscript Document Sent To Scotland Yard by the Master of the Emma Jane Fishing Trawler

From my earliest youth I realized that my nature was a mass of contradictions. I have, to begin with, an incurably romantic imagination. The practice of throwing a bottle into the sea with an important document inside was one that never failed to thrill me when reading adventure stories as a child. It thrills me still—and for that reason I have adopted this course—writing my confession, enclosing it in a bottle, sealing the latter, and casting it into the waves. There is, I suppose, a hundred to one chance that my confession may be found—and then (or do I flatter myself?) a hitherto unsolved murder mystery will be explained.

I was born with other traits besides my romantic fancy. I have a definite sadistic delight in seeing or causing death. I remember experiments with wasps—with various garden pests ... From an early age I knew very strongly the lust to kill.

But side by side with this went a contradictory trait—a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by any act of mine. I have always felt strongly that right should prevail.

It may be understood—I think a psychologist would understand—that with my mental makeup being what it was, I adopted the law as a profession. The legal profession satisfied nearly all my instincts.

Crime and its punishment has always fascinated me. I enjoy reading every kind of detective story and thriller. I have devised for my own private amusement the most ingenious ways of carrying out a murder.

When in due course I came to preside over a court of law, that other secret instinct of mine was encouraged to develop. To see a wretched criminal squirming in the dock, suffering the tortures of the damned, as his doom came slowly and slowly nearer, was to me an exquisite pleasure. Mind you, I took no pleasure in seeing an innocent man there. On at least two occasions I stopped cases where to my mind the accused was palpably innocent, directing the jury that there was no case. Thanks, however, to the fairness and efficiency of our police force, the majority of the accused persons who have come before me to be tried for murder, have been guilty.

I will say here that such was the case with the man Edward Seton. His appearance and manner were misleading and he created a good impression on the jury. But not only the evidence, which was clear, though unspectacular, but my own knowledge of criminals told me without any doubt that the man had actually committed the crime with which he was charged, the brutal murder of an elderly woman who trusted him.

I have a reputation as a hanging judge, but that is unfair. I have always been strictly just and scrupulous in my summing up of a case.

All I have done is to protect the jury against the emotional effect of emotional appeals by some of our more emotional counsel. I have drawn their attention to the actual evidence.

For some years past I have been aware of a change within myself, a lessening of control—a desire to act instead of to judge.

I have wanted—let me admit it frankly—to commit a murder myself. I recognized this as the desire of the artist to express himself! I was, or could be, an artist in crime! My imagination, sternly checked by the exigencies of my profession, waxed secretly to colossal force.

I must—I must—I must—commit a murder! And what is more, it must be no ordinary murder! It must be a fantastical crime—something stupendous—out of the common! In that one respect, I have still, I think, an adolescent's imagination.

I wanted something theatrical, impossible!

I wanted to kill ... Yes, I wanted to kill....

But—incongruous as it may seem to some—I was restrained and hampered by my innate sense of justice. The innocent must not suffer.

And then, quite suddenly, the idea came to me—started by a chance remark uttered during casual conversation. It was a doctor to whom I was talking—some ordinary undistinguished GP. He mentioned casually how often murder must be committed which the law was unable to touch.

And he instanced a particular case—that of an old lady, a patient of his who had recently died. He was, he said, himself convinced that her death was due to the withholding of a restorative drug by a married couple who attended on her and who stood to benefit very substantially by her death. That sort of thing, he explained, was

quite impossible to prove, but he was nevertheless quite sure of it in his own mind. He added that there were many cases of a similar nature going on all the time—cases of deliberate murder—and all quite untouchable by the law.

That was the beginning of the whole thing. I suddenly saw my way clear. And I determined to commit not one murder, but murder on a grand scale.

A childish rhyme of my infancy came back into my mind—the rhyme of the ten little soldier boys. It had fascinated me as a child of two—the inexorable diminishment—the sense of inevitability.

I began, secretly, to collect victims....

I will not take up space here by going into details of how this was accomplished. I had a certain routine line of conversation which I employed with nearly every one I met—and the results I got were really surprising. During the time I was in a nursing home I collected the case of Dr. Armstrong—a violently teetotal Sister who attended on me being anxious to prove to me the evils of drink by recounting to me a case many years ago in hospital when a doctor under the influence of alcohol had killed a patient on whom he was operating. A careless question as to where the Sister in question had trained, etc., soon gave me the necessary data. I tracked down the doctor and the patient mentioned without difficulty.

A conversation between two old military gossips in my Club put me on the track of General Macarthur. A man who had recently returned from the Amazon gave me a devastating résumé of the activities of one Philip Lombard. An indignant memsahib in

Majorca recounted the tale of the Puritan Emily Brent and her wretched servant girl. Anthony Marston I selected from a large group of people who had committed similar offences. His complete callousness and his inability to feel any responsibility for the lives he had taken made him, I considered, a type dangerous to the community and unfit to live. Ex-Inspector Blore came my way quite naturally, some of my professional brethren discussing the Landor case with freedom and vigour. I took a serious view of his offence. The police, as servants of the law, must be of a high order of integrity. For their word is perforce believed by virtue of their profession.

Finally there was the case of Vera Claythorne. It was when I was crossing the Atlantic. At a late hour one night the sole occupants of the smoking room were myself and a good-looking young man called Hugo Hamilton.

Hugo Hamilton was unhappy. To assuage that unhappiness he had taken a considerable quantity of drink. He was in the maudlin confidential stage. Without much hope of any result I automatically started my routine conversational gambit. The response was startling. I can remember his words now. He said:

“You’re right. Murder isn’t what most people think—giving someone a dollop of arsenic—pushing them over a cliff—that sort of stuff.” He leaned forward, thrusting his face into mine. He said, “I’ve known a murderess—known her, I tell you. And what’s more I was crazy about her ... God help me, sometimes I think I still am ... It’s hell, I tell you—hell. You see, she did it more or less for me ... Not that I ever dreamed ... Women are fiends—absolute fiends—you wouldn’t think a girl like that—a nice straight jolly girl—you wouldn’t think she’d do that, would you? That she’d take a kid

out to sea and let it drown—you wouldn't think a woman could do a thing like that?"

I said to him:

"Are you sure she did do it?"

He said and in saying it he seemed suddenly to sober up:

"I'm quite sure. Nobody else ever thought of it. But I knew the moment I looked at her—when I got back—after ... And she knew I knew ... What she didn't realize was that I loved that kid...."

He didn't say anymore, but it was easy enough for me to trace back the story and reconstruct it.

I needed a tenth victim. I found him in a man named Morris. He was a shady little creature. Amongst other things he was a dope pedlar and he was responsible for inducing the daughter of friends of mine to take to drugs. She committed suicide at the age of twenty-one.

During all this time of search my plan had been gradually maturing in my mind. It was now complete and the coping stone to it was an interview I had with a doctor in Harley Street. I have mentioned that I underwent an operation. My interview in Harley Street told me that another operation would be useless. My medical adviser wrapped up the information very prettily, but I am accustomed to getting at the truth of a statement.

I did not tell the doctor of my decision—that my death should not be a slow and protracted one as it would be in the course of nature.

No, my death should take place in a blaze of excitement. I would live before I died.

And now to the actual mechanics of the crime of Soldier Island. To acquire the island, using the man Morris to cover my tracks, was easy enough. He was an expert in that sort of thing. Tabulating the information I had collected about my prospective victims, I was able to concoct a suitable bait for each. None of my plans miscarried. All my guests arrived at Soldier Island on the 8th of August. The party included myself.

Morris was already accounted for. He suffered from indigestion. Before leaving London I gave him a capsule to take last thing at night which had, I said, done wonders for my own gastric juices. He accepted unhesitatingly—the man was a slight hypochondriac. I had no fear that he would leave any compromising documents or memoranda behind. He was not that sort of man.

The order of death upon the island had been subjected by me to special thought and care. There were, I considered, amongst my guests, varying degrees of guilt. Those whose guilt was the lightest should, I decided, pass out first, and not suffer the prolonged mental strain and fear that the more cold-blooded offenders were to suffer.

Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers died first, the one instantaneously the other in a peaceful sleep. Marston, I recognized, was a type born without that feeling of moral responsibility which most of us have. He was amoral—pagan. Mrs. Rogers, I had no doubt, had acted very largely under the influence of her husband.

I need not describe closely how those two met their deaths. The police will have been able to work that out quite easily. Potassium cyanide is easily obtained by householders for putting down wasps. I had some in my possession and it was easy to slip it into Marston's almost empty glass during the tense period after the gramophone recital.

I may say that I watched the faces of my guests closely during that indictment and I had no doubt whatever, after my long court experience, that one and all were guilty.

During recent bouts of pain, I had been ordered a sleeping draught—Chloral Hydrate. It had been easy for me to suppress this until I had a lethal amount in my possession. When Rogers brought up some brandy for his wife, he set it down on a table and in passing that table I put the stuff into the brandy. It was easy, for at that time suspicion had not begun to set in.

General Macarthur met his death quite painlessly. He did not hear me come up behind him. I had, of course, to choose my time for leaving the terrace very carefully, but everything was successful.

As I had anticipated, a search was made of the island and it was discovered that there was no one on it but our seven selves. That at once created an atmosphere of suspicion. According to my plan I should shortly need an ally. I selected Dr. Armstrong for that part. He was a gullible sort of man, he knew me by sight and reputation and it was inconceivable to him that a man of my standing should actually be a murderer! All his suspicions were directed against Lombard and I pretended to concur in these. I hinted to him that I had a scheme by which it might be possible to trap the murderer into incriminating himself.

Though a search had been made of everyone's room, no search had as yet been made of the persons themselves. But that was bound to come soon.

I killed Rogers on the morning of August 10th. He was chopping sticks for lighting the fire and did not hear me approach. I found the key to the dining room door in his pocket. He had locked it the night before.

In the confusion attending the finding of Rogers' body I slipped into Lombard's room and abstracted his revolver. I knew that he would have one with him—in fact I had instructed Morris to suggest as much when he interviewed him.

At breakfast I slipped my last dose of chloral into Miss Brent's coffee when I was refilling her cup. We left her in the dining room. I slipped in there a little while later—she was nearly unconscious and it was easy to inject a strong solution of cyanide into her. The bumble bee business was really rather childish—but somehow, you know, it pleased me. I liked adhering as closely as possible to my nursery rhyme.

Immediately after this what I had already foreseen happened—indeed I believe I suggested it myself. We all submitted to a rigorous search. I had safely hidden away the revolver, and had no more cyanide or chloral in my possession.

It was then that I intimated to Armstrong that we must carry our plan into effect. It was simply this—I must appear to be the next victim. That would perhaps rattle the murderer—at any rate once I was supposed to be dead I could move about the house and spy upon the unknown murderer.

Armstrong was keen on the idea. We carried it out that evening. A little plaster of red mud on the forehead—the red curtain and the wool and the stage was set. The lights of the candles were very flickering and uncertain and the only person who would examine me closely was Armstrong.

It worked perfectly. Miss Claythorne screamed the house down when she found the seaweed which I had thoughtfully arranged in her room. They all rushed up, and I took up my pose of a murdered man.

The effect on them when they found me was all that could be desired. Armstrong acted his part in the most professional manner. They carried me upstairs and laid me on my bed. Nobody worried about me, they were all too deadly scared and terrified of each other.

I had a rendezvous with Armstrong outside the house at a quarter to two. I took him up a little way behind the house on the edge of the cliff. I said that here we could see if any one else approached us, and we should not be seen from the house as the bedrooms faced the other way. He was still quite unsuspecting—and yet he ought to have been warned—if he had only remembered the words of the nursery rhyme. “A red herring swallowed one ...” He took the red herring all right.

It was quite easy. I uttered an exclamation, leant over the cliff, told him to look, wasn't that the mouth of a cave? He leant right over. A quick vigorous push sent him off his balance and splash into the heaving sea below. I returned to the house. It must have been my footfall that Blore heard. A few minutes after I had returned to Armstrong's room I left it, this time making a certain amount of

noise so that someone should hear me. I heard a door open as I got to the bottom of the stairs. They must have just glimpsed my figure as I went out of the front door.

It was a minute or two before they followed me. I had gone straight round the house and in at the dining room window which I had left open. I shut the window and later I broke the glass. Then I went upstairs and laid myself out again on my bed.

I calculated that they would search the house again, but I did not think they would look closely at any of the corpses, a mere twitch aside of the sheet to satisfy themselves that it was not Armstrong masquerading as a body. This is exactly what occurred.

I forgot to say that I returned the revolver to Lombard's room. It may be of interest to someone to know where it was hidden during the search. There was a big pile of tinned food in the larder. I opened the bottommost of the tins—biscuits I think it contained, bedded in the revolver and replaced the strip of adhesive tape.

I calculated, and rightly, that no one would think of working their way through a pile of apparently untouched foodstuffs, especially as all the top tins were soldered.

The red curtain I had concealed by laying it flat on the seat of one of the drawing room chairs under the chintz cover and the wool in the seat cushion, cutting a small hole.

And now came the moment that I had anticipated—three people who were so frightened of each other that anything might happen—and one of them had a revolver. I watched them from the windows of the house. When Blore came up alone I had the big marble clock poised ready. Exit Blore....

From my window I saw Vera Claythorne shoot Lombard. A daring and resourceful young woman. I always thought she was a match for him and more. As soon as that had happened I set the stage in her bedroom.

It was an interesting psychological experiment. Would the consciousness of her own guilt, the state of nervous tension consequent on having just shot a man, be sufficient, together with the hypnotic suggestion of the surroundings, to cause her to take her own life? I thought it would. I was right. Vera Claythorne hanged herself before my eyes where I stood in the shadow of the wardrobe.

And now for the last stage. I came forward, picked up the chair and set it against the wall. I looked for the revolver and found it at the top of the stairs where the girl had dropped it. I was careful to preserve her fingerprints on it.

And now?

I shall finish writing this. I shall enclose it and seal it in a bottle and I shall throw the bottle into the sea.

Why?

Yes, why?

It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve.

But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid.

I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that someone should know just how clever I have been....

In all this, I have assumed that the mystery of Soldier Island will remain unsolved. It may be, of course, that the police will be cleverer than I think. There are, after all, three clues. One: the police are perfectly aware that Edward Seton was guilty. They know, therefore, that one of the ten people on the island was not a murderer in any sense of the word, and it follows, paradoxically, that that person must logically be the murderer. The second clue lies in the seventh verse of the nursery rhyme. Armstrong's death is associated with a "red herring" which he swallowed—or rather which resulted in swallowing him! That is to say that at that stage of the affair some hocus-pocus is clearly indicated—and that Armstrong was deceived by it and sent to his death. That might start a promising line of inquiry. For at that period there are only four persons and of those four I am clearly the only one likely to inspire him with confidence.

The third is symbolical. The manner of my death marking me on the forehead. The brand of Cain.

There is, I think, little more to say.

After entrusting my bottle and its message to the sea I shall go to my room and lay myself down on the bed. To my eyeglasses is attached what seems a length of fine black cord—but it is elastic cord. I shall lay the weight of the body on the glasses. The cord I shall loop round the door handle and attach it, not too solidly, to the revolver. What I think will happen is this.

My hand, protected with a handkerchief, will press the trigger. My hand will fall to my side, the revolver, pulled by the elastic, will recoil to the door, jarred by the door handle it will detach itself from the elastic and fall. The elastic, released, will hang down innocently from the eyeglasses on which my body is lying. A handkerchief lying on the floor will cause no comment whatever.

I shall be found, laid neatly on my bed, shot through the forehead in accordance with the record kept by my fellow victims. Times of death cannot be stated with any accuracy by the time our bodies are examined.

When the sea goes down, there will come from the mainland boats and men.

And they will find ten dead bodies and an unsolved problem on Soldier Island.

Signed:

Lawrence Wargrave.

Death Comes As The End (1945)

By Agatha Christie

Author's Note

The action of this book takes place on the West bank of the Nile at Thebes in Egypt about 2000 BC. Both place and time are incidental to the story. Any other place at any other time would have served as well: but it so happened that the inspiration of both characters and plot was derived from two or three Egyptian letters of the XI Dynasty, found about 20 years ago by the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in a rock tomb opposite Luxor, and translated by Professor (then Mr.) Battiscombe Gunn in the Museum's Bulletin.

It may be of interest to the reader to note that an endowment for ka-service—an everyday feature of ancient Egyptian civilization—was very similar in principle to a mediæval chantry bequest. Property was bequeathed to the ka-priest in return for which he was expected to maintain the tomb of the testator, and to provide offerings at the tomb on certain feast days throughout the year for the repose of the deceased's soul.

The terms "Brother," "Sister" in Egyptian texts, regularly mean "Lover" and are frequently interchangeable with "Husband," "Wife." They are so used on occasion in this book.

The Agricultural calendar of Ancient Egypt, consisting of three seasons of four months of thirty days, formed the background of peasant life, and with the addition of five intercalary days at the end of the year was used as the official calendar of 365 days to the year. This "Year" originally began with the arrival in Egypt of the

flood-water of the Nile in the third week of July by our reckoning; but the absence of a Leap Year caused it to lag through the centuries, so that, at the time of our story, the official New Year's Day fell about six months earlier than the opening of the agricultural year, i.e. in January instead of July. To save the reader from continually having to make allowance for this six months, however, the dates here used as Chapter headings are stated in terms of the agricultural year of the time, i.e. Inundation—late July to late November; Winter—late November to late March; and Summer—late March to late July.

A.C. 1944

PART ONE
INUNDATION

One

SECOND MONTH OF INUNDATION 20TH DAY

Renisenb stood looking over the Nile.

In the distance she could hear faintly the upraised voices of her brothers, Yahmose and Sobek, disputing as to whether or no the dykes in a certain place needed strengthening or not. Sobek's voice was high and confident as always. He had the habit of asserting his views with easy certainty. Yahmose's voice was low and grumbling in tone, it expressed doubt and anxiety. Yahmose was always in a state of anxiety over something or other. He was the eldest son, and during his father's absence on the Northern Estates the management of the farmlands was more or less in his hands. Yahmose was slow, prudent and prone to look for difficulties where none existed. He was a heavily built, slow moving man with none of Sobek's gaiety and confidence.

From her early childhood Renisenb could remember hearing these elder brothers of hers arguing in just those selfsame accents. It gave her suddenly a feeling of security . . . She was at home again. Yes, she had come home. . . .

Yet as she looked once more across the pale, shining river, her rebellion and pain mounted again. Khay, her young husband, was dead . . . Khay with his laughing face and his strong shoulders. Khay was with Osiris in the Kingdom of the dead—and she, Renisenb, his dearly loved wife, was left desolate. Eight years they had had together—she had come to him as little more than a child

—and now she had returned widowed, with Khay's child, Teti, to her father's house.

It seemed to her at this moment as though she had never been away. . . .

She welcomed that thought. . . .

She would forget those eight years—so full of unthinking happiness, so torn and destroyed by loss and pain.

Yes, forget them, put them out of her mind. Become once more Renisenb, Imhotep the ka-priest's daughter, the unthinking, unfeeling girl. This love of a husband and brother had been a cruel thing, deceiving her by its sweetness. She remembered the strong bronze shoulders, the laughing mouth—now Khay was embalmed, swathed in bandages, protected with amulets in his journey through the other world. No more Khay in this world to sail on the Nile and catch fish and laugh up into the sun whilst she, stretched out in the boat with the little Teti on her lap, laughed back at him. . . .

Renisenb thought:

“I will not think of it. It is over! Here I am at home. Everything is the same as it was. I, too, shall be the same presently. It will all be as before. Teti has forgotten already. She plays with the other children and laughs.”

Renisenb turned abruptly and made her way back towards the house, passing on the way some loaded donkeys being driven towards the river bank. She passed by the cornbins and the outhouses and through the gateway into the courtyard. It was very pleasant in the courtyard. There was the artificial lake, surrounded

by flowering oleanders and jasmines and shaded by sycamore fig trees. Teti and the other children were playing there now, their voices rising shrill and clear. They were running in and out of the little pavilion that stood at one side of the lake. Renisenb noticed that Teti was playing with a wooden lion whose mouth opened and shut by pulling a string, a toy which she herself had loved as a child. She thought again, gratefully, "I have come home . . ."

Nothing was changed here, all was as it had been. Here life was safe, constant, unchanging, Teti was now the child and she one of the many mothers enclosed by the home walls—but the framework, the essence of things, was unchanged.

A ball with which one of the children was playing rolled to her feet and she picked it up and threw it back, laughing.

Renisenb went on to the porch with its gaily coloured columns, and then through into the house, passing through the big central chamber, with its coloured frieze of lotus and poppies and so on to the back of the house and the women's quarters.

Upraised voices struck on her ear and she paused again, savouring with pleasure the old familiar echoes. Satipy and Kait—arguing as always! Those well-remembered tones of Satipy's voice, high, domineering and bullying! Satipy was her brother Yahmose's wife, a tall, energetic, loud-tongued woman, handsome in a hard, commanding kind of way. She was eternally laying down the law, hectoring the servants, finding fault with everything, getting impossible things done by sheer force of vituperation and personality. Everyone dreaded her tongue and ran to obey her orders. Yahmose himself had the greatest admiration for his resolute, spirited wife, though he allowed himself to be bullied by her in a way that had often infuriated Renisenb.

At intervals, in the pauses in Satipy's high-pitched sentences, the quiet, obstinate voice of Kait was heard. Kait was a broad, plain-faced woman, the wife of the handsome gay Sobek. She was devoted to her children and seldom thought or spoke about anything else. She sustained her side of the daily arguments with her sister-in-law by the simple expedient of repeating whatever statement she had originally made with quiet, immovable obstinacy. She displayed neither heat nor passion, and never considered for a moment any side of a question but her own. Sobek was extremely attached to his wife and talked freely to her of all his affairs, secure in the knowledge that she would appear to listen, make comforting sounds of assent or dissent, and would remember nothing inconvenient, since her mind was sure to have been dwelling on some problem connected with the children all the time.

"It's an outrage, that's what I say," shouted Satipy. "If Yahmose had the spirit of a mouse he would not stand it for a moment! Who is in charge here when Imhotep is absent? Yahmose! And as Yahmose's wife it is I who should have the first choice of the woven mats and cushions. That hippopotamus of a black slave should be—"

Kait's heavy, deep voice cut in:

"No, no, my little one, do not eat your doll's hair. See, here is something better—a sweet—oh, how good. . . ."

"As for you, Kait, you have no courtesy, you don't even listen to what I say—you do not reply—your manners are atrocious."

"The blue cushion has always been mine . . . Oh look at little Ankh—she is trying to walk. . . ."

“You are as stupid as your children, Kait, and that is saying a good deal! But you shall not get out of it like this. I will have my rights, I tell you.”

Renisenb started as a quiet footfall sounded behind her. She turned with a start and with the old, familiar feeling of dislike at seeing the woman Henet standing behind her.

Henet’s thin face was twisted into its usual half-cringing smile.

“Things haven’t changed much, you’ll be thinking, Renisenb,” she said. “How we all bear Satipy’s tongue, I don’t know! Of course, Kait can answer back. Some of us aren’t so fortunate! I know my place, I hope—and my gratitude to your father for giving me a home and food and clothing. Ah, he’s a good man, your father. And I’ve always tried to do what I can. I’m always working—giving a hand here and a hand there—and I don’t expect thanks or gratitude. If your dear mother had lived it would have been different. She appreciated me. Like sisters we were! A beautiful woman she was. Well, I’ve done my duty and kept my promise to her. ‘Look after the children, Henet,’ she said when she was dying. And I’ve been faithful to my word. Slaved for you all, I have, and never wanted thanks. Neither asked for them nor got them! ‘It’s only old Henet,’ people say, ‘she doesn’t count.’ Nobody thinks anything of me. Why should they? I just try and be helpful, that’s all.”

She slipped like an eel under Renisenb’s arm and entered the inner room.

“About these cushions, you’ll excuse me, Satipy, but I happened to hear Sobek say—”

Renisenb moved away. Her old dislike of Henet surged up. Funny how they all disliked Henet! It was her whining voice, her continual self-pity and the occasional malicious pleasure she took in fanning the flames of a discussion.

“Oh well,” thought Renisenb, “why not?” It was, she supposed, Henet’s way of amusing herself. Life must be dreary for her—and it was true that she worked like a drudge and that no one was ever grateful. You couldn’t be grateful to Henet—she drew attention to her own merits so persistently that it chilled any generous response you might have felt.

Henet, thought Renisenb, was one of those people whose fate it is to be devoted to others and to have no one devoted to them. She was unattractive to look at, and stupid as well. Yet she always knew what was going on. Her noiseless way of walking, her sharp ears, and her quick peering eyes made it a certainty that nothing could long be a secret from her. Sometimes she hugged her knowledge to herself—at other times she would go around from one person to another, whispering, and standing back delightedly to observe the results of her tale-telling.

At one time or another everyone in the household had begged Imhotep to get rid of Henet, but Imhotep would never hear of such a thing. He was perhaps the only person who was fond of her; and she repaid his patronage with a fulsome devotion that the rest of the family found quite nauseating.

Renisenb stood uncertainly for a moment, listening to the accelerated clamour of her sisters-in-law, fanned by the flame of Henet’s interference, then she went slowly towards the small room where her grandmother, Esa, sat by herself, attended by two little

black slave girls. She was busy now inspecting certain linen garments that they were displaying to her and scolding them in a characteristic, friendly fashion.

Yes, it was all the same. Renisenb stood, unnoticed, listening. Old Esa had shrunk a little, that was all. But her voice was the same and the things that she was saying were the same, word for word, almost, as Renisenb could remember them before she herself had left home eight years ago. . . .

Renisenb slipped out again. Neither the old woman nor the two little black slave girls had noticed her. For a moment or two Renisenb paused by the open kitchen door. A smell of roasting ducks, a lot of talking and laughing and scolding all going on at once; a mound of vegetables waiting to be prepared.

Renisenb stood quite still, her eyes half closed. From where she stood she could hear everything going on at once. The rich, varied noises of the kitchen, the high, shrill note of old Esa's voice, the strident tones of Satipy and, very faintly, the deeper, persistent contralto of Kait. A babel of women's voices—chattering, laughing, complaining, scolding, exclaiming. . . .

And suddenly Renisenb felt stifled, encircled by this persistent and clamorous femininity. Women—noisy, vociferous women! A houseful of women—never quiet, never peaceful—always talking, exclaiming, saying things—not doing them!

And Khay—Khay silent and watchful in his boat, his whole mind bent on the fish he was going to spear. . . .

None of this clack of tongues, this busy, incessant fussiness.

Renisenb went swiftly out of the house again into hot clear stillness. She saw Sobek coming back from the fields and saw in the distance Yahmose going up towards the Tomb.

She turned away and took the path up to the limestone cliffs where the Tomb was. It was the Tomb of the great Noble Meriptah and her father was the mortuary priest responsible for its upkeep. All the estate and land was part of the endowment of the Tomb.

When her father was away the duties of the ka-priest fell upon her brother Yahmose. When Renisenb, walking slowly up the steep path, arrived, Yahmose was in consultation with Hori, her father's man of business and affairs, in a little rock chamber next door to the offering chamber of the Tomb.

Hori had a sheet of papyrus spread out on his knees and Yahmose and he were bending over it.

Both Yahmose and Hori smiled at Renisenb when she arrived and she sat down near them in a patch of shade. She had always been very fond of her brother Yahmose. He was gentle and affectionate to her and had a mild and kindly disposition. Hori, too, had always been gravely kind to the small Renisenb and had sometimes mended her toys for her. He had been a grave, silent young man when she went away, with sensitive, clever fingers. Renisenb thought that though he looked older he had changed hardly at all. The grave smile he gave her was just the same as she remembered.

Yahmose and Hori were murmuring together:

“Seventy-three bushels of barley with Ipi the younger. . . .”

“The total then is two hundred and thirty of spelt and one hundred and twenty of barley.”

“Yes, but there is the price of the timber, and the crop was paid for in oil at Perhaa. . . .”

Their talk went on. Renisenb sat drowsily content with the men’s murmuring voices as a background. Presently Yahmose got up and went away, handing back the roll of papyrus to Hori.

Renisenb sat on in a companionable silence.

Presently she touched a roll of papyrus and asked: “Is that from my father?”

Hori nodded.

“What does he say?” she asked curiously.

She unrolled it and stared at those marks that were meaningless to her untutored eyes.

Smiling a little, Hori leaned over her shoulder and traced with his finger as he read. The letter was couched in the ornate style of the professional letter writer of Heracleopolis.

“The Servant of the Estate, the Ka servant Imhotep says:

“May your condition be like that of one who lives a million times. May the God Herishaf, Lord of Heracleopolis and all the Gods that are aid you. May the God Ptah gladden your heart as one who lives long. The son speaks to his mother, the Ka servant to his mother Esa. How are you in your life, safety and health? To the whole

household, how are you? To my son Yahmose, how are you in your life, safety and health? Make the most of my land. Strive to the uttermost, dig the ground with your noses in the work. See, if you are industrious I will praise God for you—”

Renisenb laughed.

“Poor Yahmose! He works hard enough, I am sure.”

Her father’s exhortations had brought him vividly before her eyes—his pompous, slightly fussy manner, his continual exhortations and instructions.

Hori went on:

“Take great care of my son Ipy. I hear he is discontented. Also see that Satipy treats Henet well. Mind this. Do not fail to write about the flax and the oil. Guard the produce of my grain—guard everything of mine, for I shall hold you responsible. If my land floods, woe to you and Sobek.”

“My father is just the same,” said Renisenb happily. “Always thinking that nothing can be done right if he is not here.”

She let the roll of papyrus slip and added softly:

“Everything is just the same. . . .”

Hori did not answer.

He took up a sheet of papyrus and began to write. Renisenb watched him lazily for some time. She felt too contented to speak.

By and by she said dreamily:

“It would be interesting to know how to write on papyrus. Why doesn’t everyone learn?”

“It is not necessary.”

“Not necessary, perhaps, but it would be pleasant.”

“You think so, Renisenb? What difference would it make to you?”

Renisenb slowly considered for a moment or two. Then she said slowly:

“When you ask me like that, truly I do not know, Hori.”

Hori said, “At present a few scribes are all that are needed on a large estate, but the day will come, I fancy, when there will be armies of scribes all over Egypt.”

“That will be a good thing,” said Renisenb.

Hori said slowly: “I am not so sure.”

“Why are you not sure?”

“Because, Renisenb, it is so easy and it costs so little labour to write down ten bushels of barley, or a hundred head of cattle, or ten fields of spelt—and the thing that is written will come to seem like the real thing, and so the writer and the scribe will come to despise the man who ploughs the fields and reaps the barley and raises the cattle—but all the same the fields and the cattle are real—they are not just marks of ink on papyrus. And when all the records and all

the papyrus rolls are destroyed and the scribes are scattered, the men who toil and reap will go on, and Egypt will still live.”

Renisenb looked at him attentively. She said slowly: “Yes, I see what you mean. Only the things that you can see and touch and eat are real . . . To write down ‘I have two hundred and forty bushels of barley’ means nothing unless you have the barley. One could write down lies.”

Hori smiled at her serious face. Renisenb said suddenly: “You mended my lion for me—long ago, do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember, Renisenb.”

“Teti is playing with it now . . . It is the same lion.”

She paused and then said simply:

“When Khay went to Osiris I was very sad. But now I have come home and I shall be happy again and forget—for everything here is the same. Nothing is changed at all.”

“You really think that?”

Renisenb looked at him sharply.

“What do you mean, Hori?”

“I mean there is always change. Eight years is eight years.”

“Nothing changes here,” said Renisenb with confidence.

“Perhaps then, there should be change.”

Renisenb said sharply:

“No, no, I want everything the same!”

“But you yourself are not the same Renisenb who went away with Khay.”

“Yes I am! Or if not, then I soon shall be again.”

Hori shook his head.

“You cannot go back, Renisenb. It is like my measures here. I take half and add to it a quarter, and then a tenth and then a twenty-fourth—and at the end, you see, it is a different quantity altogether.”

“But I am just Renisenb.”

“But Renisenb has something added to her all the time, so she becomes all the time a different Renisenb!”

“No, no. You are the same Hori.”

“You may think so, but it is not so.”

“Yes, yes, and Yahmose is the same, so worried and so anxious, and Satipy bullies him just the same, and she and Kait were having their usual quarrel about mats or beads, and presently when I go back they will be laughing together, the best of friends, and Henet still creeps about and listens and whines about her devotion, and my grandmother was fussing with her little maid over some linen! It was all the same, and presently my father will come home and there will be a great fuss, and he will say ‘why have you not done

this?’ and ‘you should have done that,’ and Yahmose will look worried and Sobek will laugh and be insolent about it, and my father will spoil Ipy who is sixteen just as he used to spoil him when he was eight, and nothing will be different at all!” She paused, breathless.

Hori sighed. Then he said gently:

“You do not understand, Renisenb. There is an evil that comes from outside, that attacks so that all the world can see, but there is another kind of rottenness that breeds from within—that shows no outward sign. It grows slowly, day by day, till at last the whole fruit is rotten—eaten away by disease.”

Renisenb stared at him. He had spoken almost absently, not as though he were speaking to her, but more like a man who muses to himself.

She cried out sharply:

“What do you mean, Hori? You make me afraid.”

“I am afraid myself.”

“But what do you mean? What is this evil you talk about?”

He looked at her then, and suddenly smiled.

“Forget what I said, Renisenb. I was thinking of the diseases that attack the crops.”

Renisenb sighed in relief.

“I’m glad. I thought—I don’t know what I thought.”

Two

THIRD MONTH OF INUNDATION 4TH DAY

Satipy was talking to Yahmose. Her voice had a high strident note that seldom varied its tone.

“You must assert yourself. That is what I say! You will never be valued unless you assert yourself. Your father says this must be done and that must be done and why have you not done the others? And you listen meekly and reply yes, yes, and excuse yourself for the things that he says should have been done—and which, the Gods know, have often been quite impossible! Your father treats you as a child—as a young, irresponsible boy! You might be the age of Ipy.”

Yahmose said quietly:

“My father does not treat me in the least as he treats Ipy.”

“No indeed.” Satipy fell upon the new subject with renewed venom. “He is foolish about that spoiled brat! Day by day Ipy gets more impossible. He swaggers round and does no work that he can help and pretends that anything that is asked of him is too hard for him! It is a disgrace. And all because he knows that your father will always indulge him and take his part. You and Sobek should take a strong line about it.”

Yahmose shrugged his shoulders.

“What is the good?”

“You drive me mad, Yahmose—that is so like you! You have no spirit. You’re as meek as a woman! Everything that your father says you agree with at once!”

“I have a great affection for my father.”

“Yes, and he trades on that! You go on meekly accepting blame and excusing yourself for things that are no fault of yours! You should speak up and answer him back as Sobek does. Sobek is afraid of nobody!”

“Yes, but remember, Satipy, that it is I who am trusted by my father, not Sobek. My father reposes no confidence in Sobek. Everything is always left to my judgement, not his.”

“And that is why you should be definitely associated as a partner in the estate! You represent your father when he is away, you act as ka-priest in his absence, everything is left in your hands—and yet you have no recognized authority. There should be a proper settlement. You are now a man of nearly middle age. It’s not right that you should be treated still as a child.”

Yahmose said doubtfully:

“My father likes to keep things in his own hands.”

“Exactly. It pleases him that everyone in the household should be dependent upon him—and upon his whim of the moment. It is bad, that, and it will get worse. This time when he comes home you must tackle him boldly—you must say that you demand a

settlement in writing, that you insist on having a regularized position.”

“He would not listen.”

“Then you must make him listen. Oh that I were a man! If I were in your place I would know what to do! Sometimes I feel that I am married to a worm.”

Yahmose flushed.

“I will see what I can do—I might, yes, I might perhaps speak to my father—ask him—”

“Not ask—you must demand! After all, you have the whip-hand of him. There is no one but you whom he can leave in charge here. Sobek is too wild, your father does not trust him, and Ipy is too young.”

“There is always Hori.”

“Hori is not a member of the family. Your father relies on his judgement, but he would not leave authority except in the hands of his own kin. But I see how it is; you are too meek and mild—and there is milk in your veins, not blood! You don’t consider me, or our children. Not till your father is dead shall we ever have our proper position.”

Yahmose said heavily:

“You despise me, don’t you, Satipy?”

“You make me angry.”

“Listen, I tell you that I will speak to my father when he comes. There, it is a promise.”

Satipy murmured under her breath:

“Yes—but how will you speak? Like a man—or like a mouse?”

II

Kait was playing with her youngest child, little Ankh. The baby was just beginning to walk and Kait encouraged her with laughing words, kneeling in front of her and waiting with outstretched arms until the child lurched precariously forward and toddled on uncertain feet into her mother’s arms.

Kait had been displaying these accomplishments to Sobek, but she realized suddenly that he was not attending, but was sitting with his handsome forehead furrowed into a frown.

“Oh, Sobek—you were not looking. You do not see. Little one, tell your father he is naughty not to watch you.”

Sobek said irritably:

“I have other things to think of—yes, and worry about.”

Kait leaned back on her heels, smoothing her hair back from her heavy dark brows where Ankh’s fingers had clutched it.

“Why? Is there something wrong?”

Kait spoke without quite giving all her attention. The question was more than half mechanical.

Sobek said angrily:

“The trouble is that I am not trusted. My father is an old man, absurdly old-fashioned in his ideas, and he insists on dictating every single action here—he will not leave things to my judgement.”

Kait shook her head and murmured vaguely:

“Yes, yes, it is too bad.”

“If only Yahmose had a little more spirit and would back me up there might be some hope of making my father see reason. But Yahmose is so timid. He carries out every single instruction my father gives him to the letter.”

Kait jingled some beads at the child and murmured:

“Yes, that is true.”

“In this matter of the timber I shall tell my father when he comes that I used my judgement. It was far better to take the price in flax and not in oil.”

“I am sure you are right.”

“But my father is as obstinate over having his own way as anyone can be. He will make an outcry, will shout out, ‘I told you to transact the business in oil. Everything is done wrong when I am not here. You are a foolish boy who knows nothing!’ How old does he think I am? He doesn’t realize that I am now a man in my prime and he is past his. His instructions and his refusals to sanction any unusual transactions mean that we do not do nearly as good

business as we might do. To attain riches it is necessary to take a few risks. I have vision and courage. My father has neither.”

Her eyes on the child, Kait murmured softly:

“You are so bold and so clever, Sobek.”

“But he shall hear some truths this time if he dares to find fault and shout abuse at me! Unless I am given a free hand I shall leave. I shall go away.”

Kait, her hand stretched out to the child, turned her head sharply, the gesture arrested.

“Go away? Where would you go?”

“Somewhere! It is insupportable to be bullied and nagged at by a fussy, self-important old man who gives me no scope at all to show what I can do.”

“No,” said Kait sharply. “I say no, Sobek.”

He stared at her, recalled by her tone into noticing her presence. He was so used to her as a merely soothing accompaniment to his talks that he often forgot her existence as a living, thinking, human woman.

“What do you mean, Kait?”

“I mean that I will not let you be foolish. All the estate belongs to your father, the lands, the cultivation, the cattle, the timber, the fields of flax—all! When your father dies it will be ours—yours and Yahmose’s and our children’s. If you quarrel with your father

and go off, then he may divide your share between Yahmose and Ipy—already he loves Ipy too much. Ipy knows that and trades on it. You must not play into the hands of Ipy. It would suit him only too well if you were to quarrel with Imhotep and go away. We have our children to think of.”

Sobek stared at her. Then he gave a short surprised laugh.

“A woman is always unexpected. I did not know you had it in you, Kait, to be so fierce.”

Kait said earnestly:

“Do not quarrel with your father. Do not answer him back. Be wise for a little longer.”

“Perhaps you are right—but this may go on for years. What my father should do is to associate us with him in a partnership.”

Kait shook her head.

“He will not do that. He likes too much to say that we are all eating his bread, that we are all dependent on him, that without him we should all be nowhere.”

Sobek looked at her curiously.

“You do not like my father very much, Kait.”

But Kait had bent once more to the toddling baby.

“Come, sweetheart—see, here is your doll. Come, then—come. . .
.”

Sobek looked down at her black bent head. Then, with a puzzled look, he went out.

III

Esa had sent for her grandson Ipy.

The boy, a handsome, discontented-looking stripling, was standing before her whilst she rated him in a high shrill voice, peering at him out of her dim eyes that were shrewd although they could now see little.

“What is this I hear? You will not do this, and you will not do that? You want to look after the bulls, and you do not like going with Yahmose or seeing to the cultivating? What are things coming to when a child like you says what he will or will not do?”

Ipy said sullenly:

“I am not a child. I am grown now—and why should I be treated as a child? Put to this work or that with no say of my own and no separate allowance. Given orders all the time by Yahmose. Who does Yahmose think he is?”

“He is your older brother and he is in charge here when my son Imhotep is away.”

“Yahmose is stupid, slow and stupid. I am much cleverer than he is. And Sobek is stupid too for all that he boasts and talks about how clever he is! Already my father has written and has said that I am to do the work that I myself choose—”

“Which is none at all,” interpolated old Esa.

“And that I am to be given more food and drink, and that if he hears I am discontented and have not been well treated he will be very angry.”

He smiled as he spoke, a sly upcurving smile.

“You are a spoiled brat,” said Esa with energy. “And I shall tell Imhotep so.”

“No, no, grandmother, you would not do that.”

His smile changed, it became caressing if slightly impudent.

“You and I, grandmother, we have the brains of the family.”

“The impudence of you!”

“My father relies on your judgement—he knows you are wise.”

“That may be—indeed it is so—but I do not need you to tell me so.”

Ipy laughed.

“You had better be on my side, grandmother.”

“What is this talk of sides?”

“The big brothers are very discontented, don’t you know that? Of course you do. Henet tells you everything. Satipy harangues Yahmose all day and all night whenever she can get hold of him. And Sobek has made a fool of himself over the sale of the timber and is afraid my father will be furious when he finds out. You see,

grandmother, in another year or two I shall be associated with my father and he will do everything that I wish.”

“You, the youngest of the family?”

“What does age matter? My father is the one that has the power—and I am the one who knows how to manage my father!”

“This is evil talk,” said Esa.

Ipy said softly: “You are not a fool, grandmother . . . You know quite well that my father, in spite of all his big talk, is really a weak man—”

He stopped abruptly, noting that Esa had shifted her head and was peering over his shoulder. He turned his own head, to find Henet standing close behind him.

“So Imhotep is a weak man?” said Henet in her soft whining voice. “He will not be pleased, I think, to hear that you have said that of him.”

Ipy gave a quick uneasy laugh.

“But you will not tell him, Henet . . . Come now, Henet—promise me . . . Dear Henet. . . .”

Henet glided towards Esa. She raised her voice with its slightly whining note.

“Of course, I never want to make trouble—you know that . . . I am devoted to all of you. I never repeat anything unless I think it is my duty. . . .”

“I was teasing grandmother, that was all,” said Ipy. “I shall tell my father so. He will know I could not have said such a thing seriously.”

He gave Henet a short, sharp nod and went out of the room.

Henet looked after him and said to Esa:

“A fine boy—a fine, well-grown boy. And how bravely he speaks!”

Esa said sharply:

“He speaks dangerously. I do not like the ideas he has in his head. My son indulges him too much.”

“Who would not? He is such a handsome, attractive boy.”

“Handsome is as handsome does,” said Esa sharply.

She was silent a moment or two, then she said slowly: “Henet—I am worried.”

“Worried, Esa? What would worry you? Anyway, the master will soon be here and then all will be well.”

“Will it? I wonder.”

She was silent once more, then she said:

“Is my grandson Yahmose in the house?”

“I saw him coming towards the porch a few moments ago.”

“Go and tell him I wish to speak with him.”

Henet departed. She found Yahmose on the cool porch with its gaily coloured columns and gave him Esa's message.

Yahmose obeyed the summons at once.

Esa said abruptly:

"Yahmose, very soon Imhotep will be here."

Yahmose's gentle face lighted up.

"Yes, that will indeed be good."

"All is in order for him? Affairs have prospered?"

"My father's instructions have been carried out as well as I could compass them."

"What of Ipy?"

Yahmose sighed.

"My father is over indulgent where that boy is concerned. It is not good for the lad."

"You must make that clear to Imhotep."

Yahmose looked doubtful.

Esa said firmly: "I will back you up."

"Sometimes," said Yahmose, sighing, "there seems to be nothing but difficulties. But everything will be right when my father comes. He can make his own decisions then. It is hard to act as he would

wish in his absence—especially when I have no authority, and only act as his delegate.”

Esa said slowly:

“You are a good son—loyal and affectionate. You have been a good husband too, you have obeyed the proverb that says that a man should love his wife and make a home for her, that he should fill her belly and put clothes on her back, and provide expensive ointments for her toilet and that he should gladden her heart as long as she lives. But there is a further precept—it goes like this: Prevent her from getting the mastery. If I were you, grandson, I should take that precept to heart. . . .”

Yahmose looked at her, flushed deeply and turned away.

Three

THIRD MONTH OF INUNDATION 14TH DAY

Everywhere there was bustle and preparation. Hundreds of loaves had been baked in the kitchen, now ducks were roasting; there was a smell of leeks and garlic and various spices. Women were shouting and giving orders, serving men ran to and fro.

Everywhere ran the murmur:

“The master—the master is coming. . . .”

Renisenb, helping to weave garlands of poppies and lotus flowers, felt an excited happiness bubbling up in her heart. Her father was coming home! In the last few weeks she had slipped imperceptibly back into the confines of her old life. That first sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness, induced in her, she believed, by Hori's words, had gone. She was the same Renisenb—Yahmose, Satipy, Sobek and Kait were all the same—now, as in the past, there was all the bustle and fuss of preparations for Imbotep's return. Word had come ahead that he would be with them before nightfall. One of the servants had been posted on the river bank to give warning of the master's approach, and suddenly his voice rang out loud and clear giving the agreed call.

Renisenb dropped her flowers and ran out with the others. They all hastened towards the mooring place on the River bank. Yahmose and Sobek were already there in a little crowd of villagers,

fishermen and farm labourers, all calling out excitedly and pointing.

Yes, there was the barge with its great square sail coming fast up the river with the North wind bellying out the sail. Close behind it was the kitchen barge crowded with men and women. Presently Renisenb could make out her father sitting holding a lotus flower and with him someone whom she took to be a singer.

The cries on the bank redoubled, Imhotep waved a welcoming hand, the sailors were heaving and pulling on the halyards. There were cries of “Welcome to the master,” calls upon the Gods, and thanks for his safe return, and a few moments later Imhotep came ashore, greeting his family and answering the loud salutations that etiquette demanded.

“Praise be to Sobek, the child of Neith, who has brought you safely on the water!” “Praise be to Ptah, south of the Memphite wall, who brings you to us! Thanks be to Ré who illumines the Two Lands!”

Renisenb pressed forward, intoxicated with the general excitement.

Imhotep drew himself up importantly and suddenly Renisenb thought: “But he is a small man. I thought of him as much bigger than that.”

A feeling that was almost dismay passed over her.

Had her father shrunk? Or was her own memory at fault? She thought of him as rather a splendid being, tyrannical, often fussy, exhorting everybody right and left, and sometimes provoking her to quiet inward laughter, but nevertheless a personage. But this small, stout, elderly man, looking so full of his own importance and yet

somehow failing to impress—what was wrong with her? What were these disloyal thoughts that came into her head?

Imhotep, having finished the sonorous and ceremonial phrases, had arrived at the stage of more personal greetings. He embraced his sons.

“Ah, my good Yahmose, all smiles, you have been diligent in my absence, I am sure . . . And Sobek, my handsome son, still given to merriness of heart, I see. And here is Ipy—my dearest Ipy—let me look at you—stand away—so. Grown bigger, more of a man, how it rejoices my heart to hold you again! And Renisenb—my dear daughter—once more in the home. Satipy, Kait, my no less dear daughters . . . And Henet—my faithful Henet—”

Henet was kneeling, embracing his knees, and ostentatiously wiping tears of joy from her eyes.

“It is good to see you, Henet—you are well—happy? As devoted as ever—that is pleasant to the heart. . . .

“And my excellent Hori, so clever with his accounts and his pen! All has prospered? I am sure it has.”

Then, the greetings finished and the surrounding murmur dying down, Imhotep raised his hand for silence and spoke out loud and clear.

“My sons and daughters—friends. I have a piece of news for you. For many years, as you all know, I have been a lonely man in one respect. My wife (your mother, Yahmose and Sobek) and my sister (your mother, Ipy) have both gone to Osiris many years ago. So to you, Satipy and Kait, I bring a new sister to share your home.

Behold, this is my concubine, Nofret, whom you shall love for my sake. She has come with me from Memphis in the North and will dwell here with you when I go away again.”

As he spoke he drew forward a woman by the hand. She stood there beside him, her head flung back, her eyes narrowed, young, arrogant and beautiful.

Renisenb thought, with a shock of surprise: “But she’s quite young—perhaps not as old as I am.”

Nofret stood quite still. There was a faint smile on her lips—it had more derision in it than any anxiety to please.

She had very straight black brows and a rich bronze skin, and her eyelashes were so long and thick that one could hardly see her eyes.

The family, taken aback, stared in dumb silence. With a faint edge of irritation in his voice, Imhotep said:

“Come now, children, welcome Nofret. Don’t you know how to greet your father’s concubine when he brings her to his house?”

Haltingly and stumblingly the greetings were given.

Imhotep, affecting a heartiness that perhaps concealed some uneasiness, exclaimed cheerfully:

“That’s better! Nofret, Satipy and Kait and Renisenb will take you to the women’s quarters. Where are the trunks? Have the trunks been brought ashore?”

The round-topped travelling trunks were being carried from the barge. Imhotep said to Nofret:

“Your jewels and your clothes are here safely. Go and see to their bestowing.”

Then, as the women moved away together, he turned to his sons.

“And what of the estate? Does all go well?”

“The lower fields that were rented to Nakht—” began Yahmose, but his father cut him short.

“No details now, good Yahmose. They can wait. Tonight is rejoicing. Tomorrow you and I and Hori here will get to business. Come, Ipy, my boy, let us walk to the house. How tall you have grown—your head is above mine.”

Scowling, Sobek walked behind his father and Ipy. Into Yahmose’s ear he murmured:

“Jewels and clothes—did you hear? That is where the profits of the Northern estates have gone. Our profits.”

“Hush,” whispered Yahmose. “Our father will hear.”

“What if he does? I am not afraid of him as you are.”

Once in the house, Henet came to Imhotep’s room to prepare the bath. She was all smiles.

Imhotep abandoned a little of his defensive heartiness.

“Well, Henet, and what do you think of my choice?”

Although he had determined to carry things off with a high hand, he had known quite well that the arrival of Nofret would provoke a storm—at least in the women’s part of the house. Henet was different. A singularly devoted creature. She did not disappoint him.

“She is beautiful! Quite beautiful! What hair, what limbs! She is worthy of you, Imhotep, what can I say more than that? Your dear wife who is dead will be glad that you have chosen such a companion to gladden your days.”

“You think so, Henet?”

“I am sure of it, Imhotep. After mourning her so many years it is time that you once more enjoyed life.”

“You knew her well . . . I, too, felt it was time to live as a man should live. Er ahem—my sons’ wives and my daughter—they will take this with resentment perhaps?”

“They had better not,” said Henet. “After all, do they not all depend upon you in this house?”

“Very true, very true,” said Imhotep.

“Your bounty feeds and clothes them—their welfare is entirely the result of your efforts.”

“Yes, indeed.” Imhotep sighed. “I am continually active on their behalf. I sometimes doubt if they realize all they owe to me.”

“You must remind them of it,” said Henet, nodding her head. “I, your humble devoted Henet, never forget what I owe you—but

children are sometimes thoughtless and selfish, thinking, perhaps, that it is they who are important and not realizing that they only carry out the instructions that you give.”

“That is indeed most true,” said Imhotep. “I have always said you were an intelligent creature, Henet.”

Henet sighed. “If others only thought so.”

“What is this? Has anyone been unkind to you?”

“No, no—that is, they do not mean it—it is a matter of course to them that I should work unceasingly (which I am glad to do)—but a word of affection and appreciation, that is what makes all the difference.”

“That you will always have from me,” said Imhotep. “And this is always your home, remember.”

“You are too kind, master.” She paused and added: “The slaves are ready in the bathroom with the hot water—and when you have bathed and dressed, your mother asks that you should go to her.”

“Ah, my mother? Yes—yes, of course. . . .”

Imhotep looked suddenly slightly embarrassed. He covered his confusion by saying quickly:

“Naturally—I had intended that—tell Esa I shall come.”

Esa, dressed in her best pleated linen gown, peered across at her son with a kind of sardonic amusement.

“Welcome, Imhotep. So you have returned to us—and not alone, I hear.”

Imhotep, drawing himself up, replied rather shame-facedly:

“Oh, so you have heard?”

“Naturally. The house is humming with the news. The girl is beautiful, they say, and quite young.”

“She is nineteen and—er—not ill looking.”

Esa laughed—an old woman’s spiteful cackle.

“Ah, well,” she said, “there’s no fool like an old fool.”

“My dear mother. I am really at a loss to understand what you mean.”

Esa replied composedly:

“You always were a fool, Imhotep.”

Imhotep drew himself up and spluttered angrily. Though usually comfortably conscious of his own importance, his mother could always pierce the armour of his self-esteem. In her presence he felt himself dwindling. The faint sarcastic gleam of her nearly sightless eyes never failed to disconcert him. His mother, there was no denying, had never had an exaggerated opinion of his capabilities. And although he knew well that his own estimate of himself was

the true one and his mother's a maternal idiosyncrasy of no importance—yet her attitude never failed to puncture his happy conceit of himself.

“Is it so unusual for a man to bring home a concubine?”

“Not at all unusual. Men are usually fools.”

“I fail to see where the folly comes in.”

“Do you imagine that the presence of this girl is going to make for harmony in the household? Satipy and Kait will be beside themselves and will inflame their husbands.”

“What has it to do with them? What right have they to object?”

“None.”

Imhotep began to walk up and down angrily.

“Can I not do as I please in my own house? Do I not support my sons and their wives? Do they not owe the very bread they eat to me? Do I not tell them so without ceasing?”

“You are too fond of saying so, Imhotep.”

“It is the truth. They all depend on me. All of them!”

“And are you sure that this is a good thing?”

“Are you saying that it is not a good thing for a man to support his family?”

Esa sighed.

“They work for you, remember.”

“Do you want me to encourage them in idleness? Naturally they work.”

“They are grown men—at least Yahmose and Sobek are—more than grown.”

“Sobek has no judgement. He does everything wrong. Also he is frequently impertinent which I will not tolerate. Yahmose is a good obedient boy—”

“A good deal more than a boy!”

“But sometimes I have to tell him things two or three times before he takes them in. I have to think of everything—be everywhere! All the time I am away, I am dictating to scribes—writing full instructions so that my sons can carry them out . . . I hardly rest—I hardly sleep! And now when I come home, having earned a little peace, there is to be fresh difficulty! Even you, my mother, deny my right to have a concubine like other men—you are angry—”

Esa interrupted him.

“I am not angry. I am amused. There will be good sport to watch in the household—but I say all the same that when you go North again you had best take the girl with you.”

“Her place is here, in my household! And woe to any who dare ill-treat her.”

“It is not a question of ill-treatment. But remember, it is easy to kindle a fire in dry stubble. It has been said of women that ‘the

place where they are is not good. . . .’ ”

Esa paused and said slowly:

“Nofret is beautiful. But remember this: Men are made fools by the gleaming limbs of women, and lo, in a minute they are become discoloured cornelians. . . .”

Her voice deepened as she quoted:

“A trifle, a little, the likeness of a dream, and death comes as the end . . .”

Four

THIRD MONTH OF INUNDATION 15TH DAY

Imhotep listened to Sobek's explanation of the sale of the timber in ominous silence. His face had grown very red and a small pulse was beating in his temple.

Sobek's air of easy nonchalance wore a little thin. He had intended to carry things off with a high hand, but in the face of his father's gathering frowns, he found himself stammering and hesitating.

Imhotep finally cut him short impatiently.

"Yes, yes, yes—you thought that you knew more than I did—you departed from my instructions—it is always the same—unless I am here to see to everything . . ." He sighed. "What would become of you boys without me I cannot imagine!"

Sobek went on doggedly:

"There was a chance of making a much bigger profit—I took the risk. One cannot always be pettifogging and cautious!"

"There is nothing cautious about you, Sobek! You are rash and much too bold and your judgement is always wrong."

"Do I ever have a chance to exercise my judgement?"

Imhotep said drily:

“You have done so this time—and against my express orders—”

“Orders? Have I always got to take orders? I am a grown man.”

Losing control of his temper, Imhotep shouted:

“Who feeds you, who clothes you? Who thinks of the future? Who has your welfare—the welfare of all of you—constantly in mind? When the River was low and we were threatened with famine, did I not arrange for food to be sent south to you? You are lucky to have such a father—who thinks of everything! And what do I ask in return? Only that you should work hard, do your best, and obey the instructions I send you—”

“Yes,” shouted Sobek. “We are to work for you like slaves—so that you can buy gold and jewels for your concubine!”

Imhotep advanced towards him, bristling with rage.

“Insolent boy—to speak like that to your father. Be careful or I will say that this is no longer your home—and you can go elsewhere!”

“And if you are not careful I will go! I have ideas, I tell you—good ideas—that would bring in wealth if I was not tied down by pettifogging caution and never allowed to act as I choose.”

“Have you finished?”

Imhotep’s tone was ominous. Sobek, a trifle deflated, muttered angrily:

“Yes—yes—I have no more to say—now.”

“Then go and see after the cattle. This is no time for idling.”

Sobek turned and strode angrily away. Nofret was standing not far away and as he passed her she looked sideways at him and laughed. At her laugh the blood came up in Sobek’s face—he made an angry half step towards her. She stood quite still, looking at him out of contemptuous half-closed eyes.

Sobek muttered something and resumed his former direction. Nofret laughed again, then walked slowly on to where Imhotep was now turning his attention to Yahmose.

“What possessed you to let Sobek act in that foolish fashion?” he demanded irritably. “You should have prevented it! Don’t you know by now that he has no judgement in buying and selling? He thinks everything will turn out as he wants it to turn out.”

Yahmose said apologetically:

“You do not realize my difficulties, father. You told me to entrust Sobek with the sale of the timber. It was necessary therefore that it should be left to him to use his judgement.”

“Judgement? Judgement? He has no judgement! He is to do what I instruct him to do—and it is for you to see that he does exactly that.”

Yahmose flushed.

“I? What authority have I?”

“What authority? The authority I give you.”

“But I have no real status. If I were legally associated with you—”

He broke off as Nofret came up. She was yawning and twisting a scarlet poppy in her hands.

“Won’t you come to the little pavilion by the lake, Imhotep? It is cool there and there is fruit waiting for you and Keda beer. Surely you have finished giving your orders by now.”

“In a minute, Nofret—in a minute.”

Nofret said in a soft, deep voice:

“Come now. I want you to come now. . . .”

Imhotep looked pleased and a little sheepish. Yahmose said quickly before his father could speak.

“Let us just speak of this first. It is important. I want to ask you—”

Nofret spoke directly to Imhotep, turning her shoulder on Yahmose:

“Can you not do what you want in your own house?”

Imhotep said sharply to Yahmose:

“Another time, my son. Another time.”

He went with Nofret and Yahmose stood on the porch looking after them.

Satipy came out from the house and joined him.

“Well,” she demanded eagerly, “have you spoken to him? What did he say?”

Yahmose sighed.

“Do not be so impatient, Satipy. The time was not—propitious.”

Satipy gave an angry exclamation.

“Oh yes—that is what you would say! That is what you will always say. The truth is you are afraid of your father—you are as timid as a sheep—you bleat at him—you will not stand up to him like a man! Do you not recall the things you promised me? I tell you I am the better man of us two! You promise—you say: ‘I will ask my father—at once—the very first day.’ And what happens—”

Satipy paused—for breath, not because she had finished—but Yahmose cut in mildly:

“You are wrong, Satipy. I began to speak—but we were interrupted.”

“Interrupted? By whom?”

“By Nofret.”

“Nofret! That woman! Your father should not let his concubine interrupt when he is speaking of business to his eldest son. Women should not concern themselves with business.”

Possibly Yahmose wished that Satipy herself would live up to the maxim she was enunciating so glibly, but he was given no opportunity to speak. His wife swept on:

“Your father should have made that clear to her at once.”

“My father,” said Yahmose drily, “showed no signs of displeasure.”

“It is disgraceful,” Satipy declared. “Your father is completely bewitched by her. He lets her say and do as she pleases.”

Yahmose said thoughtfully:

“She is very beautiful. . . .”

Satipy snorted.

“Oh, she has looks of a kind. But no manners! No upbringing! She does not care how rude she is to all of us.”

“Perhaps you are rude to her?”

“I am the soul of politeness. Kait and I treat her with every courtesy. Oh, she shall have nothing of which to go complaining to your father. We can wait our time, Kait and I.”

Yahmose looked up sharply.

“How do you mean—wait your time?”

Satipy laughed meaningfully as she moved away.

“My meaning is woman’s meaning—you would not understand. We have our ways—and our weapons! Nofret would do well to moderate her insolence. What does a woman’s life come to in the end, after all? It is spent in the back of the house—amongst the other women.”

There was a peculiar significance in Satipy's tone. She added:

"Your father will not always be here . . . He will go away again to his estates in the North. And then—we shall see."

"Satipy—"

Satipy laughed—a hard-sounding, high laugh, and went back into the house.

II

By the lake the children were running about and playing. Yahmose's two boys were fine, handsome little fellows, looking more like Satipy than like their father. Then there were Sobek's three—the youngest a mere toddling baby. And there was Teti, a grave, handsome child of four years old.

They laughed and shouted, threw balls—occasionally a dispute broke out and a childish wail of anger rose high and shrill.

Sitting sipping his beer, with Nofret beside him, Imhotep murmured: "How fond children are of playing by water. It was always so, I remember. But, by Hathor, what a noise they make!"

Nofret said quickly:

"Yes—and it could be so peaceful . . . Why do you not tell them to go away whilst you are here? After all when the master of the house wants relaxation a proper respect should be shown. Don't you agree?"

“I—well—” Imhotep hesitated. The idea was new to him but pleasing. “I do not really mind them,” he finished, doubtfully.

He added rather weakly:

“They are accustomed to play here always as they please.”

“When you are away, yes,” said Nofret quickly. “But I think, Imhotep, considering all that you do for your family, they should show more sense of your dignity—of your importance. You are too gentle—too easy-going.”

Imhotep sighed placidly.

“It has always been my failing. I never insist on the outward forms.”

“And therefore these women, your son’s wives, take advantage of your kindness. It should be understood that when you come here for repose, there must be silence and tranquillity. See, I will go and tell Kait to take her children away and the others too. Then you shall have peace and contentment here.”

“You are a thoughtful girl, Nofret—yes, a good girl. You are always thinking of my comfort.”

Nofret murmured: “Your pleasure is mine.”

She got up and went to where Kait was kneeling by the water playing with a little model barge which her second child, a rather spoilt-looking-boy, was trying to float.

Nofret said curtly:

“Will you take the children away, Kait?”

Kait stared up at her uncomprehendingly.

“Away? What do you mean? This is where they always play.”

“Not today. Imhotep wants peace. These children of yours are noisy.”

Colour flamed into Kait’s heavy face.

“You should mend your ways of speech, Nofret! Imhotep likes to see his sons’ children playing here. He has said so.”

“Not today,” said Nofret. “He has sent me to tell you to take the whole noisy brood into the house, so that he can sit in peace—with me.”

“With you . . .” Kait stopped abruptly in what she had been about to say. Then she got up and walked to where Imhotep was half-sitting, half-lying. Nofret followed her.

Kait spoke without circumlocution.

“Your concubine says I am to take the children away from here? Why? What are they doing that is wrong? For what reason should they be banished?”

“I should have thought the wish of the master of the house was enough,” said Nofret softly.

“Exactly—exactly,” said Imhotep pettishly. “Why should I have to give reasons: Whose house is this?”

“I suppose it is she who wants them away.” Kait turned and looked Nofret up and down.

“Nofret thinks of my comfort—of my enjoyment,” said Imhotep. “No one else in this house ever considers it—except perhaps poor Henet.”

“So the children are not to play here any more?”

“Not when I have come here to rest.”

Kait’s anger flamed forth suddenly:

“Why do you let this woman turn you against your own blood? Why should she come and interfere with the ways of the house? With what has always been done.”

Imhotep suddenly began to shout. He felt a need to vindicate himself.

“It is I who say what is to be done here—not you! You are all in league to do as you choose—to arrange everything to suit yourselves. And when I, the master of the house, come home, no proper attention is paid to my wishes. But I am master here, let me tell you! I am constantly planning and working for your welfare—but am I given gratitude, are my wishes respected? No. First, Sobek is insolent and disrespectful, and now you, Kait, try to browbeat me! What am I supporting you all for? Take care—or I shall cease to support you. Sobek talks of going—then let him go and take you and your children with him.”

For a moment Kait stood perfectly still. There was no expression at all on her heavy, rather vacant face. Then she said in a voice from

which all emotion had been eliminated:

“I will take the children into the house. . . .”

She moved a step or two, pausing by Nofret. In a low voice Kait said:

“This is your doing, Nofret. I shall not forget. No, I shall not forget. . . .”

Five

FOURTH MONTH OF INUNDATION 5TH DAY

Imhotep breathed a sigh of satisfaction as he finished his ceremonial duties as Mortuary Priest. The ritual had been observed with meticulous detail—for Imhotep was in every respect a most conscientious man. He had poured the libations, burnt incense, and offered the customary offerings of food and drink.

Now, in the cool shade of the adjacent rock chamber where Hori was waiting for him, Imhotep became once more the land-owner and the man of affairs. Together the two men discussed business matters, prevailing prices, and the profits resulting from crops, cattle, and timber.

After half an hour or so, Imhotep nodded his head with satisfaction.

“You have an excellent head for business, Hori,” he said.

The other smiled.

“I should have, Imhotep. I have been your man of affairs for many years now.”

“And a most faithful one. Now, I have a matter to discuss with you. It concerns Ipy. He complains that his position is subordinate.”

“He is still very young.”

“But he shows great ability. He feels that his brothers are not always fair to him. Sobek, it seems, is rough and over-bearing—and Yahmose’s continual caution and timidity irk him. Ipy is high-spirited. He does not like taking orders. Moreover he says that it is only I, his father, who have the right to command.”

“That is true,” said Hori. “And it has struck me, Imhotep, that that is a weakness here on the estate. May I speak freely?”

“Certainly, my good Hori. Your words are always thoughtful and well considered.”

“Then I say this. When you are away, Imhotep, there should be someone here who has real authority.”

“I trust my affairs to you and to Yahmose—”

“I know that we act for you in your absence—but that is not enough. Why not appoint one of your sons as a partner—associate him with you by a legal deed of settlement?”

Imhotep paced up and down frowning.

“Which of my sons do you suggest? Sobek has an authoritative manner—but he is insubordinate—I could not trust him. His disposition is not good.”

“I was thinking of Yahmose. He is your eldest son. He has a gentle and affectionate disposition. He is devoted to you.”

“Yes, he has a good disposition—but he is too timid—too yielding. He gives in to everybody. Now if Ipy were only a little older—”

Hori said quickly:

“It is dangerous to give power to too young a man.”

“True—true—well, Hori, I will think of what you have said. Yahmose is certainly a good son . . . an obedient son. . . .”

Hori said gently but urgently:

“You would, I think, be wise.”

Imhotep looked at him curiously.

“What is in your mind, Hori?”

Hori said slowly:

“I said just now that it is dangerous to give a man power when he is too young. But it is also dangerous to give it to him too late.”

“You mean that he has become too used to obeying orders and not to giving them. Well, perhaps there is something in that.”

Imhotep sighed.

“It is a difficult task to rule a family! The women in particular are hard to manage. Satipy has an ungovernable temper, Kait is often sulky. But I have made it clear to them that Nofret is to be treated in a proper fashion. I think I may say that—”

He broke off. A slave was coming panting up the narrow pathway.

“What is this?”

“Master—a barge is here. A scribe called Kameni has come with a message from Memphis.”

Imhotep got up fussily.

“More trouble,” he exclaimed. “As sure as Ra sails the Heavens this will be more trouble! Unless I am on hand to attend to things everything goes wrong.”

He went stamping down the path and Hori sat quite still looking after him.

There was a troubled expression on his face.

II

Renisenb had been wandering aimlessly along the bank of the Nile when she heard shouts and commotion and saw people running towards the landing stage.

She ran and joined them. In the boat that was pulling to shore stood a young man, and just for a moment, as she saw him outlined against the bright light, her heart missed a beat.

A mad, fantastic thought leapt into her mind.

“It is Khay,” she thought. “Khay returned from the Underworld.”

Then she mocked herself for the superstitious fancy. Because in her own remembrance, she always thought of Khay as sailing on the Nile, and this was indeed a young man of about Khay’s build—she had imagined a fantasy. This man was younger than Khay, with an easy, supple grace, and had a laughing, gay face.

He had come, he told them, from Imhotep's estates in the North. He was a scribe and his name was Kameni.

A slave was despatched for her father and Kameni was taken to the house where food and drink were put before him. Presently her father arrived and there was much consultation and talking.

The gist of it all filtered through into the women's quarters with Henet, as usual, as the purveyor of the news. Renisenb sometimes wondered how it was that Henet always contrived to know all about everything.

Kameni, it seemed, was a young scribe in Imhotep's employ—the son of one of Imhotep's cousins. Kameni had discovered certain fraudulent dispositions—a falsifying of the accounts, and since the matter had many ramifications and involved the stewards of the property, he had thought it best to come South in person and report.

Renisenb was not much interested. It was clever, she thought, of Kameni to have discovered all this. Her father would be pleased with him.

The immediate outcome of the matter was that Imhotep made hurried preparations for departure. He had not meant to leave for another two months, but now the sooner he was on the spot the better.

The whole household was summoned and innumerable exordiums and recommendations were made. This was to be done and that. Yahmose was on no account to do such and such a thing. Sobek was to exercise the utmost discretion over something else. It was all, Renisenb thought, very familiar. Yahmose was attentive, Sobek

was sulky. Hori, as usual, was calm and efficient. Ipy's demands and importunities were put aside with more sharpness than usual.

"You are too young to have a separate allowance. Obey Yahmose. He knows my wishes and commands." Imhotep placed a hand on his eldest son's shoulder. "I trust you, Yahmose. When I return we will speak once more of a partnership."

Yahmose flushed quickly with pleasure. He drew himself a little more erect.

Imhotep went on:

"See only that all goes well in my absence. See to it that my concubine is well treated—and with due honour and respect. She is in your charge. It is for you to control the conduct of the women of the household. See that Satipy curbs her tongue. See also that Sobek duly instructs Kait. Renisenb, also, must act towards Nofret with courtesy. Then I will have no unkindness shown toward our good Henet. The women, I know, find her tiresome sometimes. She has been here long and thinks herself privileged to say many things that are sometimes unwelcome. She has, I know, neither beauty nor wit—but she is faithful, remember, and has always been devoted to my interests. I will not have her despised and abused."

"Everything shall be done as you say," said Yahmose. "But Henet sometimes makes trouble with her tongue."

"Pah! Nonsense! All women do. Not Henet more than another. Now as to Kameni, he shall remain here. We can do with another scribe and he can assist Hori. As for that land that we have rented to the woman Yaii—"

Imhotep went off into meticulous details.

When at last all was ready for the departure Imhotep felt a sudden qualm. He took Nofret aside and said doubtfully:

“Nofret, are you content to remain here? Would it be, perhaps, best if, after all, you came with me?”

Nofret shook her head and smiled.

“You will not be long absent,” she said.

“Three months—perhaps four. Who knows?”

“You see—it will not be long. I shall be content here.”

Imhotep said fussily:

“I have enjoined upon Yahmose—upon all my sons—that you are to have every consideration. On their heads be it if you have anything of which to complain!”

“They will do as you say, I am sure, Imhotep.” Nofret paused. Then she said, “Who is there here whom I can trust absolutely? Someone who is truly devoted to your interests? I do not mean one of the family.”

“Hori—my good Hori? He is in every way my right hand—and a man of good sense and discrimination.”

Nofret said slowly:

“He and Yahmose are like brothers. Perhaps—”

“There is Kameni. He, too, is a scribe. I will enjoin on him to place himself at your service. If you have anything of which to complain, he will write down your words with his pen and despatch the complaint to me.”

Nofret nodded appreciatively.

“That is a good thought. Kameni comes from the North. He knows my father. He will not be influenced by family considerations.”

“And Henet,” exclaimed Imhotep. “There is Henet.”

“Yes,” said Nofret, reflectively. “There is Henet. Suppose that you were to speak to her now—in front of me?”

“An excellent plan.”

Henet was sent for and came with her usual cringing eagerness. She was full of lamentations over Imhotep’s departure. Imhotep cut her short with abruptness.

“Yes, yes, my good Henet—but these things must be. I am a man who can seldom count on any stretch of peace or rest. I must toil ceaselessly for my family—little though they sometimes appreciate it. Now I wish to speak to you very seriously. You love me faithfully and devotedly, I know—I can leave you in a position of trust. Guard Nofret here—she is very dear to me.”

“Whoever is dear to you, master, is dear to me,” Henet declared with fervour.

“Very good. Then you will devote yourself to Nofret’s interests?”

Henet turned towards Nofret who was watching her under lowered lids.

“You are too beautiful, Nofret,” she said. “That is the trouble. That is why the others are jealous—but I will look after you—I will warn you of all they say and do. You can count on me!”

There was a pause whilst the eyes of the two women met.

“You can count on me,” Henet repeated.

A slow smile came to Nofret’s lips—a rather curious smile.

“Yes,” she said. “I understand you, Henet. I think I can count on you.”

Imhotep cleared his throat noisily.

“Then I think all is arranged—yes—everything is satisfactory. Organization—that has always been my strong point.”

There was a dry cackle of laughter and Imhotep turned sharply to see his mother standing in the entrance of the room. She was supporting her weight on a stick and looked more dried up and malevolent than ever.

“What a wonderful son I have!” she observed.

“I must not delay—there are some instructions to Hori—”
Muttering importantly, Imhotep hurried from the room. He managed to avoid meeting his mother’s eye.

Esa gave an imperious nod of the head to Henet—and Henet glided obediently out of the room.

Nofret had risen. She and Esa stood looking at each other. Esa said: “So my son is leaving you behind? You had better go with him, Nofret.”

“He wishes me to stay here.”

Nofret’s voice was soft and submissive. Esa gave a shrill chuckle.

“Little good that would be if you wanted to go! And why do you not want to go? I do not understand you. What is there for you here? You are a girl who has lived in cities—who has perhaps travelled. Why do you choose the monotony of day after day here—amongst those who—I am frank—do not like you—who in fact dislike you?”

“So you dislike me?”

Esa shook her head.

“No—I do not dislike you. I am old and though I can see but dimly—I can still see beauty and enjoy it. You are beautiful, Nofret, and the sight of you pleases my old eyes. Because of your beauty I wish you well. I am warning you. Go North with my son.”

Again Nofret repeated: “He wishes me to stay here.”

The submissive tone was now definitely impregnated with mockery. Esa said sharply:

“You have a purpose in remaining here. What is it, I wonder? Very well, on your own head be it. But be careful. Act discreetly. And trust no one.”

She wheeled abruptly and went out. Nofret stood quite still. Very slowly her lips curved upwards in a wide, catlike smile.

PART TWO
WINTER

Six

FIRST MONTH OF WINTER 4TH DAY

Renisenb had got into the habit of going up to the Tomb almost every day. Sometimes Yahmose and Hori would be there together, sometimes Hori alone, sometimes there would be no one—but always Renisenb was aware of a curious relief and peace—a feeling almost of escape. She liked it best when Hori was there alone. There was something in his gravity, his incurious acceptance of her coming, that gave her a strange feeling of contentment. She would sit in the shade of the rock chamber entrance with one knee raised and her hands clasped round it, and stare out over the green belt of cultivation to where the Nile showed a pale gleaming blue and beyond it to a distance of pale soft fawns and creams and pinks, all melting hazily into each other.

She had come the first time, months ago now, on a sudden wish to escape from a world of intense femininity. She wanted stillness and companionship—and she had found them here. The wish to escape was still with her, but it was no longer a mere revulsion from the stress and fret of domesticity. It was something more definite, more alarming.

She said to Hori one day: “I am afraid. . . .”

“Why are you afraid, Renisenb?” He studied her gravely.

Renisenb took a minute or two to think. Then she said slowly:

“Do you remember saying to me once that there were two evils—one that came from without and one from within?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“You were speaking, so you said afterwards, about diseases that attack fruit and crops, but I have been thinking—it is the same with people.”

Hori nodded slowly.

“So you have found that out . . . Yes, you are right, Renisenb.”

Renisenb said abruptly:

“It is happening now—down there at the house. Evil has come—from outside! And I know who has brought it. It is Nofret.”

Hori said slowly:

“You think so?”

Renisenb nodded vigorously.

“Yes, yes, I know what I am talking about. Listen, Hori, when I came up to you here and said that everything was the same even to Satipy and Kait quarrelling—that was true. But those quarrels, Hori, were not real quarrels. I mean Satipy and Kait enjoyed them—they made the time pass—neither of the women felt any real anger against each other! But now it is different. Now they do not just say things that are rude and unpleasant—they say things that they mean shall hurt—and when they have seen that a thing hurts then they are glad! It is horrid, Hori—horrid! Yesterday Satipy was

so angry that she ran a long gold pin into Kait's arm—and a day or two ago Kait dropped a heavy copper pan full of boiling fat over Satipy's foot. And it is the same everywhere—Satipy rails at Yahmose far into the night—we can all hear her. Yahmose looks sick and tired and hunted. And Sobek goes off to the village and stays there with women and comes back drunk and shouts and boasts and says how clever he is!”

“Some of these things are true, I know,” said Hori, slowly. “But why should you blame Nofret?”

“Because it is her doing! It is always the things she says—little things—clever things—that start it all. She is like the goad with which you prick oxen. She is clever, too, in knowing just what to say. Sometimes I think it is Henet who tells her. . . .”

“Yes,” said Hori thoughtfully. “That might well be.”

Renisenb shivered.

“I don't like Henet. I hate the way she creeps about. She is so devoted to us all, and yet none of us want her devotion. How could my mother have brought her here and been so fond of her?”

“We have only Henet's word for that,” said Hori drily.

“Why should Henet be so fond of Nofret and follow her round and whisper and fawn upon her? Oh, Hori, I tell you I am afraid! I hate Nofret! I wish she would go away. She is beautiful and cruel and bad! ”

“What a child you are, Renisenb.”

Then Hori added quietly:

“Nofret is coming up here now.”

Renisenb turned her head. Together they watched Nofret come slowly up the steep path that led up the cliff face. She was smiling to herself and humming a little tune under her breath.

When she reached the place where they were, she looked round her and smiled. It was a smile of amused curiosity. “So this is where you slip away to every day, Renisenb.”

Renisenb did not answer. She had the angry, defeated feeling of a child whose refuge had been discovered.

Nofret looked about her again.

“And this is the famous Tomb?”

“As you say, Nofret,” said Hori.

She looked at him, her cat-like mouth curving into a smile.

“I’ve no doubt you find it profitable, Hori. You are a good man of business, so I hear.”

There was a tinge of malice in her voice, but Hori remained unmoved, smiling his quiet, grave smile.

“It is profitable to all of us . . . Death is always profitable. . . .”

Nofret gave a quick shiver as she looked round her, her eyes sweeping over the offering tables, the entrance to the shrine and the false door.

She cried sharply:

“I hate Death!”

“You should not.” Hori’s tone was quiet. “Death is the chief source of wealth here in Egypt. Death bought the jewels you wear, Nofret. Death feeds you and clothes you.”

She stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Imhotep is a ka-priest—a mortuary priest—all his lands, all his cattle, his timber, his flax, his barley, are the endowment of a Tomb.”

He paused and then went on reflectively:

“We are a strange people, we Egyptians. We love life—and so we start very early to plan for death. That is where the wealth of Egypt goes—into pyramids, into tombs, into tomb endowment.”

Nofret said violently:

“Will you stop talking about death, Hori! I do not like it!”

“Because you are truly Egyptian—because you love life, because—sometimes—you feel the shadow of death very near. . . .”

“Stop!”

She turned on him violently. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she turned away and began to descend the path.

Renisenb breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

“I am glad she has gone,” she said childishly. “You frightened her, Hori.”

“Yes . . . Did I frighten you, Renisenb?”

“N-no.” Renisenb sounded a little unsure. “It is true what you said, only I had never thought of it that way before. My father is a mortuary priest.”

Hori said with sudden bitterness:

“All Egypt is obsessed by death! And do you know why, Renisenb? Because we have eyes in our bodies, but none in our minds. We cannot conceive of a life other than this one—of a life after death. We can visualize only a continuation of what we know. We have no real belief in a God.”

Renisenb stared at him in amazement.

“How can you say that, Hori? Why, we have many, many Gods—so many that I could not name them all. Only last night we were saying, all of us, which Gods we preferred. Sobek was all for Sakhmet and Kait prays always to Meskhant. Kameni swears by Thoth as is natural, being a scribe. Satipy is for the falcon-headed Horus and also for our own Mereseer. Yahmose says that Ptah is to be worshipped because he made all things. I myself love Isis. And Henet is all for our local God Amün. She says that there are prophecies amongst the priests that one day Amün will be the greatest God in all Egypt—so she takes him offerings now while he is still a small God. And there is Ra, the Sun God, and Osiris before whom the hearts of the dead are weighed.”

Renisenb paused, out of breath. Hori was smiling at her.

“And what is the difference, Renisenb, between a God and a man?”

She stared at him.

“The Gods are—they are magic! ”

“That is all?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Hori.”

“I meant that to you a God is only a man or a woman who can do certain things that men and women cannot do.”

“You say such odd things! I cannot understand you.”

She looked at him with a puzzled face—then glancing down over the valley, her attention was caught by something else.

“Look,” she exclaimed. “Nofret is talking to Sobek. She is laughing. Oh!—” she gave a sudden gasp, “no, it is nothing. I thought he was going to strike her. She is going back to the house and he is coming up here.”

Sobek arrived looking like a thundercloud.

“May a crocodile devour that woman!” he cried. “My father was more of a fool than usual when he took her for a concubine!”

“What did she say to you?” asked Hori curiously.

“She insulted me as usual! Asked if my father had entrusted me with the sale of any more timber. Her tongue stings like a serpent. I

would like to kill her.”

He moved along the platform and, picking up a piece of rock, threw it down to the valley below. The sound of it bouncing off the cliff seemed to please him. He levered up a larger piece, then sprang back as a snake that had been coiled up beneath it raised its head. It reared up, hissing, and Renisenb saw that it was a cobra.

Catching up a heavy staff Sobek attacked it furiously. A well directed blow broke its back, but Sobek continued to slash at it, his head thrown back, his eyes sparkling, and below his breath he muttered some word which Renisenb only half heard and did not recognize.

She cried out: “Stop, Sobek, stop—it’s dead!”

Sobek paused, then he threw the staff away and laughed.

“One poisonous snake the less in the world.”

He laughed again, his good humour restored, and clattered off down the path again.

Renisenb said in a low voice: “I believe Sobek—likes killing things!”

“Yes.”

There was no surprise in the word. Hori was merely acknowledging a fact which he evidently already knew well. Renisenb turned to stare at him. She said slowly:

“Snakes are dangerous—but how beautiful that cobra looked. . . .”

She stared down at its broken, twisted body. For some unknown reason she felt a pang at her heart.

Hori said dreamily:

“I remember when we were all small children—Sobek attacked Yahmose. Yahmose was a year older, but Sobek was the bigger and stronger. He had a stone and he was banging Yahmose’s head with it. Your mother came running and tore them apart. I remember how she stood looking down at Yahmose—and how she cried out: ‘You must not do things like that, Sobek—it is dangerous! I tell you, it is dangerous!’ ” He paused and went on, “She was very beautiful . . . I thought so as a child. You are like her, Renisenb.”

“Am I?” Renisenb felt pleased—warmed. Then she asked:

“Was Yahmose badly hurt?”

“No, it was not as bad as it looked. Sobek was very ill the next day. It might have been something he ate, but your mother said it was his rage and the hot sun—it was the middle of summer.”

“Sobek has a terrible temper,” said Renisenb thoughtfully.

She looked again at the dead snake and turned away with a shiver.

II

When Renisenb got back to the house Kameni was sitting on the front porch with a roll of papyrus. He was singing and she paused a minute and listened to the words.

“I will go to Memphis,” sang Kameni, “I will go to Ptah, Lord of Truth. I will say to Ptah, ‘Give me my sister tonight.’ The stream is wine, Ptah is its reeds, Sekhmet its lotus, Earit its bud, Nefertum its flower. I will say to Ptah, ‘Give me my sister tonight. The dawn breaks through her beauty. Memphis is a dish of love apples set before the fair face. . . .’ ”

He looked up and smiled at Renisenb.

“Do you like my song, Renisenb?”

“What is it?”

“It is a love song from Memphis.”

He kept his eyes on her, singing softly:

“Her arms are full of branches of the persea, her hair is weighed down with unguent. She is like a Princess of the Lord of the two Lands.”

The colour came up in Renisenb’s face. She passed on quickly into the house and almost collided with Nofret.

“Why are you in such a hurry, Renisenb?”

Nofret’s voice had a sharp edge to it. Renisenb looked at her in faint surprise. Nofret was not smiling. Her face looked grim and tense and Renisenb noticed that her hands were clenched at her sides.

“I am sorry, Nofret, I did not see you. It is dark in here when you come from the light outside.”

“Yes, it is dark here . . .” Nofret paused a moment. “It would be pleasanter outside—on the porch—with Kameni’s singing to listen to. He sings well, does he not?”

“Yes—yes, I am sure he does.”

“Yet you did not stay to listen? Kameni will be disappointed.”

Renisenb’s cheeks felt hot again. Nofret’s cold, sneering glance made her uncomfortable.

“Do you not like love songs, Renisenb?”

“Does it matter to you, Nofret, what I like and do not like?”

“So little cats have claws.”

“What do you mean?”

Nofret laughed. “You are not such a fool as you look, Renisenb. So you find Kameni handsome? Well, that will please him no doubt.”

“I think you are quite odious,” said Renisenb passionately.

She ran past Nofret towards the back of the house. She heard the girl’s mocking laugh. But through that laugh, sounding clearly in her memory, was the echo of Kameni’s voice and the song that he had sung with his eyes watching her face. . . .

III

That night Renisenb had a dream.

She was with Khay, sailing with him in the Barque of the Dead in the Underworld. Khay was standing in the bows of the boat—she could only see the back of his head. Then, as they drew near to sunrise, Khay turned his head, and Renisenb saw that it was not Khay but Kameny. And at the same time the prow of the barque, the serpent's head, began to writhe. It was a live serpent, a cobra, and Renisenb thought: "It is the serpent that comes out in the Tombs to eat the souls of the dead." She was paralysed with fear. And then she saw the serpent's face was the face of Nofret and she woke up screaming: "Nofret—Nofret. . . ."

She had not really screamed—it was all in the dream. She lay still, her heart beating, telling herself that none of all this was real. And then she thought suddenly: "That is what Sobek said when he was killing the snake yesterday. He said: 'Nofret'. . . ."

Seven

FIRST MONTH OF WINTER 5TH DAY

Renisenb's dream had left her wakeful. She slept after it only in snatches and towards morning she did not sleep at all. She was obsessed by an obscure feeling of impending evil.

She rose early and went out of the house. Her steps led her, as they did so often, to the Nile. There were fishermen out already and a big barge rowing with powerful strokes towards Thebes. There were other boats with sails flapping in the faint puffs of wind.

Something turned over in Renisenb's heart, the stirring of a desire for something she could not name. She thought, "I feel—I feel—" But she did not know what it was that she felt! That is to say, she knew no words to fit the sensation. She thought, "I want—but what do I want?"

Was it Khay she wanted? Khay was dead—he would not come back. She said to herself, "I shall not think of Khay any more. What is the use? It is over, all that."

Then she noticed another figure standing looking after the barge that was making for Thebes—and something about that figure—some emotion it expressed by its very motionlessness struck Renisenb, even as she recognized Nofret.

Nofret staring out at the Nile. Nofret—alone. Nofret thinking of—what?

With a little shock Renisenb suddenly realized how little they all knew about Nofret. They had accepted her as an enemy—a stranger—without interest or curiosity in her life or the surroundings from which she had come.

It must, Renisenb thought suddenly, be sad for Nofret alone here, without friends, surrounded only by people who disliked her.

Slowly Renisenb went forward until she was standing by Nofret's side. Nofret turned her head for a moment then moved it back again and resumed her study of the Nile. Her face was expressionless.

Renisenb said timidly:

“There are a lot of boats on the River.”

“Yes.”

Renisenb went on, obeying some obscure impulse towards friendliness:

“Is it like this, at all, where you come from?”

Nofret laughed, a short, rather bitter laugh.

“No, indeed. My father is a merchant in Memphis. It is gay and amusing in Memphis. There is music and singing and dancing. Then my father travels a good deal. I have been with him to Syria—to Byblos beyond the Gazelle's Nose. I have been with him in a big ship on the wide seas.”

She spoke with pride and animation.

Renisenb stood quite still, her mind working slowly, but with growing interest and understanding.

“It must be very dull for you here,” she said slowly.

Nofret laughed impatiently.

“It is dead here—dead—nothing but ploughing and sowing and reaping and grazing—and talk of crops—and wranglings about the price of flax.”

Renisenb was still wrestling with unfamiliar thoughts as she watched Nofret sideways.

And suddenly, as though it was something physical, a great wave of anger and misery and despair seemed to emanate from the girl at her side.

Renisenb thought: “She is as young as I am—younger. And she is the concubine of that old man, that fussy, kindly, but rather ridiculous old man, my father. . . .”

What did she, Renisenb, know about Nofret? Nothing at all. What was it Hori had said yesterday when she had cried out, “She is beautiful and cruel and bad!”

“You are a child, Renisenb.” That was what he had said. Renisenb knew now what he meant. Those words of hers had meant nothing—you could not dismiss a human being so easily. What sorrow, what bitterness, what despair lay behind Nofret’s cruel smile? What had Renisenb, what had any of them, done to make Nofret welcome?

Renisenb said stumblingly, childishly:

“You hate us all—I see why—we have not been kind—but now—it is not too late. Can we not, you and I, Nofret, can we not be sisters to each other? You are far away from all you know—you are alone—can I not help?”

Her words faltered into silence. Nofret turned slowly.

For a minute or two her face was expressionless—there was even, Renisenb thought, a momentary softening in her eyes. In that early morning stillness, with its strange clarity and peace, it was as though Nofret hesitated—as though Renisenb’s words had touched in her some last core of irresolution.

It was a strange moment, a moment Renisenb was to remember afterwards. . . .

Then, gradually, Nofret’s expression changed. It became heavily malevolent, her eyes smouldered. Before the fury of hate and malice in her glance, Renisenb recoiled a step.

Nofret said in a low, fierce voice:

“Go! I want nothing from any of you. Stupid fools, that is what you all are, every one of you. . . .”

She paused a moment, then wheeled round and retraced her steps towards the house, walking with energy.

Renisenb followed her slowly. Curiously enough, Nofret’s words had not made her angry. They had opened before her eyes a black abyss of hate and misery—something quite unknown as yet in her

own experience, and in her mind was only a confused, groping thought of how dreadful it must be to feel like that.

II

As Nofret entered the gateway and crossed the courtyard, one of Kait's children came running across her path, chasing a ball.

Nofret thrust the child out of her way with an angry thrust that sent the little girl sprawling on the ground. The child set up a wail and Renisenb ran to her and picked her up, saying indignantly:

"You should not have done that, Nofret! You have hurt her, see. She has cut her chin."

Nofret laughed stridently.

"So I should be careful not to hurt these spoiled brats? Why? Are their mothers so careful of my feelings?"

Kait had come running out of the house at the sound of her child's wails. She ran to it, examining the injured face. Then she turned on Nofret.

"Devil and serpent! Evil one! Wait and see what we will do to you."

With all the force of her arm she struck Nofret in the face. Renisenb gave a cry and caught her arm before she could repeat the blow.

"Kait—Kait—you must not do that."

“Who says so? Let Nofret look to herself. She is only one here among many.”

Nofret stood quite still. The print of Kait’s hand showed clear and red on her cheek. By the corner of the eye, where a bangle Kait wore on her wrist had cut the skin, a small trickle of blood was running down her face.

But it was Nofret’s expression that puzzled Renisenb—yes, and frightened her. Nofret showed no anger. Instead there was a queer, exultant look in her eyes, and once more her mouth was curving up in its cat-like, satisfied smile.

“Thank you, Kait,” she said.

Then she walked on into the house.

III

Humming softly under her breath, her eyelids lowered, Nofret called Henet.

Henet came running, stopped, exclaimed. Nofret cut short her exclamations.

“Fetch me Kameni. Tell him to bring his pencase and ink and papyrus. There is a letter to be written to the master.”

Henet’s eyes were fixed on Nofret’s cheek.

“To the master . . . I see. . . .”

Then she asked: “Who did—that?”

“Kait.” Nofret smiled quietly and reminiscently.

Henet shook her head and clicked her tongue.

“All this is very bad—very bad . . . certainly the master must know of it.” She darted a quick, sideways look at Nofret. “Yes, certainly Imhotep must know.”

Nofret said smoothly: “You and I, Henet, think alike . . . I thought that we should do so.”

From the corner of her linen robe she detached a jewel of amethyst set in gold and placed it in the woman’s hand.

“You and I; Henet, have Imhotep’s true welfare at heart.”

“This is too good for me, Nofret . . . You are too generous . . . such a lovely bit of workmanship.”

“Imhotep and I appreciate fidelity.”

Nofret was still smiling, her eyes narrow and cat-like.

“Fetch Kameni,” she said. “And come with him. You and he together are witnesses of what has occurred.”

Kameni came a little unwillingly, his brow puckered.

Nofret spoke imperiously:

“You remember Imhotep’s instructions—before he left?”

“Yes,” said Kameni.

“The time has come,” said Nofret. “Sit and take ink and write as I tell you.” Then as Kameni still hesitated, she said impatiently, “What you write shall be what you have seen with your own eyes and heard with your own ears—and Henet shall confirm all I say. The letter must be despatched with all secrecy and speed.”

Kameni said slowly, “I do not like—”

Nofret flashed out at him: “I have no complaint against Renisenb. Renisenb is soft, weak and a fool, but she has not tried to harm me. Does that content you?”

The colour of Kameni’s bronze face deepened.

“I was not thinking of that—”

Nofret said smoothly:

“I think you were . . . Come now—fulfil your instructions—write.”

“Yes, write,” said Henet. “I’m so distressed by all this—so terribly distressed. Certainly Imhotep must know about it. It’s only right that he should. However unpleasant a thing is, one has to do one’s duty. I’ve always felt that.”

Nofret laughed softly.

“I’m sure you have, Henet. You shall do your duty! And Kameni shall do his office. And I—I shall do what it is my pleasure to do. . . .”

But still Kameni hesitated. His face was sullen—almost angry.

“I do not like this,” he said. “Nofret, you had better take a little time to think.”

“You say that to me!”

Kameni flushed at her tone. His eyes avoided hers, but his sullen expression remained.

“Be careful, Kameni,” said Nofret smoothly. “I have great influence with Imhotep. He listens to what I say—so far he has been pleased with you—” She paused significantly.

“Are you threatening me, Nofret?” asked Kameni, angrily.

“Perhaps.”

He looked angrily at her for a moment or two—then he bent his head.

“I will do as you say, Nofret, but I think—yes, I think—that you will be sorry.”

“Are you threatening me, Kameni?”

“I am warning you. . . .”

Eight

SECOND MONTH OF WINTER 10TH DAY

Day followed day, and Renisenb sometimes felt that she was living in a dream.

She had made no more timid overtures to Nofret. She was, now, afraid of Nofret. There was something about Nofret she did not understand.

After the scene in the courtyard that day, Nofret had changed. There was a complacency about her, an exultation, that Renisenb could not fathom. Sometimes she thought that her own vision of Nofret as profoundly unhappy must have been ridiculously wrong. Nofret seemed pleased with life and herself and her surroundings.

And yet, actually, her surroundings had very definitely changed for the worse. In the days following Imhotep's departure, Nofret had quite deliberately, Renisenb thought, set out to sow dissension between the various members of Imhotep's family.

Now that family had closed its ranks solidly against the invader. There were no more dissensions between Satipy and Kait—no railing of Satipy against the unfortunate Yahmose. Sobek seemed quieter and boasted less. Ipy was less impudent and offhand with his elder brothers. There seemed a new harmony between the family yet this harmony did not bring peace of mind to Renisenb—for with it went a curious, persistent undercurrent of ill will to Nofret.

The two women, Satipy and Kait, no longer quarrelled with her—they avoided her. They never spoke to her, and wherever she came they immediately gathered the children together and went elsewhere. At the same time, queer, annoying little accidents began to happen. A linen dress of Nofret's was spoilt with an over hot iron—some dye stuff was spilt over another. Sometimes sharp thorns found their way into her clothing—a scorpion was discovered by her bed. The food that was served to her was over-seasoned—or lacking in any seasoning. There was a dead mouse one day in her portion of bread.

It was a quiet, relentless, petty persecution—nothing overt, nothing to lay hold of—it was essentially a woman's campaign.

Then, one day, old Esa sent for Satipy, Kait and Renisenb. Henet was already there, shaking her head and rubbing her hands in the background.

“Ha!” said Esa, peering at them with her usual ironical expression. “So here are my clever granddaughters. What do you think you are doing, all of you? What is this I hear about Nofret's dress being ruined—and her food uneatable?”

Satipy and Kait both smiled. They were not nice smiles.

Satipy said, “Has Nofret complained?”

“No,” said Esa. She pushed the wig she always wore even in the house a little awry with one hand. “No, Nofret has not complained. That is what worries me.”

“It does not worry me,” said Satipy, tossing her handsome head.

“Because you are a fool,” snapped Esa. “Nofret has twice the brains of any of you three.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Satipy. She looked good-humoured and pleased with herself.

“What do you think you are all doing?” inquired Esa.

Satipy’s face hardened.

“You are an old woman, Esa. I do not speak with any lack of respect—but things no longer matter to you in the way they matter to us who have husbands and young children. We have decided to take the matter into our own hands—we have ways of dealing with a woman whom we do not like and will not accept.”

“Fine words,” said Esa. “Fine words.” She cackled. “But a good discourse can be found with slave girls over the millstone.”

“A true and wise saying,” sighed Henet from the background.

Esa turned on her.

“Come, Henet, what does Nofret say to all this that is going on? You should know—you are always waiting on her.”

“As Imhotep told me to do. It is repugnant to me, of course—but I must do what the master ordered. You do not think I hope—”

Esa cut into the whining voice:

“We know all about you, Henet. Always devoted—and seldom thanked as you should be. What does Nofret say to all this? That is

what I asked you.”

Henet shook her head.

“She says nothing. She just—smiles.”

“Exactly,” Esa picked up a jujube from a dish at her elbow, examined it and put it in her mouth. Then she said with sudden, malevolent acerbity:

“You are fools, all of you. The power is with Nofret, not with you. All you are doing is to play into her hands. I dare swear it even pleases her what you are doing.”

Satipy said sharply: “Nonsense. Nofret is alone amongst many. What power has she?”

Esa said grimly:

“The power of a young, beautiful woman married to an ageing man. I know what I am talking about.” With a quick turn of her head she said: “Henet knows what I am talking about!”

Henet started. She sighed and began to twist her hands.

“The master thinks a great deal of her—naturally—yes, quite naturally.”

“Go to the kitchen,” said Esa. “Bring me some dates and some Syrian wine—yes, and honey too.”

When Henet had gone, the old woman said:

“There is mischief brewing—I can smell it. Satipy, you are the leader in all this. Be careful that while you are thinking yourself clever, you do not play into Nofret’s hands.”

She leaned back and closed her eyes.

“I have warned you—now go.”

“We in Nofret’s power, indeed!” said Satipy with a toss of her head as they went out to the lake. “Esa is so old she gets the most extraordinary ideas into her head. It is we who have got Nofret in our power! We will do nothing against her that can be reported—but I think, yes, I think, that she will soon be sorry she ever came here.”

“You are cruel—cruel—” cried Renisenb.

Satipy looked amused.

“Do not pretend you love Nofret, Renisenb!”

“I do not. But you sound so—so vindictive.”

“I think of my children—and Yahmose! I am not a meek woman or one who brooks insult—and I have ambition. I would wring that woman’s neck with the greatest of pleasure. Unfortunately it is not so simple as that. Imhotep’s anger must not be roused. But I think—in the end—something may be managed.”

II

The letter came like a spear thrust to a fish.

Dumbfounded, silent, Yahmose, Sobek and Ipy stared at Hori as he read out the words from the papyrus scroll.

“Did I not tell Yahmose that I would hold him to blame if any harm came to my concubine? As you all live, I am against you and you are against me! I will no longer live with you in one house since you have not respected my concubine Nofret! You are no longer my son of my flesh. Neither are Sobek and Ipy my sons of my flesh. Each one of you has done harm to my concubine. That is attested by Kamenî and Henet. I will turn you out of my house—each of you! I have supported you—now I will no longer support you.”

Hori paused and went on:

“The ka servant Imhotep addresses Hori. To you who have been faithful, how are you in your life, safety and health? Salute my mother Esa for me and my daughter Renisenb and greet Henet. Look after my affairs carefully until I reach you and see that there be prepared for me a deed whereby my concubine Nofret shall share with me in all my property as my wife. Neither Yahmose, nor Sobek shall be associated with me, nor will I support them, and hereby I denounce them that they have done harm to my concubine! Keep all safe till I come. How evil is it when a man’s household do evil deeds to his concubine. As for Ipy, let him take warning, and if he does a single hurt to my concubine, he too shall depart from my house.”

There was a paralysed silence, then Sobek rose up in a violent rage.

“How has this come about? What has my father heard? Who has been bearing false tales to him? Shall we endure this? My father

cannot disinherit us so and give all his goods to his concubine!”

Hori said mildly:

“It will cause unfavourable comment—and it will not be accepted as a right action—but legally it is in his power. He can make a deed of settlement in any way he wishes.”

“She has bewitched him—that black, jeering serpent has put a spell upon him!”

Yahmose murmured as though dumbfounded:

“It is unbelievable—it cannot be true.”

“My father is mad—mad!” cried Ipy. “He turns even against me at this woman’s bidding!”

Hori said gravely:

“Imhotep will return shortly—that he says. By then his anger may have abated; he may not really mean to do as he says.”

There was a short, unpleasant laugh. It was Satipy who had laughed. She stood looking at them from the doorway into the women’s quarters.

“So that is what we are to do, is it, most excellent Hori? Wait and see!”

Yahmose said slowly:

“What else can we do?”

“What else?” Satipy’s voice rose. She screamed out:

“What have you got in your veins, all of you? Milk? Yahmose, I know, is not a man! But you, Sobek—have you no remedy for these ills? A knife in the heart and the girl could do us no more harm.”

“Satipy,” cried Yahmose. “My father would never forgive us!”

“So you say. But I tell you a dead concubine is not the same as a live concubine! Once she was dead, his heart would return to his sons and their children. And besides, how should he know how she died? We could say a scorpion stung her! We are together in this, are we not?”

Yahmose said slowly:

“My father would know. Henet would tell him.”

Satipy gave a hysterical laugh.

“Most prudent Yahmose! Most gentle, cautious Yahmose! It is you who should look after the children and do woman’s work in the back of the house. Sakhmet help me! Married to a man who is not a man. And you, Sobek, for all your bluster, what courage have you, what determination? I swear by Ra, I am a better man than either of you.”

She swung round and went out.

Kait, who had been standing behind her, came a step forward.

She said, her voice deep and shaken:

“It is true what Satipy says! She is a better man than any of you. Yahmose, Sobek, Ipy—will you all sit here doing nothing? What of our children, Sobek? Cast out to starve! Very well, if you will do nothing, I will. You are none of you men! ”

As she in turn went out, Sobek sprang to his feet.

“By the Nine Gods of the Ennead, Kait is right! There is a man’s work to be done—and we sit here talking and shaking our heads.”

He strode towards the door. Hori called after him:

“Sobek, Sobek, where are you going? What are you going to do?”

Sobek, handsome and fierce, shouted from the doorway:

“I shall do something—that is clear. And what I do I shall enjoy doing!”

III

Renisenb came out on to the porch and stood there for a moment, shielding her eyes against the sudden glare.

She felt sick and shaken and full of a nameless fear. She said to herself, repeating the words over and over again mechanically:

“I must warn Nofret . . . I must warn her. . . .”

Behind her, in the house, she could hear men’s voices, those of Hori and Yahmose blending into each other, and above them, shrill and clear, the boyish tones of Ipy.

“Satipy and Kait are right. There are no men in this family! But I am a man. Yes, I am a man in heart if not in years. Nofret has jeered at me, laughed at me; treated me as a child. I will show her that I am not a child. I am not afraid of my father’s anger. I know my father. He is bewitched—the woman has put a spell on him. If she were destroyed his heart would come back to me—to me! I am the son he loves best. You all treat me as a child—but you shall see. Yes, you shall see!”

Rushing out of the house he collided with Renisenb and almost knocked her down. She clutched at his sleeve.

“Ipy, Ipy, where are you going?”

“To find Nofret. She shall see whether she can laugh at me!”

“Wait a little. You must calm down. We must none of us do anything rash.”

“Rash?” The boy laughed scornfully. “You are like Yahmose. Prudence! Caution! Nothing must be done in a hurry! Yahmose is an old woman. And Sobek is all words and boasting. Let go of me, Renisenb.”

He twitched the linen of his sleeve from her grasp.

“Nofret, where is Nofret?”

Henet, who had just come bustling out from the house, murmured:

“Oh dear, this is a bad business—a very bad business. What will become of us all? What would my dear mistress say?”

“Where is Nofret, Henet?”

Renisenb cried: “Don’t tell him,” but Henet was already answering:

“She went out the back way. Down towards the flax fields.”

Ipy rushed back through the house and Renisenb said reproachfully: “You should not have told him, Henet.”

“You don’t trust old Henet. You never have confidence in me.” The whine in her voice became more pronounced. “But poor old Henet knows what she is doing. The boy needs time to cool off. He won’t find Nofret by the flax fields.” She grinned. “Nofret is here—in the pavilion—with Kamenî.”

She nodded her head across the courtyard.

And she added with what seemed rather disproportionate stress:

“With Kamenî. . . .”

But Renisenb had already started to cross the courtyard.

Teti, dragging her wooden lion, came running from the lake to her mother and Renisenb caught her up in her arms. She knew, as she held the child to her, the force that was driving Satipy and Kait. These women were fighting for their children.

Teti gave a little fretful cry.

“Not so tight, mother, not so tight. You are hurting me.”

Renisenb put the child down. She went slowly across the courtyard. On the far side of the pavilion Nofret and Kamenî were standing

together. They turned as Renisenb approached.

Renisenb spoke quickly and breathlessly.

“Nofret, I have come to warn you. You must be careful. You must guard yourself.”

A look of contemptuous amusement passed over Nofret’s face.

“So the dogs are howling?”

“They are very angry—they will do some harm to you.”

Nofret shook her head.

“No one can harm me,” she said, with a superb confidence. “If they did, it would be reported to your father—and he would exact vengeance. They will know that when they pause to think.” She laughed. “What fools they have been—with their petty insults and persecutions! It was my game they played all the time.”

Renisenb said slowly:

“So you have planned for this all along? And I was sorry for you—I thought we were unkind! I am not sorry any longer . . . I think, Nofret, that you are wicked. When you come to deny the forty-two sins at the hour of judgement you will not be able to say ‘I have done no evil.’ Nor will you be able to say ‘I have not been covetous.’ And your heart that is being weighed in the scales against the feather of truth will sink in the balance.”

Nofret said sullenly:

“You are very pious all of a sudden. But I have not harmed you, Renisenb. I said nothing against you. Ask Kamenî if that is not so.”

Then she walked across the courtyard and up the steps to the porch. Henet came out to meet her and the two women went into the house.

Renisenb turned slowly to Kamenî.

“So it was you, Kamenî, who helped her to do this to us?”

Kamenî said eagerly:

“Are you angry with me, Renisenb? But what could I do? Before Imhotep left he charged me solemnly that I was to write at Nofret’s bidding at any time she might ask me to do so. Say you do not blame me, Renisenb. What else could I do?”

“I cannot blame you,” said Renisenb slowly. “You had, I suppose, to carry out my father’s orders.”

“I did not like doing it—and it is true, Renisenb, there was not one word said against you.”

“As if I cared about that!”

“But I do. Whatever Nofret had told me, I would not have written one word that might harm you, Renisenb—please believe me.”

Renisenb shook her head perplexedly. The point Kamenî was labouring to make seemed of little importance to her. She felt hurt and angry as though Kamenî, in some way, had failed her. Yet he was, after all, a stranger. Though allied by blood, he was

nevertheless a stranger whom her father had brought from a distant part of the country. He was a junior scribe who had been given a task by his employer, and who had obediently carried it out.

“I wrote no more than truth,” Kameni persisted. “There were no lies set down, that I swear to you.”

“No,” said Renisenb. “There would be no lies. Nofret is too clever for that.”

Old Esa had, after all, been right. That persecution over which Satipy and Kait had gloated had been just exactly what Nofret had wanted. No wonder that she had gone about smiling her cat-like smile.

“She is bad,” said Renisenb, following her thoughts. “Yes!”

Kameni assented. “Yes,” he said. “She is an evil creature.”

Renisenb turned and looked at him curiously.

“You knew her before she came here, did you not? You knew her in Memphis?”

Kameni flushed and looked uncomfortable.

“I did not know her well . . . I had heard of her. A proud girl, they said, ambitious and hard—and one who did not forgive.”

Renisenb flung back her head in sudden impatience.

“I do not believe it,” she said. “My father will not do what he threatens. He is angry at present—but he could not be so unjust.

When he comes he will forgive.”

“When he comes,” said Kameni, “Nofret will see to it that he does not change his mind. You do not know Nofret, Renisenb. She is very clever and determined—and she is, remember, very beautiful.”

“Yes,” admitted Renisenb. “She is beautiful.”

She got up. For some reason the thought of Nofret’s beauty hurt her. . . .

IV

Renisenb spent the afternoon playing with the children. As she took part in their game, the vague ache in her heart lessened. It was not until just before sunset that she stood upright, smoothing back her hair and the pleats of her dress which had got crumpled and disarranged, and wondered vaguely why neither Satipy nor Kait had been out as usual.

Kameni had long gone from the courtyard. Renisenb went slowly across into the house. There was no one in the living-room and she passed through to the back of the house and the women’s quarters. Esa was nodding in the corner of her room and her little slave girl was marking piles of linen sheets. They were baking batches of triangular loaves in the kitchen. There was no one else about.

A curious emptiness pressed on Renisenb’s spirits. Where was everyone?

Hori had probably gone up to the Tomb. Yahmose might be with him or out on the fields. Sobek and Ipy would be with the cattle or

possibly seeing to the cornbins. But where were Satipy and Kait, and where, yes, where was Nofret?

The strong perfume of Nofret's unguent filled her empty room. Renisenb stood in the doorway staring at the little wood pillow, at a jewel box, at a heap of bead bracelets and a ring set with a blue glazed scarab. Perfumes, unguents, clothes, linens, sandals—all speaking of their owner, of Nofret who lived in their midst and who was a stranger and an enemy.

Where, Renisenb wondered, could Nofret herself be?

She went slowly towards the back entrance of the house and met Henet coming in.

“Where is everybody, Henet? The house is empty except for my grandmother.”

“How should I know, Renisenb? I have been working—helping with the weaving, seeing to a thousand and one things. I have not time for going for walks.”

That meant, thought Renisenb, that somebody had gone for a walk. Perhaps Satipy had followed Yahmose up to the Tomb to harangue further? But where was Kait? Unlike Kait to be away from her children for so long.

And again, a strange disturbing undercurrent, there ran the thought:

“Where is Nofret?”

As though Henet had read the thought in her mind, she supplied the answer.

“As for Nofret, she went off a long time ago up to the Tomb. Oh well, Hori is a match for her.” Henet laughed spitefully. “Hori has brains too.” She sidled a little closer to Renisenb. “I wish you knew, Renisenb, how unhappy I’ve been over all this. She came to me, you know, that day—with the mark of Kait’s fingers on her cheek and the blood streaming down. And she got Kameny to write and me to say what I’d seen—and of course I couldn’t say I hadn’t seen it! Oh, she’s a clever one. And I, thinking all the time of your dear mother—”

Renisenb pushed past her and went out into the golden glow of the evening sun. Deep shadows were on the cliffs—the whole world looked fantastic at this hour of sunset.

Renisenb’s steps quickened as she took the way to the cliff path. She would go up to the Tomb—find Hori. Yes, find Hori. It was what she had done as a child when her toys had been broken—when she had been uncertain or afraid. Hori was like the cliffs themselves, steadfast, immovable, unchanging.

Renisenb thought confusedly: Everything will be all right when I get to Hori. . . .

Her steps quickened—she was almost running.

Then suddenly she saw Satipy coming towards her. Satipy, too, must have been up to the Tomb.

What a very odd way Satipy was walking, swaying from side to side, stumbling as though she could not see. . . .

When Satipy saw Renisenb she stopped short, her hand went to her breast. Renisenb, drawing close, was startled at the sight of Satipy’s

face.

“What’s the matter, Satipy, are you ill?”

Satipy’s voice in answer was a croak, her eyes were shifting from side to side.

“No, no, of course not.”

“You look ill. You look frightened. What has happened?”

“What should have happened? Nothing, of course.”

“Where have you been?”

“I went up to the Tomb—to find Yahmose. He was not there. No one was there.”

Renisenb still stared. This was a new Satipy—a Satipy with all the spirit and resolution drained out of her.

“Come, Renisenb—come back to the house.”

Satipy put a slightly shaking hand on Renisenb’s arm, urging her back the way she had come and at the touch Renisenb felt a sudden revolt.

“No, I am going up to the Tomb.”

“There is no one there, I tell you.”

“I like to look over the River. To sit there.”

“But the sun is setting—it is too late.”

Satipy's fingers closed vice-like over Renisenb's arm. Renisenb wrenched herself loose.

"Let me go, Satipy."

"No. Come back. Come back with me."

But Renisenb had already broken loose, pushed past her, and was on her way to the cliff.

There was something—instinct told her there was something . . . Her steps quickened to a run. . . .

Then she saw it—the dark bundle lying under the shadow of the cliff . . . She hurried along until she stood close beside it.

There was no surprise in her at what she saw. It was as though already she had expected it. . . .

Nofret lay with her face upturned, her body broken and twisted. Her eyes were open and sightless. . . .

Renisenb bent and touched the cold stiff cheek then stood up again looking down at her. She hardly heard Satipy come up behind her.

"She must have fallen," Satipy was saying. "She has fallen. She was walking along the cliff path and she fell. . . ."

Yes, Renisenb thought, that was what had happened. Nofret had fallen from the path above, her body bouncing off the limestone rocks.

“She may have seen a snake,” said Satipy, “and been startled. There are snakes asleep in the sun on that path sometimes.”

Snakes. Yes, snakes. Sobek and the snake. A snake, its back broken, lying dead in the sun. Sobek, his eyes gleaming. . . .

She thought: Sobek . . . Nofret. . . .

Then sudden relief came to her as she heard Hori’s voice.

“What has happened?”

She turned with relief. Hori and Yahmose had come up together. Satipy was explaining eagerly that Nofret must have fallen from the path above.

Yahmose said, “She must have come up to find us, but Hori and I have been out to look at the irrigation canals. We have been away at least an hour. As we came back we saw you standing here.”

Renisenb said, and her voice surprised her, it sounded so different: “Where is Sobek?”

She felt rather than saw Hori’s immediate sharp turn of the head at the question. Yahmose sounded merely puzzled as he said:

“Sobek? I have not seen him all the afternoon. Not since he left us so angrily in the house.”

But Hori was looking at Renisenb. She raised her eyes and met his. She saw him turn from their gaze and look down thoughtfully at Nofret’s body and she knew with absolute certainty exactly what he was thinking.

He murmured questioningly:

“Sobek?”

“Oh no,” Renisenb heard herself saying. “Oh no . . . Oh no. . . .”

Satipy said again urgently: “She fell from the path. It is narrow just above here—and dangerous. . . .”

Sobek liked killing. “What I do, I shall enjoy doing. . . .”

Sobek killing a snake. . . .

Sobek meeting Nofret on that narrow path. . . .

She heard herself murmuring brokenly:

“We don’t know—we don’t know. . . .”

And then, with intimate relief, with the sense of a burden taken away, she heard Hori’s grave voice giving weight and value to Satipy’s asseveration.

“She must have fallen from the path. . . .”

His eyes met Renisenb’s. She thought: “He and I know . . . We shall always know. . . .”

Aloud she heard her voice saying shakily:

“She fell from the path. . . .”

And like a final echo, Yahmose’s gentle voice chimed in.

“She must have fallen from the path.”

Nine

FOURTH MONTH OF WINTER 6TH DAY

Imhotep sat facing Esa.

“They all tell the same story,” he said fretfully.

“That is at least convenient,” said Esa.

“Convenient—convenient? What extraordinary words you use!”

Esa gave a short cackle.

“I know what I am saying, my son.”

“Are they speaking the truth, that is what I have to decide!”

Imhotep spoke portentously.

“You are hardly the goddess Maat. Nor, like Anubis, can you weigh the heart in a balance!”

“Was it an accident?” Imhotep shook his head judicially. “I have to remember that the announcement of my intentions towards my ungrateful family may have aroused some passionate feelings.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Esa. “Feelings were aroused. They shouted so in the main hall that I could hear what was said in my room here. By the way, were those really your intentions?”

Imhotep shifted uneasily as he murmured:

“I wrote in anger—in justifiable anger. My family needed teaching a sharp lesson.”

“In other words,” said Esa, “you were merely giving them a fright. Is that it?”

“My dear mother, does that matter now?”

“I see,” said Esa. “You did not know what you meant to do. Muddled thinking as usual.”

Imhotep controlled his irritation with an effort.

“I simply mean that that particular point no longer arises. It is the facts of Nofret’s death that are now in question. If I were to believe that anyone in my family could be so undutiful, so unbalanced in their anger, as wantonly to harm the girl—I—I really do not know what I should do!”

“So it is fortunate,” said Esa, “that they all tell the same story! Nobody has hinted at anything else, have they?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then why not regard the incident as closed? You should have taken the girl North with you. I told you so at the time.”

“Then you do believe—”

Esa said with emphasis:

“I believe what I am told, unless it conflicts with what I have seen with my own eyes (which is very little nowadays), or heard with

my own ears. You have questioned Henet, I suppose? What has she to say of the matter?"

"She is deeply distressed—very distressed. On my behalf."

Esa raised her eyebrows.

"Indeed. You surprise me."

"Henet," said Imhotep warmly, "has a lot of heart."

"Quite so. She has also more than the usual allowance of tongue. If distress at your loss is her only reaction, I should certainly regard the incident as closed. There are plenty of other affairs to occupy your attention."

"Yes, indeed." Imhotep rose with a re-assumption of his fussy, important manner. "Yahmose is waiting for me now in the main hall with all sorts of matters needing my urgent attention. There are many decisions awaiting my sanction. As you say, private grief must not usurp the main functions of life."

He hurried out.

Esa smiled for a moment, a somewhat sardonic smile, then her face grew grave again. She sighed and shook her head.

II

Yahmose was awaiting his father with Kameny in attendance. Hori, Yahmose explained, was superintending the work of the embalmers and undertakers who were busy with the last stages of the funeral preparations.

It had taken Imhotep some weeks to journey home after receiving the news of Nofret's death, and the funeral preparations were now almost completed. The body had received its long soaking in the brine bath, had been restored to some semblance of its normal appearance, had been oiled and rubbed with salts, and duly wrapped in its bandages and deposited in its coffin.

Yahmose explained that he had appointed a small funeral chamber near the rock tomb designed later to hold the body of Imhotep himself. He went into the details of what he had ordered and Imhotep expressed his approval.

"You have done well, Yahmose," he said kindly. "You seem to have shown very good judgement and to have kept your head well."

Yahmose coloured a little at this unexpected praise.

"Ipi and Montu are, of course, expensive embalmers," went on Imhotep. "These canopic jars, for instance, seem to me unduly costly. There is really no need for such extravagance. Some of their charges seem to me much too high. That is the worst of these embalmers who have been employed by the Governor's family. They think they can charge any fantastic prices they like. It would have come much cheaper to go to somebody less well known."

"In your absence," said Yahmose, "I had to decide on these matters—and I was anxious that all honour should be paid to a concubine for whom you had so great a regard."

Imhotep nodded and patted Yahmose's shoulder.

"It was a fault on the right side, my son. You are, I know, usually most prudent in money matters. I appreciate that in this matter, any

unnecessary expense was incurred in order to please me. All the same, I am not made of money, and a concubine is—er ahem!—only a concubine. We will cancel, I think, the more expensive of the amulets—and let me see, there are one or two other ways of cutting down the fees . . . Just read out the items of the estimate, Kameni.”

Kameni rustled the papyrus.

Yahmose breathed a sigh of relief.

III

Kait, coming slowly out from the house to the lake, paused where the children and their mothers were.

“You were right, Satipy,” she said. “A dead concubine is not the same as a live concubine!”

Satipy looked up at her, her eyes vague and unseeing. It was Renisenb who asked quickly:

“What do you mean, Kait?”

“For a live concubine, nothing was too good—clothes, jewels—even the inheritance of Imhotep’s own flesh and blood! But now Imhotep is busy cutting down the cost of the funeral expenses! After all, why waste money on a dead woman? Yes, Satipy, you were right.”

Satipy murmured: “What did I say? I have forgotten.”

“It is best so,” agreed Kait. “I, too, have forgotten. And Renisenb also.”

Renisenb looked at Kait without speaking. There had been something in Kait’s voice—something faintly menacing, that impressed Renisenb disagreeably. She had always been accustomed to think of Kait as rather a stupid woman—someone gentle and submissive, but rather negligible. It struck her now that Kait and Satipy seemed to have changed places. Satipy the dominant and aggressive was subdued—almost timid. It was the quiet Kait who now seemed to domineer over Satipy.

But people, thought Renisenb, do not really change their characters—or do they? She felt confused. Had Kait and Satipy really changed in the last few weeks, or was the change in the one the result of the change in the other? Was it Kait who had grown aggressive? Or did she merely seem so because of the sudden collapse of Satipy?

Satipy definitely was different. Her voice was no longer upraised in the familiar shrewish accents. She crept round the courtyard and the house with a nervous, shrinking gait quite unlike her usual self-assured manner. Renisenb had put down the change in her to the shock of Nofret’s death, but it was incredible that that shock could last so long. It would have been far more like Satipy, Renisenb could not but think, to have exulted openly in a matter of fact manner over the concubine’s sudden and untimely death. As it was, she shrank nervously whenever Nofret’s name was mentioned. Even Yahmose seemed to be exempt from her hectoring and bullying and had, in consequence, begun to assume a more resolute demeanour himself. At any rate, the change in Satipy was all to the

good—or at least so Renisenb supposed. Yet something about it made her vaguely uneasy. . . .

Suddenly, with a start, Renisenb became aware that Kait was looking at her, was frowning. Kait, she realized, was waiting for a word of assent to something she had just said.

“Renisenb also,” repeated Kait, “has forgotten.”

Suddenly Renisenb felt a flood of revolt overwhelm her. Neither Kait, nor Satipy, nor anyone should dictate to her what she should or should not remember. She returned Kait’s look steadily with a distinct hint of defiance.

“The women of a household,” said Kait, “must stand together.”

Renisenb found her voice. She said clearly and defiantly:

“Why?”

“Because their interests are the same.”

Renisenb shook her head violently. She thought, confusedly, “I am a person as well as a woman. I am Renisenb.”

Aloud she said: “It is not so simple as that.”

“Do you want to make trouble, Renisenb?”

“No. And anyway, what do you mean by trouble?”

“Everything that was said that day in the big hall had best be forgotten.”

Renisenb laughed.

“You are stupid, Kait. The servants, the slaves, my grandmother—everyone must have overheard! Why pretend that things did not happen that did happen?”

“We were angry,” said Satipy in a dull voice. “We did not mean what we said.”

She added with a feverish irritability:

“Stop talking about it, Kait. If Renisenb wants to make trouble, let her.”

“I don’t want to make trouble,” said Renisenb, indignantly. “But it is stupid to pretend.”

“No,” said Kait. “It is wisdom. You have Teti to consider.”

“Teti is all right.”

“Everything is all right—now that Nofret is dead,” Kait smiled.

It was a serene, quiet, satisfied smile—and again Renisenb felt a tide of revolt rise in her.

Yet what Kait said was true. Now that Nofret was dead everything was all right.

Satipy, Kait, herself, the children . . . All secure—all at peace—with no apprehensions for the future. The intruder, the disturbing, menacing stranger, had departed—for ever.

Then why this stirring of an emotion that she did not understand on Nofret's behalf? Why this feeling of championship for the dead girl whom she had not liked? Nofret was wicked and Nofret was dead—could she not leave it at that? Why this sudden stab of pity—of something more than pity—something that was almost comprehension?

Renisenb shook her head perplexedly. She sat on there by the water after the others had gone in, trying vainly to understand the confusion in her mind.

The sun was low when Hori, crossing the courtyard, saw her and came to sit beside her.

“It is late, Renisenb. The sun is setting. You should go in.” His grave, quiet voice soothed her, as always. She turned to him with a question.

“Must the women of a household stick together?”

“Who has been saying that to you, Renisenb?”

“Kait. She and Satipy—”

Renisenb broke off.

“And you—want to think for yourself?”

“Oh, think! I do not know how to think, Hori. Everything is confused in my head. People are confused. Everybody is different from what I thought they were. Satipy I always thought was bold, resolute, domineering. But now she is weak, vacillating, even

timid. Then which is the real Satipy? People cannot change like that in a day.”

“Not in a day—no.”

“And Kait—she who was always meek and submissive and let everybody bully her. Now she dominates us all! Even Sobek seems afraid of her. And even Yahmose is different—he gives orders and expects them to be obeyed!”

“And all this confuses you, Renisenb?”

“Yes. Because I do not understand. I feel sometimes that even Henet may be quite different from what she appears to be!”

Renisenb laughed as though at an absurdity, but Hori did not join her. His face remained grave and thoughtful.

“You have never thought very much about people, have you, Renisenb? If you had you would realize—” He paused and then went on. “You know that in all tombs there is always a false door?”

Renisenb stared. “Yes, of course.”

“Well, people are like that too. They create a false door—to deceive. If they are conscious of weakness, of inefficiency, they make an imposing door of self-assertion, of bluster, of overwhelming authority—and, after a time, they get to believe in it themselves. They think, and everybody thinks, that they are like that. But behind that door, Renisenb, is bare rock . . . And so when reality comes and touches them with the feather of truth—their true self reasserts itself. For Kait gentleness and submission brought her all she desired—a husband and children. Stupidity made life easier

for her—but when reality in the form of danger threatened, her true nature appeared. She did not change, Renisenb—that strength and that ruthlessness were always there.”

Renisenb said childishly: “But I do not like it, Hori. It makes me afraid. Everyone being different from what I thought them. And what about myself? I am always the same.”

“Are you?” He smiled at her. “Then why have you sat here all these hours, your forehead puckered, brooding and thinking? Did the old Renisenb—the Renisenb who went away with Khay—ever do that?”

“Oh no. There was no need—” Renisenb stopped.

“You see? You have said it yourself. That is the word of reality—need! You are not the happy, unthinking child you have always appeared to be, accepting everything at its face value. You are not just one of the women of the household. You are Renisenb who wants to think for herself, who wonders about other people. . . .”

Renisenb said slowly: “I have been wondering about Nofret. . . .”

“What have you been wondering?”

“I have been wondering why I cannot forget her . . . She was bad and cruel and tried to do us harm and she is dead—why can I not leave it at that?”

“Can you not leave it at that?”

“No. I try to—but—” Renisenb paused. She passed her hand across her eyes perplexedly. “Sometimes I feel I know about Nofret,

Hori.”

“Know? What do you mean?”

“I can’t explain. But it comes to me every now and then—almost as though she were here, beside me. I feel—almost—as though I were her—I seem to know what she felt. She was very unhappy, Hori, I know that now, though I didn’t at the time. She wanted to hurt us all because she was so unhappy.”

“You cannot know that, Renisenb.”

“No, of course I cannot know it, but it is what I feel. That misery, that bitterness, that black hate—I saw it in her face once, and I did not understand! She must have loved someone and then something went wrong—perhaps he died . . . or went away—but it left her like that—wanting to hurt, to wound. Oh! you may say what you like, I know I am right! She became a concubine to that old man, my father—and she came here, and we disliked her—and she thought she would make us all as unhappy as she was—Yes, that was how it was!”

Hori looked at her curiously.

“How sure you sound, Renisenb. And yet you did not know Nofret well.”

“But I feel it is true, Hori. I feel her—Nofret. Sometimes I feel her quite close beside me. . . .”

“I see.”

There was a silence between them. It was almost dark now.

Then Hori said quietly: “You believe, do you not, that Nofret did not die by accident? You think she was thrown down?”

Renisenb felt a passionate repugnance at hearing her belief put into words.

“No, no, don’t say it.”

“But I think, Renisenb, we had better say it—since it is in your head. You do think so?”

“I—yes!”

Hori bent his head thoughtfully. He went on:

“And you think it was Sobek who did it?”

“Who else could it have been? You remember him with the snake? And you remember what he said—that day—the day of her death—before he went out of the great hall?”

“I remember what he said, yes. But it is not always the people who say most who do most!”

“But don’t you believe she was killed?”

“Yes, Renisenb, I do . . . But it is, after all, only an opinion. I have no proof. I do not think there ever can be proof. That is why I have encouraged Imhotep to accept the verdict of accident. Someone pushed Nofret—we shall never know who it was.”

“You mean, you don’t think it was Sobek?”

“I do not think so. But as I say, we can never know—so it is best not to think about it.”

“But—if it was not Sobek—who do you think it was?”

Hori shook his head.

“If I have an idea—it may be the wrong idea. So it is better not to say. . . .”

“But then—we shall never know!”

There was dismay in Renisenb’s voice.

“Perhaps—” Hori hesitated—“perhaps that may be the best thing.”

“Not to know?”

“Not to know.”

Renisenb shivered.

“But then—oh, Hori, I am afraid!”

PART THREE
SUMMER

Ten

FIRST MONTH OF SUMMER 11TH DAY

The final ceremonies had been completed and the incantations duly spoken. Montu, a Divine Father of the Temple of Hathor, took the broom of heden grass and carefully swept out the chamber whilst he recited the charm to remove the footprints of all evil spirits before the door was sealed up for ever.

Then the Tomb was sealed, and all that remained of the embalmers' work, pots full of natron, salt and rags that had been in contact with the body, were placed in a little chamber nearby, and that too was sealed.

Imhotep squared his shoulders and took a deep breath, relaxing his devout funeral expression. Everything had been done in a befitting manner. Nofret had been buried with all the prescribed rites and with no sparing of expense (somewhat undue expense in Imhotep's opinion).

Imhotep exchanged courtesies with Priests who, their sacred office now finished, reassumed their men of the world manner. Everyone descended to the house where suitable refreshments were waiting. Imhotep discussed with the principal Divine Father the recent political changes. Thebes was rapidly becoming a very powerful city. It was possible that Egypt might once more be united under one ruler before very long. The Golden Age of the Pyramid builders might return.

Montu spoke with reverence and approval of the King Nebhepet-Re. A first-class soldier and a man of piety also. The corrupt and cowardly North could hardly stand against him. A unified Egypt, that was what was needed. And it would mean, undoubtedly, great things for Thebes. . . .

The men walked together, discussing the future.

Renisenb looked back at the cliff and the sealed tomb chamber.

“So that is the end,” she murmured. A feeling of relief swept over her. She had feared she hardly knew what! Some last minute outburst or accusation? But everything had gone with commendable smoothness. Nofret was duly buried with all the rites of religion.

It was the end.

Henet said below her breath: “I hope so, I’m sure I hope so, Renisenb.”

Renisenb turned on her.

“What do you mean, Henet?”

Henet avoided her eyes.

“I just said I hoped that it was the end. Sometimes what you think is an end is only a beginning. And that wouldn’t do at all.”

Renisenb said angrily: “What are you talking about, Henet? What are you hinting at?”

“I’m sure I never hint, Renisenb. I wouldn’t do such a thing. Nofret’s buried and everyone’s satisfied. So everything is as it should be.”

Renisenb demanded: “Did my father ask you what you thought about Nofret’s death?”

“Yes, indeed, Renisenb. Most particular, he was, that I should tell him exactly what I thought about it all.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“Well, of course I said it was an accident. What else could it have been? You don’t think for a minute, I said, that anyone in your family would harm the girl, do you? They wouldn’t dare, I said. They’ve far too much respect for you. Grumble they might, but nothing more, I said. You can take it from me, I said, that there’s been nothing of that kind!”

Henet nodded her head and chuckled.

“And my father believed you?”

Again Henet nodded with a good deal of satisfaction.

“Ah your father knows how devoted I am to his interests. He’ll always take old Henet’s word for anything. He appreciates me if none of the rest of you do. Ah well, my devotion to all of you is its own reward. I don’t expect thanks.”

“You were devoted to Nofret, too,” said Renisenb.

“I’m sure I don’t know what gave you that idea, Renisenb. I had to obey orders like everyone else.”

“She thought you were devoted to her.”

Henet chuckled again.

“Nofret wasn’t quite as clever as she thought herself. A proud girl—and a girl who thought she owned the earth. Well, she’s got the judges in the underworld to satisfy now—and a pretty face won’t help her there. At any rate we’re quit of her. At least,” she added under her breath and touching one of the amulets she wore, “I hope so.”

II

“Renisenb, I want to talk to you about Satipy.”

“Yes, Yahmose?”

Renisenb looked up sympathetically into her brother’s gentle, worried face.

Yahmose said slowly and heavily: “There is something very wrong the matter with Satipy. I cannot understand it.”

Renisenb shook her head sadly. She was at a loss to find anything comforting to say.

“I have noticed this change in her for some time,” went on Yahmose. “She starts and trembles at any unaccustomed noise. She does not eat well. She creeps about as though—as though she were afraid of her own shadow. You must have noticed it, Renisenb?”

“Yes, indeed, we have all noticed it.”

“I have asked her if she is ill—if I should send for a physician—but she says there is nothing—that she is perfectly well.”

“I know.”

“So you have asked her that too? And she has said nothing to you—nothing at all?”

He laid stress on the words. Renisenb sympathized with his anxiety, but she could say nothing to help.

“She insists that she is quite well.”

Yahmose murmured. “She does not sleep well at night—she cries out in her sleep. Is she—could she have some sorrow that we know nothing about?”

Renisenb shook her head.

“I do not see how that is possible. There is nothing wrong with the children. Nothing has happened here—except, of course, Nofret’s death—and Satipy would hardly grieve for that,” she added drily.

Yahmose smiled faintly.

“No, indeed. Quite the contrary. Besides, this has been coming on for some time. It began, I think, before Nofret’s death.”

His tone was a little uncertain and Renisenb looked at him quickly. Yahmose said with mild persistence:

“Before Nofret’s death, don’t you think so?”

“I did not notice it until afterwards,” said Renisenb, slowly.

“And she has said nothing to you—you are sure?”

Renisenb shook her head. “But you know, Yahmose, I do not think Satipy is ill. It seems to me more that she is—afraid.”

“Afraid?” exclaimed Yahmose, in great astonishment. “But why should Satipy be afraid? And of what? Satipy has always had the courage of a lion.”

“I know,” said Renisenb, helplessly. “We have always thought so—but people change—it is queer.”

“Does Kait know anything—do you think? Has Satipy spoken to her?”

“She would be more likely to talk to her than to me—but I do not think so. In fact, I am sure of it.”

“What does Kait think?”

“Kait? Kait never thinks about anything.”

All Kait had done, Renisenb was reflecting, was to take advantage of Satipy’s unusual meekness by grabbing for herself and her children the finest of the newly woven linen—a thing she would never have been allowed to do had Satipy been her usual self. The house would have resounded with passionate disputings! The fact that Satipy had given it up with hardly a murmur had impressed Renisenb more than anything else that could have happened.

“Have you spoken to Esa?” Renisenb asked. “Our grandmother is wise about women and their ways.”

“Esa,” said Yahmose with some slight annoyance, “merely bids me be thankful for the change. She says it is too much to hope that Satipy will continue to be so sweetly reasonable.”

Renisenb said with some slight hesitation, “Have you asked Henet?”

“Henet?” Yahmose frowned. “No, indeed. I would not speak of such things to Henet. She takes far too much upon herself as it is. My father spoils her.”

“Oh, I know that. She is very tiresome. But all the same—well—” Renisenb hesitated—“Henet usually knows things.”

Yahmose said slowly: “Would you ask her, Renisenb? And tell me what she says?”

“If you like.”

Renisenb put her query at a moment when she had Henet to herself. They were on their way to the weaving sheds. Rather to her surprise the question seemed to make Henet uneasy. There was none of her usual avidity to gossip.

She touched an amulet she was wearing and glanced over her shoulder.

“It’s nothing to do with me, I’m sure . . . It’s not for me to notice whether any one’s themselves or not. I mind my own business. If there’s trouble I don’t want to be mixed up in it.”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

Henet gave her a quick, sideways glance.

“None, I hope. None that need concern us, anyway. You and I, Renisenb, we’ve nothing to reproach ourselves with. That’s a great consolation to me.”

“Do you mean that Satipy—what do you mean?”

“I don’t mean anything at all, Renisenb—and please don’t start making out that I do. I’m little better than a servant in this house, and it’s not my business to give my opinion about things that are nothing to do with me. If you ask me, it’s a change for the better, and if it stops at that, well, we’ll all do nicely. Now, please, Renisenb, I’ve got to see that they’re marking the date properly on the linen. So careless as they are, these women, always talking and laughing and neglecting their work.”

Unsatisfied, Renisenb watched her dart away into the weaving shed. She herself walked slowly back to the house. Her entry into Satipy’s room was unheard, and Satipy sprang round with a cry as Renisenb touched her shoulder.

“Oh you startled me, I thought—”

“Satipy,” said Renisenb. “What is the matter? Won’t you tell me? Yahmose is worried about you and—”

Satipy’s fingers flew to her lips. She said, stammering nervously, her eyes wide and frightened: “Yahmose? What—what did he say?”

“He is anxious. You have been calling out in your sleep—”

“Renisenb!” Satipy caught her by the arm. “Did I say—What did I say?”

Her eyes seemed dilated with terror.

“Does Yahmose think—what did he tell you?”

“We both think that you are ill—or—or unhappy.”

“Unhappy?” Satipy repeated the word under her breath with a peculiar intonation.

“Are you unhappy, Satipy?”

“Perhaps . . . I don’t know. It is not that.”

“No. You’re frightened, aren’t you?”

Satipy stared at her with a sudden hostility.

“Why should you say that? Why should I be frightened? What is there to frighten me?”

“I don’t know,” said Renisenb. “But it’s true, isn’t it?”

With an effort Satipy recovered her old arrogant pose. She tossed her head.

“I’m not afraid of anything—of anyone! How dare you suggest such a thing to me, Renisenb? And I won’t have you talking me over with Yahmose. Yahmose and I understand each other.” She paused and then said sharply, “Nofret is dead—and a good

riddance. That's what I say. And you can tell anyone who asks you that that's what I feel about it."

"Nofret?" Renisenb uttered the name questioningly.

Satipy flew into a passion that made her seem quite like her old self.

"Nofret—Nofret—Nofret! I'm sick of the sound of that name. We don't need to hear it any more in this house—and thank goodness for that."

Her voice, which had been raised to its old shrill pitch, dropped suddenly as Yahmose entered. He said, with unusual sternness:

"Be quiet, Satipy. If my father heard you, there would be fresh trouble. How can you behave so foolishly?"

If Yahmose's stern and displeased tone was unusual, so too was Satipy's meek collapse. She murmured: "I am sorry, Yahmose . . . I did not think."

"Well, be more careful in future! You and Kait made most of the trouble before. You women have no sense!"

Satipy murmured again: "I am sorry. . . ."

Yahmose went out, his shoulders squared, and his walk far more resolute than usual as though the fact of having asserted his authority for once had done him good.

Renisenb went slowly along to old Esa's room. Her grandmother, she felt, might have some helpful counsel.

Esa, however, who was eating grapes with a good deal of relish, refused to take the matter seriously.

“Satipy? Satipy? Why all this fuss about Satipy? Do you all like being bullied and ordered about by her that you make such a to do because she behaves herself properly for once?”

She spat out the pips of the grape and remarked:

“In any case, it’s too good to last—unless Yahmose can keep it up.”

“Yahmose?”

“Yes. I hoped Yahmose had come to his senses at last and given his wife a good beating. It’s what she needs—and she’s the kind of woman who would probably enjoy it. Yahmose, with his meek, cringing ways, must have been a great trial to her.”

“Yahmose is a dear,” cried Renisenb, indignantly. “He is kind to everybody—and as gentle as a woman—if women are gentle,” she added, doubtfully.

Esa cackled.

“A good afterthought, granddaughter. No, there’s nothing gentle about women—or if there is, Isis help them! And there are few women who care for a kind, gentle husband. They’d sooner have a handsome, blustering brute like Sobek—he’s the one to take a girl’s fancy. Or a smart young fellow like Kameni—hey, Renisenb? The flies in the courtyard don’t settle on him for long! He’s got a pretty taste in love songs, too. Eh? Hee, hee, hee.”

Renisenb felt her cheeks going red.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said with dignity.

“You all think old Esa doesn’t know what’s going on! I know all right.” She peered at Renisenb with her semi-blind eyes. “I know, perhaps, before you do, child. Don’t be angry. It’s the way of life, Renisenb. Khay was a good brother to you—but he sails his boat now in the Field of Offerings. The sister will find a new brother who spears his fish in our own River—not that Kameni would be much good. A reed pen and a papyrus roll are his fancy. A personable young man, though—with a pretty taste in songs. But for all that I’m not sure he’s the man for you. We don’t know much about him—he’s a Northerner. Imhotep approves of him—but then I’ve always thought Imhotep was a fool. Anyone can get round him by flattery. Look at Henet!”

“You are quite wrong,” said Renisenb with dignity.

“Very well, then, I’m wrong. You father is not a fool.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant—”

“I know what you meant, child.” Esa grinned. “But you don’t know the real joke. You don’t know how good it is to sit at ease like I do, and to be done with all this business of brothers and sisters, and loving and hating. To eat a well-cooked fat quail or a reed bird, and then a cake with honey, and some well-cooked leeks and celery and wash it down with wine from Syria—and have never a care in the world. And look on at all the turmoil and heartaches and know that none of that can affect you any more. To see your son make a fool of himself over a handsome girl, and to see her set the whole place by the ears—it made me laugh, I can tell you! In a way, you know, I liked that girl! She had the devil in her all right—the way she

touched them all on the raw. Sobek like a pricked bladder—Ipy made to look a child—Yahmose shamed as a bullied husband. It's like the way you see your face in a pool of water—she made them see just how they looked to the world at large. But why did she hate you, Renisenb? Answer me that.”

“Did she hate me?” Renisenb spoke doubtfully. “I—tried once to be friends.”

“And she'd have none of it? She hated you all right, Renisenb.”

Esa paused and then asked sharply:

“Would it be because of Kameni?”

The colour rose in Renisenb's face: “Kameni? I do not know what you mean.”

Esa thoughtfully: “She and Kameni both came from the North, but it was you Kameni watched across the courtyard.”

Renisenb said abruptly:

“I must go and see to Teti.”

Esa's shrill, amused cackle followed her. Her cheeks hot, Renisenb sped across the courtyard towards the lake.

Kameni called to her from the porch:

“I have made a new song, Renisenb. Stay and hear it.”

She shook her head and hurried on. Her heart was beating angrily. Kameni and Nofret. Nofret and Kameni. Why let old Esa, with her

malicious love of mischief, put these ideas into her head? And why should she care?

Anyway what did it matter? She cared nothing for Kameni, nothing at all. An impertinent young man with a laughing voice and shoulders that reminded her of Khay.

Khay . . . Khay.

She repeated his name insistently—but for once no image came before her eyes. Khay was in another world. He was in the Field of Offerings. . . .

On the porch Kameni was singing softly:

“I will say to Ptah: Give me my sister tonight . . .”

III

“Renisenb!”

Hori had repeated her name twice before she heard him and turned from her contemplation of the Nile.

“You were lost in thought, Renisenb, what were you thinking about?”

Renisenb said with defiance:

“I was thinking of Khay.”

Hori looked at her for a minute or two—then he smiled:

“I see,” he said.

Renisenb had an uncomfortable feeling that he did see!

She said with a sudden rush:

“What happens when you are dead? Does anyone really know? All these texts—all these things that are written on coffins—some of them are so obscure they seem to mean nothing at all. We know that Osiris was killed and that his body was joined together again, and that he wears the white crown, and because of him we need not die—but sometimes, Hori, none of it seems real—and it is all so confused. . . .”

Hori nodded gently.

“But what really happens after you are dead—that is what I want to know?”

“I cannot tell you, Renisenb. You should ask a priest these questions.”

“He would just give me the usual answers. I want to know.”

Hori said gently, “We shall none of us know until we are dead ourselves. . . .”

Renisenb shivered.

“Don’t—don’t say that!”

“Something has upset you, Renisenb?”

“It was Esa.” She paused and then said, “Tell me, Hori, did—did Kamen and Nofret know each other well before—they came

here?”

Hori stood quite still for a moment, then as he walked by Renisenb’s side, back towards the house, he said, “I see. So that is how it is. . . .”

“What do you mean—‘that is how it is?’ I only asked you a question.”

“To which I do not know the answer. Nofret and Kamenî knew each other in the North—how well, I do not know.”

He added gently: “Does it matter?”

“No, of course not,” said Renisenb. “It is of no importance at all.”

“Nofret is dead.”

“Dead and embalmed and sealed up in her tomb! And that is that!”

Hori continued calmly:

“And Kamenî—does not seem to grieve. . . .”

“No,” said Renisenb, struck by this aspect of the question.

“That is true.” She turned to him impulsively. “Oh Hori, how—how comforting a person you are!”

He smiled.

“I mended little Renisenb’s lion for her. Now—she has other toys.”

Renisenb skirted the house as they came to it.

“I don’t want to go in yet. I feel I hate them all. Oh, not really, you understand. But just because I am cross—and impatient and everyone is so odd. Can we not go up to your Tomb? It is so nice up there—one is—oh, above everything.”

“That is clever of you, Renisenb. That is what I feel. The house and the cultivation and the farming lands—all that is below one, insignificant. One looks beyond all that—to the River—and beyond again—to the whole of Egypt. For very soon now Egypt will be one again—strong and great as she was in the past.”

Renisenb murmured vaguely:

“Oh—does it matter?”

Hori smiled.

“Not to little Renisenb. Only her own lion matters to Renisenb.”

“You are laughing at me, Hori. So it does matter to you?”

Hori murmured: “Why should it? Yes, why should it? I am only a ka-priest’s man of business. Why should I care if Egypt is great or small?”

“Look.” Renisenb drew his attention to the cliff above them.

“Yahmose and Satipy have been up to the Tomb. They are coming down now.”

“Yes,” said Hori. “There were some things to be cleared away, some rolls of linen that the embalmers did not use. Yahmose said he would get Satipy to come up and advise him what to do about them.”

The two of them stood there looking at the two descending the path above.

It came to Renisenb suddenly that they were just approaching the spot from which Nofret must have fallen.

Satipy was ahead. Yahmose a little way behind her.

Suddenly Satipy turned her head to speak to Yahmose. Perhaps, Renisenb thought, she was saying to him that this must be the place where the accident occurred.

And then, suddenly, Satipy stiffened in her tracks. She stood as though frozen, staring back along the path. Her arms went up as though at some dreadful sight or as though to ward off a blow. She cried out something, stumbled, swayed, and then, as Yahmose sprang towards her, she screamed, a scream of terror, and plunged forward off the edge, headlong to the rocks below. . . .

Renisenb, her hand to her throat, watched the fall unbelievably.

Satipy lay, a crumpled mass, just where the body of Nofret had lain.

Rousing herself, Renisenb ran forward to her. Yahmose was calling and running down the path.

Renisenb reached the body of her sister-in-law and bent over it. Satipy's eyes were open, the eyelids fluttering. Her lips were moving, trying to speak. Renisenb bent closer over her. She was appalled by the glazed terror in Satipy's eyes.

Then the dying woman's voice came. It was just a hoarse croak.

“Nofret . . .”

Satipy’s head fell back. Her jaw dropped.

Hori had turned to meet Yahmose. The two men came up together.

Renisenb turned to her brother.

“What did she call out, up there, before she fell?”

Yahmose’s breath was coming in short jerks—he could hardly speak. . . .

“She looked past me—over my shoulder—as though she saw someone coming along the path—but there was no one—there was no one there.”

Hori assented:

“There was no one. . . .”

Yahmose’s voice dropped to a low, terrified whisper:

“And then she called out—”

“What did she say?” Renisenb demanded, impatiently.

“She said—she said . . .” His voice trembled . . . “Nofret. . . .”

Eleven

FIRST MONTH OF SUMMER 12TH DAY

“So that is what you meant?”

Renisenb flung the words at Hori more as an affirmation than as a question.

She added softly under her breath with growing comprehension and horror:

“It was Satipy who killed Nofret. . . .”

Sitting with her chin supported by her hands in the entrance to Hori’s little rock chamber next to the Tomb, Renisenb stared down at the valley below.

She thought dreamily how true the words were she had uttered yesterday—(was it really only such a short time ago?—) From up here the house below and the busy hurrying figures had no more significance nor meaning than an ants’ nest.

Only the sun, majestic in power, shining overhead—only the slim streak of pale silver that was the Nile in this morning light—only these were eternal and enduring. Khay had died, and Nofret and Satipy—and some day she and Hori would die. But Ra would still rule the heavens and travel by night in his barque through the Underworld to the dawning of the next day. And the River would still flow, flow from beyond Elephantine and down past Thebes and

past the village and to lower Egypt where Nofret had lived and been gay and light of heart, and on to the great waters and so away from Egypt altogether.

Satipy and Nofret. . . .

Renisenb pursued her thoughts aloud since Hori had not answered her.

“You see, I was so sure that Sobek—”

She broke off.

Hori said thoughtfully: “The preconceived idea.”

“And yet it was stupid of me,” Renisenb went on. “Henet told me, or more or less told me, that Satipy had gone walking this way and she said that Nofret had come up here. I ought to have seen how obvious it was that Satipy had followed Nofret—that they had met on the path—and that Satipy had thrown her down. She had said, only a short while before, that she was a better man than any of my brothers.”

Renisenb broke off and shivered.

“And when I met her—” she resumed, “I should have known then. She was quite different—she was frightened. She tried to persuade me to turn back with her. She didn’t want me to find Nofret’s body. I must have been blind not to realize the truth. But I was so full of fear about Sobek. . . .”

“I know. It was seeing him kill that snake.”

Renisenb agreed eagerly.

“Yes, that was it. And then I had a dream . . . Poor Sobek—how I have misjudged him. As you say, threatening is not doing. Sobek has always been full of boastful talk. It was Satipy who was always bold and ruthless and not afraid of action. And then ever since—the way she has gone about like a ghost—it has puzzled us all—why did we not think of the true explanation?”

She added, with a quick upward glance:

“But you did?”

“For some time,” said Hori, “I have felt convinced that the clue to the truth of Nofret’s death was in Satipy’s extraordinary change of character. It was so remarkable that there had to be something to account for it.”

“And yet you said nothing?”

“How could I, Renisenb? What could I ever prove?”

“No, of course not.”

“Proofs must be solid brick walls of fact.”

“Yet once you said,” Renisenb argued, “that people didn’t really change. But now you admit that Satipy did change.”

Hori smiled at her.

“You should argue in the Nomarch’s courts. No, Renisenb, what I said was true enough—people are always themselves. Satipy, like

Sobek, was all bold words and talk. She, indeed, might go on from talk to action—but I think she is one of those who cannot know a thing or what it is like until it has happened. In her life up to that particular day, she had never had anything to fear. When fear came, it took her unawares. She learned then that courage is the resolution to face the unforeseen—and she had not got that courage.”

Renisenb murmured in a low voice:

“When fear came . . . Yes, that is what has been with us ever since Nofret died. Satipy has carried it in her face for us all to see. It was there, staring from her eyes when she died . . . when she said ‘Nofret . . .’ It was as though she saw—”

Renisenb stopped herself. She turned her face to Hori, her eyes wide with a question. “Hori, what did she see? There on the path. We saw nothing! There was nothing.”

“Not for us—no.”

“But for her? It was Nofret she saw—Nofret come to take her revenge. But Nofret is dead and her tomb is sealed. What then did she see?”

“The picture that her own mind showed her.”

“You are sure? Because if not—”

“Yes, Renisenb, if not?”

“Hori—” Renisenb stretched out her hand. “Is it ended now? Now that Satipy is dead? Is it truly ended?”

He held her hand in both of his in a comforting clasp.

“Yes, yes, Renisenb—surely. And you at least need not be afraid.”

“Renisenb murmured under her breath:

“But Esa says that Nofret hated me. . . .”

“Nofret hated you?”

“Esa says so.”

“Nofret was good at hating,” said Hori. “Sometimes I think she hated every person in this house. But you at least did nothing against her.”

“No—no, that is true.”

“And therefore, Renisenb, there is nothing in your mind to rise up against you in judgement.”

“You mean, Hori, that if I were to walk down this path alone—at sunset—at that same time when Nofret died—and if I were to turn my head—I should see nothing? I should be safe?”

“You will be safe, Renisenb, because if you walk down the path, I will walk with you and no harm shall come to you.”

But Renisenb frowned and shook her head.

“No, Hori. I will walk alone.”

“But why, little Renisenb? Will you not be afraid?”

“Yes,” said Renisenb, “I think I shall be afraid. But all the same that is what has to be done. They are all trembling and shaking in the house and running to the Temples to buy amulets and crying out that it is not well to walk on this path at the hour of sundown. But it was not magic that made Satipy sway and fall—it was fear—fear because of an evil thing that she had done. For it is evil to take away life from someone who is young and strong and who enjoys living. But I have not done any evil thing, and so even if Nofret did hate me, her hate cannot harm me. That is what I believe. And anyway if one is to live always in fear it would be better to die—so I will overcome fear.”

“These are brave words, Renisenb.”

“They are perhaps rather braver than I feel, Hori.” She smiled up at him. She rose to her feet. “But it has been good to say them.”

Hori rose and stood beside her. “I shall remember these words of yours, Renisenb. Yes, and the way you threw back your head when you said them. They show the courage and the truth that I have always felt was in your heart.”

He took her hand in his.

“Look, Renisenb. Look out from here across the valley to the River and beyond. That is Egypt, our land. Broken by war and strife for many long years, divided into petty kingdoms, but now—very soon—to come together and form once more a united land—Upper and Lower Egypt once again welded into one—I hope and believe to recover her former greatness! In those days, Egypt will need men and women of heart and courage—women such as you, Renisenb. It is not men like Imhotep, for ever preoccupied with his own

narrow gains and losses, nor men like Sobek, idle and boastful, nor boys like Ipy who thinks only of what he can gain for himself, no, nor even conscientious, honest sons like Yahmose whom Egypt will need in that hour. Sitting here, literally amongst the dead, reckoning up gains and losses, casting accounts, I have come to see gains that cannot be reckoned in terms of wealth, and losses that are more damaging than loss of a crop . . . I look at the River and I see the life blood of Egypt that has existed before we lived and that will exist after we die . . . Life and death, Renisenb, are not of such great account. I am only Hori, Imhotep's man of business, but when I look out over Egypt I know a peace—yes, and an exultation that I would not exchange to be Governor of the Province. Do you understand at all what I mean, Renisenb?"

"I think so, Hori—a little You are different from the others down there—I have known that for some time. And sometimes when I am with you here, I can feel what you feel—but dimly—not very clearly. But I do know what you mean. When I am here the things down there," she pointed, "do not seem to matter any longer. The quarrels and the hatreds and the incessant bustle and fuss. Here one escapes from all that."

She paused, her brow puckering, and went on, stammering a little.

"Sometimes I—I am glad to have escaped. And yet—I do not know—there is something—down there—that calls me back."

Hori dropped her hand and stepped back a pace.

He said gently:

"Yes—I see—Kamenî singing in the courtyard."

“What do you mean, Hori? I was not thinking of Kamenī.”

“You may not have been thinking of him. But all the same, Renisenb, I think it is his songs that you are hearing without knowing it.”

Renisenb stared at him, her brow puckered.

“What extraordinary things you say, Hori. One could not possibly hear him singing up here. It is much too far away.”

Hori sighed gently and shook his head. The amusement in his eyes puzzled her. She felt a little angry and bewildered because she could not understand.

Twelve

FIRST MONTH OF SUMMER 23RD DAY

“Can I speak with you a minute, Esa?”

Esa peered sharply towards Henet who stood in the doorway of the room, an ingratiating smile upon her face.

“What is it?” the old woman asked sharply.

“It’s nothing really—at least I don’t suppose so—but I thought I’d just like to ask—”

Esa cut her short. “Come in, then, come in. And you—” she tapped the little black slave girl, who was threading beads, on the shoulder with her stick—“go to the kitchen. Get me some olives—and make me a drink of pomegranate juice.”

The little girl ran off and Esa beckoned Henet impatiently.

“It’s just this, Esa.”

Esa peered down at the article Henet was holding out to her. It was a small jewel box with a sliding lid, the top fastened with two buttons.

“What about it?”

“It’s hers. And I found it now—in her room.”

“Who are you talking about? Satipy?”

“No, no, Esa. The other.”

“Nofret, you mean? What of it?”

“All her jewels and her toilet vases and her perfume jars—everything—was buried with her.”

Esa twirled the string from the buttons and opened the box. In it was a string of small carnelian beads and half of a green glazed amulet which had been broken in two.

“Pooh,” said Esa. “Nothing much here. It must have been overlooked.”

“The embalmers’ men took everything away.”

“Embalmers’ men aren’t any more reliable than anyone else. They forgot this.”

“I tell you, Esa—this wasn’t in the room when last I looked in.”

Esa looked up sharply at Henet.

“What are you trying to make out? That Nofret has come back from the Underworld and is here in the house? You’re not really a fool, Henet, though you sometimes like to pretend you’re one. What pleasure do you get from spreading these silly magical tales?”

Henet was shaking her head portentously.

“We all know what happened to Satipy—and why! ”

“Maybe we do,” said Esa. “And maybe some of us knew it before! Eh, Henet? I’ve always had an idea you knew more about how Nofret came to her death than the rest of us.”

“Oh, Esa, surely you wouldn’t think for a moment—”

Esa cut her short.

“What wouldn’t I think? I’m not afraid of thinking, Henet. I’ve seen Satipy creeping about the house for the last two months looking frightened to death—and it’s occurred to me since yesterday that someone might have been holding the knowledge over her head—threatening maybe to tell Yahmose—or Imhotep himself—”

Henet burst into a shrill clamour of protestations and exclamations. Esa closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair.

“I don’t suppose for a moment you’d ever admit you did such a thing. I’m not expecting you to.”

“Why should I? That’s what I ask you—why should I?”

“I’ve not the least idea,” said Esa. “You do a lot of things, Henet, for which I’ve never been able to find a satisfactory reason.”

“I suppose you think I was trying to make her bribe me to silence. I swear by the Nine Gods of the Ennead—”

“Do not trouble the Gods. You’re honest enough, Henet—as honesty goes. And it may be that you knew nothing about how Nofret came to her death. But you know most things that go on in this house. And if I were going to do any swearing myself, I’d

swear that you put this box in Nofret's room yourself—though why I can't imagine. But there's some reason behind it . . . You can deceive Imhotep with your tricks, but you can't deceive me. And don't whine! I'm an old woman and I cannot stand people whining. Go and whine to Imhotep. He seems to like it, though Ra alone knows why!"

"I will take the box to Imhotep and tell him—"

"I'll hand the box to him myself. Be off with you, Henet, and stop spreading these silly superstitious tales. The house is a more peaceful place without Satipy. Nofret dead has done more for us than Nofret living. But now that the debt is paid, let everyone return to their everyday tasks."

II

"What is all this?" Imhotep demanded as he came fussily into Esa's room a few minutes later. "Henet is deeply distressed. She came to me with the tears running down her face. Why nobody in the house can show that devoted woman the most ordinary kindness—"

Esa, unmoved, gave a cackle of laughter.

Imhotep went on:

"You have accused her, I understand, of stealing a box—a jewel box."

"Is that what she told you? I did nothing of the sort. Here is the box. It seems it was found in Nofret's room."

Imhotep took it from her.

“Ah yes, it is one I gave her.” He opened it. “H’m, nothing much inside. Very careless of the embalmers not to have included it with the rest of her personal belongings. Considering the prices Ipi and Montu charge, one could at least expect no carelessness. Well, this all seems to me a great fuss about nothing—”

“Quite so.”

“I will give the box to Kait—no, to Renisenb. She always behaved with courtesy towards Nofret.”

He sighed.

“How impossible it seems for a man to get any peace. These women—endless tears or else quarrels and bickerings.”

“Ah well, Imhotep, there is at least one woman less now!”

“Yes, indeed. My poor Yahmose! All the same, Esa—I feel that—er—it may be all for the best. Satipy bore healthy children, it is true, but she was in many ways a most unsatisfactory wife. Yahmose, of course, gave in to her far too much. Well, well, all that is over now. I must say that I have been much pleased with Yahmose’s behaviour of late. He seems much more self-reliant—less timid—and his judgement on several points has been excellent—quite excellent. . . .”

“He was always a good, obedient boy.”

“Yes, yes—but inclined to be slow and somewhat afraid of responsibility.”

Esa said drily: "Responsibility is a thing you have never allowed him to have!"

"Well, all that will be changed now. I am arranging a deed of association and partnership. It will be signed in a few days' time. I am associating with myself all my three sons."

"Surely not Ipy?"

"He would be hurt to be left out. Such a dear, warmhearted lad."

"There is certainly nothing slow about him," observed Esa.

"As you say. And Sobek too—I have been displeased with him in the past, but he has really turned over a new leaf of late. He no longer idles his time away, and he defers more to my judgement and to that of Yahmose."

"This is indeed a hymn of praise," said Esa. "Well, Imhotep, I must say that I think you are doing the right thing. It was bad policy to make your sons discontented. But I still think that Ipy is too young for what you propose. It is ridiculous to give a boy of that age a definite position. What hold will you have over him?"

"There is something in that, certainly." Imhotep looked thoughtful.

Then he roused himself.

"I must go. There are a thousand things to see to. The embalmers are here—there are all the arrangements to make for Satipy's burial. These deaths are costly—very costly. And following so quickly one upon the other!"

“Oh well,” said Esa consolingly, “we’ll hope this is the last of them—until my time comes!”

“You will live many years yet, I hope, my dear mother.”

“I’m sure you hope so,” said Esa with a grin. “No economy over me, if you please! It wouldn’t look well! I shall want a good deal of equipment to amuse me in the other world. Plenty of food and drink and a lot of models of slaves—a richly ornamented gaming board, perfume sets and cosmetics, and I insist on the most expensive canopic jars—the alabaster ones.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Imhotep changed his position nervously from one foot to the other. “Naturally all respect will be paid when the sad day comes. I must confess that I feel rather differently about Satipy. One does not want a scandal, but really, in the circumstances—”

Imhotep did not finish his sentence but hurried away.

Esa smiled sardonically as she realized that that one phrase “in the circumstances” was the nearest Imhotep would ever get towards admitting that an accident did not fully describe the way his valued concubine met her death.

Thirteen

FIRST MONTH OF SUMMER 25TH DAY

With the return of the members of the family from the Nomarch's court, the deed of association duly ratified, a general spirit of hilarity was felt. The exception was undoubtedly Ipy who had, at the last moment, been excluded from participation on the ground of his extreme youth. He was sullen in consequence and purposefully absented himself from the house.

Imhotep, in excellent spirits, called for a pitcher of wine to be brought out on to the porch where it was placed in the big wine stand.

"You shall drink, my son," he declared, clapping Yahmose on the shoulder. "Forget for the moment your sorrow in bereavement. Let us think only of the good days that are to come."

Imhotep, Yahmose, Sobek and Hori drank the toast. Then word was brought that an ox had been stolen, and all four men went hurriedly off to investigate the matter.

When Yahmose re-entered the courtyard, an hour later, he was tired and hot. He went to where the wine jar still stood in the stand. He dipped a bronze cup into it and sat down on the porch, gently sipping the wine. A little later Sobek came striding in and exclaimed with pleasure.

“Ha,” he said. “Now for more wine! Let us drink to our future which is at last well assured. Undoubtedly this is a joyful day for us, Yahmose!”

Yahmose agreed.

“Yes, indeed. It will make life easier in every way.”

“You are always so moderate in your feelings, Yahmose.”

Sobek laughed as he spoke and dipping a cup in the wine, he tossed it off, smacking his lips as he put it down.

“Let us see now whether my father will be as much of a stick in the mud as ever, or whether I shall be able to convert him to up-to-date methods.”

“I should go slowly if I were you,” Yahmose counselled. “You are always so hotheaded.”

Sobek smiled at his brother affectionately. He was in high good humour.

“Old slow-and-sure,” he said, scoffingly.

Yahmose smiled, not at all put out.

“It is the best way in the end. Besides, my father has been very good to us. We must do nothing to cause him worry.”

Sobek looked at him curiously.

“You are really fond of our father? You are an affectionate creature, Yahmose! Now I—I care for nobody—for nobody, that is, but

Sobek, long life to him!”

He took another draught of wine.

“Be careful,” Yahmose said warningly. “You have eaten little today. Sometimes, then, when one drinks wine—”

He broke off with a sudden contortion of the lips.

“What is the matter, Yahmose?”

“Nothing—a sudden pain—I, it is nothing. . . .”

But he raised a hand to wipe his forehead which was suddenly bedewed with moisture.

“You do not look well.”

“I was quite all right just now.”

“So long as nobody has poisoned the wine.” Sobek laughed at his own words and stretched out his arm towards the jar. Then, in the very act, his arm stiffened, his body bent forward in a sudden spasm of agony. . . .

“Yahmose,” he gasped. “Yahmose . . . I—too. . . .”

Yahmose, slipping forward, was bent double. A half stifled cry came from him.

Sobek was now contorted with pain. He raised his voice.

“Help. Send for a physician—a physician. . . .”

Henet came running out of the house.

“You called? What was it that you said? What is it?”

Her alarmed cries brought others.

The two brothers were both groaning with pain.

Yahmose said faintly:

“The wine—poison—send for a physician. . . .”

Henet uttered a shrill cry:

“More misfortune. In truth this house is accursed. Quick! Hurry! Send to the Temple for the Divine Father Mersu who is a skilled physician of great experience.”

II

Imhotep paced up and down the central hall of the house. His fine linen robe was soiled and limp, he had neither bathed nor changed. His face was drawn with worry and fear.

From the back of the house came a low sound of keening and weeping—the women’s contribution to the catastrophe that had overrun the household—Henet’s voice led the mourners.

From a room at the side, the voice of the physician and priest Mersu was heard raised as he strove over the inert body of Yahmose. Renisenb, stealing quietly out of the women’s quarters into the central hall, was drawn by the sound. Her feet took her to

the open doorway and she paused there, feeling a healing balm in the sonorous words that the Priest was reciting.

“Oh Isis, great of magic, loose thou me, release thou me from all things bad, evil and red, from the stroke of a God, from the stroke of a Goddess, from dead man or dead woman, from a male foe, or a female foe who may oppose himself to me. . . .”

A faint sigh came fluttering from Yahmose’s lips.

In her heart Renisenb joined in the prayer.

“Oh Isis—oh great Isis—save him—save my brother Yahmose—Thou who art great of magic. . . .”

Thoughts passed confusedly through her mind, raised there by the words of the incantation.

“From all things bad, evil and red . . . That is what has been the matter with us here in this house—yes, red thoughts, angry thoughts—the anger of a dead woman.”

She spoke within the confines of her thoughts, directly addressing the person in her mind.

“I was not Yahmose who harmed you, Nofret—and though Satipy was his wife, you cannot hold him responsible for her actions—he never had any control over her—no one had. Satipy who harmed you is dead. Is that not enough? Sobek is dead—Sobek who only spoke against you, yet never actually harmed you. Oh Isis, do not let Yahmose also die—save him from the vengeful hatred of Nofret.”

Imhotep, pacing distractedly up and down, looked up and saw his daughter and his face relaxed with affection.

“Come here, Renisenb, dear child.”

She ran to him and he put his arms around her.

“Oh, father, what do they say?”

Imhotep said heavily: “They say that in Yahmose’s case there is hope. Sobek—you know?”

“Yes, yes. Have you not heard us wailing?”

“He died at dawn,” said Imhotep. “Sobek, my strong, handsome son.” His voice faltered and broke.

“Oh it is wicked, cruel—could nothing be done?”

“All was done that could be. Potions forcing him to vomit. Administration of the juice of potent herbs. Sacred amulets were applied and mighty incantations spoken. All was of no avail. Mersu is a skilled physician. If he could not save my son—then it was the will of the Gods that he should not be saved.”

The priest physician’s voice rose in a final high chant and he came out from the chamber, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“Well?” Imhotep accosted him eagerly.

The physician said gravely: “By the favour of Isis your son will live. He is weak, but the crisis of the poison has passed. The evil influence is on the wane.”

He went on, slightly altering his tone to a more everyday intonation.

“It is fortunate that Yahmose drank much less of the poisoned wine. He sipped his wine whereas it seems your son Sobek tossed it off at a draught.”

Imhotep groaned.

“You have there the difference between them. Yahmose timid, cautious and slow in his approach to everything. Even eating and drinking. Sobek, always given to excess, generous, free-handed—alas! imprudent.”

Then he added sharply:

“And the wine was definitely poisoned?”

“There is no doubt of that, Imhotep. The residue was tested by my young assistants—of the animals treated with it, all died more or less swiftly.”

“And yet I who had drunk the same wine not an hour earlier have felt no ill effects.”

“It was doubtless not poisoned at that time—the poison was added afterwards.”

Imhotep struck the palm of one hand with his other hand clenched into a fist.

“No one,” he declared, “no one living would dare to poison my sons here under my roof! Such a thing is impossible. No living

person, I say!”

Mersu inclined his head slightly. His face became inscrutable.

“Of that, Imhotep, you are the best judge.”

Imhotep stood scratching nervously behind his ear.

“There is a tale I would like you to hear,” he said abruptly.

He clapped his hands and as a servant ran in, he called:

“Bring the herd boy here.”

He turned back to Mersu, saying:

“This is a boy whose wits are not of the best. He takes in what people say to him with difficulty and he has not full possession of his faculties. Nevertheless he has eyes and his eye-sight is good, and he is moreover devoted to my son Yahmose who has been gentle with him and kindly to his infirmity.”

The servant came back, dragging by the hand a thin, almost black-skinned boy, clad in a loin-cloth, with slightly squinting eyes and a frightened, witless face.

“Speak,” said Imhotep sharply. “Repeat what you told me just now.”

The boy hung his head, his fingers began kneading the cloth round his waist.

“Speak,” shouted Imhotep.

Esa came hobbling in, supported by her stick and peering with her dim eyes.

“You are terrifying the child. Here, Renisenb, give him this jujube. There, boy, tell us what you saw.”

The boy gazed from one to the other of them.

Esa prompted him.

“It was yesterday, as you passed the door of the courtyard—you saw—what did you see?”

The boy shook his head, glancing sideways. He murmured:

“Where is my Lord Yahmose?”

The priest spoke with authority and kindness:

“It is the wish of your Lord Yahmose that you tell us your tale. Have no fear. No one will hurt you.”

A gleam of light passed over the boy’s face. “My Lord Yahmose has been good to me. I will do what he wishes.”

He paused. Imhotep seemed about to break out, but a look from the physician restrained him.

Suddenly the boy spoke, nervously, in a quick gabble, and with a look from side to side as he spoke, as though he was afraid that some unseen presence would overhear him.

“It was the little donkey—protected by Seth and always up to mischief. I ran after him with my stick. He went past the big gate of

the courtyard, and I looked in through the gate at the house. There was no one on the porch, but there was a wine-stand there. And then a woman, a lady of the house, came out upon the porch from the house. She walked to the wine jar and she held out her hands over it and then—and then—she went back into the house, I think. I do not know. For I heard footsteps and turned and saw in the distance my Lord Yahmose coming back from the fields. So I went on seeking the little donkey, and my Lord Yahmose went into the courtyard.”

“And you did not warn him,” cried Imhotep, angrily. “You said nothing.”

The boy cried out, “I did not know anything was wrong. I saw nothing but the lady standing there smiling down as she spread out her hands over the wine jar . . . I saw nothing. . . .”

“Who was this lady, boy?” asked the priest.

With a vacant expression the boy shook his head.

“I do not know. She must have been one of the ladies of the house. I do not know them. I have the herds at the far end of the cultivation. She wore a dress of dyed linen.”

Renisenb started.

“A servant, perhaps?” suggested the priest, watching the boy.

The boy shook his head positively.

“She was not a servant . . . She had a wig on her head and she wore jewels—a servant does not wear jewels.”

“Jewels?” demanded Imhotep. “What jewels?”

The boy replied eagerly and confidently as though at last he had overcome his fear and was quite sure of what he was saying.

“Three strings of beads with gold lions hanging from them in front. . . .”

Esa’s stick clattered to the floor. Imhotep uttered a stifled cry.

Mersu said threateningly: “If you are lying, boy—”

“It is the truth. I swear it is the truth.” The boy’s voice rose shrill and clear.

From the side chamber where the ill man lay, Yahmose called feebly: “What is all this?”

The boy darted through the open door and crouched down by the couch on which Yahmose lay.

“Master, they will torture me.”

“No, no.” Yahmose turned his head with difficulty on the curved, wooden headrest. “Do not let the child be hurt. He is simple, but honest. Promise me.”

“Of course, of course,” said Imhotep. “There is no need. It is clear the boy has told all that he knows—and I do not think he is inventing. Be off with you, child, but do not return to the far herds. Stay near the house so that we can summon you again if we need you.”

The boy rose to his feet. He bent a reluctant glance upon Yahmose.

“You are ill, Lord Yahmose?”

Yahmose smiled faintly.

“Have no fear. I am not going to die. Go now—and be obedient to what you have been told.”

Smiling happily now, the boy went off. The priest examined Yahmose’s eyes and felt the rate at which the blood was coursing under the skin. Then, recommending him to sleep, he went with the others out into the central hall again.

He said to Imhotep:

“You recognize the description the boy gave?”

Imhotep nodded. His deep, bronze cheeks showed a sickly plum colour.

Renisenb said: “Only Nofret ever wore a dress of dyed linen. It was a new fashion she brought with her from the cities in the North. But those dresses were buried with her.”

Imhotep said:

“And the three strings of beads with the lions’ heads in gold were what I gave her. There is no other such ornament in the house. It was costly and unusual. All her jewellery, with the exception of a trumpery string of carnelian beads, was buried with her and is sealed in her tomb.”

He flung out his arms.

“What persecution—what vindictiveness is this! My concubine whom I treated well, to whom I paid all honour, whom I buried with the proper rites, sparing no expense. I have eaten and drunk with her in friendship—to that all can bear witness. She had had nothing of which to complain—I did indeed more for her than would have been considered right and fitting. I was prepared to favour her to the detriment of my sons who were born to me. Why, then, should she thus come back from the dead to persecute me and my family?”

Mersu said gravely:

“It seems that it is not against you personally that the dead woman wishes evil. The wine when you drank it was harmless. Who in your family did injury to your dead concubine?”

“A woman who is dead,” Imhotep answered shortly.

“I see. You mean the wife of your son Yahmose?”

“Yes.” Imhotep paused, then broke out: “But what can be done, Reverend Father? How can we counteract this malice? Oh, evil day when I first took the woman into my house.”

“An evil day, indeed,” said Kait in a deep voice, coming forward from the entrance to the women’s quarters.

Her eyes were heavy with the tears she had shed, and her plain face had a strength and resolution which made it noticeable. Her voice, deep and hoarse, was shaken with anger.

“It was an evil day when you brought Nofret here, Imhotep, to destroy the cleverest and most handsome of your sons! She has brought death to Satipy and death to my Sobek, and Yahmose has only narrowly escaped. Who will be next? Will she spare even children—she who struck my little Ankh? Something must be done, Imhotep!”

“Something must be done,” Imhotep echoed, looking imploringly at the priest.

The latter nodded his head with calm assumption.

“There are ways and means, Imhotep. Once we are sure of our facts, we can go ahead. I have in mind your dead wife, Ashayet. She was a woman of influential family. She can invoke powerful interests in the Land of the Dead, who can intervene on your behalf and against whom the woman Nofret will have no power. We must take counsel together.”

Kait gave a short laugh.

“Do not wait too long. Men are always the same—Yes, even priests! Everything must be done according to law and precedent. But I say, act quickly—or there will be more dead beneath this roof.”

She turned and went out.

“An excellent woman,” murmured Imhotep. “A devoted mother to her children, a dutiful wife—but her manners, sometimes, are hardly what they should be—to the head of the house. Naturally at such a time I forgive her. We are all distraught. We hardly know what we are doing.”

He clasped his hands to his head.

“Some of us seldom do know what we are doing,” remarked Esa.

Imhotep shot an annoyed glance at her. The physician prepared to take his leave and Imhotep went out with him on to the porch, receiving instructions for the care of the sick man.

Renisenb, left behind, looked inquiringly at her grandmother.

Esa was sitting very still. She was frowning and the expression on her face was so curious that Renisenb asked timidly:

“What is it that you are thinking, grandmother?”

“Thinking is the word, Renisenb. Such curious things are happening in this house that it is very necessary for someone to think.”

“They are terrible,” said Renisenb with a shiver. “They frighten me.”

“They frighten me,” said Esa. “But not perhaps for the same reason.”

With the old familiar gesture, she pushed the wig on her head askew.

“But Yahmose will not die now,” said Renisenb. “He will live.”

Esa nodded.

“Yes, a Master Physician reached him in time. On another occasion, though, he may not be so lucky.”

“You think—there will be other happenings like this?”

“I think that Yahmose and you and Ipy—and perhaps Kait too, had better be very careful indeed what you eat and drink. See always that a slave tastes it first.”

“And you, grandmother?”

Esa smiled her sardonic smile.

“I, Renisenb, am an old woman, and I love life as only the old can, savouring every hour, every minute that is left to them. Of you all I have the best chance of life—because I shall be more careful than any of you.”

“And my father? Surely Nofret would wish no evil to my father?”

“Your father? I do not know . . . No, I do not know. I cannot as yet see clearly. Tomorrow, when I have thought about it all, I must speak once more with that herd boy. There was something about his story—”

She broke off, frowning. Then, with a sigh, she rose to her feet, and helping herself with her stick, limped slowly back to her own quarters.

Renisenb went into her brother's room. He was sleeping and she crept out again softly. After a moment's hesitation she went to Kait's quarters. She stood in the doorway unnoticed, watching Kait sing one of the children to sleep. Kait's face was calm and placid again—she looked so much as usual that for a moment Renisenb felt that the whole tragic occurrences of the last twenty-four hours were a dream.

She turned slowly away and went to her own apartment. On a table, amongst her own cosmetic boxes and jars, was the little jewel case that had belonged to Nofret.

Renisenb picked it up and stood looking at it as it lay on the palm of her hand. Nofret had touched it, had held it—it was her possession.

And again a wave of pity swept over Renisenb, allied to that queer sense of understanding. Nofret had been unhappy. As she had held this little box in her hand perhaps she had deliberately forced that unhappiness into malice and hatred . . . and even now that hatred was unabated . . . was still seeking revenge . . . Oh no, surely not—surely not!

Almost mechanically, Renisenb twisted the two buttons and slid back the lid. The carnelian beads were there and the broken amulet and something else. . . .

Her heart beating violently, Renisenb drew out a necklace of gold beads with gold lions in front. . . .

Fourteen

FIRST MONTH OF SUMMER 30TH DAY

The finding of the necklace frightened Renisenb badly.

On the impulse of the minute she replaced it quickly in the jewel box, slid home the lid and tied the string round the buttons again. Her instinct was to conceal her discovery. She even glanced fearfully behind her to make sure that no one had watched what she had been doing.

She passed a sleepless night, twisting to and fro uneasily and settling and resettling her head on the curved wooden headrest of her bed.

By the morning she had decided that she must confide in someone. She could not bear the weight of that disturbing discovery alone. Twice in the night she had started up, wondering if, perhaps, she might perceive Nofret's figure standing menacingly by her side. But there was nothing to be seen.

Taking the lion necklace from the jewel box, Renisenb hid it in the folds of her linen dress. She had only just done so when Henet came bustling in. Her eyes were bright and sharp with the pleasure of having fresh news to impart.

“Just imagine, Renisenb, isn't it terrible? That boy—the herd boy, you know—fast asleep this morning out by the cornbins and everyone shaking him and yelling in his ear—and now it seems that

he'll never wake again. It's as though he'd drunk the poppy juice—and maybe he did—but if so who gave it to him? Nobody here, that I'll be bound. And it's not likely he'd take it himself. Oh, we might have known how it would be yesterday.” Henet's hand went to one of the many amulets she wore. “Amün protect us against the evil spirits of the dead! The boy told what he saw. He told how he saw Her. And so She came back and gave him poppy juice to close his eyes for ever. Oh, She's very powerful, that Nofret! She's been abroad, you know, out of Egypt. I dare swear she got to know all sorts of outlandish primitive magic. We're not safe in this house—none of us are safe. Your father should give several bulls to Amün—a whole herd if necessary—this isn't a time for economy. We've got to protect ourselves. We must appeal to your mother—that's what Imhotep is planning to do. The Priest Mersu says so. A solemn Letter to the Dead. Hori is busy now drawing up the terms of it. Your father was for addressing it to Nofret—appealing to her. You know: “Most excellent Nofret, what evil thing have I ever done to you—” etc. But as the Divine Father Mersu pointed out, it needs stronger measures than that. Now your mother, Ashayet, was a great lady. Her mother's brother was the Nomarch and her brother was Chief Butler to the Vizier of Thebes. If it's once brought to her knowledge, she'll see to it that a mere concubine isn't allowed to destroy her own children! Oh yes, we'll get justice done. As I say, Hori is drawing up the plea to her now.”

It had been Renisenb's intention to seek out Hori and tell him about her finding of the lion necklace. But if Hori were busy with the priests at the Temple of Isis it was hopeless to think of trying to get hold of him alone.

Should she go to her father? Dissatisfied, Renisenb shook her head. Her old childish belief in her father's omnipotence had quite passed

away. She realized now how quickly in times of crisis he went to pieces—a fussy pomposity replacing any real strength. If Yahmose were not ill, she could have told him, though she doubted if he would have any very practical counsels to offer. He would probably insist on the matter being laid before Imhotep.

And that, Renisenb felt with increasing urgency, was at all costs to be avoided. The first thing Imhotep would do would be to blazon the whole thing abroad, and Renisenb had a strong instinct for keeping it secret—though for what reason she would have been hard put to it to say.

No, it was Hori's advice she wanted. Hori would, as always, know the right thing to do. He would take the necklace from her and at the same time take her worry and perplexity away. He would look at her with those kind grave eyes and instantly she would feel that now all was well. . . .

For a moment Renisenb was tempted to confide in Kait—but Kait was unsatisfactory, she never listened properly. Perhaps if one got her away from her children—no, it wouldn't do. Kait was nice, but stupid.

Renisenb thought: "There is Kameni . . . and there is my grandmother."

Kameni . . . ? There was something pleasurable in the thought of telling Kameni. She could see his face quite clearly in her thoughts—its expression changing from a merry challenge to interest—to apprehension on her behalf . . . Or would it not be on her behalf?

Why this insidious lurking suspicion that Nofret and Kameni had been closer friends than had appeared on the surface? Because

Kameni had helped Nofret in her campaign of detaching Imhotep from his family? He had protested that he could not help himself. But was that true? It was an easy thing to say. Everything Kameni said sounded easy and natural and right. His laugh was so gay that you wanted to laugh too. The swing of his body was so graceful as he walked—the turn of his head on those smooth bronze shoulders—his eyes that looked at you—that looked at you—Renisenb's thoughts broke off confusedly. Kameni's eyes were not like Hori's eyes, safe and kind. They demanded, they challenged.

Renisenb's thoughts had brought blood into her cheeks and a sparkle into her eye. But she decided that she would not tell Kameni about the finding of Nofret's necklace. No, she would go to Esa. Esa had impressed her yesterday. Old as she was, the old woman had a grasp of things and a shrewd practical sense that was unshared by anyone else in the family.

Renisenb thought: "She is old. But she will know."

II

At the first mention of the necklace, Esa glanced quickly round, placed a finger to her lips and held out her hand. Renisenb fumbled in her dress, drew out the necklace and laid it in Esa's hand. Esa held it for a moment close to her dim eyes, then stowed it away in her dress. She said in a low, authoritative voice:

"No more now. Talking in this house is talking to a hundred ears. I have lain awake most of the night thinking, and there is much that must be done."

"My father and Hori have gone to the Temple of Isis to confer with the Priest Mersu on the drawing up of a petition to my mother for

her intervention.”

“I know. Well, let your father concern himself with the spirits of the dead. My thoughts deal with the things of this world. When Hori returns, bring him here to me. There are things that must be said and discussed—and Hori I can trust.”

“Hori will know what to do,” said Renisenb happily.

Esa looked at her curiously.

“You go often to see him at the Tomb, do you not? What do you talk about, you and Hori?”

Renisenb shook her head vaguely.

“Oh, the River—and Egypt—and the way the light changes and the colours of the sand below and the rocks . . . But very often we do not talk at all. I just sit there and it is peaceful, with no scolding voices and no crying children and no bustle of coming and going. I can think my own thoughts and Hori does not interrupt them. And then, sometimes, I look up and find him watching me and we both smile . . . I can be happy up there.”

Esa said slowly:

“You are lucky, Renisenb. You have found the happiness that is inside everybody’s own heart. To most women happiness means coming and going, busied over small affairs. It is care for one’s children and laughter and conversation and quarrels with other women and alternate love and anger with a man. It is made up of small things strung together like beads on a string.”

“Has your life been like that, grandmother?”

“Most of it. But now that I am old and sit much alone and my sight is dim and I walk with difficulty—then I realize that there is a life within as well as a life without. But I am too old now to learn the true way of it—and so I scold my little maid and enjoy good food hot from the kitchen and savour all the many different kinds of bread that we bake and enjoy ripe grapes and the juice from the pomegranates. These things remain when others go. The children that I have loved most are now dead. Your father, Ra help him, was always a fool. I loved him when he was a toddling little boy, but now he irritates me with his airs of importance. Of my grandchildren I love you, Renisenb—and talking of grandchildren, where is Ipy? I have not seen him today or yesterday.”

“He is very busy superintending the storing of the grain. My father left him in charge.”

Esa grinned.

“That will please our young gander. He will be strutting about full of his own importance. When he comes in to eat tell him to come to me.”

“Yes, Esa.”

“For the rest, Renisenb, silence. . . .”

III

“You wanted to see me, grandmother?”

Ipy stood smiling and arrogant, his head held a little on one side, a flower held between his white teeth. He looked very pleased with himself and with life generally.

“If you can spare a moment of your valuable time,” said Esa, screwing her eyes up to see better and looking him up and down.

The acerbity of her tone made no impression on Ipy.

“It is true that I am very busy today. I have to oversee everything since my father has gone to the Temple.”

“Young jackals bark loud,” said Esa.

But Ipy was quite imperturbable.

“Come, grandmother, you must have more to say to me than that.”

“Certainly I have more to say. And to begin with, this is a house of mourning. Your brother Sobek’s body is already in the hands of the embalmers. Yet your face is as cheerful as though this was a festival day.”

Ipy grinned.

“You are no hypocrite, Esa. Would you have me be one? You know very well that there was no love lost between me and Sobek. He did everything he could to thwart and annoy me. He treated me as a child. He gave me all the most humiliating and childish tasks in the fields. Frequently he jeered and laughed at me. And when my father would have associated me with him in partnership, together with my elder brothers, it was Sobek who persuaded him not to do so.”

“What makes you think it was Sobek who persuaded him?” asked Esa sharply.

“Kameni told me so.”

“Kameni?” Esa raised her eyebrows, pushed her wig on one side and scratched her head. “Kameni indeed. Now I find that interesting.”

“Kameni said he had it from Henet—and we all agree that Henet always knows everything.”

“Nevertheless,” said Esa drily, “this is an occasion when Henet was wrong in her facts. Doubtless both Sobek and Yahmose were of opinion that you were too young for the business—but it was I—yes, I who dissuaded your father from including you.”

“You, grandmother? The boy stared at her in frank surprise. Then a dark scowl altered the expression of his face, the flower fell from his lips. “Why should you do that? What business was it of yours?”

“My family’s business is my business.”

“And my father listened to you?”

“Not at the moment,” said Esa drily. “But I will teach you a lesson, my handsome child. Women work roundabout—and they learn (if they are not born with the knowledge) to play on the weaknesses of men. You may remember I sent Henet with the gaming board to the porch in the cool of the evening.”

“I remember. My father and I played together. What of it?”

“This. You played three games. And each time, being a much cleverer player, you beat your father.”

“Yes.”

“That is all,” said Esa, closing her eyes. “Your father, like all inferior players, did not like being beaten—especially by a chit of a boy. So he remembered my words—and he decided that you were certainly too young to be given a share in the partnership.”

Ipy stared at her for a moment. Then he laughed—not a very pleasant laugh.

“You are clever, Esa,” he said. “Yes, you may be old, but you are clever. Decidedly you and I have the brains of the family. You have pegged out in the first match on our gaming board. But you will see, I shall win the second. So look to yourself, grandmother.”

“I intend to,” said Esa. “And in return for your words, let me advise you to look to yourself. One of your brothers is dead, the other has been near to death. You also are your father’s son—and you may go the same way.”

Ipy laughed scornfully.

“There is little fear of that.”

“Why not? You also threatened and insulted Nofret.”

“Nofret!” Ipy’s scorn was unmistakable.

“What is in your mind?” demanded Esa sharply.

“I have my ideas, grandmother. And I can assure you that Nofret and her spirit tricks will not worry me. Let her do her worst.”

There was a shrill wail behind him and Henet ran in crying out:

“Foolish boy—imprudent child. Defying the dead! And after we’ve all had a taste of her quality! And not so much as an amulet on you for protection!”

“Protection? I will protect myself. Get out of my way, Henet, I’ve got work to do. Those lazy peasants shall know what it is to have a real master over them.”

Pushing Henet aside, Ipy strode out of the room.

Esa cut short Henet’s wails and lamentations.

“Listen to me, Henet, and stop exclaiming about Ipy. He may know what he is doing or he may not. His manner is very odd. But answer me this, did you tell Kamenî that it was Sobek who had persuaded Imhotep not to include Ipy in the deed of association?”

Henet’s voice dropped to its usual whining key.

“I’m sure I’m far too busy in the house to waste my time running about telling people things—and telling Kamenî of all people. I’m sure I’d never speak a word to him if he didn’t come and speak to me. He’s got a pleasant manner, as you must admit yourself, Esa—and I’m not the only one who thinks so—oh dear no! And if a young widow wants to make a new contract, well, she usually fancies a handsome young man—though what Imhotep would say I’m sure I don’t know. Kamenî is only a junior scribe when all is said and done.”

“Never mind what Kameni is or isn’t! Did you tell him that it was Sobek who opposed Ipy being made a partner in the association?”

“Well, really, Esa, I can’t remember what I may or may not have said. I didn’t actually go and tell anyone anything, that much is sure. But a word passed here and there, and you know yourself that Sobek was saying—and Yahmose too for that matter, though, of course, not so loud nor so often—that Ipy was a mere boy and that it would never do—and for all I know Kameni may have heard him say it himself and not got it from me at all. I never gossip—but after all, a tongue is given one to speak with and I’m not a deaf mute.”

“That you most certainly are not,” said Esa. “A tongue, Henet, may sometimes be a weapon. A tongue may cause a death—may cause more than one death. I hope your tongue, Henet, has not caused a death.”

“Why, Esa, the things you say! And what’s in your mind? I’m sure I never say a word to anybody that I wouldn’t be willing to let the whole world overhear. I’m so devoted to the whole family—I’d die for any one of them. Oh, they underestimate old Henet’s devotion. I promised their dear mother—”

“Ha,” said Esa, cutting her short, “here comes my plump reed bird, cooked with leeks and celery. It smells delicious—cooked to a turn. Since you’re so devoted, Henet, you can take a little mouthful from one side—just in case it’s poisoned.”

“Esa!” Henet gave a squeal. “Poisoned! How can you say such things! And cooked in our very own kitchen.”

“Well,” said Esa, “someone’s got to taste it—just in case. And it had better be you, Henet, since you’re so willing to die for any member of the family. I don’t suppose it would be too painful a death. Come on, Henet. Look how plump and juicy and tasty it is. No, thanks, I don’t want to lose my little slave girl. She’s young and merry. You’ve passed your best days, Henet, and it wouldn’t matter so much what happened to you. Now then—open your mouth . . . Delicious, isn’t it? I declare—you’re looking quite green in the face. Didn’t you like my little joke? I don’t believe you did. Ha ha, he he.”

Esa rolled about with merriment, then composing herself suddenly, she set greedily to work to eat her favourite dish.

Fifteen

SECOND MONTH OF SUMMER 1ST DAY

The consultation at the Temple was over. The exact form of the petition had been drawn up and amended. Hori and two Temple scribes had been busily employed. Now at last the first step had been taken.

The priest signed that the draft of the petition should be read out.

“To the Most Excellent Spirit Ashayet. This from your brother and husband. Has the sister forgotten her brother? Has the mother forgotten the children that were born to her? Does not the most excellent Ashayet know that a spirit of evil life menaces her children? Already is Sobek, her son, passed to Osiris by means of poison.

“I treated you in life with all honour. I gave you jewels and dresses, unguents and perfumes and oils for your limbs. Together we ate of good foods, sitting in peace and amity with tables loaded before us. When you were ill, I spared no expense. I procured for you a Master Physician. You were buried with all honour and with due ceremonies and all things needful for your life in the hereafter were provided for you—servants and oxen and food and drink and jewels and raiment. I mourned for you many years—and after long long years only did I take a concubine so that I might live as befits a man not yet old.

“This concubine it is that now does evil to your children. Do you not know of this? Perchance you are in ignorance. Surely if Ashayet knows, she will be swift to come to the aid of the sons born to her.

“Is it that Ashayet knows, but the evil is still done because the concubine is strong in evil magic? Yet surely it is against your will, most excellent Ashayet. Therefore reflect that in the Field of Offerings you have great relatives and powerful helpers. The great and noble Ipi, Chief Butler to the Visier. Invoke his aid! Also your mother’s brother, the great and powerful Meriptah, the Nomarch of the Province. Acquaint him with the shameful truth. Let it be brought before his court. Let witnesses be summoned. Let them testify against Nofret that she has done this evil. Let judgement be given and may Nofret be condemned and let it be decreed that she do no more evil in this house.

“Oh, excellent Ashayet, if you are angry with this your brother Imhotep in that he did listen to this woman’s evil persuasions and did threaten to do injustice to your children that were born of you, then reflect that it is not he alone that suffers, but your children also. Forgive your brother Imhotep aught that he has done for the sake of the children.”

The chief Scribe stopped reading. Mersu nodded approval.

“It is well expressed. Nothing, I think, has been left out.” Imhotep rose.

“I thank you, Reverend Father. My offering shall reach you before tomorrow’s sun sets—cattle, oil and flax. Shall we fix the day after

that for the Ceremony—the placing of the inscribed bowl in the offering chamber of the Tomb?”

“Make it three days from now. The bowl must be inscribed and the preparations made for the necessary rites.”

“As you will. I am anxious that no more mischief should befall.”

“I can well understand your anxiety, Imhotep. But have no fear. The good spirit Ashayet will surely answer this appeal, and her kinsfolk have authority and power and can deal justice where it is so richly deserved.”

“May Isis allow that it be so! I thank you, Mersu—and for your care and cure of my son Yahmose. Come, Hori, we have much that must be seen to. Let us return to the house. Ah—this petition does indeed lift a weight off my mind. The excellent Ashayet will not fail her distracted brother.”

II

When Hori entered the courtyard, bearing his rolls of papyrus, Renisenb was watching for him. She came running from the lake.

“Hori!”

“Yes, Renisenb?”

“Will you come with me to Esa? She has been waiting and wants you.”

“Of course. Let me just see if Imhotep—”

But Imhotep had been buttonholed by Ipy and father and son were engaged in close conversation.

“Let me put down these scrolls and these other things and I will come with you, Renisenb.”

Esa looked pleased when Renisenb and Hori came to her.

“Here is Hori, grandmother. I brought him to you at once.”

“Good. Is the air pleasant outside?”

“I—I think so.” Renisenb was slightly taken aback.

“Then give me my stick. I will walk a little in the courtyard.”

Esa seldom left the house and Renisenb was surprised. She guided the old woman with a hand below her elbow. They went through the central hall and out on to the porch.

“Will you sit here, grandmother?”

“No, child, I will walk as far as the lake.”

Esa’s progress was slow, but although she limped, she was strong on her feet and showed no signs of tiredness. Looking about her, she chose a spot where flowers had been planted in a little bed near the lake and where a sycamore fig tree gave welcome shade.

Then, once established, she said with grim satisfaction:

“There! Now we can talk and no one can overhear our talk.”

“You are wise, Esa,” said Hori approvingly.

“The things which have to be said must be known only to us three. I trust you, Hori. You have been with us since you were a little boy. You have always been faithful and discreet and wise. Renisenb here is the dearest to me of all my son’s children. No harm must come to her, Hori.”

“No harm shall come to her, Esa.”

Hori did not raise his voice, but the tone of it and the look in his face as his eyes met the old woman’s amply satisfied her.

“That is well said, Hori—quietly and without heat—but as one who means what he says. Now tell me what has been arranged today?”

Hori recounted the drawing up of the petition and the gist of it. Esa listened carefully.

“Now listen to me, Hori, and look at this.” She drew the lion necklace from her dress and handed it to him. She added: “Tell him, Renisenb, where you found this.”

Renisenb did so. Then Esa said: “Well, Hori, what do you think?”

Hori was silent for a moment, then he asked: “You are old and wise, Esa. What do you think?”

Esa said: “You are not of those, Hori, who do not like to speak rash words unaccompanied with facts. You knew, did you not, from the first how Nofret came to her death?”

“I suspected the truth, Esa. It was only suspicion.”

“Exactly. And we have only suspicion now. Yet here, by the lake, between us three, suspicion can be spoken—and afterwards not referred to again. Now it seems to me that there are three explanations of the tragic things that happened. The first is that the herd boy spoke the truth and that what he saw was indeed Nofret’s ghost returned from the dead and that she had an evil determination to revenge herself still further by causing increased sorrow and grief to our family. That may be so—it is said by priests and others to be possible and we do know that illnesses are caused by evil spirits. But it seems to me, who am an old woman and not inclined to believe all that priests and others say, that there are other possibilities.”

“Such as?” asked Hori.

“Let us admit that Nofret was killed by Satipy, that some time afterwards at that same spot Satipy had a vision of Nofret and that, in her fear and guilt, she fell and died. That is all clear enough. But now let us come to another assumption; which is that after that someone, for a reason we have yet to discover, wished to cause the death of two of Imhotep’s sons. That someone counted on a superstitious dread ascribing the deed to the spirit of Nofret—a singularly convenient assumption.”

“Who would want to kill Yahmose or Sobek?” cried Renisenb.

“Not a servant,” said Esa, “they would not dare. That leaves us with but few people from whom to chose.”

“One of ourselves? But, grandmother, that could not be!”

“Ask Hori,” said Esa drily. “You notice he makes no protest.”

Renisenb turned to him. “Hori—surely—”

Hori shook his head gravely.

“Renisenb, you are young and trusting. You think that everyone you know and love is just as they appear to you. You do not know the human heart and the bitterness—yes, and evil—it may contain.”

“But who—which one—?”

Esa broke in briskly:

“Let us go back to this tale told by the herd boy. He saw a woman dressed in a dyed linen dress wearing Nofret’s necklace. Now if it was no spirit, then he saw exactly what he said he did—which means that he saw a woman who was deliberately trying to appear like Nofret. It might have been Kait—it might have been Henet—it might have been you, Renisenb! From that distance it might have been anyone wearing a woman’s dress and a wig. Hush—let me go on. The other possibility is that the boy was lying. He told a tale that he had been taught to tell. He was obeying someone who had the right to command him and he may have been too dull-witted even to realize the point of the story he was bribed or cajoled to tell. We shall never know now because the boy is dead—in itself a suggestive point. It inclines me to the belief that the boy told a story he had been taught. Questioned closely, as he would have been today, that story could have been broken down—it is easy to discover with a little patience whether a child is lying.”

“So you think we have a poisoner in our midst?” asked Hori.

“I do,” said Esa. “And you?”

“I think so too,” said Hori.

Renisenb glanced from one to the other of them in dismay.

Hori went on:

“But the motive seems to me far from clear.”

“I agree,” said Esa. “That is why I am uneasy. I do not know who is threatened next.”

Renisenb broke in: “But—one of us?” Her tone was still incredulous.

Esa said sternly: “Yes, Renisenb—one of us. Henet or Kait or Ipy, or Kameni, or Imhotep himself—yes, or Esa or Hori or even—” she smiled—“Renisenb.”

“You are right, Esa,” said Hori. “We must include ourselves.”

“But why?” Renisenb’s voice held wondering horror. “Why?”

“If we knew that, we’d know very nearly all we wanted to know,” said Esa. “We can only go by who was attacked. Sobek, remember, joined Yahmose unexpectedly after Yahmose had commenced to drink. Therefore it is certain that whoever did it wanted to kill Yahmose, less certain that that person wished also to kill Sobek.”

“But who could wish to kill Yahmose?” Renisenb spoke with sceptical intonation. “Yahmose, surely, of us all would have no enemies. He is always quiet and kindly.”

“Therefore, clearly, the motive was not one of personal hate,” said Hori. “As Renisenb says, Yahmose is not the kind of man who makes enemies.”

“No,” said Esa. “The motive is more obscure than that. We have here either enmity against the family as a whole, or else there lies behind all these things that covetousness against which the Maxims of Ptahotep warn us. It is, he says, a bundle of every kind of evil and a bag of everything that is blameworthy!”

“I see the direction in which your mind is tending, Esa,” said Hori. “But to arrive at any conclusion we shall have to make a forecast of the future.”

Esa nodded her head vigorously and her large wig slipped over one ear. Grotesque though this made her appearance, no one was inclined to laugh.

“Make such a forecast, Hori,” she said.

Hori was silent for a moment or two, his eyes thoughtful. The two women waited. Then, at last, he spoke.

“If Yahmose had died as intended, then the principal beneficiaries would have been Imhotep’s remaining sons, Sobek and Ipy—some part of the estate would doubtless have been set aside for Yahmose’s children, but the administration of it would have been in their hands—in Sobek’s hands in particular. Sobek would undoubtedly have been the greatest gainer. He would presumably have functioned as ka-priest during Imhotep’s absences and would succeed to that office after Imhotep’s death. But though Sobek benefited, yet Sobek cannot be the guilty person since he himself drank of the poisoned wine so heartily that he died. Therefore, as

far as I can see, the deaths of these two can benefit only one person (at the moment, that is) and that person is Ipy.”

“Agreed,” said Esa. “But I note, Hori, that you are far-seeing—and I appreciate your qualifying phrase. But let us consider Ipy. He is young and impatient, he has in many ways a bad disposition, he is at the age when the fulfilment of what he desires seems to him the most important thing in life. He felt anger and resentment against his elder brothers and considered that he had been unjustly excluded from participation in the family partnership. It seems, too, that unwise things were said to him by Kameni—”

“Kameni?”

It was Renisenb who interrupted. Immediately she had done so she flushed and bit her lip. Hori turned his head to look at her. The long, gentle, penetrating look he gave her hurt her in some indefinable way. Esa craned her neck forward and peered at the girl.

“Yes,” she said. “By Kameni. Whether or not inspired by Henet is another matter. The fact remains that Ipy is ambitious and arrogant, was resentful of his brothers’ superior authority and that he definitely considers himself, as he told me long ago, the superior ruling intelligence of the family.”

Esa’s tone was dry.

Hori asked: “He said that to you?”

“He was kind enough to associate me with himself in the possession of a certain amount of intelligence.”

Renisenb demanded incredulously:

“You think Ipy deliberately poisoned Yahmose and Sobek?”

“I consider it a possibility, no more. This is suspicion that we talk now—we have not yet come to proof. Men have killed their brothers since the beginning of time, knowing that the Gods dislike such killing, yet driven by the evils of covetousness and hatred. And if Ipy did this thing, we shall not find it easy to get proof of what he did, for Ipy, I freely admit, is clever.”

Hori nodded.

“But as I say, it is suspicion we talk here, under the sycamore. And we will go on now to considering every member of the household in the light of suspicion. As I say, I exclude the servants because I do not believe for one moment that any one of them would dare do such a thing. But I do not exclude Henet.”

“Henet?” cried Renisenb. “But Henet is devoted to us all. She never stops saying so.”

“It is as easy to utter lies as truth. I have known Henet for many years. I knew her when she came here as a young woman with your mother. She was a relative of hers—poor and unfortunate. Her husband had not cared for her—and indeed Henet was always plain and unattractive—and had divorced her. The one child she bore died in infancy. She came here professing herself devoted to your mother, but I have seen her eyes watching your mother as she moved about the house and courtyard—and I tell you, Renisenb, there was no love in them. No, sour envy was nearer the mark—and as to her professions of love for you all, I distrust them.”

“Tell me, Renisenb,” said Hori. “Do you yourself feel affection towards Henet?”

“N-no,” said Renisenb unwillingly. “I cannot. I have often reproached myself because I dislike her.”

“Don’t you think that that is because, instinctively, you know her words are false? Does she ever show her reputed love for you by any real service? Has she not always fomented discord between you all by whispering and repeating things that are likely to wound and cause anger?”

“Yes—yes, that is true enough.”

Esa gave a dry chuckle.

“You have both eyes and ears in your head, most excellent Hori.”

Renisenb argued:

“But my father believes in her and is fond of her.”

“My son is a fool and always has been,” said Esa. “All men like flattery—and Henet applies flattery as lavishly as unguents are applied at a banquet! She may be really devoted to him—sometimes I think she is—but certainly she is devoted to no one else in this house.”

“But surely she would not—she would not kill,” Renisenb protested. “Why should she want to poison any of us? What good would it do her?”

“None. None. As to why—I know nothing of what goes on inside Henet’s head. What she thinks, what she feels, that I do not know. But I sometimes think that strange things are brewing behind that cringing, fawning manner. And if so, her reasons are reasons that we, you and I and Hori, would not understand.”

Hori nodded. “There is a rottenness that starts from within. I spoke to Renisenb once of that.”

“And I did not understand you,” said Renisenb. “But I am beginning to understand better now. It began with the coming of Nofret—I saw then how none of us were quite what I had thought us to be. It made me afraid . . . And now—” she made a helpless gesture with her hands—“everything is fear. . . .”

“Fear is only incomplete knowledge,” said Hori. “When we know, Renisenb, then there will be no more fear.”

“And then, of course, there is Kait,” proceeded Esa.

“Not Kait,” protested Renisenb. “Kait would not try to kill Sobek. It is unbelievable.”

“Nothing is unbelievable,” said Esa. “That at least I have learned in the course of my life. Kait is a thoroughly stupid woman and I have always mistrusted stupid women. They are dangerous. They can see only their own immediate surroundings and only one thing at a time. Kait lives at the core of a small world which is herself and her children and Sobek as her children’s father. It might occur to her quite simply that to remove Yahmose would be to enrich her children. Sobek has always been unsatisfactory in Imhotep’s eyes—he is rash, impatient of control and not amenable. Yahmose was the son on whom Imhotep relied. But with Yahmose gone, Imhotep

would have to rely on Sobek. She would see it, I think, quite simply like that.”

Renisenb shivered. In spite of herself she recognized a true description of Kait’s attitude to life. Her gentleness, her tenderness, her quiet loving ways were all directed to her own children. Outside herself and her children and Sobek, the world did not exist for her. She looked at it without curiosity and without interest.

Renisenb said slowly: “But surely she would have realized that it was quite possible for Sobek to come back, as he did, thirsty and also drink the wine?”

“No,” said Esa. “I don’t think that she would. Kait, as I say, is stupid. She would see only what she wanted to see—Yahmose drinking and dying and the business being put down to the magical intervention of our evil and beautiful Nofret. She would see only one simple thing—not various possibilities or probabilities, and since she did not want Sobek to die, it would never occur to her that he might come back unexpectedly.”

“And now Sobek is dead and Yahmose is living! How terrible that must be for her if what you suggest is true.”

“It is the kind of thing that happens to you when you are stupid,” said Esa. “Things go entirely differently from the way you planned them.”

She paused and then went on:

“And now we come to Kamenî.”

“Kameni?” Renisenb felt it necessary to say the word quietly and without protest. Once again she was uncomfortably aware of Hori’s eyes on her.

“Yes, we cannot exclude Kameni. He has no known motive for injuring us—but then what do we really know of him? He comes from the North—from the same part of Egypt as Nofret. He helped her, willingly or unwillingly, who can say?—to turn Imhotep’s heart against the children that had been born to him. I have watched him sometimes and in truth I can make little of him. He seems to me, on the whole, a commonplace young man with a certain shrewdness of mind, and also, besides being handsome, with a certain something that draws after him the eyes of women. Yes, women will always like Kameni and yet I think—I may be wrong—that he is not one of those who have a real hold on their hearts and minds. He seems always gay and lighthearted and he showed no great concern at the time of Nofret’s death.

“But all this is outward seeming. Who can tell what goes on in the human heart? A determined man could easily play a part . . . Does Kameni in reality passionately resent Nofret’s death, and does he seek to exact revenge for it? Since Satipy killed Nofret, must Yahmose, her husband, also die? Yes, and Sobek too, who threatened her—and perhaps Kait who persecuted her in petty ways, and Ipy who also hated her? It seems fantastic, but who can tell?”

Esa paused. She looked at Hori.

“Who can tell, Esa?”

Esa peered at him shrewdly.

“Perhaps you can tell, Hori? You think you know, do you not?”

Hori was silent for a moment, then he said:

“I have an idea of my own, yes, as to who poisoned that wine and why—but it is not as yet very clear—and indeed I do not see—” He paused for a minute, frowning, then shook his head. “No, I could make no definite accusation.”

“We talk only suspicion here. Go on, Hori, speak.”

Hori shook his head.

“No, Esa. It is only a nebulous thought . . . And if it were true then it is better for you not to know. The knowledge might be dangerous. And the same applies to Renisenb.”

“Then the knowledge is dangerous to you, Hori?”

“Yes, it is dangerous . . . I think, Esa, that we are all in danger—though Renisenb, perhaps, least.”

Esa looked at him for some time without speaking.

“I would give a great deal,” she said at last, “to know what is in your mind.”

Hori did not reply directly. He said, after a moment or two during which he seemed to be thinking:

“The only clue to what is in people’s minds is in their behaviour. If a man behaves strangely, oddly, is not himself—”

“Then you suspect him?” asked Renisenb.

“No,” said Hori. “That is just what I mean. A man whose mind is evil and whose intentions are evil is conscious of that fact and he knows that he must conceal it at all costs. He dare not, therefore, afford any unusual behaviour. . . .”

“A man?” asked Esa.

“Man or woman—it is the same.”

“I see,” said Esa. She threw him a very sharp glance. Then she said: “And what of us? What of suspicion where we three are concerned?”

“That, too, must be faced,” said Hori. “I have been much trusted. The making of contracts and the disposal of crops has been in my hands. As scribe I have dealt with all the accounts. It could be that I had falsified them—as Kamení discovered had been done in the North. Then Yahmose, it may be, might have been puzzled, he might have begun to suspect. Therefore it would be necessary for me to silence Yahmose.” He smiled faintly at his own words.

“Oh, Hori,” said Renisenb, “how can you say such things! No one who knew you would believe them.”

“No one, Renisenb, knows anyone else. Let me tell you that yet once more.”

“And I?” said Esa. “Where does suspicion point in my case? Well, I am old. When a brain grows old, it turns sick sometimes. It hates where it used to love. I may be weary of my children’s children and seek to destroy my own blood. It is an affliction of an evil spirit that happens sometimes to those who are old.”

“And I?” asked Renisenb. “Why should I try to kill my brothers whom I love?”

Hori said:

“If Yahmose and Sobek and Ipy were dead, then you would be the last of Imhotep’s children. He would find you a husband and all here would come to you—and you and your husband would be guardians to Yahmose’s and Sobek’s children.”

Then he smiled.

“But under the sycamore tree, we do not suspect you, Renisenb.”

“Under the sycamore tree, or not under the sycamore tree, we love you,” said Esa.

III

“So you have been outside the house?” said Henet, bustling in as Esa limped into the room. “A thing you have not done for almost a year!”

Her eyes looked inquisitively at Esa.

“Old people,” said Esa, “have whims.”

“I saw you sitting by the lake—with Hori and Renisenb.”

“Pleasant company, both of them. Is there ever anything you do not see, Henet?”

“Really, Esa, I don’t know what you mean! You were sitting there plain enough for all the world to see.”

“But not near enough for all the world to hear!”

Esa grinned and Henet bridled angrily.

“I don’t know why you’re so unkind to me, Esa! You’re always suggesting things. I’m much too busy seeing that things are done as they should be in this house to listen to other people’s conversations. What do I care what people say!”

“I’ve often wondered.”

“If it were not for Imhotep who does appreciate me—”

Esa cut in sharply:

“Yes, if it were not for Imhotep! It is on Imhotep you depend, is it not? If anything were to happen to Imhotep—”

It was Henet’s turn to interrupt.

“Nothing will happen to Imhotep!”

“How do you know, Henet? Is there such safety in this house? Something has happened to Yahmose and Sobek.”

“That is true—Sobek died—and Yahmose nearly died—”

“Henet!” Esa leaned forward. “Why did you smile when you said that?”

“I? Smile?” Henet was taken aback. “You are dreaming, Esa! Is it likely I should smile—at such a moment—talking of such a terrible thing!”

“It is true that I am nearly blind,” said Esa. “But I am not quite blind. Sometimes, by a trick of light, by a screwing up of the eyelids, I see very well. It can happen that if anyone is talking to a person they know cannot see well, they are careless. They permit themselves an expression of face that on other occasions they would not allow. So I ask you again: Why do you smile with such secret satisfaction?”

“What you say is outrageous—quite outrageous!”

“Now you are frightened.”

“And who would not be with the things going on in this house?” cried Henet shrilly. “We’re all afraid, I’m sure, with evil spirits returning from the dead to torment us! But I know what it is, you’ve been listening to Hori. What did he say about me?”

“What does Hori know about you, Henet?”

“Nothing—nothing at all. You’d better ask what do I know about him?”

Esa’s eyes grew sharp.

“Well, what do you know?”

Henet tossed her head.

“Ah, you all despise poor Henet! You think she’s ugly and stupid. But I know what’s going on! There are a lot of things I know—indeed there’s not much I don’t know of what goes on in this house. I may be stupid, but I can count how many beans are planted to a row. Maybe I see more than clever people like Hori do. When

Hori meets me anywhere he has a trick of looking as though I didn't exist, as though he saw something behind me, something that isn't there. He'd better look at me, that's what I say! He may think me negligible and stupid—but it's not always the clever ones who know everything. Satipy thought she was clever, and where is she now, I should like to know?"

Henet paused triumphantly—then a qualm seemed to pass over her, and she visibly cringed a little, glancing nervously at Esa.

But Esa seemed lost in some train of thought of her own. She had a shocked, almost frightened look of bewilderment on her face. She said slowly and musingly:

"Satipy. . . ."

Henet said in her old whining tone:

"I'm sorry, Esa, I'm sure, for losing my temper. Really, I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean anything of what I've been saying. . . ."

Looking up, Esa cut her short.

"Go away, Henet. Whether you meant what you said, or did not mean what you said does not really matter. But you have uttered one phrase which has awakened new thoughts in my mind . . . Go, Henet, and I warn you—Be careful of your words and actions. We want no more deaths in this house. I hope you understand."

IV

Everything is fear. . . .

Renisenb had found those words rising to her lips automatically during the consolation by the lake. It was only afterwards that she began to realize their truth.

She set out mechanically to join Kait and the children where they were clustered by the little pavilion, but found that her footsteps lagged and then ceased as if of their own volition.

She was afraid, she found, to join Kait, to look into that plain and placid face, in case she might fancy she saw there the face of a poisoner. She watched Henet bustle out on the porch and back again and her usual sense of repulsion was, she found, heightened. Desperately she turned towards the doorway of the courtyard, and a moment later encountered Ipy striding in, his head held high and a gay smile on his impudent face.

Renisenb found herself staring at him. Ipy, the spoilt child of the family, the handsome, wilful little boy she remembered when she had gone away with Khay. . . .

“Why, Renisenb, what is it? Why are you looking at me so strangely?”

“Was I?”

Ipy laughed.

“You are looking as half-witted as Henet.”

Renisenb shook her head.

“Henet is not half-witted. She is very astute.”

“She has plenty of malice, that I know. In fact she’s a nuisance about the house. I mean to get rid of her.”

Renisenb’s lips opened and closed. She whispered, “Get rid of her?”

“My dear sister, what is the matter with you? Have you, too, been seeing evil spirits like that miserable, half-witted black child?”

“You think everyone is half-witted!”

“That child certainly was. Well, it’s true I’m inclined to be impatient of stupidity. I’ve had too much of it. It’s no fun, I can tell you, being plagued with two slow-going elder brothers who can’t see beyond their own noses! Now that they are out of the way, and there is only my father to deal with, you will soon see the difference. My father will do what I say.”

Renisenb looked up at him. He looked unusually handsome and arrogant. There was a vitality about him, a sense of triumphant life and vigour, that struck her as above the normal. Some inner consciousness seemed to be affording him this vital sense of well-being.

Renisenb said sharply:

“My brothers are not both out of the way, as you put it. Yahmose is alive.”

Ipy looked at her with an air of contemptuous mockery.

“And I suppose you think he will get quite well again?”

“Why not?”

Ipy laughed.

“Why not? Well, let us say simply that I disagree with you. Yahmose is finished, done for—he may crawl about for a little and sit and moan in the sun. But he is no longer a man. He has recovered from the first effects of the poison, but you can see, yourself, he makes no further headway.”

“Then why doesn’t he?” Renisenb demanded. “The physician said it would only take a little time before he was quite strong and himself again.”

Ipy shrugged his shoulders.

“Physicians do not know everything. They talk wisely and use long words. Blame the wicked Nofret if you like—but Yahmose, your dear brother Yahmose, is doomed.”

“And have you no fear yourself, Ipy?”

“Fear? I?” The boy laughed, throwing back his handsome head.

“Nofret did not love you overwell, Ipy.”

“Nothing can harm me, Renisenb, unless I choose to let it! I am young still, but I am one of those people who are born to succeed. As for you, Renisenb, you would do well to be on my side, do you hear? You treat me, often, as an irresponsible boy. But I am more than that now. Every month will show a difference. Soon there will be no will but mine in this place. My father may give the orders,

but though his voice speaks them, the brain that conceives them will be mine!”

He took a step or two, paused, and said over his shoulder: “So be careful, Renisenb, that I do not become displeased with you.”

As Renisenb stood staring after him, she heard a footstep and turned to see Kait standing beside her.

“What was Ipy saying, Renisenb?”

Renisenb said slowly:

“He says that he will be master here soon.”

“Does he?” said Kait. “I think otherwise.”

V

Ipy ran lightly up the steps of the porch and into the house.

The sight of Yahmose lying on a couch seemed to please him. He said gaily:

“Well, how goes it, brother? Are we never to see you back on the cultivation? I cannot understand why everything has not gone to pieces without you!”

Yahmose said fretfully in a weak voice:

“I do not understand it at all. The poison is now eliminated. Why do I not regain my strength? I tried to walk this morning and my legs would not support me. I am weak—weak—and what is worse, I seem to grow weaker every day.”

Ipy shook his head with facile commiseration.

“That is indeed bad. And the physicians give no help?”

“Mersu’s assistant comes every day. He cannot understand my condition. I drink strong decoctions of herbs. The daily incantations are made to the goddess. Special food full of nourishment is prepared for me. There is no reason, so the physician assures me, why I should not rapidly grow strong. Yet instead, I seem to waste away.”

“That is too bad,” said Ipy.

He went on, singing softly under his breath till he came upon his father and Hori engaged with a sheet of accounts. Imhotep’s face, anxious and careworn, lightened at the sight of his much-loved youngest son.

“Here is my Ipy. What have you to report from the estate?”

“All goes well, father. We have been reaping the barley. A good crop.”

“Yes, thanks to Ra all goes well outside. Would it went as well inside. Still I must have faith in Ashayet—she will not refuse to aid us in our distress. I am worried about Yahmose. I cannot understand this lassitude—the unaccountable weakness.”

Ipy smiled scornfully.

“Yahmose was always a weakling,” he said.

“That is not so,” said Hori mildly. “His health has always been good.”

Ipy said assertively:

“Health depends on the spirit of a man. Yahmose never had any spirit. He was afraid, even, to give orders.”

“That is not so lately,” said Imhotep. “Yahmose has shown himself to be full of authority in these last months. I have been surprised. But this weakness in the limbs worries me. Mersu assured me that once the effects of the poison had worn off, recovery should be swift.”

Hori moved some of the papyrus aside.

“There are other poisons,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Imhotep wheeled round.

Hori spoke in a gentle, speculative voice.

“There are poisons known which do not act at once, with violence. They are insidious. A little taken every day accumulates in the system. Only after long months of weakness, does death come . . . There is a knowledge of such things among women—they use them sometimes to remove a husband and to make it seem as though his death were natural.”

Imhotep grew pale.

“Do you suggest that that—that—is what is the matter with Yahmose?”

“I am suggesting that it is a possibility. Though his food is now tasted by a slave before he gets it, such a precaution means nothing, since the amount in any one dish on any one day would cause no ill effect.”

“Folly,” cried Ipy, loudly. “Absolute folly! I do not believe there are such poisons. I have never heard of them.”

Hori raised his eyes. “You are very young, Ipy. There are still things you do not know.”

Imhotep exclaimed, “But what can we do? We have appealed to Ashayet. We have sent offerings to the Temple—not that I have ever had much belief in temples. It is women who are credulous about such things. What more can be done?”

Hori said thoughtfully:

“Let Yahmose’s food be prepared by one trustworthy slave, and let that slave be watched all the time.”

“But that means—that here in this house—”

“Rubbish,” shouted Ipy. “Absolute rubbish.”

Hori raised his eyebrows.

“Let it be tried,” he said. “We shall soon see if it is rubbish.”

Ipy went angrily out of the room. Hori stared thoughtfully after him with a perplexed frown on his face.

Ipy went out of the house in such a rage that he almost knocked over Henet.

“Get out of my way, Henet. You are always creeping about and getting in the way.”

“How rough you are, Ipy, you have bruised my arm.”

“A good thing. I am tired of you and your snivelling ways. The sooner you are out of this house for good the better—and I shall see that you go.”

Henet’s eyes flashed maliciously.

“So you would turn me out, would you? After all the care and love I have bestowed on you all. Devoted, I’ve been, to the whole family. Your father knows it well enough.”

“He’s heard about it enough, I’m sure! And so have we! In my opinion you’re just an evil-tongued old mischief maker. You helped Nofret with her schemes—that I know well enough. Then she died and you came fawning round us again. But you’ll see—in the end my father will listen to me and not to your lying tales.”

“You’re very angry, Ipy, what has made you angry?”

“Never mind.”

“You’re not afraid of something are you, Ipy? There are odd things going on here.”

“You can’t frighten me, you old cat.”

He flung himself past her and out of the house.

Henet turned slowly inwards. A groan from Yahmose attracted her attention. He had raised himself from the couch and was trying to walk. But his legs seemed to fail him almost at once, and but for Henet's rapid assistance he would have fallen to the ground.

"There, Yahmose, there. Lie back again."

"How strong you are, Henet. One would not think it to look at you." He settled back again with his head on the wooden headrest. "Thank you. But what is the matter with me? Why this feeling as though my muscles were turned into water?"

"The matter is that this house is bewitched. The work of a she-devil who came to us from the North. No good ever came out of the North."

Yahmose murmured with sudden despondency:

"I am dying. Yes, I am dying. . . ."

"Others will die before you," said Henet, grimly.

"What? What do you mean?" He raised himself on an elbow and stared at her.

"I know what I am saying." Henet nodded her head several times. "It is not you who will die next. Wait and see."

VII

"Why do you avoid me, Renisenb?"

Kameni planted himself directly in Renisenb's way. She flushed and found it difficult to give a suitable answer. It was true that she had deliberately turned aside when she saw Kameni coming.

"Why, Renisenb, tell me why?"

But she had no answer ready, could only shake her head dumbly.

Then she glanced up at him as he stood facing her. She had had a faint dread that Kameni's face, too, might seem different. It was with a curious gladness that she saw it unchanged, his eyes looked at her gravely and there was for once no smile upon his lips.

Before the look in his eyes her own fell. Kameni could always disturb her. His nearness affected her physically. Her heart beat a shade faster.

"I know why you avoid me, Renisenb."

She found her voice.

"I—was not avoiding you. I did not see you coming."

"That is a lie." He was smiling now, she could hear it in his voice.

"Renisenb, beautiful Renisenb."

She felt his warm, strong hand around her arm and immediately she shook herself free.

"Do not touch me! I do not like to be touched."

"Why do you fight against me, Renisenb? You know well enough the thing that is between us. You are young and strong and

beautiful. It is against nature that you should go on grieving for a husband all your life. I will take you away from this house. It is full of deaths and evil spells. You shall come away with me and be safe.”

“And suppose I do not want to come?” said Renisenb with spirit.

Kameni laughed. His teeth gleamed white and strong.

“But you do want to come, only you will not admit it! Life is good, Renisenb, when a sister and brother are together. I will love you and make you happy and you shall be a glorious field to me, your Lord. See, I shall no longer sing to Ptah, ‘Give me my sister tonight,’ but I shall go to Imhotep and say, ‘Give me my sister Renisenb.’ But I think it is not safe for you here, so I shall take you away. I am a good scribe and I can enter the household of one of the great nobles of Thebes if I wish, though actually I like the country life here—the cultivation and the cattle and the songs of the men who reap, and the little pleasure craft on the River. I would like to sail with you on the River, Renisenb. And we will take Teti with us. She is a beautiful, strong child and I will love her and be a good father to her. Come, Renisenb, what do you say?”

Renisenb stood silent. She was conscious of her heart beating fast and she felt a kind of languor stealing over her senses. Yet with this feeling of softness, this yielding, went something else—a feeling of antagonism.

“The touch of his hand on my arm and I am all weakness . . .” she thought. “Because of his strength . . . of his square shoulders . . . his laughing mouth . . . But I know nothing of his mind, of his thoughts, of his heart. There is no peace between us and no

sweetness . . . What do I want? I do not know . . . But not this . . .
No, not this—”

She heard herself saying, and even in her own ears the words sounded weak and uncertain:

“I do not want another husband . . . I want to be alone . . . to be myself. . . .”

“No, Renisenb, you are wrong. You were not meant to live alone. Your hand says so when it trembles with mine . . . See?”

With an effort Renisenb drew her hand away.

“I do not love you, Kameni. I think I hate you.”

He smiled.

“I do not mind you hating me, Renisenb. Your hate is very close to love. We will speak of this again.”

He left her, moving with the swiftness and easy gait of a young gazelle. Renisenb went slowly on to where Kait and the children were playing by the lake.

Kait spoke to her, but Renisenb answered at random.

Kait, however, did not seem to notice, or else, as usual, her mind was too full of the children to pay much attention to other things.

Suddenly, breaking the silence, Renisenb said:

“Shall I take another husband? What do you say, Kait?”

Kait replied placidly without any great interest:

“It would be as well, I think. You are strong and young, Renisenb, and you can have many more children.”

“Is that all a woman’s life, Kait? To busy myself in the back of the house, to have children, to spend the afternoons with them by the lake under the sycamore trees?”

“It is all that matters to a woman. Surely you know that. Do not speak as though you were a slave—women have power in Egypt—inheritance passes through them to their children. Women are the life blood of Egypt.”

Renisenb looked thoughtfully at Teti who was busily making a garland of flowers for her doll. Teti was frowning a little with the concentration of what she was doing. There had been a time when Teti had looked so like Khay, pushing out her underlip, turning her head a little sideways, that Renisenb’s heart had turned over with pain and love. But now not only was Khay’s face dim in Renisenb’s memory, but Teti no longer had that trick of head turning and pushing out her lip. There had been other moments when Renisenb had held Teti close to her, feeling the child still part of her own body, her own living flesh, with a passionate sense of ownership. “She is mine, all mine,” she had said to herself.

Now watching her, Renisenb thought, “She is me—and she is Khay —”

Then Teti looked up, and seeing her mother, she smiled. It was a grave, friendly smile, with confidence in it and pleasure.

Renisenb thought: “No, she is not me and she is not Khay—she is herself. She is Teti. She is alone, as I am alone, as we are all alone. If there is love between us we shall be friends all our life—but if there is not love she will grow up and we shall be strangers. She is Teti and I am Renisenb.”

Kait was looking at her curiously.

“What do you want, Renisenb? I do not understand.”

Renisenb did not answer. How put into words for Kait the things she hardly understood herself. She looked round her, at the courtyard walls, at the gaily coloured porch of the house, at the smooth waters of the lake and the graceful little pleasure pavilion, the neat flower beds and the clumps of papyrus. All safe, shut in, nothing to fear, with around her the murmur of the familiar home sounds, the babble of children’s voices, the raucous, far-off shrill clamour of women in the house, the distant lowing of cattle.

She said slowly:

“One cannot see the River from here. . . .”

Kait looked surprised. “Why should one want to see it?”

Renisenb said slowly:

“I am stupid. I do not know. . . .”

Before her eyes, very clearly, she saw spread out the panorama of green fields, rich and lush, and beyond, far away, an enchanted distance of pale rose and amethyst fading into the horizon, and cleaving the two, the pale silver blue of the Nile. . . .

She caught her breath—for with the vision, the sights and sounds around her faded—there came instead a stillness, a richness, an infinite satisfaction. . . .

She said to herself: “If I turn my head, I shall see Hori. He will look up from his papyrus and smile at me . . . Presently the sun will set and there will be darkness and then I shall sleep . . . That will be death.”

“What did you say, Renisenb?”

Renisenb started. She was not aware she had spoken aloud. She came back from her vision to reality. Kait was looking at her curiously.

“You said ‘Death,’ Renisenb. What were you thinking?”

Renisenb shook her head.

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean—” She looked round her again. How pleasant it was, this family scene, with the splashing water, and the children at play. She drew a deep breath.

“How peaceful it is here. One can’t imagine anything—horrible—happening here.”

But it was by the lake that they found Ipy the next morning. He was sprawled face downwards with his face in the water where a hand had held him while he drowned.

Sixteen

SECOND MONTH OF SUMMER 10TH DAY

Imhotep sat huddled down upon himself. He looked very much older, a broken shrunken old man. On his face was a piteous look of bewilderment.

Henet brought him food and coaxed him to take it.

“Yes, yes, Imhotep, you must keep up your strength.”

“Why should I? What is strength? Ipy was strong—strong in youth and beauty—and now he lies in the brine bath . . . My son, my dearly loved son. The last of my sons.”

“No, no, Imhotep—you have Yahmose, your good Yahmose.”

“For how long? No, he too is doomed. We are all doomed. What evil is this that has come upon us? Could I know that such things would come of taking a concubine into my house? It is an accepted thing to do—it is righteous and according to the law of men and Gods. I treated her with honour. Why, then, should these things come upon me? Or is it Ashayet who wreaks vengeance upon me? Is it she who will not forgive? Certainly she has made no answer to my petition. The evil business still goes on.”

“No, no, Imhotep. You must not say that. So short a time has passed since the bowl was placed in the offering chamber. Does one not know how long affairs of law and justice take in this world

—how endless are the delays in the Nomarch’s court—and still more when a case goes up to the Vizier. Justice is justice, in this world and the next, a business that moves slowly but is adjusted with righteousness in the end.”

Imhotep shook his head doubtfully. Henet went on.

“Besides, Imhotep, you must remember that Ipy was not Ashayet’s son—he was born to your sister Ankh. Why, then, should Ashayet concern herself violently on his behalf? But with Yahmose, it will be different—Yahmose will recover because Ashayet will see to it that he does.”

“I must admit, Henet, that your words comfort me . . . There is much in what you say. Yahmose, it is true, recovers strength now every day. He is a good loyal son—but oh! for my Ipy—such spirit—such beauty!” Imhotep groaned anew.

“Alas! Alas!” Henet wailed in sympathy.

“That accursed girl and her beauty! Would I had never set eyes on her.”

“Yes, indeed, dear master. A daughter of Seth if ever I saw one. Learned in magic and evil spells, there can be no doubt about it.”

There was a tap of a stick on the floor and Esa came limping into the hall. She gave a derisive snort.

“Has no one in this house any sense? Have you nothing better to do than bleat out curses against an unfortunate girl who took your fancy and who indulged in a little feminine spite and malice,

goaded by the stupid behaviour of the stupid wives of your stupid sons?”

“A little spiteful malice—is that what you call it, Esa? When, of my three sons, two are dead and one is dying! Oh! that my mother should say such a thing to me!”

“It seems necessary that someone should say them since you cannot recognize facts for what they are. Wipe out of your mind this silly superstitious belief that a dead girl’s spirit is working this evil. It was a live hand that held Ipy head down in the lake to drown, and a live hand that dropped poison into the wine that Yahmose and Sobek drank. You have an enemy, yes, Imhotep, but an enemy here in this house. And the proof is that since Hori’s advice was taken and Renisenb herself prepares Yahmose’s food, or a slave prepares it while she watches and that her hand carries it to him, since then, I say, Yahmose has gained health and strength every day. Try to stop being a fool, Imhotep, and moaning and beating your head—in all of which Henet is being extremely helpful—”

“Oh, Esa, how you misjudge me!”

“In which, I say, Henet assists you—either because she is a fool too, or for some other reason—”

“May Ra forgive you, Esa, for your unkindness to a poor lonely woman!”

Esa swept on, shaking her stick in an impressive gesture.

“Pull yourself together, Imhotep, and think. Your dead wife Ashayet, who was a very lovely woman and not a fool, by the way,

may exert her influence for you in the other world, but can hardly be expected to do your thinking for you in this one! We have got to act, for if we do not then there will be more deaths.”

“A live enemy? An enemy in this house? You really believe that, Esa?”

“Of course I believe it, because it is the only thing that makes sense.”

“But then we are all in danger?”

“Certainly we are. In danger not of spells and spirit hands, but of human agency—of live fingers that drop poison in food and drink, of a human figure that steals up behind a boy who returns late at night from the village and forces his head down into the waters of the lake!”

Imhotep said thoughtfully: “Strength would be needed for that.”

“On the face of it, yes, but I am not sure. Ipy had drunk much beer in the village. He was in a wild and boastful mood. It may be that he returned home unsteady on his feet and that, having no fear of the person who accosted him, he bent of his own accord to bathe his face in the lake. Little strength would be needed then.”

“What are you trying to say, Esa? That a woman did this thing? But it is impossible—the whole thing is impossible—there can be no enemy in this house or we should know it—I should know it!”

“There is an evil of the heart, Imhotep, that does not show in the face.”

“You mean that one of our servants, or a slave—”

“No servant and no slave, Imhotep.”

“One of ourselves? Or else—do you mean Hori or Kamenî? But Hori is one of the family, he has proved himself faithful and trustworthy. And Kamenî—he is a stranger, true, but he is of our blood and he has proved his devotion by his zeal in my service. Moreover he came to me only this morning and urged that I should consent to his marriage with Renisenb.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” Esa showed interest. “And what did you say?”

“What could I say?” Imhotep was fretful. “Is this a time to talk of marriage? I said as much to him.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He said that in his opinion this was the time to talk of marriage. He said that Renisenb was not safe in this house.”

“I wonder,” said Esa. “I very much wonder . . . Is she? I thought she was—and Hori thought so—but now. . . .”

Imhotep went on.

“Can one have marriages and funeral ceremonies going on side by side? It is not decent. The whole Nome would talk about it.”

“This is no time for convention,” said Esa. “Especially since it would seem that the embalmers’ men are with us permanently. All

this must be a blessing to Ipi and Montu—the firm must be doing exceptionally well.”

“They have put their charges up by ten per cent!” Imhotep was momentarily diverted. “Iniquitous! They say that labour is more expensive.”

“They should give us a cut rate price for quantity!” Esa smiled grimly at her joke.

“My dear mother,” Imhotep looked at her in horror. “This is not a jest.”

“All life is a jest, Imhotep—and it is death who laughs last. Do you not hear it at every feast? Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die? Well, that is very true for us here—it is a question only of whose death will come tomorrow.”

“What you say is terrible—terrible! What can be done?”

“Trust no one,” said Esa. “That is the first, the most vital thing.” She repeated with emphasis: “Trust no one.”

Henet began to sob.

“Why do you look at me . . . I’m sure if anyone is worthy of trust, I am. I’ve proved it over all these years. Don’t listen to her, Imhotep.”

“There, there, my good Henet—naturally I trust you. I know only too well your true and devoted heart.”

“You know nothing,” said Esa. “None of us know anything. That is our danger.”

“You accused me,” whined Henet.

“I cannot accuse. I have neither knowledge nor proof—only suspicion.”

Imhotep looked up sharply.

“You have suspicion—of whom?”

Esa said slowly: “I have suspected once—and twice—and a third time. I will be honest, I suspected first Ipy—but Ipy is dead, so that suspicion was false. Then I suspected another person—but, on the very day of Ipy’s death, yet a third idea came to me. . . .”

She paused.

“Are Hori and Kamenî in the house? Send for them here—yes, and Renisenb too from the kitchen. And Kait and Yahmose. I have something to say and all the house should hear it.”

II

Esa looked round at the assembled family. She met Yahmose’s grave and gentle glance, Kamenî’s ready smile, the frightened inquiry in Renisenb’s eyes, the placid incurious glance of Kait, the quiet inscrutability of Hori’s thoughtful gaze, the irritable fear of Imhotep’s twitching face and the avid curiosity and—yes—pleasure in Henet’s eyes.

She thought: “Their faces tell me nothing. They show only the outward emotion. Yet surely, if I am right, there must be some betrayal.”

Aloud she said: “I have something to say to you all—but first I will speak only to Henet—here in front of all of you.”

Henet’s expression changed—the avidity and the pleasure went out of it. She looked frightened. Her voice rose in a shrill protest.

“You suspect me, Esa. I knew it! You will make a case against me and how am I, a poor woman with no great wits, to defend myself? I shall be condemned—condemned unheard.”

“Not unheard,” said Esa with irony and saw Hori smile.

Henet went on, her voice growing more and more hysterical.

“I have done nothing—I am innocent . . . Imhotep, my dearest master, save me . . .” She flung herself down and clasped him round the knees. Imhotep began to splutter indignantly, meanwhile patting Henet’s head.

“Really, Esa, I protest—this is disgraceful. . . .”

Esa cut him short.

“I have made no accusation—I do not accuse without proof. I ask only that Henet shall explain to us here the meaning of certain things she has said.”

“I have said nothing—nothing at all. . . .”

“Oh yes, you have,” said Esa. “There are words I heard with my own ears—and my ears are sharp even if my eyes are dim. You said that you knew something about Hori. Now what is it that you know about Hori?”

Hori looked slightly surprised.

“Yes, Henet,” he said. “What do you know about me? Let us have it.”

Henet sat back on her haunches and wiped her eyes. She looked sullen and defiant.

“I know nothing,” she said. “What should I know?”

“That is what we are waiting for you to tell us,” said Hori. Henet shrugged her shoulders.

“I was just talking. I meant nothing.”

Esa said: “I will repeat to you your own words. You said that we all despised you, but that you knew a lot of what was going on in this house—and that you saw more than many clever people saw.

“And then you said this—that when Hori met you, he looked at you as though you didn’t exist, as though he saw something behind you—something that wasn’t there.”

“He always looks like that,” said Henet sullenly. “I might be an insect, the way he looks at me—something that practically doesn’t matter.”

Esa said slowly:

“That phrase has remained in my mind—something behind—something that wasn’t there. Henet said, ‘He should have looked at me.’ And she went on to speak of Satipy—yes, of Satipy—and of how Satipy was clever, but where was Satipy now? . . .”

Esa looked round.

“Does that mean nothing to any of you? Think of Satipy—Satipy who is dead . . . And remember one should look at a person—not at something that isn’t there. . . .”

There was a moment’s dead silence and then Henet screamed. It was a high, thin scream—a scream, it would seem, of sheer terror. She cried out incoherently:

“I didn’t—save me—master, don’t let her . . . I’ve said nothing—nothing.”

Imhotep’s pent up rage burst out.

“This is unpardonable,” he roared. “I will not have this poor woman terrified and accused. What have you against her? By your own words, nothing at all.”

Yahmose joined in without his usual timidity.

“My father is right. If you have a definite accusation to bring against Henet, bring it.”

“I do not accuse her,” said Esa slowly.

She leaned on her stick. Her figure seemed to have shrunk. She spoke slowly and heavily.

Yahmose turned with authority to Henet.

“Esa is not accusing you of causing the evils that have happened, but if I understand her rightly, she thinks that you have certain knowledge which you are withholding. Therefore, Henet, if there is anything you know, about Hori or another, now is the time to speak. Here, before us all. Speak. What knowledge have you?”

Henet shook her head.

“None.”

“Be very sure of what you are saying, Henet. Knowledge is dangerous.”

“I know nothing. I swear it. I swear it by the Nine Gods of the Ennead, by the Goddess Maat, by Ra himself.”

Henet was trembling. Her voice had none of its usual whining affected quality. It sounded awed and sincere.

Esa gave a deep sigh. Her figure bent forward. She murmured:

“Help me back to my room.”

Hori and Renisenb came quickly to her.

Esa said: “Not you, Renisenb. I will have Hori.”

She leaned on him as he helped her from the room towards her own quarters. Glancing up at him she saw his face was stern and unhappy.

She murmured: “Well, Hori?”

“You have been unwise, Esa, very unwise.”

“I had to know.”

“Yes—but you have taken a terrible risk.”

“I see. So you too think the same?”

“I have thought so for some time, but there is no proof—no shadow of proof. And even now, Esa, you have no proof. It is all in your mind.”

“It is enough that I know.”

“It may be too much.”

“What do you mean? Oh yes, of course.”

“Guard yourself, Esa. From now on you are in danger.”

“We must try and act quickly.”

“That, yes, but what can we do? There must be proof.”

“I know.”

They could say no more. Esa’s little maid came running to her mistress. Hori relinquished her to the girl’s care and turned away. His face was grave and perplexed.

The little maid chattered and fussed round Esa, but Esa hardly noticed her. She felt old and ill and cold . . . Once again she saw the intent circle of faces watching her as she spoke.

Only a look—a momentary flash of fear and understanding—could she have been wrong? Was she so sure of what she had seen? After all, her eyes were dim. . . .

Yes, she was sure. It was less an expression than the sudden tension of a whole body—a hardening—a rigidity. To one person, and one person only, her rambling words had made sense. That deadly, unerring sense which is truth. . . .

Seventeen

SECOND MONTH OF SUMMER 15TH DAY

“Now that the matter is laid before you, Renisenb, what have you to say?”

Renisenb looked doubtfully from her father to Yahmose. Her head felt dull and bemused.

“I do not know.” The words fell from her lips tonelessly.

“Under ordinary conditions,” went on Imhotep, “there would be plenty of time for discussion. I have other kinsmen, and we could select and reject until we settled upon the most suitable as a husband for you. But as it is uncertain—yes, life is uncertain.”

His voice faltered. He went on:

“That is how the matter stands, Renisenb. Death is facing all three of us today. Yahmose, yourself, myself. At which of us will the peril strike next? Therefore it behoves me to put my affairs in order. If anything should happen to Yahmose you, my only daughter, will need a man to stand by your side and share your inheritance and perform such duties of my estate as cannot be administered by a woman. For who knows at what moment I may be taken from you? The trusteeship and guardianship of Sobek’s children I have arranged in my will shall be administered by Hori if Yahmose is no longer alive—also the guardianship of Yahmose’s children—since that is his wish—eh, Yahmose?”

Yahmose nodded.

“Hori has always been very close to me. He is as one of my own family.”

“Quite, quite,” said Imhotep. “But the fact remains he is not one of the family. Now Kameni is. Therefore, all things considered, he is the best husband available at the moment for Renisenb. So what do you say, Renisenb?”

“I do not know,” Renisenb repeated again.

She felt a terrible lassitude.

“He is handsome and pleasing, you will agree?”

“Oh yes.”

“But you do not want to marry him?” Yahmose asked gently.

Renisenb threw her brother a grateful glance. He was so resolved that she should not be hurried or badgered into doing what she did not want to do.

“I really do not know what I want to do.” She hurried on: “It is stupid, I know, but I am stupid today. It is—it is the strain under which we are living.”

“With Kameni at your side you will feel protected,” said Imhotep.

Yahmose asked his father: “Have you considered Hori as a possible husband for Renisenb?”

“Well, yes, it is a possibility. . . .”

“Well, yes, it is a possibility. . . .”

“His wife died when he was still a young man. Renisenb knows him well and likes him.”

Renisenb sat in a dream while the two men talked. This was her marriage they were discussing, and Yahmose was trying to help her to choose what she herself wanted, but she felt as lifeless as Teti’s wooden doll.

Presently she said abruptly, interrupting their speech without even hearing what they were saying:

“I will marry Kamenî since you think it is a good thing.”

Imhotep gave an exclamation of satisfaction and hurried out of the hall. Yahmose came over to his sister. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Do you want this marriage, Renisenb? Will you be happy?”

“Why should I not be happy? Kamenî is handsome and gay and kind.”

“I know.” Yahmose still looked dissatisfied and doubtful. “But your happiness is important, Renisenb. You must not let my father rush you into something you do not want. You know how he is.”

“Oh yes, yes, when he gets an idea into his head we all have to give way to it.”

“Not necessarily.” Yahmose spoke with firmness. “I will not give way here unless you wish it.”

“Oh, Yahmose, you never stand out against our father.”

“But I will in this case. He cannot force me to agree with him and I shall not do so.”

Renisenb looked up at him. How resolute and determined his usually undecided face was looking!

“You are good to me, Yahmose,” she said gratefully. “But indeed I am not yielding to compulsion. The old life here, the life I was so pleased to come back to, has passed away. Kameni and I will make a new life together and live as a good brother and sister should.”

“If you are sure—”

“I am sure,” said Renisenb, and smiling at him affectionately she went out of the hall on to the porch.

From there she crossed the courtyard. By the edge of the lake Kameni was playing with Teti. Renisenb drew near very quietly and watched them whilst they were still unaware of her approach. Kameni, merry as ever, seemed to be enjoying the game as much as the child did. Renisenb’s heart warmed to him. She thought: “He will make a good father to Teti.”

Then Kameni turned his head and saw her and stood upright with a laugh.

“We have made Teti’s doll a ka-priest,” he said. “And he is making the offerings and attending to the ceremonies at the Tomb.”

“His name is Meriptah,” said Teti. She was very serious.

“He has two children and a scribe like Hori.”

Kameni laughed. “Teti is very intelligent,” he said. “And she is strong and beautiful too.”

His eyes went from the child to Renisenb and in their caressing glance Renisenb read the thought of his mind—of the children that she would one day bear him.

It sent a slight thrill through her—yet at the same time a sudden piercing regret. She would have liked in that moment to have seen in his eyes only her own image. She thought: “Why cannot it be only Renisenb he sees?”

Then the feeling passed and she smiled at him gently.

“My father has spoken to me,” she said.

“And you consent?”

She hesitated a moment before she answered:

“I consent.”

The final word was spoken, that was the end. It was all settled. She wished she did not feel so tired and numb.

“Renisenb?”

“Yes, Kameni.”

“Will you sail with me on the River in a pleasure boat? That is a thing I have always wanted to do with you.”

Odd that he should say that. The very first moment she had seen him she had thought of a square sail and the River and Khay's laughing face. And now she had forgotten Khay's face and in the place of it, against the sail and the River, it would be Kamení who sat and laughed into her eyes.

That was death. That was what death did to you. "I felt this," you said, "I felt that"—but you only said it, you did not now feel anything. The dead were dead. There was no such thing as remembrance. . . .

Yes, but there was Teti. There was life and renewing of life, as the waters of the yearly inundation swept away the old and prepared the soil for the new crops.

What had Kait said: "The women of the household must stand together." What was she, after all, but a woman of a household—whether Renisenb or another, what matter. . . .

Then she heard Kamení's voice—urgent, a little troubled.

"What are you thinking, Renisenb? You go so far away sometimes . . . Will you come with me on the River?"

"Yes, Kamení, I will come with you."

"We will take Teti too."

II

It was like a dream, Renisenb thought—the boat and the sail and Kamení and herself and Teti. They had escaped from death and the fear of death. This was the beginning of new life.

Kameni spoke and she answered as though in a trance. . . .

“This is my life,” she thought, “there is no escape. . . .”

Then perplexed: “But why do I say to myself ‘escape?’ What place is there to which I could fly?”

And again there rose before her eyes the little rock chamber beside the Tomb and herself sitting there with one knee drawn up and her chin resting on her hand. . . .

She thought: “But that was something outside life—this is life—and there is no escape now until death. . . .”

Kameni moored the boat and she stepped ashore. He lifted Teti out. The child clung to him and her hand at his neck broke the string of an amulet he wore. It fell at Renisenb’s feet. She picked it up. It was an Ankh sign of electrum and gold.

She gave a regretful cry. “It is bent. I am sorry. Be careful—” as Kameni took it from her. “It may break.”

But his strong fingers, bending it still further, snapped it deliberately in two.

“Oh, what have you done?”

“Take half, Renisenb, and I will take the other. It shall be a sign between us—that we are halves of the same whole.”

He held it out to her, and just as she stretched out her hand to take it, something clicked in her brain and she drew in her breath sharply.

“What is it, Renisenb?”

“Nofret.”

“What do you mean—Nofret?”

Renisenb spoke with swift certainty.

“The broken amulet in Nofret’s jewel box. It was you who gave it to her . . . You and Nofret . . . I see everything now. Why she was so unhappy. And I know who put the jewel box in my room. I know everything . . . Do not lie to me, Kamen. I tell you I know.”

Kamen made no protest. He stood looking at her steadily and his gaze did not falter. When he spoke, his voice was grave and for once there was no smile on his face.

“I shall not lie to you, Renisenb.”

He waited for a moment, frowning a little as though trying to arrange his thoughts.

“In a way, Renisenb, I am glad that you do know. Though it is not quite as you think.”

“You gave the broken amulet to her—as you would have given it to me—as a sign that you were halves of the same whole. Those were your words.”

“You are angry, Renisenb. I am glad because that shows that you love me. But all the same I must make you understand. I did not give the amulet to Nofret. She gave it to me. . . .”

He paused. "Perhaps you do not believe me, but it is true. I swear that it is true."

Renisenb said slowly: "I will not say that I do not believe you . . . That may very well be true."

Nofret's dark, unhappy face rose up before her eyes.

Kameni was going on, eagerly, boyishly. . . .

"Try and understand, Renisenb. Nofret was very beautiful. I was flattered and pleased—who would not be? But I never really loved her—"

Renisenb felt an odd pang of pity. No, Kameni had not loved Nofret—but Nofret had loved Kameni—had loved him despairingly and bitterly. It was at just this spot on the Nile bank that she had spoken to Nofret that morning, offering her friendship and affection. She remembered only too well the dark tide of hate and misery that had emanated from the girl then. The cause of it was clear enough now. Poor Nofret—the concubine of a fussy, elderly man, eating her heart out for love of a gay, careless, handsome young man who had cared little or nothing for her.

Kameni was going on eagerly.

"Do you not understand, Renisenb, that as soon as I came here, I saw you and loved you? That from that moment I thought of no one else? Nofret saw it plainly enough."

Yes, Renisenb thought, Nofret had seen it. Nofret had hated her from that moment—and Renisenb did not feel inclined to blame her.

“I did not even want to write the letter to your father. I did not want to have anything to do with Nofret’s schemes any more. But it was difficult—you must try and realize that it was difficult.”

“Yes, yes,” Renisenb spoke impatiently. “All that does not matter. It is only Nofret that matters. She was very unhappy. She loved you, I think, very much.”

“Well, I did not love her.” Kameny spoke impatiently.

“You are cruel,” said Renisenb.

“No, I am a man, that is all. If a woman chooses to make herself miserable about me, it annoys me, that is the simple truth. I did not want Nofret. I wanted you. Oh, Renisenb, you cannot be angry with me for that?”

In spite of herself she smiled.

“Do not let Nofret who is dead make trouble between us who are living. I love you, Renisenb, and you love me and that is all that matters.”

Yes, Renisenb thought, that is all that matters. . . .

She looked at Kameny who stood with his head a little on one side, a pleading expression on his gay, confident face. He looked very young.

Renisenb thought: “He is right. Nofret is dead and we are alive. I understand her hatred of me now—and I am sorry that she suffered—but it was not my fault. And it was not Kameny’s fault that he loved me and not her. These things happen.”

Teti, who had been playing on the River bank, came up and pulled her mother's hand.

“Shall we go home now? Mother—shall we go home?”

Renisenb gave a deep sigh.

“Yes,” she said, “we will go home.”

They walked towards the house, Teti running a little way in front of them. Kameni gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“You are generous, Renisenb, as well as lovely. All is the same as it was between us?”

“Yes, Kameni. All the same.”

He lowered his voice. “Out there on the River—I was very happy. Were you happy too, Renisenb?”

“Yes, I was happy.”

“You looked happy. But you looked as though you were thinking of something very far away. I want you to think of me.”

“I was thinking of you.”

He took her hand and she did not draw it away. He sang very softly under his breath:

“My sister is like the persea tree . . .”

He felt her hand tremble in his and heard the quickened pace of her breathing and was satisfied at last. . . .

III

Renisenb called Henet to her room.

Henet, hurrying in, came to an abrupt stop as she saw Renisenb standing by the open jewel box with the broken amulet in her hand. Renisenb's face was stern and angry.

"You put this jewel box in my room, didn't you, Henet? You wanted me to find that amulet. You wanted me one day—"

"To find out who had the other half? I see you have found out. Well, it's always as well to know, isn't it, Renisenb?"

Henet laughed spitefully.

"You wanted the knowledge to hurt me," said Renisenb, her anger still at white heat. "You like hurting people, don't you, Henet? You never say anything straight out. You wait and wait—until the best moment comes. You hate us all, don't you? You always have."

"The things you're saying, Renisenb! I'm sure you don't mean them!"

But there was no whine in Henet's voice now, only a sly triumph.

"You wanted to make trouble between me and Kamen. Well, there is no trouble."

"That's very nice and forgiving of you, I'm sure, Renisenb. You're quite different from Nofret, aren't you?"

"Do not let us talk of Nofret."

“No, better not perhaps. Kameni’s lucky as well as being good-looking, isn’t he? It was lucky for him, I mean, that Nofret died when she did. She could have made a lot of trouble for him. With your father. She wouldn’t have liked his marrying you—no, she wouldn’t have liked it at all. In fact, I think she would have found some way of stopping it. I’m quite sure she would.”

Renisenb looked at her with cold dislike.

“There is always poison in your tongue, Henet. It stings like a scorpion. But you cannot make me unhappy.”

“Well, that’s splendid, isn’t it? You must be very much in love. Oh, he’s a handsome young man is Kameni—and he knows how to sing a very pretty love song. He’ll always get what he wants, never fear. I admire him, I really do. He always seems so simple and straightforward.”

“What are you trying to say, Henet?”

“I’m just telling you that I admire Kameni. And I’m quite sure that he is simple and straightforward. It’s not put on. The whole thing is quite like one of those tales the storytellers in the Bazaars recite. The poor young scribe marrying the master’s daughter and sharing the inheritance with her and living happily ever afterwards. Wonderful what good luck a handsome young man always has.”

“I am right,” said Renisenb. “You do hate us.”

“Now how can you say that, Renisenb, when you know how I’ve slaved for you all ever since your mother died?”

But there was still the evil triumph in Henet's voice rather than the customary whine.

Renisenb looked down again at the jewel box and suddenly another certainty came into her mind.

"It was you who put the gold lion necklace in this box. Don't deny it, Henet. I know, I tell you."

Henet's sly triumph died. She looked suddenly frightened.

"I couldn't help it, Renisenb. I was afraid. . . ."

"What do you mean—afraid?"

Henet came a step nearer and lowered her voice.

"She gave it to me—Nofret, I mean. Oh, some time before she died. She gave me one or two—presents. Nofret was generous, you know. Oh yes, she was always generous."

"I daresay she paid you well."

"That's not a nice way of putting it, Renisenb. But I'm telling you all about it. She gave me the gold lion necklace and an amethyst clasp and one or two other things. And then, when that boy came out with his story of having seen a woman with that necklace on—well, I was afraid. I thought maybe they'd think that it was I who poisoned Yahmose's wine. So I put the necklace in the box."

"Is that the truth, Henet? Do you ever speak the truth?"

"I swear it's the truth, Renisenb. I was afraid. . . ."

Renisenb looked at her curiously. “You’re shaking, Henet. You look as though you were afraid now.”

“Yes, I am afraid . . . I’ve reason to be.”

“Why? Tell me.”

Henet licked her thin lips. She glanced sideways, behind her. Her eyes came back like a hunted animal’s.

“Tell me,” said Renisenb.

Henet shook her head. She said in an uncertain voice:

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“You know too much, Henet. You’ve always known too much. You’ve enjoyed it, but now it’s dangerous. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Henet shook her head again. Then she laughed maliciously.

“You wait, Renisenb. One day I shall hold the whip in this house—and crack it. Wait and see.”

Renisenb drew herself up. “You will not harm me, Henet. My mother will not let you harm me.”

Henet’s face changed—the eyes burned.

“I hated your mother,” she said. “I always hated her . . . And you who have her eyes—and her voice—her beauty and her arrogance—I hate you, Renisenb.”

Renisenb laughed. “And at last—I’ve made you say it!”

IV

Old Esa limped wearily into her room.

She was perplexed and very weary. Age, she realized, was at last taking toll of her. So far she had acknowledged her weariness of body, but had been conscious of no weariness of mind. But now she had to admit that the strain of remaining mentally alert was taxing her bodily resources.

If she knew now, as she believed she did, from what quarter danger impended—yet that knowledge permitted of no mental relaxation. Instead she had to be more than ever on her guard since she had deliberately drawn attention to herself. Proof—proof—she must get proof . . . But how?

It was there, she realized, that her age told against her. She was too tired to improvise—to make the mental creative effort. All she was capable of was defence—to remain alert, watchful, guarding herself.

For the killer—she had no illusions about that—would be quite ready to kill again.

Well, she had no intention of being the next victim. Poison, she felt sure, was the vehicle that would be employed. Violence was not conceivable since she was never alone, but was always surrounded by servants. So it would be poison. Well, she could counter that. Renisenb should cook her food and bring it to her. She had a wine stand and jar brought to her room and after a slave had tasted it, she waited twenty-four hours to make sure that no evil results followed. She made Renisenb share her food and her wine—although she had

no fear for Renisenb—yet. It might be that there was no fear for Renisenb—ever. But of that one could not be sure.

Between whiles she sat motionless, driving her weary brain to devise means of proving the truth or watching her little maid starching and pleating her linen dresses, or re-stringing necklaces and bracelets. This evening she was very weary. She had joined Imhotep at his request to discuss the question of Renisenb's marriage before he himself spoke to his daughter.

Imhotep, shrunken and fretful, was a shadow of his former self. His manner had lost its pomposity and assurance. He leaned now on his mother's indomitable will and determination.

As for Esa, she had been fearful—very fearful—of saying the wrong thing. Lives might hang on an injudicious word.

Yes, she said at last, the idea of marriage was wise. And there was no time to go far afield for a husband amongst more important members of the family clan. After all, the female line was the important one—her husband would be only the administrator of the inheritance that came to Renisenb and Renisenb's children.

So it came to a question of Hori—a man of integrity, of old and long-approved friendship, the son of a small land-owner whose estate had adjoined their own, or young Kamení with his claims of cousinship.

Esa had weighed the matter carefully before speaking. A false word now—and disaster might result.

Then she had made her answer, stressing it with the force of her indomitable personality. Kamení, she said, was undoubtedly the

husband for Renisenb. Their declarations and the necessary attendant festivities—much curtailed owing to the recent bereavements—might take place in a week's time. That is, if Renisenb was willing. Kamení was a fine young man—together they would raise strong children. Moreover the two of them loved one another.

Well, Esa thought, she had cast her die. The thing would be pegged out now on the gaming board. It was out of her hands. She had done what she thought expedient. If it was hazardous—well, Esa liked a match at the gaming board quite as well as Ipy had done. Life was not a matter of safety—it must be hazarded to win the game.

She looked suspiciously round her room when she returned to it. Particularly she examined the big wine jar. It was covered over and sealed as she had left it. She always sealed it when she left the room and the seal hung safely round her neck.

Yes—she was taking no risks of that kind. Esa chuckled with malicious satisfaction. Not so easy to kill an old woman. Old women knew the value of life—and knew most of the tricks too. Tomorrow—She called her little maid.

“Where is Hori? Do you know?”

The girl replied that she thought Hori was up at the Tomb in the rock chamber.

Esa nodded satisfaction.

“Go up to him there. Tell him that tomorrow morning, when Imhotep and Yahmose are out on the cultivation, taking Kamení

with them for the counting, and when Kait is at the lake with the children, he is to come to me here. Have you understood that? Repeat it.”

The little maid did so, and Esa sent her off.

Yes, her plan was satisfactory. The consultation with Hori would be quite private since she would send Henet on an errand to the weaving sheds. She would warn Hori of what was to come and they could speak freely together.

When the black girl returned with the message that Hori would do as she said, Esa gave a sigh of relief.

Now, these things settled, her weariness spread over her like a flood. She told the girl to bring the pot of sweet smelling ointment and massage her limbs.

The rhythm soothed her, and the unguent eased the aching of her bones.

She stretched herself out at last, her head on the wooden pillow, and slept—her fears for the moment allayed.

She woke much later with a strange sensation of coldness. Her feet, her hands, were numbed and dead . . . It was like a constriction stealing all over the body. She could feel it numbing her brain, paralysing her will, slowing down the beat of her heart.

She thought: “This is Death. . . .”

A strange death—death unheralded, with no warning signs.

This, she thought, is how the old die. . . .

And then a surer conviction came to her. This was not natural death! This was the Enemy striking out of the darkness.

Poison. . . .

But how? When? All she had eaten, all she had drunk—tested, secured—there had been no loophole of error.

Then how? When?

With her last feeble flickers of intelligence, Esa sought to penetrate the mystery. She must know—she must—before she died.

She felt the pressure increasing on her heart—the deadly coldness—the slow painful indrawing of her breath.

How had the enemy done this thing?

And suddenly, from the past, a fleeting memory came to aid her understanding. The shaven skin of a lamb—a lump of smelling grease—an experiment of her father's—to show that some poisons could be absorbed by the skin. Wool fat—unguents made of wool fat. That was how the enemy had reached her. Her pot of sweet smelling unguent, so necessary to an Egyptian woman. The poison had been in that. . . .

And tomorrow—Hori—he would not know—she could not tell him . . . It was too late. In the morning a frightened little slave girl went running through the house crying out that her lady had died in her sleep.

Eighteen

SECOND MONTH OF SUMMER 16TH DAY

Imhotep stood looking down on Esa's body. His face was sorrowful, but not suspicious.

His mother, he said, had died naturally enough of old age.

"She was old," he said. "Yes, she was old. It was doubtless time for her to go to Osiris, and all her troubles and sorrows have hastened the end. But it seems to have come peacefully enough. Thank Ra in his mercy that here is a death unaided by man or by evil spirit. There is no violence here. See how peaceful she looks."

Renisenb wept and Yahmose comforted her. Henet went about sighing and shaking her head, and saying what a loss Esa would be and how devoted she, Henet, had always been to her. Kameni checked his singing and showed a proper mourning face.

Hori came and stood looking down at the dead woman. It was the hour of her summons to him. He wondered what, exactly, she had meant to say.

She had had something definite to tell him.

Now he would never know.

But he thought, perhaps, that he could guess. . . .

II

“Hori—was she killed?”

“I think so, Renisenb.”

“How?”

“I do not know.”

“But she was so careful.” The girl’s voice was distressed and bewildered. “She was always on the watch. She took every precaution. Everything she ate and drank was proved and tested.”

“I know, Renisenb. But all the same I think she was killed.”

“And she was the wisest of us all—the cleverest! She was sure that no harm could befall her. Hori, it must be magic! Evil magic, the spell of an evil spirit.”

“You believe that because it is the easiest thing to believe. People are like that. But Esa herself would not have believed it. If she knew—before she died, and did not die in her sleep—she knew it was living person’s work.”

“And she knew whose?”

“Yes. She had shown her suspicion too openly. She became a danger to the enemy. The fact that she died proves that her suspicion was correct.”

“And she told you—who it was?”

“No,” said Hori. “She did not tell me. She never mentioned a name. Nevertheless, her thought and my thought were, I am convinced, the same.”

“Then you must tell me, Hori, so that I may be on my guard.”

“No, Renisenb, I care too much for your safety to do that.”

“Am I so safe?”

Hori’s face darkened. He said: “No, Renisenb, you are not safe. No one is safe. But you are much safer than if you were assured of the truth—for then you would become a definite menace to be removed at once whatever the risk.”

“What about you, Hori? You know.”

He corrected her. “I think I know. But I have said nothing and shown nothing. Esa was unwise. She spoke out. She showed the direction in which her thoughts were tending. She should not have done that—I told her so afterwards.”

“But you—Hori . . . If anything happens to you. . . .”

She stopped. She was aware of Hori’s eyes looking into hers.

Grave, intent, seeing straight into her mind and heart. . . .

He took her hands in his and held them lightly.

“Do not fear for me, little Renisenb . . . All will be well.”

“Yes, she thought, all will indeed be well if Hori says so. Strange, that feeling of content, of peace, of clear singing happiness . . . As

lovely and as remote as the far distance seen from the Tomb—a distance in which there was no clamour of human demands and restrictions.

Suddenly, almost harshly, she heard herself saying:

“I am to marry Kameni.”

Hori let her hands go—quietly and quite naturally.

“I know, Renisenb.”

“They—my father—they think it is the best thing.”

“I know.”

He moved away.

The courtyard walls seemed to come nearer, the voices within the house and from the cornbins outside sounded louder and noisier.

Renisenb had only one thought in her mind: “Hori is going. . . .”

She called to him timidly:

“Hori, where are you going?”

“Out to the fields with Yahmose. There is much work there to be done and recorded. The reaping is nearly finished.”

“And Kameni?”

“Kameni comes with us.”

Renisenb cried out: “I am afraid here. Yes, even in daylight with all the servants all round and Ra sailing across the Heavens, I am afraid.”

He came quickly back.

“Do not be afraid, Renisenb. I swear to you that you need not be afraid. Not today.”

“But after today?”

“Today is enough to live through—and I swear to you you are not in danger today.”

Renisenb looked at him and frowned.

“But we are in danger? Yahmose, my father, myself? It is not I who am threatened first . . . is that what you think?”

“Try not to think about it, Renisenb. I am doing all I can, though it may appear to you that I am doing nothing.”

“I see—” Renisenb looked at him thoughtfully. “Yes, I see. It is to be Yahmose first. The enemy has tried twice with poison and failed. There is to be a third attempt. That is why you will be close beside him—to protect him. And after that it will be the turn of my father and myself. Who is there who hates our family so much that —”

“Hush. You would do well not to talk of these things. Trust me, Renisenb. Try and banish fear from your mind.”

Renisenb threw her head back. She faced him proudly.

“I do trust you, Hori. You will not let me die . . . I love life very much and I do not want to leave it.”

“You shall not leave it, Renisenb.”

“Nor you either, Hori.”

“Nor I either.”

They smiled at each other and then Hori went away to find Yahmose.

III

Renisenb sat back on her haunches watching Kait.

Kait was helping the children to model toys out of clay, using the water of the lake. Her fingers were busy kneading and shaping and her voice encouraged the two small serious boys at their task. Kait’s face was the same as usual, affectionate, plain, expressionless. The surrounding atmosphere of violent death and constant fear seemed to affect her not at all. . . .

Hori had bidden Renisenb not to think, but with the best will in the world Renisenb could not obey. If Hori knew the enemy, if Esa had known the enemy, then there was no reason why she should not know the enemy too. She might be safer unknowing, but no human creature could be content to have it that way. She wanted to know.

And it must be very easy—very easy indeed. Her father, clearly, could not desire to kill his own children. So that left—who did it leave? It left, starkly and uncompromisingly, two people, Kait and Henet.

Women, both of them. . . .

And surely with no reason for killing. . . .

Yet Henet hated them all . . . Yes, undoubtedly Henet hated them. She had admitted hating Renisenb. So why should she not hate the others equally?

Renisenb tried to project herself into the dim, tortured recesses of Henet's brain. Living here, all these years, working, protesting her devotion, lying, spying, making mischief . . . Coming here, long ago, as the poor relative of a great and beautiful lady. Seeing that lovely lady happy with husband and children. Repudiated by her own husband, her only child dead . . . Yes, that might be the way of it. Like a wound from a spear thrust that Renisenb had once seen. It had healed quickly over the surface, but beneath evil matters had festered and raged and the arm had swollen and had gone hard to the touch. And then the physician had come and, with a suitable incantation, had plunged a small knife into the hard, swollen, distorted limb. It had been like the breaking down of an irrigation dyke. A great stream of evil smelling stuff had come welling out. . . .

That, perhaps, was like Henet's mind. Sorrow and injury smoothed over too quickly—and festering poison beneath, ever swelling in a great tide of hate and venom.

But did Henet hate Imhotep too? Surely not. For years she had fluttered round him, fawning on him, flattering him . . . He believed in her implicitly. Surely that devotion could not be wholly feigned?

And if she were devoted to him, could she deliberately inflict all this sorrow and loss upon him?

Ah, but suppose she hated him too—had always hated him. Had flattered him deliberately with a view to bringing out his weakness? Supposing Imhotep was the one she hated most? Then to a distorted, evil-ridden mind, what better pleasure could there be than this? To let him see his children die off one by one. . . .

“What is the matter, Renisenb?” Kait was staring at her. “You look so strange.”

Renisenb stood up.

“I feel as though I were going to vomit,” she said.

In a sense it was true enough. The picture she had been conjuring up induced in her a strong feeling of nausea. Kait accepted the words at their face value.

“You have eaten too many green dates—or perhaps the fish had turned.”

“No, no, it is nothing I have eaten. It is the terrible thing we are living through.”

“Oh, that.”

Kait’s disclaimer was so nonchalant that Renisenb stared at her.

“But, Kait, are you not afraid?”

“No, I do not think so.” Kait considered. “If anything happens to Imhotep, the children will be protected by Hori. Hori is honest. He will guard their inheritance for them.”

“Yahmose will do that.”

“Yahmose will die, too.”

“Kait, you say that so calmly. Do you not mind at all? I mean, that my father and Yahmose should die?”

Kait considered for a moment or two. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

“We are two women together—let us be honest. Imhotep I have always considered tyrannical and unfair. He behaved outrageously in the matter of his concubine—letting himself be persuaded by her to disinherit his own flesh and blood. I have never liked Imhotep. As to Yahmose, he is nothing. Satipy ruled him in every way. Lately, since she is gone, he takes authority on himself, gives orders. He would always prefer his children before mine—that is natural. So, if he is to die, it is as well for my children that it should be so—that is how I see it. Hori has no children and he is just. All these happenings have been upsetting—but I have been thinking lately that very likely they are all for the best.”

“You can talk like that, Kait—so calmly, so coldly? When your own husband, whom you loved, was the first to be killed?”

A faint expression of some indefinable nature passed over Kait’s face. She gave Renisenb a glance which seemed to contain a certain scornful irony.

“You are very like Teti sometimes, Renisenb. Really, one would swear, no older!”

“You do not mourn for Sobek.” Renisenb spoke the words slowly.
“No, I have noticed that.”

“Come, Renisenb, I fulfilled all the conventions. I know how a newly made widow should behave.”

“Yes—that was all there was to it . . . So—it means—that you did not love Sobek?”

Kait shrugged her shoulders.

“Why should I?”

“Kait! He was your husband—he gave you children.”

Kait’s expression softened. She looked down at the two small boys engrossed with the clay and then to where Ankh was rolling about chanting to herself and waving her little legs.

“Yes, he gave me my children. For that I thank him. But what was he, after all? A handsome braggart—a man who was always going to other women. He did not take a sister, decently, into the household, some modest person who would have been useful to us all. No, he went to ill-famed houses, spending much copper and gold there, drinking too and asking for all the most expensive dancing girls. It was fortunate that Imhotep kept him as short as he did and that he had to account so closely for the sales he made on the estate. What love and respect should I have for a man like that? And what are men anyway? They are necessary to breed children, that is all. But the strength of the race is in the women. It is we, Renisenb, who hand down to our children all that is ours. As for men, let them breed and die early. . . .”

The scorn and contempt in Kait's voice rose in a note like some musical instrument. Her strong, ugly face was transfigured.

Renisenb thought with dismay:

“Kait is strong. If she is stupid, it is with a stupidity that is satisfied with itself. She hates and despises men. I should have known. Once before I caught a glimpse of this—this menacing quality. Yes, Kait is strong—”

Unthinkingly, Renisenb's gaze fell to Kait's hands. They were squeezing and kneading clay—strong, muscular hands, and as Renisenb watched them pushing down the clay, she thought of Ipy and of strong hands pushing his head down into the water and holding it there inexorably. Yes, Kait's hands could have done that.

...

The little girl, Ankh, rolled over on to a thorny spine and set up a wail. Kait rushed to her. She picked her up, holding her to her breast, crooning over her. Her face now was all love and tenderness. Henet came running out from the porch.

“Is anything wrong? The child yelled so loud. I thought perhaps—”

She paused, disappointed. Her eager, mean, spiteful face, hoping for some catastrophe, fell.

Renisenb looked from one woman to the other.

Hate in one face. Love in the other. Which, she wondered, was the more terrible?

“Yahmose, be careful, be careful of Kait.”

“Of Kait?” Yahmose showed his astonishment. “My dear Renisenb—”

“I tell you, she is dangerous.”

“Our quiet Kait? She has always been a meek, submissive woman, not very clever—”

Renisenb interrupted him.

“She is neither meek nor submissive. I am afraid of her, Yahmose. I want you to be on your guard.”

“Against Kait?” He was still incredulous. “I can hardly see Kait dealing out death all round. She would not have the brains.”

“I do not think that it is brains that are concerned. A knowledge of poisons, that is all that has been needed. And you know that such knowledge is often found amongst certain families. They hand it down from mother to daughter. They brew these concoctions themselves from potent herbs. It is the kind of lore that Kait might easily have. She brews medicines for the children when they are ill, you know.”

“Yes, that is true.” Yahmose spoke thoughtfully.

“Henet too is an evil woman,” went on Renisenb.

“Henet—yes. We have never liked her. In fact, but for my father’s protection—”

“Our father is deceived in her,” said Renisenb.

“That may well be.” Yahmose added in a matter-of-fact tone, “She flatters him.”

Renisenb looked at him for a moment in surprise. It was the first time she had ever heard Yahmose utter a sentence containing criticism of Imhotep. He had always seemed overawed by his father.

But now, she realized, Yahmose was gradually taking the lead. Imhotep had aged by years in the last few weeks. He was incapable now of giving orders, of taking decisions. Even his physical activity seemed impaired. He spent long hours staring in front of him, his eyes filmed and abstracted. Sometimes he seemed not to understand what was said to him.

“Do you think that she—” Renisenb stopped. She looked round and began, “Is it she, do you think, who has—who is—?”

Yahmose caught her by the arm.

“Be quiet, Renisenb, these things are better not said—not even whispered.”

“Then you too think—”

Yahmose said softly and urgently:

“Say nothing now. We have plans.”

Nineteen

SECOND MONTH OF SUMMER 17TH DAY

The following day was the festival of the new moon. Imhotep was forced to go up to the Tomb, to make the offerings. Yahmose begged his father to leave it to him on this occasion, but Imhotep was obdurate. With what seemed now a feeble parody of his old manner, he murmured, “Unless I see to things myself, how can I be sure they are properly done? Have I ever shirked my duties? Have I not provided for all of you, supported you all—”

His voice stopped. “All? All—? Ah, I forget—my two brave sons—my handsome Sobek—my clever and beloved Ipy. Gone from me. Yahmose and Renisenb—my dear son and daughter—you are still with me—but for how long—how long. . . .”

“Many long years, we hope,” said Yahmose.

He spoke rather loudly as to a deaf man.

“Eh? What?” Imhotep seemed to have fallen into a coma.

He said suddenly and surprisingly:

“It depends on Henet, does it not? Yes, it depends on Henet.”

Yahmose and Renisenb exchanged glances.

Renisenb said gently and clearly:

“I do not understand you, father?”

Imhotep muttered something they did not catch. Then, raising his voice, a little, but with dull and vacant eyes, he said:

“Henet understands me. She always has. She knows how great my responsibilities are—how great . . . Yes, how great . . . And always ingratitude . . . Therefore there must be retribution. That, I think, is practice well established. Presumption must be punished. Henet has always been modest, humble and devoted. She shall be rewarded. . . .”

He drew himself up and said pompously:

“You understand, Yahmose. Henet is to have all she wants. Her commands are to be obeyed!”

“But why is this, father?”

“Because I say so. Because, if what Henet wants is done, there will be no more deaths. . . .”

He nodded his head sagely and went away—leaving Yahmose and Renisenb staring at each other in wonder and alarm.

“What does this mean, Yahmose?”

“I do not know, Renisenb. Sometimes I think my father no longer knows what he does or says. . . .”

“No—perhaps not. But I think, Yahmose, that Henet knows very well what she is saying and doing. She said to me, only the other

day, that it would soon be she who would crack the whip in this house.”

They looked at each other. Then Yahmose put his hand on Renisenb’s arm.

“Do not anger her. You show your feelings too plainly, Renisenb. You heard what my father said? If what Henet wants is done—there will be no more deaths. . . .”

II

Henet was crouching down on her haunches in one of the store rooms counting out piles of sheets. They were old sheets and she held the mark on the corner of one close up to her eyes.

“Ashayet,” she murmured. “Ashayet’s sheets. Marked with the year she came here—she and I together . . . That’s a long time ago. Do you know, I wonder, what your sheets are being used for now, Ashayet?”

She broke off in the midst of a chuckle, and gave a start as a sound made her glance over her shoulder.

It was Yahmose.

“What are you doing, Henet?”

“The embalmers need more sheets. Piles and piles of sheets they’ve used. Four hundred cubits they used yesterday alone. It’s terrible the way these funerals use up the sheeting! We’ll have to use these old ones. They’re good quality and not much worn. Your mother’s sheets, Yahmose—yes, your mother’s sheets. . . .”

“Who said you might take those?”

Henet laughed.

“Imhotep’s given everything into my charge. I don’t have to ask leave. He trusts poor old Henet. He knows she’ll see to everything in the right way. I’ve seen to most things in this house for a long time. I think—now—I’m going to have my reward!”

“It looks like it, Henet.” Yahmose’s tone was mild. “My father said,” he paused, “everything depends on you.”

“Did he now? Well that’s nice hearing—but perhaps you don’t think so, Yahmose.”

“Well—I’m not quite sure.” Yahmose’s tone was still mild, but he watched her closely.

“I think you’d better agree with your father, Yahmose. We don’t want any more—trouble, do we?”

“I don’t quite understand. You mean—we don’t want any more deaths?”

“There are going to be more deaths, Yahmose. Oh yes—”

“Who is going to die next, Henet?”

“Why do you think I should know that?”

“Because I think you know a great deal. You knew the other day, for instance, that Ipy was going to die . . . You are very clever, aren’t you, Henet.”

Henet bridled.

“So you’re beginning to realize that now! I’m not poor, stupid Henet any longer. I’m the one who knows.”

“What do you know, Henet?”

Henet’s voice changed. It was low and sharp.

“I know that at last I can do as I choose in this house. There will be no one to stop me. Imhotep leans upon me already. And you will do the same, eh, Yahmose?”

“And Renisenb?”

Henet laughed, a malicious, happy chuckle.

“Renisenb will not be here.”

“You think it is Renisenb who will die next?”

“What do you think, Yahmose?”

“I am waiting to hear what you say.”

“Perhaps I only meant that Renisenb will marry—and go away.”

“What do you mean, Henet?”

Henet chuckled.

“Esa once said my tongue was dangerous. Perhaps it is!”

She laughed shrilly, swaying to and fro on her heels.

“Well, Yahmose, what do you say? Am I at last to do as I choose in this house?”

Yahmose studied her for a moment before saying:

“Yes, Henet. You are so clever. You shall do as you choose.”

He turned to meet Hori who was coming from the main hall and who said: “There you are, Yahmose. Imhotep is awaiting you. It is time to go up to the Tomb.”

Yahmose nodded.

“I am coming.” He lowered his voice. “Hori—I think Henet is mad—she is definitely afflicted by the devils. I begin to believe that she has been responsible for all these happenings.”

Hori paused a moment before saying in his quiet, detached voice:

“She is a strange woman—and an evil one, I think.”

Yahmose lowered his voice still more:

“Hori, I think Renisenb is in danger.”

“From Henet?”

“Yes. She has just hinted that Renisenb may be the next to—go.”

Imhotep’s voice came fretfully:

“Am I to wait all day? What conduct is this? No one considers me any more. No one knows what I suffer. Where is Henet? Henet understands.”

From within the storeroom Henet's chuckle of triumph came shrilly.

"Do you hear that, Yahmose? Henet! Henet is the one!"

Yahmose said quietly:

"Yes, Henet—I understand. You are the powerful one. You and my father and I—we three together. . . ."

Hori went off to find Imhotep. Yahmose spoke a few more words to Henet who nodded, her face sparkling with malicious triumph.

Then Yahmose joined Hori and Imhotep, apologizing for his delay, and the three men went up to the Tomb together.

III

The day passed slowly for Renisenb.

She was restless, passing to and fro from the house to the porch, then to the lake and then back again to the house.

At midday Imhotep returned, and after a meal had been served to him, he came out upon the porch and Renisenb joined him.

She sat with her hands clasped round her knees, occasionally looking up at her father's face. It still wore that absent, bewildered expression. Imhotep spoke little. Once or twice he sighed deeply.

Once he roused himself and asked for Henet. But just at that time Henet had gone with linen to the embalmers.

Renisenb asked her father where Hori and Yahmose were.

“Hori has gone out to the flax fields. There is a tally to be taken there. Yahmose is on the cultivation. It all falls on him now . . . Alas for Sobek and Ipy! My boys—my handsome boys. . . .”

Renisenb tried quickly to distract him.

“Cannot Kameni oversee the workers?”

“Kameni? Who is Kameni? I have no son of that name.”

“Kameni the scribe. Kameni who is to be my husband.”

He stared at her.

“You, Renisenb? But you are to marry Khay.”

She sighed, but said no more. It seemed cruel to try and bring him back to the present. After a little while, however, he roused himself and exclaimed suddenly:

“Of course. Kameni! He has gone to give some instructions to the overseer at the brewery. I must go and join him.”

He strode away, muttering to himself, but with resumption of his old manner, so that Renisenb felt a little cheered.

Perhaps this clouding of his brain was only temporary.

She looked round her. There seemed something sinister about the silence of the house and court today. The children were at the far side of the lake. Kait was not with them and Renisenb wondered where she was.

Then Henet came out on to the porch. She looked round her and then came sidling up to Renisenb. She had resumed her old wheedling, humble manner.

“I’ve been waiting till I could get you alone, Renisenb.”

“Why, Henet?”

Henet lowered her voice.

“I’ve got a message for you—from Hori.”

“What does he say?” Renisenb’s voice was eager.

“He asks that you should go up to the Tomb.”

“Now?”

“No. Be there an hour before sunset. That was the message. If he is not there then, he asks that you will wait until he comes. It is important, he says.”

Henet paused—and then added:

“I was to wait until I got you alone to say this—and no one was to overhear.”

Henet glided away.

Renisenb felt her spirits lightened. She felt glad at the prospect of going up to the peace and quietness of the Tomb. Glad that she would see Hori and be able to talk to him freely. The only thing that surprised her a little was that he should have entrusted his message to Henet.

Nevertheless, malicious though Henet was, she had delivered the message faithfully.

“And why should I fear Henet at any time?” thought Renisenb. “I am stronger than she is.”

She drew herself up proudly. She felt young and confident and very much alive. . . .

IV

After giving the message to Renisenb, Henet went once more into the linen storeroom. She was laughing quietly to herself.

She bent over the disordered piles of sheets.

“We’ll be needing more of you soon,” she said to them gleefully. “Do you hear, Ashayet? I’m the mistress here now and I’m telling you that your linen will bandage yet another body. And whose body is that, do you think? Hee hee! You’ve not been able to do much about things, have you? You and your mother’s brother, the Nomarch! Justice? What justice can you do in this world? Answer me that!”

There was a movement behind the bales of linen. Henet half-turned her head.

Then a great width of linen was thrown over her, stifling her mouth and nose. An inexorable hand wound the fabric round and round her body, swathing her like a corpse until her struggles ceased. . . .

V

Renisenb sat in the entrance of the rock chamber, staring out at the Nile and lost in a queer dream fantasy of her own.

It seemed to her a very long time since the day when she had first sat here, soon after her return to her father's house. That had been the day when she had declared so gaily that everything was unchanged, that all in the home was exactly as it had been when she left it eight years before.

She remembered now how Hori had told her that she herself was not the same Renisenb who had gone away with Khay and how she had answered confidently that she soon would be.

Then Hori had gone on to speak of changes that came from within, of a rottenness that left no outward sign.

She knew now something of what had been in his mind when he said those things. He had been trying to prepare her. She had been so assured, so blind—accepting so easily the outward values of her family.

It had taken Nofret's coming to open her eyes. . . .

Yes, Nofret's coming. It had all hinged on that.

With Nofret had come death. . . .

Whether Nofret had been evil or not, she had certainly brought evil.
. . .

And the evil was still in their midst.

For the last time, Renisenb played with the belief that Nofret's spirit was the cause of everything. . . .

Nofret, malicious and dead. . . .

Or Henet, malicious and living . . . Henet the despised, the sycophantic, fawning Henet. . . .

Renisenb shivered, stirred, and then slowly rose to her feet.

She could wait for Hori no longer. The sun was on the point of setting. Why, she wondered, had he not come?

She got up, glanced round her and started to descend the path to the valley below.

It was very quiet at this evening hour. Quiet and beautiful, she thought. What had delayed Hori? If he had come, they would at least have had this hour together. . . .

There would not be many such hours. In the near future, when she was Kameni's wife—

Was she really going to marry Kameni? With a kind of shock Renisenb shook herself free from the mood of dull acquiescence that had held her so long. She felt like a sleeper awakening from a feverish dream. Caught in that stupor of fear and uncertainty she had assented to whatever had been proposed to her.

But now she was Renisenb again, and if she married Kameni it would be because she wanted to marry him, and not because her family arranged it. Kameni with his handsome, laughing face! She loved him, didn't she? That was why she was going to marry him.

In this evening hour up here, there was clarity and truth. No confusion. She was Renisenb, walking here above the world, serene and unafraid, herself at last.

Had she not once said to Hori that she must walk down this path alone at the hour of Nofret's death? That whether fear went with her or not, she must still go alone.

Well, she was doing it now. This was just about the hour when she and Satipy had bent over Nofret's body. And it was about this same hour when Satipy in her turn had walked down the path and had suddenly looked back—to see doom overtaking her.

At just about this same point too. What was it that Satipy had heard, to make her look suddenly behind her?

Footsteps?

Footsteps . . . but Renisenb heard footsteps now following her down the path.

Her heart gave a sudden leap of fear. It was true, then! Nofret was behind her, following her. . . .

Fear coursed through her, but her footsteps did not slacken. Nor did they race ahead. She must overcome fear, since there was, in her mind, no evil deed to regret. . . .

She steadied herself, gathered her courage and, still walking, turned her head.

Then she felt a great throb of relief. It was Yahmose following her. No spirit from the dead, but her own brother. He must have been

busied in the offering chamber of the Tomb and have come out of it just after she had passed.

She stopped with a happy little cry.

“Oh Yahmose, I’m so glad it’s you.”

He was coming up to her rapidly. She was just beginning another sentence—a recital of her foolish fears, when the words froze on her lips.

This was not the Yahmose she knew—the gentle, kindly brother. His eyes were very bright and he was passing his tongue quickly over dried lips. His hands, held a little in front of his body, were slightly curved, the fingers looking like talons.

He was looking at her and the look in his eyes was unmistakable. It was the look of a man who had killed and was about to kill again. There was a gloating cruelty, an evil satisfaction in his face.

Yahmose—the pitiless enemy was Yahmose! Behind the mask of that gentle, kindly face—this!

She had thought that her brother loved her—but there was no love in that inhuman, gloating face.

Renisenb screamed—a faint, hopeless scream.

This, she knew, was death. There was no strength in her to match Yahmose’s strength. Here, where Nofret had fallen, where the path was narrow, she too would fall to death. . . .

“Yahmose!” It was a last appeal—in that uttering of his name was the love she had always given to this eldest brother. It pleaded in vain. Yahmose laughed, a soft, inhuman, happy little laugh.

Then he rushed forward, those cruel hands with talons curving as though they longed to fasten round her throat. . . .

Renisenb backed up against the cliff face, her hands outstretched in a vain attempt to ward him off. This was terror—death.

And then she heard a sound, a faint, twanging musical sound. . . .

Something came singing through the air. Yahmose stopped, swayed, then with a loud cry he pitched forward on his face at her feet. She stared down stupidly at the feather shaft of an arrow. Then she looked down over the edge—to where Hori stood, the bow still held to his shoulder. . . .

VI

“Yahmose . . . Yahmose. . . .”

Renisenb, numbed by the shock, repeated the name again, and yet again. It was as though she could not believe it. . . .

She was outside the little rock chamber, Hori’s arm still round her. She could hardly recollect how he had led her back up the path. She had been only able to repeat her brother’s name in that dazed tone of wonder and horror.

Hori said gently:

“Yes, Yahmose. All the time, Yahmose.”

“But how? Why? And how could it be he—why, he was poisoned himself. He nearly died.”

“No, he ran no risk of dying. He was very careful of how much wine he drank. He sipped enough to make him ill and he exaggerated his symptoms and his pains. It was the way, he knew, to disarm suspicion.”

“But he could not have killed Ipy? Why, he was so weak he could not stand on his feet!”

“That, again, was feigned. Do you not remember that Mersu pronounced that once the poison was eliminated, he would regain strength quickly. So he did in reality.”

“But why, Hori? That is what I cannot make out—why?”

Hori sighed.

“Do you remember, Renisenb, that I talked to you once of the rottenness that comes from within?”

“I remember. Indeed I was thinking of it only this evening.”

“You said once that the coming of Nofret brought evil. That was not true. The evil was already here concealed within the hearts of the household. All that Nofret’s coming did was to bring it from its hidden place into the light. Her presence banished concealment. Kait’s gentle motherliness had turned to ruthless egoism for herself and her young. Sobek was no longer the gay and charming young man, but the boastful, dissipated weakling. Ipy was not so much a spoilt, attractive child as a scheming, selfish boy. Through Henet’s pretended devotion, the venom began to show clearly. Satipy

showed herself as a bully and a coward. Imhotep himself had degenerated into a fussy, pompous tyrant.”

“I know—I know.” Renisenb’s hands went to rub her eyes. “You need not tell me. I have found out little by little for myself . . . Why should these things happen—why should this rottenness come, as you say, working from within?”

Hori shrugged his shoulders.

“Who can tell? It may be that there must always be growth—and that if one does not grow kinder and wiser and greater, then the growth must be the other way, fostering the evil things. Or it may be that the life they all led was too shut in, too folded back upon itself—without breadth or vision. Or it may be that, like a disease of crops, it is contagious, that first one and then another sickened.”

“But Yahmose—Yahmose seemed always the same.”

“Yes, and that is one reason, Renisenb, why I came to suspect. For the others, by reason of their temperaments, could get relief. But Yahmose has always been timid, easily ruled, and with never enough courage to rebel. He loved Imhotep and worked hard to please him, and Imhotep found him well-meaning but stupid and slow. He despised him. Satipy, too, treated Yahmose with all of the scorn of a bullying nature. Slowly his burden of resentment, concealed but deeply felt, grew heavier. The meeker he seemed, the more his inward anger grew.

“And then, just when Yahmose was hoping at last to reap the reward of his industry and diligence, to be recognized and associated with his father, Nofret came. It was Nofret, and perhaps Nofret’s beauty, that kindled the final spark. She attacked the

manhood of all three brothers. She touched Sobek on the raw by her scorn of him as a fool, she infuriated Ipy by treating him as a truculent child without any claim to manhood, and she showed Yahmose that he was something less than a man in her eyes. It was after Nofret came that Satipy's tongue finally goaded Yahmose beyond endurance. It was her jeers, her taunt that she was a better man than he, that finally sapped his self-control. He met Nofret on this path and—driven beyond endurance—he threw her down.”

“But it was Satipy—”

“No, no, Renisenb. That is where you were all wrong. From down below Satipy saw it happen. Now do you understand?”

“But Yahmose was with you on the cultivation.”

“Yes, for the last hour. But do you not realize, Renisenb, that Nofret's body was cold. You felt her cheek yourself. You thought she had fallen a few moments before—but that was impossible. She had been dead at least two hours, otherwise, in that hot sun, her face could never have felt cold to your touch. Satipy saw it happen. Satipy hung around, fearful, uncertain what to do; then she saw you coming and tried to head you off.”

“Hori, when did you know all this?”

“I guessed fairly soon. It was Satipy's behaviour that told me. She was obviously going about in deadly fear of someone or something—and I was fairly soon convinced that the person she feared was Yahmose. She stopped bullying him and instead was eager to obey him in every way. It had been, you see, a terrible shock to her. Yahmose, whom she despised as the meekest of men, had actually been the one to kill Nofret. It turned Satipy's world upside down.

Like most bullying women, she was a coward. This new Yahmose terrified her. In her fear she began to talk in her sleep. Yahmose soon realized that she was a danger to him. . . .

“And now, Renisenb, you can realize the truth of what you saw that day with your own eyes. It was not a spirit Satipy saw that caused her to fall. She saw what you saw today. She saw in the face of the man following her—her own husband—the intention to throw her down as he had thrown that other woman. In her fear she backed away from him and fell. And when, with her dying lips, she shaped the word Nofret, she was trying to tell you that Yahmose killed Nofret.”

Hori paused and then went on:

“Esa came on the truth because of an entirely irrelevant remark made by Henet. Henet complained that I did not look at her, but as though I saw something behind her that was not there. She went on to speak of Satipy. In a flash Esa saw how much simpler the whole thing was than we had thought. Satipy did not look at something behind Yahmose—it was Yahmose himself she saw. To test her idea, Esa introduced the subject in a rambling way which could mean nothing to anyone except Yahmose himself—and only to him if what she suspected was true. Her words surprised him and he reacted to them just for a moment, sufficiently for her to know that what she suspected was the truth. But Yahmose knew then that she did suspect. And once a suspicion had arisen, things would fit in too well, even to the story the herd boy told—a boy devoted to him who would do anything his Lord Yahmose commanded—even to swallowing a medicine that night which ensured that he would not wake up again. . . .”

“Oh Hori, it is so hard to believe that Yahmose could do such things. Nofret, yes, I can understand that. But why these other killings?”

“It is difficult to explain to you, Renisenb, but once the heart is opened to evil—evil blossoms like poppies amongst the corn. All his life Yahmose had had, perhaps, a longing for violence and had been unable to achieve it. He despised his own meek, submissive role. I think that the killing of Nofret gave him a great sense of power. He realized it first by Satipy. Satipy who had browbeaten and abused him, was now meek and terrified. All the grievances that had lain buried in his heart so long, reared their heads—as that snake reared up on the path here one day. Sobek and Ipy were, one handsomer, the other cleverer than he—so they must go. He, Yahmose, was to be the ruler of the house, and his father’s only comfort and stay! Satipy’s death increased the actual pleasure of killing. He felt more powerful as a result of it. It was after that that his mind began to give way—from then on evil possessed him utterly.

“You, Renisenb, were not a rival. So far as he still could, he loved you. But the idea that your husband should share with him in the estate was not one to be borne. I think Esa agreed to the idea of accepting Kameny with two ideas in her head—the first that if Yahmose struck again, it would be more likely to be at Kameny than at you—and in any case she trusted me to see that you were kept safe. The second idea—for Esa was a bold woman—was to bring things to a head. Yahmose, watched by me (whom he did not know suspected him) could be caught in the act.”

“As you did,” said Renisenb. “Oh Hori, I was so frightened when I looked back and saw him.”

“I know, Renisenb. But it had to be. So long as I stuck close to Yahmose’s side, you would necessarily be safe—but that could not go on for ever. I knew that if he had an opportunity of throwing you off the path at the same place he would take it. It would revive the superstitious explanation of the deaths.”

“Then the message Henet brought me was not from you?”

Hori shook his head.

“I sent you no message.”

“But why did Henet—” Renisenb stopped, and shook her head. “I cannot understand Henet’s part in all this.”

“I think Henet knows the truth,” said Hori thoughtfully. “She was conveying as much to Yahmose this morning—a dangerous thing to do. He made use of her to lure you up here—a thing she would be willing to do—since she hates you, Renisenb—”

“I know.”

“Afterwards—I wonder? Henet would believe her knowledge would give her power. But I do not believe Yahmose would have let her live long. Perhaps even now—”

Renisenb shivered.

“Yahmose was mad,” said Renisenb. “He was possessed by evil spirits, but he was not always like that.”

“No, and yet—You remember, Renisenb, how I told you the story of Sobek and Yahmose as children, and how Sobek beat Yahmose’s

head against the ground and how your mother came, all pale and trembling and said, "That is dangerous." I think, Renisenb, that her meaning was that to do such things to Yahmose was dangerous. Remember that next day how Sobek was ill—food poisoning, they thought—I think your mother, Renisenb, knew something of the queer self-contained fury that dwelt within the breast of her gentle, meek little son and feared that some day it might be roused. . . ."

Renisenb shuddered.

"Is no one what they seem?"

Hori smiled at her.

"Yes, sometimes. Kamenî and I, Renisenb. Both of us, I think, are as you believe we are. Kamenî and I. . . ."

He said the last words with significance, and suddenly Renisenb realized that she stood at a moment of choice in her life.

Hori went on:

"We both love you, Renisenb. You must know that."

"And yet," said Renisenb, slowly, "you have let the arrangements be made for my marriage, and you have said nothing—not one word."

"That was for your protection. Esa had the same idea. I must remain disinterested and aloof, so that I could keep constant watch on Yahmose, and not arouse his animosity." Hori added with emotion: "You must understand, Renisenb, that Yahmose has been my friend for many years. I loved Yahmose. I tried to induce your

father to give him the status and authority he desired. I failed. All that came too late. But although I was convinced in my heart that Yahmose had killed Nofret, I tried not to believe it. I found excuses, even, for his action. Yahmose, my unhappy, tormented friend, was very dear to me. Then came Sobek's death, and Ipy, and finally Esa's . . . I knew then that the evil in Yahmose had finally vanquished the good. And so Yahmose has come to his death at my hands. A swift, almost painless death."

"Death—always death."

"No, Renisenb. It is not death that faces you today, but life. With whom will you share that life? With Kameni or with me?"

Renisenb stared straight ahead of her, out over the valley below and to the silver streak of the Nile.

Before her, very clearly, there rose up the image of Kameni's smiling face as he had sat facing her that day in the boat.

Handsome, strong, gay . . . She felt again the throb and lilt of her blood. She had loved Kameni in that moment. She loved him now. Kameni could take the place that Khay had held in her life.

She thought: "We shall be happy together—yes, we shall be happy. We shall live together and take pleasure in each other and we shall have strong, handsome children. There will be busy days full of work . . . and days of pleasure when we sail on the River . . . Life will be again as I knew it with Khay . . . What could I ask more than that? What do I want more than that?"

And slowly, very slowly indeed, she turned her face towards Hori. It was as though, silently, she asked him a question.

As though he understood her, he answered:

“When you were a child, I loved you. I loved your grave face and the confidence with which you came to me, asking me to mend your broken toys. And then, after eight years’ absence, you came again and sat here, and brought me the thoughts that were in your mind. And your mind, Renisenb, is not like the minds of the rest of your family. It does not turn in upon itself, seeking to encase itself in narrow walls. Your mind is like my mind, it looks over the River, seeing a world of changes, of new ideas—seeing a world where all things are possible to those with courage and vision. . . .”

“I know, Hori, I know. I have felt these things with you. But not all the time. There will be moments when I cannot follow you, when I shall be alone. . . .”

She broke off, unable to find words to frame her struggling thoughts. What life would be with Hori, she did not know. In spite of his gentleness, in spite of his love for her, he would remain in some respects incalculable and incomprehensible. They would share moments of great beauty and richness together—but what of their common daily life?

She stretched out her hands impulsively to him.

“Oh, Hori, decide for me. Tell me what to do!”

He smiled at her, at the child Renisenb speaking, perhaps, for the last time. But he did not take her hands.

“I cannot tell you what to do with your life, Renisenb—because it is your life—and only you can decide.”

She realized then that she was to have no help, no quickening appeal to her senses such as Kameni had made. If Hori would only have touched her—but he did not touch her.

And the choice suddenly presented itself to her in the simplest terms—the easy life or the difficult one. She was strongly tempted then to turn and go down the winding path, down to the normal, happy life she already knew—that she had experienced before with Khay. There was safety there—the sharing of daily pleasures and griefs with nothing to fear but old age and death. . . .

Death . . . From thoughts of life she had come full circle again to death. Khay had died. Kameni, perhaps, would die, and his face, like Khay's, would slowly fade from her memory. . . .

She looked then at Hori standing quietly beside her. It was odd, she thought, that she had never really known just what Hori looked like . . . She had never needed to know. . . .

She spoke then, and the tone of her voice was the same as when she had announced, long before, that she would walk down the path at sunset alone.

“I have made my choice, Hori. I will share my life with you for good or evil, until death comes. . . .”

With his arms round her, with the sudden new sweetness of his face against hers, she was filled with an exultant richness of living.

“If Hori were to die,” she thought, “I should not forget! Hori is a song in my heart for ever . . . That means—that there is no more death. . . .”

THE END

Crooked House (1949)

By Agatha Christie

Author's Foreword

This book is one of my own special favourites. I saved it up for years, thinking about it, working it out, saying to myself: "One day, when I've plenty of time, and want to really enjoy myself—I'll begin it!" I should say that of one's output, five books are work to one that is real pleasure.

Crooked House was pure pleasure. I often wonder whether people who read a book can know if it has been hard work or a pleasure to write? Again and again someone says to me: "How you must have enjoyed writing so and so!" This about a book that obstinately refused to come out the way you wished, whose characters are sticky, the plot needlessly involved, and the dialogue stilted—or so you think yourself. But perhaps the author isn't the best judge of his or her own work. However, practically everybody has liked Crooked House, so I am justified in my own belief that it is one of my best.

I don't know what put the Leonides family into my head—they just came. Then, like Topsy "they grewed."

I feel that I myself was only their scribe.

One

I first came to know Sophia Leonides in Egypt towards the end of the war. She held a fairly high administrative post in one of the Foreign Office departments out there. I knew her first in an official capacity, and I soon appreciated the efficiency that had brought her to the position she held, in spite of her youth (she was at that time just twenty-two).

Besides being extremely easy to look at, she had a clear mind and a dry sense of humour that I found very delightful. We became friends. She was a person whom it was extraordinarily easy to talk to and we enjoyed our dinners and occasional dances very much.

All this I knew; it was not until I was ordered East at the close of the European war that I knew something else—that I loved Sophia and that I wanted to marry her.

We were dining at Shepherd's when I made this discovery. It did not come to me with any shock of surprise, but more as the recognition of a fact with which I had been long familiar. I looked at her with new eyes—but I saw what I had already known for a long time. I liked everything I saw. The dark crisp hair that sprang up proudly from her forehead, the vivid blue eyes, the small square fighting chin, and the straight nose. I liked the well-cut light-grey tailor-made, and the crisp white shirt. She looked refreshingly English and that appealed to me strongly after three years without seeing my native land. Nobody, I thought, could be more English—and even as I was thinking exactly that, I suddenly wondered if, in fact, she was, or indeed could be, as English as she looked. Does the real thing ever have the perfection of a stage performance?

I realized that much and freely as we had talked together, discussing ideas, our likes and dislikes, the future, our immediate friends and acquaintances—Sophia had never mentioned her home or her family. She knew all about me (she was, as I have indicated, a good listener) but about her I knew nothing. She had, I supposed, the usual background, but she had never talked about it. And until this moment I had never realized the fact.

Sophia asked me what I was thinking about.

I replied truthfully: “You.”

“I see,” she said. And she sounded as though she did see.

“We may not meet again for a couple of years,” I said. “I don’t know when I shall get back to England. But as soon as I do get back, the first thing I shall do will be to come and see you and ask you to marry me.”

She took it without batting an eyelash. She sat there, smoking, not looking at me.

For a moment or two I was nervous that she might not understand.

“Listen,” I said. “The one thing I’m determined not to do, is to ask you to marry me now. That wouldn’t work out anyway. First you might turn me down, and then I’d go off miserable and probably tie up with some ghastly woman just to restore my vanity. And if you didn’t turn me down what could we do about it? Get married and part at once? Get engaged and settle down to a long waiting period? I couldn’t stand your doing that. You might meet someone else and feel bound to be ‘loyal’ to me. We’ve been living in a queer hectic get-on-with-it-quickly atmosphere. Marriages and love affairs making and breaking all round us. I’d like to feel you’d gone home, free and independent, to look round you and size up the new post-war world and decide what you want out of it. What is between you and me, Sophia, has got to be permanent. I’ve no use for any other kind of marriage.”

“No more have I,” said Sophia.

“On the other hand,” I said, “I think I’m entitled to let you know how I—well—how I feel.”

“But without undue lyrical expression?” murmured Sophia.

“Darling—don’t you understand? I’ve tried not to say I love you—”

She stopped me.

“I do understand, Charles. And I like your funny way of doing things. And you may come and see me when you come back—if you still want to—”

It was my turn to interrupt.

“There’s no doubt about that.”

“There’s always a doubt about everything, Charles. There may always be some incalculable factor that upsets the applecart. For one thing, you don’t know much about me, do you?”

“I don’t even know where you live in England.”

“I live at Swinly Dean.”

I nodded at the mention of the well-known outer suburb of London which boasts three excellent golf courses for the city financier.

She added softly in a musing voice: “In a little crooked house....”

I must have looked slightly startled, for she seemed amused, and explained by elaborating the quotation. “‘And they all lived together in a little crooked house.’ That’s us. Not really such a little house either. But definitely crooked—running to gables and half timbering!”

“Are you one of a large family? Brothers and sisters?”

“One brother, one sister, a mother, a father, an uncle, an aunt by marriage, a grandfather, a great-aunt, and a step-grandmother.”

“Good gracious!” I exclaimed, slightly overwhelmed.

She laughed.

“Of course we don’t normally all live together. The war and blitzes have brought that about—but I don’t know”—she frowned reflectively—“perhaps spiritually the family has always lived together—under my grandfather’s eye and protection. He’s rather a Person, my grandfather. He’s

over eighty, about four-foot ten, and everybody else looks rather dim beside him.”

“He sounds interesting,” I said.

“He is interesting. He’s a Greek from Smyrna. Aristide Leonides.” She added, with a twinkle, “He’s extremely rich.”

“Will anybody be rich after this is over?”

“My grandfather will,” said Sophia with assurance. “No soak-the-rich tactics would have any effect on him. He’d just soak the soakers.

“I wonder,” she added, “if you’ll like him?”

“Do you?” I asked.

“Better than anyone in the world,” said Sophia.

Two

It was over two years before I returned to England. They were not easy years. I wrote to Sophia and heard from her fairly frequently. Her letters, like mine, were not love letters. They were letters written to each other by close friends—they dealt with ideas and thoughts and with comments on the daily trend of life. Yet I know that as far as I was concerned, and I believed as far as Sophia was concerned too, our feelings for each other grew and strengthened.

I returned to England on a soft grey day in September. The leaves on the trees were golden in the evening light. There were playful gusts of wind. From the airfield I sent a telegram to Sophia.

“Just arrived back. Will you dine this evening Mario’s nine o’clock Charles.”

A couple of hours later I was sitting reading the Times; and scanning the Births, Marriages and Deaths column my eye was caught by the name Leonides:

On Sept. 19th, at Three Gables, Swinly Dean, Aristide Leonides, beloved husband of Brenda Leonides, in his eighty-eighth year. Deeply regretted.

There was another announcement immediately below:

Leonides—Suddenly, at his residence, Three Gables, Swinly Dean, Aristide Leonides. Deeply mourned by his loving children and grandchildren. Flowers to St. Eldred’s Church, Swinly Dean.

I found the two announcements rather curious. There seemed to have been some faulty staff work resulting in overlapping. But my main preoccupation was Sophia. I hastily sent her a second telegram:

“Just seen news of your grandfather’s death. Very sorry. Let me know when I can see you. Charles.”

A telegram from Sophia reached me at six o'clock at my father's house. It said:

“Will be at Mario's nine o'clock. Sophia.”

The thought of meeting Sophia again made me both nervous and excited. The time crept by with maddening slowness. I was at Mario's waiting twenty minutes too early. Sophia herself was only five minutes late.

It is always a shock to meet again someone whom you have not seen for a long time but who has been very much present in your mind during that period. When at last Sophia came through the swing doors our meeting seemed completely unreal. She was wearing black, and that, in some curious way, startled me. Most other women were wearing black, but I got it into my head that it was definitely mourning—and it surprised me that Sophia should be the kind of person who did wear black—even for a near relative.

We had cocktails—then went and found our table. We talked rather fast and feverishly—asking after old friends of the Cairo days. It was artificial conversation, but it tided us over the first awkwardness. I expressed commiseration for her grandfather's death and Sophia said quietly that it had been “very sudden.” Then we started off again reminiscing. I began to feel, uneasily, that something was the matter—something, I mean, other than the first natural awkwardness of meeting again. There was something wrong, definitely wrong, with Sophia herself. Was she, perhaps, going to tell me that she had found some other man whom she cared for more than she did for me? That her feeling for me had been “all a mistake?”

Somehow I didn't think it was that—I didn't know what it was. Meanwhile we continued our artificial talk.

Then, quite suddenly, as the waiter placed coffee on the table and retired bowing, everything swung into focus. Here were Sophia and I sitting together as so often before at a small table in a restaurant. The years of our separation might never have been.

“Sophia,” I said.

And immediately she said, “Charles!”

I drew a deep breath of relief.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” I said. “What’s been the matter with us?”

“Probably my fault. I was stupid.”

“But it’s all right now?”

“Yes, it’s all right now.”

We smiled at each other.

“Darling!” I said. And then: “How soon will you marry me?”

Her smile died. The something, whatever it was, was back.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure, Charles, that I can ever marry you.”

“But, Sophia! Why not? Is it because you feel I’m a stranger? Do you want time to get used to me again? Is there someone else? No—” I broke off.

“I’m a fool. It’s none of those things.”

“No, it isn’t.” She shook her head. I waited. She said in a low voice:

“It’s my grandfather’s death.”

“Your grandfather’s death? But why? What earthly difference can that make? You don’t mean—surely you can’t imagine—is it money? Hasn’t he left any? But surely, dearest—”

“It isn’t money.” She gave a fleeting smile. “I think you’d be quite willing to ‘take me in my shift,’ as the old saying goes. And grandfather never lost any money in his life.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s just his death—you see, I think, Charles, that he didn’t just—die. I think he may have been—killed....”

I stared at her.

“But—what a fantastic idea. What made you think of it?”

“I didn’t think of it. The doctor was queer to begin with. He wouldn’t sign a certificate. They’re going to have a post-mortem. It’s quite clear that they suspect something is wrong.”

I didn’t dispute that with her. Sophia had plenty of brains; any conclusions she had drawn could be relied upon.

Instead I said earnestly:

“Their suspicions may be quite unjustified. But putting that aside, supposing that they are justified, how does that affect you and me?”

“It might under certain circumstances. You’re in the Diplomatic Service. They’re rather particular about wives. No—please don’t say all the things that you’re bursting to say. You’re bound to say them—and I believe you really think them—and theoretically I quite agree with them. But I’m proud—I’m devilishly proud. I want our marriage to be a good thing for everyone—I don’t want to represent one-half of a sacrifice for love! And, as I say, it may be all right....”

“You mean the doctor—may have made a mistake?”

“Even if he hasn’t made a mistake, it won’t matter—so long as the right person killed him.”

“What do you mean, Sophia?”

“It was a beastly thing to say. But, after all, one might as well be honest.”

She forestalled my next words.

“No, Charles, I’m not going to say any more. I’ve probably said too much already. But I was determined to come and meet you tonight—to see you myself and make you understand. We can’t settle anything until this is cleared up.”

“At least tell me about it.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t want to.”

“But—Sophia—”

“No, Charles. I don’t want you to see us from my angle. I want you to see us unbiased from the outside point of view.”

“And how am I to do that?”

She looked at me, a queer light in her brilliant blue eyes.

“You’ll get that from your father,” she said.

I had told Sophia in Cairo that my father was Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard. He still held that office. At her words, I felt a cold weight settling down on me.

“It’s as bad as that, then?”

“I think so. Do you see a man sitting at a table by the door all alone—rather a nice looking stolid ex-Army type?”

“Yes.”

“He was on Swinly Dean platform this evening when I got into the train.”

“You mean he’s followed you here?”

“Yes. I think we’re all—how does one put it?—under observation. They more or less hinted that we’d all better not leave the house. But I was

determined to see you.” Her small square chin shot out pugnaciously. “I got out of the bathroom window and shinned down the water-pipe.”

“Darling!”

“But the police are very efficient. And of course there was the telegram I sent you. Well—never mind—we’re here—together ... But from now on, we’ve both got to play a lone hand.”

She paused and then added:

“Unfortunately—there’s no doubt—about our loving each other.”

“No doubt at all,” I said. “And don’t say unfortunately. You and I have survived a world war, we’ve had plenty of near escapes from sudden death—and I don’t see why the sudden death of just one old man—how old was he, by the way?”

“Eighty-seven.”

“Of course. It was in the Times. If you ask me, he just died of old age, and any self-respecting GP would accept the fact.”

“If you’d known my grandfather,” said Sophia, “you’d have been surprised at his dying of anything!”

Three

I'd always taken a certain amount of interest in my father's police work, but nothing had prepared me for the moment when I should come to take a direct and personal interest in it.

I had not yet seen the Old Man. He had been out when I arrived, and after a bath, a shave, and change I had gone out to meet Sophia. When I returned to the house, however, Glover told me that he was in his study.

He was at his desk, frowning over a lot of papers. He jumped up when I came in.

"Charles! Well, well, it's been a long time."

Our meeting, after five years of war, would have disappointed a Frenchman. Actually all the emotion of reunion was there all right. The Old Man and I are very fond of each other, and we understand each other pretty well.

"I've got some whisky," he said. "Say when. Sorry I was out when you got here. I'm up to the ears in work. Hell of a case just unfolding."

I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette.

"Aristide Leonides?" I asked.

His brows came down quickly over his eyes. He shot me a quick appraising glance. His voice was polite and steely.

"Now what makes you say that, Charles?"

"I'm right then?"

"How did you know about this?"

"Information received."

The Old Man waited.

“My information,” I said, “came from the stable itself.”

“Come on, Charles, let’s have it.”

“You mayn’t like it,” I said. “I met Sophia Leonides out in Cairo. I fell in love with her. I’m going to marry her. I met her tonight. She dined with me.”

“Dined with you? In London? I wonder just how she managed to do that! The family was asked—oh, quite politely, to stay put.”

“Quite so. She shinned down a pipe from the bathroom window.”

The Old Man’s lips twitched for a moment into a smile.

“She seems,” he said, “to be a young lady of some resource.”

“But your police force is fully efficient,” I said. “A nice Army type tracked her to Mario’s. I shall figure in the reports you get. Five foot eleven, brown hair, brown eyes, dark-blue pinstripe suit, etc.”

The Old Man looked at me hard.

“Is this—serious?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s serious, Dad.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Do you mind?” I asked.

“I shouldn’t have minded—a week ago. They’re a well-established family—the girl will have money—and I know you. You don’t lose your head easily. As it is—”

“Yes, Dad?”

“It may be all right, if—”

“If what?”

“If the right person did it.”

It was the second time that night I had heard that phrase. I began to be interested.

“Just who is the right person?”

He threw a sharp glance at me.

“How much do you know about it all?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” He looked surprised. “Didn’t the girl tell you?”

“No. She said she’d rather I saw it all—from an outside point of view.”

“Now I wonder why that was?”

“Isn’t it rather obvious?”

“No, Charles. I don’t think it is.”

He walked up and down frowning. He had lit a cigar and the cigar had gone out. That showed me just how disturbed the old boy was.

“How much do you know about the family?” he shot at me.

“Damn all! I know there was the old man and a lot of sons and grandchildren and in-laws. I haven’t got the ramifications clear.” I paused and then said, “You’d better put me in the picture, Dad.”

“Yes.” He sat down. “Very well then—I’ll begin at the beginning—with Aristide Leonides. He arrived in England when he was twenty-four.”

“A Greek from Smyrna.”

“You do know that much?”

“Yes, but it’s about all I do know.”

The door opened and Glover came in to say that Chief-Inspector Taverner was here.

“He’s in charge of the case,” said my father. “We’d better have him in. He’s been checking up on the family. Knows more about them than I do.”

I asked if the local police had called in the Yard.

“It’s in our jurisdiction. Swinly Dean is Greater London.”

I nodded as Chief-Inspector Taverner came into the room. I knew Taverner from many years back. He greeted me warmly and congratulated me on my safe return.

“I’m putting Charles in the picture,” said the Old Man. “Correct me if I go wrong, Taverner. Leonides came to London in 1884. He started up a little restaurant in Soho. It paid. He started up another. Soon he owned seven or eight of them. They all paid hand over fist.”

“Never made any mistakes in anything he handled,” said Chief-Inspector Taverner.

“He’d got a natural flair,” said my father. “In the end he was behind most of the well-known restaurants in London. Then he went into the catering business in a big way.”

“He was behind a lot of other businesses as well,” said Taverner. “Second-hand clothes trade, cheap jewellery stores, lots of things. Of course,” he added thoughtfully, “he was always a twister.”

“You mean he was a crook?” I asked.

Taverner shook his head.

“No, I don’t mean that. Crooked, yes—but not a crook. Never anything outside the law. But he was the sort of chap that thought up all the ways you can get round the law. He’s cleaned up a packet that way even in this last war, and old as he was. Nothing he did was ever illegal—but as soon as he’d got on to it, you had to have a law about it, if you know what I mean. But by that time he’d gone on to the next thing.”

“He doesn’t sound a very attractive character,” I said.

“Funnily enough, he was attractive. He’d got personality, you know. You could feel it. Nothing much to look at. Just a gnome—ugly little fellow—but magnetic—women always fell for him.”

“He made a rather astonishing marriage,” said my father. “Married the daughter of a country squire—an MFH.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Money?”

The Old Man shook his head.

“No, it was a love match. She met him over some catering arrangements for a friend’s wedding—and she fell for him. Her parents cut up rough, but she was determined to have him. I tell you, the man had charm—there was something exotic and dynamic about him that appealed to her. She was bored stiff with her own kind.”

“And the marriage was happy?”

“It was very happy, oddly enough. Of course their respective friends didn’t mix (those were the days before money swept aside all class distinctions) but that didn’t seem to worry them. They did without friends. He built a rather preposterous house at Swinly Dean and they lived there and had eight children.”

“This is indeed a family chronicle.”

“Old Leonides was rather clever to choose Swinly Dean. It was only beginning to be fashionable then. The second and third golf courses hadn’t

been made. There was a mixture of Old Inhabitants who were passionately fond of their gardens and who liked Mrs. Leonides, and rich City men who wanted to be in with Leonides, so they could take their choice of acquaintances. They were perfectly happy, I believe, until she died of pneumonia in 1905.”

“Leaving him with eight children?”

“One died in infancy. Two of the sons were killed in the last war. One daughter married and went to Australia and died there. An unmarried daughter was killed in a motor accident. Another died a year or two ago. There are two still living—the eldest son, Roger, who is married but has no children, and Philip, who married a well-known actress and has three children. Your Sophia, Eustace, and Josephine.”

“And they are all living at—what is it?—Three Gables?”

“Yes. The Roger Leonides were bombed out early in the war. Philip and his family have lived there since 1937. And there’s an elderly aunt, Miss de Haviland, sister of the first Mrs. Leonides. She always loathed her brother-in-law apparently, but when her sister died she considered it her duty to accept her brother-in-law’s invitation to live with him and bring up the children.”

“She’s very hot on duty,” said Inspector Taverner. “But she’s not the kind that changes her mind about people. She always disapproved of Leonides and his methods—”

“Well,” I said, “it seems a pretty good houseful. Who do you think killed him?”

Taverner shook his head.

“Early days,” he said, “early days to say that.”

“Come on, Taverner,” I said. “I bet you think you know who did it. We’re not in court, man.”

“No,” said Taverner gloomily. “And we may never be.”

“You mean he may not have been murdered?”

“Oh, he was murdered all right. Poisoned. But you know what these poisoning cases are like. It’s very tricky getting the evidence. Very tricky. All the possibilities may point one way—”

“That’s what I’m trying to get at. You’ve got it all taped out in your mind, haven’t you?”

“It’s a case of very strong probability. It’s one of those obvious things. The perfect setup. But I don’t know, I’m sure. It’s tricky.”

I looked appealingly at the Old Man.

He said slowly: “In murder cases, as you know, Charles, the obvious is usually the right solution. Old Leonides married again, ten years ago.”

“When he was seventy-seven?”

“Yes, he married a young woman of twenty-four.”

I whistled.

“What sort of a young woman?”

“A young woman out of a tea shop. A perfectly respectable young woman—good-looking in an anaemic, apathetic sort of way.”

“And she’s the strong probability?”

“I ask you, sir,” said Taverner. “She’s only thirty-four now—and that’s a dangerous age. She likes living soft. And there’s a young man in the house. Tutor to the grandchildren. Not been in the war—got a bad heart or something. They’re as thick as thieves.”

I looked at him thoughtfully. It was, certainly, an old and familiar pattern. The mixture as before. And the second Mrs. Leonides was, my father had

emphasized, very respectable. In the name of respectability many murders had been committed.

“What was it?” I asked. “Arsenic?”

“No. We haven’t got the analyst’s report yet—but the doctor thinks it’s eserine.”

“That’s a little unusual, isn’t it? Surely easy to trace the purchaser.”

“Not this thing. It was his own stuff, you see. Eyedrops.”

“Leonides suffered from diabetes,” said my father. “He had regular injections of insulin. Insulin is given out in small bottles with a rubber cap. A hypodermic needle is pressed down through the rubber cap and the injection drawn up.”

I guessed the next bit.

“And it wasn’t insulin in the bottle, but eserine?”

“Exactly.”

“And who gave him the injection?” I asked.

“His wife.”

I understood now what Sophia meant by the “right person.”

I asked: “Does the family get on well with the second Mrs. Leonides?”

“No. I gather they are hardly on speaking terms.”

It all seemed clearer and clearer. Nevertheless, Inspector Taverner was clearly not happy about it.

“What don’t you like about it?” I asked him.

“If she did it, Mr. Charles, it would have been so easy for her to substitute a bona fide bottle of insulin afterwards. In fact, if she is guilty, I can’t imagine why on earth she didn’t do just that.”

“Yes, it does seem indicated. Plenty of insulin about?”

“Oh yes, full bottles and empty ones. And if she’d done that, ten to one the doctor wouldn’t have spotted it. Very little is known of the post-mortem appearances in human poisoning by eserine. But as it was he checked up on the insulin (in case it was the wrong strength or something like that) and so, of course, he soon spotted that it wasn’t insulin.”

“So it seems,” I said thoughtfully, “that Mrs. Leonides was either very stupid—or possibly very clever.”

“You mean—”

“That she may be gambling on your coming to the conclusion that nobody could have been as stupid as she appears to have been. What are the alternatives? Any other—suspects?”

The Old Man said quietly:

“Practically anyone in the house could have done it. There was always a good store of insulin—at least a fortnight’s supply. One of the phials could have been tampered with, and replaced in the knowledge that it would be used in due course.”

“And anybody, more or less, had access to them?”

“They weren’t locked away. They were kept on a special shelf in the medicine cupboard in the bathroom of his part of the house. Everybody in the house came and went freely.”

“Any strong motive?”

My father sighed.

“My dear Charles. Aristide Leonides was enormously rich. He has made over a good deal of his money to his family, it is true, but it may be that somebody wanted more.”

“But the one that wanted it most would be the present widow. Has her young man any money?”

“No. Poor as a church mouse.”

Something clicked in my brain. I remembered Sophia’s quotation. I suddenly remembered the whole verse of the nursery rhyme:

There was a crooked man and he went a crooked mile.

He found a crooked sixpence beside a crooked stile.

He had a crooked cat which caught a crooked mouse,

And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

I said to Taverner:

“How does she strike you—Mrs. Leonides? What do you think of her?”

He replied slowly:

“It’s hard to say—very hard to say. She’s not easy. Very quiet—so you don’t know what she’s thinking. But she likes living soft—that I’ll swear I’m right about. Puts me in mind, you know, of a cat, a big purring lazy cat ... Not that I’ve anything against cats. Cats are all right....”

He sighed.

“What we want,” he said, “is evidence.”

Yes, I thought, we all wanted evidence that Mrs. Leonides had poisoned her husband. Sophia wanted it, and I wanted it, and Chief-Inspector Taverner wanted it.

Then everything in the garden would be lovely!

But Sophia wasn't sure, and I wasn't sure, and I didn't think Chief-Inspector Taverner was sure either.

Four

On the following day I went down to Three Gables with Taverner.

My position was a curious one. It was, to say the least of it, quite unorthodox. But the Old Man has never been highly orthodox.

I had a certain standing. I had worked with the Special Branch at the Yard during the early days of the war.

This, of course, was entirely different—but my earlier performances had given me, so to speak, a certain official standing.

My father said:

“If we’re ever going to solve this case, we’ve got to get some inside dope. We’ve got to know all about the people in that house. We’ve got to know them from the inside—not the outside. You’re the man who can get that for us.”

I didn’t like that. I threw my cigarette end into the grate as I said:

“I’m a police spy? Is that it? I’m to get the inside dope from Sophia whom I love and who both loves and trusts me, or so I believe.”

The Old Man became quite irritable. He said sharply:

“For heaven’s sake don’t take the commonplace view. To begin with, you don’t believe, do you, that your young woman murdered her grandfather?”

“Of course not. The idea’s absolutely absurd.”

“Very well—we don’t think so either. She’s been away for some years, she has always been on perfectly amicable terms with him. She has a very generous income and he would have been, I should say, delighted to hear of her engagement to you and would probably have made a handsome marriage settlement on her. We don’t suspect her. Why should we? But you

can make quite sure of one thing. If this thing isn't cleared up, that girl won't marry you. From what you've told me I'm fairly sure of that. And mark this, it's the kind of crime that may never be cleared up. We may be reasonably sure that the wife and her young man were in cahoots over it—but proving it will be another matter. There's not even a case to put up to the DPP so far. And unless we get definite evidence against her, there'll always be a nasty doubt. You see that, don't you?"

Yes, I saw that.

The Old Man then said quietly:

"Why not put it to her?"

"You mean—ask Sophia if I—" I stopped.

The Old Man was nodding his head vigorously.

"Yes, yes. I'm not asking you to worm your way in without telling the girl what you're up to. See what she has to say about it."

And so it came about that the following day I drove down with Chief-Inspector Taverner and Detective-Sergeant Lamb to Swinly Dean.

A little way beyond the golf course, we turned in at a gateway where I imagined that before the war there had been an imposing pair of gates. Patriotism or ruthless requisitioning had swept these away. We drove up a long curving drive flanked with rhododendrons and came out on a gravelled sweep in front of the house.

It was incredible! I wondered why it had been called Three Gables. Eleven Gables would have been more apposite! The curious thing was that it had a strange air of being distorted—and I thought I knew why. It was the type, really, of a cottage, it was a cottage swollen out of all proportion. It was like looking at a country cottage through a gigantic magnifying-glass. The slant-wise beams, the half-timbering, the gables—it was a little crooked house that had grown like a mushroom in the night!

Yet I got the idea. It was a Greek restaurateur's idea of something English. It was meant to be an Englishman's home—built the size of a castle! I wondered what the first Mrs. Leonides had thought of it. She had not, I fancied, been consulted or shown the plans. It was, most probably, her exotic husband's little surprise. I wondered if she had shuddered or smiled.

Apparently she had lived there quite happily.

“Bit overwhelming, isn't it?” said Inspector Taverner. “Of course, the old gentleman built on to it a good deal—making it into three separate houses, so to speak, with kitchens and everything. It's all tip-top inside, fitted up like a luxury hotel.”

Sophia came out of the front door. She was hatless and wore a green shirt and a tweed skirt.

She stopped dead when she saw me.

“You?” she exclaimed.

I said:

“Sophia, I've got to talk to you. Where can we go?”

For a moment I thought she was going to demur, then she turned and said: “This way.”

We walked down across the lawn. There was a fine view across Swinly Dean's No. 1 course—away to a clump of pine trees on a hill, and beyond it, to the dimness of hazy countryside.

Sophia led me to a rock-garden, now somewhat neglected, where there was a rustic wooden seat of great discomfort, and we sat down.

“Well?” she said.

Her voice was not encouraging.

I said my piece—all of it.

She listened very attentively. Her face gave little indication of what she was thinking, but when I came at last to a full stop, she sighed. It was a deep sigh.

“Your father,” she said, “is a very clever man.”

“The Old Man has his points. I think it’s a rotten idea myself—but—”

She interrupted me.

“Oh no,” she said. “It isn’t a rotten idea at all. It’s the only thing that might be any good. Your father, Charles, knows exactly what’s been going on in my mind. He knows better than you do.”

With a sudden almost despairing vehemence, she drove one clenched hand into the palm of the other.

“I’ve got to have the truth. I’ve got to know.”

“Because of us? But, dearest—”

“Not only because of us, Charles. I’ve got to know for my own peace of mind. You see, Charles, I didn’t tell you last night—but the truth is—I’m afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes—afraid—afraid—afraid. The police think, your father thinks, you think, everybody thinks—that it was Brenda.”

“The probabilities—”

“Oh yes, it’s quite probable. It’s possible. But when I say, ‘Brenda probably did it,’ I’m quite conscious that it’s only wishful thinking. Because, you see, I don’t really think so.”

“You don’t think so?” I said slowly.

“I don’t know. You’ve heard about it all from the outside as I wanted you to. Now I’ll show it you from the inside. I simply don’t feel that Brenda is that kind of a person—she’s not the sort of person, I feel, who would ever do anything that might involve her in any danger. She’s far too careful of herself.”

“How about this young man? Laurence Brown.”

“Laurence is a complete rabbit. He wouldn’t have the guts.”

“I wonder.”

“Yes, we don’t really know, do we? I mean, people are capable of surprising one frightfully. One gets an idea of them into one’s head, and sometimes it’s absolutely wrong. Not always—but sometimes. But all the same, Brenda”—she shook her head—“she’s always acted so completely in character. She’s what I call the harem type. Likes sitting about and eating sweets and having nice clothes and jewellery and reading cheap novels and going to the cinema. And it’s a queer thing to say, when one remembers that he was eighty-seven, but I really think she was rather thrilled by grandfather. He had a power, you know. I should imagine he could make a woman feel—oh—rather like a queen—the sultan’s favourite! I think—I’ve always thought—that he made Brenda feel as though she were an exciting, romantic person. He’s been clever with women all his life—and that kind of thing is a sort of art—you don’t lose the knack of it, however old you are.”

I left the problem of Brenda for the moment and harked back to a phrase of Sophia’s which had disturbed me.

“Why did you say,” I asked, “that you were afraid?”

Sophia shivered a little and pressed her hands together.

“Because it’s true,” she said in a low voice. “It’s very important, Charles, that I should make you understand this. You see, we’re a very queer family ... There’s a lot of ruthlessness in us—and—different kinds of ruthlessness. That’s what’s so disturbing. The different kinds.”

She must have seen incomprehension in my face. She went on, speaking energetically.

“I’ll try and make what I mean clear. Grandfather, for instance. Once when he was telling us about his boyhood in Smyrna, he mentioned, quite casually, that he had stabbed two men. It was some kind of a brawl—there had been some unforgivable insult—I don’t know—but it was just a thing that had happened quite naturally. He’d really practically forgotten about it. But it was, somehow, such a queer thing to hear about, quite casually, in England.” I nodded.

“That’s one kind of ruthlessness,” went on Sophia, “and then there was my grandmother. I only just remember her, but I’ve heard a good deal about her. I think she might have had the ruthlessness that comes from having no imagination whatever. All those fox-hunting forebears—and the old Generals, the shoot-’em-down type. Full of rectitude and arrogance, and not a bit afraid of taking responsibility in matters of life and death.”

“Isn’t that a bit far-fetched?”

“Yes, I dare say—but I’m always rather afraid of that type. It’s full of rectitude but it is ruthless. And then there’s my own mother—she’s an actress—she’s a darling, but she’s got absolutely no sense of proportion. She’s one of those unconscious egoists who can only see things in relation to how it affects them. That’s rather frightening, sometimes, you know. And there’s Clemency, Uncle Roger’s wife. She’s a scientist—she’s doing some kind of very important research—she’s ruthless too, in a kind of cold-blooded impersonal way. Uncle Roger’s the exact opposite—he’s the kindest and most lovable person in the world, but he’s got a really terrific temper. Things make his blood boil and then he hardly knows what he’s doing. And there’s father—”

She made a long pause.

“Father,” she said slowly, “is almost too well controlled. You never know what he’s thinking. He never shows any emotion at all. It’s probably a kind of unconscious self-defence against mother’s absolute orgies of emotion, but sometimes—it worries me a little.”

“My dear child,” I said, “you’re working yourself up unnecessarily. What it comes to in the end is that everybody, perhaps, is capable of murder.”

“I suppose that’s true. Even me.”

“Not you!”

“Oh yes, Charles, you can’t make me an exception. I suppose I could murder someone ...” She was silent a moment or two, then added, “But if so, it would have to be for something really worth while!”

I laughed then. I couldn’t help it. And Sophia smiled.

“Perhaps I’m a fool,” she said, “but we’ve got to find out the truth about grandfather’s death. We’ve got to. If only it was Brenda....”

I felt suddenly rather sorry for Brenda Leonides.

Five

Along the path towards us came a tall figure walking briskly. It had on a battered old felt hat, a shapeless skirt, and a rather cumbersome jersey.

“Aunt Edith,” said Sophia.

The figure paused once or twice, stooping to the flower borders, then it advanced upon us. I rose to my feet.

“This is Charles Hayward, Aunt Edith. My aunt, Miss de Haviland.”

Edith de Haviland was a woman of about seventy. She had a mass of untidy grey hair, a weather-beaten face and a shrewd and piercing glance.

“How d’ye do?” she said. “I’ve heard about you. Back from the East. How’s your father?”

Rather surprised, I said he was very well.

“Knew him when he was a boy,” said Miss de Haviland. “Knew his mother very well. You look rather like her. Have you come to help us—or the other thing?”

“I hope to help,” I said rather uncomfortably.

She nodded.

“We could do with some help. Place swarming with policemen. Pop out at you all over the place. Don’t like some of the types. A boy who’s been to a decent school oughtn’t to go into the police. Saw Moyra Kinoul’s boy the other day holding up the traffic at Marble Arch. Makes you feel you don’t know where you are!”

She turned to Sophia.

“Nannie’s asking for you, Sophia. Fish.”

“Bother,” said Sophia. “I’ll go and telephone about it.”

She walked briskly towards the house. Miss de Haviland turned and walked slowly in the same direction. I fell into step beside her.

“Don’t know what we’d all do without nannies,” said Miss de Haviland.

“Nearly everybody’s got an old nannie. They come back and wash and iron and cook and do housework. Faithful. Chose this one myself—years ago.”

She stopped and pulled viciously at an entangling twining bit of green.

“Hateful stuff—bindweed! Worst weed there is! Choking, entangling—and you can’t get at it properly, runs along underground.”

With her heel she ground the handful of greenstuff viciously underfoot.

“This is a bad business, Charles Hayward,” she said. She was looking towards the house. “What do the police think about it? Suppose I mustn’t ask you that. Seems odd to think of Aristide being poisoned. For that matter it seems odd to think of him being dead. I never liked him—never! But I can’t get used to the idea of his being dead ... Makes the house seem so—empty.”

I said nothing. For all her curt way of speech, Edith de Haviland seemed in a reminiscent mood.

“Was thinking this morning—I’ve lived here a long time. Over forty years. Came here when my sister died. He asked me to. Seven children—and the youngest only a year old ... Couldn’t leave ’em to be brought up by a dago, could I? An impossible marriage, of course. I always felt Marcia must have been—well—bewitched. Ugly common little foreigner! He gave me a free hand—I will say that. Nurses, governesses, school. And proper wholesome nursery food—not those queer spiced rice dishes he used to eat.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?” I murmured.

“Yes. Queer in a way ... I could have left, I suppose, when the children grew up and married ... I suppose, really, I’d got interested in the garden.

And then there was Philip. If a man marries an actress he can't expect to have any home life. Don't know why actresses have children. As soon as a baby's born they rush off and play in Repertory in Edinburgh or somewhere as remote as possible. Philip did the sensible thing—moved in here with his books."

"What does Philip Leonides do?"

"Writes books. Can't think why. Nobody wants to read them. All about obscure historical details. You've never even heard of them, have you?"

I admitted it.

"Too much money, that's what he's had," said Miss de Haviland. "Most people have to stop being cranks and earn a living."

"Don't his books pay?"

"Of course not. He's supposed to be a great authority on certain periods and all that. But he doesn't have to make his books pay—Aristide settled something like a hundred thousand pounds—something quite fantastic—on him! To avoid death duties! Aristide made them all financially independent. Roger runs Associated Catering—Sophia has a very handsome allowance. The children's money is in trust for them."

"So no one gains particularly by his death?"

She threw me a strange glance.

"Yes, they do. They all get more money. But they could probably have had it, if they asked for it, anyway."

"Have you any idea who poisoned him, Miss de Haviland?"

She replied characteristically:

"No, indeed I haven't. It's upset me very much. Not nice to think one has a Borgia sort of person loose about the house. I suppose the police will fasten on poor Brenda."

“You don’t think they’ll be right in doing so?”

“I simply can’t tell. She’s always seemed to me a singularly stupid and commonplace young woman—rather conventional. Not my idea of a poisoner. Still, after all, if a young woman of twenty-four marries a man close on eighty, it’s fairly obvious that she’s marrying him for his money. In the normal course of events she could have expected to become a rich widow fairly soon. But Aristide was a singularly tough old man. His diabetes wasn’t getting any worse. He really looked like living to be a hundred. I suppose she got tired of waiting....”

“In that case,” I said, and stopped.

“In that case,” said Miss de Haviland briskly, “it will be more or less all right. Annoying publicity, of course. But after all, she isn’t one of the family.”

“You’ve no other ideas?” I asked.

“What other ideas should I have?”

I wondered. I had a suspicion that there might be more going on under the battered felt hat than I knew.

Behind the perky, almost disconnected utterance, there was, I thought, a very shrewd brain at work. Just for a moment I even wondered whether Miss de Haviland had poisoned Aristide Leonides herself....

It did not seem an impossible idea. At the back of my mind was the way she had ground the bindweed into the soil with her heel with a kind of vindictive thoroughness.

I remembered the word Sophia had used. Ruthlessness.

I stole a sideways glance at Edith de Haviland.

Given good and sufficient reason ... But what exactly would seem to Edith de Haviland good and sufficient reason?

To answer that, I should have to know her better.

Six

The front door was open. We passed through it into a rather surprisingly spacious hall. It was furnished with restraint—well-polished dark oak and gleaming brass. At the back, where the staircase would normally appear, was a white panelled wall with a door in it.

“My brother-in-law’s part of the house,” said Miss de Haviland. “The ground floor is Philip and Magda’s.”

We went through a doorway on the left into a large drawing room. It had pale-blue panelled walls, furniture covered in heavy brocade, and on every available table and on the walls were hung photographs and pictures of actors, dancers, and stage scenes and designs. A Degas of ballet dancers hung over the mantelpiece. There were masses of flowers, enormous brown chrysanthemums and great vases of carnations.

“I suppose,” said Miss de Haviland, “that you want to see Philip?”

Did I want to see Philip? I had no idea. All I had wanted to do was to see Sophia. That I had done. She had given emphatic encouragement to the Old Man’s plan—but she had now receded from the scene and was presumably somewhere telephoning about fish, having given me no indication of how to proceed. Was I to approach Philip Leonides as a young man anxious to marry his daughter, or as a casual friend who had dropped in (surely not at such a moment!) or as an associate of the police?

Miss de Haviland gave me no time to consider her question. It was, indeed, not a question at all, but more an assertion. Miss de Haviland, I judged, was more inclined to assert than to question.

“We’ll go to the library,” she said.

She led me out of the drawing room, along a corridor and in through another door.

It was a big room, full of books. The books did not confine themselves to the bookcases that reached up to the ceiling. They were on chairs and tables and even on the floor. And yet there was no sense of disarray about them.

The room was cold. There was some smell absent in it that I was conscious of having expected. It smelt of the mustiness of old books and just a little beeswax. In a second or two I realized what I missed. It was the scent of tobacco. Philip Leonides was not a smoker.

He got up from behind his table as we entered—a tall man, aged somewhere around fifty, an extraordinarily handsome man. Everyone had laid so much emphasis on the ugliness of Aristide Leonides, that for some reason I expected his son to be ugly too. Certainly I was not prepared for this perfection of feature—the straight nose, the flawless line of jaw, the fair hair touched with grey that swept back from a well-shaped forehead.

“This is Charles Hayward, Philip,” said Edith de Haviland.

“Ah, how do you do?”

I could not tell if he had ever heard of me. The hand he gave me was cold. His face was quite incurious. It made me rather nervous. He stood there, patient and uninterested.

“Where are those awful policemen?” demanded Miss de Haviland. “Have they been in here?”

“I believe Chief-Inspector”—(he glanced down at a card on the desk)—“er—Taverner is coming to talk to me presently.”

“Where is he now?”

“I’ve no idea, Aunt Edith. Upstairs, I suppose.”

“With Brenda?”

“I really don’t know.”

Looking at Philip Leonides, it seemed quite impossible that a murder could have been committed anywhere in his vicinity.

“Is Magda up yet?”

“I don’t know. She’s not usually up before eleven.”

“That sounds like her,” said Edith de Haviland.

What sounded like Mrs. Philip Leonides was a high voice talking very rapidly and approaching fast. The door behind me burst open and a woman came in. I don’t know how she managed to give the impression of its being three women rather than one who entered.

She was smoking a cigarette in a long holder and was wearing a peach satin *négligé* which she was holding up with one hand. A cascade of Titian hair rippled down her back. Her face had that almost shocking air of nudity that a woman’s has nowadays when it is not made up at all. Her eyes were blue and enormous and she was talking very rapidly in a husky, rather attractive voice with a very clear enunciation.

“Darling, I can’t stand it—I simply can’t stand it—just think of the notices—it isn’t in the papers yet, but of course it will be—and I simply can’t make up my mind what I ought to wear at the inquest—very, very subdued—not black though, perhaps dark purple—and I simply haven’t got a coupon left—I’ve lost the address of that dreadful man who sells them to me—you know, the garage somewhere near Shaftesbury Avenue—and if I went up there in the car the police would follow me, and they might ask the most awkward questions, mightn’t they? I mean, what could one say? How calm you are, Philip! How can you be so calm? Don’t you realize we can leave this awful house now? Freedom—freedom! Oh, how unkind—the poor old Sweetie—of course we’d never have left him while he was alive. He really did dote on us, didn’t he—in spite of all the trouble that woman upstairs tried to make between us. I’m quite sure that if we had gone away and left him to her, he’d have cut us right out of everything. Horrible creature! After all, poor old Sweetie Pie was just on ninety—all the family feeling in the world couldn’t have stood up against a dreadful woman who was on the spot. You know, Philip, I really believe that this would be a

wonderful opportunity to put on the Edith Thompson play. This murder would give us a lot of advance publicity. Bildenstein said he could get the Thespian—that dreary play in verse about miners is coming off any minute—it’s a wonderful part—wonderful. I know they say I must always play comedy because of my nose—but you know there’s quite a lot of comedy to be got out of Edith Thompson—I don’t think the author realized that—comedy always heightens the suspense. I know just how I’d play it—commonplace, silly, make-believe up to the last minute and then—”

She cast out an arm—the cigarette fell out of the holder on to the polished mahogany of Philip’s desk and began to burn it. Impassively he reached for it and dropped it into the wastepaper basket.

“And then,” whispered Magda Leonides, her eyes suddenly widening, her face stiffening, “just terror....”

The stark fear stayed on her face for about twenty seconds, then her face relaxed, crumpled, a bewildered child was about to burst into tears.

Suddenly all emotion was wiped away as though by a sponge and, turning to me, she asked in a businesslike tone:

“Don’t you think that would be the way to play Edith Thompson?”

I said I thought that would be exactly the way to play Edith Thompson. At the moment I could only remember very vaguely who Edith Thompson was, but I was anxious to start off well with Sophia’s mother.

“Rather like Brenda, really, wasn’t she?” said Magda. “D’you know, I never thought of that. It’s very interesting. Shall I point that out to the inspector?”

The man behind the desk frowned very slightly.

“There’s really no need, Magda,” he said, “for you to see him at all. I can tell him anything he wants to know.”

“Not see him?” Her voice went up. “But of course I must see him! Darling, darling, you’re so terribly unimaginative! You don’t realize the importance

of details. He'll want to know exactly how and when everything happened, all the little things one noticed and wondered about at the time—"

"Mother," said Sophia, coming through the open door, "you're not to tell the inspector a lot of lies."

"Sophia—darling..."

"I know, precious, that you've got it all set and that you're ready to give a most beautiful performance. But you've got it wrong. Quite wrong."

"Nonsense. You don't know—"

"I do know. You've got to play it quite differently, darling. Subdued—saying very little—holding it all back—on your guard—protecting the family."

Magda Leonides' face showed the naïve perplexity of a child.

"Darling," she said, "do you really think—"

"Yes, I do. Throw it away. That's the idea."

Sophia added, as a little pleased smile began to show on her mother's face:

"I've made you some chocolate. It's in the drawing room."

"Oh—good—I'm starving—"

She paused in the doorway.

"You don't know," she said, and the words appeared to be addressed either to me or to the bookshelf behind my head, "how lovely it is to have a daughter!"

On this exit line she went out.

"God knows," said Miss de Haviland, "what she will say to the police!"

“She’ll be all right,” said Sophia.

“She might say anything.”

“Don’t worry,” said Sophia. “She’ll play it the way the producer says. I’m the producer!”

She went out after her mother, then wheeled back to say:

“Here’s Chief-Inspector Taverner to see you, Father. You don’t mind if Charles stays, do you?”

I thought that a very faint air of bewilderment showed on Philip Leonides’ face. It well might! But his incurious habit served me in good stead. He murmured:

“Oh certainly—certainly,” in a rather vague voice.

Chief-Inspector Taverner came in, solid, dependable, and with an air of businesslike promptitude that was somehow soothing.

“Just a little unpleasantness,” his manner seemed to say, “and then we shall be out of the house for good—and nobody will be more pleased than I shall. We don’t want to hang about, I can assure you....”

I don’t know how he managed, without any words at all, but merely by drawing up a chair to the desk, to convey what he did, but it worked. I sat down unobtrusively a little way off.

“Yes, Chief-Inspector?” said Philip.

Miss de Haviland said abruptly:

“You don’t want me, Chief-Inspector?”

“Not just at the moment, Miss de Haviland. Later, if I might have a few words with you—”

“Of course. I shall be upstairs.”

She went out, shutting the door behind her.

“Well, Chief-Inspector?” Philip repeated.

“I know you’re a very busy gentleman and I don’t want to disturb you for long. But I may mention to you in confidence that our suspicions are confirmed. Your father did not die a natural death. His death was the result of an overdose of physostigmine—more usually known as eserine.”

Philip bowed his head. He showed no particular emotion.

“I don’t know whether that suggests anything to you?” Taverner went on.

“What should it suggest? My own view is that my father must have taken the poison by accident.”

“You really think so, Mr. Leonides?”

“Yes, it seems to me perfectly possible. He was close on ninety, remember, and with very imperfect eyesight.”

“So he emptied the contents of his eyedrop bottle into an insulin bottle. Does that really seem to you a credible suggestion, Mr. Leonides?”

Philip did not reply. His face became even more impassive.

Taverner went on:

“We have found the eyedrop bottle, empty—in the dustbin, with no fingerprints on it. That in itself is curious. In the normal way there should have been fingerprints. Certainly your father’s, possibly his wife’s, or the valet....”

Philip Leonides looked up.

“What about the valet?” he said. “What about Johnson?”

“You are suggesting Johnson as the possible criminal? He certainly had opportunity. But when we come to motive it is different. It was your father’s

custom to pay him a bonus every year—each year the bonus was increased. Your father made it clear to him that this was in lieu of any sum that he might otherwise have left him in his will. The bonus now, after seven years' service, has reached a very considerable sum every year and is still rising. It was obviously to Johnson's interest that your father should live as long as possible. Moreover, they were on excellent terms, and Johnson's record of past service is unimpeachable—he is a thoroughly skilled and faithful valet attendant." He paused. "We do not suspect Johnson."

Philip replied tonelessly: "I see."

"Now, Mr. Leonides, perhaps you will give me a detailed account of your own movements on the day of your father's death?"

"Certainly, Chief-Inspector. I was here, in this room, all that day—with the exception of meals, of course."

"Did you see your father at all?"

"I said good morning to him after breakfast as was my custom."

"Were you alone with him then?"

"My—er—stepmother was in the room."

"Did he seem quite as usual?"

With a slight hint of irony, Philip replied:

"He showed no foreknowledge that he was to be murdered that day."

"Is your father's portion of the house entirely separate from this?"

"Yes, the only access to it is through the door in the hall."

"Is that door kept locked?"

"No."

“Never?”

“I have never known it to be so.”

“Anyone could go freely between that part of the house and this?”

“Certainly. It was only separate from the point of view of domestic convenience.”

“How did you first hear of your father’s death?”

“My brother Roger, who occupies the west wing of the floor above, came rushing down to tell me that my father had had a sudden seizure. He had difficulty in breathing and seemed very ill.”

“What did you do?”

“I telephoned through to the doctor, which nobody seemed to have thought of doing. The doctor was out—but I left a message for him to come as soon as possible. I then went upstairs.”

“And then?”

“My father was clearly very ill. He died before the doctor came.”

There was no emotion in Philip’s voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

“Where was the rest of your family?”

“My wife was in London. She returned shortly afterwards. Sophia was also absent, I believe. The two younger ones, Eustace and Josephine, were at home.”

“I hope you won’t misunderstand me, Mr. Leonides, if I ask you exactly how your father’s death will affect your financial position.”

“I quite appreciate that you want to know all the facts. My father made us financially independent a great many years ago. My brother he made Chairman and principal shareholder of Associated Catering—his largest

company, and put the management of it entirely in his hands. He made over to me what he considered an equivalent sum—actually I think it was a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in various bonds and securities—so that I could use the capital as I chose. He also settled very generous amounts on my two sisters, who have since died.”

“But he left himself still a very rich man?”

“No, actually he only retained for himself a comparatively modest income. He said it would give him an interest in life. Since that time”—for the first time a faint smile creased Philip’s lips—“he has become, as the result of various undertakings, an even richer man than he was before.”

“Your brother and yourself came here to live. That was not the result of any financial—difficulties?”

“Certainly not. It was a mere matter of convenience. My father always told us that we were welcome to make a home with him. For various domestic reasons this was a convenient thing for me to do.

“I was also,” added Philip deliberately, “extremely fond of my father. I came here with my family in 1937. I pay no rent, but I pay my proportion of the rates.”

“And your brother?”

“My brother came here as a result of the blitz, when his house in London was bombed in 1943.”

“Now, Mr. Leonides, have you any idea what your father’s testamentary dispositions are?”

“A very clear idea. He re-made his will in 1946. My father was not a secretive man. He had a great sense of family. He held a family conclave at which his solicitor was also present and who, at his request, made clear to us the terms of the will. These terms I expect you already know. Mr. Gaitskill will doubtless have informed you. Roughly, a sum of a hundred thousand pounds free of duty was left to my stepmother in addition to her

already very generous marriage settlement. The residue of his property was divided into three portions, one to myself, one to my brother, and a third in trust for the three grandchildren. The estate is a large one, but the death duties, of course, will be very heavy.”

“Any bequests to servants or to charity?”

“No bequests of any kind. The wages paid to servants were increased annually if they remained in his service.”

“You are not—you will excuse my asking—in actual need of money, Mr. Leonides?”

“Income tax, as you know, is somewhat heavy, Chief-Inspector—but my income amply suffices for my needs—and for my wife’s. Moreover, my father frequently made us all very generous gifts, and had any emergency arisen, he would have come to the rescue immediately.”

Philip added coldly and clearly:

“I can assure you that I had no financial reason for desiring my father’s death, Chief-Inspector.”

“I am very sorry, Mr. Leonides, if you think I suggested anything of the kind. But we have to get at all the facts. Now I’m afraid I must ask you some rather delicate questions. They refer to the relations between your father and his wife. Were they on happy terms together?”

“As far as I know, perfectly.”

“No quarrels?”

“I do not think so.”

“There was a—great disparity in age?”

“There was.”

“Did you—excuse me—approve of your father’s second marriage.”

“My approval was not asked.”

“That is not an answer, Mr. Leonides.”

“Since you press the point, I will say that I considered the marriage unwise.”

“Did you remonstrate with your father about it.”

“When I heard of it, it was an accomplished fact.”

“Rather a shock to you—eh?”

Philip did not reply.

“Was there any bad feeling about the matter?”

“My father was at perfect liberty to do as he pleased.”

“Your relations with Mrs. Leonides have been amicable?”

“Perfectly.”

“You are on friendly terms with her?”

“We very seldom meet.”

Chief-Inspector Taverner shifted his ground.

“Can you tell me something about Mr. Laurence Brown?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. He was engaged by my father.”

“But he was engaged to teach your children, Mr. Leonides.”

“True. My son was a sufferer from infantile paralysis—fortunately a light case—and it was considered not advisable to send him to a public school. My father suggested that he and my young daughter Josephine should have a private tutor—the choice at the time was rather limited—since the tutor in

question must be ineligible for military service. This young man's credentials were satisfactory, my father and my aunt (who has always looked after the children's welfare) were satisfied, and I acquiesced. I may add that I have no fault to find with his teaching, which has been conscientious and adequate."

"His living quarters are in your father's part of the house, not here?"

"There was more room up there."

"Have you ever noticed—I am sorry to ask this—any signs of intimacy between Laurence Brown and your stepmother?"

"I have had no opportunity of observing anything of the kind."

"Have you heard any gossip or tittle-tattle on the subject?"

"I don't listen to gossip or tittle-tattle, Chief-Inspector."

"Very creditable," said Inspector Taverner. "So you've seen no evil, heard no evil, and aren't speaking any evil?"

"If you like to put it that way, Chief-Inspector."

Inspector Taverner got up.

"Well," he said, "thank you very much, Mr. Leonides."

I followed him unobtrusively out of the room.

"Whew," said Taverner, "he's a cold fish!"

Seven

“And now,” said Taverner, “we’ll go and have a word with Mrs. Philip. Magda West, her stage name is.”

“Is she any good?” I asked. “I know her name, and I believe I’ve seen her in various shows, but I can’t remember when and where.”

“She’s one of those Near Successes,” said Taverner. “She’s starred once or twice in the West End, she’s made quite a name for herself in Repertory—she plays a lot for the little highbrow theatres and the Sunday clubs. The truth is, I think, she’s been handicapped by not having to earn her living at it. She’s been able to pick and choose, and to go where she likes and occasionally to put up the money and finance a show where she’s fancied a certain part—usually the last part in the world to suit her. Result is, she’s receded a bit into the amateur class rather than the professional. She’s good, mind you, especially in comedy—but managers don’t like her much—they say she’s too independent, and she’s a troublemaker—foments rows and enjoys a bit of mischief-making. I don’t know how much of it is true—but she’s not too popular amongst her fellow artists.”

Sophia came out of the drawing room and said: “My mother is in here, Chief-Inspector.”

I followed Taverner into the big drawing room. For a moment I hardly recognized the woman who sat on the brocaded settee.

The Titian hair was piled high on her head in an Edwardian coiffure, and she was dressed in a well-cut dark-grey coat and skirt with a delicately pleated pale mauve shirt fastened at the neck by a small cameo brooch. For the first time I was aware of the charm of her delightfully tip-tilted nose. I was faintly reminded of Athene Seyler—and it seemed quite impossible to believe that this was the tempestuous creature in the peach *négligé*.

“Inspector Taverner?” she said. “Do come in and sit down. Will you smoke? This is a most terrible business. I simply feel at the moment that I

just can't take it in."

Her voice was low and emotionless, the voice of a person determined at all costs to display self-control. She went on:

"Please tell me if I can help you in any way."

"Thank you, Mrs. Leonides. Where were you at the time of the tragedy?"

"I suppose I must have been driving down from London. I'd lunched that day at the Ivy with a friend. Then we'd gone to a dress show. We had a drink with some other friends at the Berkeley. Then I started home. When I got here everything was in commotion. It seemed my father-in-law had had a sudden seizure. He was—dead." Her voice trembled just a little.

"You were fond of your father-in-law?"

"I was devoted—"

Her voice rose. Sophia adjusted, very slightly, the angle of the Degas picture. Magda's voice dropped to its former subdued tone.

"I was very fond of him," she said in a quiet voice. "We all were. He was—very good to us."

"Did you get on well with Mrs. Leonides?"

"We didn't see very much of Brenda."

"Why was that?"

"Well, we hadn't much in common. Poor dear Brenda. Life must have been hard for her sometimes."

Again Sophia fiddled with the Degas.

"Indeed? In what way?"

"Oh, I don't know." Magda shook her head, with a sad little smile.

“Was Mrs. Leonides happy with her husband?”

“Oh, I think so.”

“No quarrels?”

Again the slight smiling shake of the head.

“I really don’t know, Inspector. Their part of the house is quite separate.”

“She and Mr. Laurence Brown were very friendly, were they not?”

Magda Leonides stiffened. Her eyes opened reproachfully at Taverner.

“I don’t think,” she said with dignity, “that you ought to ask me things like that. Brenda was quite friendly to everyone. She is really a very amiable sort of person.”

“Do you like Mr. Laurence Brown?”

“He’s very quiet. Quite nice, but you hardly know he’s there. I haven’t really seen very much of him.”

“Is his teaching satisfactory?”

“I suppose so. I really wouldn’t know. Philip seems quite satisfied.”

Taverner essayed some shock tactics.

“I’m sorry to ask you this, but in your opinion was there anything in the nature of a love affair between Mr. Brown and Mrs. Brenda Leonides?”

Magda got up. She was very much the grande dame.

“I have never seen any evidence of anything of that kind,” she said. “I don’t think really, Inspector, that that is a question you ought to ask me. She was my father-in-law’s wife.”

I almost applauded.

The Chief-Inspector also rose.

“More a question for the servants?” he suggested.

Magda did not answer.

“Thank you, Mrs. Leonides,” said the Inspector and went out.

“You did that beautifully, darling,” said Sophia to her mother warmly.

Magda twisted up a curl reflectively behind her right ear and looked at herself in the glass.

“Ye-es,” she said, “I think it was the right way to play it.”

Sophia looked at me.

“Oughtn’t you,” she asked, “to go with the Inspector?”

“Look here, Sophia, what am I supposed—”

I stopped. I could not very well ask outright in front of Sophia’s mother exactly what my role was supposed to be. Magda Leonides had so far evinced no interest in my presence at all, except as a useful recipient of an exit line on daughters. I might be a reporter, her daughter’s fiancé, or an obscure hanger-on of the police force, or even an undertaker—to Magda Leonides they would one and all come under the general heading of audience.

Looking down at her feet, Mrs. Leonides said with dissatisfaction:

“These shoes are wrong. Frivolous.”

Obedying Sophia’s imperious wave of the head, I hurried after Taverner. I caught him up in the outer hall just going through the door to the stairway.

“Just going up to see the elder brother,” he explained.

I put my problem to him without more ado.

“Look here, Taverner, who am I supposed to be?”

He looked surprised.

“Who are you supposed to be?”

“Yes, what am I doing here in this house? If anyone asks me, what do I say?”

“Oh I see.” He considered for a moment. Then he smiled. “Has anybody asked you?”

“Well—no.”

“Then why not leave it at that. Never explain. That’s a very good motto. Especially in a house upset like this house is. Everyone is far too full of their own private worries and fears to be in a questioning mood. They’ll take you for granted so long as you just seem sure of yourself. It’s a great mistake ever to say anything when you needn’t. H’m, now we go through this door and up the stairs. Nothing locked. Of course you realize, I expect, that these questions I’m asking are all a lot of hooey! Doesn’t matter a hoot who was in the house and who wasn’t, or where they all were on that particular day—”

“Then why—”

He went on: “Because it at least gives me a chance to look at them all, and size them up, and hear what they’ve got to say, and to hope that, quite by chance, somebody might give me a useful pointer.” He was silent a moment and then murmured: “I bet Mrs. Magda Leonides could spill a mouthful if she chose.”

“Would it be reliable?” I asked.

“Oh no,” said Taverner, “it wouldn’t be reliable. But it might start a possible line of inquiry. Everybody in the damned house had means and opportunity. What I want is a motive.”

At the top of the stairs, a door barred off the right-hand corridor. There was a brass knocker on it and Inspector Taverner duly knocked.

It was opened with startling suddenness by a man who must have been standing just inside. He was a clumsy giant of a man, with powerful shoulders, dark rumpled hair, and an exceedingly ugly but at the same time rather pleasant face. His eyes looked at us and then quickly away in that furtive, embarrassed manner which shy but honest people often adopt.

“Oh, I say,” he said. “Come in. Yes, do. I was going—but it doesn’t matter. Come into the sitting room. I’ll get Clemency—oh, you’re there, darling. It’s Chief-Inspector Taverner. He—are there any cigarettes? Just wait a minute. If you don’t mind.” He collided with a screen, said “I beg your pardon” to it in a flustered manner, and went out of the room.

It was rather like the exit of a bumblebee and left a noticeable silence behind it.

Mrs. Roger Leonides was standing up by the window. I was intrigued at once by her personality and by the atmosphere of the room in which we stood.

The walls were painted white—really white, not an ivory or a pale cream which is what one usually means when one says “white” in house decoration. They had no pictures on them except one over the mantelpiece, a geometrical fantasia in triangles of dark grey and battleship blue. There was hardly any furniture—only mere utilitarian necessities, three or four chairs, a glass-topped table, one small bookshelf. There were no ornaments. There was light and space and air. It was as different from the big brocaded and flowered drawing room on the floor below as chalk from cheese. And Mrs. Roger Leonides was as different from Mrs. Philip Leonides as one woman could be from another. Whilst one felt that Magda Leonides could be, and often was, at least half a dozen different women, Clemency Leonides, I was sure, could never be anyone but herself. She was a woman of very sharp and definite personality.

She was about fifty, I suppose; her hair was grey, cut very short in what was almost an Eton crop but which grew so beautifully on her small well-shaped

head that it had none of the ugliness I have always associated with that particular cut. She had an intelligent, sensitive face, with light-grey eyes of a peculiar and searching intensity. She had on a simple dark-red woollen frock that fitted her slenderness perfectly.

She was, I felt at once, rather an alarming woman ... I think, because I judged that the standards by which she lived might not be those of an ordinary woman. I understood at once why Sophia had used the word ruthlessness in connection with her. The room was cold and I shivered a little.

Clemency Leonides said in a quiet, well-bred voice:

“Do sit down, Chief-Inspector. Is there any further news?”

“Death was due to eserine, Mrs. Leonides.”

She said thoughtfully:

“So that makes it murder. It couldn’t have been an accident of any kind, could it?”

“No, Mrs. Leonides.”

“Please be very gentle with my husband, Chief-Inspector. This will affect him very much. He worshipped his father and he feels things very acutely. He is an emotional person.”

“You were on good terms with your father-in-law, Mrs. Leonides?”

“Yes, on quite good terms.” She added quietly: “I did not like him very much.”

“Why was that?”

“I disliked his objectives in life—and his methods of attaining them.”

“And Mrs. Brenda Leonides?”

“Brenda? I never saw very much of her.”

“Do you think it possible that there was anything between her and Mr. Laurence Brown?”

“You mean—some kind of a love affair? I shouldn’t think so. But I really wouldn’t know anything about it.”

Her voice sounded completely uninterested.

Roger Leonides came back with a rush, and the same bumblebee effect.

“I got held up,” he said. “Telephone. Well, Inspector? Well? Have you got news? What caused my father’s death?”

“Death was due to eserine poisoning.”

“It was? My God! Then it was that woman! She couldn’t wait! He took her more or less out of the gutter and this is his reward. She murdered him in cold blood! God, it makes my blood boil to think of it.”

“Have you any particular reason for thinking that?” Taverner asked.

Roger was pacing up and down, tugging at his hair with both hands.

“Reason? Why, who else could it be? I’ve never trusted her—never liked her! We’ve none of us liked her. Philip and I were both appalled when Dad came home one day and told us what he had done! At his age! It was madness—madness. My father was an amazing man, Inspector. In intellect he was as young and fresh as a man of forty. Everything I have in the world I owe to him. He did everything for me—never failed me. It was I who failed him—when I think of it—”

He dropped heavily on to a chair. His wife came quietly to his side.

“Now, Roger, that’s enough. Don’t work yourself up.”

“I know, dearest—I know,” he took her hand. “But how can I keep calm—how can I help feeling—”

“But we must all keep calm, Roger. Chief-Inspector Taverner wants our help.”

“That is right, Mrs. Leonides.”

Roger cried:

“Do you know what I’d like to do? I’d like to strangle that woman with my own hands. Grudging that dear old man a few extra years of life. If I had her here—” He sprang up. He was shaking with rage. He held out convulsive hands. “Yes, I’d wring her neck, wring her neck....”

“Roger!” said Clemency sharply.

He looked at her, abashed.

“Sorry, dearest.” He turned to us. “I do apologize. My feelings get the better of me. I—excuse me—”

He went out of the room again. Clemency Leonides said with a very faint smile:

“Really, you know, he wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Taverner accepted her remark politely.

Then he started on his so-called routine questions.

Clemency Leonides replied concisely and accurately.

Roger Leonides had been in London on the day of his father’s death at Box House, the headquarters of the Associated Catering. He had returned early in the afternoon and had spent some time with his father as was his custom. She herself had been, as usual, at the Lambert Institute in Gower Street where she worked. She had returned to the house just before six o’clock.

“Did you see your father-in-law?”

“No. The last time I saw him was on the day before. We had coffee with him after dinner.”

“But you did not see him on the day of his death?”

“No. I actually went over to his part of the house because Roger thought he had left his pipe there—a very precious pipe, but as it happened he had left it on the hall table there, so I did not need to disturb the old man. He often dozed off about six.”

“When did you hear of his illness?”

“Brenda came rushing over. That was just a minute or two after half past six.”

These questions, as I knew, were unimportant, but I was aware how keen was Inspector Taverner’s scrutiny of the woman who answered them. He asked her a few questions about the nature of her work in London. She said that it had to do with the radiation effects of atomic disintegration.

“You work on the atom bomb, in fact?”

“The work has nothing destructive about it. The Institute is carrying out experiments on the therapeutic effects.”

When Taverner got up, he expressed a wish to look round their part of the house. She seemed a little surprised, but showed him its extent readily enough. The bedroom with its twin beds and white coverlets and its simplified toilet appliances reminded me again of a hospital or some monastic cell. The bathroom, too, was severely plain with no special luxury fitting and no array of cosmetics. The kitchen was bare, spotlessly clean, and well equipped with labour-saving devices of a practical kind. Then we came to a door which Clemency opened, saying: “This is my husband’s special room.”

“Come in,” said Roger. “Come in.”

I drew a faint breath of relief. Something in the spotless austerity elsewhere had been getting me down. This was an intensely personal room. There was a large roll-top desk untidily covered with papers, old pipes, and tobacco ash. There were big shabby easy chairs. Persian rugs covered the floor. On the walls were groups, their photography somewhat faded. School groups, cricket groups, military groups. Water-colour sketches of deserts and minarets, and of sailing-boats and sea effects and sunsets. It was, somehow, a pleasant room, the room of a lovable, friendly, companionable man.

Roger, clumsily, was pouring out drinks from a tantalus, sweeping books and papers off one of the chairs.

“Place is in a mess. I was turning out. Clearing up old papers. Say when.” The inspector declined a drink. I accepted. “You must forgive me just now,” went on Roger. He brought my drink over to me, turning his head to speak to Taverner as he did so. “My feelings ran away with me.”

He looked round almost guiltily, but Clemency Leonides had not accompanied us into the room.

“She’s so wonderful,” he said. “My wife, I mean. All through this, she’s been splendid—splendid! I can’t tell you how I admire that woman. And she’s had such a hard time—a terrible time. I’d like to tell you about it. Before we were married, I mean. Her first husband was a fine chap—fine mind, I mean—but terribly delicate—tubercular as a matter of fact. He was doing very valuable research work on crystallography, I believe. Poorly paid and very exacting, but he wouldn’t give up. She slaved for him, practically kept him, knowing all the time that he was dying. And never a complaint—never a murmur of weariness. She always said she was happy. Then he died, and she was terribly cut up. At last she agreed to marry me. I was so glad to be able to give her some rest, some happiness, I wished she would stop working, but of course she felt it her duty in wartime, and she still seems to feel she should go on. But she’s been a wonderful wife—the most wonderful wife a man ever had. Gosh, I’ve been lucky! I’d do anything for her.”

Taverner made a suitable rejoinder. Then he embarked once more on the familiar routine questions. When had he first heard of his father’s illness?

“Brenda had rushed over to call me. My father was ill—she said he had had a seizure of some sort.

“I’d been sitting with the dear old boy only about half an hour earlier. He’d been perfectly all right then. I rushed over. He was blue in the face, gasping. I dashed down to Philip. He rang up the doctor. I—we couldn’t do anything. Of course I never dreamed for a moment then that there had been any funny business. Funny? Did I say funny? God, what a word to use.”

With a little difficulty, Taverner and I disentangled ourselves from the emotional atmosphere of Roger Leonides’ room and found ourselves outside the door, once more at the top of the stairs.

“Whew!” said Taverner. “What a contrast from the other brother.” He added, rather inconsequently: “Curious things, rooms. Tell you quite a lot about the people who live in them.”

I agreed and he went on:

“Curious the people who marry each other, too, isn’t it?”

I was not quite sure if he was referring to Clemency and Roger, or to Philip and Magda. His words applied equally well to either. Yet it seemed to me that both the marriages might be classed as happy ones. Roger’s and Clemency’s certainly was.

“I shouldn’t say he was a poisoner, would you?” asked Taverner. “Not off-hand, I wouldn’t. Of course you never know. Now she’s more the type. Remorseless sort of woman. Might be a bit mad.”

Again I agreed. “But I don’t suppose,” I said, “that she’d murder anyone just because she didn’t approve of their aims and mode of life. Perhaps, if she really hated the old man—but are any murders committed just out of pure hate?”

“Precious few,” said Taverner. “I’ve never come across one myself. No, I think we’re a good deal safer to stick to Mrs. Brenda. But God knows if we’ll ever get any evidence.”

Eight

A parlourmaid opened the door of the opposite wing to us. She looked scared but slightly contemptuous when she saw Taverner.

“You want to see the mistress?”

“Yes, please.”

She showed us into a big drawing room and went out.

Its proportions were the same as the drawing room on the ground floor below. There were coloured cretonnes, very gay in colour, and striped silk curtains. Over the mantelpiece was a portrait that held my gaze riveted—not only because of the master hand that had painted it, but also because of the arresting face of the subject.

It was the portrait of a little old man with dark, piercing eyes. He wore a black velvet skull cap and his head was sunk down in his shoulders, but the vitality and power of the man radiated forth from the canvas. The twinkling eyes seemed to hold mine.

“That’s him,” said Chief-Inspector Taverner ungrammatically. “Painted by Augustus John. Got a personality, hasn’t he?”

“Yes,” I said, and felt the monosyllable was inadequate.

I understood now just what Edith de Haviland had meant when she said the house seemed so empty without him. This was the Original Crooked Little Man who had built the Crooked Little House—and without him the Crooked Little House had lost its meaning.

“That’s his first wife over there, painted by Sargent,” said Taverner.

I examined the picture on the wall between the windows. It had a certain cruelty like many of Sargent’s portraits. The length of the face was exaggerated, I thought—so was the faint suggestion of horsiness—the

indisputable correctness. It was a portrait of a typical English Lady—in Country (not Smart) Society. Handsome, but rather lifeless. A most unlikely wife for the grinning, powerful little despot over the mantelpiece.

The door opened and Sergeant Lamb stepped in.

“I’ve done what I could with the servants, sir,” he said. “Didn’t get anything.”

Taverner sighed.

Sergeant Lamb took out his notebook and retreated to the far end of the room, where he seated himself unobtrusively.

The door opened again and Aristide Leonide’s second wife came into the room.

She wore black—very expensive black and a good deal of it. It swathed her up to the neck and down to the wrists. She moved easily and indolently, and black certainly suited her. Her face was mildly pretty, and she had rather nice brown hair arranged in somewhat too elaborate style. Her face was well powdered and she had on lipstick and rouge, but she had clearly been crying. She was wearing a string of very large pearls and she had a big emerald ring on one hand and an enormous ruby on the other.

There was one other thing I noticed about her. She looked frightened.

“Good morning, Mrs. Leonides,” said Taverner easily. “I’m sorry to have to trouble you again.”

She said in a flat voice:

“I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“You understand, don’t you, Mrs. Leonides, that if you wish your solicitor to be present, that is perfectly in order?”

I wondered if she did understand the significance of those words. Apparently not. She merely said rather sulkily:

“I don’t like Mr. Gaitskill. I don’t want him.”

“You could have your own solicitor, Mrs. Leonides.”

“Must I? I don’t like solicitors. They confuse me.”

“It’s entirely for you to decide,” said Taverner, producing an automatic smile. “Shall we go on, then?”

Sergeant Lamb licked his pencil. Brenda Leonides sat down on a sofa facing Taverner.

“Have you found out anything?” she asked.

I noticed her fingers nervously twisting and untwisting a pleat of the chiffon of her dress.

“We can state definitely now that your husband died as a result of eserine poisoning.”

“You mean those eyedrops killed him?”

“It seems quite certain that when you gave Mr. Leonides that last injection, it was eserine that you injected and not insulin.”

“But I didn’t know that. I didn’t have anything to do with it. Really I didn’t, Inspector.”

“Then somebody must have deliberately replaced the insulin by the eyedrops.”

“What a wicked thing to do!”

“Yes, Mrs. Leonides.”

“Do you think—someone did it on purpose? Or by accident? It couldn’t have been a—a joke, could it?”

Taverner said smoothly:

“We don’t think it was a joke, Mrs. Leonides.”

“It must have been one of the servants.”

Taverner did not answer.

“It must. I don’t see who else could have done it.”

“Are you sure? Think, Mrs. Leonides. Haven’t you any ideas at all? There’s been no ill-feeling anywhere? No quarrel? No grudge?”

She still stared at him with large defiant eyes.

“I’ve no idea at all,” she said.

“You had been at the cinema that afternoon, you said?”

“Yes—I came in at half past six—it was time for the insulin—I—I—gave him the injection just the same as usual and then he—he went all queer. I was terrified—I rushed over to Roger—I’ve told you all this before. Have I got to go over it again and again?” Her voice rose hysterically.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Leonides. Now can I speak to Mr. Brown?”

“To Laurence? Why? He doesn’t know anything about it.”

“I’d like to speak to him all the same.”

She stared at him suspiciously.

“Eustace is doing Latin with him in the schoolroom. Do you want him to come here?”

“No—we’ll go to him.”

Taverner went quickly out of the room. The sergeant and I followed.

“You’ve put the wind up her, sir,” said Sergeant Lamb.

Taverner grunted. He led the way up a short flight of steps and along a passage into a big room looking over the garden. There a fair-haired young man of about thirty and a handsome, dark boy of sixteen were sitting at a table.

They looked up at our entrance. Sophia's brother Eustace looked at me, Laurence Brown fixed an agonized gaze on Chief-Inspector Taverner.

I have never seen a man look so completely paralysed with fright. He stood up, then sat down again. He said, and his voice was almost a squeak:

"Oh—er—good morning, Inspector."

"Good morning." Taverner was curt. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Yes, of course. Only too pleased. At least—"

Eustace got up.

"Do you want me to go away, Chief-Inspector?" His voice was pleasant with a faintly arrogant note.

"We—we can continue our studies later," said the tutor.

Eustace strolled negligently towards the door. He walked rather stiffly. Just as he went through the door he caught my eye, drew a forefinger across the front of his throat and grinned. Then he shut the door behind him.

"Well, Mr. Brown," said Taverner. "The analysis is quite definite. It was eserine that caused Mr. Leonides' death."

"I—you mean—Mr. Leonides was really poisoned? I have been hoping—"

"He was poisoned," said Taverner curtly. "Someone substituted eserine eyedrops for insulin."

"I can't believe it ... It's incredible."

"The question is, who had a motive?"

“Nobody. Nobody at all!” The young man’s voice rose excitedly.

“You wouldn’t like to have your solicitor present, would you?” inquired Taverner.

“I haven’t got a solicitor. I don’t want one. I have nothing to hide—nothing....”

“And you quite understand that what you say is about to be taken down?”

“I’m innocent—I assure you, I’m innocent.”

“I have not suggested anything else.” Taverner paused. “Mrs. Leonides was a good deal younger than her husband, was she not?”

“I—I suppose so—I mean, well, yes.”

“She must have felt lonely sometimes?”

Laurence Brown did not answer. He passed his tongue over his dry lips.

“To have a companion of more or less her own age living here must have been agreeable to her?”

“I—no, not at all—I mean—I don’t know.”

“It seems to me quite natural that an attachment should have sprung up between you.”

The young man protested vehemently.

“It didn’t! It wasn’t! Nothing of the kind! I know what you’re thinking, but it wasn’t so! Mrs. Leonides was very kind to me always and I had the greatest—the greatest respect for her—but nothing more—nothing more, I do assure you. It’s monstrous to suggest things of that kind! Monstrous! I wouldn’t kill anybody—or tamper with bottles—or anything like that. I’m very sensitive and highly strung. I—the very idea of killing is a nightmare to me—they quite understood that at the tribunal—I have religious objections to killing. I did hospital work instead—stoking boilers—terribly

heavy work—I couldn't go on with it—but they let me take up educational work. I have done my best here with Eustace and with Josephine—a very intelligent child, but difficult. And everybody has been most kind to me—Mr. Leonides and Mrs. Leonides and Miss de Haviland. And now this awful thing happens ... And you suspect me—me—of murder!”

Inspector Taverner looked at him with a slow, appraising interest.

“I haven't said so,” he remarked.

“But you think so! I know you think so! They all think so! They look at me. I—I can't go on talking to you. I'm not well.”

He hurried out of the room. Taverner turned his head slowly to look at me.

“Well, what do you think of him?”

“He's scared stiff.”

“Yes, I know, but is he a murderer?”

“If you ask me,” said Sergeant Lamb, “he'd never have had the nerve.”

“He'd never have bashed anyone on the head, or shot off a pistol,” agreed the Chief-Inspector. “But in this particular crime what is there to do? Just monkey about with a couple of bottles ... Just help a very old man out of the world in a comparatively painless manner.”

“Practically euthanasia,” said the sergeant.

“And then, perhaps, after a decent interval, marriage with a woman who inherits a hundred thousand pounds free of legacy duty, who already has about the same amount settled upon her, and who has in addition pearls and rubies and emeralds the size of what's-its-name eggs!”

“Ah, well—” Taverner sighed. “It's all theory and conjecture! I managed to scare him all right, but that doesn't prove anything. He's just as likely to be scared if he's innocent. And anyway, I rather doubt if he was the one actually to do it. More likely to have been the woman—only why on earth

didn't she throw away the insulin bottle, or rinse it out?" He turned to the sergeant. "No evidence from the servants about any goings on?"

"The parlourmaid says they're sweet on each other."

"What grounds?"

"The way he looks at her when she pours out his coffee."

"Fat lot of good that would be in a court of law! Definitely no carryings on?"

"Not that anybody's seen."

"I bet they would have seen, too, if there had been anything to see. You know I'm beginning to believe there really is nothing between them." He looked at me. "Go back and talk to her. I'd like your impression of her."

I went, half-reluctantly, yet I was interested.

Nine

I found Brenda Leonides sitting exactly where I had left her. She looked up sharply as I entered.

“Where’s Inspector Taverner? Is he coming back?”

“Not just yet.”

“Who are you?”

At last I had been asked the question that I had been expecting all the morning.

I answered it with reasonable truth.

“I’m connected with the police, but I’m also a friend of the family.”

“The family! Beasts! I hate them all.”

She looked at me, her mouth working. She looked sullen and frightened and angry.

“They’ve been beastly to me always—always. From the very first. Why shouldn’t I marry their precious father? What did it matter to them? They’d all got loads of money. He gave it to them. They wouldn’t have had the brains to make any for themselves!”

She went on:

“Why shouldn’t a man marry again—even if he is a bit old? And he wasn’t really old at all—not in himself. I was very fond of him. I was fond of him.” She looked at me defiantly.

“I see,” I said. “I see.”

“I suppose you don’t believe that—but it’s true. I was sick of men. I wanted to have a home—I wanted someone to make a fuss of me and say nice things to me. Aristide said lovely things to me—and he could make you laugh—and he was clever. He thought up all sorts of smart ways to get round all these silly regulations. He was very, very clever. I’m not glad he’s dead. I’m sorry.”

She leaned back on the sofa. She had rather a wide mouth; it curled up sideways in a queer, sleepy smile.

“I’ve been happy here. I’ve been safe. I went to all those posh dressmakers—the ones I’d read about. I was as good as anybody. And Aristide gave me lovely things.” She stretched out a hand, looking at the ruby on it.

Just for a moment I saw the hand and arm like an outstretched cat’s claw, and heard her voice as a purr. She was still smiling to herself.

“What’s wrong with that?” she demanded. “I was nice to him. I made him happy.” She leaned forward. “Do you know how I met him?”

She went on without waiting for an answer.

“It was in the Gay Shamrock. He’d ordered scrambled eggs on toast and when I brought them to him I was crying. ‘Sit down,’ he said, ‘and tell me what’s the matter.’ ‘Oh, I couldn’t,’ I said. ‘I’d get the sack if I did a thing like that.’ ‘No, you won’t,’ he said, ‘I own this place.’ I looked at him then. Such an odd little man he was, I thought at first—but he’d got a sort of power. I told him all about it ... You’ll have heard about it all from them, I expect—making out I was a regular bad lot—but I wasn’t. I was brought up very carefully. We had a shop—a very high-class shop—art needlework. I was never the sort of girl who had a lot of boy friends or made herself cheap. But Terry was different. He was Irish—and he was going overseas ... He never wrote or anything—I suppose I was a fool. So there it was, you see. I was in trouble—just like some dreadful little servant girl....”

Her voice was disdainful in its snobbery.

“Aristide was wonderful. He said everything would be all right. He said he was lonely. We’d be married at once, he said. It was like a dream. And then I found out he was the great Mr. Leonides. He owned masses of shops and restaurants and night clubs. It was quite like a fairy tale, wasn’t it?”

“One kind of a fairy tale,” I said drily.

“We were married at a little church in the City—and then we went abroad.”

She looked at me with eyes that came back from a long distance.

“There wasn’t a child after all. It was all a mistake.”

She smiled, the curled-up sideways, crooked smile.

“I vowed to myself that I’d be a really good wife to him, and I was. I ordered all the kinds of food he liked, and wore the colours he fancied and I did all I could to please him. And he was happy. But we never got rid of that family of his. Always coming and sponging and living in his pocket. Old Miss de Haviland—I think she ought to have gone away when he got married. I said so. But Aristide said, ‘She’s been here so long. It’s her home now.’ The truth is he liked to have them all about and underfoot. They were beastly to me, but he never seemed to notice that or to mind about it. Roger hates me—have you seen Roger? He’s always hated me. He’s jealous. And Philip’s so stuck up he never speaks to me. And now they’re trying to pretend I murdered him—and I didn’t—I didn’t!” She leaned towards me. “Please believe I didn’t.”

I found her very pathetic. The contemptuous way the Leonides family had spoken of her, their eagerness to believe that she had committed the crime—now, at this moment, it all seemed positively inhuman conduct. She was alone, defenceless, hunted down.

“And if it’s not me, they think it’s Laurence,” she went on.

“What about Laurence?” I asked.

“I’m terribly sorry for Laurence. He’s delicate and he couldn’t go and fight. It’s not because he was a coward. It’s because he’s sensitive. I’ve tried to cheer him up and to make him feel happy. He has to teach those horrible children. Eustace is always sneering at him, and Josephine—well, you’ve seen Josephine. You know what she’s like.”

I said I hadn’t met Josephine yet.

“Sometimes I think that child isn’t right in her head. She has horrible sneaky ways, and she looks queer ... She gives me the shivers sometimes.”

I didn’t want to talk about Josephine. I harked back to Laurence Brown.

“Who is he?” I asked. “Where does he come from?”

I had phrased it clumsily. She flushed.

“He isn’t anybody particular. He’s just like me ... What chance have we got against all of them?”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little hysterical?”

“No, I don’t. They want to make out that Laurence did it—or that I did. They’ve got that policeman on their side. What chance have I got?”

“You mustn’t work yourself up,” I said.

“Why shouldn’t it be one of them who killed him? Or someone from outside? Or one of the servants?”

“There’s a certain lack of motive.”

“Oh, motive! What motive had I got? Or Laurence?”

I felt rather uncomfortable as I said:

“They might think, I suppose, that you and—er—Laurence—are in love with each other—that you wanted to marry.”

She sat bolt upright.

“That’s a wicked thing to suggest! And it’s not true! We’ve never said a word of that kind to each other. I’ve just been sorry for him and tried to cheer him up. We’ve been friends, that’s all. You do believe me, don’t you?”

I did believe her. That is, I believed that she and Laurence were, as she put it, only friends. But I also believed that, possibly unknown to herself, she was actually in love with the young man.

It was with that thought in my mind that I went downstairs in search of Sophia.

As I was about to go into the drawing room, Sophia poked her head out of a door farther along the passage.

“Hallo,” she said. “I’m helping Nannie with lunch.”

I would have joined her, but she came out into the passage, shut the door behind her, and taking my arm led me into the drawing room, which was empty.

“Well,” she said, “did you see Brenda? What did you think of her?”

“Frankly,” I said, “I was sorry for her.”

Sophia looked amused.

“I see,” she said. “So she got you.”

I felt slightly irritated.

“The point is,” I said, “that I can see her side of it. Apparently you can’t.”

“Her side of what?”

“Honestly, Sophia, have any of the family ever been nice to her, or even fairly decent to her, since she came here?”

“No, we haven’t been nice to her. Why should we be?”

“Just ordinary Christian kindness, if nothing else.”

“What a very high moral tone you’re taking, Charles. Brenda must have done her stuff pretty well.”

“Really, Sophia, you seem—I don’t know what’s come over you.”

“I’m just being honest and not pretending. You’ve seen Brenda’s side of it, so you say. Now take a look at my side. I don’t like the type of young woman who makes up a hard-luck story and marries a very rich old man on the strength of it. I’ve a perfect right not to like that type of young woman, and there is no earthly reason why I should pretend I do. And if the facts were written down in cold blood on paper, you wouldn’t like that young woman either.”

“Was it a made-up story?” I asked.

“About the child? I don’t know. Personally, I think so.”

“And you resent the fact that your grandfather was taken in by it?”

“Oh, grandfather wasn’t taken in.” Sophia laughed. “Grandfather was never taken in by anybody. He wanted Brenda. He wanted to play Cophetua to her beggar-maid. He knew just what he was doing and it worked out beautifully according to plan. From grandfather’s point of view the marriage was a complete success—like all his other operations.”

“Was engaging Laurence Brown as tutor another of your grandfather’s successes?” I asked ironically.

Sophia frowned.

“Do you know, I’m not sure that it wasn’t. He wanted to keep Brenda happy and amused. He may have thought that jewels and clothes weren’t enough. He may have thought she wanted a mild romance in her life. He may have calculated that someone like Laurence Brown, somebody really tame, if you know what I mean, would just do the trick. A beautiful soulful friendship

tinged with melancholy that would stop Brenda from having a real affair with someone outside. I wouldn't put it past grandfather to have worked out something on those lines. He was rather an old devil, you know."

"He must have been," I said.

"He couldn't, of course, have visualized that it would lead to murder ... And that," said Sophia, speaking with such vehemence, "is really why I don't, much as I would like to, really believe that she did it. If she'd planned to murder him—or if she and Laurence had planned it together—grandfather would have known about it. I dare say that seems a bit far-fetched to you—"

"I must confess it does," I said.

"But then you didn't know grandfather. He certainly wouldn't have connived at his own murder! So there you are! Up against a blank wall."

"She's frightened, Sophia," I said. "She's very frightened."

"Chief-Inspector Taverner and his merry, merry men? Yes, I dare say they are rather alarming. Laurence, I suppose, is in hysterics?"

"Practically. He made, I thought, a disgusting exhibition of himself. I don't understand what a woman can see in a man like that."

"Don't you, Charles? Actually Laurence has a lot of sex appeal."

"A weakling like that," I said incredulously.

"Why do men always think that a caveman must necessarily be the only type of person attractive to the opposite sex? Laurence has got sex appeal all right—but I wouldn't expect you to be aware of it." She looked at me. "Brenda got her hooks into you all right."

"Don't be absurd. She's not even really good-looking. And she certainly didn't—"

“Display allure? No, she just made you sorry for her. She’s not actually beautiful, she’s not in the least clever—but she’s got one very outstanding characteristic. She can make trouble. She’s made trouble, already, between you and me.”

“Sophia!” I cried aghast.

Sophia went to the door.

“Forget it, Charles. I must get on with lunch.”

“I’ll come and help.”

“No, you stay here. It will rattle Nannie to have ‘a gentleman in the kitchen.’”

“Sophia,” I called as she went out.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Just a servant problem. Why haven’t you got any servants down here and upstairs something in an apron and a cap opened the door to us?”

“Grandfather had a cook, housemaid, parlourmaid, and valet-attendant. He liked servants. He paid them the earth, of course, and he got them. Clemency and Roger just have a daily woman who comes in and cleans. They don’t like servants—or rather Clemency doesn’t. If Roger didn’t get a square meal in the City every day, he’d starve. Clemency’s idea of a meal is lettuce, tomatoes, and raw carrot. We sometimes have servants, and then mother throws one of her temperaments and they leave, and we have dailies for a bit and then start again. We’re in the daily period. Nannie is the permanency and copes in emergencies. Now you know.”

Sophia went out. I sank down in one of the large brocaded chairs and gave myself up to speculation.

Upstairs I had seen Brenda’s side of it. Here and now I had been shown Sophia’s side of it. I realized completely the justice of Sophia’s point of view—what might be called the Leonides family’s point of view. They

resented a stranger within the gates who had obtained admission by what they regarded as ignoble means. They were entirely within their rights. As Sophia had said: on paper it wouldn't look well....

But there was the human side of it—the side that I saw and that they didn't. They were, they always had been, rich and well established. They had no conception of the temptations of the underdog. Brenda Leonides had wanted wealth, and pretty things and safety—and a home. She had claimed that in exchange she had made her old husband happy. I had sympathy with her. Certainly, while I was talking with her, I had had sympathy for her ... Had I got as much sympathy now?

Two sides to the question—different angles of vision—which was the true angle ... the true angle....

I had slept very little the night before. I had been up early to accompany Taverner. Now, in the warm, flower-scented atmosphere of Magda Leonides' drawing room, my body relaxed in the cushioned embrace of the big chair and my eyelids dropped....

Thinking of Brenda, of Sophia, of an old man's picture, my thoughts slid together into a pleasant haze.

I slept....

Ten

I returned to consciousness so gradually that I didn't at first realize that I had been asleep.

The scent of the flowers was in my nose. In front of me a round white blob appeared to float in space. It was some few seconds before I realized that it was a human face I was looking at—a face suspended in the air about a foot or two away from me. As my faculties returned, my vision became more precise. The face still had its goblin suggestion—it was round with a bulging brow, combed-back hair and small, rather beady, black eyes. But it was definitely attached to a body—a small skinny body. It was regarding me very earnestly.

“Hallo,” it said.

“Hallo,” I replied, blinking.

“I'm Josephine.”

I had already deduced that. Sophia's sister, Josephine, was, I judged, about eleven or twelve years of age. She was a fantastically ugly child with a very distinct likeness to her grandfather. It seemed to me possible that she also had his brains.

“You're Sophia's young man,” said Josephine.

I acknowledged the correctness of this remark.

“But you came down here with Chief-Inspector Taverner. Why did you come with Chief-Inspector Taverner?”

“He's a friend of mine.”

“Is he? I don't like him. I shan't tell him things.”

“What sort of things?”

“The things I know. I know a lot of things. I like knowing things.”

She sat down on the arm of the chair and continued her searching scrutiny of my face. I began to feel quite uncomfortable.

“Grandfather’s been murdered. Did you know?”

“Yes,” I said. “I knew.”

“He was poisoned. With es-er-ine.” She pronounced the word very carefully. “It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Eustace and I are very interested. We like detective stories. I’ve always wanted to be a detective. I’m being one now. I’m collecting clues.”

She was, I felt, rather a ghoulish child.

She returned to the charge.

“The man who came with Chief-Inspector Taverner is a detective too, isn’t he? In books it says you can always know plain-clothes detectives by their boots. But this detective was wearing suede shoes.”

“The old order changeth,” I said.

Josephine interpreted this remark according to her own ideas.

“Yes,” she said, “there will be a lot of changes here now, I expect. We shall go and live in a house in London on the Embankment. Mother has wanted to for a long time. She’ll be very pleased. I don’t expect father will mind if his books go, too. He couldn’t afford it before. He lost an awful lot of money over Jezebel.”

“Jezebel?” I queried.

“Yes, didn’t you see it?”

“Oh, it was a play? No, I didn’t. I’ve been abroad.”

“It didn’t run very long. Actually it was the most awful flop. I don’t think mother’s really the type to play Jezebel, do you?”

I balanced my impressions of Magda. Neither in the peach-coloured *négligé* nor in the tailored suit had she conveyed any suggestion of Jezebel, but I was willing to believe that there were other Magdas that I had not yet seen.

“Perhaps not,” I said cautiously.

“Grandfather always said it would be a flop. He said he wouldn’t put up any money for one of those historical religious plays. He said it would never be a box-office success. But mother was frightfully keen. I didn’t like it much myself. It wasn’t really a bit like the story in the Bible. I mean, Jezebel wasn’t wicked like she is in the Bible. She was all patriotic and really quite nice. That made it dull. Still, the end was all right. They threw her out of the window. Only no dogs came and ate her. I think that was a pity, don’t you? I like the part about the dogs eating her best. Mother says you can’t have dogs on the stage but I don’t see why. You could have performing dogs.” She quoted with gusto: “‘And they ate her all but the palms of her hands.’ Why didn’t they eat the palms of her hands?”

“I’ve really no idea,” I said.

“You wouldn’t think, would you, that dogs were so particular. Our dogs aren’t. They eat simply anything.”

Josephine brooded on this Biblical mystery for some seconds.

“I’m sorry the play was a flop,” I said.

“Yes. Mother was terribly upset. The notices were simply frightful. When she read them, she burst into tears and cried all day and she threw her breakfast tray at Gladys, and Gladys gave notice. It was rather fun.”

“I perceive that you like drama, Josephine,” I said.

“They did a post-mortem on grandfather,” said Josephine. “To find out what he had died of. A P.M., they call it, but I think that’s rather confusing, don’t you? Because P.M. stands for Prime Minister too. And for afternoon,” she added thoughtfully.

“Are you sorry your grandfather is dead?” I asked.

“Not particularly. I didn’t like him much. He stopped me learning to be a ballet dancer.”

“Did you want to learn ballet dancing?”

“Yes, and mother was willing for me to learn, and father didn’t mind, but grandfather said I’d be no good.”

She slipped off the arm of the chair, kicked off her shoes and endeavoured to get on to what are called technically, I believe, her points.

“You have to have the proper shoes, of course,” she explained, “and even then you get frightful abscesses sometimes on the ends of your toes.” She resumed her shoes and inquired casually:

“Do you like this house?”

“I’m not quite sure,” I said.

“I suppose it will be sold now. Unless Brenda goes on living in it. And I suppose Uncle Roger and Aunt Clemency won’t be going away now.”

“Were they going away?” I asked with a faint stirring of interest.

“Yes. They were going on Tuesday. Abroad somewhere. They were going by air. Aunt Clemency bought one of those new featherweight cases.”

“I hadn’t heard they were going abroad,” I said.

“No,” said Josephine. “Nobody knew. It was a secret. They weren’t going to tell anyone until after they’d gone. They were going to leave a note behind for grandfather.”

She added:

“Not pinned to the pincushion. That’s only in very old-fashioned books and wives do it when they leave their husbands. But it would be silly now because nobody has pincushions any more.”

“Of course they don’t. Josephine, do you know why your Uncle Roger was—going away?”

She shot me a cunning sideways glance.

“I think I do. It was something to do with Uncle Roger’s office in London. I rather think—but I’m not sure—that he’d embezzled something.”

“What makes you think that?”

Josephine came nearer and breathed heavily in my face.

“The day that grandfather was poisoned Uncle Roger was shut up in his room with him ever so long. They were talking and talking. And Uncle Roger was saying that he’d never been any good, and that he’d let grandfather down—and that it wasn’t the money so much—it was the feeling he’d been unworthy of trust. He was in an awful state.”

I looked at Josephine with mixed feelings.

“Josephine,” I said, “hasn’t anybody ever told you that it’s not nice to listen at doors?”

Josephine nodded her head vigorously.

“Of course they have. But if you want to find things out, you have to listen at doors. I bet Chief-Inspector Taverner does, don’t you?”

I considered the point. Josephine went on vehemently:

“And anyway, if he doesn’t, the other one does, the one with the suede shoes. And they look in people’s desks and read all their letters, and find out all their secrets. Only they’re stupid! They don’t know where to look!”

Josephine spoke with cold superiority. I was stupid enough to let the inference escape me. The unpleasant child went on:

“Eustace and I know lots of things—but I know more than Eustace does. And I shan’t tell him. He says women can’t ever be great detectives. But I say they can. I’m going to write down everything in a notebook and then, when the police are completely baffled, I shall come forward and say, ‘I can tell you who did it.’”

“Do you read a lot of detective stories, Josephine?”

“Masses.”

“I suppose you think you know who killed your grandfather?”

“Well, I think so—but I shall have to find a few more clues.” She paused and added: “Chief-Inspector Taverner thinks that Brenda did it, doesn’t he? Or Brenda and Laurence together because they’re in love with each other.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Josephine.”

“Why not? They are in love with each other.”

“You can’t possibly judge.”

“Yes, I can. They write to each other. Love letters.”

“Josephine! How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve read them. Awfully soppy letters. But Laurence is soppy. He was too frightened to fight in the war. He went into basements, and stoked boilers. When the flying-bombs went over here, he used to turn green—really green. It made Eustace and me laugh a lot.”

What I would have said next I do not know, for at that moment a car drew up outside. In a flash Josephine was at the window, her snub nose pressed to the pane.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s Mr. Gaitskill, grandfather’s lawyer. I expect he’s come about the will.”

Breathing excitedly, she hurried from the room, doubtless to resume her sleuthing activities.

Magda Leonides came into the room, and to my surprise came across to me and took my hands in hers.

“My dear,” she said, “thank goodness you’re still here. One needs a man so badly.”

She dropped my hands, crossed to a high-backed chair, altered its position a little, glanced at herself in a mirror, then, picking up a small Battersea enamel box from a table, she stood pensively opening and shutting it.

It was an attractive pose.

Sophia put her head in at the door and said in an admonitory whisper, “Gaitskill!”

“I know,” said Magda.

A few moments later Sophia entered the room, accompanied by a small elderly man, and Magda put down her enamel box and came forward to meet him.

“Good morning, Mrs. Philip. I’m on my way upstairs. It seems there’s some misunderstanding about the will. Your husband wrote to me with the impression that the will was in my keeping. I understood from Mr. Leonides himself that it was at his vault. You don’t know anything about it, I suppose?”

“About poor Sweetie’s will?” Magda opened astonished eyes. “No, of course not. Don’t tell me that wicked woman upstairs has destroyed it?”

“Now, Mrs. Philip,”—he shook an admonitory finger at her—“no wild surmises. It’s just a question of where your father-in-law kept it.”

“But he sent it to you—surely he did—after signing it. He actually told us he had.”

“The police, I understand, have been through Mr. Leonides’ private papers,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “I’ll just have a word with Chief-Inspector Taverner.”

He left the room.

“Darling,” cried Magda. “She has destroyed it. I know I’m right.”

“Nonsense, Mother, she wouldn’t do a stupid thing like that.”

“It wouldn’t be stupid at all. If there’s no will she’ll get everything.”

“Ssh—here’s Gaitskill back again.”

The lawyer reentered the room. Chief-Inspector Taverner was with him and behind Taverner came Philip.

“I understood from Mr. Leonides,” Gaitskill was saying, “that he had placed his will with the Bank for safe keeping.”

Taverner shook his head.

“I’ve been in communication with the Bank. They have no private papers belonging to Mr. Leonides beyond certain securities which they held for him.”

Philip said:

“I wonder if Roger—or Aunt Edith ... Perhaps, Sophia, you’d ask them to come down here.”

But Roger Leonides, summoned with the others to the conclave, could give no assistance.

“But it’s nonsense—absolute nonsense,” he declared. “Father signed the will and said distinctly that he was posting it to Mr. Gaitskill on the

following day.”

“If my memory serves me,” said Mr. Gaitskill, leaning back and half-closing his eyes, “it was on November 24th of last year that I forwarded a draft drawn up according to Mr. Leonides’ instructions. He approved the draft, returned it to me, and in due course I sent him the will for signature. After a lapse of a week, I ventured to remind him that I had not yet received the will duly signed and attested, and asking him if here was anything he wished altered. He replied that he was perfectly satisfied, and added that after signing the will he had sent it to his bank.”

“That’s quite right,” said Roger eagerly. “It was about the end of November last year—you remember, Philip? Father had us all up one evening and read the will to us.”

Taverner turned towards Philip Leonides.

“That agrees with your recollection, Mr. Leonides?”

“Yes,” said Philip.

“It was rather like the Voysey Inheritance,” said Magda. She sighed pleasantly. “I always think there’s something so dramatic about a will.”

“Miss Sophia?”

“Yes,” said Sophia. “I remember perfectly.”

“And the provisions of that will?” asked Taverner.

Mr. Gaitskill was about to reply in his precise fashion, but Roger Leonides got ahead of him.

“It was a perfectly simple will. Electra and Joyce had died and their share of the settlements had returned to father. Joyce’s son, William, had been killed in action in Burma, and the money he left went to his father. Philip and I and the children were the only relatives left. Father explained that. He left fifty thousand pounds free of duty to Aunt Edith, a hundred thousand pounds free of duty to Brenda, this house to Brenda, or else a suitable house

in London to be purchased for her, whichever she preferred. The residue to be divided into three portions, one to myself, one to Philip, the third to be divided between Sophia, Eustace, and Josephine, the portions of the last two to be held in trust until they should come of age. I think that's right, isn't it, Mr. Gaitskill?"

"Those are—roughly stated—the provisions of the document I drew up," agreed Mr. Gaitskill, displaying some slight acerbity at not having been allowed to speak for himself.

"Father read it out to us," said Roger. "He asked if there was any comment we might like to make. Of course there was none."

"Brenda made a comment," said Miss de Haviland.

"Yes," said Magda with zest. "She said she couldn't bear her darling old Aristide to talk about death. It 'gave her the creeps,' she said. And after he was dead she didn't want any of the horrid money!"

"That," said Miss de Haviland, "was a conventional protest, typical of her class."

It was a cruel and biting little remark. I realized suddenly how much Edith de Haviland disliked Brenda.

"A very fair and reasonable disposal of his estate," said Mr. Gaitskill.

"And after reading it what happened?" asked Inspector Taverner.

"After reading it," said Roger, "he signed it."

Taverner leaned forward.

"Just how and when did he sign it?"

Roger looked round at his wife in an appealing way. Clemency spoke in answer to that look. The rest of the family seemed content for her to do so.

"You want to know exactly what took place?"

“If you please, Mrs. Roger.”

“My father-in-law laid the will down on his desk and requested one of us—Roger, I think—to ring the bell. Roger did so. When Johnson came in answer to the bell, my father-in-law requested him to fetch Janet Wolmer, the parlourmaid. When they were both there, he signed the will and requested them to sign their own names beneath his signature.”

“The correct procedure,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “A will must be signed by the testator in the presence of two witnesses who must affix their own signatures at the same time and place.”

“And after that?” asked Taverner.

“My father-in-law thanked them, and they went out. My father-in-law picked up the will, put it in a long envelope and mentioned that he would send it to Mr. Gaitskill on the following day.”

“You all agree,” said Inspector Taverner, looking round, “that this is an accurate account of what happened?”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“The will was on the desk, you said. How near were any of you to that desk?”

“Not very near. Five or six yards, perhaps, would be the nearest.”

“When Mr. Leonides read you the will was he himself sitting at the desk?”

“Yes.”

“Did he get up, or leave the desk, after reading the will and before signing it?”

“No.”

“Could the servants read the document when they signed their names?”

“No,” said Clemency. “My father-in-law placed a sheet of paper across the upper part of the document.”

“Quite properly,” said Philip. “The contents of the will were no business of the servants.”

“I see,” said Taverner. “At least—I don’t see.”

With a brisk movement he produced a long envelope and leaned forward to hand it to the lawyer.

“Have a look at that,” he said. “And tell me what it is.”

Mr. Gaitskill drew a folded document out of the envelope. He looked at it with lively astonishment, turning it round and round in his hands.

“This,” he said, “is somewhat surprising. I do not understand it at all. Where was this, if I may ask?”

“In the safe, amongst Mr. Leonides’ other papers.”

“But what is it?” demanded Roger. “What’s all the fuss about?”

“This is the will I prepared for your father’s signature, Roger—but—I can’t understand it after what you have all said—it is not signed.”

“What? Well, I suppose it is just a draft.”

“No,” said the lawyer. “Mr. Leonides returned me the original draft. I then drew up the will—this will,” he tapped it with his finger—“and sent it to him for signature. According to your evidence he signed the will in front of you all—and two witnesses also appended their signatures—and yet this will is unsigned.”

“But that’s impossible,” exclaimed Philip Leonides, speaking with more animation than I had yet heard from him.

Taverner asked: “How good was your father’s eyesight?”

“He suffered from glaucoma. He used strong glasses, of course, for reading.”

“He had those glasses on that evening?”

“Certainly. He didn’t take his glasses off until after he had signed. I think I am right.”

“Quite right,” said Clemency.

“And nobody—you are all sure of that—went near the desk before the signing of the will?”

“I wonder now,” said Magda, screwing up her eyes. “If one could only visualize it all again.”

“Nobody went near the desk,” said Sophia. “And grandfather sat at it all the time.”

“The desk was in the position it is now? It was not near a door, or a window, or any drapery?”

“It was where it is now.”

“I am trying to see how a substitution of some kind could be effected,” said Taverner. “Some kind of substitution there must have been. Mr. Leonides was under the impression that he was signing the document he had just read aloud.”

“Couldn’t the signatures have been erased?” Roger demanded.

“No, Mr. Leonides. Not without leaving signs of erasion. There is one other possibility. That this is not the document sent to Mr. Leonides by Mr. Gaitskill and which he signed in your presence.”

“On the contrary,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “I could swear to this being the original document. There is a small flaw in the paper—at the top left-hand corner—it resembles, by a stretch of fancy, an aeroplane. I noticed it at the time.”

The family looked blankly at one another.

“A most curious set of circumstances,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “Quite without precedent in my experience.”

“The whole thing’s impossible,” said Roger. “We were all there. It simply couldn’t have happened.”

Miss de Haviland gave a dry cough.

“Never any good wasting breath saying something that has happened couldn’t have happened,” she remarked. “What’s the position now? That’s what I’d like to know.”

Gaitskill immediately became the cautious lawyer.

“The position will have to be examined very carefully,” he said. “This document, of course, revokes all former wills and testaments. There are a large number of witnesses who saw Mr. Leonides sign what he certainly believed to be this will in perfectly good faith. Hum. Very interesting. Quite a little legal problem.”

Taverner glanced at his watch.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “I’ve been keeping you from your lunch.”

“Won’t you stay and lunch with us, Chief-Inspector?” asked Philip.

“Thank you, Mr. Leonides, but I am meeting Dr. Gray in Swinly Dean.”

Philip turned to the lawyer.

“You’ll lunch with us, Gaitskill?”

“Thank you, Philip.”

Everybody stood up. I edged unobtrusively towards Sophia.

“Do I go or stay?” I murmured. It sounded ridiculously like the title of a Victorian song.

“Go, I think,” said Sophia.

I slipped quietly out of the room in pursuit of Taverner. Josephine was swinging to and fro on a baize door leading to the back quarters. She appeared to be highly amused about something.

“The police are stupid,” she observed.

Sophia came out of the drawing room.

“What have you been doing, Josephine?”

“Helping Nannie.”

“I believe you’ve been listening outside the door.”

Josephine made a face at her and retreated.

“That child,” said Sophia, “is a bit of a problem.”

Eleven

I

I came into the AC's room at the Yard to find Taverner finishing the recital of what had apparently been a tale of woe.

"And there you are," he was saying. "I've turned the lot of them inside out—and what do I get—nothing at all! No motives. None of them hard up. And all that we've got against the wife and her young man is that he made sheep's eyes at her when she poured him out his coffee!"

"Come, come, Taverner," I said. "I can do a little better than that for you."

"You can, can you? Well, Mr. Charles, what did you get?"

I sat down, lit a cigarette, leaned back and let them have it.

"Roger Leonides and his wife were planning a getaway abroad next Tuesday. Roger and his father had a stormy interview on the day of the old man's death. Old Leonides had found out something was wrong, and Roger was admitting culpability."

Taverner went purple in the face.

"Where the hell did you get all that from?" he demanded. "If you got it from the servants—"

"I didn't get it from the servants. I got it," I said, "from a private inquiry agent."

"What do you mean?"

"And I must say that, in accordance with the canons of the best detective stories, he, or rather she—or perhaps I'd better say it—has licked the police hollow!"

“I also think,” I went on, “that my private detective has a few more things up his, her or its sleeve.”

Taverner opened his mouth and shut it again. He wanted to ask so many questions at once that he found it hard to begin.

“Roger!” he said. “So Roger’s a wrong ’un, is he?”

I felt a slight reluctance as I unburdened myself. I had liked Roger Leonides. Remembering his comfortable, friendly room, and the man’s own friendly charm, I disliked setting the hounds of justice on his track. It was possible, of course, that all Josephine’s information would be unreliable, but I did not really think so.

“So the kid told you?” said Taverner. “She seems to be wise to everything that goes on in that house.”

“Children usually are,” said my father drily.

This information, if true, altered the whole position. If Roger had been, as Josephine confidently suggested, “embezzling” the funds of Associated Catering and if the old man had found it out, it might have been vital to silence old Leonides and to leave England before the truth came out. Possibly Roger had rendered himself liable to criminal prosecution.

It was agreed that inquiries should be made without delay into the affairs of Associated Catering.

“It will be an almighty crash, if that goes,” my father remarked. “It’s a huge concern. There are millions involved.”

“If it’s really in Queer Street, it gives us what we want,” said Taverner.

“Father summons Roger. Roger breaks down and confesses. Brenda Leonides was out at a cinema. Roger has only got to leave his father’s room, walk into the bathroom, empty out an insulin phial and replace it with the strong solution of eserine and there you are. Or his wife may have done it. She went over to the other wing after she came home that day—says she went to fetch a pipe Roger had left there. But she could have gone over to

switch the stuff before Brenda came home and gave him his injection. She'd be quite cool and capable about it."

I nodded. "Yes, I fancy her as the actual doer of the deed. She's cool enough for anything! And I don't really think that Roger Leonides would think of poison as a means—that trick with the insulin has something feminine about it."

"Plenty of men poisoners," said my father drily.

"Oh, I know, sir," said Taverner. "Don't I know!" he added with feeling.

"All the same I shouldn't have said Roger was the type."

"Pritchard," the Old Man reminded him, "was a good mixer."

"Let's say they were in it together."

"With the accent on Lady Macbeth," said my father, as Taverner departed. "Is that how she strikes you, Charles?"

I visualized the slight, graceful figure standing by the window in that austere room.

"Not quite," I said. "Lady Macbeth was essentially a greedy woman. I don't think Clemency Leonides is. I don't think she wants or cares for possessions."

"But she might care, desperately, about her husband's safety?"

"That, yes. And she could certainly be—well, ruthless."

"Different kinds of ruthlessness ..." That was what Sophia had said.

I looked up to see the Old Man watching me.

"What's in your mind, Charles?"

But I didn't tell him then.

II

I was summoned on the following day and found Taverner and my father together.

Taverner was looking pleased with himself and slightly excited.

“Associated Catering is on the rocks,” said my father.

“Due to crash at any minute,” said Taverner.

“I saw there had been a sharp fall in the shares last night,” I said. “But they seem to have recovered this morning.”

“We’ve had to go about it very cautiously,” said Taverner. “No direct inquiries. Nothing to cause a panic—or to put the wind up our absconding gentleman. But we’ve got certain private sources of information and the information is fairly definite. Associated Catering is on the verge of a crash. It can’t possibly meet its commitments. The truth seems to be that it’s been grossly mismanaged for years.”

“By Roger Leonides?”

“Yes. He’s had supreme power, you know.”

“And he’s helped himself to money—”

“No,” said Taverner. “We don’t think he has. To put it bluntly, he may be a murderer, but we don’t think he’s a swindler. Quite frankly he’s just been—a fool. He doesn’t seem to have had any kind of judgement. He’s launched out where he ought to have held in—he’s hesitated and retreated where he ought to have launched out. He’s delegated power to the last sort of people he ought to have delegated it to. He’s a trustful sort of chap, and he’s trusted the wrong people. At every time, and on every occasion, he’s done the wrong thing.”

“There are people like that,” said my father. “And they’re not really stupid either. They’re bad judges of men, that’s all. And they’re enthusiastic at the wrong time.”

“A man like that oughtn’t to be in business at all,” said Taverner.

“He probably wouldn’t be,” said my father, “except for the accident of being Aristide Leonides’ son.”

“That show was absolutely blooming when the old man handed it over to him. It ought to have been a gold mine! You’d think he could have just sat back and let the show run itself.”

“No,” my father shook his head. “No show runs itself. There are always decisions to be made—a man sacked here—a man appointed there—small questions of policy. And with Roger Leonides the answer seems to have been always wrong.”

“That’s right,” said Taverner. “He’s a loyal sort of chap, for one thing. He kept on the most frightful duds—just because he had an affection for them—or because they’d been there a long time. And then he sometimes had wild impractical ideas and insisted on trying them out in spite of the enormous outlay involved.”

“But nothing criminal?” my father insisted.

“No, nothing criminal.”

“Then why murder?” I asked.

“He may have been a fool and not a knave,” said Taverner. “But the result was the same—or nearly the same. The only thing that could save Associated Catering from the smash was a really colossal sum of money by next” (he consulted a notebook) “by next Wednesday at the latest.”

“Such a sum as he would inherit, or thought he would have inherited, under his father’s will?”

“Exactly.”

“But he wouldn’t be able to have got that sum in cash.”

“No. But he’d have got credit. It’s the same thing.”

The Old Man nodded.

“Wouldn’t it have been simpler to go to old Leonides and ask for help?” he suggested.

“I think he did,” said Taverner. “I think that’s what the kid overheard. The old boy refused point blank, I should imagine, to throw good money after bad. He would, you know.”

I thought that Taverner was right there. Aristide Leonides had refused the backing for Magda’s play—he had said that it would not be a box office success. Events had proved him correct. He was a generous man to his family, but he was not a man to waste money in unprofitable enterprises. And Associated Catering ran to thousands, or probably hundreds of thousands. He had refused point blank, and the only way for Roger to avoid financial ruin was for his father to die.

Yes, there was certainly a motive there all right.

My father looked at his watch.

“I’ve asked him to come here,” he said. “He’ll be here any minute now.”

“Roger?”

“Yes.”

“Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly?” I murmured.

Taverner looked at me in a shocked way.

“We shall give him all the proper cautions,” he said severely.

The stage was set, the shorthand writer established. Presently the buzzer sounded, and a few minutes later Roger Leonides entered the room.

He came in eagerly—and rather clumsily—he stumbled over a chair. I was reminded as before of a large friendly dog. At the same time I decided quite definitely that it was not he who had carried out the actual process of

transferring eserine to an insulin bottle. He would have broken it, spilled it, or muffed the operation in some way or the other. No, Clemency's, I decided, had been the actual hand, though Roger had been privy to the deed.

Words rushed from him.

"You wanted to see me? You've found out something? Hallo, Charles. I didn't see you. Nice of you to come along. But please tell me, Sir Arthur—"

Such a nice fellow—really such a nice fellow. But lots of murderers had been nice fellows—so their astonished friends had said afterwards. Feeling rather like Judas, I smiled a greeting.

My father was deliberate, coldly official. The glib phrases were uttered. Statement ... taken down ... no compulsion ... solicitor....

Roger Leonides brushed them all aside with the same characteristic eager impatience.

I saw the faint sardonic smile on Chief-Inspector Taverner's face, and read from it the thought in his mind.

"Always sure of themselves, these chaps. They can't make a mistake. They're far too clever!"

I sat down unobtrusively in a corner and listened.

"I have asked you to come here, Mr. Leonides," my father said, "not to give you fresh information, but to ask for some information from you—information that you have previously withheld."

Roger Leonides looked bewildered.

"Withheld? But I've told you everything—absolutely everything!"

"I think not. You had a conversation with the deceased on the afternoon of his death?"

“Yes, yes, I had tea with him. I told you so.”

“You told us that, yes, but you did not tell us about your conversation.”

“We—just—talked.”

“What about?”

“Daily happenings, the house, Sophia—”

“What about Associated Catering? Was that mentioned?”

I think I had hoped up to then that Josephine had been inventing the whole story; but if so, that hope was quickly quenched.

Roger’s face changed. It changed in a moment from eagerness to something that was recognizably close to despair.

“Oh, my God,” he said. He dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Taverner smiled like a contented cat.

“You admit, Mr. Leonides, that you have not been frank with us?”

“How did you get to know about that? I thought nobody knew—I don’t see how anybody could know.”

“We have means of finding out these things, Mr. Leonides.” There was a majestic pause. “I think you will see now that you had better tell us the truth.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ll tell you. What do you want to know?”

“Is it true that Associated Catering is on the verge of collapse?”

“Yes. It can’t be staved off now. The crash is bound to come. If only my father could have died without ever knowing. I feel so ashamed—so disgraced—”

“There is a possibility of criminal prosecution?”

Roger sat up sharply.

“No, indeed. It will be bankruptcy—but an honourable bankruptcy. Creditors will be paid twenty shillings in the pound if I throw in my personal assets, which I shall do. No, the disgrace I feel is to have failed my father. He trusted me. He made over to me this, his largest concern—and his pet concern. He never interfered, he never asked what I was doing. He just—trusted me ... And I let him down.”

My father said drily:

“You say there was no likelihood of criminal prosecution? Why then had you and your wife planned to go abroad without telling anybody of your intention?”

“You know that too?”

“Yes, Mr. Leonides.”

“But don’t you see?” He leaned forward eagerly. “I couldn’t face him with the truth. It would have looked, you see, as if I was asking for money. As though I wanted him to set me on my feet again. He—he was very fond of me. He would have wanted to help. But I couldn’t—I couldn’t go on—it would have meant making a mess of things all over again—I’m no good. I haven’t got the ability. I’m not the man my father was. I’ve always known it. I’ve tried. But it’s no good. I’ve been so miserable—God! you don’t know how miserable I’ve been! Trying to get out of the muddle, hoping I’d just get square, hoping the dear old man would never need to hear about it. And then it came—no more hope of avoiding the crash. Clemency—my wife—she understood, she agreed with me. We thought out this plan. Say nothing to anyone. Go away. And then let the storm break. I’d leave a letter for my father, telling him all about it—telling him how ashamed I was and begging him to forgive me. He’s been so good to me always—you don’t know! But it would be too late then for him to do anything. That’s what I wanted. Not to ask him—or even to seem to ask him for help. Start again on my own somewhere. Live simply and humbly. Grow things. Coffee—fruit.

Just have the bare necessities of life—hard on Clemency, but she swore she didn't mind. She's wonderful—absolutely wonderful.”

“I see.” My father's voice was dry. “And what made you change your mind?”

“Change my mind?”

“Yes. What made you decide to go to your father and ask for financial help after all?”

Roger stared at him.

“But I didn't!”

“Come now, Mr. Leonides.”

“You've got it all wrong. I didn't go to him. He sent for me. He'd heard, somehow, in the City. A rumour, I suppose. But he always knew things. Someone had told him. He tackled me with it. Then, of course, I broke down ... I told him everything. I said it wasn't so much the money—it was the feeling I'd let him down after he'd trusted me.”

Roger swallowed convulsively.

“The dear old man,” he said. “You can't imagine how good he was to me. No reproaches. Just kindness. I told him I didn't want help, that I preferred not to have it—that I'd rather go away as I'd planned to do. But he wouldn't listen. He insisted on coming to the rescue—on putting Associated Catering on its legs again.”

Taverner said sharply:

“You are asking us to believe that your father intended to come to your assistance financially?”

“Certainly he did. He wrote to his brokers then and there, giving them instructions.”

I suppose he saw the incredulity on the two men's faces. He flushed.

"Look here," he said, "I've still got the letter. I was to post it. But of course later—with—with the shock and confusion, I forgot. I've probably got it in my pocket now."

He drew out his wallet and started hunting through it. Finally he found what he wanted. It was a creased envelope with a stamp on it. It was addressed, as I saw by leaning forward, to Messrs Greateorex and Hanbury.

"Read it for yourselves," he said, "if you don't believe me."

My father tore open the letter. Taverner went round behind him. I did not see the letter then, but I saw it later. It instructed Messrs Greateorex and Hanbury to realize certain investments and asked for a member of the firm to be sent down on the following day to take certain instructions re the affairs of Associated Catering. Some of it was unintelligible to me, but its purpose was clear enough. Aristide Leonides was preparing to put Associated Catering on its feet again.

Taverner said:

"We will give you a receipt for this, Mr. Leonides."

Roger took the receipt. He got up and said:

"Is that all? You do see how it all was, don't you?"

Taverner said:

"Mr. Leonides gave you this letter and then you left him? What did you do next?"

"I rushed back to my own part of the house. My wife had just come in. I told her what my father proposed to do. How wonderful he had been! I—really, I hardly knew what I was doing."

"And your father was taken ill—how long after that?"

“Let me see—half an hour, perhaps, or an hour. Brenda came rushing in. She was frightened. She said he looked queer. I—I rushed over with her. But I’ve told you all this before.”

“During your former visit, did you go into the bathroom adjoining your father’s room at all?”

“I don’t think so. No—no, I am sure I didn’t. Why, you can’t possibly think that I—”

My father quelled the sudden indignation. He got up and shook hands.

“Thank you, Mr. Leonides,” he said. “You have been very helpful. But you should have told us all this before.”

The door closed behind Roger. I got up and came to look at the letter lying on my father’s table.

“It could be a forgery,” said Taverner hopefully.

“It could be,” said my father, “but I don’t think it is. I think we’ll have to accept it exactly as it stands. Old Leonides was prepared to get his son out of this mess. It could have been done more efficiently by him alive than it could by Roger after his death—especially as it now transpires that no will is to be found and that in consequence Roger’s actual amount of inheritance is open to question. That means delays—and difficulties. As things now stand, the crash is bound to come. No, Taverner, Roger Leonides and his wife had no motive for getting the old man out of the way. On the contrary —”

He stopped and repeated thoughtfully as though a sudden thought had occurred to him: “On the contrary....”

“What’s on your mind, sir?” Taverner asked.

The Old Man said slowly:

“If Aristide Leonides had lived only another twenty-four hours, Roger would have been all right. But he didn’t live twenty-four hours. He died

suddenly and dramatically within little more than an hour.”

“H’m,” said Taverner. “Do you think somebody in the house wanted Roger to go broke? Someone who had an opposing financial interest? Doesn’t seem likely.”

“What’s the position as regards the will?” my father asked. “Who actually gets old Leonides’ money?”

Taverner heaved an exasperated sigh.

“You know what lawyers are. Can’t get a straight answer out of them. There’s a former will. Made when he married the second Mrs. Leonides. That leaves the same sum to her, rather less to Miss de Haviland, and the remainder between Philip and Roger. I should have thought that if this will isn’t signed, then the old one would operate, but it seems it isn’t so simple as that. First the making of the new will revoked the former one and there are witnesses to the signing of it, and the ‘testator’s intention.’ It seems to be a toss-up if it turns out that he died intestate. Then the widow apparently gets the lot—or a life interest at any rate.”

“So if the will’s disappeared Brenda Leonides is the most likely person to profit by it?”

“Yes. If there’s been any hocus-pocus, it seems probable that she’s at the bottom of it. And there obviously has been hocus-pocus, but I’m dashed if I see how it was done.”

I didn’t see, either. I suppose we were really incredibly stupid. But we were looking at it, of course, from the wrong angle.

Twelve

There was a short silence after Taverner had gone out.

Then I said:

“Dad, what are murderers like?”

The Old Man looked at me thoughtfully. We understand each other so well that he knew exactly what was in my mind when I put that question. And he answered it very seriously.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s important now—very important, for you ... Murder’s come close to you. You can’t go on looking at it from the outside.”

I had always been interested, in an amateurish kind of way, in some of the more spectacular “cases” with which the CID had dealt, but, as my father said, I had been interested from the outside—looking in, as it were, through the shop window. But now, as Sophia had seen much more quickly than I did, murder had become a dominant factor in my life.

The Old Man went on:

“I don’t know if I’m the right person to ask. I could put you on to a couple of the tame psychiatrists who do jobs for us. They’ve got it all cut and dried. Or Taverner could give you all the inside dope. But you want, I take it, to hear what I, personally, as the result of my experience of criminals, think about it?”

“That’s what I want,” I said gratefully.

My father traced a little circle with his finger on the desk top.

“What are murderers like? Some of them”—a faint rather melancholy smile showed on his face—“have been thoroughly nice chaps.”

I think I looked a little startled.

“Oh yes, they have,” he said. “Nice ordinary fellows like you and me—or like that chap who went out just now—Roger Leonides. Murder, you see, is an amateur crime. I’m speaking of course of the kind of murder you have in mind—not gangster stuff. One feels, very often, as though these nice ordinary chaps had been overtaken, as it were, by murder, almost accidentally. They’ve been in a tight place, or they’ve wanted something very badly, money or a woman—and they’ve killed to get it. The brake that operates with most of us doesn’t operate with them. A child, you know, translates desire into action without compunction. A child is angry with its kitten, says ‘I’ll kill you,’ and hits it on the head with a hammer—and then breaks its heart because the kitten doesn’t come alive again! Lots of kids try to take a baby out of a pram and ‘drown it,’ because it usurps attention—or interferes with their pleasures. They get—very early—to a stage when they know that that is ‘wrong’—that is, that it will be punished. Later, they get to feel that it is wrong. But some people, I suspect, remain morally immature. They continue to be aware that murder is wrong, but they do not feel it. I don’t think, in my experience, that any murderer has really felt remorse ... And that, perhaps, is the mark of Cain. Murderers are set apart, they are ‘different’—murder is wrong—but not for them—for them it is necessary—the victim has ‘asked for it,’ it was ‘the only way.’”

“Do you think,” I asked, “that if someone hated old Leonides, had hated him, say, for a very long time, that that would be a reason?”

“Pure hate? Very unlikely, I should say.” My father looked at me curiously. “When you say hate, I presume you mean dislike carried to excess. A jealous hate is different—that rises out of affection and frustration. Constance Kent, everybody said, was very fond of the baby brother she killed. But she wanted, one supposes, the attention and the love that was bestowed on him. I think people more often kill those they love than those they hate. Possibly because only the people you love can really make life unendurable to you.

“But all this doesn’t help you much, does it?” he went on. “What you want, if I read you correctly, is some token, some universal sign that will help you

to pick out a murderer from a household of apparently normal and pleasant people?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Is there a common denominator? I wonder. You know,” he paused in thought, “if there is, I should be inclined to say it is vanity.”

“Vanity?”

“Yes, I’ve never met a murderer who wasn’t vain ... It’s their vanity that leads to their undoing, nine times out of ten. They may be frightened of being caught, but they can’t help strutting and boasting and usually they’re sure they’ve been far too clever to be caught.” He added: “And here’s another thing, a murderer wants to talk.”

“To talk?”

“Yes; you see, having committed a murder puts you in a position of great loneliness. You’d like to tell somebody all about it—and you never can. And that makes you want to all the more. And so—if you can’t talk about how you did it, you can at least talk about the murder itself—discuss it, advance theories—go over it.

“If I were you, Charles, I should look out for that. Go down there again, mix with them all, and get them to talk. Of course it won’t be plain sailing. Guilty or innocent, they’ll be glad of the chance to talk to a stranger, because they can say things to you that they couldn’t say to each other. But it’s possible, I think, that you might spot a difference. A person who has something to hide can’t really afford to talk at all. The bloke knew that in Intelligence during the war. If you were captured, your name, rank, and number, but nothing more. People who attempt to give false information nearly always slip up. Get that household talking, Charles, and watch out for a slip or for some flash of self-revelation.”

I told him then what Sophia had said about the ruthlessness in the family—the different kinds of ruthlessness. He was interested.

“Yes,” he said. “Your young woman has got something there. Most families have got a defect, a chink in their armour. Most people can deal with one weakness—but they mightn’t be able to deal with two weaknesses of a different kind. Interesting thing, heredity. Take the de Haviland ruthlessness, and what we might call the Leonides unscrupulousness—the de Havilands are all right because they’re not unscrupulous, and the Leonides are all right because, though unscrupulous, they are kindly—but get a descendant who inherited both of those traits—see what I mean?”

I had not thought of it quite in those terms. My father said:

“But I shouldn’t worry your head about heredity. It’s much too tricky and complicated a subject. No, my boy, go down there and let them talk to you. Your Sophia is quite right about one thing. Nothing but the truth is going to be any good to her or to you. You’ve got to know.”

He added as I went out of the room:

“And be careful of the child.”

“Josephine? You mean don’t let on to her what I’m up to.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant—look after her. We don’t want anything to happen to her.”

I stared at him.

“Come, come, Charles. There’s a cold-blooded killer somewhere in that household. The child Josephine appears to know most of what goes on.”

“She certainly knew all about Roger—even if she did leap to the conclusion that he was a swindler. Her account of what she overheard seems to have been quite accurate.”

“Yes, yes. Child’s evidence is always the best evidence there is. I’d rely on it every time. No good in court, of course. Children can’t stand being asked direct questions. They mumble or else look idiotic and say they don’t know. They’re at their best when they’re showing off. That’s what the child was

doing to you. Showing off. You'll get more out of her in the same way. Don't go asking her questions. Pretend you think she doesn't know anything. That'll fetch her."

He added:

"But take care of her. She may know a little too much for somebody's safety."

Thirteen

I went down to the Crooked House (as I called it in my own mind) with a slightly guilty feeling. Though I had repeated to Taverner Josephine's confidences about Roger, I had said nothing about her statement that Brenda and Laurence Brown wrote love letters to each other.

I excused myself by pretending that it was mere romancing, and that there was no reason to believe that it was true. But actually I had felt a strange reluctance to pile up additional evidence against Brenda Leonides. I had been affected by the pathos of her position in the house—surrounded by a hostile family united solidly against her. If such letters existed doubtless Taverner and his myrmidons would find them. I disliked to be the means of bringing fresh suspicion on a woman in a difficult position. Moreover, she had assured me solemnly that there was nothing of that kind between her and Laurence and I felt more inclined to believe her than to believe that malicious gnome Josephine. Had not Brenda said herself that Josephine was “not all there?”

I stifled an uneasy certainty that Josephine was very much all there. I remembered the intelligence of her beady black eyes.

I had rung up Sophia and asked if I might come down again.

“Please do, Charles.”

“How are things going?”

“I don't know. All right. They keep on searching the house. What are they looking for?”

“I've no idea.”

“We're all getting very nervy. Come as soon as you can. I shall go crazy if I can't talk to someone.”

I said I would come down straight away.

There was no one in sight as I drove up to the front door. I paid the taxi and it drove away. I felt uncertain whether to ring the bell or to walk in. The front door was open.

As I stood there, hesitating, I heard a slight sound behind me. I turned my head sharply. Josephine, her face partially obscured by a very large apple, was standing in the opening of the yew hedge looking at me.

As I turned my head, she turned away.

“Hallo, Josephine.”

She did not answer, but disappeared behind the hedge. I crossed the drive and followed her. She was seated on the uncomfortable rustic bench by the goldfish pond swinging her legs to and fro and biting into her apple. Above its rosy circumference her eyes regarded me sombrely and with what I could not but feel was hostility.

“I’ve come down again, Josephine,” I said.

It was a feeble opening, but I found Josephine’s silence and her unblinking gaze rather unnerving.

With excellent strategic sense, she still did not reply.

“Is that a good apple?” I asked.

This time Josephine did condescend to reply. Her reply consisted of one word.

“Woolly.”

“A pity,” I said. “I don’t like woolly apples.”

Josephine replied scornfully:

“Nobody does.”

“Why wouldn’t you speak to me when I said hallo?”

“I didn’t want to.”

“Why not?”

Josephine removed the apple from her face to assist in the clearness of her denunciation.

“You went and sneaked to the police,” she said.

“Oh!” I was rather taken aback. “You mean—about—”

“About Uncle Roger.”

“But it’s all right, Josephine,” I assured her. “Quite all right. They know he didn’t do anything wrong—I mean, he hadn’t embezzled any money or anything of that kind.”

Josephine threw me an exasperated glance.

“How stupid you are.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t worrying about Uncle Roger. It’s simply that that’s not the way to do detective work. Don’t you know that you never tell the police until the very end?”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “I’m sorry, Josephine. I’m really very sorry.”

“So you should be.” She added reproachfully: “I trusted you.”

I said I was sorry for the third time. Josephine appeared a little mollified. She took another couple of bites of apple.

“But the police would have been bound to find out about all this,” I said. “You—I—we couldn’t have kept it a secret.”

“You mean because he’s going bankrupt?”

As usual Josephine was well informed.

“I suppose it will come to that.”

“They’re going to talk about it tonight,” said Josephine. “Father and Mother and Uncle Roger and Aunt Edith. Aunt Edith would give him her money—only she hasn’t got it yet—but I don’t think father will. He says if Roger has got in a jam he’s only got himself to blame and what’s the good of throwing good money after bad, and Mother won’t hear of giving him any because she wants Father to put up the money for Edith Thompson. Do you know about Edith Thompson? She was married, but she didn’t like her husband. She was in love with a young man called Bywaters who came off a ship and he went down a different street after the theatre and stabbed him in the back.”

I marvelled once more at the range and completeness of Josephine’s knowledge; and also at the dramatic sense which, only slightly obscured by hazy pronouns, had presented all the salient facts in a nutshell.

“It sounds all right,” said Josephine, “but I don’t suppose the play will be like that at all. It will be like Jezebel again.” She sighed. “I wish I knew why the dogs wouldn’t eat the palms of her hands.”

“Josephine,” I said. “You told me that you were almost sure who the murderer was?”

“Well?”

“Who is it?”

She gave me a look of scorn.

“I see,” I said. “Not till the last chapter? Not even if I promise not to tell Inspector Taverner?”

“I want just a few more clues,” said Josephine.

“Anyway,” she added, throwing the core of the apple into the goldfish pool, “I wouldn’t tell you. If you’re anyone, you’re Watson.”

I stomached this insult.

“OK,” I said. “I’m Watson. But even Watson was given the data.”

“The what?”

“The facts. And then he made the wrong deductions from them. Wouldn’t it be a lot of fun for you to see me making the wrong deductions?”

For a moment Josephine was tempted. Then she shook her head.

“No,” she said, and added: “Anyway, I’m not very keen on Sherlock Holmes. It’s awfully old-fashioned. They drive about in dogcarts.”

“What about those letters?” I asked.

“What letters?”

“The letters you said Laurence Brown and Brenda wrote to each other.”

“I made that up,” said Josephine.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Yes, I did. I often make things up. It amuses me.”

I stared at her. She stared back.

“Look here, Josephine. I know a man at the British Museum who knows a lot about the Bible. If I find out from him why the dogs didn’t eat the palms of Jezebel’s hands, will you tell me about those letters?”

This time Josephine really hesitated.

Somewhere, not very far away, a twig snapped with a sharp cracking noise. Josephine said flatly:

“No, I won’t.”

I accepted defeat. Rather late in the day, I remembered my father's advice.

"Oh well," I said, "it's only a game. Of course you don't really know anything."

Josephine's eyes snapped, but she resisted the bait.

I got up. "I must go in now," I said, "and find Sophia. Come along."

"I shall stop here," said Josephine.

"No, you won't," I said. "You're coming in with me."

Unceremoniously I yanked her to her feet. She seemed surprised and inclined to protest, but yielded with a fairly good grace—partly, no doubt, because she wished to observe the reactions of the household to my presence.

Why I was so anxious for her to accompany me I could not at that moment have said. It only came to me as we were passing through the front door.

It was because of the sudden snapping of a twig.

Fourteen

There was a murmur of voices from the big drawing room. I hesitated but did not go in. I wandered down the passage and, led by some impulse, I pushed open a baize door. The passage beyond was dark, but suddenly a door opened showing a big lighted kitchen. In the doorway stood an old woman—a rather bulky old woman. She had a very clean white apron tied round her ample waist and the moment I saw her I knew that everything was all right. It is the feeling that a good Nannie can always give you. I am thirty-five, but I felt just like a reassured little boy of four.

As far as I knew, Nannie had never seen me, but she said at once:

“It’s Mr. Charles, isn’t it? Come into the kitchen and let me give you a cup of tea.”

It was a big happy-feeling kitchen. I sat down by the centre table and Nannie brought me a cup of tea and two sweet biscuits on a plate. I felt more than ever that I was in the nursery again. Everything was all right—and the terrors of the dark and the unknown were no more with me.

“Miss Sophia will be glad you’ve come,” said Nannie. “She’s been getting rather overexcited.” She added disapprovingly: “They’re all overexcited.”

I looked over my shoulder.

“Where’s Josephine? She came in with me.”

Nannie made a disapproving clacking noise with her tongue.

“Listening at doors and writing down things in that silly little book she carries about with her,” she said. “She ought to have gone to school and had children of her own age to play with. I’ve said so to Miss Edith and she agrees—but the master would have it that she was best here in her home.”

“I suppose he’s very fond of her,” I said.

“He was, sir. He was fond of them all.”

I looked slightly astonished, wondering why Philip’s affection for his offspring was put so definitely in the past. Nannie saw my expression and flushing slightly, she said:

“When I said the master, it was old Mr. Leonides I meant.”

Before I could respond to that, the door opened with a rush and Sophia came in.

“Oh, Charles,” she said, and then quickly: “Oh, Nannie, I’m so glad he’s come.”

“I know you are, love.”

Nannie gathered up a lot of pots and pans and went off into a scullery with them. She shut the door behind her.

I got up from the table and went over to Sophia. I put my arms round her and held her to me.

“Dearest,” I said. “You’re trembling. What is it?”

Sophia said:

“I’m frightened, Charles. I’m frightened.”

“I love you,” I said. “If I could take you away—”

She drew apart and shook her head.

“No, that’s impossible. We’ve got to see this through. But you know, Charles, I don’t like it. I don’t like the feeling that someone—someone in this house—someone I see and speak to every day is a cold-blooded, calculating poisoner....”

And I didn’t know how to answer that. To someone like Sophia one can give no easy meaningless reassurances.

She said: “If only one knew—”

“That must be the worst of it,” I agreed.

“You know what really frightens me?” she whispered. “It’s that we may never know....”

I could visualize easily what a nightmare that would be ... And it seemed to me highly probable that it never might be known who had killed old Leonides.

But it also reminded me of a question I had meant to put to Sophia on a point that had interested me.

“Tell me, Sophia,” I said. “How many people in this house knew about the eserine eyedrops—I mean (a) that your grandfather had them, and (b) that they were poisonous and what would be a fatal dose?”

“I see what you’re getting at, Charles. But it won’t work. You see, we all knew.”

“Well, yes, vaguely, I suppose, but specifically—”

“We knew specifically. We were all up with grandfather one day for coffee after lunch. He liked all the family round him, you know. And his eyes had been giving him a lot of trouble. And Brenda got the eserine to put a drop in each eye, and Josephine, who always asks questions about everything, said: ‘Why does it say “Eyedrops—not to be taken” on the bottle?’ And grandfather smiled and said: ‘If Brenda were to make a mistake and inject eyedrops into me one day instead of insulin—I suspect I should give a big gasp, and go rather blue in the face and then die, because you see, my heart isn’t very strong.’ And Josephine said: ‘Oo,’ and grandfather went on: ‘So we must be careful that Brenda does not give me an injection of eserine instead of insulin, mustn’t we?’” Sophia paused and then said: “We were all there listening. You see? We all heard!”

I did see. I had some faint idea in my mind that just a little specialized knowledge would have been needed. But now it was borne in upon me that

old Leonides had actually supplied the blueprint for his own murder. The murderer had not had to think out a scheme, or to plan or devise anything. A simple easy method of causing death had been supplied by the victim himself.

I drew a deep breath. Sophia, catching my thought, said: “Yes, it’s rather horrible, isn’t it?”

“You know, Sophia,” I said slowly. “There’s just one thing does strike me.”

“Yes?”

“That you’re right, and that it couldn’t have been Brenda. She couldn’t do it exactly that way—when you’d all listened—when you’d all remember.”

“I don’t know about that. She is rather dumb in some ways, you know.”

“Not as dumb as all that,” I said. “No, it couldn’t have been Brenda.”

Sophia moved away from me.

“You don’t want it to be Brenda, do you?” she asked.

And what could I say? I couldn’t—no, I couldn’t—say flatly: “Yes, I hope it is Brenda.”

Why couldn’t I? Just the feeling that Brenda was all alone on one side, and the concentrated animosity of the powerful Leonides family was arrayed against her on the other side. Chivalry? A feeling for the weaker? For the defenceless? I remembered her sitting on the sofa in her expensive rich mourning, the hopelessness in her voice—the fear in her eyes.

Nannie came back rather opportunely from the scullery. I don’t know whether she sensed a certain strain between myself and Sophia.

She said disapprovingly:

“Talking murders and suchlike. Forget about it, that’s what I say. Leave it to the police. It’s their nasty business, not yours.”

“Oh, Nannie—don’t you realize that someone in this house is a murderer —”

“Nonsense, Miss Sophia, I’ve no patience with you. Isn’t the front door open all the time—all the doors open, nothing locked—asking for thieves and burglars?”

“But it couldn’t have been a burglar, nothing was stolen. Besides, why should a burglar come in and poison somebody?”

“I didn’t say it was a burglar, Miss Sophia. I only said all the doors were open. Anyone could have got in. If you ask me it was the Communists.”

Nannie nodded her head in a satisfied way.

“Why on earth should Communists want to murder poor grandfather?”

“Well, everyone says that they’re at the bottom of everything that goes on. But if it wasn’t the Communists, mark my word, it was the Catholics. The Scarlet Woman of Babylon, that’s what they are.”

With the air of one saying the last word, Nannie disappeared again into the scullery.

Sophia and I laughed.

“A good old Black Protestant,” I said.

“Yes, isn’t she? Come on, Charles, come into the drawing room. There’s a kind of family conclave going on. It was scheduled for this evening—but it’s started prematurely.”

“I’d better not butt in, Sophia.”

“If you’re ever going to marry into the family, you’d better see just what it’s like when it has the gloves off.”

“What’s it all about?”

“Roger’s affairs. You seem to have been mixed up in them already. But you’re crazy to think that Roger would ever have killed grandfather. Why, Roger adored him.”

“I didn’t really think Roger had. I thought Clemency might have.”

“Only because I put it into your head. But you’re wrong there too. I don’t think Clemency will mind a bit if Roger loses all his money. I think she’ll actually be rather pleased. She’s got a queer kind of passion for not having things. Come on.”

When Sophia and I entered the drawing room, the voices that were speaking stopped abruptly. Everybody looked at us.

They were all there. Philip sitting in a big crimson brocaded armchair between the windows, his beautiful face set in a cold, stern mask. He looked like a judge about to pronounce sentence. Roger was astride a big pouffe by the fireplace. He had ruffled up his hair between his fingers until it stood up all over his head. His left trouser leg was rucked up and his tie askew. He looked flushed and argumentative. Clemency sat beyond him, her slight form seemed too slender for the big stuffed chair. She was looking away from the others and seemed to be studying the wall panels with a dispassionate gaze. Edith sat in a grandfather chair, bolt upright. She was knitting with incredible energy, her lips pressed tightly together. The most beautiful thing in the room to look at was Magda and Eustace. They looked like a portrait by Gainsborough. They sat together on the sofa—the dark, handsome boy with a sullen expression on his face, and beside him, one arm thrust out along the back of the sofa, sat Magda, the Duchess of Three Gables in a picture gown of taffetas with one small foot in a brocaded slipper thrust out in front of her.

Philip frowned.

“Sophia,” he said, “I’m sorry, but we are discussing family matters which are of a private nature.”

Miss de Haviland’s needles clicked. I prepared to apologize and retreat. Sophia forestalled me. Her voice was clear and determined.

“Charles and I,” she said, “hope to get married. I want Charles to be here.”

“And why on earth not?” cried Roger, springing up from his pouffe with explosive energy. “I keep telling you, Philip, there’s nothing private about this! The whole world is going to know tomorrow or the day after. Anyway, my dear boy,” he came and put a friendly hand on my shoulder, “you know all about it. You were there this morning.”

“Do tell me,” cried Magda, leaning forward. “What is it like at Scotland Yard? One always wonders. A table? A desk? Chairs? What kind of curtains? No flowers, I suppose? A dictaphone?”

“Put a sock in it, Mother,” said Sophia. “And anyway, you told Vavasour Jones to cut that Scotland Yard scene. You said it was an anticlimax.”

“It makes it too like a detective play,” said Magda. “Edith Thompson is definitely a psychological drama—or psychological thriller—which do you think sounds best?”

“You were there this morning?” Philip asked me sharply. “Why? Oh, of course—your father—”

He frowned. I realized more clearly than ever that my presence was unwelcome, but Sophia’s hand was clenched on my arm.

Clemency moved a chair forward.

“Do sit down,” she said.

I gave her a grateful glance and accepted.

“You may say what you like,” said Miss de Haviland, apparently going on from where they had all left off, “but I do think we ought to respect Aristide’s wishes. When this will business is straightened out, as far as I am concerned, my legacy is entirely at your disposal, Roger.”

Roger tugged his hair in a frenzy.

“No Aunt Edith. No!” he cried.

“I wish I could say the same,” said Philip, “but one has to take every factor into consideration—”

“Dear old Phil, don’t you understand? I’m not going to take a penny from anyone.”

“Of course he can’t!” snapped Clemency.

“Anyway, Edith,” said Magda. “If the will is straightened out, he’ll have his own legacy.”

“But it can’t possibly be straightened out in time, can it?” asked Eustace.

“You don’t know anything about it, Eustace,” said Philip.

“The boy’s absolutely right,” cried Roger. “He’s put his finger on the spot. Nothing can avert the crash. Nothing.”

He spoke with a kind of relish.

“There is really nothing to discuss,” said Clemency.

“Anyway,” said Roger, “what does it matter?”

“I should have thought it mattered a good deal,” said Philip, pressing his lips together.

“No,” said Roger. “No! Does anything matter compared with the fact that father is dead? Father is dead! And we sit here discussing mere money matters!”

A faint colour rose in Philip’s pale cheeks.

“We are only trying to help,” he said stiffly.

“I know, Phil, old boy, I know. But there’s nothing anyone can do. So let’s call it a day.”

“I suppose,” said Philip, “that I could raise a certain amount of money. Securities have gone down a good deal and some of my capital is tied up in such a way that I can’t touch it: Magda’s settlement and so on—but—”

Magda said quickly:

“Of course you can’t raise the money, darling. It would be absurd to try—and not very fair on the children.”

“I tell you I’m not asking anyone for anything!” shouted Roger. “I’m hoarse with telling you so. I’m quite content that things should take their course.”

“It’s a question of prestige,” said Philip. “Father’s. Ours.”

“It wasn’t a family business. It was solely my concern.”

“Yes,” said Philip, looking at him. “It was entirely your concern.”

Edith de Haviland got up and said: “I think we’ve discussed this enough.”

There was in her voice that authentic note of authority that never fails to produce its effect.

Philip and Magda got up. Eustace lounged out of the room and I noticed the stiffness of his gait. He was not exactly lame, but his walk was a halting one.

Roger linked his arm in Philip’s and said:

“You’ve been a brick, Phil, even to think of such a thing!” The brothers went out together.

Magda murmured, “Such a fuss!” as she followed them, and Sophia said that she must see about my room.

Edith de Haviland stood rolling up her knitting. She looked towards me and I thought she was going to speak to me. There was something almost like appeal in her glance. However, she changed her mind, sighed, and went out after the others.

Clemency had moved over to the window and stood looking out into the garden. I went over and stood beside her. She turned her head slightly towards me.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” she said—and added with distaste: “What a preposterous room this is!”

“Don’t you like it?”

“I can’t breathe in it. There’s always a smell of half-dead flowers and dust.”

I thought she was unjust to the room. But I knew what she meant. It was very definitely an interior.

It was a woman’s room, exotic, soft, shut away from the rude blasts of outside weather. It was not a room that a man would be happy in for long. It was not a room where you could relax and read the newspaper and smoke a pipe and put up your feet. Nevertheless I preferred it to Clemency’s own abstract expression of herself upstairs. On the whole I prefer a boudoir to an operating theatre.

She said, looking round:

“It’s just a stage set. A background for Magda to play her scenes against.” She looked at me. “You realize, don’t you, what we’ve just been doing? Act II—the family conclave. Magda arranged it. It didn’t mean a thing. There was nothing to talk about, nothing to discuss. It’s all settled—finished.”

There was no sadness in her voice. Rather there was satisfaction. She caught my glance.

“Oh, don’t you understand?” she said impatiently. “We’re free—at last! Don’t you understand that Roger’s been miserable—absolutely miserable—for years? He never had any aptitude for business. He likes things like horses and cows and pottering round in the country. But he adored his father—they all did. That’s what’s wrong with this house—too much family. I don’t mean that the old man was a tyrant, or preyed upon them, or

bullied them. He didn't. He gave them money and freedom. He was devoted to them. And they kept on being devoted to him."

"Is there anything wrong in that?"

"I think there is. I think, when your children have grown up, that you should cut away from them, efface yourself, slink away, force them to forget you."

"Force them? That's rather drastic, isn't it? Isn't coercion as bad one way as another?"

"If he hadn't made himself such a personality—"

"You can't make yourself a personality," I said. "He was a personality."

"He was too much of a personality for Roger. Roger worshipped him. He wanted to do everything his father wanted him to do, he wanted to be the kind of son his father wanted. And he couldn't. His father made over Associated Catering to him—it was the old man's particular joy and pride, and Roger tried hard to carry on in his father's footsteps. But he hadn't got that kind of ability. In business matters Roger is—yes, I'll say it plainly—a fool. And it nearly broke his heart. He's been miserable for years, struggling, seeing the whole thing go down the hill, having sudden wonderful 'ideas' and 'schemes' which always went wrong and made it worse than ever. It's a terrible thing to feel you're a failure year after year. You don't know how unhappy he's been. I do."

Again she turned and faced me.

"You thought, you actually suggested to the police, that Roger would have killed his father—for money! You don't know how—how absolutely ridiculous that is!"

"I do know it now," I said humbly.

"When Roger knew he couldn't stave it off any more—that the crash was bound to come, he was actually relieved. Yes, he was. He worried about his

father's knowing—but not about anything else. He was looking forward to the new life we were going to live.”

Her face quivered a little and her voice softened.

“Where were you going?” I asked.

“To Barbados. A distant cousin of mine died a short time ago and left me a tiny estate out there—oh, nothing much. But it was somewhere to go. We’d have been desperately poor, but we’d have scratched a living—it costs very little just to live. We’d have been together—unworried, away from them all.”

She sighed.

“Roger is a ridiculous person. He would worry about me—about my being poor. I suppose he’s the Leonides’ attitude to money too firmly in his mind. When my first husband was alive, we were terribly poor—and Roger thinks it was so brave and wonderful of me! He doesn’t realize that I was happy—really happy! I’ve never been so happy since. And yet—I never loved Richard as I love Roger.”

Her eyes half-closed. I was aware of the intensity of her feeling.

She opened her eyes, looked at me and said:

“So you see, I would never have killed anyone for money. I don’t like money.”

I was quite sure that she meant exactly what she said. Clemency Leonides was one of those rare people to whom money does not appeal. They dislike luxury, prefer austerity and are suspicious of possessions.

Still, there are many to whom money has no personal appeal, but who can be tempted by the power it confers.

I said: “You mightn’t want money for yourself—but wisely directed, money can do a lot of interesting things. It can endow research, for example.”

I had suspected that Clemency might be a fanatic about her work, but she merely said:

“I doubt if endowments ever do much good. They’re usually spent in the wrong way. The things that are worthwhile are usually accomplished by someone with enthusiasm and drive—and with natural vision. Expensive equipment and training and experiment never does what you’d imagine it might do. The spending of it usually gets into the wrong hands.”

“Will you mind giving up your work when you go to Barbados?” I asked. “You’re still going, I presume?”

“Oh, yes, as soon as the police will let us. No, I shan’t mind giving up my work at all. Why should I? I wouldn’t like to be idle, but I shan’t be idle in Barbados.”

She added impatiently:

“Oh, if only this could all be cleared up quickly and we could get away.”

“Clemency,” I said, “have you any idea at all who did do this? Granting that you and Roger had no hand in it (and really I can’t see any reason to think you had), surely, with your intelligence, you must have some idea of who did?”

She gave me a rather peculiar look, a darting, sideways glance. When she spoke her voice had lost its spontaneity. It was awkward, rather embarrassed.

“One can’t make guesses, it’s unscientific,” she said. “One can only say that Brenda and Laurence are the obvious suspects.”

“So you think they did it?”

Clemency shrugged her shoulders.

She stood for a moment as though listening, then she went out of the room, passing Edith de Haviland in the doorway.

Edith came straight over to me.

“I want to talk to you,” she said.

My father’s words leapt into my mind. Was this—

But Edith de Haviland was going on:

“I hope you didn’t get the wrong impression,” she said. “About Philip, I mean. Philip is rather difficult to understand. He may seem to you reserved and cold, but that is not so at all. It’s just a manner. He can’t help it.”

“I really hadn’t thought—” I began.

But she swept on:

“Just now—about Roger. It isn’t really that he’s grudging. He’s never been mean about money. And he’s really a dear—he’s always been a dear—but he needs understanding.”

I looked at her with the air, I hope, of one who was willing to understand. She went on:

“It’s partly, I think, from having been the second of the family. There’s often something about a second child—they start handicapped. He adored his father, you see. Of course, all the children adored Aristide and he adored them. But Roger was his especial pride and joy. Being the eldest—the first. And I think Philip felt it. He drew back right into himself. He began to like books and the past and things that were well divorced from everyday life. I think he suffered—children do suffer....”

She paused and went on:

“What I really mean, I suppose, is that he’s always been jealous of Roger. I think perhaps he doesn’t know it himself. But I think the fact that Roger has come a cropper—oh, it seems an odious thing to say and really I’m sure he doesn’t realize it himself—but I think perhaps Philip isn’t as sorry about it as he ought to be.”

“You mean really that he’s rather pleased Roger has made a fool of himself.”

“Yes,” said Miss de Haviland. “I mean just exactly that.”

She added, frowning a little:

“It distressed me, you know, that he didn’t at once offer to help his brother.”

“Why should he?” I said. “After all, Roger has made a muck of things. He’s a grown man. There are no children to consider. If he were ill or in real want, of course his family would help—but I’ve no doubt Roger would really much prefer to start afresh entirely on his own.”

“Oh! he would. It’s only Clemency he minds about. And Clemency is an extraordinary creature. She really likes being uncomfortable and having only one utility teacup to drink out of. Modern, I suppose. She’s no sense of the past, no sense of beauty.”

I felt her shrewd eyes looking me up and down.

“This is a dreadful ordeal for Sophia,” she said. “I am so sorry her youth should be dimmed by it. I love them all, you know. Roger and Philip, and now Sophia and Eustace and Josephine. All the dear children. Marcia’s children. Yes, I love them dearly.” She paused and then added sharply: “But, mind you, this side idolatry.”

She turned abruptly and went. I had the feeling that she had meant something by her last remark that I did not quite understand.

Fifteen

“Your room’s ready,” said Sophia.

She stood by my side looking out at the garden. It looked bleak and grey now with the half-denuded trees swaying in the wind.

Sophia echoed my thoughts as she said:

“How desolate it looks....”

As we watched, a figure, and then presently another came through the yew hedge from the rock garden. They both looked grey and unsubstantial in the fading light.

Brenda Leonides was the first. She was wrapped in a grey chinchilla coat and there was something catlike and stealthy in the way she moved. She slipped through the twilight with a kind of eerie grace.

I saw her face as she passed the window. There was a half-smile on it, the curving, crooked smile I had noticed upstairs. A few minutes later Laurence Brown, looking slender and shrunken, also slipped through the twilight. I can only put it that way. They did not seem like two people walking, two people who had been out for a stroll. There was something furtive and unsubstantial about them like two ghosts.

I wondered if it was under Brenda’s or Laurence’s foot a twig had snapped.

By a natural association of ideas, I asked:

“Where’s Josephine?”

“Probably with Eustace up in the schoolroom.” She frowned. “I’m worried about Eustace, Charles.”

“Why?”

“He’s so moody and odd. He’s been so different ever since that wretched paralysis. I can’t make out what’s going on in his mind. Sometimes he seems to hate us all.”

“He’ll probably grow out of all that. It’s just a phase.”

“Yes, I suppose so. But I do get worried, Charles.”

“Why, dear heart?”

“Really, I suppose, because mother and father never worry. They’re not like a mother and father.”

“That may be all for the best. More children suffer from interference than from noninterference.”

“That’s true. You know, I never thought about it until I came back from abroad, but they really are a queer couple. Father living determinedly in a world of obscure historical bypaths and mother having a lovely time creating scenes. That tomfoolery this evening was all mother. There was no need for it. She just wanted to play a family conclave scene. She gets bored, you know, down here and has to try and work up a drama.”

For the moment I had a fantastic vision of Sophia’s mother poisoning her elderly father-in-law in a lighthearted manner in order to observe a murder drama at firsthand with herself in the leading role.

An amusing thought! I dismissed it as such—but it left me a little uneasy.

“Mother,” said Sophia, “has to be looked after the whole time. You never know what she’s up to!”

“Forget your family, Sophia,” I said firmly.

“I shall be only too delighted to, but it’s a little difficult at the present moment. But I was happy out in Cairo when I had forgotten them all.”

I remembered how Sophia had never mentioned her home or her people.

“Is that why you never talked about them?” I asked. “Because you wanted to forget them?”

“I think so. We’ve always, all of us, lived too much in each other’s pockets. We’re—we’re all too fond of each other. We’re not like some families where they all hate each other like poison. That must be pretty bad, but it’s almost worse to live all tangled up in conflicting affections.”

She added:

“I think that’s what I mean when I said we all lived together in a little crooked house. I didn’t mean that it was crooked in the dishonest sense. I think what I meant was that we hadn’t been able to grow up independent, standing by ourselves, upright. We’re all a bit twisted and twining.”

I saw Edith de Haviland’s heel grinding a weed into the path as Sophia added:

“Like bindweed....”

And then suddenly Magda was with us—flinging open the door—crying out:

“Darlings, why don’t you have the lights on? It’s almost dark.”

And she pressed the switches and the lights sprang up on the walls and on the tables, and she and Sophia and I pulled the heavy rose curtains, and there we were in the flower-scented interior, and Magda flinging herself on the sofa, cried:

“What an incredible scene it was, wasn’t it? How cross Eustace was! He told me he thought it was all positively indecent. How funny boys are!”

She sighed.

“Roger’s rather a pet. I love him when he rumples his hair and starts knocking things over. Wasn’t it sweet of Edith to offer her legacy to him? She really meant it, you know, it wasn’t just a gesture. But it was terribly stupid—it might have made Philip think he ought to do it too! Of course

Edith would do anything for the family! There's something very pathetic in the love of a spinster for her sister's children. Some day I shall play one of those devoted spinster aunts. Inquisitive and obstinate and devoted."

"It must have been hard for her after her sister died," I said, refusing to be sidetracked into discussion of another of Magda's roles. "I mean if she disliked old Leonides so much."

Magda interrupted me.

"Disliked him? Who told you that? Nonsense. She was in love with him."

"Mother!" said Sophia.

"Now don't try and contradict me, Sophia. Naturally at your age, you think love is all two good-looking young people in the moonlight."

"She told me," I said, "that she had always disliked him."

"Probably she did when she first came. She'd been angry with her sister for marrying him. I dare say there was always some antagonism—but she was in love with him all right! Darling, I do know what I'm talking about! Of course, with deceased wife's sister and all that, he couldn't have married her, and I dare say he never thought of it—and quite probably she didn't either. She was quite happy mothering the children, and having fights with him. But she didn't like it when he married Brenda. She didn't like it a bit!"

"No more did you and father," said Sophia.

"No, of course we hated it! Naturally! But Edith hated it most. Darling, the way I've seen her look at Brenda!"

"Now, Mother," said Sophia.

Magda threw her an affectionate and half-guilty glance, the glance of a mischievous, spoilt child.

She went on, with no apparent realization of any lack of continuity:

“I’ve decided Josephine really must go to school.”

“Josephine? To school?”

“Yes. To Switzerland. I’m going to see about it tomorrow. I really think we might get her off at once. It’s so bad for her to be mixed up in a horrid business like this. She’s getting quite morbid about it. What she needs is other children of her own age. School life. I’ve always thought so.”

“Grandfather didn’t want her to go to school,” said Sophia slowly. “He was very much against it.”

“Darling old Sweetie Pie liked us all here under his eye. Very old people are often selfish in that way. A child ought to be amongst other children. And Switzerland is so healthy—all the winter sports, and the air, and so much, much better food than we get here!”

“It will be difficult to arrange for Switzerland now with all the currency regulations, won’t it?” I asked.

“Nonsense, Charles. There’s some kind of educational racket—or you exchange with a Swiss child—there are all sorts of ways. Rudolph Alstir’s in Lausanne. I shall wire him tomorrow to arrange everything. We can get her off by the end of the week!”

Magda punched a cushion, smiled at us, went to the door, stood a moment looking back at us in a quite enchanting fashion.

“It’s only the young who count,” she said. As she said it, it was a lovely line. “They must always come first. And, darlings—think of the flowers—the blue gentians, the narcissus....”

“In October?” asked Sophia, but Magda had gone.

Sophia heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Really,” she said. “Mother is too trying! She gets these sudden ideas, and she sends thousands of telegrams and everything has to be arranged at a

moment's notice. Why should Josephine be hustled off to Switzerland all in a flurry?"

"There's probably something in the idea of school. I think children of her own age would be a good thing for Josephine."

"Grandfather didn't think so," said Sophia obstinately.

I felt slightly irritated.

"My dear Sophia, do you really think an old gentleman of over eighty is the best judge of a child's welfare?"

"He was about the best judge of anybody in this house," said Sophia.

"Better than your Aunt Edith?"

"No, perhaps not. She did rather favour school. I admit Josephine's got into rather difficult ways—she's got a horrible habit of snooping. But I really think it's just because she's playing detectives."

Was it only the concern for Josephine's welfare which had occasioned Magda's sudden decision? I wondered. Josephine was remarkably well-informed about all sorts of things that had happened prior to the murder and which had been certainly no business of hers. A healthy school life with plenty of games would probably do her a world of good. But I did rather wonder at the suddenness and urgency of Magda's decision—Switzerland was a long way off.

Sixteen

The Old Man had said:

“Let them talk to you.”

As I shaved the following morning, I considered just how far that had taken me.

Edith de Haviland had talked to me—she had sought me out for that especial purpose. Clemency had talked to me (or had I talked to her?). Magda had talked to me in a sense—that is, I had formed part of the audience to one of her broadcasts. Sophia naturally had talked to me. Even Nannie had talked to me. Was I any the wiser for what I had learned from them all? Was there any significant word or phrase? More, was there any evidence of that abnormal vanity on which my father had laid stress? I couldn't see that there was.

The only person who had shown absolutely no desire to talk to me in any way, or on any subject, was Philip. Was not that, in a way, rather abnormal? He must know by now that I wanted to marry his daughter. Yet he continued to act as though I was not in the house at all. Presumably he resented my presence there. Edith de Haviland had apologized for him. She had said it was just “manner.” She had shown herself concerned about Philip. Why?

I considered Sophia's father. He was in every sense a repressed individual. He had been an unhappy jealous child. He had been forced back into himself. He had taken refuge in the world of books—in the historical past. That studied coldness and reserve of his might conceal a good deal of passionate feeling. The inadequate motive of financial gain by his father's death was unconvincing—I did not think for a moment that Philip Leonides would kill his father because he himself had not quite as much money as he would like to have. But there might be some deep psychological reason for his desiring his father's death. Philip had come back to his father's house to live, and later, as a result of the Blitz, Roger had come—and Philip had been obliged to see day by day that Roger was his father's favourite ...

Might things have come to such a pass in his tortured mind that the only relief possible was his father's death? And supposing that death should incriminate his elder brother? Roger was short of money—on the verge of a crash. Knowing nothing of that last interview between Roger and his father and the latter's offer of assistance, might not Philip have believed that the motive would seem so powerful that Roger would be at once suspected? Was Philip's mental balance sufficiently disturbed to lead him to do murder?

I cut my chin with the razor and swore.

What the hell was I trying to do? Fasten murder on Sophia's father? That was a nice thing to try and do! That wasn't what Sophia had wanted me to come down here for.

Or—was it? There was something, had been something all along, behind Sophia's appeal. If there was any lingering suspicion in her mind that her father was the killer, then she would never consent to marry me—in case that suspicion might be true. And since she was Sophia, clear-eyed and brave, she wanted the truth, since uncertainty would be an eternal and perpetual barrier between us. Hadn't she been in effect saying to me, "Prove that this dreadful thing I am imagining is not true—but if it is true, then prove its truth to me—so that I can know the worst and face it!"

Did Edith de Haviland know, or suspect, that Philip was guilty. What had she meant by "this side idolatry?"

And what had Clemency meant by that peculiar look she had thrown at me when I had asked her who she suspected and she had answered: "Laurence and Brenda are the obvious suspects, aren't they?"

The whole family wanted it to be Brenda and Laurence, hoped it might be Brenda and Laurence, but didn't really believe it was Brenda and Laurence....

And of course, the whole family might be wrong, and it might really be Laurence and Brenda after all.

Or, it might be Laurence, and not Brenda....

That would be a much better solution.

I finished dabbing my cut chin and went down to breakfast filled with the determination to have an interview with Laurence Brown as soon as possible.

It was only as I drank my second cup of coffee that it occurred to me that the Crooked House was having its effect on me also. I, too, wanted to find, not the true solution, but the solution that suited me best.

After breakfast I went through the hall and up the stairs. Sophia had told me that I should find Laurence giving instruction to Eustace and Josephine in the schoolroom.

I hesitated on the landing outside Brenda's front door. Did I ring and knock, or did I walk right in? I decided to treat the house as an integral Leonides home and not as Brenda's private residence.

I opened the door and passed inside. Everything was quiet, there seemed no one about. On my left the door into the big drawing room was closed. On my right two open doors showed a bedroom and adjoining bathroom. This I knew was the bathroom adjoining Aristide Leonides' bedroom where the eserine and the insulin had been kept.

The police had finished with it now. I pushed the door open and slipped inside. I realized then how easy it would have been for anyone in the house (or from outside the house for the matter of that!) to come up here and into the bathroom unseen.

I stood in the bathroom looking round. It was sumptuously appointed with gleaming tiles and a sunken bath. At one side were various electric appliances; a hot plate and grill under, an electric kettle—a small electric saucepan, a toaster—everything that a valet attendant to an old gentleman might need. On the wall was a white enamelled cupboard. I opened it. Inside were medical appliances, two medicine glasses, eye bath, eye dropper, and a few labelled bottles. Aspirin, boracic powder, iodine.

Elastoplast bandages, etc. On a separate shelf were the stacked supply of insulin, two hypodermic needles, and a bottle of surgical spirit. On a third shelf was a bottle marked "The Tablets—one or two to be taken at night as ordered." On this shelf, no doubt, had stood the bottle of eyedrops. It was all clear, well arranged, easy for anyone to get at if needed, and equally easy to get at for murder.

I could do what I liked with the bottles and then go softly out and downstairs again and nobody would ever know I had been there. All this was, of course, nothing new, but it brought home to me how difficult the task of the police was.

Only from the guilty party or parties could one find out what one needed.

"Rattle 'em," Taverner had said to me. "Get 'em on the run. Make 'em think we're on to something. Keep ourselves well in the limelight. Sooner or later, if we do, our criminal will stop leaving well alone and try to be smarter still—and then—we've got him."

Well, the criminal hadn't reacted to this treatment so far.

I came out of the bathroom. Still no one about. I went on along the corridor. I passed the dining room on the left, and Brenda's bedroom and bathroom on the right. In the latter, one of the maids was moving about. The dining room door was closed. From a room beyond that, I heard Edith de Haviland's voice telephoning to the inevitable fishmonger. A spiral flight of stairs led to the floor above. I went up them. Edith's bedroom and sitting room were here, I knew, and two more bathrooms and Laurence Brown's room. Beyond that again the short flight of steps down to the big room built out over the servants' quarters at the back which was used as a schoolroom.

Outside the door I paused. Laurence Brown's voice could be heard, slightly raised, from inside.

I think Josephine's habit of snooping must have been catching. Quite unashamedly I leaned against the door jamb and listened.

It was a history lesson that was in progress, and the period in question was the French Directoire.

As I listened astonishment opened my eyes. It was a considerable surprise to me to discover that Laurence Brown was a magnificent teacher.

I don't know why it should have surprised me so much. After all, Aristide Leonides had always been a good picker of men. For all his mouselike exterior, Laurence had that supreme gift of being able to rouse enthusiasm and imagination in his pupils. The drama of Thermidor, the decree of outlawry against the Robespierrists, the magnificence of Barras, the cunning of Fouché—Napoleon the half-starved young gunner lieutenant—all these were real and living.

Suddenly Laurence stopped, he asked Eustace and Josephine a question, he made them put themselves in the place of first one and then another figure in the drama. Though he didn't get much result from Josephine, whose voice sounded as though she had a cold in the head, Eustace sounded quite different from his usual moody self. He showed brains and intelligence and the keen historical sense which he had doubtless inherited from his father.

Then I heard the chairs being pushed back and scraped across the floor. I retreated up the steps and was apparently just coming down them when the door opened.

Eustace and Josephine came out.

"Hallo," I said.

Eustace looked surprised to see me.

"Do you want anything?" he asked politely.

Josephine, taking no interest in my presence, slipped past me.

"I just wanted to see the schoolroom," I said rather feebly.

"You saw it the other day, didn't you? It's just a kid's place really. Used to be the nursery. It's still got a lot of toys in it."

He held open the door for me and I went in.

Laurence Brown stood by the table. He looked up, flushed, murmured something in answer to my good morning and went hurriedly out.

“You’ve scared him,” said Eustace. “He’s very easily scared.”

“Do you like him, Eustace?”

“Oh! he’s all right. An awful ass, of course.”

“But not a bad teacher?”

“No, as a matter of fact he’s quite interesting. He knows an awful lot. He makes you see things from a different angle. I never knew that Henry the Eighth wrote poetry—to Ann Boleyn, of course—jolly decent poetry.”

We talked for a few moments on such subjects as *The Ancient Mariner*, Chaucer, the political implications behind the Crusades, the medieval approach to life, and the, to Eustace, surprising fact that Oliver Cromwell had prohibited the celebration of Christmas Day. Behind Eustace’s scornful and rather ill-tempered manner there was, I perceived, an inquiring and able mind.

Very soon, I began to realize the source of his ill humour. His illness had not only been a frightening ordeal, it had also been a frustration and a setback, just at a moment when he had been enjoying life.

“I was to have been in the eleven next term—and I’d got my house colours. It’s pretty thick to have to stop at home and do lessons with a rotten kid like Josephine. Why, she’s only twelve.”

“Yes, but you don’t have the same studies, do you?”

“No, of course she doesn’t do advanced maths—or Latin. But you don’t want to have to share a tutor with a girl.”

I tried to soothe his injured male pride by remarking that Josephine was quite an intelligent girl for her age.

“D’you think so? I think she’s awfully wet. She’s mad keen on this detecting stuff—goes round poking her nose in everywhere and writing things down in a little black book and pretending that she’s finding out a lot. Just a silly kid, that’s all she is,” said Eustace loftily.

“Anyway,” he added, “girls can’t be detectives. I told her so. I think mother’s quite right and the sooner Jo’s packed off to Switzerland the better.”

“Wouldn’t you miss her?”

“Miss a kid of that age?” said Eustace haughtily. “Of course not. My goodness, this house is the absolute limit! Mother always haring up and down to London and bullying tame dramatists to rewrite plays for her, and making frightful fusses about nothing at all. And father shut up with his books and sometimes not hearing you if you speak to him. I don’t see why I should have to be burdened with such peculiar parents. Then there’s Uncle Roger—always so hearty that it makes you shudder. Aunt Clemency’s all right, she doesn’t bother you, but I sometimes think she’s a bit batty. Aunt Edith’s not too bad, but she’s old. Things have been a bit more cheerful since Sophia came back—though she can be pretty sharp sometimes. But it is a queer household, don’t you think so? Having a step-grandmother young enough to be your aunt or your older sister. I mean, it makes you feel an awful ass!”

I had some comprehension of his feelings. I remembered (very dimly) my own supersensitiveness at Eustace’s age. My horror of appearing in any way unusual or of my near relatives departing from the normal.

“What about your grandfather?” I said. “Were you fond of him?”

A curious expression flitted across Eustace’s face.

“Grandfather,” he said, “was definitely antisocial!”

“In what way?”

“He thought of nothing but the profit motive. Laurence says that’s completely wrong. And he was a great individualist. All that sort of thing has got to go, don’t you think so?”

“Well,” I said, rather brutally, “he has gone.”

“A good thing, really,” said Eustace. “I don’t want to be callous, but you can’t really enjoy life at that age!”

“Didn’t he?”

“He couldn’t have. Anyway, it was time he went. He—”

Eustace broke off as Laurence Brown came back into the schoolroom.

Laurence began fussing about with some books, but I thought that he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

He looked at his wristwatch and said:

“Please be back here sharp at eleven, Eustace. We’ve wasted too much time the last few days.”

“OK, sir.”

Eustace lounged towards the door and went out whistling.

Laurence Brown darted another sharp glance at me. He moistened his lips once or twice. I was convinced that he had come back into the schoolroom solely in order to talk to me.

Presently, after a little aimless stacking and unstacking of books and a pretence of looking for a book that was missing, he spoke:

“Er—How are they getting on?” he said.

“They?”

“The police.”

His nose twitched. A mouse in a trap, I thought, a mouse in a trap.

“They don’t take me into their confidence,” I said.

“Oh. I thought your father was the Assistant Commissioner.”

“He is,” I said. “But naturally he would not betray official secrets.”

I made my voice purposely pompous.

“Then you don’t know how—what—if—” His voice trailed off. “They’re not going to make an arrest, are they?”

“Not so far as I know. But then, as I say, I mightn’t know.”

Get ’em on the run, Inspector Taverner had said. Get ’em rattled. Well, Laurence Brown was rattled all right.

He began talking quickly and nervously.

“You don’t know what it’s like ... The strain ... Not knowing what—I mean, they just come and go—Asking questions ... Questions that don’t seem to have anything to do with the case....”

He broke off. I waited. He wanted to talk—well, then, let him talk.

“You were there when the Chief Inspector made that monstrous suggestion the other day? About Mrs. Leonides and myself ... It was monstrous. It makes one feel so helpless. One is powerless to prevent people thinking things! And it is all so wickedly untrue. Just because she is—was—so many years younger than her husband. People have dreadful minds—dreadful minds. I feel—I can’t help feeling, that it is all a plot.”

“A plot? That’s interesting.”

It was interesting, though not quite in the way he took it.

“The family, you know; Mr. Leonides’ family, have never been sympathetic to me. They were always aloof. I always felt that they despised me.”

His hands had begun to shake.

“Just because they have always been rich and—powerful. They looked down on me. What was I to them? Only the tutor. Only a wretched conscientious objector. And my objections were conscientious. They were indeed!”

I said nothing.

“All right then,” he burst out. “What if I was—afraid? Afraid I’d make a mess of it. Afraid that when I had to pull a trigger—I mightn’t be able to bring myself to do it. How can you be sure it’s a Nazi you’re going to kill? It might be some decent lad—some village boy—with no political leanings, just called up for his country’s service. I believe war is wrong, do you understand? I believe it is wrong.”

I was still silent. I believed that my silence was achieving more than any arguments or agreements could do. Laurence Brown was arguing with himself, and in so doing was revealing a good deal of himself.

“Everyone’s always laughed at me.” His voice shook. “I seem to have a knack of making myself ridiculous. It isn’t that I really lack courage—but I always do the thing wrong. I went into a burning house to rescue a woman they said was trapped there. But I lost the way at once, and the smoke made me unconscious, and it gave a lot of trouble to the firemen finding me. I heard them say, ‘Why couldn’t the silly chump leave it to us?’ It’s no good my trying, everyone’s against me. Whoever killed Mr. Leonides arranged it so that I would be suspected. Someone killed him so as to ruin me.”

“What about Mrs. Leonides?” I asked.

He flushed. He became less of a mouse and more like a man.

“Mrs. Leonides is an angel,” he said, “an angel. Her sweetness, her kindness to her elderly husband were wonderful. To think of her in connection with poison is laughable—laughable! And that thick-headed Inspector can’t see it!”

“He’s prejudiced,” I said, “by the number of cases on his files where elderly husbands have been poisoned by sweet young wives.”

“The insufferable dolt,” said Laurence Brown angrily.

He went over to a bookcase in the corner and began rummaging the books in it. I didn’t think I should get anything more out of him. I went slowly out of the room.

As I was going along the passage, a door on my left opened and Josephine almost fell on top of me. Her appearance had the suddenness of a demon in an old-fashioned pantomime.

Her face and hands were filthy and a large cobweb floated from one ear.

“Where have you been, Josephine?”

I peered through the half-open door. A couple of steps led up into an attic-like rectangular space in the gloom of which several large tanks could be seen.

“In the cistern room.”

“Why in the cistern room?”

Josephine replied in a brief businesslike way:

“Detecting.”

“What on earth is there to detect among the cisterns?”

To this, Josephine merely replied:

“I must wash.”

“I should say most decidedly.”

Josephine disappeared through the nearest bathroom door. She looked back to say:

“I should say it’s about time for the next murder, wouldn’t you?”

“What do you mean—the next murder?”

“Well, in books there’s always a second murder about now. Someone who knows something is bumped off before they can tell what they know.”

“You read too many detective stories, Josephine. Real life isn’t like that. And if anybody in this house knows something the last thing they seem to want to do is to talk about it.”

Josephine’s reply came to me rather obscurely by the gushing of water from a tap.

“Sometimes it’s something that they don’t know that they do know.”

I blinked as I tried to think this out. Then, leaving Josephine to her ablutions, I went down to the floor below.

Just as I was going out through the front door to the staircase, Brenda came with a soft rush through the drawing room door.

She came close to me and laid her hand on my arm, looking up in my face.

“Well?” she asked.

It was the same demand for information that Laurence had made, only it was phrased differently. And her one word was far more effective.

I shook my head.

“Nothing,” I said.

She gave a long sigh.

“I’m so frightened,” she said. “Charles, I’m so frightened ...”

Her fear was very real. It communicated itself to me there in that narrow space. I wanted to reassure her, to help her. I had once more that poignant

sense of her as terribly alone in hostile surroundings.

She might well have cried out: “Who is on my side?”

And what would the answer have been? Laurence Brown? And what, after all, was Laurence Brown? No tower of strength in a time of trouble. One of the weaker vessels. I remembered the two of them drifting in from the garden the night before.

I wanted to help her. I badly wanted to help her. But there was nothing much I could say or do. And I had at the bottom of my mind an embarrassed guilty feeling, as though Sophia’s scornful eyes were watching me. I remembered Sophia’s voice saying: “So she got you.”

And Sophia did not see, did not want to see, Brenda’s side of it. Alone, suspected of murder, with no one to stand by her.

“The inquest is tomorrow,” Brenda said. “What—what will happen?”

There I could reassure her.

“Nothing,” I said. “You needn’t worry about that. It will be adjourned for the police to make inquiries. It will probably set the Press loose, though. So far, there’s been no indication in the papers that it wasn’t a natural death. The Leonides have got a good deal of influence. But with an adjourned inquest—well, the fun will start.”

(What extraordinary things one said! The fun! Why must I choose that particular word?)

“Will—will they be very dreadful?”

“I shouldn’t give any interviews if I were you. You know, Brenda, you ought to have a lawyer—” She recoiled with a terrific gasp of dismay. “No—no—not the way you mean. But someone to look after your interests and advise you as to procedure, and what to say and do, and what not to say and do.

“You see,” I added, “you’re very much alone.”

Her hand pressed my arm more closely.

“Yes,” she said. “You do understand that. You’ve helped, Charles, you have helped....”

I went down the stairs with a feeling of warmth, of satisfaction ... Then I saw Sophia standing by the front door. Her voice was cold and rather dry.

“What a long time you’ve been,” she said. “They rang up for you from London. Your father wants you.”

“At the Yard?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what they want me for. They didn’t say?”

Sophia shook her head. Her eyes were anxious. I drew her to me.

“Don’t worry, darling,” I said, “I’ll soon be back.”

Seventeen

There was something strained in the atmosphere of my father's room. The Old Man sat behind his table, Chief-Inspector Taverner leaned against the window frame. In the visitors' chair sat Mr. Gaitskill, looking ruffled.

“—extraordinary want of confidence,” he was saying acidly.

“Of course, of course.” My father spoke soothingly. “Ah, hallo, Charles, you've made good time. Rather a surprising development has occurred.”

“Unprecedented,” Mr. Gaitskill said.

Something had clearly ruffled the little lawyer to the core. Behind him, Chief-Inspector Taverner grinned at me.

“If I may recapitulate?” my father said. “Mr. Gaitskill received a somewhat surprising communication this morning, Charles. It was from a Mr. Agrodopolous, proprietor of the Delphos Restaurant. He is a very old man, a Greek by birth, and when he was a young man he was helped and befriended by Aristide Leonides. He has always remained deeply grateful to his friend and benefactor and it seems that Aristide Leonides placed great reliance and trust in him.”

“I would never have believed Leonides was of such a suspicious and secretive nature,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “Of course, he was of advanced years—practically in his dotage, one might say.”

“Nationality tells,” said my father gently. “You see, Gaitskill, when you are very old your mind dwells a good deal on the days of your youth and the friends of your youth.”

“But Leonides' affairs had been in my hands for well over forty years,” said Mr. Gaitskill. “Forty-three years and six months to be precise.”

Taverner grinned again.

“What happened?” I asked.

Mr. Gaitskill opened his mouth, but my father forestalled him.

“Mr. Agrodopolous stated in his communication that he was obeying certain instructions given him by his friend Aristide Leonides. Briefly, about a year ago he had been entrusted by Mr. Leonides with a sealed envelope which Mr. Agrodopolous was to forward to Mr. Gaitskill immediately after Mr. Leonides’ death. In the event of Mr. Agrodopolous dying first, his son, a godson of Mr. Leonides, was to carry out the same instructions. Mr. Agrodopolous apologizes for the delay, but explains that he has been ill with pneumonia and only learned of his old friend’s death yesterday afternoon.”

“The whole business is most unprofessional,” said Mr. Gaitskill.

“When Mr. Gaitskill had opened the sealed envelope and made himself acquainted with its contents, he decided that it was his duty—”

“Under the circumstances,” said Mr. Gaitskill.

“To let us see the enclosures. They consist of a will, duly signed and attested, and a covering letter.”

“So the will has turned up at last?” I said.

Mr. Gaitskill turned a bright purple.

“It is not the same will,” he barked. “This is not the document I drew up at Mr. Leonides’ request. This has been written out in his own hand, a most dangerous thing for any layman to do. It seems to have been Mr. Leonides’ intention to make me look a complete fool.”

Chief-Inspector Taverner endeavoured to inject a little balm into the prevailing bitterness.

“He was a very old gentleman, Mr. Gaitskill,” he said. “They’re inclined to be cranky when they get old, you know—not barmy, of course, but just a little eccentric.”

Mr. Gaitskill sniffed.

“Mr. Gaitskill rang us up,” my father said, “and apprised us of the main contents of the will and I asked him to come round and bring the two documents with him. I also rang you up, Charles.”

I did not quite see why I had been rung up. It seemed to me singularly unorthodox procedure on both my father’s and Taverner’s part. I should have learnt about the will in due course, and it was really not my business at all how old Leonides had left his money.

“Is it a different will?” I asked. “I mean, does it dispose of his estate in a different way?”

“It does indeed,” said Mr. Gaitskill.

My father was looking at me. Chief-Inspector Taverner was very carefully not looking at me. In some way, I felt vaguely uneasy....

Something was going on in both their minds—and it was a something to which I had no clue.

I looked inquiringly at Gaitskill.

“It’s none of my business,” I said. “But—”

He responded.

“Mr. Leonides’ testamentary dispositions are not, of course, a secret,” he said. “I conceived it to be my duty to lay the facts before the police authorities first, and to be guided by them in my subsequent procedure. I understand,” he paused, “that there is an—understanding, shall we say—between you and Miss Sophia Leonides?”

“I hope to marry her,” I said, “but she will not consent to an engagement at the present time.”

“Very proper,” said Mr. Gaitskill.

I disagreed with him. But this was no time for argument.

“By this will,” said Mr. Gaitskill, “dated November the 29th of last year, Mr. Leonides, after a bequest to his wife of one hundred thousand pounds, leaves his entire estate, real and personal, to his granddaughter, Sophia Katherine Leonides absolutely.”

I gasped. Whatever I had expected, it was not this.

“He left the whole caboodle to Sophia,” I said. “What an extraordinary thing. Any reason?”

“He set out his reasons very clearly in the covering letter,” said my father. He picked up a sheet of paper from the desk in front of him. “You have no objection to Charles reading this, Mr. Gaitskill?”

“I am in your hands,” said Mr. Gaitskill coldly. “The letter does at least offer an explanation—and possibly (though I am doubtful as to this) an excuse for Mr. Leonides’ extraordinary conduct.”

The Old Man handed me the letter. It was written in a small crabbed handwriting in very black ink. The handwriting showed character and individuality. It was not at all like the careful forming of the letters, more characteristic of a bygone period, when literacy was something painstakingly acquired and correspondingly valued.

Dear Gaitskill [it ran],

You will be astonished to get this, and probably offended. But I have my own reasons for behaving in what may seem to you an unnecessarily secretive manner. I have long been a believer in the individual. In a family (this I have observed in my boyhood and never forgotten) there is always one strong character and it usually falls to this one person to care for, and bear the burden of, the rest of the family. In my family I was that person. I came to London, established myself there, supported my mother and my aged grandparents in Smyrna, extricated one of my brothers from the grip of the law, secured the freedom of my sister from an unhappy marriage and so on.

God has been pleased to grant me a long life, and I have been able to watch over and care for my own children and their children. Many have been taken from me by death; the rest, I am happy to say, are under my roof. When I die, the burden I have carried must descend on someone else. I have debated whether to divide my fortune as equally as possible amongst my dear ones—but to do so would not eventually result in a proper equality. Men are not born equal—to offset the natural inequality of Nature one must redress the balance. In other words, someone must be my successor, must take upon him or herself the burden of responsibility for the rest of the family. After close observation I do not consider either of my sons fit for this responsibility. My dearly loved son Roger has no business sense, and though of a lovable nature is too impulsive to have good judgement. My son Philip is too unsure of himself to do anything but retreat from life. Eustace, my grandson, is very young and I do not think he has the qualities of sense and judgement necessary. He is indolent and very easily influenced by the ideas of anyone whom he meets. Only my granddaughter Sophia seems to me to have the positive qualities required. She has brains, judgement, courage, a fair and unbiased mind and, I think, generosity of spirit. To her I commit the family welfare—and the welfare of my kind sister-in-law Edith de Haviland, for whose lifelong devotion to the family I am deeply grateful.

This explains the enclosed document. What will be harder to explain—or rather to explain to you, my old friend—is the deception that I have employed. I thought it wise not to raise speculation about the disposal of my money, and I have no intention of letting my family know that Sophia is to be my heir. Since my two sons have already had considerable fortunes settled upon them, I do not feel that my testamentary dispositions will place them in a humiliating position.

To stifle curiosity and surmise, I asked you to draw me up a will. This will I read aloud to my assembled family. I laid it on my desk, placed a sheet of blotting paper over it and asked for two servants to be summoned. When they came I slid the blotting paper up a little, exposing the bottom of a document, signed my name and caused them to sign theirs. I need hardly say that what I and they signed was the

will which I now enclose and not the one drafted by you which I had read aloud.

I cannot hope that you will understand what prompted me to execute this trick. I will merely ask you to forgive me for keeping you in the dark. A very old man likes to keep his little secrets.

Thank you, my dear friend, for the assiduity with which you have always attended to my affairs. Give Sophia my dear love. Ask her to watch over the family well and shield them from harm.

Yours very sincerely

Aristide Leonides.

I read this very remarkable document with intense interest.

“Extraordinary,” I said.

“Most extraordinary,” said Mr. Gaitskill, rising. “I repeat, I think my old friend Mr. Leonides might have trusted me.”

“No, Gaitskill,” said my father. “He was a natural twister. He liked, if I may put it so, doing things the crooked way.”

“That’s right, sir,” said Chief-Inspector Taverner. “He was a twister if there ever was one!”

He spoke with feeling.

Gaitskill stalked out unmollified. He had been wounded to the depths of his professional nature.

“It’s hit him hard,” said Taverner. “Very respectable firm, Gaitskill, Callum & Gaitskill. No hanky panky with them. When old Leonides put through a doubtful deal, he never put it through with Gaitskill, Callum & Gaitskill. He had half a dozen different firms of solicitors who acted for him. Oh, he was a twister!”

“And never more so than when making his will,” said my father.

“We were fools,” said Taverner. “When you come to think of it, the only person who could have played tricks with that will was the old boy himself. It just never occurred to us that he could want to!”

I remembered Josephine’s superior smile as she had said:

“Aren’t the police stupid?”

But Josephine had not been present on the occasion of the will. And even if she had been listening outside the door (which I was fully prepared to believe!) she could hardly have guessed what her grandfather was doing. Why, then, the superior air? What did she know that made her say the police were stupid? Or was it, again, just showing off?

Struck by the silence in the room I looked up sharply—both my father and Taverner were watching me. I don’t know what there was in their manner that compelled me to blurt out defiantly:

“Sophia knew nothing about this! Nothing at all.”

“No?” said my father.

I didn’t quite know whether it was an agreement or a question.

“She’ll be absolutely astounded!”

“Yes?”

“Astounded!”

There was a pause. Then, with what seemed sudden harshness, the telephone on my father’s desk rang.

“Yes?” He lifted the receiver—listened and then said: “Put her through.”

He looked at me.

“It’s your young woman,” he said. “She wants to speak to us. It’s urgent.”

I took the receiver from him.

“Sophia?”

“Charles? Is that you? It’s—Josephine!” Her voice broke slightly.

“What about Josephine?”

“She’s been hit on the head. Concussion. She’s—she’s pretty bad ... They say she may not recover....”

I turned to the other two.

“Josephine’s been knocked out,” I said.

My father took the receiver from me. He said sharply as he did so:

“I told you to keep an eye on that child....”

Eighteen

In next to no time Taverner and I were racing in a fast police car in the direction of Swinly Dean.

I remembered Josephine emerging, from among the cisterns, and her airy remark that it was “about time for the second murder.” The poor child had had no idea that she herself was likely to be the victim of the “second murder.”

I accepted fully the blame that my father had tacitly ascribed to me. Of course I ought to have kept an eye on Josephine. Though neither Taverner nor I had any real clue to the poisoner of old Leonides, it was highly possible that Josephine had. What I had taken for childish nonsense and “showing off” might very well have been something quite different. Josephine, in her favourite sports of snooping and prying, might have become aware of some piece of information that she herself could not assess at its proper value.

I remembered the twig that had cracked in the garden.

I had had an inkling then that danger was about. I had acted upon it at the moment, and afterwards it had seemed to me that my suspicions had been melodramatic and unreal. On the contrary, I should have realized that this was murder, that whoever had committed murder had endangered their neck, and that consequently that same person would not hesitate to repeat the crime if by that way safety could be assured.

Perhaps Magda, by some obscure maternal instinct, had recognized that Josephine was in peril, and that may have been what occasioned her sudden feverish haste to get the child sent to Switzerland.

Sophia came out to meet us as we arrived. Josephine, she said, had been taken by ambulance to Market Basing General Hospital. Dr. Gray would let them know as soon as possible the result of the X-ray.

“How did it happen?” asked Taverner.

Sophia led the way round to the back of the house and through a door in a small disused yard. In one corner a door stood ajar.

“It’s a kind of washhouse,” Sophia explained. “There’s a cat hole cut in the bottom of the door, and Josephine used to stand on it and swing to and fro.”

I remembered swinging on doors in my own youth.

The washhouse was small and rather dark. There were wooden boxes in it, some old hose pipe, a few derelict garden implements, and some broken furniture. Just inside the door was a marble lion doorstep.

“It’s the doorstopper from the front door,” Sophia explained. “It must have been balanced on top of the door.”

Taverner reached up a hand to the top of the door. It was a low door, the top of it only about a foot above his head.

“A booby trap,” he said.

He swung the door experimentally to and fro. Then he stooped to the block of marble but he did not touch it.

“Has anyone handled this?”

“No,” said Sophia. “I wouldn’t let anyone touch it.”

“Quite right. Who found her?”

“I did. She didn’t come in for her dinner at one o’clock. Nannie was calling her. She’d passed through the kitchen and out into the stable yard about a quarter of an hour before. Nannie said, ‘She’ll be bouncing her ball or swinging on that door again.’ I said I’d fetch her in.”

Sophia paused.

“She had a habit of playing in that way, you said? Who knew about that?”

Sophia shrugged her shoulders.

“Pretty well everybody in the house, I should think.”

“Who else used the washhouse? Gardeners?”

Sophia shook her head.

“Hardly anyone ever goes into it.”

“And this little yard isn’t overlooked from the house?” Taverner summed it up. “Anyone could have slipped out from the house or round the front and fixed up that trap ready. But it would be chancy....”

He broke off, looking at the door, and swinging it gently to and fro.

“Nothing certain about it. Hit or miss. And likelier miss than hit. But she was unlucky. With her it was hit.”

Sophia shivered.

He peered at the floor. There were various dents on it.

“Looks as though someone experimented first ... to see just how it would fall ... The sound wouldn’t carry to the house.”

“No, we didn’t hear anything. We’d no idea anything was wrong until I came out and found her lying face down—all sprawled out.” Sophia’s voice broke a little. “There was blood on her hair.”

“That her scarf?” Taverner pointed to a checked woollen muffler lying on the floor.

“Yes.”

Using the scarf he picked up the block of marble carefully.

“There may be fingerprints,” he said, but he spoke without much hope. “But I rather think whoever did it was—careful.” He said to me: “What are you

looking at?”

I was looking at a broken-backed wooden kitchen chair which was among the derelicts. On the seat of it were a few fragments of earth.

“Curious,” said Taverner. “Someone stood on that chair with muddy feet. Now why was that?”

He shook his head.

“What time was it when you found her, Miss Leonides?”

“It must have been five minutes past one.”

“And your Nannie saw her going out about twenty minutes earlier. Who was the last person before that known to have been in the washhouse?”

“I’ve no idea. Probably Josephine herself. Josephine was swinging on the door this morning after breakfast, I know.”

Taverner nodded.

“So between then and a quarter to one someone set the trap. You say that bit of marble is the doorstep you use for the front door? Any idea when that was missing?”

Sophia shook her head.

“The door hasn’t been propped open all today. It’s been too cold.”

“Any idea where everyone was all the morning?”

“I went out for a walk. Eustace and Josephine did lessons until half past twelve—with a break at half past ten. Father, I think, has been in the library all the morning.”

“Your mother?”

“She was just coming out of her bedroom when I came in from my walk—that was about a quarter-past twelve. She doesn’t get up very early.”

We reentered the house. I followed Sophia to the library. Philip, looking white and haggard, sat in his usual chair. Magda crouched against his knees, crying quietly. Sophia asked:

“Have they telephoned yet from the hospital?”

Philip shook his head.

Magda sobbed.

“Why wouldn’t they let me go with her? My baby—my funny ugly baby. And I used to call her a changeling and make her so angry. How could I be so cruel? And now she’ll die. I know she’ll die.”

“Hush, my dear,” said Philip. “Hush.”

I felt that I had no place in this family scene of anxiety and grief. I withdrew quietly and went to find Nannie. She was sitting in the kitchen crying quietly.

“It’s a judgement on me, Mr. Charles, for the hard things I’ve been thinking. A judgement, that’s what it is.”

I did not try and fathom her meaning.

“There’s wickedness in this house. That’s what there is. I didn’t wish to see it or believe it. But seeing’s believing. Somebody killed the master and the same somebody must have tried to kill Josephine.”

“Why should they try and kill Josephine?”

Nannie removed a corner of her handkerchief from her eye and gave me a shrewd glance.

“You know well enough what she was like, Mr. Charles. She liked to know things. She was always like that, even as a tiny thing. Used to hide under

the dinner table and listen to the maids talking and then she'd hold it over them. Made her feel important. You see, she was passed over, as it were, by the mistress. She wasn't a handsome child, like the other two. She was always a plain little thing. A changeling, the mistress used to call her. I blame the mistress for that, for it's my belief it turned the child sour. But in a funny sort of way she got her own back by finding out things about people and letting them know she knew them. But it isn't safe to do that when there's a poisoner about!"

No, it hadn't been safe. And that brought something else to my mind. I asked Nannie: "Do you know where she kept a little black book—a notebook of some kind where she used to write down things?"

"I know what you mean, Mr. Charles. Very sly about it, she was. I've seen her sucking her pencil and writing in the book and sucking her pencil again. And 'don't do that,' I'd say, 'you'll get lead poisoning' and 'oh no, I shan't,' she said, 'because it isn't really lead in a pencil. It's carbon,' though I don't see how that could be so for if you call a thing a lead pencil it stands to reason that that's because there's lead in it."

"You'd think so," I agreed. "But as a matter of fact she was right." (Josephine was always right!) "What about this notebook? Do you know where she kept it?"

"I've no idea at all, sir. It was one of the things she was sly about."

"She hadn't got it with her when she was found?"

"Oh no, Mr. Charles, there was no notebook."

Had someone taken the notebook? Or had she hidden it in her own room? The idea came to me to look and see. I was not sure which Josephine's room was, but as I stood hesitating in the passage Taverner's voice called me:

"Come in here," he said. "I'm in the kid's room. Did you ever see such a sight?"

I stepped over the threshold and stopped dead.

The small room looked as though it had been visited by a tornado. The drawers of the chest of drawers were pulled out and their contents scattered on the floor. The mattress and bedding had been pulled from the small bed. The rugs were tossed into heaps. The chairs had been turned upside down, the pictures taken down from the wall, the photographs wrenched out of their frames.

“Good Lord,” I exclaimed. “What was the big idea?”

“What do you think?”

“Someone was looking for something.”

“Exactly.”

I looked round and whistled.

“But who on earth—surely nobody could come in here and do all this and not be heard—or seen?”

“Why not? Mrs. Leonides spends the morning in her bedroom doing her nails and ringing up her friends on the telephone and playing with her clothes. Philip sits in the library browsing over books. The nurse woman is in the kitchen peeling potatoes and stringing beans. In a family that knows each other’s habits it would be easy enough. And I’ll tell you this. Anyone in the house could have done our little job—could have set the trap for the child and wrecked her room. But it was someone in a hurry, someone who hadn’t the time to search quietly.”

“Anyone in the house, you say?”

“Yes, I’ve checked up. Everyone has some time or other unaccounted for. Philip, Magda, the nurse, your girl. The same upstairs. Brenda spent most of the morning alone. Laurence and Eustace had a half hour break—from ten-thirty to eleven—you were with them part of that time—but not all of it. Miss de Haviland was in the garden alone. Roger was in his study.”

“Only Clemency was in London at her job.”

“No, even she isn’t out of it. She stayed at home today with a headache—she was alone in her room having that headache. Any of them—any blinking one of them! And I don’t know which! I’ve no idea. If I knew what they were looking for in here—”

His eyes went round the wrecked room....

“And if I knew whether they’d found it....”

Something stirred in my brain—a memory....

Taverner clinched it by asking me:

“What was the kid doing when you last saw her?”

“Wait,” I said.

I dashed out of the room and up the stairs. I passed through the left-hand door and went up to the top floor. I pushed open the door of the cistern room, mounted the two steps and bending my head, since the ceiling was low and sloping, I looked round me.

Josephine had said when I asked her what she was doing there that she was “detecting.”

I didn’t see what there could be to detect in a cobwebby attic full of water tanks. But such an attic would make a good hiding-place. I considered it probable that Josephine had been hiding something there, something that she knew quite well she had no business to have. If so, it oughtn’t to take long to find it.

It took me just three minutes. Tucked away behind the largest tank, from the interior of which a sibilant hissing added an eerie note to the atmosphere, I found a packet of letters wrapped in a torn piece of brown paper.

I read the first letter.

Oh Laurence—my darling, my own dear love ... It was wonderful last night when you quoted that verse of poetry. I knew it was meant for me, though you didn't look at me. Aristide said, "You read verse well." He didn't guess what we were both feeling. My darling, I feel convinced that soon everything will come right. We shall be glad that he never knew, that he died happy. He's been good to me. I don't want him to suffer. But I don't really think that it can be any pleasure to live after you're eighty. I shouldn't want to! Soon we shall be together for always. How wonderful it will be when I can say to you: "My dear dear husband ..."
Dearest, we were made for each other. I love you, love you, love you—I can see no end to our love, I—

There was a good deal more, but I had no wish to go on.

Grimly I went downstairs and thrust my parcel into Taverner's hands.

"It's possible," I said, "that that's what our unknown friend was looking for."

Taverner read a few passages, whistled and shuffled through the various letters.

Then he looked at me with the expression of a cat who has been fed with the best cream.

"Well," he said softly. "This pretty well cooks Mrs. Brenda Leonides' goose. And Mr. Laurence Brown's. So it was them, all the time...."

Nineteen

It seems odd to me, looking back, how suddenly and completely my pity and sympathy for Brenda Leonides vanished with the discovery of her letters, the letters she had written to Laurence Brown. Was my vanity unable to stand up to the revelation that she loved Laurence Brown with a doting and sugary infatuation and had deliberately lied to me? I don't know. I'm not a psychologist. I prefer to believe that it was the thought of the child Josephine, struck down in ruthless self-preservation, that dried up the springs of my sympathy.

"Brown fixed that booby trap, if you ask me," said Taverner, "and it explains what puzzled me about it."

"What did puzzle you?"

"Well, it was such a sappy thing to do. Look here, say the kid's got hold of these letters—letters that are absolutely damning! The first thing to do is to try and get them back (after all, if the kid talks about them, but has got nothing to show, it can be put down as mere romancing), but you can't get them back because you can't find them. Then the only thing to do is to put the kid out of action for good. You've done one murder and you're not squeamish about doing another. You know she's fond of swinging on a door in a disused yard. The ideal thing to do is wait behind the door and lay her out as she comes through with a poker, or an iron bar, or a nice bit of hosepipe. They're all there ready to hand. Why fiddle about with a marble lion perched on top of a door which is as likely as not to miss her altogether and which even if it does fall on her may not do the job properly (which actually is how it turns out). I ask you—why?"

"Well," I said, "what's the answer?"

"The only idea I got to begin with was that it was intended to tie in with someone's alibi. Somebody would have a nice fat alibi for the time when Josephine was being slugged. But that doesn't wash because, to begin with, nobody seems to have any kind of alibi, and second, someone's bound to

look for the child at lunch time, and they'll find the booby trap and the marble block, the whole *modus operandi* will be quite plain to see. Of course, if the murderer had removed the block before the child was found, then we might have been puzzled. But as it is the whole thing just doesn't make sense."

He stretched out his hands.

"And what's your present explanation?"

"The personal element. Personal idiosyncrasy. Laurence Brown's idiosyncrasy. He doesn't like violence—he can't force himself to do physical violence. He literally couldn't have stood behind the door and socked the kid on the head. He could rig up a booby trap and go away and not see it happen."

"Yes, I see," I said slowly. "It's the *eserine* in the insulin bottle all over again?"

"Exactly."

"Do you think he did that without Brenda's knowing?"

"It would explain why she didn't throw away the insulin bottle. Of course, they may have fixed it up between them—or she may have thought up the poison trick all by herself—a nice easy death for her tired old husband and all for the best in the best possible worlds! But I bet she didn't fix the booby trap. Women never have any faith in mechanical things working properly. And they are right. I think myself the *eserine* was her idea, but that she made her besotted slave do the switch. She's the kind that usually manages to avoid doing anything equivocal themselves. Then they keep a nice happy conscience."

He paused, then went on:

"With these letters I think the DPP will say we have a case. They'll take a bit of explaining away! Then, if the kid gets through all right everything in

the garden will be lovely.” He gave me a sideways glance. “How does it feel to be engaged to about a million pounds sterling?”

I winced. In the excitement of the last few hours, I had forgotten the developments about the will.

“Sophia doesn’t know yet,” I said. “Do you want me to tell her?”

“I understand Gaitskill is going to break the sad (or glad) news after the inquest tomorrow.” Taverner paused and looked at me thoughtfully.

“I wonder,” he said, “what the reactions will be from the family?”

Twenty

The inquest went off much as I had prophesied. It was adjourned at the request of the police.

We were in good spirits, for news had come through the night before from the hospital that Josephine's injuries were much less serious than had been feared and that her recovery would be rapid. For the moment, Dr. Gray said, she was to be allowed no visitors—not even her mother.

“Particularly not her mother,” Sophia murmured to me. “I made that quite clear to Dr. Gray. Anyway, he knows mother.”

I must have looked rather doubtful, for Sophia said sharply:

“Why the disapproving look?”

“Well—surely a mother—”

“I'm glad you've got a few nice old-fashioned ideas, Charles. But you don't quite know what my mother is capable of yet. The darling can't help it, but there would simply have to be a grand dramatic scene. And dramatic scenes aren't the best things for anyone recovering from head injuries.”

“You do think of everything, don't you, my sweet.”

“Well, somebody's got to do the thinking now that grandfather's gone.”

I looked at her speculatively. I saw that old Leonides' acumen had not deserted him. The mantle of his responsibilities was already on Sophia's shoulders.

After the inquest, Gaitskill accompanied us back to Three Gables. He cleared his throat and said pontifically:

“There is an announcement it is my duty to make to you all.”

For this purpose the family assembled in Magda's drawing room. I had on this occasion the rather pleasurable sensations of the man behind the scenes. I knew in advance what Gaitskill had to say.

I prepared myself to observe the reactions of everyone.

Gaitskill was brief and dry. Any signs of personal feeling and annoyance were well held in check. He read first Aristide Leonides' letter and then the will itself.

It was very interesting to watch. I only wished my eyes could be everywhere at once.

I did not pay much attention to Brenda and Laurence. The provision for Brenda in this will was the same. I watched primarily Roger and Philip, and after them Magda and Clemency.

My first impression was that they all behaved very well.

Philip's lips were pressed closely together, his handsome head was thrown back against the tall chair in which he was sitting. He did not speak.

Magda, on the contrary, burst into speech as soon as Mr. Gaitskill finished, her rich voice surging over his thin tones like an incoming tide drowning a rivulet.

"Darling Sophia—how extraordinary—how romantic. Fancy old Sweetie Pie being so cunning and deceitful—just like a dear old baby. Didn't he trust us? Did he think we'd be cross? He never seemed to be fonder of Sophia than the rest of us. But really, it's most dramatic."

Suddenly Magda jumped lightly to her feet, danced over to Sophia and swept her a very grand court curtsy.

"Madame Sophia, your penniless and broken-down-old mother begs you for alms." Her voice took on a Cockney whine. "Spare us a copper, old dear. Your Ma wants to go to the pictures."

Her hand, crooked into a claw, twitched urgently at Sophia.

Philip, without moving, said through stiff lips:

“Please, Magda, there’s no call for any unnecessary clowning.”

“Oh, but Roger,” cried Magda, suddenly turning to Roger. “Poor darling Roger. Sweetie was going to come to the rescue and then, before he could do it, he died. And now Roger doesn’t get anything. Sophia,” she turned imperiously, “you simply must do something about Roger.”

“No,” said Clemency. She had moved forward a step. Her face was defiant. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Roger came shambling over to Sophia like a large amiable bear.

He took her hands affectionately.

“I don’t want a penny, my dear girl. As soon as this business is cleared up—or has died down, which is more what it looks like—then Clemency and I are off to the West Indies and the simple life. If I’m ever in extremis I’ll apply to the head of the family”—he grinned at her engagingly—“but until then I don’t want a penny. I’m a very simple person really, my dear—you ask Clemency if I’m not.”

An unexpected voice broke in. It was Edith de Haviland’s.

“That’s all very well,” she said. “But you’ve got to pay some attention to the look of the thing. If you go bankrupt, Roger, and then slink off to the ends of the earth without Sophia’s holding out a helping hand, there will be a good deal of ill-natured talk that will not be pleasant for Sophia.”

“What does public opinion matter?” asked Clemency scornfully.

“We know it doesn’t to you, Clemency,” said Edith de Haviland sharply, “but Sophia lives in this world. She’s a girl with good brains and a good heart, and I’ve no doubt that Aristide was quite right in his selection of her to hold the family fortunes—though to pass over your two sons in their lifetime seems odd to our English ideas—but I think it would be very

unfortunate if it got about that she behaved greedily over this—and had let Roger crash without trying to help him.”

Roger went over to his aunt. He put his arms round her and hugged her.

“Aunt Edith,” he said. “You are a darling—and a stubborn fighter, but you don’t begin to understand. Clemency and I know what we want—and what we don’t want!”

Clemency, a sudden spot of colour showing in each thin cheek, stood defiantly facing them.

“None of you,” she said, “understand Roger. You never have! I don’t suppose you ever will! Come on, Roger.”

They left the room as Mr. Gaitskill began clearing his throat and arranging his papers. His countenance was one of deep disapprobation. He had disliked the foregoing scenes very much. That was clear.

My eyes came at last to Sophia herself. She stood straight and handsome by the fireplace, her chin up, her eyes steady. She had just been left an immense fortune, but my principal thought was how alone she had suddenly become. Between her and her family a barrier had been erected. Henceforth she was divided from them, and I fancied that she already knew and faced that fact. Old Leonides had laid a burden upon her shoulders—he had been aware of that and she knew it herself. He had believed that her shoulders were strong enough to bear it, but just at this moment I felt unutterably sorry for her.

So far she had not spoken—indeed she had been given no chance, but very soon now speech would be forced from her. Already, beneath the affection of her family, I could sense latent hostility. Even in Magda’s graceful playacting there had been, I fancied, a subtle malice. And there were other darker undercurrents that had not yet come to the surface.

Mr. Gaitskill’s throat clearings gave way to precise and measured speech.

“Allow me to congratulate you, Sophia,” he said. “You are a very wealthy woman. I should not advise any—er—precipitate action. I can advance you what ready money is needed for current expenses. If you wish to discuss future arrangements I shall be happy to give you the best advice in my power. Make an appointment with me at Lincoln’s Inn when you have had plenty of time to think things over.”

“Roger,” began Edith de Haviland obstinately.

Mr. Gaitskill snapped in quickly.

“Roger,” he said, “must fend for himself. He’s a grown man—er, fifty-four, I believe. And Aristide Leonides was quite right, you know. He isn’t a business man. Never will be.” He looked at Sophia. “If you put Associated Catering on its legs again, don’t be under any illusions that Roger can run it successfully.”

“I shouldn’t dream of putting Associated Catering on its legs again,” said Sophia.

It was the first time she had spoken. Her voice was crisp and businesslike.

“It would be an idiotic thing to do,” she added.

Gaitskill shot a glance at her from under his brows, and smiled to himself. Then he wished everyone goodbye and went out.

There were a few moments of silence, a realization that the family circle was alone with itself.

Then Philip got up stiffly.

“I must get back to the library,” he said. “I have lost a lot of time.”

“Father—” Sophia spoke uncertainly, almost pleadingly.

I felt her quiver and draw back as Philip turned cold hostile eyes on her.

“You must forgive me not congratulating you,” he said. “But this has been rather a shock to me. I would not have believed that my father would have so humiliated me—that he would have disregarded my lifetime’s devotion—yes—devotion.”

For the first time, the natural man broke through the crust of icy restraint.

“My God,” he cried. “How could he do this to me? He was always unfair to me—always.”

“Oh no, Philip, no, you mustn’t think that,” cried Edith de Haviland. “Don’t regard this as another slight. It isn’t. When people get old, they turn naturally to a younger generation ... I assure you it’s only that ... and besides, Aristide had a very keen business sense. I’ve often heard him say that two lots of death duties—”

“He never cared for me,” said Philip. His voice was low and hoarse. “It was always Roger—Roger. Well, at least”—an extraordinary expression of spite suddenly marred his handsome features—“father realized that Roger was a fool and a failure. He cut Roger out, too.”

“What about me?” said Eustace.

I had hardly noticed Eustace until now, but I perceived that he was trembling with some violent emotion. His face was crimson, there were, I thought, tears in his eyes. His voice shook as it rose hysterically.

“It’s a shame!” said Eustace. “It’s a damned shame! How dare grandfather do this to me? How dare he? I was his only grandson. How dare he pass me over for Sophia? It’s not fair. I hate him. I hate him. I’ll never forgive him as long as I live. Beastly tyrannical old man. I wanted him to die. I wanted to get out of this house. I wanted to be my own master. And now I’ve got to be bullied and messed around by Sophia, and be made to look a fool. I wish I was dead....”

His voice broke and he rushed out of the room.

Edith de Haviland gave a sharp click of her tongue.

“No self-control,” she murmured.

“I know just how he feels,” cried Magda.

“I’m sure you do,” said Edith with acidity in her tone.

“The poor sweet! I must go after him.”

“Now, Magda—” Edith hurried after her.

Their voices died away. Sophia remained looking at Philip. There was, I think, a certain pleading in her glance. If so, it got no response. He looked at her coldly, quite in control of himself once more.

“You played your cards very well, Sophia,” he said and went out of the room.

“That was a cruel thing to say,” I cried. “Sophia—”

She stretched out her hands to me. I took her in my arms.

“This is too much for you, my sweet.”

“I know just how they feel,” said Sophia.

“That old devil, your grandfather, shouldn’t have let you in for this.”

She straightened her shoulders.

“He believed I could take it. And so I can. I wish—I wish Eustace didn’t mind so much.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“Will he? I wonder. He’s the kind that broods terribly. And I hate father being hurt.”

“Your mother’s all right.”

“She minds a bit. It goes against the grain to have to come and ask your daughter for money to put on plays. She’ll be after me to put on the Edith Thompson one before you can turn round.”

“And what will you say? If it keeps her happy....”

Sophia pulled herself right out of my arms, her head went back.

“I shall say No! It’s a rotten play and mother couldn’t play the part. It would be throwing the money away.”

I laughed softly. I couldn’t help it.

“What is it?” Sophia demanded suspiciously.

“I’m beginning to understand why your grandfather left you his money. You’re a chip off the old block, Sophia.”

Twenty-one

My one feeling of regret at this time was that Josephine was out of it all. She would have enjoyed it all so much.

Her recovery was rapid and she was expected to be back any day now, but nevertheless she missed another event of importance.

I was in the rock garden one morning with Sophia and Brenda when a car drew up to the front door. Taverner and Sergeant Lamb got out of it. They went up the steps and into the house.

Brenda stood still, staring at the car.

“It’s those men,” she said. “They’ve come back, and I thought they’d given up—I thought it was all over.”

I saw her shiver.

She had joined us about ten minutes before. Wrapped in her chinchilla coat, she had said: “If I don’t get some air and exercise, I shall go mad. If I go outside the gate there’s always a reporter waiting to pounce on me. It’s like being besieged. Will it go on for ever?”

Sophia said that she supposed the reporters would soon get tired of it.

“You can go out in the car,” she added.

“I tell you I want to get some exercise.”

Then she said abruptly:

“You’re giving Laurence the sack, Sophia. Why?”

Sophia answered quietly:

“We’re making other arrangements for Eustace. And Josephine is going to Switzerland.”

“Well, you’ve upset Laurence very much. He feels you don’t trust him.”

Sophia did not reply and it was at that moment that Taverner’s car had arrived.

Standing there, shivering in the moist autumn air, Brenda muttered: “What do they want? Why have they come?”

I thought I knew why they had come. I said nothing to Sophia of the letters I had found by the cistern, but I knew that they had gone to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Taverner came out of the house again. He walked across the drive and the lawn towards us. Brenda shivered more violently.

“What does he want?” she repeated nervously. “What does he want?”

Then Taverner was with us. He spoke curtly in his official voice, using the official phrases.

“I have a warrant here for your arrest—you are charged with administering eserine to Aristide Leonides on September 19th last. I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence at your trial.”

And then Brenda went to pieces. She screamed. She clung to me. She cried out, “No, no, no, it isn’t true! Charles, tell them it isn’t true! I didn’t do it. I didn’t know anything about it. It’s all a plot. Don’t let them take me away. It isn’t true, I tell you ... It isn’t true.... I haven’t done anything....”

It was horrible—unbelievably horrible. I tried to soothe her, I unfastened her fingers from my arm. I told her that I would arrange for a lawyer for her—that she was to keep calm—that a lawyer would arrange everything—

Taverner took her gently under the elbow.

“Come along, Mrs. Leonides,” he said. “You don’t want a hat, do you? No? Then we’ll go off right away.”

She pulled back, staring at him with enormous cat’s eyes.

“Laurence,” she said. “What have you done to Laurence?”

“Mr. Laurence Brown is also under arrest,” said Taverner.

She wilted then. Her body seemed to collapse and shrink. The tears poured down her face. She went away quietly with Taverner across the lawn to the car. I saw Laurence Brown and Sergeant Lamb come out of the house. They all got into the car. The car drove away.

I drew a deep breath and turned to Sophia. She was very pale and there was a look of distress on her face.

“It’s horrible, Charles,” she said. “It’s quite horrible.”

“I know.”

“You must get her a really first-class solicitor—the best there is. She—she must have all the help possible.”

“One doesn’t realize,” I said, “what these things are like. I’ve never seen anyone arrested before.”

“I know. One has no idea.”

We were both silent. I was thinking of the desperate terror on Brenda’s face. It had seemed familiar to me and suddenly I realized why. It was the same expression that I had seen on Magda Leonides’ face the first day I had come to the Crooked House when she had been talking about the Edith Thompson play.

“And then,” she had said, “sheer terror, don’t you think so?”

Sheer terror—that was what had been on Brenda’s face. Brenda was not a fighter. I wondered that she had ever had the nerve to do murder. But

possibly she had not. Possibly it had been Laurence Brown, with his persecution mania, his unstable personality, who had put the contents of one little bottle into another little bottle—a simple easy act—to free the woman he loved.

“So it’s over,” said Sophia.

She sighed deeply, then asked:

“But why arrest them now? I thought there wasn’t enough evidence.”

“A certain amount of evidence has come to light. Letters.”

“You mean love letters between them?”

“Yes.”

“What fools people are to keep these things!”

Yes, indeed. Fools. The kind of folly which never seemed to profit by the experience of others. You couldn’t open a daily newspaper without coming across some instance of that folly—the passion to keep the written word, the written assurance of love.

“It’s quite beastly, Sophia,” I said. “But it’s no good minding about it. After all, it’s what we’ve been hoping all along, isn’t it? It’s what you said that first night at Mario’s. You said it would be all right if the right person had killed your grandfather. Brenda was the right person, wasn’t she? Brenda or Laurence?”

“Don’t, Charles, you make me feel awful.”

“But we must be sensible. We can marry now, Sophia. You can’t hold me off any longer. The Leonides family are out of it.”

She stared at me. I had never realized before the vivid blue of her eyes.

“Yes,” she said. “I suppose we’re out of it now. We are out of it, aren’t we. You’re sure?”

“My dear girl, none of you ever really had a shadow of motive.”

Her face went suddenly white.

“Except me, Charles. I had a motive.”

“Yes, of course—” I was taken aback. “But not really. You didn’t know, you see, about the will.”

“But I did, Charles,” she whispered.

“What?” I stared at her. I felt suddenly cold.

“I knew all the time that grandfather had left his money to me.”

“But how?”

“He told me. About a fortnight before he was killed. He said to me quite suddenly: ‘I’ve left all my money to you, Sophia. You must look after the family when I’ve gone.’”

I stared.

“You never told me.”

“No. You see, when they all explained about the will and his signing it, I thought perhaps he had made a mistake—that he was just imagining that he had left it to me. Or that if he had made a will leaving it to me, then it had got lost and would never turn up. I didn’t want it to turn up—I was afraid.”

“Afraid? Why?”

“I suppose—because of murder.”

I remembered the look of terror on Brenda’s face—the wild unreasoning panic. I remembered the sheer panic that Magda had conjured up at will when she considered playing the part of a murderess. There would be no panic in Sophia’s mind, but she was a realist, and she could see clearly enough that Leonides’ will made her a suspect. I understood better now (or

thought I did) her refusal to become engaged to me and her insistence that I should find out the truth. Nothing but the truth, she had said, was any good to her. I remembered the passion, the earnestness with which she had said it.

We had turned to walk towards the house and suddenly, at a certain spot, I remembered something else she had said.

She had said that she supposed she could murder someone, but if so, she had added, it must be for something really worthwhile.

Twenty-two

Round a turn of the rock garden Roger and Clemency came walking briskly towards us. Roger's flapping tweeds suited him better than his City clothes. He looked eager and excited. Clemency was frowning.

"Hallo, you two," said Roger. "At last! I thought they were never going to arrest that foul woman. What they've been waiting for, I don't know. Well, they've pinched her now, and her miserable boyfriend—and I hope they hang them both."

Clemency's frown increased. She said:

"Don't be so uncivilized, Roger."

"Uncivilized? Bosh! Deliberate cold-blooded poisoning of a helpless trusting old man—and when I'm glad the murderers are caught and will pay the penalty you say I'm uncivilized! I tell you I'd willingly strangle that woman myself."

He added:

"She was with you, wasn't she, when the police came for her? How did she take it?"

"It was horrible," said Sophia in a low voice. "She was scared out of her wits."

"Serve her right."

"Don't be vindictive," said Clemency.

"Oh, I know, dearest, but you can't understand. It wasn't your father. I loved my father. Don't you understand? I loved him!"

"I should understand by now," said Clemency.

Roger said to her, half-jokingly:

“You’ve no imagination, Clemency. Suppose it had been I who had been poisoned—?”

I saw the quick droop of her lids, her half-clenched hands. She said sharply: “Don’t say things like that even in fun.”

“Never mind, darling, we’ll soon be away from all this.”

We moved towards the house. Roger and Sophia walked ahead and Clemency and I brought up the rear. She said:

“I suppose now—they’ll let us go?”

“Are you so anxious to get off?” I asked.

“It’s wearing me out.”

I looked at her in surprise. She met my glance with a faint desperate smile and a nod of the head.

“Haven’t you seen, Charles, that I’m fighting all the time? Fighting for my happiness. For Roger’s. I’ve been so afraid the family would persuade him to stop in England. That we’d go on tangled up in the midst of them, stifled with family ties. I was afraid Sophia would offer him an income and that he’d stay in England because it would mean greater comfort and amenities for me. The trouble with Roger is that he will not listen. He gets ideas in his head—and they’re never the right ideas. He doesn’t know anything. And he’s enough of a Leonides to think that happiness for a woman is bound up with comfort and money. But I will fight for my happiness—I will. I will get Roger away and give him the life that suits him where he won’t feel a failure. I want him to myself—away from them all—right away—”

She had spoken in a low hurried voice with a kind of desperation that startled me. I had not realized how much on edge she was. I had not realized, either, quite how desperate and possessive was her feeling for Roger.

It brought back to my mind that odd quotation of Edith de Haviland's. She had quoted the line "this side idolatry" with a peculiar intonation. I wondered if she had been thinking of Clemency.

Roger, I thought, had loved his father better than he would ever love anyone else, better even than his wife, devoted though he was to her. I realized for the first time how urgent was Clemency's desire to get her husband to herself. Love for Roger, I saw, made up her entire existence. He was her child, as well as her husband and her lover.

A car drove up to the front door.

"Hallo," I said. "Here's Josephine back."

Josephine and Magda got out of the car. Josephine had a bandage round her head but otherwise looked remarkably well.

She said at once:

"I want to see my goldfish," and started towards us and the pond.

"Darling," cried Magda, "you'd better come in first and lie down a little, and perhaps have a little nourishing soup."

"Don't fuss, Mother," said Josephine. "I'm quite all right, and I hate nourishing soup."

Magda looked irresolute. I knew that Josephine had really been fit to depart from the hospital for some days, and that it was only a hint from Taverner that had kept her there. He was taking no chances on Josephine's safety until his suspects were safe under lock and key.

I said to Magda:

"I dare say fresh air will do her good. I'll go and keep an eye on her."

I caught Josephine up before she got to the pond.

"All sorts of things have been happening while you've been away," I said.

Josephine did not reply. She peered with her shortsighted eyes into the pond.

“I don’t see Ferdinand,” she said.

“Which is Ferdinand?”

“The one with four tails.”

“That kind is rather amusing. I like that bright gold one.”

“It’s quite a common one.”

“I don’t much care for that moth-eaten white one.”

Josephine cast me a scornful glance.

“That’s a shebunkin. They cost a lot—far more than goldfish.”

“Don’t you want to hear what’s been happening, Josephine?”

“I expect I know about it.”

“Did you know that another will has been found and that your grandfather left all his money to Sophia?”

Josephine nodded in a bored kind of way.

“Mother told me. Anyway, I knew it already.”

“Do you mean you heard it in hospital?”

“No, I mean I knew that grandfather had left his money to Sophia. I heard him tell her so.”

“Were you listening again?”

“Yes. I like listening.”

“It’s a disgraceful thing to do, and remember this, listeners hear no good of themselves.”

Josephine gave me a peculiar glance.

“I heard what he said about me to her, if that’s what you mean.”

She added:

“Nannie gets wild if she catches me listening at doors. She says it’s not the sort of thing a little lady does.”

“She’s quite right.”

“Pooh,” said Josephine. “Nobody’s a lady nowadays. They said so on the Brains Trust. They said it was ob-so-lete.” She pronounced the word carefully.

I changed the subject.

“You’ve got home a bit late for the big event,” I said. “Chief-Inspector Taverner has arrested Brenda and Laurence.”

I expected that Josephine, in her character of young detective, would be thrilled by this information, but she merely repeated in her maddening bored fashion:

“Yes, I know.”

“You can’t know. It’s only just happened.”

“The car passed us on the road. Inspector Taverner and the detective with the suede shoes were inside with Brenda and Laurence, so of course I knew they must have been arrested. I hope he gave them the proper caution. You have to, you know.”

I assured her that Taverner had acted strictly according to etiquette.

“I had to tell him about the letters,” I said apologetically. “I found them behind the cistern. I’d have let you tell him only you were knocked out.”

Josephine’s hand went gingerly to her head.

“I ought to have been killed,” she said with complacency. “I told you it was about time for the second murder. The cistern was a rotten place to hide those letters. I guessed at once when I saw Laurence coming out of there one day. I mean he’s not a useful kind of man who does things with ball taps, or pipes or fuses, so I knew he must have been hiding something.”

“But I thought—” I broke off as Edith de Haviland’s voice called authoritatively:

“Josephine, Josephine, come here at once.”

Josephine sighed.

“More fuss,” she said. “But I’d better go. You have to, if it’s Aunt Edith.”

She ran across the lawn. I followed more slowly.

After a brief interchange of words Josephine went into the house. I joined Edith de Haviland on the terrace.

This morning she looked fully her age. I was startled by the lines of weariness and suffering on her face. She looked exhausted and defeated. She saw the concern in my face and tried to smile.

“That child seems none the worse for her adventure,” she said. “We must look after her better in future. Still—I suppose now it won’t be necessary?”

She sighed and said:

“I’m glad it’s over. But what an exhibition! If you are arrested for murder, you might at least have some dignity. I’ve no patience with people like Brenda who go to pieces and squeal. No guts, these people. Laurence Brown looked like a cornered rabbit.”

An obscure instinct of pity rose in me.

“Poor devils,” I said.

“Yes—poor devils. She’ll have the sense to look after herself, I suppose? I mean the right lawyers—all that sort of thing.”

It was queer, I thought, the dislike they all had for Brenda, and their scrupulous care for her to have all the advantages for defence.

Edith de Haviland went on:

“How long will it be? How long will the whole thing take?”

I said I didn’t know exactly. They would be charged at the police court and presumably sent for trial. Three or four months, I estimated—and if convicted, there would be the appeal.

“Do you think they will be convicted?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know exactly how much evidence the police have. There are letters.”

“Love letters—They were lovers then?”

“They were in love with each other.”

Her face grew grimmer.

“I’m not happy about this, Charles. I don’t like Brenda. In the past, I’ve disliked her very much. I’ve said sharp things about her. But now—I do feel that I want her to have every chance—every possible chance. Aristide would have wished that. I feel it’s up to me to see that—that Brenda gets a square deal.”

“And Laurence?”

“Oh, Laurence!” she shrugged her shoulders impatiently. “Men must look after themselves. But Aristide would never forgive us if—” She left the

sentence unfinished.

Then she said:

“It must be almost lunch time. We’d better go in.”

I explained that I was going up to London.

“In your car?”

“Yes.”

“H’m. I wonder if you’d take me with you. I gather we’re allowed off the lead now.”

“Of course I will, but I believe Magda and Sophia are going up after lunch. You’ll be more comfortable with them than in my two-seater.”

“I don’t want to go with them. Take me with you, and don’t say much about it.”

I was surprised, but I did as she asked. We did not speak much on the way to town. I asked her where I should put her down.

“Harley Street.”

I felt some faint apprehension, but I didn’t like to say anything. She continued:

“No, it’s too early. Drop me at Debenhams. I can have some lunch there and go to Harley Street afterwards.”

“I hope—” I began and stopped.

“That’s why I didn’t want to go up with Magda. She dramatizes things. Lots of fuss.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said.

“You needn’t be. I’ve had a good life. A very good life.” She gave a sudden grin. “And it’s not over yet.”

Twenty-three

I had not seen my father for some days. I found him busy with things other than the Leonides case, and I went in search of Taverner.

Taverner was enjoying a short spell of leisure and was willing to come out and have a drink with me. I congratulated him on having cleared up the case and he accepted my congratulation, but his manner remained far from jubilant.

“Well, that’s over,” he said. “We’ve got a case. Nobody can deny we’ve got a case.”

“Do you think you’ll get a conviction?”

“Impossible to say. The evidence is circumstantial—it nearly always is in a murder case—bound to be. A lot depends on the impression they make on the jury.”

“How far do the letters go?”

“At first sight, Charles, they’re pretty damning. There are references to their life together when her husband’s dead. Phrases like—‘it won’t be long now.’ Mind you, defence counsel will try and twist it the other way—the husband was so old that of course they could reasonably expect him to die. There’s no actual mention of poisoning—not down in black and white—but there are some passages that could mean that. It depends what judge we get. If it’s old Carberry he’ll be down on them all through. He’s always very righteous about illicit love. I suppose they’ll have Eagles or Humphrey Kerr for the defence—Humphrey is magnificent in these cases—but he likes a gallant war record or something of that kind to help him do his stuff. A conscientious objector is going to cramp his style. The question is going to be will the jury like them? You can never tell with juries. You know, Charles, those two are not really sympathetic characters. She’s a good-looking woman who married a very old man for his money, and Brown is a neurotic conscientious objector. The crime is so familiar—so according to

pattern that you really believe they didn't do it. Of course, they may decide that he did it and she knew nothing about it—or alternately that she did it, and he didn't know about it—or they may decide that they were both in it together.”

“And what do you yourself think?” I asked.

He looked at me with a wooden expressionless face.

“I don't think anything. I've turned in the facts and they went to the DPP and it was decided that there was a case. That's all. I've done my duty and I'm out of it. So now you know, Charles.”

But I didn't know. I saw that for some reason Taverner was unhappy.

It was not until three days later that I unburdened myself to my father. He himself had never mentioned the case to me. There had been a kind of restraint between us—and I thought I knew the reason for it. But I had to break down that barrier.

“We've got to have this out,” I said. “Taverner's not satisfied that those two did it—and you're not satisfied either.”

My father shook his head. He said what Taverner had said: “It's out of our hands. There is a case to answer. No question about that.”

“But you don't—Taverner doesn't—think that they're guilty?”

“That's for a jury to decide.”

“For God's sake,” I said, “don't put me off with technical terms. What do you think—both of you—personally?”

“My personal opinion is no better than yours, Charles.”

“Yes, it is. You've more experience.”

“Then I'll be honest with you. I just—don't know!”

“They could be guilty?”

“Oh, yes.”

“But you don’t feel sure that they are?”

My father shrugged his shoulders.

“How can one be sure?”

“Don’t fence with me, Dad. You’ve been sure other times, haven’t you? Dead sure? No doubt in your mind at all?”

“Sometimes, yes. Not always.”

“I wish to God you were sure this time.”

“So do I.”

We were silent. I was thinking of those two figures drifting in from the garden in the dusk. Lonely and haunted and afraid. They had been afraid from the start. Didn’t that show a guilty conscience?

But I answered myself: “Not necessarily.” Both Brenda and Laurence were afraid of life—they had no confidence in themselves, in their ability to avoid danger and defeat, and they could see, only too clearly, the pattern of illicit love leading to murder which might involve them at any moment.

My father spoke, and his voice was grave and kind:

“Come, Charles,” he said, “let’s face it. You’ve still got it in your mind, haven’t you, that one of the Leonides family is the real culprit?”

“Not really. I only wonder—”

“You do think so. You may be wrong, but you do think so.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because”—I thought about it, trying to see clearly—to bring my wits to bear—“because” (yes, that was it), “because they think so themselves.”

“They think so themselves? That’s interesting. That’s very interesting. Do you mean that they all suspect each other, or that they know, actually, who did do it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “It’s all very nebulous and confused. I think—on the whole—that they try to cover up the knowledge from themselves.”

My father nodded.

“Not Roger,” I said. “Roger wholeheartedly believes it was Brenda and he wholeheartedly wants her hanged. It’s—it’s a relief to be with Roger, because he’s simple and positive, and hasn’t any reservations in the back of his mind.

“But the others are apologetic, they’re uneasy—they urge me to be sure that Brenda has the best defence—that every possible advantage is given her—why?”

My father answered: “Because they don’t really, in their hearts, believe she is guilty ... Yes, that’s sound.”

Then he asked quietly:

“Who could have done it? You’ve talked to them all? Who’s the best bet?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And it’s driving me frantic. None of them fits your ‘sketch of a murderer’ and yet I feel—I do feel—that one of them is a murderer.”

“Sophia?”

“No. Good God, no!”

“The possibility’s in your mind, Charles—yes, it is, don’t deny it. All the more potently because you won’t acknowledge it. What about the others? Philip?”

“Only for the most fantastic motive.”

“Motives can be fantastic—or they can be absurdly slight. What’s his motive?”

“He is bitterly jealous of Roger—always has been all his life. His father’s preference for Roger drove Philip in upon himself. Roger was about to crash, then the old man heard of it. He promised to put Roger on his feet again. Supposing Philip learnt that. If the old man died that night there would be no assistance for Roger. Roger would be down and out. Oh! I know it’s absurd—”

“Oh no, it isn’t. It’s abnormal, but it happens. It’s human. What about Magda?”

“She’s rather childish. She—she gets things out of proportion. But I would never have thought twice about her being involved if it hadn’t been for the sudden way she wanted to pack Josephine off to Switzerland. I couldn’t help feeling she was afraid of something that Josephine knew or might say —”

“And then Josephine was conked on the head?”

“Well, that couldn’t be her mother!”

“Why not?”

“But Dad, a mother wouldn’t—”

“Charles, Charles, don’t you ever read the police news? Again and again a mother takes a dislike to one of her children. Only one—she may be devoted to the others. There’s some association, some reason, but it’s often hard to get at. But when it exists, it’s an unreasoning aversion, and it’s very strong.”

“She called Josephine a changeling,” I admitted unwillingly.

“Did the child mind?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Who else is there? Roger?”

“Roger didn’t kill his father. I’m quite sure of that.”

“Wash out Roger then. His wife—what’s her name—Clemency?”

“Yes,” I said. “If she killed old Leonides it was for a very odd reason.”

I told him of my conversation with Clemency. I said I thought it possible that in her passion to get Roger away from England she might have deliberately poisoned the old man.

“She persuaded Roger to go without telling his father. Then the old man found out. He was going to back up Associated Catering. All Clemency’s hopes and plans were frustrated. And she really does care desperately for Roger—beyond idolatry.”

“You’re repeating what Edith de Haviland said!”

“Yes. And Edith’s another whom I think—might have done it. But I don’t know why. I can only believe that for what she considered a good and sufficient reason she might take the law into her own hands. She’s that kind of person.”

“And she also was very anxious that Brenda should be adequately defended?”

“Yes. That, I suppose, might be conscience. I don’t think for a moment that if she did do it, she intended them to be accused of the crime.”

“Probably not. But would she knock out the child, Josephine?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I can’t believe that. Which reminds me that there’s something that Josephine said to me that keeps nagging at my mind, and I can’t remember what it is. It’s slipped my memory. But it’s something that doesn’t fit in where it should. If only I could remember—”

“Never mind. It will come back. Anything or anyone else on your mind?”

“Yes,” I said. “Very much so. How much do you know about infantile paralysis. Its aftereffects on character, I mean?”

“Eustace?”

“Yes. The more I think about it, the more it seems to me that Eustace might fit the bill. His dislike and resentment against his grandfather. His queerness and moodiness. He’s not normal.

“He’s the only one of the family who I can see knocking out Josephine quite callously if she knew something about him—and she’s quite likely to know. That child knows everything. She writes it down in a little book—”

I stopped.

“Good Lord,” I said. “What a fool I am.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I know now what was wrong. We assumed, Taverner and I, that the wrecking of Josephine’s room, the frantic search, was for those letters. I thought that she’d got hold of them and that she’d hidden them up in the cistern room. But when she was talking to me the other day she made it quite clear that it was Laurence who had hidden them there. She saw him coming out of the cistern room and went snooping around and found the letters. Then, of course, she read them. She would! But she left them where they were.”

“Well?”

“Don’t you see? It couldn’t have been the letters someone was looking for in Josephine’s room. It must have been something else.”

“And that something—”

“Was the little black book she writes down her ‘detection’ in. That’s what someone was looking for! I think, too, that whoever it was didn’t find it. I think Josephine still has it. But if so—”

I half rose.

“If so,” said my father, “she still isn’t safe. Is that what you were going to say?”

“Yes. She won’t be out of danger until she’s actually started for Switzerland. They’re planning to send her there, you know.”

“Does she want to go?”

I considered.

“I don’t think she does.”

“Then she probably hasn’t gone,” said my father, drily. “But I think you’re right about the danger. You’d better go down there.”

“Eustace?” I cried desperately. “Clemency?”

My father said gently:

“To my mind the facts point clearly in one direction ... I wonder you don’t see it yourself. I....”

Glover opened the door.

“Beg pardon, Mr. Charles, the telephone. Miss Leonides speaking from Swinly Dean. It’s urgent.”

It seemed like a horrible repetition. Had Josephine again fallen a victim. And had the murderer this time made no mistake ...?

I hurried to the telephone.

“Sophia? It’s Charles here.”

Sophia’s voice came with a kind of hard desperation in it. “Charles, it isn’t all over. The murderer is still here.”

“What on earth do you mean? What is wrong? Is it—Josephine?”

“It’s not Josephine. It’s Nannie.”

“Nannie?”

“Yes, there was some cocoa—Josephine’s cocoa, she didn’t drink it. She left it on the table. Nannie thought it was a pity to waste it. So she drank it.”

“Poor Nannie. Is she very bad?”

Sophia’s voice broke.

“Oh, Charles, she’s dead.”

Twenty-four

We were back again in the nightmare.

That is what I thought as Taverner and I drove out of London. It was a repetition of our former journey.

At intervals, Taverner swore.

As for me, I repeated from time to time, stupidly, unprofitably: “So it wasn’t Brenda and Laurence. It wasn’t Brenda and Laurence.”

Had I really thought it was? I had been so glad to think it. So glad to escape from other, more sinister, possibilities....

They had fallen in love with each other. They had written silly sentimental romantic letters to each other. They had indulged in hopes that Brenda’s old husband might soon die peacefully and happily—but I wondered really if they had even acutely desired his death. I had a feeling that the despairs and longings of an unhappy love affair suited them as well or better than commonplace married life together. I didn’t think Brenda was really passionate. She was too anaemic, too apathetic. It was romance she craved for. And I thought Laurence, too, was the type to enjoy frustration and vague future dreams of bliss rather than the concrete satisfaction of the flesh.

They had been caught in a trap and, terrified, they had not had the wit to find their way out. Laurence, with incredible stupidity, had not even destroyed Brenda’s letters. Presumably Brenda had destroyed his, since they had not been found. And it was not Laurence who had balanced the marble doorstep on the washhouse door. It was someone else whose face was still hidden behind a mask.

We drove up to the door. Taverner got out and I followed him. There was a plain clothes man in the hall whom I didn’t know. He saluted Taverner and Taverner drew him aside.

My attention was taken by a pile of luggage in the hall. It was labelled and ready for departure. As I looked at it Clemency came down the stairs and through the open door at the bottom. She was dressed in her same red dress with a tweed coat over it and a red felt hat.

“You’re in time to say goodbye, Charles,” she said.

“You’re leaving?”

“We go to London tonight. Our plane goes early tomorrow morning.”

She was quiet and smiling, but I thought her eyes were watchful.

“But surely you can’t go now?”

“Why not?” Her voice was hard.

“With this death—”

“Nannie’s death has nothing to do with us.”

“Perhaps not. But all the same—”

“Why do you say ‘perhaps not’? It has nothing to do with us. Roger and I have been upstairs, finishing packing up. We did not come down at all during the time that the cocoa was left on the hall table.”

“Can you prove that?”

“I can answer for Roger. And Roger can answer for me.”

“No more than that ... You’re man and wife, remember.”

Her anger flamed out.

“You’re impossible, Charles! Roger and I are going away—to lead our own life. Why on earth should we want to poison a nice stupid old woman who had never done us any harm?”

“It mightn’t have been her you meant to poison.”

“Still less are we likely to poison a child.”

“It depends rather on the child, doesn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Josephine isn’t quite the ordinary child. She knows a good deal about people. She—”

I broke off. Josephine had emerged from the door leading to the drawing room. She was eating the inevitable apple, and over its round rosiness her eyes sparkled with a kind of ghoulish enjoyment.

“Nannie’s been poisoned,” she said. “Just like grandfather. It’s awfully exciting, isn’t it?”

“Aren’t you at all upset about it?” I demanded severely. “You were fond of her, weren’t you?”

“Not particularly. She was always scolding me about something or other. She fussed.”

“Are you fond of anybody, Josephine?” asked Clemency.

Josephine turned her ghoulish eyes towards Clemency.

“I love Aunt Edith,” she said. “I love Aunt Edith very much. And I could love Eustace, only he’s always such a beast to me and won’t be interested in finding out who did all this.”

“You’d better stop finding things out, Josephine,” I said. “It isn’t very safe.”

“I don’t need to find out any more,” said Josephine. “I know.”

There was a moment’s silence. Josephine’s eyes, solemn and unwinking, were fixed on Clemency. A sound like a long sigh reached my ears. I swung sharply round. Edith de Haviland stood halfway down the staircase—but I

did not think it was she who had sighed. The sound had come from behind the door through which Josephine had just come.

I stepped sharply across to it and yanked it open. There was no one to be seen.

Nevertheless I was seriously disturbed. Someone had stood just within that door and had heard those words of Josephine's. I went back and took Josephine by the arm. She was eating her apple and staring stolidly at Clemency. Behind the solemnity there was, I thought, a certain malignant satisfaction.

"Come on, Josephine," I said. "We're going to have a little talk."

I think Josephine might have protested, but I was not standing any nonsense. I ran her along forcibly into her own part of the house. There was a small unused morning room where we could be reasonably sure of being undisturbed. I took her in there, closed the door firmly, and made her sit on a chair. I took another chair and drew it forward so that I faced her. "Now, Josephine," I said, "we're going to have a showdown. What exactly do you know?"

"Lots of things."

"That I have no doubt about. That noddle of yours is probably crammed to overflowing with relevant and irrelevant information. But you know perfectly what I mean. Don't you?"

"Of course I do. I'm not stupid."

I didn't know whether the disparagement was for me or the police, but I paid no attention to it and went on:

"You know who put something in your cocoa?"

Josephine nodded.

"You know who poisoned your grandfather?"

Josephine nodded again.

“And who knocked you on the head?”

Again Josephine nodded.

“Then you’re going to come across with what you know. You’re going to tell me all about it—now.”

“Shan’t.”

“You’ve got to. Every bit of information you’ve got or ferret out has got to be given to the police.”

“I won’t tell the police anything. They’re stupid. They thought Brenda had done it—or Laurence. I wasn’t stupid like that. I knew jolly well they hadn’t done it. I’ve had an idea who it was all along, and then I made a kind of test—and now I know I’m right.”

She finished on a triumphant note.

I prayed to Heaven for patience and started again.

“Listen, Josephine, I dare say you’re extremely clever—” Josephine looked gratified. “But it won’t be much good to you to be clever if you’re not alive to enjoy the fact. Don’t you see, you little fool, that as long as you keep your secrets in this silly way you’re in imminent danger?”

Josephine nodded approvingly. “Of course I am.”

“Already you’ve had two very narrow escapes. One attempt nearly did for you. The other has cost somebody else their life. Don’t you see if you go on strutting about the house and proclaiming at the top of your voice that you know who the killer is, there will be more attempts made—and that either you’ll die or somebody else will?”

“In some books person after person is killed,” Josephine informed me with gusto. “You end by spotting the murderer because he or she is practically the only person left.”

“This isn’t a detective story. This is Three Gables, Swinly Dean, and you’re a silly little girl who’s read more than is good for her. I’ll make you tell me what you know if I have to shake you till your teeth rattle.”

“I could always tell you something that wasn’t true.”

“You could, but you won’t. What are you waiting for, anyway?”

“You don’t understand,” said Josephine. “Perhaps I may never tell. You see, I might—be fond of the person.”

She paused as though to let this sink in.

“And if I do tell,” she went on, “I shall do it properly. I shall have everybody sitting round, and then I’ll go over it all—with the clues, and then I shall say, quite suddenly:

“‘And it was you...’”

She thrust out a dramatic forefinger just as Edith de Haviland entered the room.

“Put that core in the wastepaper basket, Josephine,” said Edith. “Have you got a handkerchief? Your fingers are sticky. I’m taking you out in the car.” Her eyes met mine with significance as she said: “You’ll be safer out here for the next hour or so.” As Josephine looked mutinous, Edith added: “We’ll go into Longbridge and have an ice cream soda.”

Josephine’s eyes brightened and she said: “Two.”

“Perhaps,” said Edith. “Now go and get your hat and coat on and your dark blue scarf. It’s cold out today. Charles, you had better go with her while she gets them. Don’t leave her. I have just a couple of notes to write.”

She sat down at the desk, and I escorted Josephine out of the room. Even without Edith’s warning, I would have stuck to Josephine like a leech.

I was convinced that there was danger to the child very near at hand.

As I finished superintending Josephine's toilet, Sophia came into the room. She seemed rather astonished to see me.

"Why, Charles, have you turned nursemaid? I didn't know you were here."

"I'm going in to Longbridge with Aunt Edith," said Josephine importantly. "We're going to have ice creams."

"Brrr, on a day like this?"

"Ice cream sodas are always lovely," said Josephine. "When you're cold inside, it makes you feel hotter outside."

Sophia frowned. She looked worried, and I was shocked by her pallor and the circles under her eyes.

We went back to the morning room. Edith was just blotting a couple of envelopes. She got up briskly.

"We'll start now," she said. "I told Evans to bring round the Ford."

She swept out to the hall. We followed her.

My eye was again caught by the suitcases and their blue labels. For some reason they aroused in me a vague disquietude.

"It's quite a nice day," said Edith de Haviland, pulling on her gloves and glancing up at the sky. The Ford Ten was waiting in front of the house. "Cold—but bracing. A real English autumn day. How beautiful trees look with their bare branches against the sky—and just a golden leaf or two still hanging...."

She was silent a moment or two, then she turned and kissed Sophia.

"Goodbye, dear," she said. "Don't worry too much. Certain things have to be faced and endured."

Then she said, "Come, Josephine," and got into the car. Josephine climbed in beside her.

They both waved as the car drove off.

“I suppose she’s right, and it’s better to keep Josephine out of this for a while. But we’ve got to make that child tell what she knows, Sophia.”

“She probably doesn’t know anything. She’s just showing off. Josephine likes to make herself look important, you know.”

“It’s more than that. Do they know what poison it was in the cocoa?”

“They think it’s digitalin. Aunt Edith takes digitalin for her heart. She has a whole bottle full of little tablets up in her room. Now the bottle’s empty.”

“She ought to keep things like that locked up.”

“She did. I suppose it wouldn’t be difficult for someone to find out where she hid the key.”

“Someone? Who?” I looked again at the pile of luggage. I said suddenly and loudly:

“They can’t go away. They mustn’t be allowed to.”

Sophia looked surprised.

“Roger and Clemency? Charles, you don’t think—”

“Well, what do you think?”

Sophia stretched out her hands in a helpless gesture.

“I don’t know, Charles,” she whispered. “I only know that I’m back—back in the nightmare—”

“I know. Those were the very words I used to myself as I drove down with Taverner.”

“Because this is just what a nightmare is. Walking about among people you know, looking in their faces—and suddenly the faces change—and it’s not

someone you know any longer—it's a stranger—a cruel stranger....”

She cried:

“Come outside, Charles—come outside. It's safer outside ... I'm afraid to stay in this house....”

Twenty-five

We stayed in the garden a long time. By a kind of tacit consent, we did not discuss the horror that was weighing upon us. Instead Sophia talked affectionately of the dead woman, of things they had done, and games they had played as children with Nannie—and tales that the old woman used to tell them about Roger and their father and the other brothers and sisters.

“They were her real children, you see. She only came back to us to help during the war when Josephine was a baby and Eustace was a funny little boy.”

There was a certain balm for Sophia in these memories and I encouraged her to talk.

I wondered what Taverner was doing. Questioning the household, I supposed. A car drove away with the police photographer and two other men, and presently an ambulance drove up.

Sophia shivered a little. Presently the ambulance left and we knew that Nannie’s body had been taken away in preparation for an autopsy.

And still we sat or walked in the garden and talked—our words becoming more and more of a cloak for our real thoughts.

Finally, with a shiver, Sophia said:

“It must be very late—it’s almost dark. We’ve got to go in. Aunt Edith and Josephine haven’t come back ... Surely they ought to be back by now?”

A vague uneasiness woke in me. What had happened? Was Edith deliberately keeping the child away from the Crooked House?

We went in. Sophia drew all the curtains. The fire was lit and the big drawing room looked harmonious with an unreal air of bygone luxury. Great bowls of bronze chrysanthemums stood on the tables.

Sophia rang and a maid whom I recognized as having been formerly upstairs brought in tea. She had red eyes and sniffed continuously. Also I noticed that she had a frightened way of glancing quickly over her shoulder.

Magda joined us, but Philip's tea was sent in to him in the library. Magda's role was a stiff frozen image of grief. She spoke little or not at all. She said once:

"Where are Edith and Josephine? They're out very late."

But she said it in a preoccupied kind of way.

But I myself was becoming increasingly uneasy. I asked if Taverner were still in the house and Magda replied that she thought so. I went in search of him. I told him that I was worried about Miss de Haviland and the child.

He went immediately to the telephone and gave certain instructions.

"I'll let you know when I have news," he said.

I thanked him and went back to the drawing room. Sophia was there with Eustace. Magda had gone.

"He'll let us know if he hears anything," I said to Sophia.

She said in a low voice:

"Something's happened, Charles, something must have happened."

"My dear Sophia, it's not really late yet."

"What are you bothering about?" said Eustace. "They've probably gone to the cinema."

He lounged out of the room. I said to Sophia: "She may have taken Josephine to a hotel—or up to London. I think she really realized that the child was in danger—perhaps she realized it better than we did."

Sophia replied with a sombre look that I could not quite fathom.

“She kissed me goodbye....”

I did not see quite what she meant by that disconnected remark, or what it was supposed to show. I asked if Magda was worried.

“Mother? No, she’s all right. She’s no sense of time. She’s reading a new play of Vavasour Jones called *The Woman Disposes*. It’s a funny play about murder—a female Bluebeard—cribbed from *Arsenic and Old Lace* if you ask me, but it’s got a good woman’s part, a woman who’s got a mania for being a widow.”

I said no more. We sat, pretending to read.

It was half past six when Taverner opened the door and came in. His face prepared us for what he had to say.

Sophia got up.

“Yes?” she said.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got bad news for you. I sent out a general alarm for the car. A motorist reported having seen a Ford car with a number something like that turning off the main road at Flackspur Heath—through the woods.”

“Not—the track to the Flackspur Quarry?”

“Yes, Miss Leonides.” He paused and went on. “The car’s been found in the quarry. Both the occupants were dead. You’ll be glad to know they were killed outright.”

“Josephine!” It was Magda standing in the doorway. Her voice rose in a wail. “Josephine ... My baby.”

Sophia went to her and put her arms round her. I said: “Wait a minute.”

I had remembered something! Edith de Haviland writing a couple of letters at the desk, going out into the hall with them in her hand.

But they had not been in her hand when she got into the car.

I dashed out into the hall and went to the long oak chest. I found the letters—pushed inconspicuously to the back behind a brass tea urn.

The uppermost was addressed to Chief-Inspector Taverner.

Taverner had followed me. I handed the letter to him and he tore it open. Standing beside him I read its brief contents.

My expectation is that this will be opened after my death. I wish to enter into no details, but I accept full responsibility for the deaths of my brother-in-law, Aristide Leonides and Janet Rowe (Nannie). I hereby solemnly declare that Brenda Leonides and Laurence Brown are innocent of the murder of Aristide Leonides. Inquiry of Dr. Michael Chavasse, 783 Harley Street, will confirm that my life could only have been prolonged for a few months. I prefer to take this way out and to spare two innocent people the ordeal of being charged with a murder they did not commit. I am of sound mind and fully conscious of what I write.

Edith Elfrida de Haviland.

As I finished the letter I was aware that Sophia, too, had read it—whether with Taverner’s concurrence or not, I don’t know.

“Aunt Edith ...” murmured Sophia.

I remembered Edith de Haviland’s ruthless foot grinding bindweed into the earth. I remembered my early, almost fanciful, suspicions of her. But why—

Sophia spoke the thought in my mind before I came to it.

“But why Josephine? Why did she take Josephine with her?”

“Why did she do it at all?” I demanded. “What was her motive?”

But even as I said that, I knew the truth. I saw the whole thing clearly. I realized that I was still holding her second letter in my hand. I looked down and saw my own name on it.

It was thicker and harder than the other one. I think I knew what was in it before I opened it. I tore the envelope along and Josephine's little black notebook fell out. I picked it up off the floor—it came open in my hand and I saw the entry on the first page....

Sounding from a long way away, I heard Sophia's voice, clear and self-controlled.

"We've got it all wrong," she said. "Edith didn't do it."

"No," I said.

Sophia came closer to me—she whispered:

"It was—Josephine—wasn't it? That was it, Josephine."

Together we looked down on the first entry in the little black book, written in an unformed childish hand:

"Today I killed grandfather."

Twenty-six

I

I was to wonder afterwards that I could have been so blind. The truth had stuck out so clearly all along. Josephine and only Josephine fitted in with all the necessary qualifications. Her vanity, her persistent self-importance, her delight in talking, her reiteration on how clever she was, and how stupid the police were.

I had never considered her because she was a child. But children have committed murders, and this particular murder had been well within a child's compass. Her grandfather himself had indicated the precise method—he had practically handed her a blueprint. All she had to do was to avoid leaving fingerprints and the slightest knowledge of detection fiction would teach her that. And everything else had been a mere hotchpotch, culled at random from stock mystery stories. The notebook—the sleuthing—her pretended suspicions, her insistence that she was not going to tell till she was sure....

And finally the attack on herself. An almost incredible performance considering that she might easily have killed herself. But then, childlike, she had never considered such a possibility. She was the heroine. The heroine isn't killed. Yet there had been a clue there—the traces of earth on the seat of the old chair in the washhouse. Josephine was the only person who would have had to climb up on a chair to balance the block of marble on the top of the door. Obviously it had missed her more than once (the dints in the floor) and patiently she had climbed up again and replaced it, handling it with her scarf to avoid fingerprints. And then it had fallen—and she had had a near escape from death.

It had been the perfect setup—the impression she was aiming for! She was in danger, she “knew something,” she had been attacked!

I saw how she had deliberately drawn my attention to her presence in the cistern room. And she had completed the artistic disorder of her room

before going out to the washhouse.

But when she had returned from hospital, when she had found Brenda and Laurence arrested, she must have become dissatisfied. The case was over—and she—Josephine, was out of the limelight.

So she stole the digitalin from Edith's room and put it in her own cup of cocoa and left the cup untouched on the hall table.

Did she know that Nannie would drink it? Possibly. From her words that morning, she had resented Nannie's criticisms of her. Did Nannie, perhaps, wise from a lifetime of experience with children, suspect? I think that Nannie knew, had always known, that Josephine was not normal. With her precocious mental development had gone a retarded moral sense. Perhaps, too, the various factors of heredity—what Sophia had called the “ruthlessness of the family”—had met together.

She had had an authoritarian ruthlessness of her grandmother's family, and the ruthless egoism of Magda, seeing only her own point of view. She had also presumably suffered, sensitive like Philip, from the stigma of being the unattractive—the changeling child—of the family. Finally, in her very marrow had run the essential crooked strain of old Leonides. She had been Leonides' grandchild, she had resembled him in brain and cunning—but where his love had gone outwards to family and friends, hers had turned inward to herself.

I thought that old Leonides had realized what none of the rest of the family had realized, that Josephine might be a source of danger to others and to herself. He had kept her from school life because he was afraid of what she might do. He had shielded her, and guarded her in the home, and I understood now his urgency to Sophia to look after Josephine.

Magda's sudden decision to send Josephine abroad—had that, too, been due to a fear for the child? Not, perhaps, a conscious fear, but some vague maternal instinct.

And Edith de Haviland? Had she first suspected, then feared—and finally known?

I looked down at the letter in my hand.

Dear Charles. This is in confidence for you—and for Sophia if you so decide. It is imperative that someone should know the truth. I found the enclosed in the disused dog kennel outside the back door. She kept it there. It confirms what I already suspected. The action I am about to take may be right or wrong—I do not know. But my life, in any case, is close to its end, and I do not want the child to suffer as I believe she would suffer if called to earthly account for what she has done.

There is often one of the litter who is “not quite right.”

If I am wrong, God forgive me—but I did it out of love. God bless you both.

Edith de Haviland.

I hesitated for only a moment, then I handed the letter to Sophia. Together we again opened Josephine’s little black book.

Today I killed grandfather.

We turned the pages. It was an amazing production. Interesting, I should imagine, to a psychologist. It set out, with such terrible clarity, the fury of thwarted egoism. The motive for the crime was set down, pitifully childish and inadequate.

Grandfather wouldn’t let me do bally dancing so made up my mind I would kill him. Then we should go to London and live and mother wouldn’t mind me doing bally.

I give only a a few entries. They are all significant.

I don’t want to go to Switzerland—I won’t go. If mother makes me I will kill her too—only I can’t get any poison. Perhaps I could make it with youberries. They are poisonous, the book says so.

Eustace has made me very cross today. He says I am only a girl and no use and that it's silly my detecting. He wouldn't think me silly if he knew it was me did the murder.

I like Charles—but he is rather stupid. I have not decided yet who I shall make have done the crime. Perhaps Brenda and Laurence—Brenda is nasty to me—she says I am not all there but I like Laurence—he told me about Charlot Korday—she killed someone in his bath. She was not very clever about it.

The last entry was revealing.

I hate Nannie ... I hate her ... I hate her ... She says I am only a little girl. She says I show off. She's making mother send me abroad ... I'm going to kill her too—I think Aunt Edith's medicine would do it. If there is another murder, then the police will come back and it will all be exciting again.

Nannie's dead. I am glad. I haven't decided yet where I'll hide the bottle with the little pill things. Perhaps in Aunt Clemency's room—or else Eustace. When I am dead as an old woman I shall leave this behind me addressed to the Chief of Police and they will see what a really great criminal I was.

I closed the book. Sophia's tears were flowing fast.

“Oh, Charles—oh, Charles—it's so dreadful. She's such a little monster—and yet—and yet it's so terribly pathetic.”

I had felt the same.

I had liked Josephine ... I still felt a fondness for her ... You do not like anyone less because they have tuberculosis or some other fatal disease. Josephine was, as Sophia had said, a little monster, but she was a pathetic little monster. She had been born with a kink—the crooked child of the little Crooked House.

Sophia asked.

“If—she had lived—what would have happened?”

“I suppose she would have been sent to a reformatory or a special school. Later she would have been released—or possibly certified, I don’t know.”

Sophia shuddered.

“It’s better the way it is. But Aunt Edith—I don’t like to think of her taking the blame.”

“She chose to do so. I don’t suppose it will be made public. I imagine that when Brenda and Laurence come to trial, no case will be brought against them and they will be discharged.

“And you, Sophia,” I said, this time on a different note and taking both her hands in mine, “will marry me. I’ve just heard I’m appointed to Persia. We will go out there together, and you will forget the little Crooked House. Your mother can put on plays and your father can buy more books and Eustace will soon go to a university. Don’t worry about them any more. Think of me.”

Sophia looked me straight in the eyes.

“Aren’t you afraid, Charles, to marry me?”

“Why should I be? In poor little Josephine all the worst of the family came together. In you, Sophia, I fully believe that all that is bravest and best in the Leonides family has been handed down to you. Your grandfather thought highly of you and he seems to have been a man who was usually right. Hold up your head, my darling. The future is ours.”

“I will, Charles. I love you and I’ll marry you and make you happy.” She looked down at the notebook. “Poor Josephine.”

“Poor Josephine,” I said.

II

“What’s the truth of it, Charles?” said my father.

I never lie to the Old Man.

“It wasn’t Edith de Haviland, sir,” I said. “It was Josephine.”

My father nodded his head gently.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve thought so for some time. Poor child...”

They Came To Baghdad (1951)

By Agatha Christie

One

I

Captain Crosbie came out of the bank with the pleased air of one who has cashed a cheque and has discovered that there is just a little more in his account than he thought there was.

Captain Crosbie often looked pleased with himself. He was that kind of man. In figure he was short and stocky, with rather a red face and a bristling military moustache. He strutted a little when he walked. His clothes were, perhaps, just a trifle loud, and he was fond of a good story. He was popular among other men. A cheerful man, commonplace but kindly, unmarried. Nothing remarkable about him. There are heaps of Crosbies in the East.

The street into which Captain Crosbie emerged was called Bank Street for the excellent reason that most of the banks in the city were situated in it. Inside the bank it was cool and dark and rather musty. The predominant sound was of large quantities of typewriters clicking in the background.

Outside in Bank Street it was sunny and full of swirling dust and the noises were terrific and varied. There was the persistent honking of motor horns, the cries of vendors of various wares. There were hot disputes between small groups of people who seemed ready to murder each other but were really fast friends; men, boys and children were selling every type of tree, sweetmeats, oranges and bananas, bath towels, combs, razor blades and other assorted merchandise carried rapidly through the streets on trays. There was also a perpetual and ever renewed sound of throat clearing and spitting, and above it the thin melancholy wail of men conducting donkeys and horses amongst the stream of motors and pedestrians shouting, “Balek —Balek!”

It was eleven o’clock in the morning in the city of Baghdad.

Captain Crosbie stopped a rapidly running boy with an armful of newspapers and bought one. He turned the corner of Bank Street and came

into Rashid Street which is the main street of Baghdad, running through it for about four miles parallel with the river Tigris.

Captain Crosbie glanced at the headlines in the paper, tucked it under his arm, walked for about two hundred yards and then turned down a small alleyway and into a large khan or court. At the farther side of this he pushed open a door with a brass plate and found himself in an office.

A neat young Iraqi clerk left his typewriter and came forward smiling a welcome.

“Good morning, Captain Crosbie. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Dakin in his room? Good, I’ll go through.”

He passed through a door, up some very steep stairs and along a rather dirty passage. He knocked at the end door and a voice said, “Come in.”

It was a high, rather bare room. There was an oil stove with a saucer of water on top of it, a long, low cushioned seat with a little coffee table in front of it and a large rather shabby desk. The electric light was on and the daylight was carefully excluded. Behind the shabby desk was a rather shabby man, with a tired and indecisive face—the face of one who has not got on in the world and knows it and has ceased to care.

The two men, the cheerful self-confident Crosbie, and the melancholy fatigued Dakin, looked at each other.

Dakin said, “Hallo, Crosbie. Just in from Kirkuk?”

The other nodded. He shut the door carefully behind him. It was a shabby looking door, badly painted, but it had one rather unexpected quality; it fitted well, with no crevices and no space at the bottom.

It was, in fact, soundproof.

With the closing of the door, the personalities of both men changed ever so slightly. Captain Crosbie became less aggressive and cocksure. Mr. Dakin’s shoulders drooped less, his manner was less hesitating. If anyone had been

in the room listening they would have been surprised to find that Dakin was the man in authority.

“Any news, sir?” asked Crosbie.

“Yes.” Dakin sighed. He had before him a paper which he had just been busy decoding. He dotted down two more letters and said:

“It’s to be held in Baghdad.”

Then he struck a match, set light to the paper and watched it burn. When it had smouldered to ashes, he blew gently. The ashes flew up and scattered.

“Yes,” he said. “They’ve settled on Baghdad. Twentieth of next month. We’re to ‘preserve all secrecy.’”

“They’ve been talking about it in the souk—for three days,” said Crosbie drily.

The tall man smiled his weary smile.

“Top secret! No top secrets in the East, are there, Crosbie?”

“No, sir. If you ask me, there aren’t any top secrets anywhere. During the war I often noticed a barber in London knew more than the High Command.”

“It doesn’t matter much in this case. If the meeting is arranged for Baghdad it will soon have to be made public. And then the fun—our particular fun—starts.”

“Do you think it will ever take place, sir?” asked Crosbie sceptically. “Does Uncle Joe”—thus disrespectfully did Captain Crosbie refer to the head of a Great European Power—“really mean to come?”

“I think he does this time, Crosbie,” said Dakin thoughtfully. “Yes, I think so. And if the meeting comes off—comes off without a hitch—well, it might be the saving of—everything. If some kind of understanding could only be reached—” he broke off.

Crosbie still looked slightly sceptical. “Is—forgive me, sir—is understanding of any kind possible?”

“In the sense you mean, Crosbie, probably not! If it were just a bringing together of two men representing totally different ideologies probably the whole thing would end as usual—in increased suspicion and misunderstanding. But there’s the third element. If that fantastic story of Carmichael’s is true—”

He broke off.

“But surely, sir, it can’t be true. It’s too fantastic!”

The other was silent for a few moments. He was seeing, very vividly, an earnest troubled face, hearing a quiet nondescript voice saying fantastic and unbelievable things. He was saying to himself, as he had said then, “Either my best, my most reliable man has gone mad: or else—this thing is true....”

He said in the same thin melancholy voice:

“Carmichael believed it. Everything he could find out confirmed his hypothesis. He wanted to go there to find out more—to get proof. Whether I was wise to let him or not, I don’t know. If he doesn’t get back, it’s only my story of what Carmichael told me, which again is a story of what someone told him. Is that enough? I don’t think so. It is, as you say, such a fantastic story...But if the man himself is here, in Baghdad, on the twentieth, to tell his own story, the story of an eyewitness, and to produce proof—”

“Proof?” said Crosbie sharply.

The other nodded.

“Yes, he’s got proof.”

“How do you know?”

“The agreed formula. The message came through Salah Hassan.” He quoted carefully: “A white camel with a load of oats is coming over the Pass.”

He paused and then went on:

“So Carmichael has got what he went to get, but he didn’t get away unsuspected. They’re on his trail. Whatever route he takes will be watched, and what is far more dangerous, they’ll be waiting for him—here. First on the frontier. And if he succeeds in passing the frontier, there will be a cordon drawn round the Embassies and the Consulates. Look at this.”

He shuffled amongst the papers on his desk and read out:

“An Englishman travelling in his car from Persia to Iraq shot dead—supposedly by bandits. A Kurdish merchant travelling down from the hills ambushed and killed. Another Kurd, Abdul Hassan, suspected of being a cigarette smuggler, shot by the police. Body of a man, afterwards identified as an Armenian lorry driver, found on the Rowanduz road. All of them mark you, of roughly the same description. Height, weight, hair, build, it corresponds with a description of Carmichael. They’re taking no chances. They’re out to get him. Once he’s in Iraq the danger will be greater still. A gardener at the Embassy, a servant at the Consulate, an official at the Airport, in the Customs, at the railway stations...all hotels watched...A cordon, stretched tight.

Crosbie raised his eyebrows.

“You think it’s as widespread as all that, sir?”

“I’ve no doubt of it. Even in our show there have been leakages. That’s the worst of all. How am I to be sure that the measures we’re adopting to get Carmichael safely into Baghdad aren’t known already to the other side? It’s one of the elementary moves of the game, as you know, to have someone in the pay of the other camp.”

“Is there anyone you—suspect?”

Slowly Dakin shook his head.

Crosbie sighed.

“In the meantime,” he said, “we carry on?”

“Yes.”

“What about Crofton Lee?”

“He’s agreed to come to Baghdad.”

“Everyone’s coming to Baghdad,” said Crosbie. “Even Uncle Joe, according to you, sir. But if anything should happen to the President—while he’s here—the balloon will go up with a vengeance.”

“Nothing must happen,” said Dakin. “That’s our business. To see it doesn’t.”

When Crosbie had gone Dakin sat bent over his desk. He murmured under his breath:

“They came to Baghdad....”

On the blotting pad he drew a circle and wrote under it Baghdad—then, dotted round it, he sketched a camel, an aeroplane, a steamer, a small puffing train—all converging on the circle. Then on the corner of the pad he drew a spider’s web. In the middle of the spider’s web he wrote a name: Anna Scheele. Underneath he put a big query mark.

Then he took his hat, and left the office. As he walked along Rashid Street, some man asked another who that was.

“That? Oh, that’s Dakin. In one of the oil companies. Nice fellow, but never gets on. Too lethargic. They say he drinks. He’ll never get anywhere. You’ve got to have drive to get on in this part of the world.”

II

“Have you got the reports on the Krugenhorf property, Miss Scheele?”

“Yes, Mr. Morganthal.”

Miss Scheele, cool and efficient, slipped the papers in front of her employer.

He grunted as he read.

“Satisfactory, I think.”

“I certainly think so, Mr. Morganthal.”

“Is Schwartz here?”

“He’s waiting in the outer office.”

“Have him sent in right now.”

Miss Scheele pressed a buzzer—one of six.

“Will you require me, Mr. Morganthal?”

“No, I don’t think so, Miss Scheele.”

Anna Scheele glided noiselessly from the room.

She was a platinum blonde—but not a glamorous blonde. Her pale flaxen hair was pulled straight back from her forehead into a neat roll at the neck. Her pale blue intelligent eyes looked out on the world from behind strong glasses. Her face had neat small features, but was quite expressionless. She had made her way in the world not by her charm but by sheer efficiency. She could memorize anything, however complicated, and produce names, dates and times without having to refer to notes. She could organize the staff of a big office in such a way that it ran as by well-oiled machinery. She was discretion itself and her energy, though controlled and disciplined, never flagged.

Otto Morganthal, head of the firm of Morganthal, Brown and Shipperke, international bankers, was well aware that to Anna Scheele he owed more than mere money could repay. He trusted her completely. Her memory, her experience, her judgement, her cool level head were invaluable. He paid her a large salary and would have made it a larger one had she asked for it.

She knew not only the details of his business but the details of his private life. When he had consulted her in the matter of the second Mrs. Morganthal, she had advised divorce and suggested the exact amount of alimony. She had not expressed sympathy or curiosity. She was not, he would have said, that kind of woman. He didn't think she had any feelings, and it had never occurred to him to wonder what she thought about. He would indeed have been astonished if he had been told that she had any thoughts—other, that is, than thoughts connected with Morganthal, Brown and Shipperke and with the problems of Otto Morganthal.

So it was with complete surprise that he heard her say as she prepared to leave his office:

“I should like three weeks' leave of absence if I might have it, Mr. Morganthal. Starting from Tuesday next.”

Staring at her, he said uneasily: “It will be awkward—very awkward.”

“I don't think it will be too difficult, Mr. Morganthal. Miss Wygate is fully competent to deal with things. I shall leave her my notes and full instructions. Mr. Cornwall can attend to the Ascher Merger.”

Still uneasily he asked:

“You're not ill, or anything?”

He couldn't imagine Miss Scheele being ill. Even germs respected Anna Scheele and kept out of her way.

“Oh no, Mr. Morganthal. I want to go to London to see my sister there.”

“Your sister?” He didn't know she had a sister. He had never conceived of Miss Scheele as having any family or relations. She had never mentioned having any. And here she was, casually referring to a sister in London. She had been over in London with him last fall but she had never mentioned having a sister then.

With a sense of injury he said:

“I never knew you had a sister in England?”

Miss Scheele smiled very faintly.

“Oh yes, Mr. Morganthal. She is married to an Englishman connected with the British Museum. It is necessary for her to undergo a very serious operation. She wants me to be with her. I should like to go.”

In other words, Otto Morganthal saw, she had made up her mind to go.

He said grumblingly, “All right, all right...Get back as soon as you can. I’ve never seen the market so jumpy. All this damned Communism. War may break out at any moment. It’s the only solution, I sometimes think. The whole country’s riddled with it—riddled with it. And now the President’s determined to go to this fool conference at Baghdad. It’s a put-up job in my opinion. They’re out to get him. Baghdad! Of all the outlandish places!”

“Oh I’m sure he’ll be very well guarded,” Miss Scheele said soothingly.

“They got the Shah of Persia last year, didn’t they? They got Bernadotte in Palestine. It’s madness—that’s what it is—madness.

“But then,” added Mr. Morganthal heavily, “all the world is mad.”

Two

I

Victoria Jones was sitting moodily on a seat in FitzJames Gardens. She was wholly given up to reflections—or one might almost say moralizations—on the disadvantages inherent in employing one's particular talents at the wrong moment.

Victoria was like most of us, a girl with both qualities and defects. On the credit side she was generous, warmhearted and courageous. Her natural leaning towards adventure may be regarded as either meritorious or the reverse in this modern age which places the value of security high. Her principal defect was a tendency to tell lies at both opportune and inopportune moments. The superior fascination of fiction to fact was always irresistible to Victoria. She lied with fluency, ease, and artistic fervour. If Victoria was late for an appointment (which was often the case) it was not sufficient for her to murmur an excuse of her watch having stopped (which actually was quite often the case) or of an unaccountably delayed bus. It would appear preferable to Victoria to tender the mendacious explanation that she had been hindered by an escaped elephant lying across a main bus route, or by a thrilling smash-and-grab raid in which she herself had played a part to aid the police. To Victoria an agreeable world would be one where tigers lurked in the Strand and dangerous bandits infested Tooting.

A slender girl, with an agreeable figure and first-class legs, Victoria's features might actually have been described as plain. They were small and neat. But there was a piquancy about her, for "little indiarubber face," as one of her admirers had named her, could twist those immobile features into a startling mimicry of almost anybody.

It was this last-named talent that had led to her present predicament. Employed as a typist by Mr. Greenholtz of Greenholtz, Simmons and Lederbetter, of Graysholme Street, WC2, Victoria had been whiling away a dull morning by entertaining the three other typists and the office boy with a vivid performance of Mrs. Greenholtz paying a visit to her husband's

office. Secure in the knowledge that Mr. Greenholtz had gone round to his solicitors, Victoria let herself go.

“Why do you say we not have that Knole settee, Daddee?” she demanded in a high whining voice. “Mrs. Dievtakis she have one in electric blue satin. You say it is money that is tight? But then why you take that blonde girl out dining and dancing—Ah! you think I do not know—and if you take that girl—then I have a settee and all done plum-coloured and gold cushions. And when you say it is a business dinner you are a damn’ fool—yes—and come back with lipstick on your shirt. So I have the Knole settee and I order a fur cape—very nice—all like mink but not really mink and I get him very cheap and it is good business—”

The sudden failure of her audience—at first entranced, but now suddenly resuming work with spontaneous agreement, caused Victoria to break off and swing round to where Mr. Greenholtz was standing in the doorway observing her.

Victoria, unable to think of anything relevant to say, merely said, “Oh!”

Mr. Greenholtz grunted.

Flinging off his overcoat, Mr. Greenholtz proceeded to his private office and banged the door. Almost immediately his buzzer sounded, two shorts and a long. That was a summons for Victoria.

“It’s for you, Jonesey,” a colleague remarked unnecessarily, her eyes alight with the pleasure occasioned by the misfortunes of others. The other typists collaborated in this sentiment by ejaculating: “You’re for it, Jones,” and “On the mat, Jonesey.” The office boy, an unpleasant child, contented himself with drawing a forefinger across his throat and uttering a sinister noise.

Victoria picked up her notebook and pencil and sailed into Mr. Greenholtz’s office with such assurance as she could muster.

“You want me, Mr. Greenholtz?” she murmured, fixing a limpid gaze on him.

Mr. Greenholtz was rustling three pound notes and searching his pockets for coin of the realm.

“So there you are,” he observed. “I’ve had about enough of you, young lady. Do you see any particular reason why I shouldn’t pay you a week’s salary in lieu of notice and pack you off here and now?”

Victoria (an orphan) had just opened her mouth to explain how the plight of a mother at this moment suffering a major operation had so demoralized her that she had become completely light-headed, and how her small salary was all the aforesaid mother had to depend upon, when, taking an opening glance at Mr. Greenholtz’s unwholesome face, she shut her mouth and changed her mind.

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” she said heartily and pleasantly. “I think you’re absolutely right, if you know what I mean.”

Mr. Greenholtz appeared slightly taken aback. He was not used to having his dismissals treated in this approving and congratulatory spirit. To conceal a slight discomfiture he sorted through a pile of coins on the desk in front of him. He then sought once more in his pockets.

“Ninepence short,” he murmured gloomily.

“Never mind,” said Victoria kindly. “Take yourself to the pictures or spend it on sweets.”

“Don’t seem to have any stamps, either.”

“It doesn’t matter. I never write letters.”

“I could send it after you,” said Mr. Greenholtz but without much conviction.

“Don’t bother. What about a reference?” said Victoria.

Mr. Greenholtz’s choler returned.

“Why the hell should I give you a reference?” he demanded wrathfully.

“It’s usual,” said Victoria.

Mr. Greenholtz drew a piece of paper towards him and scrawled a few lines. He shoved it towards her.

“That do for you?”

Miss Jones has been with me two months as a shorthand typist. Her shorthand is inaccurate and she cannot spell. She is leaving owing to wasting time in office hours.

Victoria made a grimace.

“Hardly a recommendation,” she observed.

“It wasn’t meant to be,” said Mr. Greenholtz.

“I think,” said Victoria, “that you ought at least to say I’m honest, sober and respectable. I am, you know. And perhaps you might add that I’m discreet.”

“Discreet?” barked Mr. Greenholtz.

Victoria met his gaze with an innocent stare.

“Discreet,” she said gently.

Remembering sundry letters taken down and typed by Victoria, Mr. Greenholtz decided that prudence was the better part of rancour.

He snatched back the paper, tore it up and indited a fresh one.

Miss Jones has been with me for two months as a shorthand typist. She is leaving owing to redundancy of office staff.

“How about that?”

“It could be better,” said Victoria, “but it will do.”

So it was that with a week's salary (less ninepence) in her bag Victoria was sitting in meditation upon a bench in FitzJames Gardens which are a triangular plantation of rather sad shrubs flanking a church and overlooked by a tall warehouse.

It was Victoria's habit on any day when it was not actually raining to purchase one cheese, and one lettuce and tomato sandwich at a milk bar and eat this simple lunch in these pseudorural surroundings.

Today, as she munched meditatively, she was telling herself, not for the first time, that there was a time and place for everything—and that the office was definitely not the place for imitations of the boss's wife. She must, in future, curb the natural exuberance that led her to brighten up the performance of a dull job. In the meantime, she was free of Greenholtz, Simmons and Lederbetter, and the prospect of obtaining a situation elsewhere filled her with pleasurable anticipation. Victoria was always delighted when she was about to take up a new job. One never knew, she always felt, what might happen.

She had just distributed the last crumb of bread to three attentive sparrows who immediately fought each other with fury for it, when she became aware of a young man sitting at the other end of the seat. Victoria had noticed him vaguely already, but her mind full of good resolutions for the future, she had not observed him closely until now. What she now saw (out of the corner of her eye) she liked very much. He was a good-looking young man, cherubically fair, but with a firm chin and extremely blue eyes which had been, she rather imagined, examining her with covert admiration for some time.

Victoria had no inhibitions about making friends with strange young men in public places. She considered herself an excellent judge of character and well able to check any manifestations of freshness on the part of unattached males.

She proceeded to smile frankly at him and the young man responded like a marionette when you pull the string.

"Hallo," said the young man. "Nice place this. Do you often come here?"

“Nearly every day.”

“Just my luck that I never came here before. Was that your lunch you were eating?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think you eat enough. I’d be starving if I only had two sandwiches. What about coming along and having a sausage at the SPO in Tottenham Court Road?”

“No thanks. I’m quite all right. I couldn’t eat anymore now.”

She rather expected that he would say: “Another day,” but he did not. He merely sighed—then he said:

“My name’s Edward, what’s yours?”

“Victoria.”

“Why did your people want to call you after a railway station?”

“Victoria isn’t only a railway station,” Miss Jones pointed out. “There’s Queen Victoria as well.”

“Mm yes. What’s your other name?”

“Jones.”

“Victoria Jones,” said Edward, trying it over on his tongue. He shook his head. “They don’t go together.”

“You’re quite right,” said Victoria with feeling. “If I were Jenny it would be rather nice—Jenny Jones. But Victoria needs something with a bit more class to it. Victoria Sackville-West for instance. That’s the kind of thing one needs. Something to roll round the mouth.”

“You could tack something on to the Jones,” said Edward with sympathetic interest.

“Bedford Jones.”

“Carisbrooke Jones.”

“St. Clair Jones.”

“Lonsdale Jones.”

This agreeable game was interrupted by Edward’s glancing at his watch and uttering a horrified ejaculation.

“I must tear back to my blinking boss—er—what about you?”

“I’m out of a job. I was sacked this morning.”

“Oh I say, I am sorry,” said Edward with real concern.

“Well, don’t waste sympathy, because I’m not sorry at all. For one thing, I’ll easily get another job, and besides that, it was really rather fun.”

And delaying Edward’s return to duty still further, she gave him a spirited rendering of this morning’s scene, reenacting her impersonation of Mrs. Greenholtz to Edward’s immense enjoyment.

“You really are marvellous, Victoria,” he said. “You ought to be on the stage.”

Victoria accepted this tribute with a gratified smile and remarked that Edward had better be running along if he didn’t want to get the sack himself.

“Yes—and I shouldn’t get another job as easily as you will. It must be wonderful to be a good shorthand typist,” said Edward with envy in his voice.

“Well, actually I’m not a good shorthand typist,” Victoria admitted frankly, “but fortunately even the lousiest of shorthand typists can get some sort of a job nowadays—at any rate an educational or charitable one—they can’t afford to pay much and so they get people like me. I prefer the learned type

of job best. These scientific names and terms are so frightful anyway that if you can't spell them properly it doesn't really shame you because nobody could. What's your job? I suppose you're out of one of the services. RAF?"

"Good guess."

"Fighter pilot?"

"Right again. They're awfully decent about getting us jobs and all that, but you see, the trouble is, that we're not particularly brainy. I mean one didn't need to be brainy in the RAF. They put me in an office with a lot of files and figures and some thinking to do and I just folded up. The whole thing seemed utterly purposeless anyway. But there it is. It gets you down a bit to know that you're absolutely no good."

Victoria nodded sympathetically—Edward went on bitterly:

"Out of touch. Not in the picture anymore. It was all right during the war—one could keep one's end up all right—I got the DFC for instance—but now—well, I might as well write myself off the map."

"But there ought to be—"

Victoria broke off. She felt unable to put into words her conviction that those qualities that brought a DFC to their owner should somewhere have their appointed place in the world of 1950.

"It's got me down, rather," said Edward. "Being no good at anything, I mean. Well—I'd better be pushing off—I say—would you mind—would it be most awful cheek—if I only could—"

As Victoria opened surprised eyes, stammering and blushing, Edward produced a small camera.

"I would like so awfully to have a snapshot of you. You see, I'm going to Baghdad tomorrow."

"To Baghdad?" exclaimed Victoria with lively disappointment.

“Yes. I mean I wish I wasn’t—now. Earlier this morning I was quite bucked about it—it’s why I took this job really—to get out of this country.”

“What sort of job is it?”

“Pretty awful. Culture—poetry, all that sort of thing. A Dr. Rathbone’s my boss. Strings of letters after his name, peers at you soulfully through pince-nez. He’s terrifically keen on uplift and spreading it far and wide. He opens bookshops in remote places—he’s starting one in Baghdad. He gets Shakespeare’s and Milton’s works translated into Arabic and Kurdish and Persian and Armenian and has them all on tap. Silly, I think, because you’ve got the British Council doing much the same thing all over the place. Still, there it is. It gives me a job so I oughtn’t to complain.”

“What do you actually do?” asked Victoria.

“Well, really it boils down to being the old boy’s personal Yesman and Dogsbody. Buy the tickets, make the reservations, fill up the passport forms, check the packing of all the horrid little poetic manuals, run round here, there, and everywhere. Then, when we get out there I’m supposed to fraternize—kind of glorified youth movement—all nations together in a united drive for uplift.” Edward’s tone became more and more melancholy. “Frankly, it’s pretty ghastly, isn’t it?”

Victoria was unable to administer much comfort.

“So you see,” said Edward, “if you wouldn’t mind awfully—one sideways and one looking right at me—oh I say, that’s wonderful—”

The camera clicked twice and Victoria showed that purring complacency displayed by young women who know they have made an impression on an attractive member of the opposite sex.

“But it’s pretty foul really, having to go off just when I’ve met you,” said Edward. “I’ve half a mind to chuck it—but I suppose I couldn’t do that at the last moment—not after all those ghastly forms and visas and everything. Wouldn’t be a very good show, what?”

“It mayn’t turn out as bad as you think,” said Victoria consolingly.

“N-no,” said Edward doubtfully. “The funny thing is,” he added, “that I’ve got a feeling there’s something fishy somewhere.”

“Fishy?”

“Yes. Bogus. Don’t ask me why. I haven’t any reason. Sort of feeling one gets sometimes. Had it once about my port oil. Began fussing about the damned thing and sure enough there was a washer wedged in the spare gear pump.”

The technical terms in which this was couched made it quite unintelligible to Victoria, but she got the main idea.

“You think he’s bogus—Rathbone?”

“Don’t see how he can be. I mean he’s frightfully respectable and learned and belongs to all these societies—and sort of hobnobs with Archbishops and Principals of Colleges. No, it’s just a feeling—well, time will show. So long. I wish you were coming, too.”

“So do I,” said Victoria.

“What are you going to do?”

“Go round to St. Guildric’s Agency in Gower Street and look for another job,” said Victoria gloomily.

“Good-bye, Victoria. Partir, say mourir un peu,” added Edward with a very British accent. “These French johnnies know their stuff. Our English chaps just maunder on about parting being a sweet sorrow—silly asses.”

“Good-bye, Edward, good luck.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll ever think about me again.”

“Yes, I shall.”

“You’re absolutely different from any girl I’ve ever seen before—I only wish—” The clock chimed a quarter, and Edward said, “Oh hell—I must fly —”

Retreating rapidly, he was swallowed up by the great maw of London. Victoria remaining behind on her seat absorbed in meditation was conscious of two distinct streams of thought.

One dealt with the theme of Romeo and Juliet. She and Edward, she felt, were somewhat in the position of that unhappy couple, although perhaps Romeo and Juliet had expressed their feelings in rather more high-class language. But the position, Victoria thought, was the same. Meeting, instant attraction—frustration—two fond hearts thrust asunder. A remembrance of a rhyme once frequently recited by her old nurse came to her mind:

Jumbo said to Alice I love you,

Alice said to Jumbo I don’t believe you do,

If you really loved me as you say you do

You wouldn’t go to America and leave me in the Zoo.

Substitute Baghdad for America and there you were!

Victoria rose at last, dusting crumbs from her lap, and walked briskly out of FitzJames Gardens in the direction of Gower Street. Victoria had come to two decisions: the first was that (like Juliet) she loved this young man, and meant to have him.

The second decision that Victoria had come to was that as Edward would shortly be in Baghdad, the only thing to do was for her to go to Baghdad also. What was now occupying her mind was how this could be accomplished. That it could be accomplished somehow or other, Victoria did not doubt. She was a young woman of optimism and force of character.

Parting is such sweet sorrow appealed to her as a sentiment no more than it did to Edward.

“Somehow,” said Victoria to herself, “I’ve got to get to Baghdad!”

Three

I

The Savoy Hotel welcomed Miss Anna Scheele with the empressement due to an old and valued client—they inquired after the health of Mr. Morgenthal—and assured her that if her suite was not to her liking she had only to say so—for Anna Scheele represented DOLLARS.

Miss Scheele bathed, dressed, made a telephone call to a Kensington number and then went down in the lift. She passed through the revolving doors and asked for a taxi. It drew up and she got in and directed it to Cartier's in Bond Street.

As the taxi turned out of the Savoy approach into the Strand a little dark man who had been standing looking into a shop window suddenly glanced at his watch and hailed a taxi that was conveniently cruising past and which had been singularly blind to the hails of an agitated woman with parcels a moment or two previously.

The taxi followed along the Strand keeping the first taxi in sight. As they were both held up by the lights in going round Trafalgar Square, the man in the second taxi looked out of the left-hand window and made a slight gesture with his hand. A private car, which had been standing in the side street by the Admiralty Arch started its engine and swung into the stream of traffic behind the second taxi.

The traffic had started on again. As Anna Scheele's taxi followed the stream of traffic going to the left into Pall Mall, the taxi containing the little dark man swung away to the right, continuing round Trafalgar Square. The private car, a grey Standard, was now close behind Anna Scheele. It contained two passengers, a fair rather vacant-looking young man at the wheel and a smartly dressed young woman beside him. The Standard followed Anna Scheele's taxi along Piccadilly and up Bond Street. Here for a moment it paused by the kerb, and the young woman got out.

She called brightly and conventionally.

“Thanks so much.”

The car went on. The young woman walked along glancing every now and again into a window. A block held up the traffic. The young woman passed both the Standard and Anna Scheele’s taxi. She arrived at Cartier’s and went inside.

Anna Scheele paid off her taxi and went into the jeweller’s. She spent some time looking at various pieces of jewellery. In the end she selected a sapphire and diamond ring. She wrote a cheque for it on a London bank. At the sight of the name on it, a little extra empressement came into the assistant’s manner.

“Glad to see you in London again, Miss Scheele. Is Mr. Morganthal over?”

“No.”

“I wondered. We have a very fine star sapphire here—I know he is interested in star sapphires. If you would care to see it?”

Miss Scheele expressed her willingness to see it, duly admired it and promised to mention it to Mr. Morganthal.

She went out again into Bond Street, and the young woman who had been looking at clip earrings expressed herself as unable to make up her mind and emerged also.

The grey Standard car having turned to the left in Grafton Street and gone down to Piccadilly was just coming up Bond Street again. The young woman showed no signs of recognition.

Anna Scheele had turned into the Arcade. She entered a florist’s. She ordered three dozen long stemmed roses, a bowl full of sweet big purple violets, a dozen sprays of white lilac, and a jar of mimosa. She gave an address for them to be sent.

“That will be twelve pounds, eighteen shillings, madam.”

Anna Scheele paid and went out. The young woman who had just come in asked the price of a bunch of primroses but did not buy them.

Anna Scheele crossed Bond Street and went along Burlington Street and turned into Savile Row. Here she entered the establishment of one of those tailors who, whilst catering essentially for men, occasionally condescend to cut a suit for certain favoured members of the feminine sex.

Mr. Bolford received Miss Scheele with the greeting accorded to a valued client, and the materials for a suit were considered.

“Fortunately, I can give you our own export quality. When will you be returning to New York, Miss Scheele?”

“On the twenty-third.”

“We can manage that nicely. By the clipper, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“And how are things in America? They are very sadly here—very sadly indeed.” Mr. Bolford shook his head like a doctor describing a patient. “No heart in things, if you know what I mean. And no one coming along who takes any pride in a good job of work. D’you know who will cut your suit, Miss Scheele? Mr. Lantwick—seventy-two years of age he is and he’s the only man I’ve got I can really trust to cut for our best people. All the others —”

Mr. Bolford’s plump hands waved them away.

“Quality,” he said. “That’s what this country used to be renowned for. Quality! Nothing cheap, nothing flashy. When we try mass production we’re no good at it, and that’s a fact. That’s your country’s speciality, Miss Scheele. What we ought to stand for, and I say it again, is quality. Take time over things, and trouble, and turn out an article that no one in the world can beat. Now what day shall we say for the first fitting. This day week? At 11:30? Thank you very much.”

Making her way through the archaic gloom round bales of material, Anna Scheele emerged into daylight again. She hailed a taxi and returned to the Savoy. A taxi that was drawn up on the opposite side of the street and which contained a little dark man, took the same route but did not turn into the Savoy. It drove round to the Embankment and there picked up a short plump woman who had recently emerged from the service entrance of the Savoy.

“What about it, Louisa? Been through her room?”

“Yes. Nothing.”

Anna Scheele had lunch in the restaurant. A table had been kept for her by the window. The Maître d’Hôtel inquired affectionately after the health of Otto Morganthal.

After lunch Anna Scheele took her key and went up to her suite. The bed had been made, fresh towels were in the bathroom and everything was spick and span. Anna crossed to the two light aircases that constituted her luggage, one was open, the other locked. She cast an eye over the contents of the unlocked one, then taking her keys from her purse she unlocked the other. All was neat, folded, as she had folded things, nothing had apparently been touched or disturbed. A briefcase of leather lay on top. A small Leica camera and two rolls of films were in one corner. The films were still sealed and unopened. Anna ran her nail across the flap and pulled it up. Then she smiled, very gently. The single almost invisible blonde hair that had been there was there no longer. Deftly she scattered a little powder over the shiny leather of the briefcase and blew it off. The briefcase remained clear and shiny. There were no fingerprints. But that morning after patting a little brilliantine on to the smooth flaxen cap of her hair, she had handled the briefcase. There should have been fingerprints on it, her own.

She smiled again.

“Good work,” she said to herself. “But not quite good enough....”

Deftly, she packed a small overnight case and went downstairs again. A taxi was called and she directed the driver to 17 Elmsleigh Gardens.

Elmsleigh Gardens was a quiet, rather dingy Kensington Square. Anna paid off the taxi and ran up the steps to the peeling front door. She pressed the bell. After a few minutes an elderly woman opened the door with a suspicious face which immediately changed to a beam of welcome.

“Won’t Miss Elsie be pleased to see you! She’s in the study at the back. It’s only the thought of your coming that’s been keeping her spirits up.”

Anna went quickly along the dark hallway and opened the door at the far end. It was a small shabby, comfortable room with large worn leather armchairs. The woman sitting in one of them jumped up.

“Anna, darling.”

“Elsie.”

The two women kissed each other affectionately.

“It’s all arranged,” said Elsie. “I go in tonight. I do hope—”

“Cheer up,” said Anna. “Everything is going to be quite all right.”

II

The small dark man in the raincoat entered a public callbox at High Street Kensington Station, and dialled a number.

“Valhalla Gramophone Company?”

“Yes.”

“Sanders here.”

“Sanders of the River? What river?”

“River Tigris. Reporting on A. S. Arrived this morning from New York. Went to Cartier’s. Bought sapphire and diamond ring costing one hundred and twenty pounds. Went to florist’s, Jane Kent—twelve pounds eighteen shillings’ worth of flowers to be delivered at a nursing home in Portland

Place. Ordered coat and skirt at Bolford and Ivory's. None of these firms known to have any suspicious contacts, but particular attention will be paid to them in future. A. S.'s room at Savoy gone through. Nothing suspicious found. Briefcase in suitcase containing papers relating to Paper Merger with Wolfensteins. All aboveboard. Camera and two rolls of apparently unexposed films. Possibility of films being photostatic records, substituted other films for them, but original films reported upon as being straightforward unexposed films. A. S. took small overnight case and went to sister at 17 Elmsleigh Gardens. Sister entering nursing home in Portland Place this evening for internal operation. This confirmed from nursing home and also appointment book of surgeon. Visit of A. S. seems perfectly aboveboard. Showed no uneasiness or consciousness of being followed. Understand she is spending tonight at nursing home. Has kept on her room at the Savoy. Return passage to New York by clipper booked for twenty-third."

The man who called himself Sanders of the River paused and added a postscript off the record as it were.

"And if you ask what I think it's all a mare's nest! Throwing money about, that's all she's doing. Twelve pounds eighteen on flowers! I ask you!"

Four

I

It says a good deal for the buoyancy of Victoria's temperament that the possibility of failing to attain her objective did not for a moment occur to her. Not for her the lines about ships that pass in the night. It was certainly unfortunate that when she had—well—frankly—fallen for an attractive young man, that that young man should prove to be just on the verge of departure to a place distant some three thousand miles. He might so easily have been going to Aberdeen or Brussels, or even Birmingham.

That it should be Baghdad, thought Victoria, was just her luck! Nevertheless, difficult though it might be, she intended to get to Baghdad somehow or other. Victoria walked purposefully along Tottenham Court Road evolving ways and means. Baghdad. What went on in Baghdad? According to Edward: "Culture." Could she, in some way, play up culture? Unesco? Unesco was always sending people here, there and everywhere, sometimes to the most delectable places. But these were usually, Victoria reflected, superior young women with university degrees who had got into the racket early on.

Victoria, deciding that first things came first, finally bent her steps to a travel agency, and there made her inquiries. There was no difficulty, it seemed, in travelling to Baghdad. You could go by air, by long sea to Basrah, by train to Marseilles and by boat to Beirut and across the desert by car. You could go via Egypt. You could go all the way by train if you were determined to do so, but visas were at present difficult and uncertain and were apt to have actually expired by the time you received them. Baghdad was in the sterling area and money therefore presented no difficulties. Not, that is to say, in the clerk's meaning of the word. What it all boiled down to was that there was no difficulty whatsoever in getting to Baghdad so long as you had between sixty and a hundred pounds in cash.

As Victoria had at this moment three pounds ten (less ninepence), an extra twelve shillings, and five pounds in the PO Savings Bank, the simple and

straightforward way was out of the question.

She made tentative queries as to a job as air hostess or stewardess, but these, she gathered, were highly coveted posts for which there was a waiting list.

Victoria next visited St. Guildric's Agency where Miss Spenser, sitting behind her efficient desk, welcomed her as one of those who were destined to pass through the office with reasonable frequency.

"Dear me, Miss Jones, not out of a post again. I really hoped this last one —"

"Quite impossible," said Victoria firmly. "I really couldn't begin to tell you what I had to put up with."

A pleasurable flush rose in Miss Spenser's pallid cheek.

"Not—" she began—"I do hope not—He didn't seem to me really that sort of man—but of course he is a trifle gross—I do hope—"

"It's quite all right," said Victoria. She conjured up a pale brave smile. "I can take care of myself."

"Oh, of course, but it's the unpleasantness."

"Yes," said Victoria. "It is unpleasant. However—" She smiled bravely again.

Miss Spenser consulted her books.

"The St. Leonard's Assistance to Unmarried Mothers want a typist," said Miss Spenser. "Of course, they don't pay very much—"

"Is there any chance," asked Victoria brusquely, "of a post in Baghdad?"

"In Baghdad?" said Miss Spenser in lively astonishment.

Victoria saw she might as well have said in Kamchatka or at the South Pole.

“I should very much like to get to Baghdad,” said Victoria.

“I hardly think—in a secretary’s post you mean?”

“Anyhow,” said Victoria. “As a nurse or a cook, or looking after a lunatic. Anyway at all.”

Miss Spenser shook her head.

“I’m afraid I can’t hold out much hope. There was a lady in yesterday with two little girls who was offering a passage to Australia.”

Victoria waved away Australia.

She rose. “If you did hear of anything. Just the fare out—that’s all I need.” She met the curiosity in the other woman’s eye by explaining—“I’ve got—er—relations out there. And I understand there are plenty of well-paid jobs. But of course, one has to get there first.

“Yes,” repeated Victoria to herself as she walked away from St. Guildric’s Bureau. “One has to get there.”

It was an added annoyance to Victoria that, as is customary, when one has had one’s attention suddenly focused on a particular name or subject, everything seemed to have suddenly conspired to force the thought of Baghdad onto her attention.

A brief paragraph in the evening paper she bought stated that Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, the well-known archaeologist, had started excavation on the ancient city of Murik, situated a hundred and twenty miles from Baghdad. An advertisement mentioned shipping lines to Basrah (and thence by train to Baghdad, Mosul, etc.). In the newspaper that lined her stocking drawer, a few lines of print about students in Baghdad leapt to her eyes. The Thief of Baghdad was on at the local cinema, and in the high-class highbrow bookshop into whose window she always gazed, a New Biography of Haroun el Rashid, Caliph of Baghdad, was prominently displayed.

The whole world, it seemed to her, had suddenly become Baghdad conscious. And until that afternoon at approximately 1:45 she had, for all intents and purposes never heard of Baghdad, and certainly never thought about it.

The prospects of getting there were unsatisfactory, but Victoria had no idea of giving up. She had a fertile brain and the optimistic outlook that if you want to do a thing there is always some way of doing it.

She employed the evening in drawing up a list of possible approaches. It ran:

Try Foreign Office?

Insert advertisement?

Try Iraq Legation?

What about date firms?

Ditto shipping firms?

British Council?

Selfridge's Information Bureau?

Citizen's Advice Bureau?

None of them, she was forced to admit, seemed very promising. She added to the list:

Somehow or other, get hold of a hundred pounds?

II

The intense mental efforts of concentration that Victoria had made overnight, and possibly the subconscious satisfaction at no longer having to be punctually in the office at nine a.m., made Victoria oversleep herself.

She awoke at five minutes past ten, and immediately jumped out of bed and began to dress. She was just passing a final comb through her rebellious dark hair when the telephone rang.

Victoria reached for the receiver.

A positively agitated Miss Spenser was at the other end.

“So glad to have caught you, my dear. Really the most amazing coincidence.”

“Yes?” cried Victoria.

“As I say, really a startling coincidence. A Mrs. Hamilton Clipp—travelling to Baghdad in three days’ time—has broken her arm—needs someone to assist her on journey—I rang you up at once. Of course I don’t know if she has also applied to any other agencies—”

“I’m on my way,” said Victoria. “Where is she?”

“The Savoy.”

“And what’s her silly name? Tripp?”

“Clipp, dear. Like a paper clip, but with two P’s—I can’t think why, but then she’s an American,” ended Miss Spencer as if that explained everything.

“Mrs. Clipp at the Savoy.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton Clipp. It was actually the husband who rang up.”

“You’re an angel,” said Victoria. “Good-bye.”

She hurriedly brushed her suit and wished it were slightly less shabby, recombed her hair so as to make it seem less exuberant and more in keeping with the role of ministering angel and experienced traveller. Then she took out Mr. Greenholtz’s recommendation and shook her head over it.

We must do better than that, said Victoria.

From a No. 19 bus, Victoria alighted at Green Park, and entered the Ritz Hotel. A quick glance over the shoulder of a woman reading in the bus had proved rewarding. Entering the writing room Victoria wrote herself some generous lines of praise from Lady Cynthia Bradbury who had been announced as having just left England for East Africa...“excellent in illness,” wrote Victoria, “and most capable in every way....”

Leaving the Ritz she crossed the road and walked a short way up Albemarle Street until she came to Balderton’s Hotel, renowned as the haunt of the higher clergy and of old-fashioned dowagers up from the country.

In less dashing handwriting, and making neat small Greek “E’s, she wrote a recommendation from the Bishop of Llangow.

Thus equipped, Victoria caught a No. 9 bus and proceeded to the Savoy.

At the reception desk she asked for Mrs. Hamilton Clipp and gave her name as coming from St. Guildric’s Agency. The clerk was just about to pull the telephone towards him when he paused, looked across, and said:

“That is Mr. Hamilton Clipp now.”

Mr. Hamilton Clipp was an immensely tall and very thin grey-haired American of kindly aspect and slow deliberate speech.

Victoria told him her name and mentioned the Agency.

“Why now, Miss Jones, you’d better come right up and see Mrs. Clipp. She is still in our suite. I fancy she’s interviewing some other young lady, but she may have gone by now.”

Cold panic clutched at Victoria’s heart.

Was it to be so near and yet so far?

They went up in the lift to the third floor.

As they walked along the deep carpeted corridor, a young woman came out of a door at the far end and came towards them. Victoria had a kind of hallucination that it was herself who was approaching. Possibly, she thought, because of the young woman's tailor-made suit that was so exactly what she would have liked to be wearing herself. "And it would fit me too. I'm just her size. How I'd like to tear it off her," thought Victoria with a reversion to primitive female savagery.

The young woman passed them. A small velvet hat perched on the side of her fair hair partially hid her face, but Mr. Hamilton Clipp turned to look after her with an air of surprise.

"Well now," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought of that? Anna Scheele."

He added in an explanatory way:

"Excuse me, Miss Jones. I was surprised to recognize a young lady whom I saw in New York only a week ago, secretary to one of our big international banks—"

He stopped as he spoke at a door in the corridor. The key was hanging in the lock and, with a brief tap, Mr. Hamilton Clipp opened the door and stood aside for Victoria to precede him into the room.

Mrs. Hamilton Clipp was sitting on a high-backed chair near the window and jumped up as they came in. She was a short birdlike sharp-eyed little woman. Her right arm was encased in plaster.

Her husband introduced Victoria.

"Why, it's all been most unfortunate," exclaimed Mrs. Clipp breathlessly. "Here we were, with a full itinerary, and enjoying London and all our plans made and my passage booked. I'm going out to pay a visit to my married daughter in Iraq, Miss Jones. I've not seen her for nearly two years. And then what do I do but take a crash—as a matter of fact, it was actually in Westminster Abbey—down some stone steps—and there I was. They rushed me to hospital and they've set it, and all things considered it's not

too uncomfortable—but there it is, I’m kind of helpless, and however I’d manage travelling, I don’t know. And George here, is just tied up with business, and simply can’t get away for at least another three weeks. He suggested that I should take a nurse along with me—but after all, once I’m out there I don’t need a nurse hanging around, Sadie can do all that’s necessary—and it means paying her fare back as well, and so I thought I’d ring up the agencies and see if I couldn’t find someone who’d be willing to come along just for the fare out.”

“I’m not exactly a nurse,” said Victoria, managing to imply that that was practically what she was. “But I’ve had a good deal of experience of nursing.” She produced the first testimonial. “I was with Lady Cynthia Bradbury for over a year. And if you should want any correspondence or secretarial work done, I acted as my uncle’s secretary for some months. My uncle,” said Victoria modestly, “is the Bishop of Llangow.”

“So your uncle’s a Bishop. Dear me, how interesting.”

Both the Hamilton Clipp were, Victoria thought, decidedly impressed. (And so they should be after the trouble she had taken!)

Mrs. Hamilton Clipp handed the two testimonials to her husband.

“It really seems quite wonderful,” she said reverently. “Quite providential. It’s an answer to prayer.”

Which, indeed, was exactly what it was, thought Victoria.

“You’re taking up a position of some kind out there? Or joining a relative?” asked Mrs. Hamilton Clipp.

In the flurry of manufacturing testimonials, Victoria had quite forgotten that she might have to account for her reasons for travelling to Baghdad. Caught unprepared, she had to improvise rapidly. The paragraph she had read yesterday came to her mind.

“I’m joining my uncle out there. Dr. Pauncefoot Jones,” she explained.

“Indeed? The archaeologist?”

“Yes.” For one moment Victoria wondered whether she were perhaps endowing herself with too many distinguished uncles. “I’m terribly interested in his work, but of course I’ve no special qualifications so it was out of the question for the Expedition to pay my fare out. They’re not too well off for funds. But if I can get out on my own, I can join them and make myself useful.”

“It must be very interesting work,” said Mr. Hamilton Clipp, “and Mesopotamia is certainly a great field for archaeology.”

“I’m afraid,” said Victoria, turning to Mrs. Clipp, “that my uncle the Bishop is up in Scotland at this moment. But I can give you his secretary’s telephone number. She is staying in London at the moment. Pimlico 87693—one of the Fulham Palace extensions. She’ll be there anytime from (Victoria’s eyes slid to the clock on the mantelpiece) 11:30 onwards if you would like to ring her up and ask about me.”

“Why, I’m sure—” Mrs. Clipp began, but her husband interrupted.

“Time’s very short you know. This plane leaves day after tomorrow. Now have you got a passport, Miss Jones?”

“Yes.” Victoria felt thankful that owing to a short holiday trip to France last year, her passport was up to date. “I brought it with me in case,” she added.

“Now that’s what I call businesslike,” said Mr. Clipp approvingly. If any other candidate had been in the running, she had obviously dropped out now. Victoria with her good recommendations, and her uncles, and her passport on the spot had successfully made the grade.

“You’ll want the necessary visas,” said Mr. Clipp, taking the passport. “I’ll run round to our friend Mr. Burgeon in American Express, and he’ll get everything fixed up. Perhaps you’d better call round this afternoon, so you can sign whatever’s necessary.”

This Victoria agreed to do.

As the door of the apartment closed behind her, she heard Mrs. Hamilton Clipp say to Mr. Hamilton Clipp:

“Such a nice straightforward girl. We really are in luck.”

Victoria had the grace to blush.

She hurried back to her flat and sat glued to the telephone prepared to assume the gracious refined accents of a Bishop’s secretary in case Mrs. Clipp should seek confirmation of her capability. But Mrs. Clipp had obviously been so impressed by Victoria’s straightforward personality that she was not going to bother with these technicalities. After all, the engagement was only for a few days as a travelling companion.

In due course, papers were filled up and signed, the necessary visas were obtained and Victoria was bidden to spend the final night at the Savoy so as to be on hand to help Mrs. Clipp get off at 7 a.m. on the following morning for Airways House and Heathrow Airport.

Five

The boat that had left the marshes two days before paddled gently along the Shatt el Arab. The stream was swift and the old man who was propelling the boat needed to do very little. His movements were gentle and rhythmic. His eyes were half closed. Almost under his breath he sang very softly, a sad unending Arab chant:

“Asri bi lel ya yamali

“Hadhi alek ya ibn Ali.”

Thus, on innumerable other occasions, had Abdul Suleiman of the Marsh Arabs come down the river to Basrah. There was another man in the boat, a figure often seen nowadays with a pathetic mingling of West and East in his clothing. Over his long robe of striped cotton he wore a discarded khaki tunic, old and stained and torn. A faded red knitted scarf was tucked into the ragged coat. His head showed again the dignity of the Arab dress, the inevitable keffiyah of black and white held in place by the black silk agal. His eyes, unfocused in a wide stare, looked out blearily over the riverbend. Presently he too began to hum in the same key and tone. He was a figure like thousands of other figures in the Mesopotamian landscape. There was nothing to show that he was an Englishman, and that he carried with him a secret that influential men in almost every country in the world were striving to intercept and to destroy along with the man who carried it.

His mind went hazily back over the last weeks. The ambush in the mountains. The ice-cold of the snow coming over the Pass. The caravan of camels. The four days spent trudging on foot over bare desert in company with two men carrying a portable “cinema.” The days in the black tent and the journeying with the Aneizeh tribe, old friends of his. All difficult, all fraught with danger—slipping again and again through the cordon spread out to look for him and intercept him.

“Henry Carmichael. British Agent. Age about thirty. Brown hair, dark eyes, five-foot-ten. Speaks Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, Armenian, Hindustani,

Turkish and many mountain dialects. Befriended by the tribesmen. Dangerous.”

Carmichael had been born in Kashgar where his father was a Government official. His childish tongue had lisped various dialects and patois—his nurses, and later his bearers, had been natives of many different races. In nearly all the wild places of the Middle East he had friends.

Only in the cities and the towns did his contacts fail him. Now, approaching Basrah, he knew that the critical moment of his mission had come. Sooner or later he had got to reenter the civilized zone. Though Baghdad was his ultimate destination, he had judged it wise not to approach it direct. In every town in Iraq facilities were awaiting him, carefully discussed and arranged many months beforehand. It had had to be left to his own judgement where he should, so to speak, make his landing ground. He had sent no word to his superiors, even through the indirect channels where he could have done so. It was safer thus. The easy plan—the aeroplane waiting at the appointed rendezvous—had failed, as he had suspected it would fail. That rendezvous had been known to his enemies. Leakage! Always that deadly, that incomprehensible, leakage.

And so it was that his apprehensions of danger were heightened. Here in Basrah, in sight of safety, he felt instinctively sure that the danger would be greater than during the wild hazards of his journey. And to fail at the last lap—that would hardly bear thinking about.

Rhythmically pulling at his oars, the old Arab murmured without turning his head.

“The moment approaches, my son. May Allah prosper you.”

“Do not tarry long in the city, my father. Return to the marshes. I would not have harm befall you.”

“That is as Allah decrees. It is in his hands.”

“Inshallah,” the other repeated.

For a moment he longed intensely to be a man of Eastern and not of Western blood. Not to worry over the chances of success or of failure, not to calculate again and again the hazards, repeatedly asking himself if he had planned wisely and with forethought. To throw responsibility on the All Merciful, the All Wise. Inshallah, I shall succeed!

Even saying the words over to himself he felt the calmness and the fatalism of the country overwhelming him and he welcomed it. Now, in a few moments, he must step from the haven of the boat, walk the streets of the city, run the gauntlet of keen eyes. Only by feeling as well as looking like an Arab could he succeed.

The boat turned gently into the waterway that ran at right angles to the river. Here all kinds of river craft were tied up and other boats were coming in before and after them. It was a lovely, almost Venetian scene; the boats with their high scrolled prows and the soft faded colours of their paintwork. There were hundreds of them tied up close alongside each other.

The old man asked softly:

“The moment has come. There are preparations made for you?”

“Yes, indeed my plans are set. The hour has come for me to leave.”

“May God make your path straight, and may He lengthen the years of your life.”

Carmichael gathered his striped skirts about him and went up the slippery stone steps to the wharf above.

All about him were the usual waterside figures. Small boys, orange sellers squatting down by their trays of merchandise. Sticky squares of cakes and sweetmeats, trays of bootlaces and cheap combs and pieces of elastic. Contemplative strollers, spitting raucously from time to time, wandering along with their beads clicking in their hands. On the opposite side of the street where the shops were and the banks, busy young effendis walked briskly in European suits of a slightly purplish tinge. There were Europeans, too, English and foreigners. And nowhere was there interest shown, or

curiosity, because one amongst fifty or so Arabs had just climbed onto the wharf from a boat.

Carmichael strolled along very quietly, his eyes taking in the scene with just the right touch of childlike pleasure in his surroundings. Every now and then he hawked and spat, not too violently, just to be in the picture. Twice he blew his nose with his fingers.

And so, the stranger come to town, he reached the bridge at the top of the canal, and turned over it and passed into the souk.

Here all was noise and movement. Energetic tribesmen strode along pushing others out of their way—laden donkeys made their way along, their drivers calling out raucously. Balek—balek...Children quarrelled and squealed and ran after Europeans calling hopefully, Baksheesh, madame, Baksheesh. Meskin-meskin....

Here the produce of the West and the East were equally for sale side by side. Aluminium saucepans, cups and saucers and teapots, hammered copperware, silverwork from Amara, cheap watches, enamel mugs, embroideries and gay patterned rugs from Persia. Brassbound chests from Kuwait, secondhand coats and trousers and children's woolly cardigans. Local quilted bedcovers, painted glass lamps, stacks of clay water jars and pots. All the cheap merchandise of civilization together with the native products.

All as normal and as usual. After his long sojourn in the wilder spaces, the bustle and confusion seemed strange to Carmichael, but it was all as it should be, he could detect no jarring note, no sign of interest in his presence. And yet, with the instinct of one who has for some years known what it is to be a hunted man, he felt a growing uneasiness—a vague sense of menace. He could detect nothing amiss. No one had looked at him. No one, he was almost sure, was following him or keeping him under observation. Yet he had that indefinable certainty of danger.

He turned up a narrow dark turning, again to the right, then to the left. Here among the small booths, he came to the opening of a khan, he stepped through the doorway into the court. Various shops were all round it.

Carmichael went to one where ferwahs were hanging—the sheepskin coats of the north. He stood there handling them tentatively. The owner of the store was offering coffee to a customer, a tall bearded man of fine presence who wore green round his tarbush showing him to be a Hajji who had been to Mecca.

Carmichael stood there fingering the ferwah.

“Besh hadha?” he asked.

“Seven dinars.”

“Too much.”

The Hajji said, “You will deliver the carpets at my khan?”

“Without fail,” said the merchant. “You start tomorrow?”

“At dawn for Kerbela.”

“It is my city, Kerbela,” said Carmichael. “It is fifteen years now since I have seen the Tomb of the Hussein.”

“It is a holy city,” said the Hajji.

The shopkeeper said over his shoulder to Carmichael:

“There are cheaper ferwahs in the inner room.”

“A white ferwah from the north is what I need.”

“I have such a one in the farther room.”

The merchant indicated the door set back in the inner wall.

The ritual had gone according to pattern—a conversation such as might be heard any day in any souk—but the sequence was exact—the keywords all there—Kerbela—white ferwah.

Only, as Carmichael passed to cross the room and enter the inner enclosure, he raised his eyes to the merchant's face—and knew instantly that the face was not the one he expected to see. Though he had seen this particular man only once before, his keen memory was not at fault. There was a resemblance, a very close resemblance, but it was not the same man.

He stopped. He said, his tone one of mild surprise, “Where, then, is Salah Hassan?”

“He was my brother. He died three days ago. His affairs are in my hands.”

Yes, this was probably a brother. The resemblance was very close. And it was possible that the brother was also employed by the department. Certainly the responses had been correct. Yet it was with an increased awareness that Carmichael passed through into the dim inner chamber. Here again was merchandise piled on shelves, coffeepots and sugar hammers of brass and copper, old Persian silver, heaps of embroideries, folded abas, enamelled Damascus trays and coffee sets.

A white ferwah lay carefully folded by itself on a small coffee table. Carmichael went to it and picked it up. Underneath it was a set of European clothes, a worn, slightly flashy business suit. The pocketbook with money and credentials was already in the breast pocket. An unknown Arab had entered the store, Mr. Walter Williams of Messrs Cross and Co., Importers and Shipping Agents would emerge and would keep certain appointments made for him in advance. There was, of course, a real Mr. Walter Williams—it was as careful as that—a man with a respectable open business past. All according to plan. With a sigh of relief Carmichael started to unbutton his ragged army jacket. All was well.

If a revolver had been chosen as the weapon, Carmichael's mission would have failed then and there. But there are advantages in a knife—noticeably noiselessness.

On the shelf in front of Carmichael was a big copper coffee pot and that coffee pot had been recently polished to the order of an American tourist who was coming in to collect it. The gleam of the knife was reflected in that shining rounded surface—a whole picture, distorted but apparent was

reflected there. The man slipping through the hangings behind Carmichael, the long curved knife he had just pulled from beneath his garments. In another moment that knife would have been buried in Carmichael's back.

Like a flash Carmichael wheeled round. With a low flying tackle he brought the other to the ground. The knife flew across the room. Carmichael disentangled himself quickly, leaped over the other's body, rushed through the outer room where he caught a glimpse of the merchant's startled malevolent face and the placid surprise of the fat Hajji. Then he was out, across the khan, back into the crowded souk, turning first one way, then another, strolling again now, showing no signs of haste in a country where to hurry is to appear unusual.

And walking thus, almost aimlessly, stopping to examine a piece of stuff, to feel a texture, his brain was working with furious activity. The machinery had broken down! Once more he was on his own, in hostile country. And he was disagreeably aware of the significance of what had just happened.

It was not only the enemies on his trail he had to fear. Nor was it the enemies guarding the approaches to civilization. There were enemies to fear within the system. For the passwords had been known, the responses had come pat and correct. The attack had been timed for exactly the moment when he had been lulled into security. Not surprising, perhaps, that there was treachery from within. It must have always been the aim of the enemy to introduce one or more of their own number into the system. Or, perhaps, to buy the man that they needed. Buying a man was easier than one might think—one could buy with other things than money.

Well, no matter how it had come about, there it was. He was on the run—back on his own resources. Without money, without the help of a new personality, and his appearance known. Perhaps at this very moment he was being quietly followed.

He did not turn his head. Of what use would that be? Those who followed were not novices at the game.

Quietly, aimlessly, he continued to stroll. Behind his listless manner he was reviewing various possibilities. He came out of the souk at last and crossed

the little bridge over the canal. He walked on until he saw the big painted hatchment over the doorway and the legend: British Consulate.

He looked up the street and down. No one seemed to be paying the least attention to him. Nothing, it appeared, was easier than just to step into the British Consulate. He thought for a moment, of a mousetrap, an open mousetrap with its enticing piece of cheese. That, too, was easy and simple for the mouse....

Well, the risk had to be taken. He didn't see what else he could do.

He went through the doorway.

Six

Richard Baker sat in the outer office of the British Consulate waiting until the Consul was disengaged.

He had come ashore from the Indian Queen that morning and seen his baggage through the Customs. It consisted almost entirely of books. Pyjamas and shirts were strewed amongst them rather as an afterthought.

The Indian Queen had arrived on time and Richard, who had allowed a margin of two days since small cargo boats such as the Indian Queen were frequently delayed, had now two days in hand before he need proceed, via Baghdad, to his ultimate destination, Tell Aswad, the site of the ancient city of Murik.

His plans were already made as to what to do with these two days. A mound reputed to contain ancient remains at a spot near the seashore in Kuwait had long excited his curiosity. This was a heaven-sent opportunity to investigate it.

He drove to the Airport Hotel and inquired as to the methods of getting to Kuwait. A plane left at ten o'clock the following morning, he was told, and he could return the following day. Everything therefore was plain sailing. There were, of course, the inevitable formalities, exit visa and entry visa for Kuwait. For these he would have to repair to the British Consulate. The Consul-General at Basrah, Mr. Clayton, Richard had met some years previously in Persia. It would be pleasant, Richard thought, to meet him again.

The Consulate had several entrances. A main gate for cars. Another small gate leading out from the garden to the road that lay alongside the Shatt el Arab. The business entrance to the Consulate was in the main street. Richard went in, gave his card to the man on duty, was told the Consul-General was engaged at the moment but would soon be free, and was shown into a small waiting room to the left of the passage which ran straight through from the entrance to the garden beyond.

There were several people already in the waiting room. Richard hardly glanced at them. He was, in any case, seldom interested by members of the human race. A fragment of antique pottery was always more exciting to him than a mere human being born somewhere in the twentieth century AD.

He allowed his thoughts to dwell pleasantly on some aspects of the Mari letters and the movements of the Benjaminite tribes in 1750 BC.

It would be hard to say exactly what awoke him to a vivid sense of the present and of his fellow human beings. It was, first, an uneasiness, a sense of tension. It came to him, he thought, though he could not be sure, through his nose. Nothing he could diagnose in concrete terms—but it was there, unmistakable, taking him back to days in the late war. One occasion in particular when he, and two others, had been parachuted from a plane, and had waited in the small cold hours of dawn for the moment to do their stuff. A moment when morale was low, when the full hazards of the undertaking were clearly perceived, a moment of dread lest one might not be adequate, a shrinking of the flesh. The same acrid, almost imperceptible tang in the air.

The smell of fear....

For some moments, this registered only subconsciously. Half of his mind still obstinately strove to focus itself BC. But the pull of the present was too strong.

Someone in this small room was in deadly fear....

He looked around. An Arab in a ragged khaki tunic, his fingers idly slipping over the amber beads he held. A stoutish Englishman with a grey moustache—the commercial traveller type—who was jotting down figures in a small notebook and looking absorbed and important. A lean tired-looking man, very dark-skinned, who was leaning back in a reposeful attitude, his face placid and uninterested. A man who looked like an Iraqi clerk. An elderly Persian in flowing snowy robes. They all seemed quite unconcerned.

The clicking of the amber beads fell into a definite rhythm. It seemed, in an odd way, familiar. Richard jerked himself to attention. He had been nearly

asleep. Short—long—long—short—that was Morse—definite Morse signalling. He was familiar with Morse, part of his job during the war had dealt with signalling. He could read it easily enough. OWL. F-L-O-R-E-A-T-E-T-O-N-A. What the devil! Yes, that was it. It was being repeated Floreat Etona. Tapped out (or rather clicked out) by a ragged Arab. Hallo, what was this? “Owl. Eton. Owl.”

His own nickname at Eton—where he had been sent with an unusually large and solid pair of spectacles.

He looked across the room at the Arab, noting every detail of his appearance—the striped robe—the old khaki tunic—the ragged hand-knitted red scarf full of dropped stitches. A figure such as you saw hundreds of on the waterfront. The eyes met his vacantly with no sign of recognition. But the beads continued to click.

Fakir here. Stand by. Trouble.

Fakir? Fakir? Of course! Fakir Carmichael! A boy who had been born or who had lived in some outlandish part of the world—Turkestan, Afghanistan?

Richard took out his pipe. He took an exploratory pull at it—peered into the bowl and then tapped it on an adjacent ashtray: Message received.

After that, things happened very fast. Later, Richard was at pains to sort them out.

The Arab in the torn army jacket got up and crossed towards the door. He stumbled as he was passing Richard, his hand went out and clutched Richard to steady himself. Then he righted himself, apologized and moved towards the door.

It was so surprising and happened so quickly that it seemed to Richard like a cinema scene rather than a scene in real life. The stout commercial traveller dropped his notebook and tugged at something in his coat pocket. Because of his plumpness and the tight fit of the coat, he was a second or two in getting it out and in that second or two Richard acted. As the man

brought the revolver up, Richard struck it out of his hand. It went off and a bullet buried itself in the floor.

The Arab had passed through the doorway and had turned towards the Consul's office, but he paused suddenly, and turning he ran swiftly the other way to the door by which he had entered and into the busy street.

The kavass ran to Richard's side where he stood holding the stout man's arm. Of the other occupants of the room, the Iraqi clerk was dancing excitedly on his feet, the dark thin man was staring and the elderly Persian gazed into space unmoved.

Richard said:

"What the devil are you doing, brandishing a revolver like that?"

There was just a moment's pause, and then the stout man said in a plaintive Cockney voice:

"Sorry, old man. Absolute accident. Just clumsy."

"Nonsense. You were going to shoot at that Arab fellow who's just run out."

"No, no, old man, not shoot him. Just give him a fright. Recognized him suddenly as a fellow who swindled me over some antikas. Just a bit of fun."

Richard Baker was a fastidious soul who disliked publicity of any kind. His instincts were to accept the explanation at its face value. After all, what could he prove? And would old Fakir Carmichael thank him for making a song and dance about the matter. Presumably if he were on some hush-hush, cloak-and-dagger business he would not.

Richard relaxed his grasp on the man's arm. The fellow was sweating, he noticed.

The kavass was talking excitedly. It was very wrong, he was saying, to bring firearms into the British Consulate. It was not allowed. The Consul would be very angry.

“I apologize,” said the fat man. “Little accident—that’s all.” He thrust some money into the kavass’s hand who pushed it back again indignantly.

“I’d better get out of this,” said the stout man. “I won’t wait to see the Consul.” He thrust a card suddenly on Richard. “That’s me and I’m at the Airport Hotel if there’s any fuss, but actually it was a pure accident. Just a joke if you know what I mean.”

Reluctantly, Richard watched him walk with an uneasy swagger out of the room and turn towards the street.

He hoped he had done right, but it was a difficult thing to know what to do when one was as much in the dark as he was.

“Mr. Clayton, he is disengaged now,” said the kavass.

Richard followed the man along the corridor. The open circle of sunlight at the end grew larger. The Consul’s room was on the right at the extreme end of the passage.

Mr. Clayton was sitting behind his desk. He was a quiet grey-haired man with a thoughtful face.

“I don’t know whether you remember me?” said Richard. “I met you in Tehran two years ago.”

“Of course. You were with Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, weren’t you? Are you joining him again this year?”

“Yes. I’m on my way there now, but I’ve got a few days to spare, and I rather wanted to run down to Kuwait. There’s no difficulty I suppose?”

“Oh, no. There’s a plane tomorrow morning. It’s only about an hour and a half. I’ll wire to Archie Gaunt—he’s the Resident there. He’ll put you up. And we can put you up here for the night.”

Richard protested slightly.

“Really—I don’t want to bother you and Mrs. Clayton. I can go to the hotel.”

“The Airport Hotel’s very full. We’d be delighted to have you here. I know my wife would like to meet you again. At the moment—let me see—we’ve got Crosbie of the Oil Company and some young sprig of Dr. Rathbone’s who’s down here clearing some cases of books through the customs. Come upstairs and see Rosa.”

He got up and escorted Richard out through the door and into the sunlit garden. A flight of steps led up to the living quarters of the Consulate.

Gerald Clayton pushed open the wire door at the top of the steps and ushered his guest into a long dim hallway with attractive rugs on the floor and choice examples of furniture on either side. It was pleasant coming into the cold dimness after the glare outside.

Clayton called, “Rosa, Rosa,” and Mrs. Clayton, whom Richard remembered as a buoyant personality with abounding vitality, came out of an end room.

“You remember Richard Baker, dear? He came to see us with Dr. Pauncefoot Jones in Tehran.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Clayton shaking hands. “We went to the bazaars together and you bought some lovely rugs.”

It was Mrs. Clayton’s delight when not buying things herself to urge on her friends and acquaintances to seek for bargains in the local souks. She had a wonderful knowledge of values and was an excellent bargainer.

“One of the best purchases I’ve ever made,” said Richard. “And entirely owing to your good offices.”

“Baker wants to fly to Kuwait tomorrow,” said Gerald Clayton. “I’ve said that we can put him up here for tonight.”

“But if it’s any trouble,” began Richard.

“Of course it’s no trouble,” said Mrs. Clayton. “You can’t have the best spare room, because Captain Crosbie has got it, but we can make you quite comfortable. You don’t want to buy a nice Kuwait chest, do you? Because they’ve got some lovely ones in the souk just now. Gerald wouldn’t let me buy another one for here though it would be quite useful to keep extra blankets in.”

“You’ve got three already, dear,” said Clayton mildly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Baker. I must get back to the office. There seems to have been a spot of trouble in the outer office. Somebody let off a revolver, I understand.”

“One of the local sheikhs, I suppose,” said Mrs. Clayton. “They are so excitable and they do so love firearms.”

“On the contrary,” said Richard. “It was an Englishman. His intention seemed to be to take a potshot at an Arab.” He added gently, “I knocked his arm up.”

“So you were in it all,” said Clayton. “I didn’t realize that.” He fished a card out of his pocket. “Robert Hall, Achilles Works, Enfield, seems to be his name. I don’t know what he wanted to see me about. He wasn’t drunk, was he?”

“He said it was a joke,” said Richard drily, “and that the gun went off by accident.”

Clayton raised his eyebrows.

“Commercial travellers don’t usually carry loaded guns in their pockets,” he said.

Clayton, Richard thought, was no fool.

“Perhaps I ought to have stopped him going away.”

“It’s difficult to know what one should do when these things happen. The man he fired at wasn’t hurt?”

“No.”

“Probably was better to let the thing slide, then.”

“I wonder what was behind it?”

“Yes, yes...I wonder too.”

Clayton looked a little distraught.

“Well, I must be getting back,” he said and hurried away.

Mrs. Clayton took Richard into the drawing room, a large inside room, with green cushions and curtains and offered him a choice of coffee or beer. He chose beer and it came deliciously iced.

She asked him why he was going to Kuwait and he told her.

She asked him why he hadn't got married yet and Richard said he didn't think he was the marrying kind, to which Mrs. Clayton said briskly, “Nonsense.” Archaeologists, she said, made splendid husbands—and were there any young women coming out to the Dig this season? One or two, Richard said, and Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones of course.

Mrs. Clayton asked hopefully if they were nice girls who were coming out, and Richard said he didn't know because he hadn't met them yet. They were very inexperienced, he said.

For some reason this made Mrs. Clayton laugh.

Then a short stocky man with an abrupt manner came in and was introduced as Captain Crosbie. Mr. Baker, said Mrs. Clayton, was an archaeologist and dug up the most wildly interesting things thousands of years old. Captain Crosbie said he never could understand how archaeologists were able to say so definitely how old these things were. Always used to think they must be the most awful liars, ha ha, said Captain Crosbie. Richard looked at him in a rather tired kind of way. No, said Captain Crosbie, but how did an archaeologist know how old a thing was? Richard said that that would take

a long time to explain, and Mrs. Clayton quickly took him away to see his room.

“He’s very nice,” said Mrs. Clayton, “but not quite quite, you know. Hasn’t got any idea of culture.”

Richard found his room exceedingly comfortable, and his appreciation of Mrs. Clayton as a hostess rose still higher.

Feeling in the pocket of his coat, he drew out a folded-up piece of dirty paper. He looked at it with surprise, for he knew quite well that it had not been there earlier in the morning.

He remembered how the Arab had clutched him when he stumbled. A man with deft fingers might have slipped this into his pocket without his being aware of it.

He unfolded the paper. It was dirty and seemed to have been folded and refolded many times.

In six lines of rather crabbed handwriting, Major John Wilber-force recommended one Ahmed Mohammed as an industrious and willing worker, able to drive a lorry and do minor repairs and strictly honest—it was, in fact, the usual type of “chit” or recommendation given in the East. It was dated eighteen months back, which again is not unusual as these chits are hoarded carefully by their possessors.

Frowning to himself, Richard went over the events of the morning in his precise orderly fashion.

Fakir Carmichael, he was now well assured, had been in fear of his life. He was a hunted man and he bolted into the Consulate. Why? To find security? But instead of that he had found a more instant menace. The enemy or a representative of the enemy had been waiting for him. This commercial traveller chap must have had very definite orders—to be willing to risk shooting Carmichael in the Consulate in the presence of witnesses. It must, therefore, have been very urgent. And Carmichael had appealed to his old school friend for help, and had managed to pass this seemingly innocent

document into his possession. It must, therefore, be very important, and if Carmichael's enemies caught up with him, and found that he no longer possessed this document, they would doubtless put two and two together and look for any person or persons to whom Carmichael might conceivably have passed it on.

What then was Richard Baker to do with it?

He could pass it on to Clayton, as His Britannic Majesty's representative.

Or he could keep it in his own possession until such time as Carmichael claimed it?

After a few minutes' reflection he decided to do the latter.

But first he took certain precautions.

Tearing a blank half sheet of paper off an old letter, he sat down to compose a reference for a lorry driver in much the same terms, but using different wording—if this message was a code that took care of that—though it was possible, of course, that there was a message written in some kind of invisible ink.

Then he smeared his own composition with dust from his shoes—rubbed it in his hands, folded and refolded it—until it gave a reasonable appearance of age and dirt.

Then he crumpled it up and put it into his pocket. The original he stared at for some time whilst he considered and rejected various possibilities.

Finally, with a slight smile, he folded and refolded it until he had a small oblong. Taking a stick of plasticine (without which he never travelled) out of his bag, he first wrapped his packet in oilskin cut from his sponge-bag, then encased it in plasticine. This done he rolled and patted out the plasticine till he had a smooth surface. On this he rolled out an impression from a cylinder seal that he had with him.

He studied the result with grim appreciation.

It showed a beautifully carved design of the Sun God Shamash armed with the Sword of Justice.

“Let’s hope that’s a good omen,” he said to himself.

That evening, when he looked in the pocket of the coat he had worn in the morning, the screwed-up paper had gone.

Seven

Life, thought Victoria, life at last! Sitting in her seat at Airways Terminal there had come the magic moment when the words “Passengers for Cairo, Baghdad and Tehran, take your places in the bus, please,” had been uttered.

Magic names, magic words. Devoid of glamour to Mrs. Hamilton Clipp who, as far as Victoria could make out, had spent a large portion of her life jumping from boats into aeroplanes and from aeroplanes into trains with brief intervals at expensive hotels in between. But to Victoria they were a marvellous change from the oft-repeated phrases, “Take down, please, Miss Jones.” “This letter’s full of mistakes. You’ll have to type it again, Miss Jones.” “The kettle’s boiling, ducks, just make the tea, will you.” “I know where you can get the most marvellous perm.” Trivial boring everyday happenings! And now: Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran—all the romance of the glorious East (and Edward at the end of it)....

Victoria returned to earth to hear her employer, whom she had already diagnosed as a nonstop talker, concluding a series of remarks by saying:

“—and nothing really clean if you know what I mean. I’m always very very careful what I eat. The filth of the streets and the bazaars you wouldn’t believe. And the unhygienic rags the people wear. And some of the toilets—why, you just couldn’t call them toilets at all!”

Victoria listened dutifully to these depressing remarks, but her own sense of glamour remained undimmed. Dirt and germs meant nothing in her young life. They arrived at Heathrow and she assisted Mrs. Clipp to alight from the bus. She was already in charge of passports, tickets, money, etc.

“My,” said that lady, “it certainly is a comfort to have you with me, Miss Jones. I just don’t know what I’d have done if I’d had to travel alone.”

Travelling by air, Victoria thought, was rather like being taken on a school treat. Brisk teachers, kind but firm, were at hand to shepherd you at every turn. Air hostesses, in trim uniform with the authority of nursery

governesses dealing with feeble minded children explained kindly just what you were to do. Victoria almost expected them to preface their remarks with “Now, children.”

Tired-looking young gentlemen behind desks extended weary hands to check passports, to inquire intimately of money and jewellery. They managed to induce a sense of guilt in those questioned. Victoria, suggestible by nature, knew a sudden longing to describe her one meagre brooch as a diamond tiara value ten thousand pounds, just to see the expression on the bored young man’s face. Thoughts of Edward restrained her.

The various barriers passed, they sat down to wait once more in a large room giving directly on the aerodrome. Outside the roar of a plane being revved up gave the proper background. Mrs. Hamilton Clipp was now happily engaged in making a running commentary on their fellow travellers.

“Aren’t those two little children just too cute for words? But what an ordeal to travel alone with a couple of children. British, I guess they are. That’s a well cut suit the mother has on. She looks kind of tired, though. That’s a good-looking man—rather Latin looking, I’d say. What a loud check that man has on—I’d call it very bad taste. Business, I guess. That man over there’s a Dutchman, he was just ahead of us at the controls. That family over there is either Turkish or Persian, I should say. There don’t seem to be any Americans. I guess they go mostly Pan American. I’d say those three men talking together are Oil, wouldn’t you? I just love looking at people and wondering about them. Mr. Clipp says to me I’ve got real yen for human nature. It seems to me just natural to take an interest in your fellow creatures. Wouldn’t you say that mink coat over there cost every bit of three thousand dollars?”

Mrs. Clipp sighed. Having duly appraised her fellow travellers she became restless.

“I’d like to know what we are waiting for like this. That plane’s revved up four times. We’re all here. Why can’t they get on with things? They’re certainly not keeping to schedule.”

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Mrs. Clipp? I see there is a buffet at the end of the room.”

“Why, no, thank you, Miss Jones. I had coffee before I started, and my stomach feels too unsettled right now to take anything more. What are we waiting for, I’d like to know?”

Her question seemed to be answered almost before the words were out of her mouth.

The door leading from the corridor out of the Customs and Passport Department swung open with a rush and a tall man came through with the effect of a gust of wind. Air officials of the line hovered around him. Two large canvas sacks sealed were carried by an officer of BOAC.

Mrs. Clipp sat up with alacrity.

“He’s certainly some big noise,” she remarked.

“And knows it,” thought Victoria.

There was something of calculated sensationalism about the late traveller. He wore a kind of dark-grey travelling cloak with a capacious hood at the back. On his head was what was in essence a wide sombrero, but in light grey. He had silver grey curling hair, worn rather long, and a beautiful silver grey moustache curling up at the ends. The effect was that of a handsome stage bandit. Victoria, who disliked theatrical men who posed, looked at him with disapproval.

The Air officials were, she noted with displeasure, all over him.

“Yes, Sir Rupert.” “Of course, Sir Rupert.” “The plane is leaving immediately, Sir Rupert.”

With a swirl of his voluminous cloak, Sir Rupert passed out through the door leading to the aerodrome. The door swung to behind him with vehemence.

“Sir Rupert,” murmured Mrs. Clipp. “Now who would he be, I wonder?”

Victoria shook her head, though she had a vague feeling that the face and general appearance were not unknown to her.

“Somebody important in your Government,” suggested Mrs. Clipp.

“I shouldn’t think so,” said Victoria.

The few members of the Government she had ever seen had impressed her as men anxious to apologize for being alive. Only on platforms did they spring into pompous and didactic life.

“Now then, please,” said the smart nursery governess air hostess. “Take your seats in the plane. This way. As quickly as you can, please.”

Her attitude implied that a lot of dawdling children had been keeping the patient grown-ups waiting.

Everybody filed out onto the aerodrome.

The great plane was waiting, its engine ticking over like the satisfied purring of a gigantic lion.

Victoria and a steward helped Mrs. Clipp on board and settled her in her seat. Victoria sat next to her on the aisle. Not until Mrs. Clipp was comfortably ensconced, and Victoria had fastened her safety-belt, did the girl have leisure to observe that in front of them was sitting the great man.

The doors closed. A few seconds later the plane began to move slowly along the ground.

“We’re really going,” thought Victoria in ecstasy. “Oh, isn’t it frightening? Suppose it never gets up off the ground? Really, I don’t see how it can!”

During what seemed an age the plane taxied along the aerodrome, then it turned slowly round and stopped. The engines rose to a ferocious roar. Chewing gum, barley sugar and cotton wool were handed round.

Louder and louder, fiercer and fiercer. Then, once more, the aeroplane moved forward. Mincingly at first, then faster—faster still—they were

rushing along the ground.

“It will never go up,” thought Victoria, “we’ll be killed.”

Faster—more smoothly—no jars—no bumps—they were off the ground skimming along up, round, back over the car park and the main road, up, higher—a silly little train puffing below—doll’s houses—toy cars on roads...Higher still—and suddenly the earth below lost interest, was no longer human or alive—just a large flat map with lines and circles and dots.

Inside the plane people undid their safety belts, lit cigarettes, opened magazines. Victoria was in a new world—a world so many feet long, and a very few feet wide, inhabited by twenty to thirty people. Nothing else existed.

She peered out of the small window again. Below her were clouds, a fluffy pavement of clouds. The plane was in the sun. Below the clouds somewhere was the world she had known heretofore.

Victoria pulled herself together. Mrs. Hamilton Clipp was talking. Victoria removed cotton wool from her ears and bent attentively towards her.

In the seat in front of her, Sir Rupert rose, tossed his wide-brimmed grey felt hat to the rack, drew up his hood over his head and relaxed into his seat.

“Pompous ass,” thought Victoria, unreasonably prejudiced.

Mrs. Clipp was established with a magazine open in front of her. At intervals she nudged Victoria, when on trying to turn the page with one hand, the magazine slipped.

Victoria looked round her. She decided that air travel was really rather boring. She opened a magazine, found herself faced with an advertisement that said, “Do you want to increase your efficiency as a shorthand typist?” shuddered, shut the magazine, leant back, and began to think of Edward.

They came down at Castel Benito Aerodrome in a storm of rain. Victoria was by now feeling slightly sick, and it took all her energies to accomplish

her duties vis-à-vis her employer. They were driven through scurrying rain to the rest house. The magnificent Sir Rupert, Victoria noted, had been met by an officer in uniform with red tabs, and hurried off in a staff car to some dwelling of the mighty in Tripolitania.

They were allotted rooms. Victoria helped Mrs. Clipp with her toilet and left her to rest on her bed in a dressing gown until it was time for the evening meal. Victoria retired to her own room, lay down and closed her eyes, grateful to be spared the sight of the heaving and sinking floor.

She awakened an hour later in good health and spirits and went to help Mrs. Clipp. Presently a rather more peremptory air hostess instructed them that cars were ready to convey them to the evening meal. After dinner Mrs. Clipp got into conversation with some of her fellow travellers. The man in the loud check coat seemed to have taken a fancy to Victoria and told her at some length all about the manufacture of lead pencils.

Later they were conveyed back to their sleeping quarters and told curtly that they must be ready to depart at 5:30 a.m. the following morning.

“We haven’t seen much of Tripolitania, have we?” said Victoria rather sadly. “Is air travel always like this?”

“Why, yes, I’d say so. It’s just positively sadistic the way they get you up in the mornings. After that, often they keep you hanging round the aerodrome for an hour or two. Why, in Rome, I remember they called us at 3:30. Breakfast in the restaurant at 4 o’clock. And then actually at the Airport we didn’t leave until eight. Still the great thing is they get you to your destination right away with no fooling about on the way.”

Victoria sighed. She could have done with a good deal of fooling about. She wanted to see the world.

“And what do you know, my dear,” continued Mrs. Clipp excitedly, “you know that interesting looking man? The Britisher? The one that there’s all the fuss about. I’ve found out who he is. That’s Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, the great traveller. You’ve heard of him, of course.”

Yes, Victoria remembered now. She had seen several pictures in the press about six months ago. Sir Rupert was a great authority upon the interior of China. He was one of the few people who had been to Tibet and visited Lhasa. He had travelled through the unknown parts of Kurdistan and Asia Minor. His books had had a wide sale, for they had been racily and wittily written. If Sir Rupert was just noticeably a self-advertiser, it was with good reason. He made no claims that were not fully justified. The cloak with the hood and the wide-brimmed hat were, Victoria remembered now, a deliberate fashion of his own choosing.

“Isn’t that thrilling now?” demanded Mrs. Clipp with all a lion hunter’s enthusiasm as Victoria adjusted the bedclothes over her recumbent form.

Victoria agreed that it was very thrilling, but she said to herself that she preferred Sir Rupert’s books to his personality. He was, she considered, what children call “a show-off!”

A start was made in good order the next morning. The weather had cleared and the sun was shining. Victoria still felt disappointed to have seen so little of Tripolitania. Still, the plane was due to arrive at Cairo by lunchtime and the departure to Baghdad did not take place until the following morning, so she would at least be able to see a little of Egypt in the afternoon.

They were flying over the sea, but clouds soon blocked out the blue water below them and Victoria settled back in her seat with a yawn. In front of her Sir Rupert was already asleep. The hood had fallen back from his head, which was hanging forwards, nodding at intervals. Victoria observed with a faint malicious pleasure that he had a small boil starting on the back of his neck. Why she should have been pleased at this fact was hard to say—perhaps it made the great man seem more human and vulnerable. He was as other men after all—prone to the small annoyances of the flesh. It may be said that Sir Rupert had kept up his Olympian manner and had taken no notice whatever of his fellow travellers.

“Who does he think he is, I wonder?” thought Victoria to herself. The answer was obvious. He was Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, a celebrity, and she was Victoria Jones, an indifferent shorthand typist, and of no account whatever.

On arrival at Cairo, Victoria and Mrs. Hamilton Clipp had lunch together. The latter then announced that she was going to nap until six o'clock, and suggested that Victoria might like to go and see the Pyramids.

"I've arranged for a car for you, Miss Jones, because I know that owing to your Treasury regulations you won't be able to cash any money here."

Victoria who had in any case no money to cash, was duly grateful, and said so with some effusion.

"Why, that's nothing at all. You've been very very kind to me. And travelling with dollars everything is easy for us. Mrs. Kitchin—the lady with the two cute children—is very anxious to go also, so I suggested you'd join up with her—if that suits you?"

So long as she saw the world, anything suited Victoria.

"That's fine, then you'd better get off right now."

The afternoon at the Pyramids was duly enjoyable. Victoria, though reasonably fond of children, might have enjoyed it more without Mrs. Kitchin's offspring. Children when sightseeing is in progress are apt to be somewhat of a handicap. The youngest child became so fretful that the two women returned earlier from the expedition than they had meant to do.

Victoria threw herself on her bed with a yawn. She wished very much that she could stay a week in Cairo—perhaps go up the Nile. "And what would you use for money, my girl?" she asked herself witheringly. It was already a miracle that she was being transported to Baghdad free of charge.

And what, inquired a cold inward voice, are you going to do once you are landed in Baghdad with only a few pounds in your pocket?

Victoria waved that query aside. Edward must find her a job. Or failing that, she would find herself a job. Why worry?

Her eyes, dazzled with strong sunlight, closed gently.

A knock on the door, as she thought, roused her. She called "Come in," then as there was no response, she got off the bed, crossed to the door and opened it.

But the knock had not been at her door, but at the next door down the passage. Another of the inevitable air hostesses, dark haired and trim in her uniform, was knocking at Sir Rupert Crofton Lee's door. He opened it just as Victoria looked out.

"What's the matter now?"

He sounded annoyed and sleepy.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, Sir Rupert," cooed the air hostess, "but would you mind coming to the BOAC office? It's just three doors down the passage here. Just a small detail about the flight to Baghdad tomorrow."

"Oh, very well."

Victoria withdrew into her room. She was less sleepy now. She glanced at her watch. Only half past four. An hour and a half until Mrs. Clipp would be requiring her. She decided to go out and walk about Heliopolis. Walking, at least, required no money.

She powdered her nose and resumed her shoes. They felt rather full of feet. The visit to the Pyramids had been hard on her feet.

She came out of her room and walked along the corridor towards the main hall of the hotel. Three doors down she passed the BOAC office. It had a card announcing the fact nailed to the door. Just as she passed it, the door opened and Sir Rupert came out. He was walking fast and he overtook her in a couple of strides. He went on ahead of her, his cloak swinging, and Victoria fancied that he was annoyed about something.

Mrs. Clipp was in a somewhat petulant mood when Victoria reported for duty at six o'clock.

“I’m worried about the excess on my baggage, Miss Jones. I took it that I’d paid for that right through, but it seems that it’s only paid until Cairo. We go on tomorrow by Iraqi Airways. My ticket is a through ticket, but not the excess baggage. Perhaps you’d go and find out if that is really so? Because maybe I ought to change another traveller’s cheque.”

Victoria agreed to make inquiries. She could not find the BOAC office at first, and finally located it in the far corridor—the other side of the hall—quite a big office. The other, she supposed, had been a small office only used during the afternoon siesta hours. Mrs. Clipp’s fears about the excess baggage were found to be justified, which annoyed that lady very much.

Eight

On the fifth floor of a block of offices in the City of London are situated the offices of the Valhalla Gramophone Co. The man who sat behind the desk in that office was reading a book on economics. The telephone rang and he picked up the receiver. He said in a quiet unemotional voice:

“Valhalla Gramophone Co.”

“Sanders here.”

“Sanders of the River? What river?”

“River Tigris. Reporting as to A. S. We’ve lost her.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then the quiet voice spoke again, with a steely note in it.

“Did I hear what you said correctly?”

“We’ve lost Anna Scheele.”

“No names. This is a very serious error on your part. How did it come about?”

“She went into that nursing home. I told you before. Her sister was having an operation.”

“Well?”

“The operation went off all right. We expected A. S. to return to the Savoy. She had kept on her suite. She didn’t return. Watch had been kept on the nursing home and we were quite sure she hadn’t left it. We assumed she was still there.”

“And she isn’t?”

“We’ve just found out. She left there, in an ambulance, the day after the operation.”

“She deliberately fooled you?”

“Looks like it. I’d swear she didn’t know she was being followed. We took every precaution. There were three of us and—”

“Never mind the excuses. Where did the ambulance take her?”

“To University College Hospital.”

“What have you learnt from the hospital?”

“That a patient was brought in accompanied by a hospital nurse. The hospital nurse must have been Anna Scheele. They’ve no idea where she went after she brought the patient in.”

“And the patient?”

“The patient knows nothing. She was under morphia.”

“So Anna Scheele walked out of University College Hospital dressed as a nurse and may now be anywhere?”

“Yes. If she goes back to the Savoy—”

The other interrupted.

“She won’t go back to the Savoy.”

“Shall we check up on other hotels?”

“Yes, but I doubt if you’ll get any result. That’s what she’d expect you to do.”

“What instructions otherwise?”

“Check on the ports—Dover, Folkestone, etc. Check with air lines. In particular check all bookings to Baghdad by plane for the next fortnight. The passage won’t be booked in her own name. Check up on all passengers of suitable age.”

“Her baggage is still at the Savoy. Perhaps she’ll claim it.”

“She won’t do anything of the sort. You may be a fool—she isn’t! Does the sister know anything?”

“We’re in contact with her special nurse at the home. Apparently the sister thinks A. S. is in Paris doing business for Morgenthal and staying at the Ritz Hotel. She believed A. S. is flying home to States on 23rd.”

“In other words A. S. has told her nothing. She wouldn’t. Check up on those air passages. It’s the only hope. She’s got to get to Baghdad—and air is the only way she can do it in time, and, Sanders—”

“Yes?”

“No more failures. This is your last chance.”

Nine

Young Mr. Shrivenham of the British Embassy shifted from one foot to the other and gazed upwards as the plane zoomed over Baghdad aerodrome. There was a considerable dust storm in progress. Palm trees, houses, human beings were all shrouded in a thick brown haze. It had come on quite suddenly.

Lionel Shrivenham observed in a tone of deep distress:

“Ten to one they can’t come down here.”

“What will they do?” asked his friend Harold.

“Go on to Basrah, I imagine. It’s clear there, I hear.”

“You’re meeting some kind of a VIP, aren’t you?”

Young Mr. Shrivenham groaned again.

“Just my luck. The new Ambassador has been delayed coming out. Lansdowne, the Counsellor, is in England. Rice, the Oriental Counsellor, is ill in bed with gastric flu, dangerously high temperature. Best is in Tehran, and here am I, left with the whole bag of tricks. No end of a flap about this fellow. I don’t know why. Even the hush-hush boys are in a flap. He’s one of these world travellers, always off somewhere inaccessible on a camel. Don’t see why he’s so important, but apparently he’s absolutely the cat’s whiskers, and I’m to conform to his slightest wish. If he gets carried on to Basrah he’ll probably be wild. Don’t know what arrangements I’d better lay on. Train up tonight? Or get the RAF to fly him up tomorrow?”

Mr. Shrivenham sighed again, as his sense of injury and responsibility deepened. Since his arrival three months ago in Baghdad he had been consistently unlucky. One more raspberry, he felt, would finally blight what might have been a promising career.

The plane swooped overhead once more.

“Evidently thinks he can’t make it,” said Shrivenham, then added excitedly: “Hallo—I believe he’s coming down.”

A few moments later and the plane had taxied sedately to its place and Shrivenham stood ready to greet the VIP.

His unprofessional eye noted “rather a pretty girl” before he sprang forward to greet the buccaneer-like figure in the swirling cloak.

“Practically fancy dress,” he thought to himself disapprovingly as he said aloud:

“Sir Rupert Crofton Lee? I’m Shrivenham of the Embassy.”

Sir Rupert, he thought, was slightly curt in manner—perhaps understandable after the strain of circling round the city uncertain whether a landing could be effected or not.

“Nasty day,” continued Shrivenham. “Had a lot of this sort of thing this year. Ah, you’ve got the bags. Then, if you’ll follow me, sir, it’s all laid on....”

As they left the aerodrome in the car, Shrivenham said:

“I thought for a bit that you were going to be carried on to some other Airport, sir. Didn’t look as though the pilot could make a landing. Came up suddenly, this dust storm.”

Sir Rupert blew out his cheeks importantly as he remarked:

“That would have been disastrous—quite disastrous. Had my schedule been jeopardized, young man, I can tell you the results would have been grave and far-reaching in the extreme.”

“Lot of cock,” thought Shrivenham disrespectfully. “These VIP’s think their potty affairs are what makes the world go round.”

Aloud he said respectfully:

“I expect that’s so, sir.”

“Have you any idea when the Ambassador will reach Baghdad?”

“Nothing definite as yet, sir.”

“I shall be sorry to miss him. Haven’t seen him since—let me see, yes, India in 1938.”

Shrivenham preserved a respectful silence.

“Let me see, Rice is here, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir, he’s Oriental Counsellor.”

“Capable fellow. Knows a lot. I’ll be glad to meet him again.”

Shrivenham coughed.

“As a matter of fact, sir, Rice is on the sick list. They’ve taken him to hospital for observation. Violent type of gastroenteritis. Something a bit worse than the usual Baghdad tummy, apparently.”

“What’s that?” Sir Rupert turned his head sharply. “Bad gastroenteritis—hm. Came on suddenly, did it?”

“Day before yesterday, sir.”

Sir Rupert was frowning. The rather affected grandiloquence of manner had dropped from him. He was a simpler man—and somewhat of a worried one.

“I wonder,” he said. “Yes, I wonder.”

Shrivenham looked politely inquiring.

“I’m wondering,” said Sir Rupert, “if it might be a case of Scheele’s Green....”

Baffled, Shrivenham remained silent.

They were just approaching the Feisal Bridge, and the car swung off to the left towards the British Embassy.

Suddenly Sir Rupert leaned forward.

“Just stop a minute, will you?” he said sharply. “Yes, right-hand side. Where all those pots are.”

The car glided into the right-hand kerb and stopped.

It was a small native shop piled high with crude white clay pots and water jars.

A short stocky European who had been standing talking to the proprietor moved away towards the bridge as the car drew up. Shrivenham thought it was Crosbie of the I and P whom he had met once or twice.

Sir Rupert sprang from the car and strode up to the small booth. Picking up one of the pots, he started a rapid conversation in Arabic with the proprietor. The flow of speech was too fast for Shrivenham whose Arabic was as yet slow and painstaking and distinctly limited in vocabulary.

The proprietor was beaming, his hands flew wide, he gesticulated, he explained at length. Sir Rupert handled different pots, apparently asking questions about them. Finally he selected a narrow-mouthed water jar, tossed the man some coins and went back to the car.

“Interesting technique,” said Sir Rupert. “Been making them like this for thousands of years, same shape as in one of the hill districts in Armenia.”

His finger slipped down through the narrow aperture, twisting round and round.

“It’s very crude stuff,” said Shrivenham unimpressed.

“Oh, no artistic merit! But interesting historically. See these indications of lugs here? You pick up many a historical tip from observation of the simple things in daily use. I’ve got a collection of them.”

The car turned in through the gates of the British Embassy.

Sir Rupert demanded to be taken straight to his room. Shrivenham was amused to note that, his lecture on the clay pot ended, Sir Rupert had left it nonchalantly in the car. Shrivenham made a point of carrying it upstairs and placing it meticulously upon Sir Rupert's bedside table.

"Your pot, sir."

"Eh? Oh, thank you, my boy."

Sir Rupert appeared distraught. Shrivenham left him after repeating that luncheon would be ready shortly and drinks awaited his choice.

When the young man had left the room, Sir Rupert went to the window and unfolded the small slip of paper that had been tucked into the mouth of the pot. He smoothed it out. There were two lines of writing on it. He read them over carefully, then set light to the paper with a match.

Then he summoned a servant.

"Yes, sir? I unpack for you, sir?"

"Not yet. I want to see Mr. Shrivenham—up here."

Shrivenham arrived with a slightly apprehensive expression.

"Anything I can do, sir? Anything wrong?"

"Mr. Shrivenham, a drastic change has occurred in my plans. I can count upon your discretion, of course?"

"Oh, absolutely, sir."

"It is some time since I was in Baghdad, actually I have not been here since the war. The hotels lie mainly on the other bank, do they not?"

"Yes, sir. In Rashid Street."

“Backing on the Tigris?”

“Yes. The Babylonian Palace is the biggest of them. That’s the more or less official hotel.”

“What do you know about a hotel called the Tio?”

“Oh, a lot of people go there. Food’s rather good and it’s run by a terrific character called Marcus Tio. He’s quite an institution in Baghdad.”

“I want you to book me a room there, Mr. Shrivenham.”

“You mean—you’re not going to stay at the Embassy?” Shrivenham looked nervously apprehensive. “But—but—it’s all laid on, sir.”

“What is laid on can be laid off,” barked Sir Rupert.

“Oh, of course, sir. I didn’t mean—”

Shrivenham broke off. He had a feeling that in the future someone was going to blame him.

“I have certain somewhat delicate negotiations to carry out. I learn that they cannot be carried out from the Embassy. I want you to book me a room tonight at the Tio Hotel and I wish to leave the Embassy in a reasonably unobtrusive manner. That is to say I do not want to drive up to the Tio in an Embassy car. I also require a seat booked on the plane leaving for Cairo the day after tomorrow.”

Shrivenham looked more dismayed still.

“But I understood you were staying five days—”

“That is no longer the case. It is imperative that I reach Cairo as soon as my business here is terminated. It would not be safe for me to remain longer.”

“Safe?”

A sudden grim smile transformed Sir Rupert's face. The manner which Shrivenham had been likening to that of a Prussian drill sergeant was laid aside. The man's charm became suddenly apparent.

"Safety hasn't usually been one of my preoccupations, I agree," he said. "But in this case it isn't only my own safety I have to consider—my safety includes the safety of a lot of other people as well. So make those arrangements for me. If the air passage is difficult, apply for priority. Until I leave here tonight, I shall remain in my room." He added, as Shrivenham's mouth opened in surprise, "Officially, I'm sick. Touch of malaria." The other nodded. "So I shan't need food."

"But surely we can send you up—"

"Twenty-four hours' fast is nothing to me. I've gone hungry longer than that on some of my journeys. You just do as I tell you."

Downstairs Shrivenham was greeted by his colleagues and groaned in answer to their inquiries.

"Cloak and dagger stuff in a big way," he said. "Can't quite make his grandiloquence Sir Rupert Crofton Lee out. Whether it's genuine or playacting. The swirling cloak and bandit's hat and all the rest of it. Fellow who'd read one of his books told me that although he's a bit of a self-advertiser, he really has done all these things and been to these places—but I don't know...Wish Thomas Rice was up and about to cope. That reminds me, what's Scheele's Green?"

"Scheele's Green?" said his friend, frowning. "Something to do with wallpaper, isn't it? Poisonous. It's a form of arsenic, I think."

"Cripes!" said Shrivenham, staring. "I thought it was a disease. Something like amoebic dysentery."

"Oh, no, it's something in the chemical line. What wives do their husbands in with, or vice versa."

Shrivenham had relapsed into startled silence. Certain disagreeable facts were becoming clear to him. Crofton Lee had suggested, in effect, that Thomas Rice, Oriental Counsellor to the Embassy, was suffering, not from gastroenteritis, but from arsenical poisoning. Added to that Sir Rupert had suggested that his own life was in danger, and his decision not to eat food and drink prepared in the kitchens of the British Embassy shook Shrivenham's decorous British soul to the core. He couldn't imagine what to make of it all.

Ten

I

Victoria, breathing in hot choking yellow dust, was unfavourably impressed by Baghdad. From the Airport to the Tio Hotel, her ears had been assailed by continuous and incessant noise. Horns of cars blaring with maddening persistence, voices shouting, whistles blowing, then more deafening senseless blaring of motor horns. Added to the loud incessant noises of the street was a small thin trickle of continuous sound which was Mrs. Hamilton Clipp talking.

Victoria arrived at the Tio Hotel in a dazed condition.

A small alleyway led back from the fanfare of Rashid Street towards the Tigris. A short flight of steps to go up and there at the entrance of the hotel they were greeted by a very stout young man with a beaming smile who, metaphorically at least, gathered them to his heart. This, Victoria gathered, was Marcus—or more correctly Mr. Tio, the owner of the Tio Hotel.

His words of welcome were interrupted by shouted orders to various underlings regarding the disposal of their baggage.

“And here you are, once more, Mrs. Clipp—but your arm—why is it in that funny stuff?—(You fools, do not carry that with the strap! Imbeciles! Don’t trail that coat!)—But, my dear—what a day to arrive—never, I thought, would the plane land. It went round and round and round. Marcus, I said to myself—it is not you that will travel by planes—all this hurry, what does it matter?—And you have brought a young lady with you—it is nice always to see a new young lady in Baghdad—why did not Mr. Harrison come down to meet you—I expected him yesterday—but, my dear, you must have a drink at once.”

Now, somewhat dazed, Victoria, her head reeling slightly under the effect of a double whisky authoritatively pressed upon her by Marcus, was standing in a high whitewashed room containing a large brass bedstead, a very

sophisticated dressing table of newest French design, an aged Victorian wardrobe, and two vivid plush chairs. Her modest baggage reposed at her feet and a very old man with a yellow face and white whiskers had grinned and nodded at her as he placed towels in the bathroom and asked her if she would like the water made hot for a bath.

“How long would it take?”

“Twenty minutes, half an hour. I go and do it now.”

With a fatherly smile he withdrew. Victoria sat down on the bed and passed an experimental hand over her hair. It felt clogged with dust and her face was sore and gritty. She looked at herself in the glass. The dust had changed her hair from black to a strange reddish brown. She pulled aside a corner of the curtain and looked out on to a wide balcony which gave on the river. But there was nothing to be seen of the Tigris but a thick yellow haze. A prey to deep depression, Victoria said to herself: “What a hateful place.”

Then rousing herself, she stepped across the landing and tapped on Mrs. Clipp’s door. Prolonged and active ministrations would be required of her here before she could attend to her own cleansing and rehabilitation.

II

After a bath, lunch and a prolonged nap, Victoria stepped out from her bedroom onto the balcony and gazed with approval across the Tigris. The dust storm had subsided. Instead of a yellow haze, a pale clear light was appearing. Across the river was a delicate silhouette of palm trees and irregularly placed houses.

Voices came up to Victoria from the garden below. She stepped to the edge of the balcony and looked over.

Mrs. Hamilton Clipp, that indefatigable talker and friendly soul, had struck up an acquaintanceship with an Englishwoman—one of those weather-beaten Englishwomen of indeterminate age who can always be found in any foreign city.

“—and whatever I’d have done without her, I really don’t know,” Mrs. Clipp was saying. “She’s just the sweetest girl you can imagine. And very well connected. A niece of the Bishop of Llangow.”

“Bishop of who?”

“Why, Llangow, I think it was.”

“Nonsense, there’s no such person,” said the other.

Victoria frowned. She recognized the type of County Englishwoman who is unlikely to be taken in by the mention of spurious Bishops.

“Why, then, perhaps I got the name wrong,” Mrs. Clipp said doubtfully.

“But,” she resumed, “she certainly is a very charming and competent girl.”

The other said “Ha!” in a noncommittal manner.

Victoria resolved to give this lady as wide a berth as possible. Something told her that inventing stories to satisfy that kind of woman was no easy job.

Victoria went back into her room, sat on the bed, and gave herself up to speculation on her present position.

She was staying at the Tio Hotel, which was, she was fairly sure, not at all inexpensive. She had four pounds seventeen shillings in her possession. She had eaten a hearty lunch for which she had not yet paid and for which Mrs. Clipp was under no obligation to pay. Travelling expenses to Baghdad were what Mrs. Clipp had offered. The bargain was completed. Victoria had got to Baghdad. Mrs. Hamilton Clipp had received the skilled attention of a Bishop’s niece, an ex-hospital nurse, and competent secretary. All that was over, to the mutual satisfaction of both parties. Mrs. Hamilton Clipp would depart on the evening train to Kirkuk—and that was that. Victoria toyed hopefully with the idea that Mrs. Clipp might press upon her a parting present in the form of hard cash, but abandoned it reluctantly as unlikely. Mrs. Clipp could have no idea that Victoria was in really dire financial straits.

What then must Victoria do? The answer came immediately. Find Edward, of course.

With a sense of annoyance she realized that she was quite unaware of Edward's last name. Edward—Baghdad. Very much, Victoria reflected, like the Saracen maid who arrived in England knowing only the name of her lover "Gilbert" and "England." A romantic story—but certainly inconvenient. True that in England at the time of the Crusades, nobody, Victoria thought, had had any surname at all. On the other hand England was larger than Baghdad. Still, England was sparsely populated then.

Victoria wrenched her thoughts away from these interesting speculations and returned to hard facts. She must find Edward immediately and Edward must find her a job. Also immediately.

She did not know Edward's last name, but he had come to Baghdad as the secretary of a Dr. Rathbone and presumably Dr. Rathbone was a man of importance.

Victoria powdered her nose and patted her hair and started down the stairs in search of information.

The beaming Marcus, passing through the hall of his establishment, hailed her with delight.

"Ah, it is Miss Jones, you will come with me and have a drink, will you not, my dear? I like very much English ladies. All the English ladies in Baghdad, they are my friends. Everyone is very happy in my hotel. Come, we will go into the bar."

Victoria, not at all averse to free hospitality, consented gladly.

III

Sitting on a stool and drinking gin, she began her search for information.

"Do you know a Dr. Rathbone who has just come to Baghdad?" she asked.

“I know everyone in Baghdad,” said Marcus Tio joyfully. “And everybody knows Marcus. That is true, what I am telling you. Oh! I have many many friends.”

“I’m sure you have,” said Victoria. “Do you know Dr. Rathbone?”

“Last week I have the Air Marshal commanding all Middle East passing through. He says to me, ‘Marcus, you villain, I haven’t seen you since ’46. You haven’t grown any thinner.’ Oh he is very nice man. I like him very much.”

“What about Dr. Rathbone? Is he a nice man?”

“I like, you know, people who can enjoy themselves. I do not like sour faces. I like people to be gay and young and charming—like you. He says to me, that Air Marshal, ‘Marcus, you like too much the women.’ But I say to him: ‘No, my trouble is I like too much Marcus...’” Marcus roared with laughter, breaking off to call out, “Jesus—Jesus!”

Victoria looked startled, but it appeared that Jesus was the barman’s Christian name. Victoria felt again that the East was an odd place.

“Another gin and orange, and whisky,” Marcus commanded.

“I don’t think I—”

“Yes, yes, you will—they are very very weak.”

“About Dr. Rathbone,” persisted Victoria.

“That Mrs. Hamilton Clipp—what an odd name—with whom you arrive, she is American—is she not? I like also American people but I like English best. American peoples, they look always very worried. But sometimes, yes, they are good sports. Mr. Summers—you know him?—he drink so much when he come to Baghdad, he go to sleep for three days and not wake up. It is too much that. It is not nice.”

“Please, do help me,” said Victoria.

Marcus looked surprised.

“But of course I help you. I always help my friends. You tell me what you want—and at once it shall be done. Special steak—or turkey cooked very nice with rice and raisins and herbs—or little baby chickens.”

“I don’t want baby chickens,” said Victoria. “At least not now,” she added prudently. “I want to find this Dr. Rathbone. Dr. Rathbone. He’s just arrived in Baghdad. With a—with a—secretary.”

“I do not know,” said Marcus. “He does not stay at the Tio.”

The implication was clearly that anyone who did not stay at the Tio did not exist for Marcus.

“But there are other hotels,” persisted Victoria, “or perhaps he has a house?”

“Oh yes, there are other hotels. Babylonian Palace, Sennacherib, Zobeide Hotel. They are good hotels, yes, but they are not like the Tio.”

“I’m sure they’re not,” Victoria assured him. “But you don’t know if Dr. Rathbone is staying at one of them? There is some kind of society he runs—something to do with culture—and books.”

Marcus became quite serious at the mention of culture.

“It is what we need,” he said. “There must be much culture. Art and music, it is very nice, very nice indeed. I like violin sonatas myself if it is not very long.”

Whilst thoroughly agreeing with him, especially in regard to the end of the speech, Victoria realized that she was not getting any nearer to her objective. Conversation with Marcus was, she thought, most entertaining, and Marcus was a charming person in his childlike enthusiasm for life, but conversation with him reminded her of Alice in Wonderland’s endeavours to find a path that led to the hill. Every topic found them returning to the point of departure—Marcus!

She refused another drink and rose sadly to her feet. She felt slightly giddy. The cocktails had been anything but weak. She went out from the bar on to the terrace outside and stood by the railing looking across the river, when somebody spoke from behind her.

“Excuse me, but you’d better go and put a coat on. Dare say it seems like summer to you coming out from England, but it gets very cold about sundown.”

It was the Englishwoman who had been talking to Mrs. Clipp earlier. She had the hoarse voice of one who is in the habit of training and calling to sporting dogs. She wore a fur coat, had a rug over her knees and was sipping a whisky and soda.

“Oh thank you,” said Victoria and was about to escape hurriedly when her intentions were defeated.

“I must introduce myself. I’m Mrs. Cardew Trench.” (The implication was clearly: one of the Cardew Trenches.) “I believe you arrived with Mrs.—what’s her name—Hamilton Clipp.”

“Yes,” said Victoria, “I did.”

“She told me you were the niece of the Bishop of Llangow.”

Victoria rallied.

“Did she really?” she inquired with the correct trace of light amusement.

“Got it wrong, I suppose?”

Victoria smiled.

“Americans are bound to get some of our names wrong. It does sound a little like Llangow. My uncle,” said Victoria improvising rapidly, “is the Bishop of Languao?”

“Languao?”

“Yes—in the Pacific Archipelago. He’s a Colonial Bishop, of course.”

“Oh, a Colonial Bishop,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench, her voice falling at least three semitones.

As Victoria had anticipated: Mrs. Cardew Trench was magnificently unaware of Colonial Bishops.

“That explains it,” she added.

Victoria thought with pride that it explained it very well for a spur of the moment plunge!

“And what are you doing out here?” asked Mrs. Cardew Trench with that inexorable geniality that conceals natural curiosity of disposition.

“Looking for a young man I talked to for a few moments in a public square in London,” was hardly an answer that Victoria could give. She said, remembering the newspaper paragraph she had read, and her statement to Mrs. Clipp:

“I’m joining my uncle, Dr. Pauncefoot Jones.”

“Oh, so that’s who you are.” Mrs. Cardew Trench was clearly delighted at having “placed” Victoria. “He’s a charming little man, though a bit absentminded—still I suppose that’s only to be expected. Heard him lecture last year in London—excellent delivery—couldn’t understand a word of what it was all about, though. Yes, he passed through Baghdad about a fortnight ago. I think he mentioned some girls were coming out later in the season.”

Hurriedly, having established her status, Victoria chipped in with a question.

“Do you know if Dr. Rathbone is out here?” she asked.

“Just come out,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench. “I believe they’ve asked him to give a lecture at the Institute next Thursday. On ‘World Relationships and Brotherhood’—or something like that. All nonsense if you ask me. The

more you try to get people together, the more suspicious they get of each other. All this poetry and music and translating Shakespeare and Wordsworth into Arabic and Chinese and Hindustani. 'A primrose by the river's brim,' etc...what's the good of that to people who've never seen a primrose?"

"Where is he staying, do you know?"

"At the Babylonian Palace Hotel, I believe. But his headquarters are up near the Museum. The Olive Branch—ridiculous name. Full of young women in slacks with unwashed necks and spectacles."

"I know his secretary slightly," said Victoria.

"Oh yes, whatshisname Edward Thingummy—nice boy—too good for that long-haired racket—did well in the war, I hear. Still a job's a job, I suppose. Nice-looking boy—those earnest young women are quite fluttered by him, I fancy."

A pang of devastating jealousy pierced Victoria.

"The Olive Branch," she said. "Where did you say it was?"

"Up past the turning to the second bridge. One of the turnings off Rashid Street—tucked away rather. Not far from the Copper Bazaar."

"And how's Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones?" continued Mrs. Cardew Trench.

"Coming out soon? I hear she's been in poor health?"

But having got the information she wanted, Victoria was taking no more risks in invention. She glanced at her wristwatch and uttered an exclamation.

"Oh dear—I promised to wake Mrs. Clipp at half past six and help her to prepare for the journey. I must fly."

The excuse was true enough, though Victoria had substituted half past six for seven o'clock. She hurried upstairs quite exhilarated. Tomorrow she would get in touch with Edward at the Olive Branch. Earnest young women

with unwashed necks, indeed! They sounded most unattractive...Still, Victoria reflected uneasily that men are less critical of dingy necks than middle-aged hygienic Englishwomen are—especially if the owners of the said necks were gazing with large eyes of admiration and adoration at the male subject in question.

The evening passed rapidly. Victoria had an early meal in the dining room with Mrs. Hamilton Clipp, the latter talking nineteen to the dozen on every subject under the sun. She urged Victoria to come and pay a visit later—and Victoria noted down the address carefully, because, after all, one never knew...She accompanied Mrs. Clipp to Baghdad North Station, saw her safely ensconced in her compartment and was introduced to an acquaintance also travelling to Kirkuk who would assist Mrs. Clipp with her toilet on the following morning.

The engine uttered loud melancholy screams like a soul in distress, Mrs. Clipp thrust a thick envelope into Victoria's hand, said: "Just a little remembrance, Miss Jones, of our very pleasant companionship which I hope you will accept with my most grateful thanks."

Victoria said: "But it's really too kind of you, Mrs. Clipp," in a delighted voice, the engine gave a fourth and final supreme banshee wail of anguish and the train pulled slowly out of the station.

Victoria took a taxi from the station back to the hotel since she had not the faintest idea how to get back to it any other way and there did not seem anyone about whom she could ask.

On her return to the Tio, she ran up to her room and eagerly opened the envelope. Inside were a couple of pairs of nylon stockings.

Victoria at any other moment would have been enchanted—nylon stockings having been usually beyond the reach of her purse. At the moment, however, hard cash was what she had been hoping for. Mrs. Clipp, however had been far too delicate to think of giving her a five-dinar note. Victoria wished heartily that she had not been quite so delicate.

However, tomorrow there would be Edward. Victoria undressed, got into bed and in five minutes was fast asleep, dreaming that she was waiting at an aerodrome for Edward, but that he was held back from joining her by a spectacled girl who clasped him firmly round the neck while the aeroplane began slowly to move away....

Eleven

Victoria awoke to a morning of vivid sunshine. Having dressed, she went out onto the wide balcony outside her window. Sitting in a chair a little way along with his back to her was a man with curling grey hair growing down onto a muscular red brown neck. When the man turned his head sideways Victoria recognized, with a distinct feeling of surprise, Sir Rupert Crofton Lee. Why she should be so surprised she could hardly have said. Perhaps because she had assumed as a matter of course that a VIP such as Sir Rupert would have been staying at the Embassy and not at a hotel. Nevertheless there he was, staring at the Tigris with a kind of concentrated intensity. She noticed, even, that he had a pair of field glasses slung over the side of his chair. Possibly, she thought, he studied birds.

A young man whom Victoria had at one time thought attractive had been a bird enthusiast, and she had accompanied him on several weekend tramps, to be made to stand as though paralysed in wet woods and icy winds, for what seemed like hours, to be at last told in tones of ecstasy to look through the glasses at some drab-looking bird on a remote twig which in appearance as far as Victoria could see, compared unfavourably in bird appeal with a common robin or chaffinch.

Victoria made her way downstairs, encountering Marcus Tio on the terrace between the two buildings of the hotel.

“I see you’ve got Sir Rupert Crofton Lee staying here,” she said.

“Oh yes,” said Marcus, beaming, “he is a nice man—a very nice man.”

“Do you know him well?”

“No, this is the first time I see him. Mr. Shrivenham of the British Embassy bring him here last night. Mr. Shrivenham, he is very nice man, too. I know him very well.”

Proceeding in to breakfast Victoria wondered if there was anyone whom Marcus would not consider a very nice man. He appeared to exercise a wide charity.

After breakfast, Victoria started forth in search of the Olive Branch.

A London-bred Cockney, she had no idea of the difficulties involved in finding any particular place in a city such as Baghdad until she had started on her quest.

Coming across Marcus again on her way out, she asked him to direct her to the Museum.

“It is a very nice museum,” said Marcus, beaming. “Yes. Full of interesting, very very old things. Not that I have been there myself. But I have friends, archaeological friends, who stay here always when they come through Baghdad. Mr. Baker—Mr. Richard Baker, you know him? And Professor Kalzman? And Dr. Pauncefoot Jones—and Mr. and Mrs. McIntyre—they all come to the Tio. They are my friends. And they tell me about what is in the Museum. Very very interesting.”

“Where is it, and how do I get there?”

“You go straight along Rashid Street—a long way—past the turn to the Feisal Bridge and past Bank Street—you know Bank Street?”

“I don’t know anything,” said Victoria.

“And then there is another street—also going down to a bridge and it is along there on the right. You ask for Mr. Betoun Evans, he is English Adviser there—very nice man. And his wife, she is very nice, too, she came here as Transport Sergeant during the war. Oh, she is very very nice.”

“I don’t really want to go actually to the Museum,” said Victoria. “I want to find a place—a society—a kind of club called the Olive Branch.”

“If you want olives,” said Marcus, “I give you beautiful olives—very fine quality. They keep them especially for me—for the Tio Hotel. You see, I

send you some to your table tonight.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Victoria and escaped towards Rashid Street.

“To the left,” Marcus shouted after her, “not to the right. But it is a long way to the Museum. You had better take a taxi.”

“Would a taxi know where the Olive Branch was?”

“No, they do not know where anything is! You say to the driver left, right, stop, straight on—just where you want to go.”

“In that case, I might as well walk,” said Victoria.

She reached Rashid Street and turned to the left.

Baghdad was entirely unlike her idea of it. A crowded main thoroughfare thronged with people, cars hooting violently, people shouting, European goods for sale in the shop windows, hearty spitting all round her with prodigious throat clearing as a preliminary. No mysterious Eastern figures, most of the people wore tattered or shabby Western clothes, old army and air force tunics, the occasional shuffling black-robed and veiled figures were almost inconspicuous amongst the hybrid European styles of dress. Whining beggars came up to her—women with dirty babies in their arms. The pavement under her feet was uneven with occasional gaping holes.

She pursued her way feeling suddenly strange and lost and far from home. Here was no glamour of travel, only confusion.

She came at last to the Feisal Bridge, passed it and went on. In spite of herself she was intrigued by the curious mixture of things in the shop windows. Here were babies’ shoes and woollies, toothpaste and cosmetics, electric torches and china cups and saucers—all shown together. Slowly a kind of fascination came over her, the fascination of assorted merchandise coming from all over the world to meet the strange and varied wants of a mixed population.

She found the Museum, but not the Olive Branch. To one accustomed to finding her way about London it seemed incredible that here was no one she could ask. She knew no Arabic. Those shopkeepers who spoke to her in English as she passed, pressing their wares, presented blank faces when she asked for direction to the Olive Branch.

If one could only “ask a policeman,” but gazing at the policemen actively waving their arms, and blowing their whistles, she realized that here that would be no solution.

She went into a bookshop with English books in the window, but a mention of the Olive Branch drew only a courteous shrug and shake of the head. Regrettably they had no idea at all.

And then, as she walked along the street, a prodigious hammering and clanging came to her ears and peering down a long dim alley, she remembered that Mrs. Cardew Trench had said that the Olive Branch was near the Copper Bazaar. Here, at least, was the Copper Bazaar.

Victoria plunged in, and for the next three-quarters of an hour she forgot the Olive Branch completely. The Copper Bazaar fascinated her. The blow-lamps, the melting metal, the whole business of craftsmanship came like a revelation to the little Cockney used only to finished products stacked up for sale. She wandered at random through the souk, passed out of the Copper Bazaar, came to the gay striped horse blankets, and the cotton quilted bedcovers. Here European merchandise took on a totally different guise, in the arched cool darkness it had the exotic quality of something come from overseas, something strange and rare. Bales of cheap printed cottons in gay colours made a feast for the eyes.

Occasionally with a shout of Balek, Balek, a donkey or laden mule pushed past her, or men bearing great loads balanced on their backs. Little boys rushed up to her with trays slung round their necks.

“See, lady, elastic, good elastic, English elastic. Comb, English comb?”

The wares were thrust at her, close to her nose, with vehement urgings to buy. Victoria walked in a happy dream. This was really seeing the world. At

every turn of the vast arched cool world of alleyways you came to something totally unexpected—an alley of tailors, sitting stitching, with smart pictures of European men's tailoring; a line of watches and cheap jewellery. Bales of velvets and rich metal embroidered brocades, then a chance turn and you were walking down an alley of cheap and shoddy secondhand European clothes, quaint pathetic little faded jumpers and long straggly vests.

Then every now and then there were glimpses into vast quiet courtyards open to the sky.

She came to a vast vista of men's trouserings, with cross-legged dignified merchants in turbans sitting in the middle of their little square recesses.

“Balek!”

A heavily-laden donkey coming up behind her made Victoria turn aside into a narrow alleyway open to the sky that turned and twisted through tall houses. Walking along it she came, quite by chance, to the object of her search. Through an opening she looked into a small square courtyard and at the farther side of it an open doorway with THE OLIVE BRANCH on a huge sign and a rather impossible looking plaster bird holding an unrecognizable twig in its beak.

Joyously Victoria sped across the courtyard and in at the open door. She found herself in a dimly lit room with tables covered with books and periodicals and more books ranged round on shelves. It looked a little like a bookshop except that there were little groups of chairs arranged together here and there.

Out of the dimness a young woman came up to Victoria and said in careful English:

“What can I do for you, yes, please?”

Victoria looked at her. She wore corduroy trousers and an orange flannel shirt and had black dank hair cut in a kind of depressed bob. So far she would have looked more suited to Bloomsbury, but her face was not

Bloomsbury. It was a melancholy Levantine face with great sad dark eyes and a heavy nose.

“This is—is this—is—is Dr. Rathbone here?”

Maddening still not to know Edward’s surname! Even Mrs. Cardew Trench had called him Edward Thingummy.

“Yes. Dr. Rathbone. The Olive Branch. You wish to join us? Yes? That will be very nice.”

“Well, perhaps. I’d—can I see Dr. Rathbone, please?”

The young woman smiled in a tired way.

“We do not disturb. I have a form. I tell you all about everything. Then you sign your name. It is two dinars, please.”

“I’m not sure yet that I want to join,” said Victoria, alarmed at the mention of two dinars. “I’d like to see Dr. Rathbone—or his secretary. His secretary would do.”

“I explain. I explain to you everything. We all are friends here, friends together, friends for the future—reading very fine educational books—reciting poems each to other.”

“Dr. Rathbone’s secretary,” said Victoria loudly and clearly. “He particularly told me to ask for him.”

A kind of mulish sullenness came into the young woman’s face.

“Not today,” she said. “I explain—”

“Why not today? Isn’t he here? Isn’t Dr. Rathbone here?”

“Yais, Dr. Rathbone is here. He is upstairs. We do not disturb.”

A kind of Anglo-Saxon intolerance of foreigners swept over Victoria. Regrettably, instead of the Olive Branch creating friendly international

feelings, it seemed to be having the opposite effect as far as she was concerned.

“I have just arrived from England,” she said—and her accents were almost those of Mrs. Cardew Trench herself—“and I have a very important message for Dr. Rathbone which I must deliver to him personally. Please take me to him at once! I am sorry to disturb him, but I have got to see him.

“At once!” she added, to clinch matters.

Before an imperious Briton who means to get his or her own way, barriers nearly always fall. The young woman turned at once and led the way to the back of the room and up a staircase and along a gallery overlooking the courtyard. Here she stopped before a door and knocked. A man’s voice said, “Come in.”

Victoria’s guide opened the door and motioned to Victoria to pass in.

“It is a lady from En gland for you.”

Victoria walked in.

From behind a large desk covered with papers, a man got up to greet her.

He was an imposing-looking elderly man of about sixty with a high domed forehead and white hair. Benevolence, kindness and charm were the most apparent qualities of his personality. A producer of plays would have cast him without hesitation for the role of the great philanthropist.

He greeted Victoria with a warm smile and an outstretched hand.

“So you’ve just come out from England,” he said. “First visit East, eh?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what you think of it all... You must tell me sometime. Now let me see, have I met you before or not? I’m so shortsighted and you didn’t give your name.”

“You don’t know me,” said Victoria, “but I’m a friend of Edward’s.”

“A friend of Edward’s,” said Dr. Rathbone. “Why, that’s splendid. Does Edward know you’re in Baghdad?”

“Not yet,” said Victoria.

“Well, that will be a pleasant surprise for him when he gets back.”

“Back?” said Victoria, her voice falling.

“Yes, Edward’s at Basrah at the moment. I had to send him down there to see about some crates of books that have come out for us. There have been most vexatious delays in the Customs—we simply have not been able to get them cleared. The personal touch is the only thing, and Edward’s good at that sort of thing. He knows just when to charm and when to bully, and he won’t rest till he’s got the thing through. He’s a sticker. A fine quality in a young man. I think a lot of Edward.”

His eyes twinkled.

“But I don’t suppose I need to sing Edward’s praises to you, young lady?”

“When—when will Edward be back from Basrah?” asked Victoria faintly.

“Well—now that I couldn’t say, he won’t come back till he’s finished the job—and you can’t hurry things too much in this country. Tell me where you are staying and I’ll make sure he gets in touch with you as soon as he gets back.”

“I was wondering—” Victoria spoke desperately, aware of her financial plight. “I was wondering if—if I could do some work here?”

“Now that I do appreciate,” said Dr. Rathbone warmly. “Yes, of course you can. We need all the workers, all the help we can get. And especially English girls. Our work is going splendidly—quite splendidly—but there’s lots more to be done. Still, people are keen. I’ve got thirty voluntary helpers already—thirty—all of ’em as keen as mustard! If you’re really in earnest, you can be most valuable.”

The word voluntary struck unpleasantly on Victoria's ear.

"I really wanted a paid position," she said.

"Oh dear!" Dr. Rathbone's face fell. "That's rather more difficult. Our paid staff is very small—and for the moment, with the voluntary help, it's quite adequate."

"I can't afford not to take a job," explained Victoria. "I'm a competent shorthand typist," she added without a blush.

"I'm sure you're competent, my dear young lady, you radiate competence, if I may say so. But with us it's a question of £.s.d. But even if you take a job elsewhere, I hope you'll help us in your spare time. Most of our workers have their own regular jobs. I'm sure you'll find helping us really inspiring. There must be an end of all the savagery in the world, the wars, the misunderstandings, the suspicions. A common meeting ground, that's what we all need. Drama, art, poetry—the great things of the spirit—no room there for petty jealousies or hatreds."

"N-no," said Victoria doubtfully, recalling friends of hers who were actresses and artists and whose lives seemed to be obsessed by jealousy of the most trivial kind, and by hatreds of a peculiarly virulent intensity.

"I've had *A Midsummer Night's Dream* translated into forty different languages," said Dr. Rathbone. "Forty different sets of young people all reacting to the same wonderful piece of literature. Young people—that's the secret. I've no use for anybody but the young. Once the mind and spirit are muscle-bound, it's too late. No, it's the young who must get together. Take that girl downstairs, Catherine, the one who showed you up here. She's a Syrian from Damascus. You and she are probably about the same age. Normally you'd never come together, you'd have nothing in common. But at the Olive Branch you and she and many many others, Russians, Jewesses, Iraqis, Turkish girls, Armenians, Egyptians, Persians, all meet and like each other and read the same books and discuss pictures and music (we have excellent lecturers who come out) all of you finding out and being excited by encountering a different point of view—why, that's what the world is meant to be."

Victoria could not help thinking that Dr. Rathbone was slightly overoptimistic in assuming that all those divergent elements who were coming together would necessarily like each other. She and Catherine, for instance, had not liked each other at all. And Victoria strongly suspected that the more they saw of each other the greater their dislike would grow.

“Edward’s splendid,” said Dr. Rathbone. “Gets on with everybody. Better perhaps, with the girls than with the young men. The men students out here are apt to be difficult at first—suspicious—almost hostile. But the girls adore Edward, they’ll do anything for him. He and Catherine get on particularly well.”

“Indeed,” said Victoria coldly. Her dislike of Catherine grew even more intense.

“Well,” said Dr. Rathbone, smiling, “come and help us if you can.”

It was a dismissal. He pressed her hand warmly. Victoria went out of the room and down the stairs. Catherine was standing near the door talking to a girl who had just come in with a small suitcase in her hand. She was a good-looking dark girl, and just for a moment Victoria fancied that she had seen her before somewhere. But the girl looked at her without any sign of recognition. The two young women had been talking eagerly together in some language Victoria did not know. They stopped when she appeared and remained silent, staring at her. She walked past them to the door, forcing herself to say “Good-bye” politely to Catherine as she went out.

She found her way out from the winding alley into Rashid Street and made her way slowly back to the hotel, her eyes unseeing of the throngs around her. She tried to keep her mind from dwelling on her own predicament (penniless in Baghdad) by fixing her mind on Dr. Rathbone and the general setup of the Olive Branch. Edward had had an idea in London that there was something “fishy” about his job. What was fishy? Dr. Rathbone? Or the Olive Branch itself?

Victoria could hardly believe that there was anything fishy about Dr. Rathbone. He appeared to her to be one of those misguided enthusiasts who

insist on seeing the world in their own idealistic manner, regardless of realities.

What had Edward meant by fishy? He'd been very vague. Perhaps he didn't really know himself.

Could Dr. Rathbone be some kind of colossal fraud?

Victoria, fresh from the soothing charm of his manner, shook her head. His manner had certainly changed, ever so slightly, at the idea of paying her a salary. He clearly preferred people to work for nothing.

But that, thought Victoria, was a sign of common sense.

Mr. Greenholtz, for instance, would have felt just the same.

Twelve

I

Victoria arrived back at the Tio, rather footsore, to be hailed enthusiastically by Marcus who was sitting out on the grass terrace overlooking the river and talking to a thin rather shabby middle-aged man.

“Come and have a drink with us, Miss Jones. Martini—sidecar? This is Mr. Dakin. Miss Jones from England. Now then, my dear, what will you have?”

Victoria said she would have a sidecar “and some of those lovely nuts?” she suggested hopefully, remembering that nuts were nutritious.

“You like nuts. Jesus!” He gave the order in rapid Arabic. Mr. Dakin said in a sad voice that he would have a lemonade.

“Ah,” cried Marcus, “but that is ridiculous. Ah, here is Mrs. Cardew Trench. You know Mr. Dakin? What will you have?”

“Gin and lime,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench, nodding to Dakin in an offhand manner. “You look hot,” she added to Victoria.

“I’ve been walking round seeing the sights.”

When the drinks came, Victoria ate a large plateful of pistachio nuts and also some potato chips.

Presently, a short thickset man came up the steps and the hospitable Marcus hailed him in his turn. He was introduced to Victoria as Captain Crosbie, and by the way his slightly protuberant eyes goggled at her, Victoria gathered that he was susceptible to feminine charm.

“Just come out?” he asked her.

“Yesterday.”

“Thought I hadn’t seen you around.”

“She is very nice and beautiful, is she not?” said Marcus joyfully. “Oh yes, it is very nice to have Miss Victoria. I will give a party for her—a very nice party.”

“With baby chickens?” said Victoria hopefully.

“Yes, yes—and foie gras—Strasbourg foie gras—and perhaps caviare—and then we have a dish with fish—very nice—a fish from the Tigris, but all with sauce and mushrooms. And then there is a turkey stuffed in the way we have it at my home—with rice and raisins and spice—and all cooked so! Oh it is very good—but you must eat very much of it—not just a tiny spoonful. Or if you like it better you shall have a steak—a really big steak and tender—I see to it. We will have a long dinner that goes on for hours. It will be very nice. I do not eat myself—I only drink.”

“That will be lovely,” said Victoria in a faint voice. The description of these viands made her feel quite giddy with hunger. She wondered if Marcus really meant to give this party and if so, how soon it could possibly happen.

“Thought you’d gone to Basrah,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench to Crosbie.

“Got back yesterday,” said Crosbie.

He looked up at the balcony.

“Who’s the bandit?” he asked. “Feller in fancy dress in the big hat.”

“That, my dear, is Sir Rupert Crofton Lee,” said Marcus. “Mr. Shrivenham brought him here from the Embassy last night. He is a very nice man, very distinguished traveller. He rides on camels over the Sahara, and climbs up mountains. It is very uncomfortable and dangerous, that kind of life. I should not like it myself.”

“Oh he’s that chap, is he?” said Crosbie. “I’ve read his book.”

“I came over on the plane with him,” said Victoria.

Both men, or so it seemed to her, looked at her with interest.

“He’s frightfully stuck up and pleased with himself,” said Victoria with disparagement.

“Knew his aunt in Simla,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench. “The whole family is like that. Clever as they make them, but can’t help boasting of it.”

“He’s been sitting out there doing nothing all the morning,” said Victoria with slight disapproval.

“It is his stomach,” explained Marcus. “Today he cannot eat anything. It is sad.”

“I can’t think,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench, “why you’re the size you are, Marcus, when you never eat anything.”

“It is the drink,” said Marcus. He sighed deeply. “I drink far too much. Tonight my sister and her husband come. I will drink and drink almost until morning.” He sighed again, then uttered his usual sudden roar. “Jesus! Jesus! Bring the same again.”

“Not for me,” said Victoria hastily, and Mr. Dakin refused also, finishing up his lemonade, and ambling gently away while Crosbie went up to his room.

Mrs. Cardew Trench flicked Dakin’s glass with her fingernail. “Lemonade as usual?” she said. “Bad sign, that.”

Victoria asked why it was a bad sign.

“When a man only drinks when he’s alone.”

“Yes, my dear,” said Marcus. “That is so.”

“Does he really drink, then?” asked Victoria.

“That’s why he’s never got on,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench. “Just manages to keep his job and that’s all.”

“But he is a very nice man,” said the charitable Marcus.

“Pah,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench. “He’s a wet fish. Potters and dillydallies about—no stamina—no grip on life. Just one more Englishman who’s come out East and gone to seed.”

Thanking Marcus for the drink and again refusing a second, Victoria went up to her room, removed her shoes, and lay down on her bed to do some serious thinking. The three pounds odd to which her capital had dwindled was, she fancied, already due to Marcus for board and lodging. Owing to his generous disposition, and if she could sustain life mainly on alcoholic liquor assisted by nuts, olives and chip potatoes, she might solve the purely alimentary problem of the next few days. How long would it be before Marcus presented her with her bill, and how long would he allow it to run unpaid? She had no idea. He was not really, she thought, careless in business matters. She ought, of course, to find somewhere cheaper to live. But how would she find out where to go? She ought to find herself a job—quickly. But where did one apply for jobs? What kind of a job? Whom could she ask about looking for one? How terribly handicapping to one’s style it was to be dumped down practically penniless in a foreign city where one didn’t know the ropes. With just a little knowledge of the terrain, Victoria felt confident (as always) that she could hold her own. When would Edward get back from Basrah? Perhaps (horror) Edward would have forgotten all about her. Why on earth had she come rushing out to Baghdad in this asinine way? Who and what was Edward after all? Just another young man with an engaging grin and an attractive way of saying things. And what—what—what was his surname? If she knew that, she might wire him—no good, she didn’t even know where he was staying. She didn’t know anything—that was the trouble—that was what was cramping her style.

And there was no one to whom she could go for advice. Not Marcus who was kind but never listened. Not Mrs. Cardew Trench (who had had suspicions from the first). Not Mrs. Hamilton Clipp who had vanished to Kirkuk. Not Dr. Rathbone.

She must get some money—or get a job—any job. Look after children, stick stamps on in an office, serve in a restaurant...Otherwise they would

send her to a Consul and she would be repatriated to England and never see Edward again....

At this point, worn out with emotion, Victoria fell asleep.

II

She awoke some hours later and deciding that she might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, went down to the restaurant and worked her way solidly through the entire menu—a generous one. When she had finished, she felt slightly like a boa constrictor, but definitely heartened.

“It’s no good worrying anymore,” thought Victoria. “I’ll leave it all till tomorrow. Something may turn up, or I may think of something, or Edward may come back.”

Before going to bed she strolled out onto the terrace by the river. Since in the feelings of those living in Baghdad it was arctic winter nobody else was out there except one of the waiters, who was leaning over a railing staring down into the water, and he sprang away guiltily when Victoria appeared and hurried back into the hotel by the service door.

Victoria, to whom, coming from England, it appeared to be an ordinary summer night with a slight nip in the air, was enchanted by the Tigris seen in the moonlight with the farther bank looking mysterious and Eastern with its fringes of palms.

“Well, anyway, I’ve got here,” said Victoria, cheering up a good deal, “and I’ll manage somehow. Something is bound to turn up.”

With this Micawber-like pronouncement, she went up to bed, and the waiter slipped quietly out again and resumed his task of attaching a knotted rope so that it hung down to the river’s edge.

Presently another figure came out of the shadows and joined him. Mr. Dakin said in a low voice:

“All in order?”

“Yes, sir, nothing suspicious to report.”

Having completed the task to his satisfaction, Mr. Dakin retreated into the shadows, exchanged his waiters’ white coat for his own nondescript blue pinstripe and ambled gently along the terrace until he stood outlined against the water’s edge just where the steps led up from the street below.

“Getting pretty chilly in the evenings now,” said Crosbie, strolling out from the bar and down to join him. “Suppose you don’t feel it so much, coming from Tehran.”

They stood there for a moment or two smoking. Unless they raised their voices, nobody could overhear them. Crosbie said quietly:

“Who’s the girl?”

“Niece apparently of the archaeologist, Pauncefoot Jones.”

“Oh well—that should be all right. But coming on the same plane as Crofton Lee—”

“It’s certainly as well,” said Dakin, “to take nothing for granted.”

The men smoked in silence for a few moments.

Crosbie said: “You really think it’s advisable to shift the thing from the Embassy to here?”

“I think so, yes.”

“In spite of the whole thing being taped down to the smallest detail.”

“It was taped down to the smallest detail in Basrah—and that went wrong.”

“Oh, I know. Salah Hassan was poisoned, by the way.”

“Yes—he would be. Were there any signs of an approach to the Consulate?”

“I suspect there may have been. Bit of a shindy there, Chap drew a revolver.” He paused and added, “Richard Baker grabbed him and disarmed him.”

“Richard Baker,” said Dakin thoughtfully.

“Know him? He’s—”

“Yes, I know him.”

There was a pause and then Dakin said:

“Improvisation. That’s what I’m banking on. If we have, as you say, got everything taped—and our plans are known, then it’s easy for the other side to have got us taped, too. I very much doubt if Carmichael would even so much as get near the Embassy—and even if he reached it—” He shook his head.

“Here, only you and I and Crofton Lee are wise to what’s going on.”

“They’ll know Crofton Lee moved here from the Embassy.”

“Oh of course. That was inevitable. But don’t you see, Crosbie, that whatever show they put up against our improvisation has got to be improvised, too. It’s got to be hastily thought of and hastily arranged. It’s got to come, so to speak, from the outside. There’s no question here of someone established in the Tio six months ago waiting. The Tio’s never been in the picture until now. There’s never been any idea or suggestion of using the Tio as the rendezvous.”

He looked at his watch. “I’ll go up now and see Crofton Lee.”

Dakin’s raised hand had no need to tap on Sir Rupert’s door. It opened silently to let him in.

The traveller had only one small reading lamp alight and had placed his chair beside it. As he sat down again, he gently slipped a small automatic pistol onto the table within reach of his hand.

He said: “What about it, Dakin? Do you think he’ll come?”

“I think so, yes, Sir Rupert.” Then he said, “You’ve never met him have you?”

The other shook his head.

“No. I’m looking forward to meeting him tonight. That young man, Dakin, must have got guts.”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Dakin in his flat voice. “He’s got guts.”

He sounded a little surprised at the fact needing to be stated.

“I don’t mean only courage,” said the other. “Lots of courage in the war—magnificent. I mean—”

“Imagination?” suggested Dakin.

“Yes. To have the guts to believe something that isn’t in the least degree probable. To risk your life finding out that a ridiculous story isn’t ridiculous at all. That takes something that the modern young man usually hasn’t got. I hope he’ll come.”

“I think he’ll come,” said Mr. Dakin.

Sir Rupert glanced at him sharply.

“You’ve got it all sewn up?”

“Crosbie’s on the balcony, and I shall be watching the stairs. When Carmichael reaches you, tap on the wall and I’ll come in.”

Crofton Lee nodded.

Dakin went softly out of the room. He went to the left and onto the balcony and walked to the extreme corner. Here, too, a knotted rope dropped over the edge and came to earth in the shade of a eucalyptus tree and some judas bushes.

Mr. Dakin went back past Crofton Lee's door and into his own room beyond. His room had a second door in it leading onto the passage behind the rooms and it opened within a few feet of the head of the stairs. With this door unobtrusively ajar, Mr. Dakin settled down to his vigil.

It was about four hours later that a gufa, that primitive craft of the Tigris, dropped gently downstream and came to shore on the mudflat beneath the Tio Hotel. A few moments later a slim figure swarmed up the rope and crouched amongst the judas trees.

Thirteen

It had been Victoria's intention to go to bed and to sleep and to leave all problems until the morning, but having already slept most of the afternoon, she found herself devastatingly wide awake.

In the end she switched on the light, finished a magazine story she had been reading in the plane, darned her stockings, tried on her new nylons, wrote out several different advertisements requiring employment (she could ask tomorrow where these should be inserted), wrote three or four tentative letters to Mrs. Hamilton Clipp, each setting out a different and more ingenious set of unforeseen circumstances which had resulted in her being "stranded" in Baghdad, sketched out one or two telegrams appealing for help to her sole surviving relative, a very old, crusty, and unpleasant gentleman in the North of England who had never helped anybody in his life; tried out a new style of hairdo, and finally with a sudden yawn decided that at last she really was desperately sleepy and ready for bed and repose.

It was at this moment that without any warning her bedroom door swung open, a man slipped in, turned the key in the lock behind him and said to her urgently:

"For God's sake hide me somewhere—quickly...."

Victoria's reactions were never slow. In a twinkling of an eye she had noted the laboured breathing, the fading voice, the way the man held an old red knitted scarf bunched on his breast with a desperate clutching hand. And she rose immediately in response to the adventure.

The room did not lend itself to many hiding places. There was the wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a table and the rather pretentious dressing table. The bed was a large one—almost a double bed and memories of childish hide-and-seek made Victoria's reaction prompt.

"Quick," she said. She swept off pillows, and raised sheet and blanket. The man lay across the top of the bed. Victoria pulled sheet and blanket over

him, dumped the pillows on top and sat down herself on the side of the bed.

Almost immediately there came a low insistent knocking on the door.

Victoria called out, “Who is it?” in a faint, alarmed voice.

“Please,” said a man’s voice outside. “Open, please. It is the police.”

Victoria crossed the room, pulling her dressing gown round her. As she did so, she noticed the man’s red knitted scarf was lying on the floor and she caught it up and swept it into a drawer, then she turned the key and opened the door of her room a small way, peering out with an expression of alarm.

A dark-haired young man in a mauve pinstripe suit was standing outside and behind him was a man in police officer’s uniform.

“What’s the matter?” Victoria asked, letting a quaver creep into her voice.

The young man smiled brilliantly and spoke in very passable English.

“I am so sorry, miss, to disturb you at this hour,” he said, “but we have a criminal escaped. He has run into this hotel. We must look in every room. He is a very dangerous man.”

“Oh dear!” Victoria fell back, opening the door wide. “Do come in, please, and look. How very frightening. Look in the bathroom, please. Oh! and the wardrobe—and, I wonder, would you mind looking under the bed? He might have been there all evening.”

The search was very rapid.

“No, he is not here.”

“You’re sure he’s not under the bed? No, how silly of me. He couldn’t be in here at all. I locked the door when I went to bed.”

“Thank you, miss, and good evening.”

The young man bowed and withdrew with his uniformed assistant.

Victoria, following him to the door, said:

“I’d better lock it again, hadn’t I? To be safe.”

“Yes, that will be best, certainly. Thank you.”

Victoria relocked the door and stood by it for some few minutes. She heard the police officers knock in the same way on the door the other side of the passage, heard the door open, an exchange of remarks and the indignant hoarse voice of Mrs. Cardew Trench, and then the door closing. It reopened a few minutes later, the sound of their footsteps moved down the passage. The next knock came from much farther away.

Victoria turned and walked across the room to the bed. It was borne in upon her that she had probably been excessively foolish. Led away by the romantic spirit, and by the sound of her own language, she had impulsively lent aid to what was probably an extremely dangerous criminal. A disposition to be on the side of the hunted against the hunter sometimes brings unpleasant consequences. Oh well, thought Victoria, I’m in for it now, anyway!

Standing beside the bed she said curtly:

“Get up.”

There was no movement, and Victoria said sharply, though without raising her voice:

“They’ve gone. You can get up now.”

But still there was no sign of movement from under the slightly raised hump of pillows. Impatiently, Victoria threw them all off.

The young man lay just as she had left him. But now his face was a queer greyish colour and his eyes were closed.

Then, with a sharp catch in her breath, Victoria noticed something else—a bright red stain seeping through onto the blanket.

“Oh, no,” said Victoria, almost as though pleading with someone. “Oh, no—no!”

And as though in recognition of that plea the wounded man opened his eyes. He stared at her, stared as though from very far away at some object he was not quite certain of seeing.

His lips parted—the sound was so faint that Victoria scarcely heard.

She bent down.

“What?”

She heard this time. With difficulty, great difficulty, the young man said two words. Whether she heard them correctly or not Victoria did not know. They seemed to her quite nonsensical and without meaning. What he said was, “Lucifer—Basrah....”

The eyelids drooped and flickered over the wide anxious eyes. He said one word more—a name. Then his head jerked back a little and he lay still.

Victoria stood quite still, her heart beating violently. She was filled now with an intense pity and anger. What to do next she had no idea. She must call someone—get someone to come. She was alone here with a dead man and sooner or later the police would want an explanation.

Whilst her brain worked rapidly on the situation, a small sound made her turn her head. The key had fallen out of her bedroom door, and whilst she stared at it, she heard the sound of the lock turning. The door opened and Mr. Dakin came in, carefully closing the door behind him.

He walked across to her saying quietly:

“Nice work, my dear. You think quickly. How is he?”

With a catch in her voice Victoria said:

“I think he’s—he’s dead.”

She saw the other's face alter, caught just a flash of intense anger, then his face was just as she had seen it the day before—only now it seemed to her that the indecision and flabbiness of the man had vanished, giving place to something quite different.

He bent down—and gently loosened the ragged tunic.

“Very neatly stabbed through the heart,” said Dakin as he straightened up. “He was a brave lad—and a clever one.”

Victoria found her voice.

“The police came. They said he was a criminal. Was he a criminal?”

“No. He wasn't a criminal.”

“Were they—were they the police?”

“I don't know,” said Dakin. “They may have been. It's all the same.”

Then he asked her:

“Did he say anything—before he died?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“He said Lucifer—and then Basrah. And then after a pause he said a name—a French name it sounded like—but I mayn't have got it right.”

“What did it sound like to you?”

“I think it was Lefarge.”

“Lefarge,” said Dakin thoughtfully.

“What does it all mean?” said Victoria, and added with some dismay: “And what am I to do?”

“We must get you out of it as far as we can,” said Dakin. “As for what it’s all about, I’ll come back and talk to you later. The first thing to do is to get hold of Marcus. It’s his hotel and Marcus has a great deal of sense, though one doesn’t always realize it in talking to him. I’ll get hold of him. He won’t have gone to bed. It’s only half past one. He seldom goes to bed before two o’clock. Just attend to your appearance before I bring him in. Marcus is very susceptible to beauty in distress.”

He left the room. As though in a dream she moved over to the dressing table, combed back her hair, made up her face to a becoming pallor and collapsed on to a chair as she heard footsteps approaching. Dakin came in without knocking. Behind him came the bulk of Marcus Tio.

This time Marcus was serious. There was not the usual smile on his face.

“Now, Marcus,” said Mr. Dakin, “you must do what you can about this. It’s been a terrible shock to this poor girl. The fellow burst in, collapsed—she’s got a very kind heart and she hid him from the police. And now he’s dead. She oughtn’t to have done it, perhaps, but girls are softhearted.”

“Of course she did not like the police,” said Marcus. “Nobody likes the police. I do not like the police. But I have to stand well with them because of my hotel. You want me to square them with money?”

“We just want to get the body away quietly.”

“That is very nice, my dear. And I, too, I do not want a body in my hotel. But it is, as you say, not so easy to do?”

“I think it could be managed,” said Dakin. “You’ve got a doctor in your family, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Paul, my sister’s husband, is a doctor. He is a very nice boy. But I do not want him to get into trouble.”

“He won’t,” said Dakin. “Listen, Marcus. We move the body from Miss Jones’ room across into my room. That lets her out of it. Then I use your telephone. In ten minutes’ time a young man reels into the hotel from the

street. He is very drunk, he clutches at his side. He demands me at the top of his voice. He staggers into my room and collapses. I come out and call you and ask for a doctor. You produce your brother-in-law. He sends for an ambulance and he goes in it with this drunken friend of mine. Before they get to the hospital my friend is dead. He has been stabbed. That is all right for you. He has been stabbed in the street before coming into your hotel.”

“My brother-in-law takes away the body—and the young man who plays the part of the drunkard, he goes away quietly in the morning perhaps?”

“That’s the idea.”

“And there is no body found in my hotel? And Miss Jones she does not get any worry or annoyance? I think, my dear, that that is all a very good idea.”

“Good, then if you’ll make sure the coast is clear, I’ll get the body across to my room. Those servants of yours potter round the corridors half the night. Go along to your room and raise a shindy. Get them all running to fetch you things.”

Marcus nodded and left the room.

“You’re a strong girl,” said Dakin. “Can you manage to help me to carry him across the corridor to my room?”

Victoria nodded. Between them they lifted the limp body, carried it across the deserted corridor (in the distance Marcus’ voice could be heard upraised in furious anger) and laid it on Dakin’s bed.

Dakin said:

“Got a pair of scissors? Then cut off the top of your under-blanket where it’s stained. I don’t think the stain’s gone through to the mattress. The tunic soaked up most of it. I’ll come along to you in about an hour. Here, wait a minute, take a pull from this flask of mine.”

Victoria obeyed.

“Good girl,” said Dakin. “Now go back to your room. Turn out the light. As I said, I’ll be along in about an hour.”

“And you’ll tell me what it all means?”

He gave her a long rather peculiar stare but did not answer her question.

Fourteen

Victoria lay in bed with her light out, listening through the darkness. She heard sounds of loud drunken altercation. Heard a voice declaring: “Felt I got to look you up, ole man. Had a row with a fellow outside.” She heard bells ring. Heard other voices. Heard a good deal of commotion. Then came a stretch of comparative silence—except for the far-off playing of Arab music on a gramophone in somebody’s room. When it seemed to her as though hours had passed, she heard the gentle opening of her door and sat up in bed and switched on the bedside lamp.

“That’s right,” said Dakin approvingly.

He brought a chair up to the bedside and sat down in it. He sat there staring at her in the considering manner of a physician making a diagnosis.

“Tell me what it’s all about?” demanded Victoria.

“Suppose,” said Dakin, “that you tell me all about yourself first. What are you doing here? Why did you come to Baghdad?”

Whether it was the events of the night, or whether it was something in Dakin’s personality (Victoria thought afterwards that it was the latter), Victoria for once did not launch out on an inspired and meretricious account of her presence in Baghdad. Quite simply and straightforwardly she told him everything. Her meeting with Edward, her determination to get to Baghdad, the miracle of Mrs. Hamilton Clipp, and her own financial destitution.

“I see,” said Dakin when she had finished.

He was silent for a moment before he spoke.

“Perhaps I’d like to keep you out of this. I’m not sure. But the point is, you can’t be kept out of it! You’re in it, whether I like it or not. And as you’re in it, you might as well work for me.”

“You’ve got a job for me?” Victoria sat up in bed, her cheeks bright with anticipation.

“Perhaps. But not the kind of job you’re thinking of. This is a serious job, Victoria. And it’s dangerous.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Victoria cheerfully. She added doubtfully, “It’s not dishonest, is it? Because though I know I tell an awful lot of lies, I wouldn’t really like to do anything that was dishonest.”

Dakin smiled a little.

“Strangely enough, your capacity to think up a convincing lie quickly is one of your qualifications for the job. No, it’s not dishonest. On the contrary, you are enlisted in the cause of law and order. I’m going to put you in the picture—only in a general kind of way, but so that you can understand fully what it is you are doing and exactly what the dangers are. You seem to be a sensible young woman and I don’t suppose you’ve thought much about world politics which is just as well, because as Hamlet very wisely remarked, ‘There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’”

“I know everybody says there’s going to be another war sooner or later,” said Victoria.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Dakin. “Why does everybody say so, Victoria?”

She frowned. “Why, because Russia—the Communists—America—” she stopped.

“You see,” said Dakin. “Those aren’t your own opinions or words. They’re picked up from newspapers and casual talk, and the wireless. There are two divergent points of view dominating different parts of the world, that is true enough. And they are represented loosely in the public mind as ‘Russia and the Communists’ and ‘America.’ Now the only hope for the future, Victoria, lies in peace, in production, in constructive activities and not destructive ones. Therefore everything depends on those who hold those two divergent viewpoints, either agreeing to differ and each contenting themselves with their respective spheres of activity, or else finding a mutual

basis for agreement, or at least toleration. Instead of that, the opposite is happening, a wedge is being driven in the whole time to force two mutually suspicious groups farther and farther apart. Certain things led one or two people to believe that this activity comes from a third party or group working under cover and so far absolutely unsuspected by the world at large. Whenever there is a chance of agreement being reached or any sign of dispersal of suspicion, some incident occurs to plunge one side back in distrust, or the other side into definite hysterical fear. These things are not accidents, Victoria, they are deliberately produced for a calculated effect.”

“But why do you think so and who’s doing it?”

“One of the reasons we think so is because of money. The money, you see, is coming from the wrong sources. Money, Victoria, is always the great clue to what is happening in the world. As a physician feels your pulse, to get a clue to your state of health, so money is the lifeblood that feeds any great movement or cause. Without it, the movement can’t make headway. Now here, there are very large sums of money involved and although very cleverly and artfully camouflaged, there is definitely something wrong about where the money comes from and where it is going. A great many unofficial strikes, various threats to Governments in Europe who show signs of recovery, are staged and brought into being by Communists, earnest workers for their cause—but the funds for these measures do not come from Communist sources, and traced back, they come from very strange and unlikely quarters. In the same way an increasing wave of fear of Communism, of almost hysterical panic, is arising in America and in other countries, and here, too, the funds are not coming from the appropriate quarter—it is not Capitalist money, though it naturally passes through Capitalist hands. A third point, enormous sums of money seem to be going completely out of circulation. As much as though—to put it simply—you spent your salary every week on things—bracelets or tables or chairs—and those things then disappeared or passed out of ordinary circulation and sight. All over the world a great demand for diamonds and other precious stones has arisen. They change hands a dozen or more times until finally they disappear and cannot be traced.

“This, of course, is only a vague sketch. The upshot is that somewhere a third group of people whose aim is as yet obscure, as fomenting strife and misunderstanding and are engaging in cleverly camouflaged money and jewel transactions for their own ends. We have reason to believe that in every country there are agents of this group, some established there many years ago. Some are in very high and respectable positions, others are playing humble parts, but all are working with one unknown end in view. In substance, it is exactly like the Fifth Column activities at the beginning of the last war, only this time it is on a worldwide scale.”

“But who are these people?” Victoria demanded.

“They are not, we think, of any special nationality. What they want is, I fear, the betterment of the world! The delusion that by force you can impose the Millennium on the human race is one of the most dangerous delusions in existence. Those who are out only to line their own pockets can do little harm—mere greed defeats its own ends. But the belief in a superstratum of human beings—in Supermen to rule the rest of the decadent world—that, Victoria, is the most evil of all beliefs. For when you say, ‘I am not as other men’—you have lost the two most valuable qualities we have ever tried to attain: humility and brotherhood.”

He coughed. “Well, I mustn’t preach a sermon. Let me just explain to you what we do know. There are various centres of activity. One in the Argentine, one in Canada—certainly one or more in the United States of America, and I should imagine, though we can’t tell, one in Russia. And now we come to a very interesting phenomenon.

“In the past two years, twenty-eight promising young scientists of various nationalities have quietly faded out of their background. The same thing has happened with constructional engineers, with aviators, with electricians and many other skilled trades. These disappearances have this in common: those concerned are all young, ambitious, and all without close ties. Besides those we know of, there must be many many more, and we are beginning to guess at something of what they are accomplishing.”

Victoria listened, her brows drawn together.

“You might say it was impossible in these days for anything to go on in any country unbeknownst to the rest of the world. I do not, of course, mean undercover activities; those may go on anywhere. But anything on a large scale of up-to-date production. And yet there are still obscure parts of the world, remote from trade routes, cut off by mountains and deserts, in the midst of peoples who still have the power to bar out strangers and which are never known or visited except by a solitary and exceptional traveller. Things could go on there the news of which would never penetrate to the outside world, or only as a dim and ridiculous rumour.

“I won’t particularize the spot. It can be reached from China—and nobody knows what goes on in the interior of China. It can be reached from the Himalayas, but the journey there, save to the initiated, is hard and long to travel. Machinery and personnel dispatched from all over the globe reaches it after being diverted from its ostensible destination. The mechanics of it all need not be gone into.

“But one man got interested in following up a certain trail. He was an unusual man, a man who has friends and contacts throughout the East. He was born in Kashgar and he knows a score of local dialects and languages. He suspected and he followed up the trail. What he heard was so incredible that when he got back to civilization and reported it he was not believed. He admitted that he had had fever and he was treated as a man who had had delirium.

“Only two people believed his story. One was myself. I never object to believing impossible things—they’re so often true. The other—” he hesitated.

“Yes?” said Victoria.

“The other was Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, a great traveller, and a man who had himself travelled through these remote regions and who knew something about their possibilities.

“The upshot of it all was that Carmichael, that’s my man, decided to go and find out for himself. It was a desperate and hazardous journey, but he was as well equipped as any man to carry it through. That was nine months

back. We heard nothing until a few weeks ago and then news came through. He was alive and he'd got what he went to get. Definite proof.

"But the other side were on to him. It was vital to them that he should never get back with his proofs. And we've had ample evidence of how the whole system is penetrated and infiltrated with their agents. Even in my own department there are leaks. And some of those leaks, Heaven help us, are at a very high level.

"Every frontier has been watched for him. Innocent lives have been sacrificed in mistake for his—they don't set much store by human life. But somehow or other he got through unscathed—until tonight."

"Then that was who—he was?"

"Yes, my dear. A very brave and indomitable young man."

"But what about the proofs? Did they get those?"

A very slow smile showed on Dakin's tired face.

"I don't think they did. No, knowing Carmichael, I'm pretty sure they didn't. But he died without being able to tell us where those proofs are and how to get hold of them. I think he probably tried to say something when he was dying that should give us the clue." He repeated slowly, "Lucifer—Basrah—Lefarge. He'd been in Basrah—tried to report at the Consulate and narrowly missed being shot. It's possible that he left the proofs somewhere in Basrah. What I want you to do, Victoria, is to go there and try to find out."

"Me?"

"Yes. You've no experience. You don't know what you're looking for. But you heard Carmichael's last words and they may suggest something to you when you get there. Who knows—you may have beginner's luck?"

"I'd love to go to Basrah," said Victoria eagerly.

Dakin smiled.

“Suits you because your young man is there, eh? That’s all right. Good camouflage, too. Nothing like a genuine love affair for camouflage. You go to Basrah, keep your eyes and ears open and look about you. I can’t give you any instructions for how to set about things—in fact I’d much rather not. You seem a young woman with plenty of ingenuity of your own. What the words Lucifer and Lefarge mean, assuming that you heard correctly, I don’t know. I’m inclined to agree with you that Lefarge must be a name. Look out for that name.”

“How do I get to Basrah?” said Victoria in a businesslike way. “And what do I use for money?”

Dakin took out his pocketbook and handed her a wad of paper money.

“That’s what you use for money. As for how you get to Basrah, fall into conversation with that old trout Mrs. Cardew Trench tomorrow morning, say you’re anxious to visit Basrah before you go off to this Dig you’re pretending to work at. Ask her about a hotel. She’ll tell you at once you must stay at the Consulate and will send a telegram to Mrs. Clayton. You’ll probably find your Edward there. The Claytons keep open house—everyone who passes through stays with them. Beyond that, I can’t give you any tips except one. If—er—anything unpleasant happens, if you’re asked what you know and who put you up to what you’re doing—don’t try and be heroic. Spill the beans at once.”

“Thank you very much,” said Victoria gratefully. “I’m an awful coward about pain, and if anyone were to torture me I’m afraid I shouldn’t hold out.”

“They won’t bother to torture you,” said Mr. Dakin. “Unless some sadistic element enters in. Torture’s very old-fashioned. A little prick with a needle and you answer every question truthfully without realizing you’re doing it. We live in a scientific age. That’s why I didn’t want you to get grand ideas of secrecy. You won’t be telling them anything they don’t know already. They’ll be wise to me after this evening—bound to be. And to Rupert Crofton Lee.”

“What about Edward? Do I tell him?”

“That I must leave to you. Theoretically, you’re to hold your tongue about what you’re doing to everybody. Practically!” His eyebrows went up quizzically. “You can put him in danger, too. There’s that aspect of it. Still, I gather he had a good record in the Air Force. I don’t suppose danger will worry him. Two heads are often better than one. So he thinks there’s something fishy about this ‘Olive Branch’ he’s working for? That’s interesting—very interesting.”

“Why?”

“Because we think so, too,” said Dakin.

Then he added:

“Just two parting tips. First, if you don’t mind my saying so, don’t tell too many different kinds of lies. It’s harder to remember and live up to. I know you’re a bit of a virtuoso, but keep it simple, is my advice.”

“I’ll remember,” said Victoria with becoming humility. “And what’s the other tip?”

“Just keep your ears strained for any mention of a young woman called Anna Scheele.”

“Who is she?”

“We don’t know much about her. We could do with knowing a little more.”

Fifteen

I

“Of course you must stay at the Consulate,” said Mrs. Cardew Trench.

“Nonsense, my dear—you can’t stay at the Airport Hotel. The Claytons will be delighted. I’ve known them for years. We’ll send a wire and you can go down on tonight’s train. They know Dr. Pauncefoot Jones quite well.”

Victoria had the grace to blush. The Bishop of Llangow, alias the Bishop of Languao was one thing, a real flesh and blood Dr. Pauncefoot Jones was quite another.

“I suppose,” thought Victoria guiltily, “I could be sent to prison for that—false pretences or something.”

Then she cheered herself up by reflecting that it was only if you attempted to obtain money by false statements that the rigours of the law were set in motion. Whether this was really so or not, Victoria did not know, being as ignorant of the law as most average people, but it had a cheering sound.

The train journey had all the fascination of novelty—to Victoria’s idea the train was hardly an express—but she had begun to feel conscious of her Western impatience.

A Consular car met her at the station and she was driven to the Consulate. The car drove in through big gates into a delightful garden and drew up before a flight of steps leading up to a balcony surrounding the house. Mrs. Clayton, a smiling energetic woman, came through the swinging wire mesh door to meet her.

“We’re so pleased to see you,” she said. “Basrah’s really delightful this time of year and you oughtn’t to leave Iraq without seeing it. Luckily there’s no one much here just at the moment—sometimes we just don’t know where to turn so as to fit people in, but there’s no one here now except Dr.

Rathbone's young man who's quite charming. You've just missed Richard Baker, by the way. He left before I got Mrs. Cardew Trench's telegram."

Victoria had no idea who Richard Baker was—but it seemed fortunate he had left when he did.

"He had been down to Kuwait for a couple of days," continued Mrs. Clayton. "Now, that's a place you ought to see—before it's spoilt. I dare say it soon will be. Every place gets ruined sooner or later. What would you like first—a bath or some coffee?"

"A bath, please," said Victoria gratefully.

"How's Mrs. Cardew Trench? This is your room and the bathroom's along here. Is she an old friend of yours?"

"Oh no," said Victoria truthfully. "I've only just met her."

"And I suppose she turned you inside out in the first quarter of an hour? She's a terrific gossip as I expect you've gathered. Got quite a mania for knowing all about everybody. But she's quite good company and a really first-class bridge player. Now are you sure you wouldn't like some coffee or something first?"

"No, really."

"Good—then I'll see you later. Have you got everything you want?"

Mrs. Clayton buzzed away like a cheerful bee, and Victoria took a bath, and attended to her face and her hair with the meticulous care of a young woman who is shortly going to be reunited to a young man who has taken her fancy.

If possible, Victoria hoped to meet Edward alone. She did not think that he would make any tactless remarks—fortunately he knew her as Jones and the additional Pauncefoot would probably cause him no surprise. The surprise would be that she was in Iraq at all, and for that Victoria hoped that she could catch him alone even for a bare second or two.

With this end in view, when she had put on a summer frock (for to her the climate of Basrah recalled a June day in London) she slipped out quietly through the wire door and took up her position on the balcony where she could intercept Edward when he arrived back from whatever he was doing—wrestling with the Customs officials, she presumed.

The first arrival was a tall thin man with a thoughtful face, and as he came up the steps Victoria slipped round the corner of the balcony. As she did so, she actually saw Edward entering through a garden door that gave on to the riverbend.

Faithful to the tradition of Juliet, Victoria leaned over the balcony and gave a prolonged hiss.

Edward (who was looking, Victoria thought, more attractive than ever) turned his head sharply, looking about him.

“Hist! Up here,” called Victoria in a low voice.

Edward raised his head, and an expression of utter astonishment appeared on his face.

“Good Lord,” he exclaimed. “It’s Charing Cross!”

“Hush. Wait for me. I’m coming down.”

Victoria sped round the balcony, down the steps and along round the corner of the house to where Edward had remained obediently standing, the expression of bewilderment still on his face.

“I can’t be drunk so early in the day,” said Edward. “It is you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” said Victoria happily and ungrammatically.

“But what are you doing here? How did you get here? I thought I was never going to see you again.”

“I thought so too.”

“It’s really just like a miracle. How did you get here?”

“I flew.”

“Naturally you flew. You couldn’t have got here in time, otherwise. But I mean what blessed and wonderful chance brought you to Basrah?”

“The train,” said Victoria.

“You’re doing it on purpose, you little brute. God, I’m pleased to see you. But how did you get here—really?”

“I came out with a woman who’d broken her arm—a Mrs. Clipp, an American. I was offered the job the day after I met you, and you’d talked about Baghdad, and I was a bit fed up with London, so I thought, well why not see the world?”

“You really are awfully sporting, Victoria. Where’s this Clipp woman, here?”

“No, she’s gone to a daughter near Kirkuk. It was only a journey-out job.”

“Then what are you doing now?”

“I’m still seeing the world,” said Victoria. “But it has required a few subterfuges. That’s why I wanted to get at you before we met in public, I mean, I don’t want any tactless references to my being a shorthand typist out of a job when you last saw me.”

“As far as I’m concerned you’re anything you say you are. I’m ready for briefing.”

“The idea is,” said Victoria, “that I am Miss Pauncefoot Jones. My uncle is an eminent archaeologist who is excavating in some more or less inaccessible place out here, and I am joining him shortly.”

“And none of that is true?”

“Naturally not. But it makes quite a good story.”

“Oh yes, excellent. But suppose you and old Pussyfoot Jones come face to face?”

“Pauncefoot. I don’t think that is likely. As far as I can make out once archaeologists start to dig, they go on digging like mad, and don’t stop.”

“Rather like terriers. I say, there’s a lot in what you say. Has he got a real niece?”

“How should I know?” said Victoria.

“Oh, then you’re not impersonating anybody in particular. That makes it easier.”

“Yes, after all, a man can have lots of nieces. Or, at a pinch, I could say I’m only a cousin but that I always call him uncle.”

“You think of everything,” said Edward admiringly. “You really are an amazing girl, Victoria. I’ve never met anyone like you. I thought I wouldn’t see you again for years, and when I did see you, you’d have forgotten all about me. And now here you are.”

The admiring and humble glance which Edward cast on her caused Victoria intense satisfaction. If she had been a cat she would have purred.

“But you’ll want a job, won’t you?” said Edward. “I mean, you haven’t come into a fortune or anything?”

“Far from it! Yes,” said Victoria slowly, “I shall want a job. I went into your Olive Branch place, as a matter of fact, and saw Dr. Rathbone and asked him for a job, but he wasn’t very responsive—not to a salaried job, that is.”

“The old beggar’s fairly tight with his money,” said Edward. “His idea is that everybody comes and works for the love of the thing.”

“Do you think he’s a phoney, Edward?”

“N-o. I don’t know exactly what I do think. I don’t see how he can be anything but on the square—he doesn’t make any money out of the show.

So far as I can see all that terrific enthusiasm must be genuine. And yet, you know, I don't really feel he's a fool."

"We'd better go in," said Victoria. "We can talk later."

II

"I'd no idea you and Edward knew each other," exclaimed Mrs. Clayton.

"Oh we're old friends," laughed Victoria. "Only, as a matter of fact, we'd lost sight of each other. I'd no idea Edward was in this country."

Mr. Clayton, who was the quiet thoughtful-looking man Victoria had seen coming up the steps, asked:

"How did you get on this morning, Edward? Any progress?"

"It seems very uphill work, sir. The cases of books are there, all present and correct, but the formalities needed to clear them seem unending."

Clayton smiled.

"You're new to the delaying tactics of the East."

"The particular official who's wanted, always seems to be away that day," complained Edward. "Everyone is very pleasant and willing—only nothing seems to happen."

Everyone laughed and Mrs. Clayton said consolingly:

"You'll get them through in the end. Very wise of Dr. Rathbone to send someone down personally. Otherwise they'd probably stay here for months."

"Since Palestine, they are very suspicious about bombs. Also subversive literature. They suspect everything."

"Dr. Rathbone isn't shipping bombs out here disguised as books, I hope," said Mrs. Clayton, laughing.

Victoria thought she caught a sudden flicker in Edward's eye, as though Mrs. Clayton's remark had opened up a new line of thought.

Clayton said, with a hint of reproof: "Dr. Rathbone's a very learned and well-known man, my dear. He's a Fellow of various important Societies and is known and respected all over Europe."

"That would make it all the easier for him to smuggle in bombs," Mrs. Clayton pointed with irrepressible spirits.

Victoria could see that Gerald Clayton did not quite like this lighthearted suggestion.

He frowned at his wife.

Business being at a standstill during the midday hours, Edward and Victoria went out together after lunch to stroll about and see the sights. Victoria was delighted with the river, the Shatt el Arab, with its bordering of date palm groves. She adored the Venetian look of the high-prowed Arab boats tied up in the canal in the town. Then they wandered into the souk and looked at Kuwait bride-chests studded with patterned brass and other attractive merchandise.

It was not until they turned towards the Consulate and Edward was preparing himself to assail the Customs department once more that Victoria said suddenly:

"Edward, what's your name?"

Edward stared at her.

"What on earth do you mean, Victoria?"

"Your last name. Don't you realize that I don't know it."

"Don't you? No, I suppose you don't. It's Goring."

"Edward Goring. You've no idea what a fool I felt going into that Olive Branch place and wanting to ask for you and not knowing anything but

Edward.”

“Was there a dark girl there? Rather long bobbed hair?”

“Yes.”

“That’s Catherine. She’s awfully nice. If you’d said Edward she’d have known at once.”

“I dare say she would,” said Victoria with reserve.

“She’s a frightfully nice girl. Didn’t you think so?”

“Oh quite....”

“Not actually good-looking—in fact nothing much to look at, but she’s frightfully sympathetic.”

“Is she?” Victoria’s voice was now quite glacial—but Edward apparently noticed nothing.

“I don’t really know what I should have done without her. She put me in the picture and helped me out when I might have made a fool of myself. I’m sure you and she will be great friends.”

“I don’t suppose we shall have the opportunity.”

“Oh yes, you will. I’m going to get you a job in the show.”

“How are you going to manage that?”

“I don’t know but I shall manage it somehow. Tell old Rattle-bones what a wonderful typist et cetera you are.”

“He’ll soon find out that I’m not,” said Victoria.

“Anyway, I shall get you into the Olive Branch somehow. I’m not going to have you beetling round on your own. Next thing I know, you’d be heading for Burma or darkest Africa. No, young Victoria, I’m going to have you

right under my eyes. I'm not going to take any chances on your running out on me. I don't trust you an inch. You're too fond of seeing the world."

"You sweet idiot," thought Victoria, "don't you know wild horses wouldn't drive me away from Baghdad!"

Aloud she said: "Well, it would be quite fun to have a job at the Olive Branch."

"I wouldn't describe it as fun. It's all terribly earnest. As well as being absolutely goofy."

"And you still think there's something wrong about it?"

"Oh, that was only a wild idea of mine."

"No," said Victoria thoughtfully, "I don't think it was only a wild idea. I think it's true."

Edward turned on her sharply.

"What makes you say that?"

"Something I heard—from a friend of mine."

"Who was it?"

"Just a friend."

"Girls like you have too many friends," grumbled Edward. "You are a devil, Victoria. I love you madly and you don't care a bit."

"Oh yes, I do," said Victoria. "Just a little bit."

Then, concealing her delighted satisfaction, she asked:

"Edward, is there anyone called Lefarge connected with the Olive Branch or with anything else?"

“Lefarge?” Edward looked puzzled. “No, I don’t think so, Who is he?”

Victoria pursued her inquiries.

“Or anyone called Anna Scheele?”

This time Edward’s reaction was very different. He turned on her abruptly, caught her by the arm and said:

“What do you know about Anna Scheele?”

“Ow! Edward, let go! I don’t know anything about her. I just wanted to know if you did.”

“Where did you hear about her? Mrs. Clipp?”

“No—not Mrs. Clipp—at least I don’t think so, but actually she talked so fast and so unendingly about everyone and everything that I probably wouldn’t remember if she mentioned her.”

“But what made you think this Anna Scheele had anything to do with the Olive Branch?”

“Has she?”

Edward said slowly, “I don’t know...It’s all so—so vague.”

They were standing outside the garden door to the Consulate. Edward glanced at his watch. “I must go and do my stuff,” he said. “Wish I knew some Arabic. But we’ve got to get together, Victoria. There’s a lot I want to know.”

“There’s a lot I want to tell you,” said Victoria.

Some tender heroine of a more sentimental age might have sought to keep her man out of danger. Not so, Victoria. Men, in Victoria’s opinion, were born to danger as the sparks fly upwards. Edward wouldn’t thank her for keeping him out of things. And, on reflection, she was quite certain that Mr. Dakin hadn’t intended her to keep him out of things.

III

At sunset that evening Edward and Victoria walked together in the Consulate garden. In deference to Mrs. Clayton's insistence that the weather was wintry Victoria wore a woollen coat over her summer frock. The sunset was magnificent but neither of the young people noticed it. They were discussing more important things.

"It began quite simply," said Victoria, "with a man coming into my room at the Tio Hotel and getting stabbed."

It was not, perhaps, most people's idea of a simple beginning. Edward stared at her and said: "Getting what?"

"Stabbed," said Victoria. "At least I think it was stabbed, but it might have been shot only I don't think so because then I would have heard the noise of the shot. Anyway," she added, "he was dead."

"How could he come into your room if he was dead?"

"Oh Edward, don't be stupid."

Alternately baldly and vaguely, Victoria told her story. For some mysterious reason Victoria could never tell of truthful occurrences in a dramatic fashion. Her narrative was halting and incomplete and she told it with the air of one offering a palpable fabrication.

When she had come to the end, Edward looked at her doubtfully and said, "You do feel all right, Victoria, don't you? I mean you haven't had a touch of the sun or—a dream, or anything?"

"Of course not."

"Because, I mean, it seems such an absolutely impossible thing to have happened."

"Well, it did happen," said Victoria touchily.

“And all that melodramatic stuff about world forces and mysterious secret installations in the heart of Tibet or Baluchistan. I mean, all that simply couldn’t be true. Things like that don’t happen.”

“That’s what people always say before they’ve happened.”

“Honest to God, Charing Cross—are you making all this up?”

“No!” cried Victoria, exasperated.

“And you’ve come down here looking for someone called Lefarge and someone called Anna Scheele—”

“Whom you’ve heard of yourself,” Victoria put in. “You had heard of her hadn’t you?”

“I’d heard the name—yes.”

“How? Where? At the Olive Branch?”

Edward was silent for some moments, then said:

“I don’t know if it means anything. It was just—odd—”

“Go on. Tell me.”

“You see, Victoria. I’m so different from you. I’m not as sharp as you are. I just feel, in a queer kind of way, that things are wrong somehow—I don’t know why I think so. You spot things as you go along and deduce things from them. I’m not clever enough for that. I just feel vaguely that things are—well—wrong—but I don’t know why.”

“I feel like that sometimes, too,” said Victoria. “Like Sir Rupert on the balcony of the Tio.”

“Who’s Sir Rupert?”

“Sir Rupert Crofton Lee. He was on the plane coming out. Very haughty and showing off. A VIP. You know. And when I saw him sitting out on the

balcony at the Tio in the sun, I had that queer feeling you've just said of something being wrong, but not knowing what it was."

"Rathbone asked him to lecture to the Olive Branch, I believe, but he couldn't make it. Flew back to Cairo or Damascus or somewhere yesterday morning, I believe."

"Well, go on about Anna Scheele."

"Oh, Anna Scheele. It was nothing really. It was just one of the girls."

"Catherine?" said Victoria instantly.

"I believe it was Catherine now I think of it."

"Of course it was Catherine. That's why you don't want to tell me about it."

"Nonsense, that's quite absurd."

"Well, what was it?"

"Catherine said to one of the other girls, 'When Anna Scheele comes, we can go forward. Then we take our orders from her—and her alone.'"

"That's frightfully important, Edward."

"Remember, I'm not even sure that was the name," Edward warned her.

"Didn't you think it queer at the time?"

"No, of course I didn't. I thought it was just some female who was coming out to boss things. A kind of Queen Bee. Are you sure you're not imagining all this, Victoria?"

Immediately he quailed before the glance his young friend gave him.

"All right, all right," he said hastily. "Only you'll admit the whole story does sound queer. So like a thriller—a young man coming in and gasping

out one word that doesn't mean anything—and then dying. It just doesn't seem real.”

“You didn't see the blood,” said Victoria and shivered slightly.

“It must have given you a terrible shock,” said Edward sympathetically.

“It did,” said Victoria. “And then on top of it, you come along and ask me if I'm making it all up.”

“I'm sorry. But you are rather good at making things up. The Bishop of Llangow and all that!”

“Oh, that was just girlish joie de vivre,” said Victoria. “This is serious, Edward, really serious.”

“This man, Dakin—is that his name?—impressed you as knowing what he was talking about?”

“Yes, he was very convincing. But, look here, Edward, how do you know —”

A hail from the balcony interrupted her.

“Come in—you two—drinks waiting.”

“Coming,” called Victoria.

Mrs. Clayton, watching them coming towards the steps, said to her husband:

“There's something in the wind there! Nice couple of children—probably haven't got a bean between them. Shall I tell you what I think, Gerald?”

“Certainly, dear. I'm always interested to hear your ideas.”

“I think that girl has come out here to join her uncle on his Dig simply and solely because of that young man.”

“I hardly think so, Rosa. They were quite astonished to see each other.”

“Pooh!” said Mrs. Clayton. “That’s nothing. He was astonished, I dare say.”

Gerald Clayton shook his head at her and smiled.

“She’s not an archaeological type,” said Mrs. Clayton. “They’re usually earnest girls with spectacles—and very often damp hands.”

“My dear, you can’t generalize in that way.”

“And intellectual and all that. This girl is an amiable nitwit with a lot of common sense. Quite different. He’s a nice boy. A pity he’s tied up with all this silly Olive Branch stuff—but I suppose jobs are hard to get. They should find jobs for these boys.”

“It’s not so easy, dear, they do try. But you see, they’ve no training, no experience and usually not much habit of concentration.”

Victoria went to bed that night in a turmoil of mixed feelings.

The object of her quest was attained. Edward was found! She shuddered from the inevitable reaction. Do what she might a feeling of anticlimax persisted.

It was partly Edward’s disbelief that made everything that had happened seem stagy and unreal. She, Victoria Jones, a little London typist, had arrived in Baghdad, had seen a man murdered almost before her eyes, had become a secret agent or something equally melodramatic, and had finally met the man she loved in a tropical garden with palms waving overhead, and in all probability not far from the spot where the original Garden of Eden was said to be situated.

A fragment of a nursery rhyme floated through her head.

How many miles to Babylon?

Threescore and ten,

Can I get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again.

But she wasn't back again—she was still in Babylon.

Perhaps she would never get back—she and Edward in Babylon.

Something she had meant to ask Edward—there in the garden. Garden of Eden—she and Edward—Ask Edward—but Mrs. Clayton had called—and it had gone out of her head—But she must remember—because it was important—It didn't make sense—Palms—garden—Edward—Saracen Maiden—Anna Scheele—Rupert Crofton Lee—All wrong somehow—And if only she could remember—

A woman coming towards her along a hotel corridor—a woman in a tailored suit—it was herself—but when the woman got near she saw the face was Catherine's. Edward and Catherine—absurd! “Come with me,” she said to Edward, “we will find M. Lefarge—” And suddenly there he was, wearing lemon yellow kid gloves and a little pointed black beard.

Edward had gone now and she was alone. She must get back from Babylon before the candles went out.

And we are for the dark.

Who said that? Violence, terror—evil—blood on a ragged khaki tunic. She was running—running—down a hotel corridor. And they were coming after her.

Victoria woke with a gasp.

IV

“Coffee?” said Mrs. Clayton. “How do you like your eggs? Scrambled?”

“Lovely.”

“You look rather washed out. Not feeling ill?”

“No, I didn’t sleep very well last night. I don’t know why. It’s a very comfortable bed.”

“Turn the wireless on, will you, Gerald? It’s time for the news.”

Edward came in just as the pips were sounding.

“In the House of Commons last night, the Prime Minister gave fresh details of the cuts in dollar imports.

“A report from Cairo announces that the body of Sir Rupert Crofton Lee has been taken from the Nile. (Victoria put down her coffee-cup sharply, and Mrs. Clayton uttered an ejaculation.) Sir Rupert left his hotel after arriving by plane from Baghdad, and did not return to it that night. He had been missing for twenty-four hours when his body was recovered. Death was due to a stab wound in the heart and not to drowning. Sir Rupert was a renowned traveller, was famous for his travels through China and Baluchistan and was the author of several books.”

“Murdered!” exclaimed Mrs. Clayton. “I think Cairo is worse than anyplace now. Did you know anything about all this, Gerry?”

“I knew he was missing,” said Mr. Clayton. “It appears he got a note, brought by hand, and left the hotel in a great hurry on foot without saying where he was going.”

“You see,” said Victoria to Edward after breakfast when they were alone together. “It is all true. First this man Carmichael and now Sir Rupert Crofton Lee. I feel sorry now I called him a show-off. It seems unkind. All the people who know or guess about this queer business are being got out of the way. Edward, do you think it will be me next?”

“For Heaven’s sake don’t look so pleased by the idea, Victoria! Your sense of drama is much too strong. I don’t see why anyone should eliminate you because you don’t really know anything—but do, please, do, be awfully careful.”

“We’ll both be careful. I’ve dragged you into it.”

“Oh, that’s all right. Relieves the monotony.”

“Yes, but take care of yourself.” She gave a sudden shiver.

“It’s rather awful—he was so very much alive—Crofton Lee, I mean—and now he’s dead too. It’s frightening, really frightening.”

Sixteen

I

“Find your young man?” asked Mr. Dakin.

Victoria nodded.

“Find anything else?”

Rather mournfully, Victoria shook her head.

“Well, cheer up,” said Mr. Dakin. “Remember, in this game, results are few and far between. You might have picked up something there—one never knows, but I wasn’t in any way counting on it.”

“Can I still go on trying?” asked Victoria.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes, I do. Edward thinks he can get me a job at the Olive Branch. If I keep my ears and eyes open, I might find out something, mightn’t I? They know something about Anna Scheele there.”

“Now that’s very interesting, Victoria. How did you learn that?”

Victoria repeated what Edward had told her—about Catherine’s remark that when “Anna Scheele came” they would take their orders from her.

“Very interesting,” said Mr. Dakin.

“Who is Anna Scheele?” asked Victoria. “I mean, you must know something about her—or is she just a name?”

“She’s more than a name. She’s confidential secretary to an American banker—head of an international banking firm. She left New York and came to London about ten days ago. Since then she’s disappeared.”

“Disappeared? She’s not dead?”

“If so, her dead body hasn’t been found.”

“But she may be dead?”

“Oh yes, she may be dead.”

“Was she—coming to Baghdad?”

“I’ve no idea. It would seem from the remarks of this young woman Catherine, that she was. Or shall we say—is—since as yet there’s no reason to believe she isn’t still alive.”

“Perhaps I can find out more at the Olive Branch.”

“Perhaps you can—but I must warn you once more to be very careful, Victoria. The organization you are up against is quite ruthless. I would much rather not have your dead body found floating down the Tigris.”

Victoria gave a little shiver and murmured:

“Like Sir Rupert Crofton Lee. You know that morning he was at the hotel here there was something odd about him—something that surprised me. I wish I could remember what it was....”

“In what way—odd?”

“Well—different.” Then in response to the inquiring look, she shook her head vexedly. “It will come back to me, perhaps. Anyway I don’t suppose it really matters.”

“Anything might matter.”

“If Edward gets me a job, he thinks I ought to get a room like the other girls in a sort of boardinghouse or paying guest place, not stay on here.”

“It would create less surmise. Baghdad hotels are very expensive. Your young man seems to have his head screwed on the right way.”

“Do you want to see him?”

Dakin shook his head emphatically.

“No, tell him to keep right away from me. You, unfortunately, owing to the circumstances on the night of Carmichael’s death, are bound to be suspect. But Edward is not linked with that occurrence or with me in any way—and that’s valuable.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” said Victoria. “Who actually did stab Carmichael? Was it someone who followed him here?”

“No,” said Dakin slowly. “That couldn’t have been so.”

“Couldn’t?”

“He came in a gufa—one of those native boats—and he wasn’t followed. We know that because I had someone watching the river.”

“Then it was someone—in the hotel?”

“Yes, Victoria. And what is more someone in one particular wing of the hotel—for I myself was watching the stairs and no one came up them.”

He watched her rather puzzled face and said quietly:

“That doesn’t really give us very many names. You and I and Mrs. Cardew Trench, and Marcus and his sisters. A couple of elderly servants who have been here for years. A man called Harrison from Kirkuk against whom nothing is known. A nurse who works at the Jewish Hospital...It might be any of them—yet all of them are unlikely for one very good reason.”

“What is that?”

“Carmichael was on his guard. He knew that the peak moment of his mission was approaching. He was a man with a very keen instinct for danger. How did that instinct let him down?”

“Those police that came—” began Victoria.

“Ah, they came after—up from the street. They’d had a signal, I suppose. But they didn’t do the stabbing. That must have been done by someone Carmichael knew well, whom he trusted...or alternatively whom he judged negligible. If I only knew....”

II

Achievement brings with it its own anticlimax. To get to Baghdad, to find Edward, to penetrate the secrets of the Olive Branch: all this had appeared as an entrancing programme. Now, her objective attained, Victoria, in a rare moment of self-questioning, sometimes wondered what on earth she was doing! The rapture of reunion with Edward had come and gone. She loved Edward, Edward loved her. They were, on most days, working under the same roof—but thinking about it dispassionately, what on earth were they doing?

By some means or other, sheer force of determination, or ingenious persuasion, Edward had been instrumental in Victoria’s being offered a meagrely-paid job at the Olive Branch. She spent most of her time in a small dark room with the electric light on, typing on a very faulty machine various notices and letters and manifestos of the milk and water programme of the Olive Branch activities. Edward had had a hunch there was something wrong about the Olive Branch. Mr. Dakin had seemed to agree with that view. She, Victoria, was here to find out what she could, but as far as she could see, there was nothing to find out! The Olive Branch activities dripped with the honey of international peace. Various gatherings were held with orangeade to drink and depressing edibles to go with it, and at these Victoria was supposed to act as quasi-hostess; to mix, to introduce, to promote general good feeling amongst various foreign nationals, who were inclined to stare with animosity at one another and wolf refreshments hungrily.

As far as Victoria could see, there were no undercurrents, no conspiracies, no inner rings. All was aboveboard, mild as milk and water, and desperately dull. Various dark-skinned young men made tentative love to her, others lent her books to read which she skimmed through and found tedious. She had, by now, left the Tio Hotel and had taken up her quarters with some other young women workers of various nationalities in a house on the west

bank of the river. Amongst these young women was Catherine, and it seemed to Victoria that Catherine watched her with a suspicious eye, but whether this was because Catherine suspected her of being a spy on the activities of the Olive Branch or whether it was the more delicate matter of Edward's affections, Victoria was unable to make up her mind. She rather fancied the latter. It was known that Edward had secured Victoria her job and several pairs of jealous dark eyes looked at her without undue affection.

The fact was, Victoria thought moodily, that Edward was far too attractive. All these girls had fallen for him, and Edward's engaging friendly manner to one and all did nothing to help. By agreement between them, Victoria and Edward were to show no signs of special intimacy. If they were to find out anything worth finding out, they must not be suspected of working together. Edward's manner to her was the same as to any of the other young women, with an added shade of coldness.

Though the Olive Branch itself seemed so innocuous Victoria had a distinct feeling that its head and founder was in a different category. Once or twice she was aware of Dr. Rathbone's dark thoughtful gaze resting upon her and though she countered it with her most innocent and kitten-like expression, she felt a sudden throb of something like fear.

Once, when she had been summoned to his presence (for explanation of a typing error), the matter went farther than a glance.

"You are happy working with us, I hope?" he asked.

"Oh yes, indeed, sir," said Victoria, and added: "I'm sorry I make so many mistakes."

"We don't mind mistakes. A soulless machine would be no use to us. We need youth, generosity of spirit, broadness of outlook."

Victoria endeavoured to look eager and generous.

"You must love the work...love the object for which you are working...look forward to the glorious future. Are you truly feeling all that, dear child?"

“It’s all so new to me,” said Victoria. “I don’t feel I have taken it all in yet.”

“Get together—get together—young people everywhere must get together. That is the main thing. You enjoy your evenings of free discussion and comradeship?”

“Oh! yes,” said Victoria, who loathed them.

“Agreement, not dissension—brotherhood, not hatred. Slowly and surely it is growing—you do feel that, don’t you?”

Victoria thought of the endless petty jealousies, the violent dislikes, the endless quarrels, hurt feelings, apologies demanded; and hardly knew what she was expected to say.

“Sometimes,” she said cautiously, “people are difficult.”

“I know...I know...” Dr. Rathbone sighed. His noble domed forehead furrowed itself in perplexity. “What is this I hear of Michael Rakounian striking Isaac Nahoum and cutting his lip open?”

“They were just having a little argument,” said Victoria.

Dr. Rathbone brooded mournfully.

“Patience and faith,” he murmured. “Patience and faith.”

Victoria murmured a dutiful assent and turned to leave. Then, remembering she had left her typescript, she came back again. The glance she caught in Dr. Rathbone’s eye startled her a little. It was a keen suspicious glance, and she wondered uneasily just how closely she was being watched, and what Dr. Rathbone really thought about her.

Her instructions from Mr. Dakin were very precise. She was to obey certain rules for communicating with him if she had anything to report. He had given her an old faded pink handkerchief. If she had anything to report she was to walk, as she often did when the sun was setting along the riverbank, near her hostel. There was a narrow path in front of the houses there for perhaps a quarter of a mile. In one place a big flight of steps led down to the

water's edge and boats were constantly being tied up there. There was a rusty nail in one of the wooden posts at the top. Here she was to affix a small piece of the pink handkerchief if she wanted to get into communication with Dakin. So far, Victoria reflected bitterly, there had been no need for anything of the sort. She was merely doing an ill-paid job in a slovenly fashion. Edward she saw at rare intervals, since he was always being sent to far-off places by Dr. Rathbone. At the moment, he had just come back from Persia. During his absence, she had had one short and somewhat unsatisfactory interview with Dakin. Her instructions had been to go to the Tio Hotel and ask if she had left a cardigan behind. The answer having been in the negative, Marcus appeared and immediately swept her out on to the riverbank for a drink. During the process Dakin had shambled in from the street and had been hailed by Marcus to join them, and presently, as Dakin supped lemonade, Marcus had been called away and the two of them sat there on opposite sides of the small painted table.

Rather apprehensively Victoria confessed her utter lack of success, but Dakin was indulgently reassuring.

"My dear child, you don't even know what you are looking for or even if there is anything to find. Taken by and large what is your considered opinion of the Olive Branch?"

"It's a thoroughly dim show," said Victoria slowly.

"Dim, yes. But not bogus?"

"I don't know," said Victoria slowly. "People are so sold on the idea of culture if you know what I mean?"

"You mean that where anything cultured is concerned, nobody examines bona fides in the way they would if it were a charitable or a financial proposition? That's true. And you'll find genuine enthusiasts there, I've no doubt. But is the organization being used?"

"I think there's a lot of Communist activity going on," said Victoria doubtfully. "Edward thinks so too—he's making me read Karl Marx and leave it about just to see what reactions there will be."

Dakin nodded.

“Interesting. Any response so far?”

“No, not yet.”

“What about Rathbone? Is he genuine?”

“I think really that he is—” Victoria sounded doubtful.

“He’s the one I worry about, you see,” said Dakin. “Because he’s a big noise. Suppose there is a Communist plotting going on—students and young revolutionaries have very little chance of coming into contact with the President. Police measures will look after bombs thrown from the street. But Rathbone’s different. He’s one of the high-ups, a distinguished man with a fine record of public beneficence. He could come in close contact with the distinguished visitors. He probably will. I’d like to know about Rathbone.”

Yes, Victoria thought to herself, it all centred round Rathbone. On the first meeting in London, weeks ago, Edward’s vague remarks about the “fishiness” of the show had had their origin in his employer. And there must, Victoria decided suddenly, have been some incident, some word, that had awakened Edward’s uneasiness. For that, in Victoria’s belief, was how minds worked. Your vague doubt or distrust was never just a hunch—it was really always due to a cause. If Edward, now, could be made to think back, to remember; between them they might hit upon the fact or incident that had aroused his suspicions. In the same way, Victoria thought, she herself must try to think back to what it was that had so surprised her when she came out upon the balcony at the Tio and found Sir Rupert Crofton Lee sitting there in the sun. It was true that she had expected him to be at the Embassy and not at the Tio Hotel but that was not enough to account for the strong feeling she had had that his sitting there was quite impossible! She would go over and over the events of that morning, and Edward must be urged to go over and over his early association with Dr. Rathbone. She would tell him so when next she got him alone. But to get Edward alone was not easy. To begin with he had been away in Persia and now that he was back, private communications at the Olive Branch were out of the question where the

slogan of the last war (“Les oreilles ennemies vous écoutent”) might have been written up all over the walls. In the Armenian household where she was a paying guest, privacy was equally impossible. Really, thought Victoria to herself, for all I see of Edward, I might as well have stayed in England!

That this was not quite true was proved very shortly afterwards.

Edward came to her with some sheets of manuscripts and said:

“Dr. Rathbone would like this typed out at once, please, Victoria. Be especially careful of the second page, there are some rather tricky Arab names on it.”

Victoria, with a sigh, inserted a sheet of paper in her typewriter and started off in her usual dashing style. Dr. Rathbone’s handwriting was not particularly difficult to read and Victoria was just congratulating herself that she had made less mistakes than usual. She laid the top sheet aside and proceeded to the next—and at once realized the meaning of Edward’s injunction to be careful of the second page. A tiny note in Edward’s handwriting was pinned to the top of it.

Go for a walk along the Tigris bank past the Beit Melek Ali tomorrow morning about eleven.

The following day was Friday, the weekly holiday. Victoria’s spirits rose mercurially. She would wear her jade-green pullover. She ought really to get her hair shampooed. The amenities of the house where she lived made it difficult to wash it herself. “And it really needs it,” she murmured aloud.

“What did you say?” Catherine, at work on a pile of circulars and envelopes, raised her head suspiciously from the next table.

Victoria quickly crumpled up Edward’s note in her hand as she said lightly:

“My hair wants washing. Most of these hairdressing places look so frightfully dirty, I don’t know where to go.”

“Yes, they are dirty and expensive too. But I know a girl who washes hair very well and the towels are clean. I will take you there.”

“That’s very kind of you, Catherine,” said Victoria.

“We will go tomorrow. It is holiday.”

“Not tomorrow,” said Victoria.

“Why not tomorrow?”

A suspicious stare was bent upon her. Victoria felt her usual annoyance and dislike of Catherine rising.

“I’d rather go for a walk—get some air. One is so cooped up here.”

“Where can you walk? There is nowhere to walk in Baghdad.”

“I shall find somewhere,” said Victoria.

“It would be better to go to the cinema. Or is there an interesting lecture?”

“No, I want to get out. In England we like going for walks.”

“Because you are English, you are so proud and stuck up. What does it mean to be English? Next to nothing. Here we spit upon the English.”

“If you start spitting on me you may get a surprise,” said Victoria, wondering as usual at the ease with which angry passions seemed to rise at the Olive Branch.

“What would you do?”

“Try and see.”

“Why do you read Karl Marx? You cannot understand it. You are much too stupid. Do you think they would ever accept you as a member of the Communist Party? You are not well enough educated politically.”

“Why shouldn’t I read it? It was meant for people like me—workers.”

“You are not a worker. You are bourgeoisie. You cannot even type properly. Look at the mistakes you make.”

“Some of the cleverest people can’t spell,” said Victoria with dignity. “And how can I work when you keep talking to me?”

She rattled off a line at break-neck speed—and was then somewhat chagrined to find that as a result of unwittingly depressing the shift key, she had written a line of exclamation marks, figures and brackets. Removing the sheet from the machine she replaced it with another and applied herself diligently until, her task finished, she took the result in to Dr. Rathbone.

Glancing over it and murmuring, “Shiraz is in Iran not Iraq—and anyway you don’t spell Iraq with a k... Wasit—not Wuzle—er—thank you, Victoria.”

Then as she was leaving the room he called her back.

“Victoria, are you happy here?”

“Oh yes, Dr. Rathbone.”

The dark eyes under the massive brows were very searching. She felt uneasiness rising.

“I’m afraid we do not pay you very much.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Victoria. “I like to work.”

“Do you really?”

“Oh yes,” said Victoria. “One feels,” she added, “that this sort of thing is really worthwhile.”

Her limpid gaze met the dark searching eyes and did not falter.

“And you manage—to live?”

“Oh yes—I’ve found quite a good cheap place—with some Armenians. I’m quite all right.”

“There is a shortage at present of shorthand typists in Baghdad,” said Dr. Rathbone. “I think, you know, that I could get you a better position than the one you have here.”

“But I don’t want any other position.”

“You might be wise to take one.”

“Wise?” Victoria faltered a little.

“That is what I said. Just a word of warning—of advice.”

There was something faintly menacing now in his tone.

Victoria opened her eyes still wider.

“I really don’t understand, Dr. Rathbone,” she said.

“Sometimes it is wiser not to mix oneself up in things one does not understand.”

She felt quite sure of the menace this time, but she continued to stare in kitten-eyed innocence.

“Why did you come and work here, Victoria? Because of Edward?”

Victoria flushed angrily.

“Of course not,” she said indignantly. She was much annoyed.

Dr. Rathbone nodded his head.

“Edward has his way to make. It will be many many years before he is in a position to be of any use to you. I should give up thinking of Edward if I were you. And, as I say, there are good positions to be obtained at present,

with a good salary and prospects—and which will bring you amongst your own kind.”

He was still watching her, Victoria thought, very closely. Was this a test? She said with an affectation of eagerness:

“But I really am very keen on the Olive Branch, Dr. Rathbone.”

He shrugged his shoulders then and she left him, but she could feel his eyes in the centre of her spine as she left the room.

She was somewhat disturbed by the interview. Had something occurred to arouse his suspicions? Did he guess that she might be a spy placed in the Olive Branch to find out its secrets? His voice and manner had made her feel unpleasantly afraid. His suggestion that she had come there to be near Edward had made her angry at the time and she had vigorously denied it, but she realized now that it was infinitely safer that Dr. Rathbone should suppose her to have come to the Olive Branch for Edward’s sake than to have even an inkling that Mr. Dakin had been instrumental in the matter. Anyway, owing to her idiotic blush, Rathbone probably did think that it was Edward—so that all had really turned out for the best.

Nevertheless she went to sleep that night with an unpleasant little clutch of fear at her heart.

Seventeen

I

It proved fairly simple on the following morning for Victoria to go out by herself with few explanations. She had inquired about the Beit Melek Ali and had learnt it was a big house built right out on the river some way down the West Bank.

So far Victoria had had very little time to explore her surroundings and she was agreeably surprised when she came to the end of the narrow street and found herself actually on the riverbank. She turned to her right and made her way slowly along the edge of the high bank. Sometimes the going was precarious—the bank had been eaten away and had not always been repaired or built-up again. One house had steps in front of it which, if you took one more, would land you in the river on a dark night. Victoria looked down at the water below and edged her way round. Then, for a while, the way was wide and paved. The houses on her right hand had an agreeable air of secrecy. They offered no hint as to their occupancy. Occasionally the central door stood open and peering inside Victoria was fascinated by the contrasts. On one such occasion she looked into a courtyard with a fountain playing and cushioned seats and deck chairs round it, with tall palms growing up and a garden beyond, that looked like the backcloth of a stage set. The next house, looking much the same outside, opened on a litter of confusion and dark passages, with five or six dirty children playing in rags. Then she came to palm gardens in thick groves. On her left she had passed uneven steps leading down to the river and an Arab boatman seated in a primitive rowing boat gesticulated and called, asking evidently if she wanted to be taken across to the other side. She must by now, Victoria judged, be just about opposite the Tio Hotel, though it was hard to distinguish differences in the architecture viewed from this side and the hotel buildings looked more or less alike. She came now to a road leading down through the palms and then to two tall houses with balconies. Beyond was a big house built right out on to the river with a garden and balustrade. The path on the bank passed on the inside of what must be the Beit Melek Ali or the House of King Ali.

In a few minutes more Victoria had passed its entrance and had come to a more squalid part. The river was hidden from her by palm plantations fenced off with rusty barbed wire. On the right were tumbledown houses inside rough mudbrick walls, and small shanties with children playing in the dirt and clouds of flies hanging over garbage heaps. A road led away from the river and a car was standing there—a somewhat battered and archaic car. By the car, Edward was standing.

“Good,” said Edward, “you’ve got here. Get in.”

“Where are we going?” asked Victoria, entering the battered automobile with delight. The driver, who appeared to be an animate bundle of rags, turned round and grinned happily at her.

“We’re going to Babylon,” said Edward. “It’s about time we had a day out.”

The car started with a terrific jerk and bumped madly over the rude paving stones.

“To Babylon?” cried Victoria. “How lovely it sounds. Really to Babylon?”

The car swerved to the left and they were bowling along upon a well-paved road of imposing width.

“Yes, but don’t expect too much. Babylon—if you know what I mean—isn’t quite what it was.”

Victoria hummed.

“How many miles to Babylon?

Threescore and ten,

Can I get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again.”

“I used to sing that when I was a small child. It always fascinated me. And now we’re really going there!”

“And we’ll get back by candlelight. Or we should do. Actually you never know in this country.”

“This car looks very much as though it might break down.”

“It probably will. There’s sure to be simply everything wrong with it. But these Iraqis are frightfully good at tying it up with string and saying Inshallah and then it goes again.”

“It’s always Inshallah, isn’t it?”

“Yes, nothing like laying the responsibility upon the Almighty.”

“The road isn’t very good, is it?” gasped Victoria, bouncing in her seat. The deceptively well-paved and wide road had not lived up to its promise. The road was still wide but was now corrugated with ruts.

“It gets worse later on,” shouted Edward.

They bounced and bumped happily. The dust rose in clouds round them. Large lorries covered with Arabs tore along in the middle of the track and were deaf to all intimations of the horn.

They passed walled-in gardens, and parties of women and children and donkeys and to Victoria it was all new and part of the enchantment of going to Babylon with Edward beside her.

They reached Babylon bruised and shaken in a couple of hours. The meaningless pile of ruined mud and burnt brick was somewhat of a disappointment to Victoria, who expected something in the way of columns and arches, looking like pictures she had seen of Baalbek.

But little by little her disappointment ebbed as they scrambled over mounds and lumps of burnt brick led by the guide. She listened with only half an ear to his profuse explanations, but as they went along the Processional Way to the Ishtar Gate, with the faint reliefs of unbelievable animals high on the walls, a sudden sense of the grandeur of the past came to her and a wish to know something about this vast proud city that now lay dead and

abandoned. Presently, their duty to Antiquity accomplished, they sat down by the Babylonian Lion to eat the picnic lunch that Edward had brought with him. The guide moved away, smiling indulgently and telling them firmly that they must see the Museum later.

“Must we?” said Victoria dreamily. “Things all labelled and put into cases don’t seem a bit real somehow. I went to the British Museum once. It was awful, and dreadfully tiring on the feet.”

“The past is always boring,” said Edward. “The future’s much more important.”

“This isn’t boring,” said Victoria, waving a sandwich towards the panorama of tumbling brick. “There’s a feeling of—of greatness here. What’s the poem ‘When you were a King in Babylon and I was a Christian Slave?’ Perhaps we were. You and I, I mean.”

“I don’t think there were any Kings of Babylon by the time there were Christians,” said Edward. “I think Babylon stopped functioning somewhere about five or six hundred BC. Some archaeologist or other is always turning up to give lectures about these things—but I really never grasp any of the dates—I mean not until proper Greek and Roman ones.”

“Would you have liked being a King of Babylon, Edward?”

Edward drew a deep breath.

“Yes, I should.”

“Then we’ll say you were. You’re in a new incarnation now.”

“They understood how to be Kings in those days!” said Edward. “That’s why they could rule the world and bring it into shape.”

“I don’t know that I should have liked being a slave much,” said Victoria meditatively, “Christian or otherwise.”

“Milton was quite right,” said Edward. “‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.’ I always admired Milton’s Satan.”

“I never quite got around to Milton,” said Victoria apologetically. “But I did go and see Comus at Sadler’s Wells and it was lovely and Margot Fonteyn danced like a kind of frozen angel.”

“If you were a slave, Victoria,” said Edward, “I should free you and take you into my harem—over there,” he added gesticulating vaguely at a pile of debris.

A glint came into Victoria’s eye.

“Talking of harems—” she began.

“How are you getting on with Catherine?” asked Edward hastily.

“How did you know I was thinking about Catherine?”

“Well, you were, weren’t you? Honestly, Vicky, I do want you to become friends with Catherine.”

“Don’t call me Vicky.”

“All right, Charing Cross. I want you to become friends with Catherine.”

“How fatuous men are! Always wanting their girlfriends to like each other.”

Edward sat up energetically. He had been reclining with his hands behind his head.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Charing Cross. Anyway, your references to harems are simply silly—”

“No, they’re not. The way all those girls glower intensely at you and yearn at you! It makes me mad.”

“Splendid,” said Edward. “I love you to be mad. But to return to Catherine. The reason I want you to be friends with Catherine is that I’m fairly sure she’s the best way of approach to all the things we want to find out. She knows something.”

“You really think so?”

“Remember what I heard her say about Anna Scheele?”

“I’d forgotten that.”

“How have you been getting on with Karl Marx? Any results?”

“Nobody’s made a beeline at me and invited me into the fold. In fact, Catherine told me yesterday the party wouldn’t accept me, because I’m not sufficiently politically educated. And to have to read all that dreary stuff—honestly, Edward, I haven’t the brains for it.”

“You are not politically aware, are you?” Edward laughed. “Poor Charing Cross. Well, well, Catherine may be frantic with brains and intensity and political awareness, my fancy is still a little Cockney typist who can’t spell any words of three syllables.”

Victoria frowned suddenly. Edward’s words brought back to her mind the curious interview she had had with Dr. Rathbone. She told Edward about it. He seemed much more upset than she would have expected him to be.

“This is serious, Victoria, really serious. Try and tell me exactly what he said.”

Victoria tried her best to recall the exact words Rathbone had used.

“But I don’t see,” she said, “why it upsets you so.”

“Eh?” Edward seemed abstracted. “You don’t see—But my dear girl, don’t you realize that this shows that they’ve got wise to you. They’re warning you off. I don’t like it Victoria—I don’t like it at all.”

He paused and then said gravely:

“Communists, you know, are very ruthless. It’s part of their creed to stick at nothing. I don’t want you knocked on the head and thrown into the Tigris, darling.”

How odd, thought Victoria, to be sitting amidst the ruins of Babylon debating whether or not she was likely in the near future to be knocked on the head and thrown into the Tigris. Half closing her eyes she thought dreamily, “I shall wake up soon and find I’m in London dreaming a wonderful melodramatic dream about dangerous Babylon. Perhaps,” she thought, closing her eyes altogether, “I am in London...and the alarm clock will go off very soon, and I shall get up and go to Mr. Greenholtz’s office—and there won’t be any Edward....”

And at that last thought she opened her eyes again hastily to make sure that Edward was indeed really there (and what was it I was going to ask him at Basrah and they interrupted us and I forgot?) and it was not a dream. The sun was glaring down in a dazzling and most un-London-like way, and the ruins of Babylon were pale and shimmering with a background of dark palms and sitting up with his back a little towards her was Edward. How extraordinarily nicely his hair grew down with a little twirl into his neck—and what a nice neck—bronzed red brown from the sun—with no blemishes on it—so many men had necks with cysts or pimples where their collars had rubbed—a neck like Sir Rupert’s for instance, with a boil just starting.

Suddenly with a stifled exclamation Victoria sat bolt upright and her daydreams were a thing of the past. She was wildly excited.

Edward turned an inquiring head.

“What’s the matter, Charing Cross?”

“I’ve just remembered,” said Victoria, “about Sir Rupert Crofton Lee.”

As Edward still turned a blank inquiring look upon her Victoria proceeded to elucidate her meaning which truth to tell, she did not do very clearly.

“It was a boil,” she said, “on his neck.”

“A boil on his neck?” Edward was puzzled.

“Yes, in the aeroplane. He sat in front of me, you know, and that hood thing he wore fell back and I saw it—the boil.”

“Why shouldn’t he have a boil? Painful, but lots of people get them.”

“Yes, yes, of course they do. But the point is that that morning on the balcony he hadn’t.”

“Hadn’t what?”

“Hadn’t got a boil. Oh, Edward, do try and take it in. In the aeroplane he had a boil and on the balcony at the Tio he hadn’t got a boil. His neck was quite smooth and unscarred—like yours now.”

“Well, I suppose it had gone away.”

“Oh no, Edward, it couldn’t have. It was only a day later, and it was just coming up. It couldn’t have gone away—not completely without a trace. So you see what it means—yes, it must mean—the man at the Tio wasn’t Sir Rupert at all.”

She nodded her head with vehemence. Edward stared at her.

“You’re crazy, Victoria. It must have been Sir Rupert. You didn’t see any other difference in him.”

“But don’t you see, Edward, I’d never really looked at him properly—only at his—well, you might call it general effect. The hat—and the cape—and the swashbuckling attitude. He’d be a very easy man to impersonate.”

“But they’d have known at the Embassy—”

“He didn’t stay at the Embassy, did he? He came to the Tio. It was one of the minor secretaries or people who met him. The Ambassador’s in England. Besides, he’s travelled and been away from England so much.”

“But why—”

“Because of Carmichael, of course. Carmichael was coming to Baghdad to meet him—to tell him what he’d found out. Only they’d never met before. So Carmichael wouldn’t know he wasn’t the right man—and he wouldn’t

be on his guard. Of course—it was Rupert Crofton Lee (the false one) who stabbed Carmichael! Oh, Edward, it all fits in.”

“I don’t believe a word of it. It’s crazy. Don’t forget Sir Rupert was killed afterwards in Cairo.”

“That’s where it all happened. I know now. Oh Edward, how awful. I saw it happen.”

“You saw it happen—Victoria, are you quite mad?”

“No, I’m not in the least mad. Just listen, Edward. There was a knock on my door—in the hotel in Heliopolis—at least I thought it was on my door and I looked out, but it wasn’t—it was one door down, Sir Rupert Crofton Lee’s. It was one of the stewardesses or air hostesses or whatever they call them. She asked him if he would mind coming to BOAC office—just along the corridor. I came out of my room just afterwards. I passed a door which had a notice with BOAC on it, and the door opened and he came out. I thought then that he had had some news that made him walk quite differently. Do you see, Edward? It was a trap, the substitute was waiting, all ready, and as soon as he came in, they just conked him on the head and the other one came out and took up the part. I think they probably kept him somewhere in Cairo, perhaps in the hotel as an invalid, kept him drugged and then killed him just at the right moment when the wrong one had come back to Cairo.”

“It’s a magnificent story,” said Edward. “But you know, Victoria, quite frankly you are making the whole thing up. There’s no corroboration of it.”

“There’s the boil—”

“Oh, damn the boil!”

“And there are one or two other things.”

“What?”

“The BOAC notice on the door. It wasn’t there later. I remembered being puzzled when I found the BOAC office was on the other side of the entrance hall. That’s one thing. And there’s another. That air stewardess, the one who knocked at his door. I’ve seen her since—here in Baghdad—and what’s more, at the Olive Branch. The first day I went there. She came in and spoke to Catherine. I thought then I’d seen her before.”

After a moment’s silence, Victoria said:

“So you must admit, Edward, that it isn’t all my fancy.”

Edward said slowly:

“It all comes back to the Olive Branch—and to Catherine. Victoria, all ragging apart, you’ve got to get closer to Catherine. Flatter her, butter her up, talk Bolshie ideas to her. Somehow or other get sufficiently intimate with her to know who her friends are and where she goes and whom she’s in touch with outside the Olive Branch.”

“It won’t be easy,” said Victoria, “but I’ll try. What about Mr. Dakin. Ought I to tell him about this?”

“Yes, of course. But wait a day or two. We may have more to go on,” Edward sighed. “I shall take Catherine to Le Select to hear the cabaret one night.”

And this time Victoria felt no pang of jealousy. Edward had spoken with a grim determination that ruled out any anticipation of pleasure in the commission he had undertaken.

II

Exhilarated by her discoveries, Victoria found it no effort to greet Catherine the following day with an effusion of friendliness. It was so kind of Catherine she said, to have told her of a place to have her hair washed. It needed washing terribly badly. (This was undeniable, Victoria had returned from Babylon with her dark hair the colour of red rust from the clogging sand.)

“It is looking terrible, yes,” said Catherine, eyeing it with a certain malicious satisfaction. “You went out then in that dust storm yesterday afternoon?”

“I hired a car and went to see Babylon,” said Victoria. “It was very interesting, but on the way back, the dust storm got up and I was nearly choked and blinded.”

“It is interesting, Babylon,” said Catherine, “but you should go with someone who understands it and can tell you about it properly. As for your hair, I will take you to this Armenian girl tonight. She will give you a cream shampoo. It is the best.”

“I don’t know how you keep your hair looking so wonderful,” said Victoria, looking with what appeared to be admiring eyes at Catherine’s heavy erections of greasy sausage-like curls.

A smile appeared on Catherine’s usually sour face, and Victoria thought how right Edward had been about flattery.

When they left the Olive Branch that evening, the two girls were on the friendliest of terms. Catherine wove in and out of narrow passages and alleys and finally tapped on an unpromising door which gave no sign of hairdressing operations being conducted on the other side of it. They were, however, received by a plain but competent looking young woman who spoke careful slow English and who led Victoria to a spotlessly clean basin with shining taps and various bottles and lotions ranged round it. Catherine departed and Victoria surrendered her mop of hair into Miss Ankoumian’s deft hands. Soon her hair was a mass of creamy lather.

“And now if you please...”

Victoria bent forward over the basin. Water streamed over her hair and gurgled down the waste pipe.

Suddenly her nose was assailed by a sweet rather sickly smell that she associated vaguely with hospitals. A wet saturated pad was clasped firmly over her nose and mouth. She struggled wildly, twisting and turning, but an

iron grip kept the pad in place. She began to suffocate, her head reeled dizzily, a roaring sound came in her ears....

And after that blackness, deep and profound.

Eighteen

When Victoria regained consciousness, it was with a sense of an immense passage of time. Confused memories stirred in her—jolting in a car—high jabbering and quarrelling in Arabic—lights that flashed into her eyes—a horrible attack of nausea—then vaguely she remembered lying on a bed and someone lifting her arm—the sharp agonizing prick of a needle—then more confused dreams and darkness and behind it a mounting sense of urgency....

Now at last, dimly, she was herself—Victoria Jones...And something had happened to Victoria Jones—a long time ago—months—perhaps years... after all, perhaps only days.

Babylon—sunshine—dust—hair—Catherine. Catherine, of course, smiling, her eyes sly under the sausage curls—Catherine had taken her to have her hair shampooed and then—what had happened? That horrible smell—she could still smell it—nauseating—chloroform, of course. They had chloroformed her and taken her—where?

Cautiously Victoria tried to sit up. She seemed to be lying on a bed—a very hard bed—her head ached and felt dizzy—she was still drowsy, horribly drowsy...that prick, the prick of a hypodermic, they had been drugging her...she was still half-drugged.

Well, anyway they hadn't killed her. (Why not?) So that was all right. The best thing, thought the still half-drugged Victoria, is to go to sleep. And promptly did so.

When next she awakened she felt much more clearheaded. It was daylight now and she could see more clearly where she was.

She was in a small but very high room, distempered a depressing pale bluish grey. The floor was of beaten earth. The only furniture in the room seemed to be the bed on which she was lying with a dirty rug thrown over her and a rickety table with a cracked enamel basin on it and a zinc bucket

underneath it. There was a window with a kind of wooden latticework outside it. Victoria got gingerly off the bed, feeling distinctly headachy and queer, and approached the window. She could see through the latticework quite plainly and what she saw was a garden with palm trees beyond it. The garden was quite a pleasant one by Eastern standards though it would have been looked down on by an English suburban householder. It had a lot of bright orange marigolds in it, and some dusty eucalyptus trees and some rather wispy tamarisks.

A small child with a face tattooed in blue, and a lot of bangles on, was tumbling about with a ball and singing in a high nasal whine rather like distant bagpipes.

Victoria next turned her attention to the door, which was large and massive. Without much hope she went to it and tried it. The door was locked. Victoria went back and sat on the side of the bed.

Where was she? Not in Baghdad, that was certain. And what was she going to do next?

It struck her after a minute or two that the last question did not really apply. What was more to the point was what was someone else going to do to her? With an uneasy feeling in the pit of the stomach she remembered Mr. Dakin's admonition to tell all she knew. But perhaps they had already got all that out of her whilst she was under the drug.

Still—Victoria returned to this one point with determined cheerfulness—she was alive. If she could manage to keep alive until Edward found her—what would Edward do when he found she had vanished? Would he go to Mr. Dakin? Would he play a lone hand? Would he put the fear of the Lord into Catherine and force her to tell? Would he suspect Catherine at all? The more Victoria tried to conjure up a reassuring picture of Edward in action, the more the image of Edward faded and became a kind of faceless abstraction. How clever was Edward? That was really what it amounted to. Edward was adorable. Edward had glamour. But had Edward got brains? Because clearly, in her present predicament, brains were going to be needed.

Mr. Dakin, now, would have the necessary brains. But would he have the impetus? Or would he merely cross off her name from a mental ledger, scoring it through, and writing after it a neat RIP. After all, to Mr. Dakin she was merely one of a crowd. They took their chance, and if luck failed, it was just too bad. No, she didn't see Mr. Dakin staging a rescue. After all, he had warned her.

And Dr. Rathbone had warned her. (Warned her or threatened her?) And on her refusing to be threatened there had not been much delay in carrying out the threat....

But I'm still alive, repeated Victoria, determined to look upon the bright side of things.

Footsteps approached outside and there was the grinding of an outsize key in a rusty lock. The door staggered on its hinges and flew open. In the aperture appeared an Arab. He carried an old tin tray on which were dishes.

He appeared to be in good spirits, grinned broadly, uttered some incomprehensible remarks in Arabic, finally deposited the tray, opened his mouth and pointed down his throat and departed relocking the door behind him.

Victoria approached the tray with interest. There was a large bowl of rice, something that looked like rolled up cabbage leaves and a large flap of Arab bread. Also a jug of water and a glass.

Victoria started by drinking a large glass of water and then fell to on the rice, the bread, and the cabbage leaves which were full of rather peculiar tasting chopped meat. When she had finished everything on the tray she felt a good deal better.

She tried her best to think things out clearly. She had been chloroformed and kidnapped. How long ago? As to that, she had only the foggiest idea. From drowsy memories of sleeping and waking she judged that it was some days ago. She had been taken out of Baghdad—where? There again, she had no means of knowing. Owing to her ignorance of Arabic, it was not

even possible to ask questions. She could not find out a place, or a name, or a date.

Several hours of acute boredom followed.

That evening her gaoler reappeared with another tray of food. With him this time came a couple of women. They were in rusty black with their faces hidden. They did not come into the room but stood just outside the door. One had a baby in her arms. They stood there and giggled. Through the thinness of the veil their eyes, she felt, were appraising her. It was exciting to them and highly humorous to have a European woman imprisoned here.

Victoria spoke to them in English and in French, but got only giggles in reply. It was queer, she thought, to be unable to communicate with her own sex. She said slowly and with difficulty one of the few phrases she had picked up:

“El hamdu lillah.”

Its utterance was rewarded by a delighted spate of Arabic. They nodded their heads vigorously. Victoria moved towards them, but quickly the Arab servant or whatever he was, stepped back and barred her way. He motioned the two women back and went out himself, closing and locking the door again. Before he did so, he uttered one word several times over.

“Bukra—Bukra...”

It was a word Victoria had heard before. It meant tomorrow.

Victoria sat down on her bed to think things over. Tomorrow? Tomorrow, someone was coming or something was going to happen. Tomorrow her imprisonment would end (or wouldn't it?)—or if it did end, she herself might end too! Taking all things together, Victoria didn't much care for the idea of tomorrow. She felt instinctively that it would be much better if by tomorrow she was somewhere else.

But was that possible? For the first time, she gave this problem full attention. She went first to the door and examined it. Certainly nothing

doing there. This wasn't the kind of lock you picked with a hairpin—if indeed she would have been capable of picking any lock with a hairpin, which she very much doubted.

There remained the window. The window, she soon found, was a much more hopeful proposition. The wooden latticework that screened it was in the final stages of decrepitude. Granted she could break away sufficient of the rotten woodwork to force herself through, she could hardly do so without a good deal of noise which could not fail to attract attention. Moreover, since the room in which she was confined was on an upper floor, it meant either fashioning a rope of some kind or else jumping with every likelihood of a sprained ankle or other injury. In books, thought Victoria, you make a rope of strips of bedclothes. She looked doubtfully at the thick cotton quilt and ragged blanket. Neither of them seemed at all suitable to her purpose. She had nothing with which to cut the quilt in strips, and though she could probably tear the blanket, its condition of rottenness would preclude any possibility of trusting her weight to it.

“Damn,” said Victoria aloud.

She was more and more enamoured of the idea of escape. As far as she could judge, her gaolers were people of very simple mentality to whom the mere fact that she was locked in a room spelt finality. They would not be expecting her to escape for the simple reason that she was a prisoner and could not. Whoever had used the hypodermic on her and presumably brought her here was not now on the premises—of that she was sure. He or she or they were expected “bukra.” They had left her in some remote spot in the guardianship of simple folk who would obey instructions but who would not appreciate subtleties, and who were not, presumably, alive to the inventive faculties of a European young woman in imminent fear of extinction.

“I’m getting out of here somehow,” said Victoria to herself.

She approached the table and helped herself to the new supply of food. She might as well keep her strength up. There was rice again and some oranges, and some bits of meat in a bright orange sauce.

Victoria ate everything and then had a drink of water. As she replaced the jug on the table, the table tilted slightly and some of the water went on the floor. The floor in that particular spot at once became a small puddle of liquid mud. Looking at it, an idea stirred in Miss Victoria Jones' always fertile brain.

The question was, had the key been left in the lock on the outside of the door?

The sun was setting now. Very soon it would be dark. Victoria went over to the door, knelt down and peered into the immense keyhole. She could see no light. Now what she needed was something to prod with—a pencil or the end of a fountain pen. How tiresome that her handbag had been taken away. She looked round the room frowning. The only article of cutlery on the table was a large spoon. That was no good for her immediate need, though it might come in handy later. Victoria sat down to puzzle and contrive. Presently she uttered an exclamation, took off her shoe and managed to pull out the inner leather sole. She rolled this up tightly. It was reasonably stiff. She went back to the door, squatted down and poked vigorously through the keyhole. Fortunately the immense key fitted loosely into the lock. After three or four minutes it responded to the efforts and fell out of the door on the outside. It made little noise falling on the earthen floor.

Now, Victoria thought, I must hurry, before the light goes altogether. She fetched the jug of water and poured a little carefully on a spot at the bottom of the door frame as near as possible to where she judged the key had fallen. Then, with the spoon and her fingers she scooped and scrabbled in the muddy patch that resulted. Little by little, with fresh applications of water from the jug, she scooped out a low trough under the door. Lying down she tried to peer through it but it wasn't easy to see anything. Rolling up her sleeves, she found she could get her hand and part of her arm under the door. She felt about with exploratory fingers and finally the tip of one finger touched something metallic. She had located the key, but she was unable to get her arm far enough to claw it nearer. Her next procedure was to detach the safety-pin which was holding up a torn shoulder strap. Bending it into a hook, she embedded it in a wedge of Arab bread and lay down again to fish. Just as she was ready to cry with vexation the hooked

safety pin caught in the key and she was able to draw it within reach of her fingers and then to pull it through the muddy trough to her side of the door.

Victoria sat back on her heels full of admiration for her own ingenuity. Grasping the key in her muddy hand, she got up and fitted it into the lock. She waited for a moment when there was a good chorus of pi-dogs barking in the near neighbourhood, and turned it. The door yielded to her push and swung open a little way. Victoria peered cautiously through the aperture. The door gave onto another small room with an open door at the end of it. Victoria waited a moment, then tiptoed out and across. This outside room had large gaping holes in the roof and one or two in the floor. The door at the end gave on the top of a flight of rough mudbrick stairs affixed to the side of the house, and which led down to the garden.

That was all Victoria wanted to see. She tiptoed back to her own place of imprisonment. There was little likelihood that anyone would come near her again tonight. She would wait until it was dark and the village or town more or less settled down to sleep and then she would go.

One other thing she noted. A torn shapeless bit of black material lay in a heap near the outside door. It was, she thought, an old aba and would come in useful to cover her Western clothes.

How long she waited Victoria did not know. It seemed to her interminable hours. Yet at last the various noises of local humankind died down. The far-off blaring of a gramophone or phonograph stopped its Arab songs, the raucous voices and the spitting ceased, and there was no more far-off women's high-pitched squealing laughter; no children's crying.

At last she heard only a far-off howling noise which she took to be jackals, and the intermittent bursts of dog barking which she knew would continue through the night.

"Well, here goes!" said Victoria and stood up.

After a moments cogitation she locked the door of her prison on the outside and left the key in the lock. Then she felt her way across the outer room, picked up the black heap of material and came out at the top of the mud

stairs. There was a moon, but it was still low in the sky. It gave sufficient light for Victoria to see her way. She crept down the stairs, then paused about four steps from the bottom. She was level here with the mudwall that enclosed the garden. If she continued down the stairs she would have to pass along the side of the house. She could hear snoring from the downstairs rooms. If she went along the top of the wall it might be better. The wall was sufficiently thick to walk along.

She chose the latter course and went swiftly and somewhat precariously to where the wall turned at right angles. Here, outside, was what seemed to be a palm garden, and at one point the wall was crumbling away. Victoria found her way there, partly jumped and partly slithered down and a few moments later was threading her way through palm trees towards a gap in the far wall. She came out upon a narrow street of a primitive nature, too small for the passage of a car, but suitable for donkeys. It ran between mudbrick walls. Victoria sped along it as fast as she could.

Now dogs began to bark furiously. Two fawn-coloured pi-dogs came snarlingly out of a doorway at her. Victoria picked up a handful of rubble and brick and shied a piece at them. They yelped and ran away. Victoria sped on. She rounded a corner and came into what was evidently the main street. Narrow and heavily rutted, it ran through a village of mudbrick houses, uniformly pale in the moonlight. Palms peeped over walls, dogs snarled and barked. Victoria took a deep breath and ran. Dogs continued to bark, but no human being took any interest in this possible night marauder. Soon she came out on a wide space with a muddy stream and a decrepit humpbacked bridge over it. Beyond, the road, or track, lay heading towards what seemed infinite space. Victoria continued to run until she was out of breath.

The village was well behind her now. The moon was high in the sky. To the left and the right and in front of her, was bare stony ground, uncultivated and without a sign of human habitation. It looked flat but was really faintly contoured. It had, as far as Victoria could see, no landmarks and, she had no idea in what direction the track led. She was not learned enough in the stars to know even towards what point of the compass she was heading. There

was something subtly terrifying in this large empty waste, but it was impossible to turn back. She could only go on.

Pausing a few moments to get her breath back, and assuring herself by looking back over her shoulder, that her flight had not been discovered, she set forth, walking a steady three and a half miles an hour towards the unknown.

Dawn came at last to find Victoria weary, footsore, and almost on the verge of hysteria. By noting the light in the sky she ascertained that she was heading roughly southwest, but since she did not know where she was, that knowledge was of little use to her.

A little to the side of the road ahead of her was a kind of small compact hill or knob. Victoria left the track and made her way to the knob, the sides of which were quite steep, and climbed up to the top of it.

Here she was able to take a survey of the country all around and her feeling of meaningless panic returned. For everywhere there was nothing...The scene was beautiful in the early morning light. The ground and horizon shimmered with faint pastel shades of apricot and cream and pink on which were patterns of shadows. It was beautiful but frightening. "I know what it means now," thought Victoria, "when anyone says they are alone in the world...."

There was a little faint scrubby grass in dark patches here and there and some dry thorn. But otherwise there was no cultivation, and no signs of life. There was only Victoria Jones.

Of the village from which she had fled there were no signs either. The road along which she had come stretched back apparently into an infinity of waste. It seemed incredible to Victoria that she could have walked so far as to have lost the village altogether from view. For a moment she had a panic-stricken yearning to go back. Somehow or other to regain touch with humankind....

Then she took herself in hand. She had meant to escape, and had escaped but her troubles were not likely to be at an end simply because she had

placed several miles between her and her gaolers. A car, however old and rickety, would make short work of those miles. As soon as her escape was discovered, someone would come in search of her. And how on earth was she going to take cover or hide. There simply wasn't anywhere to hide. She still carried the ragged black aba she had snatched up. Now tentatively she wrapped herself in its folds, pulling it down over her face. She had no idea what she looked like because she had no mirror with her. If she took off her European shoes and stockings and shuffled along with bare feet, she might possibly evade detection. A virtuously veiled Arab woman, however ragged and poor, had, she knew, all possible immunity. It would be the height of bad manners for any man to address her. But would that disguise fool Western eyes who might be out in a car looking for her. At any rate, it was the only chance.

She was much too tired to go on at present. She was terribly thirsty too, but it was impossible to do anything about that. The best thing, she decided, was to lie down on the side of this hillock. She could hear a car coming and if she kept herself flattened into a little ravine which had eroded down the side of the hillock, she could get some idea of who was in the car.

She could take cover by moving round the back of the hillock so as to keep out of sight of the road.

On the other hand, what she badly needed was to get back to civilization, and the only means, as far as she could see, was to stop a car with Europeans in it and ask for a lift.

But she must be sure that the Europeans were the right Europeans. And how on earth was she to make sure of that?

Worrying over this point, Victoria quite unexpectedly fell asleep, worn out by her long trudge and her general exhaustion.

When she awoke the sun was directly overhead. She felt hot and stiff and dizzy and her thirst was now a raging torment. Victoria gave a groan, but as the groan issued from her dry sore lips, she suddenly stiffened and listened. She heard faintly but distinctly the sound of a car. Very cautiously she raised her head. The car was not coming from the direction of the village

but towards it. That meant that it was not in pursuit. It was as yet a small black dot far-off on the track. Still lying as much concealed as she could, Victoria watched it come nearer. How she wished she had field glasses with her.

It disappeared for a few minutes in a depression of landscape, then reappeared surmounting a rise not very far away. There was an Arab driver and beside him was a man in European dress.

“Now,” thought Victoria, “I’ve got to decide.” Was this her chance? Should she run down to the road and hail the car to stop?

Just as she was getting ready to do so, a sudden qualm stopped her. Suppose, just suppose, that this was the Enemy?

After all, how could she tell? The track was certainly a very deserted one. No other car had passed. No lorry. Not even a train of donkeys. This car was making, perhaps for the village she had left last night....

What should she do? It was a horrible decision to have to make at a moment’s notice. If it was the Enemy, it was the end. But if it wasn’t the Enemy, it might be her only hope of survival. Because if she went on wandering about, she would probably die of thirst and exposure. What should she do?

And as she crouched paralysed with indecision, the note of the approaching car changed. It slackened speed, then, swerving, it came off the road and across the stony ground towards the mound on which she squatted.

It had seen her! It was looking for her!

Victoria slithered down the gully and crawled round the back of the mound away from the approaching car. She heard it come to a stop and the bang of the door as someone got out.

Then somebody said something in Arabic. After that, nothing happened. Suddenly, without any warning, a man came into view. He was walking round the mound, about halfway up it. His eyes were bent on the ground

and from time to time he stooped and picked something up. Whatever he was looking for, it did not seem to be a girl called Victoria Jones. Moreover, he was unmistakably an Englishman.

With an exclamation of relief Victoria struggled to her feet and came towards him. He lifted his head and stared in surprise.

“Oh please,” said Victoria. “I’m so glad you’ve come.”

He still stared.

“Who on earth,” he began. “Are you English? But—”

With a spurt of laughter, Victoria cast away the enveloping aba.

“Of course I’m English,” she said. “And please, can you take me back to Baghdad?”

“I’m not going to Baghdad. I’ve just come from it. But what on earth are you doing all alone out here in the middle of the desert?”

“I was kidnapped,” said Victoria breathlessly. “I went to have my hair shampooed and they gave me chloroform. And when I woke up I was in an Arab house in a village over there.”

She gesticulated towards the horizon:

“In Mandali?”

“I don’t know its name. I escaped last night. I walked all through the night and then I hid behind this hill in case you were an Enemy.”

Her rescuer was staring at her with a very odd expression on his face. He was a man of about thirty-five, fair-haired, with a somewhat supercilious expression. His speech was academic and precise. He now put on a pair of pince-nez and stared at her through them with an expression of distaste. Victoria realized that this man did not believe a word of what she was saying.

She was immediately moved to furious indignation.

“It’s perfectly true,” she said. “Every word of it!”

The stranger looked more disbelieving than ever.

“Very remarkable,” he said in a cold tone.

Despair seized Victoria. How unfair it was that whilst she could always make a lie sound plausible, in recitals of stark truth she lacked the power to make herself believed. Actual facts she told badly and without conviction.

“And if you haven’t got anything to drink with you, I shall die of thirst,” she said. “I’m going to die of thirst anyway, if you leave me here and go on without me.”

“Naturally I shouldn’t dream of doing that,” said the stranger stiffly. “It is most unsuitable for an Englishwoman to be wandering about alone in the wilds. Dear me, your lips are quite cracked...Abdul.”

“Sahib?”

The driver appeared round the side of the mound.

On receiving instructions in Arabic he ran off towards the car to return shortly with a large Thermos flask and a bakelite cup.

Victoria drank water avidly.

“Oo!” she said. “That’s better.”

“My name’s Richard Baker,” said the Englishman.

Victoria responded.

“I’m Victoria Jones,” she said. And then, in an effort to recover lost ground and to replace the disbelief she saw by a respectful attention, she added:

“Pauncefoot Jones. I’m joining my uncle, Dr. Pauncefoot Jones on his excavation.

“What an extraordinary coincidence,” said Baker, staring at her surprisedly. “I’m on my way to the Dig myself. It’s only about fifteen miles from here. I’m just the right person to have rescued you, aren’t I?”

To say that Victoria was taken aback is to put it mildly. She was completely flabbergasted. So much so that she was quite incapable of saying a word of any kind. Meekly and in silence she followed Richard to the car and got in.

“I suppose you’re the anthropologist,” said Richard, as he settled her in the back seat and removed various impedimenta. “I heard you were coming out, but I didn’t expect you so early in the season.”

He stood for a moment sorting through various potsherds which he removed from his pockets and which, Victoria now realized, were what he had been picking up from the surface of the mound.

“Likely looking little Tell,” he said, gesturing towards the mound. “But nothing out of the way on it so far as I can see. Late Assyrian ware mostly—a little Parthian, some quite good ring bases of the Kassite period.” He smiled as he added, “I’m glad to see that in spite of your troubles your archaeological instincts led you to examine a Tell.”

Victoria opened her mouth and then shut it again. The driver let in the clutch and they started off.

What, after all, could she say? True, she would be unmasked as soon as they reached the Expedition House—but it would be infinitely better to be unmasked there and confess penitence for her inventions, than it would be to confess to Mr. Richard Baker in the middle of nowhere. The worst they could do to her would be to send her into Baghdad. And, anyway, thought Victoria, incorrigible as ever, perhaps before I get there I shall have thought of something. Her busy imagination got to work forthwith. A lapse of memory? She had travelled out with a girl who had asked her to—no, really, as far as she could see, she would have to make a complete breast of it. But she infinitely preferred making a clean breast of it to Dr. Pauncefoot

Jones whatever kind of man he was, than to Mr. Richard Baker, with his supercilious way of lifting his eyebrows and his obvious disbelief of the exact and true story she had told him.

“We don’t go right into Mandali,” said Mr. Baker, turning in the front seat. “We branch off from the road into the desert about a mile farther on. A bit difficult to hit the exact spot sometimes with no particular landmarks.”

Presently he said something to Abdul and the car turned sharply off the track and made straight for the desert. With no particular landmarks to guide him, as far as Victoria could see, Richard Baker directed Abdul with gestures—the car now to the right—now to the left. Presently Richard gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

“On the right track now,” he said.

Victoria could not see any track at all. But presently she did catch sight every now and again of faintly marked tyre tracks.

Once they crossed a slightly more clearly marked track and when they did so, Richard made an exclamation and ordered Abdul to stop.

“Here’s an interesting sight for you,” he said to Victoria. “Since you’re new to this country you won’t have seen it before.”

Two men were advancing towards the car along the cross track. One man carried a short wooden bench on his back, the other a big wooden object about the size of an upright piano.

Richard hailed them, they greeted him with every sign of pleasure. Richard produced cigarettes and a cheerful party spirit seemed to be developing.

Then Richard turned to her.

“Fond of the cinema? Then you shall see a performance.”

He spoke to the two men and they smiled with pleasure. They set up the bench and motioned to Victoria and Richard to sit on it. Then they set up

the round contrivance on a stand of some kind. It had two eye-holes in it and as she looked at it, Victoria cried:

“It’s like things on piers. What the butler saw.”

“That’s it,” said Richard. “It’s a primitive form of same.”

Victoria applied her eyes to the glass-fronted peephole, one man began slowly to turn a crank or handle, and the other began a monotonous kind of chant.

“What is he saying?” Victoria asked.

Richard translated as the singsong chant continued:

“Draw near and prepare yourself for much wonder and delight. Prepare to behold the wonders of antiquity.”

A crudely coloured picture of Negroes reaping wheat swam into Victoria’s gaze.

“Fellahin in America,” announced Richard, translating.

Then came:

“The wife of the great Shah of the Western world,” and the Empress Eugénie simpered and fingered a long ringlet. A picture of the King’s Palace in Montenegro, another of the Great Exhibition.

An odd and varied collection of pictures followed each other, all completely unrelated and sometimes announced in the strangest terms.

The Prince Consort, Disraeli, Norwegian Fjords and Skaters in Switzerland completed this strange glimpse of olden far-off days.

The showman ended his exposition with the following words:

“And so we bring to you the wonders and marvels of antiquity in other lands and far-off places. Let your donation be generous to match the

marvels you have seen, for all these things are true.”

It was over. Victoria beamed with delight. “That really was marvellous!” she said. “I wouldn’t have believed it.”

The proprietors of the travelling cinema were smiling proudly. Victoria got up from the bench and Richard who was sitting on the other end of it was thrown to the ground in a somewhat undignified posture. Victoria apologized but was not ill pleased. Richard rewarded the cinema men and with courteous farewells and expressions of concern for each other’s welfare, and invoking the blessing of God on each other, they parted company. Richard and Victoria got into the car again and the men trudged away into the desert.

“Where are they going?” asked Victoria.

“They travel all over the country. I met them first in Transjordan coming up the road from the Dead Sea to Amman. Actually they’re bound now for Kerbela, going of course by unfrequented routes so as to give shows in remote villages.”

“Perhaps someone will give them a lift?”

Richard laughed.

“They probably wouldn’t take it. I offered an old man a lift once who was walking from Basrah to Baghdad. I asked him how long he expected to be and he said a couple of months. I told him to get in and he would be there late that evening, but he thanked me and said no. Two months ahead would suit him just as well. Time doesn’t mean anything out here. Once one gets that into one’s head, one finds a curious satisfaction in it.”

“Yes. I can imagine that.”

“Arabs find our Western impatience for doing things quickly extraordinarily hard to understand, and our habit of coming straight to the point in conversation strikes them as extremely ill-mannered. You should always sit

round and offer general observations for about an hour—or if you prefer it, you need not speak at all.”

“Rather odd if we did that in offices in London. One would waste a lot of time.”

“Yes, but we’re back again at the question: What is time? And what is waste?”

Victoria meditated on these points. The car still appeared to be proceeding to nowhere with the utmost confidence.

“Where is this place?” she said at last.

“Tell Aswad? Well out in the middle of the desert. You’ll see the Ziggurat very shortly now. In the meantime, look over to your left. There—where I’m pointing.”

“Are they clouds?” asked Victoria. “They can’t be mountains.”

“Yes, they are. The snowcapped mountains of Kurdistan. You can only see them when it’s very clear.”

A dreamlike feeling of contentment came over Victoria. If only she could drive on like this forever. If only she wasn’t such a miserable liar. She shrank like a child at the thought of the unpleasant denouement ahead of her. What would Dr. Pauncefoot Jones be like? Tall, with a long grey beard, and a fierce frown. Never mind, however annoyed Dr. Pauncefoot Jones might be, she had circumvented Catherine and the Olive Branch and Dr. Rathbone.

“There you are,” said Richard.

He pointed ahead. Victoria made out a kind of pimple on the far horizon.

“It looks miles away.”

“Oh no, it’s only a few miles now. You’ll see.”

And indeed the pimple developed with astonishing rapidity into first a blob and then a hill and finally into a large and impressive Tell. On one side of it was a long sprawling building of mudbrick.

“The Expedition House,” said Richard.

They drew up with a flourish amidst the barking of dogs. White robed servants rushed out to greet them, beaming with smiles.

After an interchange of greetings, Richard said:

“Apparently they weren’t expecting you so soon. But they’ll get your bed made. And they’ll take you in hot water at once. I expect you’d like to have a wash and a rest? Dr. Pauncefoot Jones is up on the Tell. I’m going up to him. Ibrahim will look after you.”

He strode away and Victoria followed the smiling Ibrahim into the house. It seemed dark inside at first after coming in out of the sun. They passed through a living room with some big tables and a few battered armchairs and she was then led round a courtyard and into a small room with one tiny window. It held a bed, a rough chest of drawers and a table with a jug and basin on it and a chair. Ibrahim smiled and nodded and brought her a large jug of rather muddy-looking hot water and a rough towel. Then, with an apologetic smile, he returned with a small looking glass which he carefully affixed upon a nail on the wall.

Victoria was thankful to have the chance of a wash. She was just beginning to realize how utterly weary and worn out she was and how very much encrusted with grime.

“I suppose I look simply frightful,” she said to herself and approached the looking glass.

For some moments she stared at her reflection uncomprehendingly.

This wasn’t her—this wasn’t Victoria Jones.

And then she realized that, though her features were the small neat features of Victoria Jones, her hair was now platinum blonde!

Nineteen

I

Richard found Dr. Pauncefoot Jones in the excavations squatting by the side of his foreman and tapping gently with a small pick at a section of wall.

Dr. Pauncefoot Jones greeted his colleague in a matter-of-fact manner.

“Hallo Richard my boy, so you’ve turned up. I had an idea you were arriving on Tuesday. I don’t know why.”

“This is Tuesday,” said Richard.

“Is it really now?” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones without interest. “Just come down here and see what you think of this. Perfectly good walls coming out already and we’re only down three feet. Seems to me there are a few traces of paint here. Come and see what you think. It looks very promising to me.”

Richard leapt down into the trench and the two archaeologists enjoyed themselves in a highly technical manner for about a quarter of an hour.

“By the way,” said Richard, “I’ve brought a girl.”

“Oh have you? What sort of girl?”

“She says she’s your niece.”

“My niece?” Dr. Pauncefoot Jones brought his mind back with a struggle from his contemplation of mudbrick walls. “I don’t think I have a niece,” he said doubtfully, as though he might have had one and forgotten about her.

“She’s coming out to work with you here, I gathered.”

“Oh.” Dr. Pauncefoot Jones’ face cleared. “Of course. That will be Veronica.”

“Victoria, I think she said.”

“Yes, yes, Victoria. Emerson wrote to me about her from Cambridge. A very able girl, I understand. An anthropologist. Can’t think why anyone wants to be an anthropologist, can you?”

“I heard you had some anthropologist girl coming out.”

“There’s nothing in her line so far. Of course we’re only just beginning. Actually I understood she wasn’t coming out for another fortnight or so, but I didn’t read her letter very carefully, and then I mislaid it, so I didn’t really remember what she said. My wife arrives next week—or the week after—now what have I done with her letter?—and I rather thought Venetia was coming out with her—but of course I may have got it all wrong. Well, well, I dare say we can make her useful. There’s a lot of pottery coming up.”

“There’s nothing odd about her, is there?”

“Odd?” Dr. Pauncefoot Jones peered at him. “In what way?”

“Well, she hasn’t had a nervous breakdown or anything?”

“Emerson did say, I remember, that she had been working very hard. Diploma or degree or something, but I don’t think he said anything about a breakdown. Why?”

“Well, I picked up her up at the side of the road, wandering about all by herself. It was on that little Tell as a matter of fact that you come to about a mile before you turn off the road—”

“I remember,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. “You know I once picked up a bit of Nuzu ware on that Tell. Extraordinary really, to find it so far south.”

Richard refused to be diverted to archaeological topics and went on firmly:

“She told me the most extraordinary story. Said she’d gone to have her hair shampooed, and they chloroformed her and kidnapped her and carried her off to Mandali and imprisoned her in a house and she’d escaped in the middle of the night—the most preposterous rigmarole you ever heard.”

Dr. Pauncefoot Jones shook his head.

“Doesn’t sound at all probable,” he said. “Country’s perfectly quiet and well-policed. It’s never been safer.”

“Exactly. She’d obviously made the whole thing up. That’s why I asked if she’d had a breakdown. She must be one of those hysterical girls who say curates are in love with them, or that doctors assault them. She may give us a lot of trouble.”

“Oh, I expect she’ll calm down,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones optimistically. “Where is she now?”

“I left her to have a wash and brush up.” He hesitated. “She hasn’t got any luggage of any kind with her.”

“Hasn’t she? That really is awkward. You don’t think she’ll expect me to lend her pyjamas? I’ve only got two pairs and one of them is badly torn.”

“She’ll have to do the best she can until the lorry goes in next week. I must say I wonder what she can have been up to—all alone and out in the blue.”

“Girls are amazing nowadays,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones vaguely. “Turn up all over the place. Great nuisance when you want to get on with things. This place is far enough out, you’d think, to be free of visitors, but you’d be surprised how cars and people turn up when you can least do with them. Dear me, the men have stopped work. It must be lunchtime. We’d better go back to the house.”

II

Victoria, waiting in some trepidation, found Dr. Pauncefoot Jones wildly far from her imaginings. He was a small rotund man with a semi-bald head and a twinkling eye. To her utter amazement he came towards her with outstretched hands.

“Well, well, Venetia—I mean Victoria,” he said. “This is quite a surprise. Got it into my head you weren’t arriving until next month. But I’m

delighted to see you. Delighted. How's Emerson? Not troubled too much by asthma, I hope?"

Victoria rallied her scattered senses and said cautiously that the asthma hadn't been too bad.

"Wraps his throat up too much," said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. "Great mistake. I told him so. All these academic fellows who stick around universities get far too absorbed in their health. Shouldn't think about it—that's the way to keep fit. Well, I hope you'll settle down—my wife will be out next week—or the week after—she's been seedy, you know. I really must find her letter. Richard tells me your luggage has gone astray. How are you going to manage? Can't very well send the lorry in before next week?"

"I expect I can manage until then," said Victoria. "In fact I shall have to."

Dr. Pauncefoot Jones chuckled.

"Richard and I can't lend you much. Toothbrush will be all right. There are a dozen of them in our stores—and cotton wool if that's any good to you and—let me see—talcum powder—and some spare socks and handkerchiefs. Not much else, I'm afraid."

"I shall be all right," said Victoria and smiled happily.

"No signs of a cemetery for you," Dr. Pauncefoot Jones warned her. "Some nice walls coming up—and quantities of potsherds from the far trenches. Might get some joins. We'll keep you busy somehow or other. I forget if you do photography?"

"I know something about it," said Victoria cautiously, relieved by a mention of something that she did actually have a working knowledge of.

"Good, good. You can develop negatives? I'm old-fashioned—use plates still. The darkroom is rather primitive. You young people who are used to all the gadgets, often find these primitive conditions rather upsetting."

"I shan't mind," said Victoria.

From the Expedition's stores, she selected a toothbrush, toothpaste, a sponge and some talcum powder.

Her head was still in a whirl as she tried to understand exactly what her position was. Clearly she was being mistaken for a girl called Venetia Someone who was coming out to join the Expedition and who was an anthropologist. Victoria didn't even know what an anthropologist was. If there was a dictionary somewhere about, she must look it up. The other girl was presumably not arriving for at least another week. Very well then, for a week—or until such time as the car or lorry went into Baghdad, Victoria would be Venetia Thingummy, keeping her end up as best she could. She had no fears for Dr. Pauncefoot Jones who seemed delightfully vague, but she was nervous of Richard Baker. She disliked the speculative way he looked at her, and she had an idea that unless she was careful he would soon see through her pretences. Fortunately she had been, for a brief period, a secretary typist at the Archaeological Institute in London, and she had a smattering of phrases and odds and ends that would be useful now. But she would have to be very careful not to make any real slip. Luckily, thought Victoria, men were always so superior about women that any slip she did make would be treated less as a suspicious circumstance than as a proof of how ridiculously addlepated all women were!

This interval would give her a respite which, she felt, she badly needed. For, from the point of view of the Olive Branch, her complete disappearance would be very disconcerting. She had escaped from her prison, but what had happened to her afterwards would be very hard to trace. Richard's car had not passed through Mandali so that nobody could guess she was now at Tell Aswad. No, from their point of view, Victoria would seem to have vanished into thin air. They might conclude, very possibly they would conclude, that she was dead. That she had strayed into the desert and died of exhaustion.

Well, let them think so. Regrettably, of course, Edward would think so, too! Very well, Edward must lump it. In any case he would not have to lump it long. Just when he was torturing himself with remorse for having told her to cultivate Catherine's society—there she would be—suddenly restored to him—back from the dead—only a blonde instead of a brunette.

That brought her back to the mystery of why They (whoever they were) had dyed her hair. There must, Victoria thought, be some reason—but she could not for the life of her understand what the reason could be. As it was, she was soon going to look very peculiar when her hair started growing out black at the roots. A phony platinum blonde, with no face powder and no lipstick! Could any girl be more unfortunately placed? Never mind, thought Victoria, I'm alive, aren't I? And I don't see at all why I shouldn't enjoy myself a good deal—at any rate for a week. It was really great fun to be on an archaeological expedition and see what it was like. If only she could keep her end up and not give herself away.

She did not find her role altogether easy. References to people, to publications, to styles of architecture and categories of pottery had to be dealt with cautiously. Fortunately a good listener is always appreciated. Victoria was an excellent listener to the two men, and warily feeling her way, she began to pick up the jargon fairly easily.

Surreptitiously, she read furiously when she was alone in the house. There was a good library of archaeological publications. Victoria was quick to pick up a smattering of the subject. Unexpectedly, she found the life quite enchanting. Tea brought to her in the early morning, then out on the Dig. Helping Richard with camera work. Piecing together and sticking up pottery. Watching the men at work, appreciating the skill and delicacy of the pick men—enjoying the songs and laughter of the little boys who ran to empty their baskets of earth on the dump. She mastered the periods, realized the various levels where digging was going on, and familiarized herself with the work of the previous season. The only thing she dreaded was that burials might turn up. Nothing that she read gave her any idea of what would be expected of her as a working anthropologist! “If we do get bones or a grave,” said Victoria to herself, “I shall have to have a frightful cold—no, a severe bilious attack—and take to my bed.”

But no graves did appear. Instead, the walls of a palace were slowly excavated. Victoria was fascinated and had no occasion to show any aptitude or special skill.

Richard Baker still looked at her quizzically sometimes and she sensed his unspoken criticism, but his manner was pleasant and friendly, and he was

genuinely amused by her enthusiasm.

“It’s all new to you coming out from England,” he said one day. “I remember how thrilled I was my first season.”

“How long ago was that?”

He smiled.

“Rather a long time. Fifteen—no, sixteen years ago.”

“You must know this country very well.”

“Oh, it’s not only been here. Syria—and Persia as well.”

“You talk Arabic very well, don’t you. If you were dressed as one could you pass as an Arab?”

He shook his head.

“Oh no—that takes some doing. I doubt if any Englishman has ever been able to pass as an Arab—for any length of time, that is.”

“Lawrence?”

“I don’t think Lawrence ever passed as an Arab. No, the only man I know who is practically indistinguishable from the native product is a fellow who was actually born out in these parts. His father was Consul at Kashgar and other wild spots. He talked all kinds of outlandish dialects as a child and, I believe, kept them up later.”

“What happened to him?”

“I lost sight of him after we left school. We were at school together. Fakir, we used to call him, because he could sit perfectly still and go into a queer sort of trance. I don’t know what he’s doing now—though actually I could make a pretty good guess.”

“You never saw him after school?”

“Strangely enough, I ran into him only the other day—at Basrah, it was. Rather a queer business altogether.”

“Queer?”

“Yes. I didn’t recognize him. He was got up as an Arab, keffiyah and striped robe and an old army coat. He had a string of those amber beads they carry sometimes and he was clicking it through his fingers in the orthodox way—only, you see, he was actually using army code. Morse. He was clicking out a message—to me!”

“What did it say?”

“My name—or nickname, rather—and his, and then a signal to stand by, expecting trouble.”

“And was there trouble?”

“Yes. As he got up and started out of the door, a quiet inconspicuous commercial traveller sort of fellow tugged out a revolver. I knocked his arm up—and Carmichael got away.

“Carmichael?”

He switched his head round quickly at her tone.

“That was his real name. Why—do you know him?”

Victoria thought to herself—How odd it would sound if I said: “He died in my bed.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I knew him.”

“Knew him? Why—is he—”

Victoria nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s dead.”

“When did he die?”

“In Baghdad. In the Tio Hotel.” She added quickly, “It was—hushed up. Nobody knows.”

He nodded his head slowly.

“I see. It was that kind of business. But you—” He looked at her. “How did you know?”

“I got mixed up in it—by accident.”

He gave her a long considering look.

Victoria asked suddenly:

“Your nickname at school wasn’t Lucifer, was it?”

He looked surprised.

“Lucifer, no? I was called Owl—because I always had to wear shiny glasses.”

“You don’t know anyone who is called Lucifer—in Basrah?”

Richard shook his head.

“Lucifer, Son of the Morning—the fallen Angel.”

He added: “Or an old-fashioned wax match. Its merit if I remember rightly, was that it didn’t go out in a wind.”

He watched her closely as he spoke, but Victoria was frowning.

“I wish you’d tell me,” she said presently, “exactly what happened at Basrah.”

“I have told you.”

“No. I mean where were you when all this occurred?”

“Oh I see. Actually it was in the waiting room of the Consulate. I was waiting to see Clayton, the Consul.”

“And who else was there? This commercial traveller person and Carmichael? Anyone else?”

“There were a couple of others, a thin dark Frenchman or Syrian, and an old man—a Persian, I should say.”

“And the commercial traveller got the revolver out and you stopped him, and Carmichael got out—how?”

“He turned first towards the Consul’s office. It’s at the other end of a passage with a garden—”

She interrupted.

“I know. I stayed there for a day or two. As a matter of fact, it was just after you left.”

“It was, was it?” Once again he watched her narrowly—but Victoria was unaware of it. She was seeing the long passage at the Consulate, but with the door open at the other end—opening on to green trees and sunlight.

“Well, as I was saying, Carmichael headed that way first. Then he wheeled round and dashed the other way into the street. That’s the last I saw of him.”

“What about the commercial traveller?”

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

“I understand he told some garbled story about having been attacked and robbed by a man the night before and fancying he had recognized his assailant in the Arab in the Consulate. I didn’t hear much more about it because I flew on to Kuwait.”

“Who was staying at the Consulate just then?” Victoria asked.

“A fellow called Crosbie—one of the oil people. Nobody else. Oh yes, I believe there was someone else down from Baghdad, but I didn’t meet him. Can’t remember his name.”

“Crosbie,” thought Victoria. She remembered Captain Crosbie, his short stocky figure, his staccato conversation. A very ordinary person. A decent soul without much finesse about him. And Crosbie had been back in Baghdad the night when Carmichael came to the Tio. Could it be because he had seen Crosbie at the other end of the passage, silhouetted against the sunlight, that Carmichael had turned so suddenly and made for the street instead of attempting to reach the Consul General’s office?

She had been thinking this out in some absorption. She started rather guiltily when she looked up to find Richard Baker watching her with close attention.

“Why do you want to know all this?” he asked.

“I’m just interested.”

“Any more questions?”

Victoria asked:

“Do you know anybody called Lefarge?”

“No—I can’t say I do. Man or woman?”

“I don’t know.”

She was wondering about Crosbie. Crosbie? Lucifer?

Did Lucifer equal Crosbie?

III

That evening, when Victoria had said good night to the two men and gone to bed, Richard said to Dr. Pauncefoot Jones:

“I wonder if I might have a look at that letter from Emerson. I’d like to see just exactly what he said about this girl.”

“Of course, my dear fellow, of course. It’s somewhere lying around. I made some notes on the back of it, I remember. He spoke very highly of Veronica, if I remember rightly—said she was terrifically keen. She seems to me a charming girl—quite charming. Very plucky the way she’s made so little fuss about the loss of her luggage. Most girls would have insisted on being motored into Baghdad the very next day to buy a new outfit. She’s what I call a sporting girl. By the way, how was it that she came to lose her luggage?”

“She was chloroformed, kidnapped, and imprisoned in a native house,” said Richard impassively.

“Dear, dear, yes so you told me. I remember now. All most improbable. Reminds me—now what does it remind me of?—ah! yes, Elizabeth Canning, of course. You remember she turned up with a most impossible story after being missing a fortnight. Very interesting conflict of evidence—about some gypsies, if it’s the right case I’m thinking of. And she was such a plain girl, it didn’t seem likely there could be a man in the case. Now little Victoria—Veronica—I never can get her name right—she’s a remarkably pretty little thing. Quite likely there is a man in her case.”

“She’d be better looking if she didn’t dye her hair,” said Richard drily.

“Does she dye it? Indeed. How knowledgeable you are in these matters.”

“About Emerson’s letter, sir—”

“Of course—of course—I’ve no idea where I put it. But look anywhere you choose—I’m anxious to find it anyway because of those notes I made on the back—and a sketch of that coiled wire bead.”

Twenty

On the following afternoon Dr. Pauncefoot Jones uttered a disgusted exclamation as the sound of a car came faintly to his ears. Presently he located it, winding across the desert towards the Tell.

“Visitors,” he said with venom. “At the worst possible moment, too. I want to superintend the cellulosing of that painted rosette on the northeast corner. Sure to be some idiots come out from Baghdad with a lot of social chatter and expecting to get shown all over the excavations.”

“This is where Victoria comes in useful,” said Richard. “You hear, Victoria? It’s up to you to do a personally conducted tour.”

“I shall probably say all the wrong things,” said Victoria. “I’m really very inexperienced, you know.”

“I think you’re doing very well indeed,” said Richard pleasantly. “Those remarks you made this morning about plano convex bricks might have come straight out of DeLongaz’s book.”

Victoria changed colour slightly, and resolved to paraphrase her erudition more carefully. Sometimes the quizzical glance through the thick lenses made her uncomfortable.

“I’ll do my best,” she said meekly.

“We push all the odd jobs on to you,” said Richard.

Victoria smiled.

Indeed her activities during the last five days surprised her not a little. She had developed plates with water filtered through cotton wool and by the light of a primitive dark lantern containing a candle which always went out at the most crucial moment. The darkroom table was a packing case and to work she had to crouch or kneel—the darkroom itself being as Richard remarked, a modern model of the famous medieval Little East. There would

be more amenities in the season to come, Dr. Pauncefoot Jones assured her—but at the moment every penny was needed to pay workmen and get results.

The baskets of broken potsherds had at first excited her astonished derision (though this she had been careful not to display). All these broken bits of coarse stuff—what was the good of them?

Then as she found joins, stuck them and propped them up in boxes of sand, she began to take an interest. She learned to recognize shapes and types. And she came finally to try and reconstruct in her own mind just how and for what these vessels had been used some three thousand odd years ago. In the small area where some poor quality private houses had been dug, she pictured the houses as they had originally stood and the people who had lived in them with their wants and possessions and occupations, their hopes and their fears. Since Victoria had a lively imagination, a picture rose up easily enough in her mind. On a day when a small clay pot was found encased in a wall with a half-dozen gold earrings in it, she was enthralled. Probably the dowry of a daughter, Richard had said smiling.

Dishes filled with grain, gold earrings saved up for a dowry, bone needles, querns and mortars, little figurines and amulets. All the everyday life and fears and hopes of a community of unimportant simple people.

“That’s what I find so fascinating,” said Victoria to Richard. “You see, I always used to think that archaeology was just Royal graves and palaces.

“Kings of Babylon,” she added, with a strange little smile. “But what I like so much about all this is that it’s the ordinary everyday people—people like me. My St. Anthony who finds things for me when I lose them—and a lucky china pig I’ve got—and an awfully nice mixing bowl, blue inside and white out, that I used to make cakes in. It got broken and the new one I bought wasn’t a bit the same. I can understand why these people mended up their favourite bowls or dishes so carefully with bitumen. Life’s all the same really, isn’t it—then or now?”

She was thinking of these things as she watched the visitors ascending the side of the Tell. Richard went to greet them, Victoria following behind him.

They were two Frenchmen, interested in archaeology, who were making a tour through Syria and Iraq. After civil greetings, Victoria took them round the excavations, reciting parrot wise what was going on, but being unable to resist, being Victoria, adding sundry embellishments of her own, just, as she put it to herself, to make it more exciting.

She noticed that the second man was a very bad colour, and that he dragged himself along without much interest. Presently he said, if Mademoiselle would excuse him, he would retire to the house. He had not felt well since early that morning—and the sun was making him worse.

He departed in the direction of the Expedition House, and the other, in suitably lowered tones explained that, unfortunately, it was his estomac. The Baghdad tummy they called it, did they not? He should not really have come out today.

The tour was completed, the Frenchman remained talking to Victoria, finally Fidos was called and Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, with a determined air of hospitality suggested the guests should have tea before departing.

To this, however, the Frenchman demurred. They must not delay their departure until it was dark or they would never find the way. Richard Baker said immediately that this was quite right. The sick friend was retrieved from the house and the car rushed off at top speed.

“I suppose that’s just the beginning,” grunted Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. “We shall have visitors every day now.”

He took a large flap of Arab bread and covered it thickly with apricot jam.

Richard went to his room after tea. He had letters to answer, and others to write in preparation for going into Baghdad on the following day.

Suddenly he frowned. Not a man of particular neatness to the outward view, he yet had a way of arranging his clothes and his papers that never varied. Now he saw at once that every drawer had been disturbed. It was not the servants, of that he was sure. It must be, then, that sick visitor who had made a pretext to go down to the house, had coolly ransacked through his

belongings. Nothing was missing, he assured himself of that. His money was untouched. What, then, had they been looking for? His face grew grave as he considered the implications.

He went to the Antika Room and looked into the drawer which held the seals and seal impressions. He gave a grim smile—nothing had been touched or removed. He went into the living room. Dr. Pauncefoot Jones was out in the courtyard with the foreman. Only Victoria was there, curled up with a book.

Richard said, without preamble, “Somebody’s been searching my room.”

Victoria looked up, astonished.

“But why? And who?”

“It wasn’t you?”

“Me?” Victoria was indignant. “Of course not? Why should I want to pry among your things?”

He gave her a hard stare. Then he said:

“It must have been that damned stranger—the one who shammed sick and came down to the house.”

“Did he steal something?”

“No,” said Richard. “Nothing was taken.”

“But why on earth should anyone—”

Richard cut in to say:

“I thought you might know that.”

“Me?”

“Well, by your own account, rather odd things have happened to you.”

“Oh that—yes.” Victoria looked rather startled. She said slowly: “But I don’t see why they should search your room. You’ve got nothing to do with —”

“With what?”

Victoria did not answer for a moment or two. She seemed lost in thought.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. “What did you say? I wasn’t listening.”

Richard did not repeat his question. Instead he asked:

“What are you reading?”

“You don’t have much choice of light fiction here. Tale of Two Cities, Pride and Prejudice and The Mill on the Floss. I’m reading the Tale of Two Cities.”

“Never read it before?”

“Never. I always thought Dickens would be stuffy.”

“What an idea!”

“I’m finding it most exciting.”

“Where have you got to?” He looked over her shoulder and read out: “And the knitting women count One.”

“I think she’s awfully frightening,” said Victoria.

“Madame Defarge? Yes, a good character. Though whether you could keep a register of names in knitting has always seemed to me rather doubtful. But then, of course, I’m not a knitter.”

“Oh I think you could,” said Victoria, considering the point. “Plain and purl—and fancy stitches—and the wrong stitch at intervals and dropped stitches. Yes—it could be done—camouflaged, of course, so that it looked like someone who was rather bad at knitting and made mistakes....”

Suddenly, with a vividness like a flash of lightning, two things came together in her mind and affected her with the force of an explosion. A name—a visual memory. The man with the ragged hand-knitted red scarf clasped in his hands—the scarf she had hurriedly picked up later and flung into a drawer. And together with that name. Defarge—not Lefarge—Defarge, Madame Defarge.

She was recalled to herself by Richard saying to her courteously:

“Is anything the matter?”

“No—no, that is, I just thought of something.”

“I see.” Richard raised his eyebrows in his most supercilious way.

Tomorrow, thought Victoria, they would all go in to Baghdad. Tomorrow her respite would be over. For over a week she had had safety, peace, time to pull herself together. And she had enjoyed that time—enjoyed it enormously. Perhaps I’m a coward, thought Victoria, perhaps that’s it. She had talked gaily about adventure, but she hadn’t liked it very much when it really came. She hated that struggle against chloroform and the slow suffocation, and she had been frightened, horribly frightened, in that upper room when the ragged Arab had said “Bukra.”

And now she’d got to go back to it all. Because she was employed by Mr. Dakin and paid by Mr. Dakin and she had to earn her pay and show a brave front! She might even have to go back to the Olive Branch. She shivered a little when she remembered Dr. Rathbone and that searching dark glance of his. He’d warned her....

But perhaps she wouldn’t have to go back. Perhaps Mr. Dakin would say it was better not—now that they knew about her. But she would have to go back to her lodgings and get her things because thrust carelessly into her suitcase was the red knitted scarf...She had bundled everything into suitcases when she left for Basrah. Once she had put that scarf into Mr. Dakin’s hands, perhaps her task would be done. He would say to her perhaps, like on the pictures: “Oh! Good show, Victoria.”

She looked up to find Richard Baker watching her.

“By the way,” he said, “will you be able to get hold of your passport tomorrow?”

“My passport?”

Victoria considered the position. It was characteristic of her that she had not as yet defined her plan of action as regards the Expedition. Since the real Veronica (or Venetia) would shortly be arriving from England, a retreat in good order was necessary. But whether she would merely fade away, or confess her deception with suitable penitence, or indeed what she intended to do, had not yet presented itself as a problem to be solved. Victoria was always prone to adopt the Micawber-like attitude that Something would Turn Up.

“Well,” she said temporizing, “I’m not sure.”

“It’s needed, you see, for the police of this district,” explained Richard. “They enter its number and your name and age and special distinguishing marks, etc., all the whole caboodle. As we haven’t got the passport, I think we ought at any rate to send your name and description to them. By the way, what is your last name? I’ve always called you ‘Victoria.’”

Victoria rallied gallantly.

“Come now,” she said. “You know my last name as well as I do.”

“That’s not quite true,” said Richard. His smile curved upwards with a hint of cruelty. “I do know your last name. It’s you, I think who don’t know it.”

Through the glasses the eyes watched her.

“Of course I know my own name,” snapped Victoria.

“Then I’ll challenge you to tell it to me—now.”

His voice was suddenly hard and curt.

“It’s no good lying,” he said. “The game’s up. You’ve been very clever about it. You’ve read up your subject, you’ve brought out very telling bits of knowledge—but it’s the kind of imposture you can’t keep up all the time. I’ve laid traps for you and you’ve fallen into them. I’ve quoted bits of sheer rubbish to you and you’ve accepted them.” He paused. “You’re not Venetia Savile. Who are you?”

“I told you who I was the first time I met you,” said Victoria. “I’m Victoria Jones.”

“Dr. Pauncefoot Jones’ niece?”

“I’m not his niece—but my name is Jones.”

“You told me a lot of other things.”

“Yes, I did. And they were all true! But I could see you didn’t believe me. And that made me mad, because though I do tell lies sometimes—in fact quite often—what I’d just told you wasn’t a lie. And so, just to make myself more convincing, I said my name was Pauncefoot Jones—I’ve said that before out here, and it’s always gone down frightfully well. How could I tell you were actually coming to this place?”

“It must have been a slight shock to you,” said Richard grimly. “You carried it off very well—cool as a cucumber.”

“Not inside,” said Victoria. “I was absolutely shaking. But I felt that if I waited to explain until I got here—well at any rate I should be safe.”

“Safe?” he considered the word. “Look here, Victoria, was that incredible rigmarole you told me about being chloroformed really true?”

“Of course it was true! Don’t you see, if I wanted to make up a story I could make up a much better one than that, and tell it better!”

“Knowing you a little more closely now, I can see the force of that! But you must admit that, on first hearing, the story was wildly improbable.”

“But you are willing to think it’s possible now. Why?”

Richard said slowly.

“Because if, as you say, you were mixed up in Carmichael’s death—well, then it might be true.”

“That’s what it all began with,” said Victoria.

“You’d better tell me about it.”

Victoria stared at him very hard.

“I’m wondering,” she said, “if I can trust you.”

“The boot is on the other leg! Do you realize that I’ve had grave suspicions that you’d planted yourself here under a false name in order to get information out of me? And perhaps that is what you are doing.”

“Meaning that you know something about Carmichael that They would like to know?”

“Who exactly are They?”

“I shall have to tell you all about it,” said Victoria. “There isn’t any other way—and if you are one of Them you know it already, so it doesn’t matter.”

She told him of the night of Carmichael’s death, of her interview with Mr. Dakin, of her journey to Basrah, her employment in the Olive Branch, of Catherine’s hostility, of Dr. Rathbone and his warning and of the final denouement, including this time the enigma of the dyed hair. The only things she left out were the red scarf and Madame Defarge.

“Dr. Rathbone?” Richard seized on that point. “You think he’s mixed up in this? Behind it? But my dear girl, he’s a very important man. He’s known all over the world. Subscriptions pour in from all over the globe for his schemes.”

“Wouldn’t he have to be all those things?” asked Victoria.

“I’ve always regarded him as a pompous ass,” said Richard meditatively.

“And that’s a very good camouflage, too.”

“Yes—yes, I suppose it is. Who was Lefarge that you asked me about?”

“Just another name,” said Victoria. “There’s Anna Scheele, too,” she said.

“Anna Scheele? No, I’ve never heard of her.”

“She’s important,” said Victoria. “But I don’t know exactly how or why. It’s all so mixed-up.”

“Just tell me again,” said Richard. “Who’s the man who started you onto all this?”

“Edwar—oh, you mean Mr. Dakin. He’s in Oil, I think.”

“Is he a tired, stooping, rather vacant-looking chap?”

“Yes—but he’s not really. Vacant, I mean.”

“Doesn’t he drink?”

“People say so, but I don’t think he does.”

Richard sat back and looked at her.

“Phillips Oppenheim, William Le Queux and several distinguished imitators since? Is this real? Are you real? And are you the persecuted heroine, or the wicked adventuress?”

Victoria said in a practical manner:

“The real point is, what are we going to say to Dr. Pauncefoot Jones about me?”

“Nothing,” said Richard. “It won’t be necessary.”

Twenty-one

They started into Baghdad early. Victoria's spirits felt curiously low. She had almost a lump in her throat as she looked back on the Expedition House. However, the acute discomfort entailed in the mad bumping of the lorry effectively distracted her mind from anything but the torture of the moment. It seemed strange to be driving along a so-called road again, passing donkeys and meeting dusty lorries. It took nearly three hours to reach the outskirts of Baghdad. The lorry decanted them at the Tio Hotel and then went off with the cook and the driver to do all the necessary shopping. A large bundle of mail was awaiting Dr. Pauncefoot Jones and Richard. Marcus appearing suddenly, massive and beaming, welcomed Victoria with his usual friendly radiance.

"Ah," he said, "it is a long time since I have seen you. You do not come to my hotel. Not for a week—two weeks. Why is that? You lunch here today, you have everything you want? The baby chickens? The big steak? Only not the turkey stuffed very special with flavouring and rice, because for that you must let me know the day before."

It seemed clear that as far as the Tio Hotel was concerned, the kidnapping of Victoria had not been noticed. Possibly Edward, on the advice of Mr. Dakin, had not been to the police.

"Is Mr. Dakin in Baghdad, do you know, Marcus?" she asked.

"Mr. Dakin—ah yes, very nice man—of course, he is friend of yours. He was here yesterday—no, day before. And Captain Crosbie, you know him? A friend of Mr. Dakin's. He arrives today from Kermanshah."

"You know where Mr. Dakin's office is?"

"Sure I know. Everybody knows the Iraqi Iranian Oil Co."

"Well, I want to go there now. In a taxi. But I want to be sure the taxi knows where to take me."

“I tell him myself,” said Marcus obligingly.

He escorted her to the head of the alleyway and yelled in his usual violent fashion. A startled minion arrived at a run. Marcus commanded him to procure a taxi. Then Victoria was escorted to the taxi and Marcus addressed the driver. Then he stepped back and waved a hand.

“And I want a room,” said Victoria. “Can I have one?”

“Yes, yes. I give you a beautiful room and I order you the big steak tonight I have—very special—some caviare. And before that we have a little drink.”

“Lovely,” said Victoria. “Oh Marcus, can you lend me some money?”

“Of course, my dear. Here you are. Take all you want.”

The taxi started off with a violent honk and Victoria fell back on the seat clutching an assortment of coins and notes.

Five minutes later Victoria entered the offices of the Iraqi Iranian Oil Co. and asked for Mr. Dakin.

Mr. Dakin looked up from his desk where he was writing when Victoria was shown in. He rose and shook hands with her in a formal manner.

“Miss—er—Miss Jones, isn’t it? Bring coffee, Abdullah.”

As the soundproof door closed behind the clerk, he said quietly:

“You shouldn’t really have come here, you know.”

“I had to this time,” said Victoria. “There’s something I’ve got to tell you at once—before anything more happens to me.”

“Happens to you? Has anything happened to you?”

“Don’t you know?” asked Victoria. “Hasn’t Edward told you?”

“As far as I know, you are still working at the Olive Branch. Nobody has told me anything.”

“Catherine,” exclaimed Victoria.

“I beg your pardon.”

“The cat Catherine! I bet she’s stuffed Edward up with some tale or other and the goop has believed her.”

“Well, let’s hear about it,” said Mr. Dakin. “Er—if I may say so,” his eye went discreetly to Victoria’s blonde head, “I prefer you as a brunette.”

“That’s only part of it,” said Victoria.

There was a tap at the door and the messenger entered with two little cups of sweet coffee. When he had gone, Dakin said:

“Now take your time and tell me all about it. We can’t be overheard here.”

Victoria plunged into the story of her adventures. As always when she was talking to Dakin, she managed to be both coherent and concise. She finished her story with an account of the red scarf Carmichael had dropped and her association of it with Madame Defarge.

Then she looked anxiously at Dakin.

He had seemed to her when she came in, to be even more bowed and tired-looking. Now she saw a new glint come into his eye.

“I should read my Dickens more often,” he said.

“Then you do think I’m right? You think it was Defarge he said—and you think some message is knitted into the scarf?”

“I think,” said Dakin, “that this is the first real break we’ve had—and we’ve got you to thank for it. But the important thing is the scarf. Where is it?”

“With all the rest of my things. I shoved it into a drawer that night—and when I packed I remember bundling everything in without sorting or anything.”

“And you’ve never happened to mention to anyone—to anyone at all—that that scarf belonged to Carmichael?”

“No, because I’d forgotten all about it. I bundled it into a suitcase with some other things when I went to Basrah and I’ve never even opened the case since.”

“Then it ought to be all right. Even if they’ve been through your things, they won’t have attached any importance to an old dirty woollen scarf—unless they were tipped off to it, which as far as I can see, is impossible. All we’ve got to do now is to have all your things collected and sent to you at—have you got anywhere to stay, by the way?”

“I’ve booked a room at the Tio.”

Dakin nodded.

“Best place for you.”

“Have I—do you want me—to go back to the Olive Branch?”

Dakin looked at her keenly.

“Scared?”

Victoria stuck out her chin.

“No,” she said with defiance. “I’ll go if you like.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary—or even wise. However they learned it, I presume that someone there got wise to your activities. That being so, you wouldn’t be able to find out anything more, so you’d better stay clear.”

He smiled.

“Otherwise you may be a redhead next time I see you.”

“That’s what I want to know most of all,” cried Victoria. “Why did they dye my hair? I’ve thought and I’ve thought and I can’t see any point in it. Can you?”

“Only the somewhat unpleasant one that your dead body might be less easy to identify.”

“But if they wanted me to be a dead body, why didn’t they kill me straightaway?”

“That’s a very interesting question, Victoria. It’s the question I want answered most of all.”

“And you haven’t any idea?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” said Mr. Dakin with a faint smile.

“Talking of clues,” said Victoria, “do you remember my saying that there was something about Sir Rupert Crofton Lee that didn’t seem right, that morning at the Tio?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t know him personally, did you?”

“I hadn’t met him before, no.”

“I thought not. Because, you see, he wasn’t Sir Rupert Crofton Lee.”

And she plunged once more into animated narrative, starting with the incipient boil on the back of Sir Rupert’s neck.

“So that was how it was done,” said Dakin. “I didn’t see how Carmichael could have been sufficiently off his guard to be killed that night. He got safely to Crofton Lee—and Crofton Lee stabbed him, but he managed to get away and burst into your room before he collapsed. And he hung onto the scarf—literally like grim death.”

“Do you think it was because I was coming to tell you this that they kidnapped me? But nobody knew except Edward.”

“I think they felt they had to get you out of the picture quickly. You were tumbling to too much that was going on at the Olive Branch.”

“Dr. Rathbone warned me,” said Victoria. “It was—more of a threat than a warning. I think he realized that I wasn’t what I pretended to be.”

“Rathbone,” said Dakin drily, “is no fool.”

“I’m glad I haven’t got to go back there,” said Victoria. “I pretended to be brave just now—but really I’m scared stiff. Only if I don’t go to the Olive Branch, how can I get hold of Edward?”

Dakin smiled.

“If Mohammed won’t come to the mountain, the mountain must come to Mohammed. Write him a note now. Just say you’re at the Tio and ask him to get your clothes and luggage and bring them along there. I’m going to consult Dr. Rathbone this morning about one of his Club soirées. It will be easy for me to slip a note to his secretary—so there will be no danger of your enemy Catherine causing it to go astray. As for you, go back to the Tio and stay there—and, Victoria—”

“Yes?”

“If you’re in a jam—of any kind—do the best you can for yourself. As far as possible you’ll be watched over, but your adversaries are rather formidable, and unfortunately you know rather a lot. Once your luggage is in the Tio Hotel your obligations to me are over. Understand that.”

“I’ll go straight back to the Tio now,” said Victoria. “At least I shall just buy some face powder and lipstick and vanishing cream on the way. After all —”

“After all,” said Mr. Dakin, “one cannot meet one’s young man completely unarmoured.”

“It didn’t matter so much with Richard Baker though I’d like him to know I can look quite nice if I try,” said Victoria. “But Edward....”

Twenty-two

Her blonde hair carefully arranged, her nose powdered and her lips freshly painted, Victoria sat upon the balcony of the Tio, once more in the role of a modern Juliet, waiting for Romeo.

And in due course Romeo came. He appeared on the grass sward, looking this way and that.

“Edward,” said Victoria.

Edward looked up.

“Oh, there you are, Victoria!”

“Come up here.”

“Right.”

A moment later he came out upon the balcony which was deserted.

“It’s more peaceful up here,” said Victoria. “We’ll go down and let Marcus give us drinks presently.”

Edward was staring at her in perplexity.

“I say, Victoria, haven’t you done something to your hair?”

Victoria gave an exasperated sigh.

“If anybody mentions hair to me, I really think I shall bat them over the head.”

“I think I liked it better as it was,” said Edward.

“Tell Catherine so!”

“Catherine? What has she got to do with it?”

“Everything,” said Victoria. “You told me to chum up with her, and I did, and I don’t suppose you’ve any idea what it let me in for!”

“Where’ve you been all this time, Victoria? I’ve been getting quite worried.”

“Oh you have, have you? Where did you think I’d been?”

“Well, Catherine gave me your message. Said you’d told her to tell me that you’d gone off to Mosul suddenly. It was something very important and good news, and I’d hear from you in due course.”

“And you believed that?” said Victoria in an almost pitying voice.

“I thought you’d got on the track of something. Naturally, you couldn’t say much to Catherine—”

“It didn’t occur to you that Catherine was lying, and that I’d been knocked on the head.”

“What?” Edward stared.

“Drugged, chloroformed—starved....”

Edward cast a sharp glance around.

“Good Lord! I never dreamed—look here, I don’t like talking out here. All these windows. Can’t we go to your room?”

“All right. Did you bring my luggage?”

“Yes, I dumped it with the porter.”

“Because when one hasn’t had a change of clothes for a fortnight—”

“Victoria, what has been happening? I know—I’ve got the car here. Let’s go out to Devonshire. You’ve never been there, have you?”

“Devonshire?” Victoria stared in surprise.

“Oh, it’s just a name for a place not far out of Baghdad. It’s rather lovely this time of year. Come on. I haven’t had you to myself for years.”

“Not since Babylon. But what will Dr. Rathbone and the Olive Branch say?”

“Blast Dr. Rathbone. I’m fed up with the old ass anyway.”

They ran down the stairs and out to where Edward’s car was parked. Edward drove southwards through Baghdad, along a wide avenue. Then he turned off from there; they jolted and twisted through palm groves and over irrigation bridges. Finally, with a strange unexpectedness they came to a small wooded copse surrounded and pierced by irrigation streams. The trees of the copse, mostly almond and apricot, were just coming into blossom. It was an idyllic spot. Beyond the copse, at a little distance, was the Tigris.

They got out of the car and walked together through the blossoming trees.

“This is lovely,” said Victoria, sighing deeply. “It’s like being back in England in spring.”

The air was soft and warm. Presently they sat down on a fallen tree trunk with pink blossom hanging down over their heads.

“Now, darling,” said Edward. “Tell me what’s been happening to you. I’ve been so dreadfully miserable.”

“Have you?” she smiled dreamily.

Then she told him. Of the girl hairdresser. Of the smell of chloroform and her struggle. Of waking up drugged and sick. Of how she had escaped and of her fortuitous meeting with Richard Baker, and of how she had claimed to be Victoria Pauncefoot Jones on her way to the Excavations, and of how she had almost miraculously sustained the part of an archaeological student arriving from England.

At this point Edward shouted with laughter.

“You are marvellous, Victoria! The things you think of—and invent.”

“I know,” said Victoria. “My uncles. Dr. Pauncefoot Jones and before him—the Bishop.”

And at that she suddenly remembered what it was she had been going to ask Edward at Basrah when Mrs. Clayton had interrupted by calling them in for drinks.

“I meant to ask you before,” she said. “How did you know about the Bishop?”

She felt the hand that held hers stiffen suddenly. He said quickly, too quickly:

“Why, you told me, didn’t you?”

Victoria looked at him. It was odd, she thought afterwards, that that one silly childish slip should have accomplished what it did.

For he was taken completely by surprise. He had no story ready—his face was suddenly defenceless and unmasked.

And as she looked at him, everything shifted and settled itself into a pattern, exactly as a kaleidoscope does, and she saw the truth. Perhaps it was not really sudden. Perhaps in her subconscious mind that question: How did Edward know about the Bishop? had been teasing and worrying, and she had been slowly arriving at the one, the inevitable, answer...Edward had not learned about the Bishop of Llangow from her, and the only other person he could have learned it from, would have been Mr. or Mrs. Hamilton Clipp. But they could not possibly have seen Edward since her arrival in Baghdad, for Edward had been in Basrah then, so he must have learned it from them before he himself left England. He must have known all along, then, that Victoria was coming out with them—and the whole wonderful coincidence was not, after all, a coincidence. It was planned and intended.

And as she stared at Edward’s unmasked face, she knew, suddenly, what Carmichael had meant by Lucifer. She knew what he had seen that day as he looked along the passage to the Consulate garden. He had seen that

young beautiful face that she was looking at now—for it was a beautiful face:

Lucifer, Son of the Morning, how art thou fallen?

Not Dr. Rathbone—Edward! Edward, playing a minor part, the part of the secretary, but controlling and planning and directing, using Rathbone as a figurehead—and Rathbone, warning her to go while she could....

As she looked at that beautiful evil face, all her silly adolescent calf love faded away, and she knew that what she felt for Edward had never been love. It had been the same feeling that she had experienced some hours earlier for Humphrey Bogart, and later for the Duke of Edinburgh. It had been glamour. And Edward had never loved her. He had exerted his charm and his glamour deliberately. He had picked her up that day, using his charm so easily, so naturally, that she had fallen for it without a struggle. She had been a sucker.

It was extraordinary how much could flash through your mind in just a few seconds. You didn't have to think it out. It just came. Full and instant knowledge. Perhaps because really, underneath, you had known it all along....

And at the same time some instinct of self-preservation, quick as all Victoria's mental processes were quick, kept her face in an expression of foolish unthinking wonder. For she knew, instinctively, that she was in great danger. There was only one thing that could save her, only one card she could play. She made haste to play it.

"You knew all along!" she said. "You knew I was coming out here. You must have arranged it. Oh Edward, you are wonderful!"

Her face, that plastic impressionable face, showed one emotion—an almost cloying adoration. And she saw the response—the faintly scornful smile, the relief. She could almost feel Edward saying to himself, "The little fool! She'll swallow anything! I can do what I like with her."

“But how did you arrange it?” she said. “You must be very powerful. You must be quite different from what you pretend to be. You’re—it’s like you said the other day—you’re a King of Babylon.”

She saw the pride that lit up his face. She saw the power and strength and beauty and cruelty that had been disguised behind a façade of a modest likeable young man.

“And I’m only a Christian Slave,” thought Victoria. She said quickly and anxiously, as a final artistic touch (and what its cost was to her pride no one will ever know), “But you do love me, don’t you?”

His scorn was hardly to be hidden now. This little fool—all these fools of women! So easy to make them think you loved them and that was all they cared about! They had no conception of greatness of construction, of a new world, they just whined for love! They were slaves and you used them as slaves to further your ends.

“Of course I love you,” he said.

“But what is it all about? Tell me, Edward? Make me understand.”

“It’s a new world, Victoria. A new world that will rise out of the muck and ashes of the old.”

“Tell me.”

He told her and in spite of herself she was almost carried away, carried into the dream. The old bad things must destroy each other. The fat old men grasping at their profits, impeding progress. The bigoted stupid Communists, trying to establish their Marxian heaven. There must be total war—total destruction. And then—the new Heaven and the new Earth. The small chosen band of higher beings, the scientists, the agricultural experts, the administrators—the young men like Edward—the young Siegfrieds of the New World. All young, all believing in their destiny as Supermen. When destruction had run its course, they would step in and take over.

It was madness—but it was constructive madness. It was the sort of thing that in a world, shattered and disintegrating, could happen.

“But think,” said Victoria, “of all the people who will be killed first.”

“You don’t understand,” said Edward. “That doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t matter—that was Edward’s creed. And suddenly for no reason, a remembrance of that three thousand years old coarse pottery bowl mended with bitumen flashed across Victoria’s mind. Surely those were the things that mattered—the little everyday things, the family to be cooked for, the four walls that enclosed the home, the one or two cherished possessions. All the thousands of ordinary people on the earth, minding their own business, and tilling the earth, and making pots and bringing up families and laughing and crying, and getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. They were the people who mattered, not these Angels with wicked faces who wanted to make a new world and who didn’t care whom they hurt to do it.

And carefully, feeling her way, for here in Devonshire she knew that death might be very near, she said:

“You are wonderful, Edward. But what about me? What can I do?”

“You want to—help? You believe in it?”

But she was prudent. Not sudden conversion. That would be too much.

“I think I just believe in you!” she said. “Anything you tell me to do, Edward, I’ll do.”

“Good girl,” he said.

“Why did you arrange for me to come out here to begin with? There must have been some reason?”

“Of course there was. Do you remember I took a snap of you that day?”

“I remember,” said Victoria.

(You fool, how flattered you were, how you simpered! she thought to herself.)

“I’d been struck by your profile—by your resemblance to someone. I took that snap to make sure.”

“Whom do I resemble?”

“A woman who’s been causing us a good deal of trouble—Anna Scheele.”

“Anna Scheele.” Victoria stared at him in blank surprise. Whatever she had expected, it was not this. “You mean—she looks like me?”

“Quite remarkably so side view. The features in profile are almost exactly the same. And there’s one most extraordinary thing, you’ve got a tiny mark of a scar on your upper lip, left side—”

“I know. It’s where I fell on a tin horse when I was a child. It had a sharp ear sticking up and it cut quite deep in. It doesn’t show much—not with powder on.”

“Anna Scheele has a mark in just the same place. That was a most valuable point. You’re alike in height and build—she’s about four or five years older than you. The real difference is the hair, you’re a brunette and she’s a blonde. And your style of hairdressing is quite different. Your eyes are a darker blue, but that wouldn’t matter with tinted glasses.”

“And that’s why you wanted me to come to Baghdad? Because I looked like her.”

“Yes, I thought the resemblance might—come in useful.”

“So you arranged the whole thing...The Clipps—who are the Clipps?”

“They’re not important—they just do as they’re told.”

Something in Edward’s tone sent a faint shiver down Victoria’s spine. It was as though he had said with inhuman detachment, “They are under Obedience.”

There was a religious flavour about this mad project. “Edward,” she thought, “is his own God. That’s what’s so frightening.”

Aloud she said:

“You told me that Anna Scheele was the boss, the Queen Bee, in your show?”

“I had to tell you something to put you off the scent. You had already learnt too much.”

“And if I hadn’t happened to look like Anna Scheele that would have been the end of me,” thought Victoria.

She said:

“Who is she really?”

“She’s confidential secretary to Otto Morgenthal, the American and international banker. But that isn’t all she is. She has the most remarkable financial brain. We’ve reason to believe she’s traced out a lot of our financial operations. Three people have been dangerous to us—Rupert Crofton Lee, Carmichael—well they’re both wiped out. There remains Anna Scheele. She’s due in Baghdad in three days’ time. In the meantime, she’s disappeared.”

“Disappeared? Where?”

“In London. Vanished, apparently, off the face of the earth.”

“And does no one know where she is?”

“Dakin may know.”

But Dakin didn’t know. Victoria knew that, though Edward didn’t—so where was Anna Scheele?

She asked:

“You really haven’t the least idea?”

“We’ve an idea,” said Edward slowly.

“Well?”

“It’s vital that Anna Scheele should be here in Baghdad for the Conference. That, as you know, is in five days’ time.”

“As soon as that? I’d no idea.”

“We’ve got every entry into this country taped. She’s certainly not coming here under her own name. And she’s not coming in on a Government service plane. We’ve our means of checking that. So we’ve investigated all the private bookings. There’s a passage booked by BOAC in the name of Grete Harden. We’ve traced Grete Harden back and there’s no such person. It’s an assumed name. The address given is a phony one. It’s our idea that Grete Harden is Anna Scheele.”

He added:

“Her plane will touch down at Damascus the day after tomorrow.”

“And then?”

Edward’s eyes looked suddenly into hers.

“That’s up to you, Victoria.”

“To me?”

“You’ll take her place.”

Victoria said slowly:

“Like Rupert Crofton Lee?”

It was almost a whisper. In the course of that substitution Rupert Crofton Lee had died. And when Victoria took her place, presumably Anna Scheele,

or Grete Harden, would die.

And Edward was waiting—and if for one moment Edward doubted her loyalty, then she, Victoria, would die—and die without the possibility of warning anyone.

No, she must agree and seize a chance to report to Mr. Dakin.

She drew a deep breath and said:

“I—I—oh, but Edward, I couldn’t do it. I’d be found out. I can’t do an American voice.”

“Anna Scheele has practically no accent. In any case you will be suffering from laryngitis. One of the best doctors in this part of the world will say so.”

“They’ve got people everywhere,” thought Victoria.

“What would I have to do?” she asked.

“Fly from Damascus to Baghdad as Grete Harden. Take to your bed immediately. Be allowed up by our reputable doctor just in time to go to the Conference. There you will lay before them the documents which you have brought with you.”

Victoria asked: “The real documents?”

“Of course not. We shall substitute our version.”

“What will the documents show?”

Edward smiled.

“Convincing details of the most stupendous Communist plot in America.”

Victoria thought: “How well they’ve got it planned.”

Aloud she said:

“Do you really think I can get away with it, Edward?”

Now that she was playing a part, it was quite easy for Victoria to ask it with every appearance of anxious sincerity.

“I’m sure you can. I’ve noticed that your playing of a part affords you such enjoyment that it’s practically impossible to disbelieve you.”

Victoria said meditatively:

“I still feel an awful fool when I think of the Hamilton Clipps.”

He laughed in a superior way.

Victoria, her face still a mask of adoration, thought to herself viciously. “But you were an awful fool, too, to let slip that about the Bishop at Basrah. If you hadn’t I’d never have seen through you.”

She said suddenly: “What about Dr. Rathbone?”

“What do you mean ‘What about him?’”

“Is he just a figurehead?”

Edward’s lips curved in cruel amusement.

“Rathbone has got to toe the line. Do you know what he’s been doing all these years? Cleverly appropriating about three-quarters of the subscriptions which pour in from all over the world to his own use. It’s the cleverest swindle since the time of Horatio Bottomley. Oh yes, Rathbone’s completely in our hands—we can expose him at anytime and he knows it.”

Victoria felt a sudden gratitude to the old man with the noble domed head, and the mean acquisitive soul. He might be a swindler—but he had known pity—he had tried to get her to escape in time.

“All things work towards our New Order,” said Edward.

She thought to herself, “Edward, who looks so sane, is really mad! You get mad, perhaps, if you try and act the part of God. They always say humility is a Christian virtue—now I see why. Humility is what keeps you sane and a human being....”

Edward got up.

“Time to be moving,” he said. “We’ve got to get you to Damascus and our plans there worked out by the day after tomorrow.”

Victoria rose with alacrity. Once she was away from Devonshire, back in Baghdad with its crowds, in the Tio Hotel with Marcus shouting and beaming and offering her a drink, the near persistent menace of Edward would be removed. Her part was to play a double game—continue to fool Edward by a sickly dog-like devotion, and counter his plans secretly.

She said: “You think that Mr. Dakin knows where Anna Scheele is? Perhaps I could find that out. He might drop some hint.”

“Unlikely—and in any case, you won’t be seeing Dakin.”

“He told me to come to see him this evening,” said Victoria mendaciously, a slightly chilly feeling attacking her spine. “He’ll think it odd if I don’t turn up.”

“It doesn’t matter at this stage what he thinks,” said Edward. “Our plans are made.” He added, “You won’t be seen in Baghdad again.”

“But Edward, all my things are at the Tio! I’ve booked a room.”

The scarf. The precious scarf.

“You won’t need your things for some time to come. I’ve got a rig out waiting for you. Come on.”

They got in the car again. Victoria thought, “I ought to have known that Edward would never be such a fool as to let me get in touch with Mr. Dakin after I’d found him out. He believes I’m besotted about him—yes, I think he’s sure of that—but all the same he isn’t going to take any chances.”

She said: “Won’t there be a search for me if I—don’t turn up?”

“We’ll attend to that. Officially you’ll say good-bye to me at the bridge and go off to see some friends on the West Bank.”

“And actually?”

“Wait and see.”

Victoria sat silent as they bumped over the rough track and twisted round palm gardens and over the little irrigation bridges.

“Lefarge,” murmured Edward. “I wish we knew what Carmichael meant by that.”

Victoria’s heart gave a leap of anxiety.

“Oh,” she said. “I forgot to tell you. I don’t know if it means anything. A M. Lefarge came to the Excavations one day at Tell Aswad.”

“What?” Edward almost stalled the car in his excitement. “When was this?”

“Oh! About a week ago. He said he came from some Dig in Syria. M. Parrot’s, would it be?”

“Did two men called André and Juvet come while you were there?”

“Oh yes,” said Victoria. “One of them had a sick stomach. He went to the house and lay down.”

“They were two of our people,” said Edward.

“Why did they come here? To look for me?”

“No—I’d no idea where you were. But Richard Baker was in Basrah at the same time as Carmichael. We had an idea Carmichael might have passed something on to Baker.”

“He said his things had been searched. Did they find anything?”

“No—now think carefully, Victoria. Did this man Lefarge come before the other two or afterwards?”

Victoria reflected in a convincing manner, as she decided what movements to impute to the mythical M. Lefarge.

“It was—yes, the day before the other two came,” she said.

“What did he do?”

“Well,” said Victoria, “he went over the Dig—with Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. And then Richard Baker took him down to the house to see some of the things in the Antika Room there.”

“He went to the house with Richard Baker. They talked together?”

“I suppose so,” said Victoria. “I mean, you wouldn’t look at things in absolute silence, would you?”

“Lefarge,” murmured Edward. “Who is Lefarge? Why have we got no line on him?”

Victoria longed to say, “He’s brother to Mrs. Harris,” but refrained. She was pleased with her invention of M. Lefarge. She could see him quite clearly now in her mind’s eye—a thin rather consumptive-looking young man with dark hair and a little moustache. Presently, when Edward asked her, she described him carefully and accurately.

They were driving now through the suburbs of Baghdad. Edward turned off down a side street of modern villas built in a pseudo-European style, with balconies and gardens round them. In front of one house a big touring car was standing. Edward drew up behind it and he and Victoria got out, and went up the steps to the front door.

A thin dark woman came out to meet them and Edward spoke to her rapidly in French. Victoria’s French was not sufficiently good to understand fully what was said, but it seemed to be to the effect that this was the young lady and that the change must be effected at once.

The woman turned to her and said politely in French:

“Come with me, please.”

She led Victoria into a bedroom where, spread out on a bed, was the habit of a nun. The woman motioned to her, and Victoria undressed and put on the stiff wool undergarment and the voluminous medieval folds of dark stuff. The Frenchwoman adjusted the headdress. Victoria caught a glimpse of herself in the glass. Her small pale face under the gigantic (was it a wimple?) with the white folds under her chin, looked strangely pure and unearthly. The Frenchwoman threw a Rosary of wooden beads over her head. Then, shuffling in the over-large coarse shoes Victoria was led out to rejoin Edward.

“You look all right,” he said approvingly. “Keep your eyes down, particularly when there are men about.”

The Frenchwoman rejoined them a moment or two later similarly apparelled. The two nuns went out of the house and got into the touring car which now had a tall dark man in European dress in the driver’s seat.

“It’s up to you now, Victoria,” said Edward. “Do exactly as you are told.”

There was a slight steely menace behind the words.

“Aren’t you coming, Edward?” Victoria sounded plaintive.

He smiled at her.

“You’ll see me in three days’ time,” he said. And then, with a resumption of his persuasive manner, he murmured, “Don’t fail me, darling. Only you could do this—I love you, Victoria. I daren’t be seen kissing a nun—but I’d like to.”

Victoria dropped her eyes in approved nun-like fashion, but actually to conceal the fury that showed for a moment.

“Horrible Judas,” she thought.

Instead she said with an assumption of her usual manner:

“Well, I seem to be a Christian Slave all right.”

“That’s the girl!” said Edward. He added, “Don’t worry. Your papers are in perfect order—you’ll have no difficulty at the Syrian frontier. Your name in religion, by the way, is Sister Marie des Anges. Sister Thérèse who accompanies you has all the documents and is in full charge, and for God’s sake obey orders—or I warn you frankly, you’re for it.”

He stepped back, waved his hand cheerfully, and the touring car started off.

Victoria leaned back against the upholstery and gave herself up to contemplation of possible alternatives. She could, as they were passing through Baghdad, or when they got to the frontier control, make an agitation, scream for help, explain that she was being carried off against her will—in fact, adopt one or other variants of immediate protest.

What would that accomplish? In all probability it would mean the end of Victoria Jones. She had noticed that Sister Thérèse had slipped into her sleeve a small and businesslike automatic pistol. She could be given no chance of talking.

Or she could wait until she got to Damascus? Make her protest there? Possibly the same fate would be meted out, or her statements might be overborne by the evidence of the driver and her fellow nun. They might be able to produce papers saying that she was mentally afflicted.

The best alternative was to go through with things—to acquiesce in the plan. To come to Baghdad as Anna Scheele and to play Anna Scheele’s part. For, after all, if she did so, there would come a moment, at the final climax, when Edward could no longer control her tongue or her actions. If she could continue to convince Edward that she would do anything he told her, then the moment would come when she was standing with her forged documents before the Conference—and Edward would not be there.

And no one could stop her then from saying, “I am not Anna Scheele and these papers are forged and untrue.”

She wondered that Edward did not fear her doing just that. But she reflected that vanity was a strangely blinding quality. Vanity was the Achilles heel. And there was also the fact to be considered that Edward and his crowd had more or less got to have an Anna Scheele if their scheme was to succeed. To find a girl who sufficiently resembled Anna Scheele—even to the point of having a scar in the right place—was extremely difficult. In *The Lyons Mail*, Victoria remembered, Dubosc having a scar above one eyebrow and also of having a distortion, one by birth and one by accident, of the little finger of one hand. These coincidences must be very rare. No, the Supermen needed Victoria Jones, typist—and to that extent Victoria Jones had them in her power—not the other way round.

The car sped across the bridge. Victoria watched the Tigris with a nostalgic longing. Then they were speeding along a wide dusty highway. Victoria let the beads of her Rosary pass through her fingers. Their click was comforting.

“After all,” thought Victoria with sudden comfort. “I am a Christian. And if you’re a Christian, I suppose it’s a hundred times better to be a Christian Martyr than a King in Babylon—and I must say, there seems to me a great possibility that I am going to be a Martyr. Oh! well, anyway, it won’t be lions. I should have hated lions!”

Twenty-three

I

The big Skymaster swooped down from the air and made a perfect landing. It taxied gently along the runway and presently came to a stop at the appointed place. The passengers were invited to descend. Those going on to Basrah were separated from those who were catching a connecting plane to Baghdad.

Of the latter there were four. A prosperous-looking Iraqi business man, a young English doctor and two women. They all passed through the various controls and questioning.

A dark woman with untidy hair imperfectly bound in a scarf and a tired face came first.

“Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones? British. Yes. To join your husband. Your address in Baghdad, please? What money have you...?”

It went on. Then the second woman took the first one’s place.

“Grete Harden. Yes. Nationality? Danish. From London. Purpose of visit? Masseuse at hospital? Address in Baghdad? What money have you?”

Grete Harden was a thin, fair-haired young woman wearing dark glasses. Some rather blotchily applied cosmetic concealed what might have been a blemish on her upper lip. She wore neat but slightly shabby clothes.

Her French was halting—occasionally she had to have the question repeated.

The four passengers were told that the Baghdad plane took off that afternoon. They would be driven now to the Abbassid Hotel for a rest and lunch.

Grete Harden was sitting on her bed when a tap came on the door. She opened it and found a tall dark young woman wearing BOAC uniform.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Harden. Would you come with me to the BOAC office? A little difficulty has arisen about your ticket. This way, please.”

Grete Harden followed her guide down the passage. On a door was a large board lettered in gold—BOAC office.

The air hostess opened the door and motioned the other inside. Then, as Grete Harden passed through, she closed the door from outside and quickly unhooked the board.

As Grete Harden came through the door, two men who had been standing behind it passed a cloth over her head. They stuffed a gag into her mouth. One of them rolled her sleeve up, and bringing out a hyperdermic syringe gave her an injection.

In a few minutes her body sagged and went limp.

The young doctor said cheerfully, “That ought to take care of her for about six hours, anyway. Now then, you two, get on with it.”

He nodded towards two other occupants of the room. They were nuns who were sitting immobile by the window. The men went out of the room. The elder of the two nuns went to Grete Harden and began to take the clothes off her inert body. The younger nun, trembling a little, started taking off her habit. Presently Grete Harden, dressed in a nun’s habit, lay reposefully on the bed. The younger nun was now dressed in Grete Harden’s clothes.

The older nun turned her attention to her companion’s flaxen hair. Looking at a photograph which she propped up against the mirror, she combed and dressed the hair, bringing it back from the forehead and coiling it low on the neck.

She stepped back and said in French:

“Astonishing how it changes you. Put on the dark spectacles. Your eyes are too deep a blue. Yes—that is admirable.”

There was a slight tap on the door and the two men came in again. They were grinning.

“Grete Harden is Anna Scheele all right,” one said. “She’d got the papers in her luggage, carefully camouflaged between the leaves of a Danish publication on ‘Hospital Massage.’ Now then, Miss Harden,” he bowed with mock ceremony to Victoria, “you will do me the honour to have lunch with me.”

Victoria followed him out of the room and along to the hall. The other woman passenger was trying to send off a telegram at the desk.

“No,” she was saying, “P A U N C E foot. Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. Arriving today Tio Hotel, Good journey.”

Victoria looked at her with sudden interest. This must be Dr. Pauncefoot Jones’ wife, coming out to join him. That she was a week earlier than expected did not seem to Victoria at all extraordinary since Dr. Pauncefoot Jones had several times lamented that he had lost her letter giving the date of arrival but that he was almost certain it was the 26th!

If only she could somehow or other send a message through Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones to Richard Baker....

Almost as though he read her thoughts, the man accompanying her steered her by the elbow away from the desk.

“No conversation with fellow travellers, Miss Harden,” he said. “We don’t want that good woman to notice that you’re a different person from the one she came out from En gland with.”

He took her out of the hotel to a restaurant for lunch. As they came back, Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones was coming down the steps of the hotel. She nodded without suspicion at Victoria.

“Been sightseeing?” she called. “I’m just going to the bazaars.”

“If I could slip something into her luggage...” thought Victoria.

But she was not left alone for a moment.

The Baghdad plane left at three o’clock.

Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones’ seat was right up in front. Victoria’s was in the tail, near the door, and across the aisle sat the fair young man who was her gaoler. Victoria had no chance of reaching the other woman or of introducing a message into any of her belongings.

The flight was not a long one. For the second time, Victoria looked down from the air and saw the city outlined below her, the Tigris dividing it like a streak of gold.

So she had seen it less than a month ago. How much had happened since then.

In two days’ time the men who represented the two predominant ideologies of the world would meet here to discuss the future.

And she, Victoria Jones, would have a part to play.

II

“You know,” said Richard Baker, “I’m worried about that girl.”

Dr. Pauncefoot Jones said vaguely:

“What girl?”

“Victoria.”

“Victoria?” Dr. Pauncefoot Jones peered about. “Where is—why, God bless me, we came back without her yesterday.”

“I wondered if you’d noticed it,” said Richard.

“Very remiss of me. I was so interested by that report of the Excavations at Tell Bamdar. Completely unsound stratification. Didn’t she know where to find the lorry?”

“There was no question of her coming back here,” said Richard. “As a matter of fact, she isn’t Venetia Savile.”

“Not Venetia Savile? How very odd. But I thought you said her Christian name was Victoria.”

“It is. But she’s not an anthropologist. And she doesn’t know Emerson. As a matter of fact, the whole thing has been a—well—a misunderstanding.”

“Dear me. That seems very odd.” Dr. Pauncefoot Jones reflected for some moments. “Very odd. I do hope—am I to blame? I know I am somewhat absentminded. The wrong letter, perhaps?”

“I can’t understand it,” said Richard Baker, frowning and paying no attention to Dr. Pauncefoot Jones’ speculations. “She went off in a car with a young man, it seems, and she didn’t come back. What’s more, her baggage was there and she hadn’t bothered to open it. That seems to me very strange—considering the mess she was in. I’d have thought she’d be sure to doll herself up. And we agreed to meet here for lunch...No, I can’t understand it. I hope nothing’s happened to her.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so for a moment,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones comfortably. “I shall start going down in H. tomorrow. From the general plan I should say that would be the best chance of getting a record office. That fragment of tablet was very promising.”

“They’ve kidnapped her once,” said Richard. “What’s to prevent their having kidnapped her again?”

“Very improbable—very improbable,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. “The country’s really very settled nowadays. You said so yourself.”

“If only I could remember the name of that man in some oil company. Was it Deacon? Deacon, Dakin? Something like that.”

“Never heard of him,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. “I think I shall change over Mustafa and his gang to the northeast corner. Then we might extend Trench J—”

“Would you mind awfully, sir, if I went into Baghdad again tomorrow?”

Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, suddenly giving his colleague his full attention, stared at him.

“Tomorrow? But we were there yesterday.”

“I’m worried about that girl. I really am.”

“Dear me, Richard, I had no idea there was anything of that kind.”

“What kind?”

“That you’d formed an attachment. That’s the worst of having women on a Dig—especially good-looking ones. I really did think we were safe with Sybil Muirfield the year before last, a really distressingly plain girl—and see what came of it! I ought to have listened to Claude in London—these Frenchmen always hit the nail on the head. He commented on her legs at the time—most enthusiastic about them. Of course this girl, Victoria Venetia, whatever her name is—most attractive and such a nice little thing. You’ve got good taste, Richard, I will admit that. Funny thing, she’s the first girl I’ve ever known you take any interest in.”

“There’s nothing of that kind,” said Richard, blushing and looking even more supercilious than usual. “I’m just—er—worried about her. I must go back to Baghdad.”

“Well, if you are going tomorrow,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, “you might bring back those extra picks. That fool of a driver forgot them.”

III

Richard started into Baghdad at early dawn and went straight to the Tio Hotel. Here he learnt that Victoria had not returned.

“And it was all arranged that she was to have special dinner with me,” said Marcus. “And I kept her a very nice room. It is odd, is it not?”

“Have you been to the Police?”

“Ah no, my dear, it would not be nice, that. She might not like it. And I certainly would not like it.”

After a little inquiry, Richard tracked down Mr. Dakin and called upon him in his office.

His memory of the man had not played him false. He looked at the stooping figure, the indecisive face and the slight tremor of the hands. This man was no good! He apologized to Mr. Dakin if he was wasting his time but had he seen Miss Victoria Jones.

“She called on me the day before yesterday.”

“Can you give me her present address?”

“She’s at the Tio Hotel, I believe.”

“Her luggage is there, but she isn’t.”

Mr. Dakin raised his eyebrows slightly.

“She has been working with us on the Excavations at Tell Aswad,” explained Richard.

“Oh I see. Well—I’m afraid I don’t know anything that can help you. She has several friends in Baghdad, I believe—but I don’t know her well enough to say who they are.”

“Would she be at this Olive Branch?”

“I don’t think so. You could ask.”

Richard said: “Look here. I’m not leaving Baghdad until I find her.”

He frowned at Mr. Dakin and strode out of the room.

Mr. Dakin, as the door closed behind Richard, smiled and shook his head.

“Oh Victoria,” he murmured reproachfully.

Fuming into the Tio Hotel, Richard was met by a beaming Marcus.

“She’s come back,” cried Richard eagerly.

“No, no, it’s Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones. She arrives by plane today I have just heard. Dr. Pauncefoot Jones, he told me she was coming next week.”

“He always gets dates wrong. What about Victoria Jones?”

Marcus’s face went grave again.

“No, I have heard nothing of her. And I do not like it, Mr. Baker. It is not nice. She is so young a girl. And so pretty. And so gay and charming.”

“Yes, yes,” said Richard, flinching. “I’d better wait over and greet Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones, I suppose.”

What on earth he wondered could have happened to Victoria.

IV

“You!” said Victoria with undisguised hostility.

Ushered up to her room in the Babylonian Palace Hotel, the first person she saw was Catherine.

Catherine nodded her head with equal venom.

“Yes,” she said. “It is I. And now please go to bed. The doctor will soon arrive.”

Catherine was dressed as a hospital nurse and she took her duties seriously, being obviously quite determined never to leave Victoria’s side. Victoria,

lying disconsolately in bed, murmured:

“If I could get hold of Edward—”

“Edward—Edward!” said Catherine scornfully. “Edward has never cared for you, you stupid English girl. It is me whom Edward loves!”

Victoria looked at Catherine’s stubborn fanatical face without enthusiasm.

Catherine went on:

“Always I have hated you from that first morning you came in and demanded to see Dr. Rathbone with such rudeness.”

Searching about for an irritant, Victoria said:

“At any rate I’m much more indispensable than you are. Anybody could do your hospital nurse act. But the whole thing depends on me doing mine.”

Catherine said with prim smugness:

“Nobody is indispensable. We are taught that.”

“Well I am. For goodness’ sake order up a substantial meal. If I don’t get something to eat, how do you expect me to give a good performance of an American banker’s secretary when the time comes?”

“I suppose you might as well eat while you can,” said Catherine grudgingly.

Victoria took no notice of the sinister implication.

V

Captain Crosbie said:

“I understand you’ve got a Miss Harden just arrived.”

The suave gentleman in the office of the Babylonian Palace inclined his head.

“Yes, sir. From England.”

“She’s a friend of my sister’s. Will you take my card up to her.”

He pencilled a few words on the card and sent it up in an envelope.

Presently the boy who had taken it returned.

“The lady is not well, sir. Very bad throat. Doctor coming soon. She has hospital nurse with her.”

Crosbie turned away. He went along to the Tio where he was accosted by Marcus.

“Ah, my dear, let us have a drink. This evening my hotel is quite full. It is for the Conference. But what a pity, Dr. Pauncefoot Jones went back to his Expedition the day before yesterday and now here is his wife who arrives and expects that he will be here to meet her. And she is not pleased, no! She says she told him she was coming on this plane. But you know what he is like, that one. Every date, every time—he always gets it wrong. But he is a very nice man,” finished Marcus with his usual charity. “And I have had to squeeze her in somehow—I turn out a very important man from UNO—”

“Baghdad seems quite mad.”

“All the police they have drafted in—they are taking great precautions—they say—have you heard?—there is a Communist plot to assassinate the President. They have arrested sixty-five students! Have you seen the Russian policemen? They are very suspicious of everybody. But all this is very good for trade—very good indeed.”

VI

The telephone bell rang and was promptly answered.

“American Embassy.”

“This is the Babylonian Palace Hotel. Miss Anna Scheele is staying here.”

Anna Scheele? Presently one of the Attachés was speaking. Could Miss Scheele come to the phone?

“Miss Scheele is ill in bed with laryngitis. This is Dr. Smallbrook. I am attending Miss Scheele. She has some important papers with her and would like some responsible person from the Embassy to come and fetch them. Immediately? Thank you. I will be waiting for you.”

VII

Victoria turned from the mirror. She was wearing a well-cut tailored suit. Every blonde hair was in place. She felt nervous but exhilarated.

As she turned, she caught the exultant gleam in Catherine’s eyes and was suddenly on her guard. Why was Catherine exultant?

What was going on?

“What are you so pleased about?” she asked.

“Soon you will see.”

The malice was quite unconcealed now.

“You think you are so clever,” said Catherine scornfully. “You think everything depends on you. Pah, you are just a fool.”

With a bound Victoria was upon her! She caught her by the shoulder and dug her fingers in.

“Tell me what you mean, you horrible girl.”

“Ach—you hurt me.”

“Tell me—”

A knock came on the door. A knock twice repeated and then after a pause, a single one.

“Now you will see!” cried Catherine.

The door opened and a man slipped in. He was a tall man, dressed in the uniform of the International Police. He locked the door behind him and removed the key. Then he advanced to Catherine.

“Quickly,” he said.

He took a length of thin cord from his pocket and, with Catherine’s full cooperation, bound her swiftly to a chair. Then he produced a scarf and tied it over her mouth. He stood back and nodded appreciatively.

“So—that will do nicely.”

Then he turned towards Victoria. She saw the heavy truncheon he was brandishing and in a moment it flashed across her brain what the real plan was. They had never intended that she should play the part of Anna Scheele at the Conference. How could they risk such a thing? Victoria was too well known in Baghdad? No, the plan was, had always been, that Anna Scheele should be attacked and killed at the last moment—killed in such a way that her features would not be recognizable...Only the papers she had brought with her—those carefully forged papers—would remain.

Victoria turned away to the window—she screamed. And with a smile the man came at her.

Then several things happened—there was a crash of broken glass—a heavy hand sent her headlong down—she saw stars—and blackness...Then out of the blackness a voice spoke, a reassuring English voice.

“Are you all right, Miss?” it asked.

Victoria murmured something.

“What did she say?” asked a second voice.

The first man scratched his head.

“Said it was better to serve in Heaven than reign in Hell,” he said doubtfully.

“That’s a quotation,” said the other. “But she’s got it wrong,” he added.

“No, I haven’t,” said Victoria and fainted.

VIII

The telephone rang and Dakin picked up the receiver. A voice said:

“Operation Victoria successfully concluded.”

“Good,” said Dakin.

“We’ve got Catherine Serakis and the medico. The other fellow threw himself off the balcony. He’s fatally injured.”

“The girl’s not hurt?”

“She fainted—but she’s OK.”

“No news still of the real A. S.?”

“No news whatever.”

Dakin laid down the receiver.

At any rate Victoria was all right—Anna herself, he thought, must be dead...She had insisted on playing a lone hand, had reiterated that she would be in Baghdad without fail on the 19th. Today was the 19th and there was no Anna Scheele. Perhaps she had been right not to trust the official setup—he didn’t know. Certainly there had been leakages—betrayals. But apparently her own native wits had served her no better....

And without Anna Scheele, the evidence was incomplete.

A messenger came in with a piece of paper on which was written Mr. Richard Baker and Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones.

“I can’t see anybody now,” said Dakin. “Tell them I am very sorry. I am engaged.”

The messenger withdrew, but presently he returned. He handed Dakin a note.

Dakin tore open the envelope and read:

“I want to see you about Henry Carmichael. R. B.”

“Show him in,” said Dakin.

Presently Richard Baker and Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones came in. Richard Baker said:

“I don’t want to take up your time, but I was at school with a man called Henry Carmichael. We lost sight of each other for many years, but when I was at Basrah a few weeks ago I encountered him in the Consulate waiting room. He was dressed as an Arab, and without giving any overt sign of recognition, he managed to communicate with me. Does this interest you?”

“It interests me very much,” said Dakin.

“I formed the idea that Carmichael believed himself to be in danger. This was very soon verified. He was attacked by a man with a revolver which I managed to knock up. Carmichael took to his heels but before he went, he slipped something into my pocket which I found later—it didn’t appear to be important—it seems to be just a ‘chit’—a reference for one Ahmed Mohammed. But I acted on the assumption that to Carmichael it was important.”

“Since he gave me no instructions, I kept it carefully, believing that he would one day reclaim it. The other day I learnt from Victoria Jones that he was dead. From other things she told me, I have come to the conclusion that the right person to deliver this object to is you.”

He got up and placed a dirty sheet of paper with writing on it on Dakin’s desk.

“Does this mean anything to you?”

Dakin drew a deep sigh.

“Yes,” he said. “It means more than you can possibly imagine.”

He got up.

“I’m deeply obliged to you, Baker,” he said. “Forgive my cutting this interview short, but there is a lot that I have to see to without wasting a minute.” He shook hands with Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones, saying, “I suppose you are joining your husband on his Dig. I hope you have a good season.”

“It’s a good thing Pauncefoot Jones didn’t come into Baghdad with me this morning,” said Richard. “Dear old John Pauncefoot Jones doesn’t notice much that goes on, but he’d probably notice the difference between his wife and his wife’s sister.”

Dakin looked with slight surprise at Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones. She said in a low pleasant voice.

“My sister Elsie is still in England. I dyed my hair black and came out on her passport. My sister’s maiden name was Elsie Scheele. My name, Mr. Dakin, is Anna Scheele.”

Twenty-four

Baghdad was transformed. Police lined the streets—police drafted in from outside, the International Police. American and Russian Police stood side by side with impassive faces.

Rumours were spreading the whole time—neither of the Great Ones was coming! Twice the Russian plane, duly escorted, landed—and proved to contain only a young Russian pilot!

But at last the news went round that all was well. The President of the United States and the Russian Dictator were here, in Baghdad. They were in the Regent's Palace.

At last the historic Conference had begun.

In a small anteroom certain events were taking place which might well alter the course of history. Like most momentous happenings, the proceedings were not at all dramatic.

Doctor Alan Breck of the Harwell Atomic Institute contributed his quota of information in a small precise voice.

Certain specimens had been left with him for analysis by the late Sir Rupert Crofton Lee. They had been acquired in the course of one of Sir Rupert's journeys through China and Turkestan through Kurdistan to Iraq. Dr. Breck's evidence then became severely technical. Metallic ores...high uranium content...Source of deposit not known exactly, since Sir Rupert's notes and diaries had been destroyed during the war by enemy action.

Then Mr. Dakin took up the tale. In a gentle tired voice he told the saga of Henry Carmichael, of his belief in certain rumours and wild tales of vast installations and underground laboratories functioning in a remote valley beyond the bounds of civilization. Of his search—and of the success of his search. Of how that great traveller, Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, the man who had believed Carmichael because of his own knowledge of those regions,

had agreed to come to Baghdad, and of how he had died. And of how Carmichael had met his own death at the hands of Sir Rupert's impersonator.

"Sir Rupert is dead, and Henry Carmichael is dead. But there is a third witness who is alive and who is here today. I will call upon Miss Anna Scheele to give us her testimony."

Anna Scheele, as calm and composed as if she were in Mr. Morgenthal's office, gave lists of names and figures. From the depths of that remarkable financial brain of hers, she outlined the vast financial network that had drained money from circulation, and poured it into the financing of activities that should tend to split the civilized world into two opposing factions. It was no mere assertion. She produced facts and figures to support her contention. To those who listened she carried a conviction that was not as yet fully accorded to Carmichael's wild tale.

Dakin spoke again:

"Henry Carmichael is dead," he said. "But he brought back with him from that hazardous journey tangible and definite proofs. He did not dare to keep those proofs on him—his enemies were too close on his track. But he was a man of many friends. By the hands of two of those friends, he sent the proofs to the safekeeping of another friend—a man whom all Iraq reveres and respects. He has courteously consented to come here today. I refer to Sheikh Hussein el Ziyara of Kerbela."

Sheikh Hussein el Ziyara was renowned, as Dakin had said, throughout the Moslem world, both as a Holy Man and a poet of renown. He was considered by many to be a Saint. He stood up now, an imposing figure with his deep brown hennaed beard. His grey jacket edged with gold braid was covered by a flowing brown cloak of gossamer fineness. Round his head he wore a green cloth headdress which was bound with many strands of heavy gold agal and which gave him a patriarchal appearance. He spoke in a deep sonorous voice.

"Henry Carmichael was my friend," he said. "I knew him as a boy and he studied with me the verses of our great poets. Two men came to Kerbela,

men who travel the country with a picture show. They are simple men, but good followers of the Prophet. They brought me a packet which they said they had been told to deliver into my hands from my friend the Englishman Carmichael. I was to keep this in secrecy and security and to deliver it only to Carmichael himself, or to a messenger who would repeat certain words. If in truth you are the messenger, speak, my son.”

Dakin said, “Sayyid, the Arabic poet Mutanabbi, ‘the Pretender to prophecy,’ who lived just one thousand years ago, wrote an Ode to Prince Sayfu ’l-Dawla at Aleppo in which those words occur: Zid hashshi bashshi tafaddal adni surra sili.”*

With a smile Sheikh Hussein el Ziyara held out a packet to Dakin.

“I say as Prince Sayfu ’l-Dawla said: ‘You shall have your desire...’”

“Gentlemen,” said Dakin. “These are the microfilms brought back by Henry Carmichael in proof of his story....”

One more witness spoke—a tragic broken figure: an old man with a fine domed head who had once been universally admired and respected.

He spoke with a tragic dignity.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “I shall shortly be arraigned as a common swindler. But there are somethings that even I cannot countenance. There is a band of men, mostly young men, so evil in their hearts and aims that the truth would hardly be believed.”

He lifted up his head and roared out:

“Antichrist! I say this thing must be stopped! We have got to have peace—peace to lick our wounds and make a new world—and to do that we must to try to understand each other. I started a racket to make money—but, by God, I’ve ended in believing in what I preach—though I don’t advocate the methods I’ve used. For God’s sake, gentlemen, let’s start again and try to pull together....”

There was a moment's silence, and then a thin official voice, with the bloodless impersonality of bureaucracy said:

“These facts will be put forthwith before the President of the United States of America and the Premier of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics....”

Twenty-five

I

“What bothers me,” said Victoria, “is that poor Danish woman who got killed by mistake in Damascus.”

“Oh! she’s all right,” said Mr. Dakin cheerfully. “As soon as your plane had taken off, we arrested the French woman and took Grete Harden to hospital. She came round all right. They were going to keep her drugged for a bit until they were sure the Baghdad business went off all right. She was one of our people of course.”

“Was she?”

“Yes, when Anna Scheele disappeared, we thought it might be as well to give the other side something to think about. So we booked a passage for Grete Harden and carefully didn’t give her a background. They fell for it—jumped to the conclusion that Grete Harden must be Anna Scheele. We gave her a nice little set of faked papers to prove it.”

“Whilst the real Anna Scheele remained quietly in the nursing home till it was time for Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones to join her husband out here.”

“Yes. Simple—but effective. Acting on the assumption that in times of stress the only people you can really trust are your own family. She’s an exceedingly clever young woman.”

“I really thought I was for it,” said Victoria. “Were your people really keeping tabs on me?”

“All the time. Your Edward wasn’t really quite so clever as he thought himself, you know. Actually we’d been investigating the activities of young Edward Goring for some time. When you told me your story, the night Carmichael was killed, I was frankly very worried about you.”

“The best thing I could think of was to send you deliberately into the setup as a spy. If your Edward knew that you were in touch with me, you’d be reasonably safe, because he’d learn through you what we were up to. You’d be too valuable to kill. And he could also pass on false information to us through you. You were a link. But then you spotted the Rupert Crofton Lee impersonation, and Edward decided you’d better be kept out of it until you were needed (if you should be needed) for the impersonation of Anna Scheele. Yes, Victoria, you’re very very lucky to be sitting where you are now, eating all those pistachio nuts.”

“I know I am.”

Mr. Dakin said:

“How much do you mind—about Edward?”

Victoria looked at him steadily.

“Not at all. I was just a silly little fool. I let Edward pick me up and do his glamour act. I just had a thoroughly school-girl crush on him—fancying myself Juliet and all sorts of silly things.”

“You needn’t blame yourself too much. Edward had a wonderful natural gift for attracting women.”

“Yes, and he used it.”

“He certainly used it.”

“Next time I fall in love,” said Victoria, “it won’t be looks that attract me, or glamour. I’d like a real man—not one who says pretty things to you. I shan’t mind if he’s bald or wears spectacles or anything like that. I’d like him to be interesting—and know about interesting things.”

“About thirty-five or fifty-five?” asked Mr. Dakin.

Victoria stared.

“Oh thirty-five,” she said.

“I am relieved. I thought for a moment you were proposing to me.”

Victoria laughed.

“And—I know I mustn’t ask questions—but was there really a message knitted into the scarf?”

“There was a name. The tricoteuses of whom Madam Defarge was one, knitted a register of names. The scarf and the ‘chit’ were the two halves of the clue. One gave us the name of Sheikh Hussein el Ziyara of Kerbela. The other when treated with iodine vapour gave us the words to induce the Sheikh to part with his trust. There couldn’t have been a safer place to hide the thing, you know, than in the sacred city of Kerbela.”

“And it was carried through the country by those two wandering cinema men—the ones we actually met?”

“Yes. Simple well-known figures. Nothing political about them. Just Carmichael’s personal friends. He had a lot of friends.”

“He must have been very nice. I’m sorry he’s dead.”

“We’ve all got to die sometime,” said Mr. Dakin. “And if there’s another life after this which I myself fully believe, he’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that his faith and his courage have done more to save this sorry old world from a fresh attack of blood-letting and misery than almost anyone that one can think of.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it,” said Victoria meditatively, “that Richard should have had one half of the secret and I should have had the other. It almost seems as though—”

“As though it were meant to be,” finished Mr. Dakin with a twinkle. “And what are you going to do next, may I ask?”

“I shall have to find a job,” said Victoria. “I must start looking about.”

“Don’t look too hard,” said Mr. Dakin. “I rather think a job is coming towards you.”

He ambled gently away to give place to Richard Baker.

“Look here, Victoria,” said Richard. “Venetia Savile can’t come out after all. Apparently she’s got mumps. You were quite useful on the Dig. Would you like to come back? Only your keep, I’m afraid. And probably your passage back to England—but we’ll talk about that later. Mrs. Pauncefoot Jones is coming out next week. Well, what do you say?”

“Oh, do you really want me?” cried Victoria.

For some reason Richard Baker became very pink in the face. He coughed and polished his pince-nez.

“I think,” he said, “we could find you—er—quite useful.”

“I’d love it,” said Victoria.

“In that case,” said Richard, “you’d better collect your luggage and come along back to the Dig now. You don’t want to hang about Baghdad, do you?”

“Not in the least,” said Victoria.

II

“So there you are, my dear Veronica,” said Dr. Pauncefoot Jones. “Richard went off in a great state about you. Well, well—I hope you’ll both be very happy.”

“What does he mean?” asked Victoria bewildered, as Dr. Pauncefoot Jones pottered away.

“Nothing,” said Richard. “You know what he’s like. He’s being—just a little—premature.”

Destination Unknown (1954)

By Agatha Christie

One

The man behind the desk moved a heavy glass paperweight four inches to the right. His face was not so much thoughtful or abstracted as expressionless. He had the pale complexion that comes from living most of the day in artificial light. This man, you felt, was an indoor man. A man of desks and files. The fact that to reach his office you had to walk through long twisting underground corridors was somehow strangely appropriate. It would have been difficult to guess his age. He looked neither old nor young. His face was smooth and unwrinkled, and in his eyes was a great tiredness.

The other man in the room was older. He was dark with a small military moustache. There was about him an alert nervous energy. Even now, unable to sit still, he was pacing up and down, from time to time throwing off a remark in a jerky manner.

“Reports!” he said explosively. “Reports, reports and more reports, and none of them any damn’ good!” The man at the desk looked down at the papers in front of him. On top was an official card headed, “Betterton, Thomas Charles.” After the name was an interrogation mark. The man at the desk nodded thoughtfully. He said:

“You’ve followed up these reports and none of them any good?” The other shrugged his shoulders.

“How can one tell?” he asked.

The man behind the desk sighed.

“Yes,” he said, “there is that. One can’t tell, really.” The older man went on with a kind of machine-gun volley abruptness:

“Reports from Rome; reports from Touraine; seen on the Riviera; noticed in Antwerp; definitely identified in Oslo; positively seen in Biarritz; observed

behaving suspiciously in Strasbourg; seen on the beach at Ostend with a glamorous blonde; noticed walking in the streets in Brussels with a greyhound! Hasn't been seen yet in the Zoo with his arm round a zebra, but I dare say that will come!"

"You've no particular fancy yourself, Wharton? Personally I had hopes of the Antwerp report, but it hasn't led to anything. Of course by now—" the young man stopped speaking and seemed to go into a coma. Presently he came out of it again and said cryptically, "Yes, probably . . . and yet—I wonder?"

Colonel Wharton sat down abruptly on the arm of a chair.

"But we've got to find out," he said insistently. "We've got to break the back of all this how and why and where? You can't lose a tame scientist every month or so and have no idea how they go or why they go or where! Is it where we think—or isn't it? We've always taken it for granted that it is, but now I'm not so sure. You've read all the last dope on Betterton from America?"

The man behind the desk nodded.

"Usual Left-Wing tendencies at the period when everyone had them. Nothing of a lasting or permanent nature as far as can be found out. Did sound work before the war though nothing spectacular. When Mannheim escaped from Germany, Betterton was assigned as assistant to him, and ended by marrying Mannheim's daughter. After Mannheim's death he carried on, on his own, and did brilliant work. He leaped into fame with the startling discovery of ZE Fission. ZE Fission was a brilliant and absolutely revolutionary discovery. It put Betterton tops. He was all set for a brilliant career over there, but his wife had died soon after their marriage and he was all broken up over it. He came to England. He has been at Harwell for the last eighteen months. Just six months ago he married again."

"Anything there?" asked Wharton sharply.

The other shook his head.

“Not that we can find out. She’s the daughter of a local solicitor. Worked in an insurance office before her marriage. No violent political affinities so far as we’ve been able to discover.”

“ZE Fission,” said Colonel Wharton gloomily, with distaste. “What they mean by all these terms beats me. I’m old-fashioned. I never really even visualized a molecule, but here they are nowadays splitting up the universe! Atom bombs, nuclear fission, ZE fission, and all the rest of it. And Betterton was one of the splitters in chief! What do they say of him at Harwell?”

“Quite a pleasant personality. As to his work, nothing outstanding or spectacular. Just variations on the practical applications of ZEF.”

Both men were silent for a moment. Their conversation had been desultory, almost automatic. The security reports lay in a pile on the desk and the security reports had had nothing of value to tell.

“He was thoroughly screened on arrival here, of course,” said Wharton.

“Yes, everything was quite satisfactory.”

“Eighteen months ago,” said Wharton thoughtfully. “It gets ’em down, you know. Security precautions. The feeling of being perpetually under the microscope, the cloistered life. They get nervy, queer. I’ve seen it often enough. They begin to dream of an ideal world. Freedom and brotherhood, and pool-all-secrets and work for the good of humanity! That’s exactly the moment when someone, who’s more or less the dregs of humanity, sees their chance and takes it!” He rubbed his nose. “Nobody’s so gullible as the scientist,” he said. “All the phony mediums say so. Can’t quite see why.”

The other smiled, a very tired smile.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “it would be so. They think they know, you see. That’s always dangerous. Now, our kind are different. We’re humble-minded men. We don’t expect to save the world, only pick up one or two broken pieces and remove a spanner or two when it’s jamming up the works.” He tapped thoughtfully on the table with his finger. “If I only knew a little more about

Betterton,” he said. “Not his life and his actions, but the revealing, everyday things. What sort of jokes he laughed at. What made him swear. Who were the people he admired and who made him mad.”

Wharton looked at him curiously.

“What about the wife—you’ve tried her?”

“Several times.”

“Can’t she help?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“She hasn’t so far.”

“You think she knows something?”

“She doesn’t admit, of course, that she knows anything. All the established reactions: worry, grief, desperate anxiety, no clue or suspicion beforehand, husband’s life perfectly normal, no stress of any kind—and so on and so on. Her own theory is that he’s been kidnapped.”

“And you don’t believe her?”

“I’m handicapped,” said the man behind the desk bitterly. “I never believe anybody.”

“Well,” said Wharton slowly, “I suppose one has to keep an open mind. What’s she like?”

“Ordinary sort of woman you’d meet any day playing bridge.”

Wharton nodded comprehendingly.

“That makes it more difficult,” he said.

“She’s here to see me now. We shall go over all the same ground again.”

“It’s the only way,” said Wharton. “I couldn’t do it, though. Haven’t got the patience.” He got up. “Well, I won’t keep you. We’ve not got much further, have we?”

“Unfortunately, no. You might do a special check-up on that Oslo report. It’s a likely spot.”

Wharton nodded and went out. The other man raised the receiver by his elbow and said:

“I’ll see Mrs. Betterton now. Send her in.”

He sat staring into space until there was a tap on the door and Mrs. Betterton was shown in. She was a tall woman, about twenty-seven years of age. The most noticeable thing about her was a magnificent head of auburn-red hair. Beneath the splendour of this, her face seemed almost insignificant. She had the blue-green eyes and light eyelashes that so often go with red hair. She was wearing no make-up, he noticed. He considered the significance of that whilst he was greeting her, settling her comfortably in a chair near the desk. It inclined him very slightly to the belief that Mrs. Betterton knew more than she had said she knew.

In his experience, women suffering from violent grief and anxiety did not neglect their make-up. Aware of the ravages grief made in their appearance, they did their best to repair those ravages. He wondered if Mrs. Betterton calculatingly abstained from make-up, the better to sustain the part of the distracted wife. She said now, rather breathlessly:

“Oh, Mr. Jessop, I do hope—is there any news?”

He shook his head and said gently:

“I’m so sorry to ask you to come up like this, Mrs. Betterton. I’m afraid we haven’t got any definite news for you.”

Olive Betterton said quickly:

“I know. You said so in your letter. But I wondered if—since then—oh! I was glad to come up. Just sitting at home wondering and brooding—that’s the worst of it all. Because there’s nothing one can do!”

The man called Jessop said soothingly:

“You mustn’t mind, Mrs. Betterton, if I go over the same ground again and again, ask you the same questions, stress the same points. You see it’s always possible that some small point might arise. Something that you hadn’t thought of before, or perhaps hadn’t thought worth mentioning.”

“Yes. Yes, I understand. Ask me all over again about everything.”

“The last time you saw your husband was on the 23rd of August?”

“Yes.”

“That was when he left England to go to Paris to a Conference there.”

“Yes.”

Jessop went on rapidly:

“He attended the first two days of the Conference. The third day he did not turn up. Apparently he had mentioned to one of his colleagues that he was going instead for a trip on a bateau mouche that day.”

“A bateau mouche? What’s a bateau mouche?”

Jessop smiled.

“One of those small boats that go along the Seine.” He looked at her sharply. “Does that strike you as unlike your husband?”

She said doubtfully:

“It does, rather. I should have thought he’d be so keen on what was going on at the Conference.”

“Possibly. Still the subject for discussion on this particular day was not one in which he had any special interest, so he might reasonably have given himself a day off. But it doesn’t strike you as being quite like your husband?”

She shook her head.

“He did not return that evening to his hotel,” went on Jessop. “As far as can be ascertained he did not pass any frontier, certainly not on his own passport. Do you think he could have had a second passport, in another name perhaps?”

“Oh, no, why should he?”

He watched her.

“You never saw such a thing in his possession?”

She shook her head with vehemence.

“No, and I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it for a moment. I don’t believe he went away deliberately as you all try to make out. Something’s happened to him, or else—or else perhaps he’s lost his memory.”

“His health had been quite normal?”

“Yes. He was working rather hard and sometimes felt a little tired, nothing more than that.”

“He’d not seemed worried in any way or depressed?”

“He wasn’t worried or depressed about anything!” With shaking fingers she opened her bag and took out her handkerchief. “It’s all so awful.” Her voice shook. “I can’t believe it. He’d never have gone off without a word to me. Something’s happened to him. He’s been kidnapped or he’s been attacked perhaps. I try not to think it but sometimes I feel that that must be the solution. He must be dead.”

“Now please, Mrs. Betterton, please—there’s no need to entertain that supposition yet. If he’s dead, his body would have been discovered by now.”

“It might not. Awful things happen. He might have been drowned or pushed down a sewer. I’m sure anything could happen in Paris.”

“Paris, I can assure you, Mrs. Betterton, is a very well-policed city.”

She took the handkerchief away from her eyes and stared at him with sharp anger.

“I know what you think, but it isn’t so! Tom wouldn’t sell secrets or betray secrets. He wasn’t a communist. His whole life is an open book.”

“What were his political beliefs, Mrs. Betterton?”

“In America he was a Democrat, I believe. Here he voted Labour. He wasn’t interested in politics. He was a scientist, first and last.” She added defiantly, “He was a brilliant scientist.”

“Yes,” said Jessop, “he was a brilliant scientist. That’s really the crux of the whole matter. He might have been offered, you know, very considerable inducements to leave this country and go elsewhere.”

“It’s not true.” Anger leaped out again. “That’s what the papers try to make out. That’s what you all think when you come questioning me. It’s not true. He’d never go without telling me, without giving me some idea.”

“And he told you—nothing?”

Again he was watching her keenly.

“Nothing. I don’t know where he is. I think he was kidnapped, or else, as I say, dead. But if he’s dead, I must know. I must know soon. I can’t go on like this, waiting and wondering. I can’t eat or sleep. I’m sick and ill with worry. Can’t you help me? Can’t you help me at all?”

He got up then and moved round his desk. He murmured:

“I’m so very sorry, Mrs. Betterton, so very sorry. Let me assure you that we are trying our very best to find out what has happened to your husband. We get reports in every day from various places.”

“Reports from where?” she asked sharply. “What do they say?”

He shook his head.

“They all have to be followed up, sifted and tested. But as a rule, I am afraid, they’re vague in the extreme.”

“I must know,” she murmured brokenly again. “I can’t go on like this.”

“Do you care for your husband very much, Mrs. Betterton?”

“Of course I care for him. Why, we’ve only been married six months. Only six months.”

“Yes, I know. There was—forgive me for asking—no quarrel of any kind between you?”

“Oh, no!”

“No trouble over any other woman?”

“Of course not. I’ve told you. We were only married last April.”

“Please believe that I’m not suggesting such a thing is likely, but one has to take every possibility into account that might allow for his going off in this way. You say he had not been upset lately, or worried—not on edge—not nervy in any way?”

“No, no, no!”

“People do get nervy, you know, Mrs. Betterton, in such a job as your husband had. Living under exacting security conditions. In fact”—he smiled—“it’s almost normal to be nervy.”

She did not smile back.

“He was just as usual,” she said stolidly.

“Happy about his work? Did he discuss it at all with you?”

“No, it was all so technical.”

“You don’t think he had any qualms over its—destructive possibilities, shall I say? Scientists do feel that sometimes.”

“He never said anything of the kind.”

“You see, Mrs. Betterton,” he leaned forward over the desk, dropping some of his impassiveness, “what I am trying to do is to get a picture of your husband. The sort of man he was. And somehow you’re not helping me.”

“But what more can I say or do? I’ve answered all your questions.”

“Yes, you’ve answered my questions, mostly in the negative. I want something positive, something constructive. Do you see what I mean? You can look for a man so much better when you know what kind of a man he is.”

She reflected for a moment. “I see. At least, I suppose I see. Well, Tom was cheerful and good-tempered. And clever, of course.”

Jessop smiled. “That’s a list of qualities. Let’s try and get more personal. Did he read much?”

“Yes, a fair amount.”

“What sort of books?”

“Oh, biographies. Book Society recommendations, crime stories if he was tired.”

“Rather a conventional reader, in fact. No special preferences? Did he play cards or chess?”

“He played bridge. We used to play with Dr. Evans and his wife once or twice a week.”

“Did your husband have many friends?”

“Oh, yes, he was a good mixer.”

“I didn’t mean just that. I mean was he a man who—cared very much for his friends?”

“He played golf with one or two of our neighbours.”

“No special friends or cronies of his own?”

“No. You see, he’d been in the U.S.A. for so long, and he was born in Canada. He didn’t know many people over here.”

Jessop consulted a scrap of paper at his elbow.

“Three people visited him recently from the States, I understand. I have their names here. As far as we can discover, these three were the only people with whom he recently made contact from outside, so to speak. That’s why we’ve given them special attention. Now first, Walter Griffiths. He came to see you at Harwell.”

“Yes, he was over in England on a visit and he came to look up Tom.”

“And your husband’s reactions?”

“Tom was surprised to see him, but very pleased. They’d known each other quite well in the States.”

“What did this Griffiths seem like to you? Just describe him in your own way.”

“But surely you know all about him?”

“Yes, we know all about him. But I want to hear what you thought of him.”

She reflected for a moment.

“Well, he was solemn and rather long-winded. Very polite to me and seemed very fond of Tom and anxious to tell him about things that had happened after Tom had come to England. All local gossip, I suppose. It wasn’t very interesting to me because I didn’t know any of the people. Anyway, I was getting dinner ready while they were reminiscing.”

“No question of politics came up?”

“You’re trying to hint that he was a communist.” Olive Betterton’s face flushed. “I’m sure he was nothing of the sort. He had some government job—in the District Attorney’s office, I think. And anyway when Tom said something laughingly about witch hunts in America, he said solemnly that we didn’t understand over here. They were necessary. So that shows he wasn’t a communist!”

“Please, please, Mrs. Betterton, now don’t get upset.”

“Tom wasn’t a communist! I keep telling you so and you don’t believe me.”

“Yes, I do, but the point is bound to come up. Now for the second contact from abroad, Dr. Mark Lucas. You ran across him in London in the Dorset.”

“Yes. We’d gone up to a show and we were having supper at the Dorset afterwards. Suddenly this man, Luke or Lucas, came along and greeted Tom. He was a research chemist of some kind and the last time he had seen Tom was in the States. He was a German refugee who’d taken American nationality. But surely you—”

“But surely I know that? Yes, I do, Mrs. Betterton. Was your husband surprised to see him?”

“Yes, very surprised.”

“Pleased?”

“Yes, yes—I think so.”

“But you’re not sure?” He pressed her.

“Well, he was a man Tom didn’t much care about, or so he told me afterwards, that’s all.”

“It was just a casual meeting? There was no arrangement made to meet at some future date?”

“No, it was just a casual encounter.”

“I see. The third contact from abroad was a woman, Mrs. Carol Speeder, also from the States. How did that come about?”

“She was something to do with U.N.O., I believe. She’d known Tom in America, and she rang him up from London to say she was over here, and asked if we could come up and lunch one day.”

“And did you?”

“No.”

“You didn’t, but your husband did!”

“What!” She stared.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

Olive Betterton looked bewildered and uneasy. The man questioning her felt a little sorry for her, but he did not relent. For the first time he thought he might be getting somewhere.

“I don’t understand it,” she said uncertainly. “It seems very odd he shouldn’t have said anything about it to me.”

“They lunched together at the Dorset where Mrs. Speeder was staying, on Wednesday, August 12th.”

“August 12th?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, he did go to London about then . . . He never said anything—” she broke off again, and then shot out a question. “What is she like?”

He answered quickly and reassuringly.

“Not at all a glamorous type, Mrs. Betterton. A competent young career woman of thirty-odd, not particularly good-looking. There’s absolutely no suggestion of her ever having been on intimate terms with your husband. That is just why it’s odd that he didn’t tell you about the meeting.”

“Yes, yes, I see that.”

“Now think carefully, Mrs. Betterton. Did you notice any change in your husband about that time? About the middle of August, shall we say? That would be about a week before the Conference.”

“No—no, I noticed nothing. There was nothing to notice.”

Jessop sighed.

The instrument on his desk buzzed discreetly. He picked up the receiver.

“Yes,” he said.

The voice at the other end said:

“There’s a man who’s asking to see someone in authority about the Betterton case, sir.”

“What’s his name?”

The voice at the other end coughed discreetly.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure how you pronounce it, Mr. Jessop. Perhaps I’d better spell it.”

“Right. Go ahead.”

He jotted down on his blotter the letters as they came over the wire.

“Polish?” he said interrogatively, at the end.

“He didn’t say, sir. He speaks English quite well, but with a bit of an accent.”

“Ask him to wait.”

“Very good, sir.”

Jessop replaced the telephone. Then he looked across at Olive Betterton. She sat there quite quietly with a disarming, hopeless placidity. He tore off the leaf on his desk pad with the name he had just written on it, and shoved it across to her.

“Know anybody of that name?” he asked.

Her eyes widened as she looked at it. For a moment he thought she looked frightened.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I do. He wrote to me.”

“When?”

“Yesterday. He’s a cousin of Tom’s first wife. He’s just arrived in this country. He was very concerned about Tom’s disappearance. He wrote to ask if I had had any news and—and to give me his most profound sympathy.”

“You’d never heard of him before that?”

She shook her head.

“Ever hear your husband speak of him?”

“No.”

“So really he mightn’t be your husband’s cousin at all?”

“Well, no, I suppose not. I never thought of that.” She looked startled. “But Tom’s first wife was a foreigner. She was Professor Mannheim’s daughter. This man seemed to know all about her and Tom in his letter. It was very correct and formal and—and foreign, you know. It seemed quite genuine. And anyway, what would be the point—if he weren’t genuine, I mean?”

“Ah, that’s what one always asks oneself.” Jessop smiled faintly. “We do it so much here that we begin to see the smallest thing quite out of proportion!”

“Yes, I should think you might.” She shivered suddenly. “It’s like this room of yours, in the middle of a labyrinth of corridors, just like a dream when you think you will never get out. . . .”

“Yes, yes, I can see it might have a claustrophobic effect,” said Jessop pleasantly.

Olive Betterton put a hand up and pushed back her hair from her forehead.

“I can’t stand it much longer, you know,” she said. “Just sitting and waiting. I want to get away somewhere for a change. Abroad for choice. Somewhere where reporters won’t ring me up all the time, and people won’t stare at me. I’m always meeting friends and they keep asking me if I have had any news.” She paused, then went on, “I think—I think I’m going to break down. I’ve tried to be brave, but it’s too much for me. My doctor agrees. He says I ought to go right away somewhere for three or four weeks. He wrote me a letter. I’ll show you.”

She fumbled in her bag, took out an envelope and pushed it across the desk to Jessop.

“You’ll see what he says.”

Jessop took the letter out of the envelope and read it.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I see.”

He put the letter back in the envelope.

“So—so it would be all right for me to go?” Her eyes watched him nervously.

“But of course, Mrs. Betterton,” he replied. He raised surprised eyebrows. “Why not?”

“I thought you might object.”

“Object—why? It’s entirely your own business. You’ll arrange it so that I can get in touch with you while you’re away in case any news should come through?”

“Oh, of course.”

“Where were you thinking of going?”

“Somewhere where there is sun and not too many English people. Spain or Morocco.”

“Very nice. Do you a lot of good, I’m sure.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you very much.”

She rose, excited, elated—her nervousness still apparent.

Jessop rose, shook hands with her, pressed the buzzer for a messenger to see her out. He went back to his chair and sat down. For a few moments his face remained as expressionless as before, then very slowly he smiled. He lifted the phone.

“I’ll see Major Glydr now,” he said.

Two

“Major Glydr?” Jessop hesitated a little over the name.

“It is difficult, yes.” The visitor spoke with humorous appreciation. “Your compatriots, they have called me Glider in the war. And now, in the States, I shall change my name to Glyn, which is more convenient for all.”

“You come from the States now?”

“Yes, I arrived a week ago. You are—excuse me—Mr. Jessop?”

“I’m Jessop.”

The other looked at him with interest.

“So,” he said. “I have heard of you.”

“Indeed? From whom?”

The other smiled.

“Perhaps we go too fast. Before you permit that I should ask you some questions, I present you first this letter from the U.S. Embassy.”

He passed it with a bow. Jessop took it, read the few lines of polite introduction, put it down. He looked appraisingly at his visitor. A tall man, carrying himself rather stiffly, aged thirty or thereabouts. The fair hair was close cropped in the continental fashion. The stranger’s speech was slow and careful with a very definite foreign intonation, though grammatically correct. He was, Jessop noticed, not at all nervous or unsure of himself. That in itself was unusual. Most of the people who came into this office were nervous or excited or apprehensive. Sometimes they were shifty, sometimes violent.

This was a man who had complete command of himself, a man with a poker face who knew what he was doing and why, and who would not be easily tricked or betrayed into saying more than he meant to say. Jessop said pleasantly:

“And what can we do for you?”

“I came to ask if you had any further news of Thomas Betterton, who disappeared recently in what seems a somewhat sensational manner. One cannot, I know, believe exactly what one reads in the press, so I ask where I can go for reliable information. They tell me—you.”

“I’m sorry, we’ve no definite information about Betterton.”

“I thought perhaps he might have been sent abroad on some mission.” He paused and added, rather quaintly, “You know, hush-hush.”

“My dear sir.” Jessop looked pained. “Betterton was a scientist, not a diplomat or a secret agent.”

“I am rebuked. But labels are not always correct. You will want to inquire my interest in the matter. Thomas Betterton was a relation of mine by marriage.”

“Yes. You are the nephew, I believe, of the late Professor Mannheim.”

“Ah, that you knew already. You are well informed here.”

“People come along and tell us things,” murmured Jessop. “Betterton’s wife was here. She told me. You had written to her.”

“Yes, to express my condolences and to ask if she had had any further news.”

“That was very correct.”

“My mother was Professor Mannheim’s only sister. They were very much attached. In Warsaw when I was a child I was much at my uncle’s house, and his daughter, Elsa, was to me like a sister. When my father and mother

died my home was with my uncle and cousin. They were happy days. Then came the war, the tragedies, the horrors . . . Of all that we will not speak. My uncle and Elsa escaped to America. I myself remained in the underground Resistance, and after the war ended I had certain assignments. One visit I paid to see my uncle and cousin, that was all. But there came a time when my commitments in Europe are ended. I intend to reside in the States permanently. I shall be, I hope, near my uncle and my cousin and her husband. But alas”—he spread out his hands—“I get there and my uncle, he is dead, my cousin, too, and her husband he has come to this country and has married again. So once more I have no family. And then I read of the disappearance of the well-known scientist Thomas Betterton, and I come over to see what can be done.” He paused and looked inquiringly at Jessop.

Jessop looked expressionlessly back at him.

“Why did he disappear, Mr. Jessop?”

“That,” said Jessop, “is just what we’d like to know.”

“Perhaps you do know?”

Jessop appreciated with some interest how easily their roles might become reversed. In this room he was accustomed to ask questions of people. This stranger was now the inquisitor.

Still smiling pleasantly, Jessop replied:

“I assure you we do not.”

“But you suspect?”

“It is possible,” said Jessop cautiously, “that the thing follows a certain pattern . . . There have been occurrences of this kind before.”

“I know.” Rapidly the visitor cited a half-dozen cases. “All scientists,” he said, with significance.

“Yes.”

“They have gone beyond the Iron Curtain?”

“It is a possibility, but we do not know.”

“But they have gone of their own free will?”

“Even that,” said Jessop, “is difficult to say.”

“It is not my business, you think?”

“Oh, please.”

“But you are right. It is of interest to me only because of Betterton.”

“You’ll forgive me,” said Jessop, “if I don’t quite understand your interest. After all, Betterton is only a relation by marriage. You didn’t even know him.”

“That is true. But for us Poles, the family is very important. There are obligations.” He stood up and bowed stiffly. “I regret that I have trespassed upon your time, and I thank you for your courtesy.”

Jessop rose also.

“I’m sorry we cannot help you,” he said, “but I assure you we are completely in the dark. If I do hear of anything can I reach you?”

“Care of the U.S. Embassy will find me. I thank you.” Again he bowed formally.

Jessop touched the buzzer. Major Glydr went out. Jessop lifted the receiver.

“Ask Colonel Wharton to come to my room.”

When Wharton entered the room Jessop said:

“Things are moving—at last.”

“How?”

“Mrs. Betterton wants to go abroad.”

Wharton whistled.

“Going to join hubby?”

“I’m hopeful. She came provided with a convenient letter from her medical adviser. Complete need of rest and change of scene.”

“Looks good!”

“Though, of course, it may be true,” Jessop warned him. “A simple statement of fact.”

“We never take that view here,” said Wharton.

“No. I must say she does her stuff very convincingly. Never slips up for a moment.”

“You got nothing further from her, I suppose?”

“One faint lead. The Speeder woman with whom Betterton lunched at the Dorset.”

“Yes?”

“He didn’t tell his wife about the lunch.”

“Oh.” Wharton considered. “You think that’s relevant?”

“It might be. Carol Speeder was had up before the Committee of Investigation of un-American Activities. She cleared herself, but all the same . . . yes, all the same she was, or they thought she was, tarred with that brush. It may be a possible contact. The only one we’ve found for Betterton so far.”

“What about Mrs. Betterton’s contacts—any possible contact lately who could have instigated the going abroad business?”

“No personal contact. She had a letter yesterday from a Pole. A cousin of Betterton’s first wife. I had him here just now asking for details, etc.”

“What’s he like?”

“Not real,” said Jessop. “All very foreign and correct, got all the ‘gen,’ curiously unreal as a personality.”

“Think he’s been the contact to tip her off?”

“It could be. I don’t know. He puzzles me.”

“Going to keep tabs on him?”

Jessop smiled.

“Yes. I pressed the buzzer twice.”

“You old spider—with your tricks.” Wharton became businesslike again.

“Well, what’s the form?”

“Janet, I think, and the usual. Spain, or Morocco.”

“Not Switzerland?”

“Not this time.”

“I should have thought Spain or Morocco would have been difficult for them.”

“We mustn’t underestimate our adversaries.”

Wharton flipped the security files disgustedly with his nail.

“About the only two countries where Betterton hasn’t been seen,” he said with chagrin. “Well, we’ll lay it all on. My God, if we fall down on the job this time—”

Jessop leaned back in his chair.

“It’s a long time since I’ve had a holiday,” he said. “I’m rather sick of this office. I might take a little trip abroad. . . .”

Three

I

“Flight 108 to Paris. Air France. This way please.”

The persons in the lounge at Heathrow Airport rose to their feet. Hilary Craven picked up her small, lizard-skin travelling case and moved in the wake of the others, out on to the tarmac. The wind blew sharply cold after the heated air of the lounge.

Hilary shivered and drew her furs a little closer round her. She followed the other passengers across to where the aircraft was waiting. This was it! She was off, escaping! Out of the greyness, the coldness, the dead numb misery. Escaping to sunshine and blue skies and a new life. She would leave all this weight behind, this dead weight of misery and frustration. She went up the gangway of her plane, bending her head as she passed inside and was shown by the steward to her seat. For the first time in months she savoured relief from a pain that had been so sharply acute as almost to be physical. “I shall get away,” she said to herself, hopefully. “I shall get away.”

The roaring and the revolutions of the plane excited her. There seemed a kind of elemental savagery in it. Civilized misery, she thought, is the worst misery. Grey and hopeless. “But now,” she thought, “I shall escape.”

The plane taxied gently along the runway. The air hostess said:

“Fasten your belts, please.”

The plane made a half-turn and stood waiting its signal to depart. Hilary thought, “Perhaps the plane will crash . . . Perhaps it will never rise off the ground. Then that will be the end, that will be the solution to everything.” They seemed to wait for ages out on the airfield. Waiting for the signal to

start off to freedom, Hilary thought, absurdly: “I shall never get away, never. I shall be kept here—a prisoner. . . .”

Ah, at last.

A final roar of engines, then the plane started forward. Quicker, quicker, racing along. Hilary thought: “It won’t rise. It can’t . . . this is the end.” Ah, they were above the ground now, it seemed. Not so much that the plane rose as that the earth was falling away, dropping down, thrusting its problems and its disappointments and its frustrations beneath the soaring creature rising up so proudly into the clouds. Up they went, circling round, the aerodrome looking like a ridiculous child’s toy beneath. Funny little roads, strange little railways with toy trains on them. A ridiculous childish world where people loved and hated and broke their hearts. None of it mattered because they were all so ridiculous and so prettily small and unimportant. Now there were clouds below them, a dense, greyish-white mass. They must be over the Channel now. Hilary leaned back, closing her eyes. Escape. Escape. She had left England, left Nigel, left the sad little mound that was Brenda’s grave. All left behind. She opened her eyes, closed them again with a long sigh. She slept. . . .

II

When Hilary awoke, the plane was coming down. “Paris,” thought Hilary, as she sat up in her seat and reached for her handbag. But it was not Paris. The air hostess came down the car saying, with that nursery governess brightness that some travellers found so annoying:

“We are landing you at Beauvais as the fog is very thick in Paris.”

The suggestion in her manner was: “Won’t that be nice, children?” Hilary peered down through the small space of window at her side. She could see little. Beauvais also appeared to be wreathed in fog. The plane was circling round slowly. It was some time before it finally made its landing. Then the passengers were marshalled through cold, damp mist into a rough wooden building with a few chairs and a long wooden counter.

Depression settled down on Hilary but she tried to fight it off. A man near her murmured:

“An old war aerodrome. No heating or comforts here. Still, fortunately, being the French, they’ll serve us out some drinks.”

True enough, almost immediately a man came along with some keys and presently passengers were being served with various forms of alcoholic refreshments to boost their morale. It helped to buoy the passengers up for the long and irritating wait.

Some hours passed before anything happened. Other planes appeared out of the fog and landed, also diverted from Paris. Soon the small room was crowded with cold, irritable people grumbling about the delay.

To Hilary it all had an unreal quality. It was as though she was still in a dream, mercifully protected from contact with reality. This was only a delay, only a matter of waiting. She was still on her journey—her journey of escape. She was still getting away from it all, still going towards that spot where her life would start again. Her mood held. Held through the long, fatiguing delay, held through the moments of chaos when it was announced, long after dark, that buses had come to convey the travellers to Paris.

There was then a wild confusion, of coming and going, passengers, officials, porters all carrying baggage, hurrying and colliding in the darkness. In the end Hilary found herself, her feet and legs icy cold, in a bus slowly rumbling its way through the fog towards Paris.

It was a long weary drive taking four hours. It was midnight when they arrived at the Invalides and Hilary was thankful to collect her baggage and drive to the hotel where accommodation was reserved for her. She was too tired to eat—just had a hot bath and tumbled into bed.

The plane to Casablanca was due to leave Orly Airport at ten-thirty the following morning, but when they arrived at Orly everything was confusion. Planes had been grounded in many parts of Europe, arrivals had been delayed as well as departures.

A harassed clerk at the departure desk shrugged his shoulders and said:

“Impossible for Madame to go on the flight where she had reservations! The schedules have all had to be changed. If Madame will take a seat for a little minute, presumably all will arrange itself.”

In the end she was summoned and told that there was a place on a plane going to Dakar which normally did not touch down at Casablanca but would do so on this occasion.

“You will arrive three hours later, that is all, Madame, on this later service.”

Hilary acquiesced without protest and the official seemed surprised and positively delighted by her attitude.

“Madame has no conceptions of the difficulties that have been made to me this morning,” he said. “Enfin, they are unreasonable, Messieurs the travellers. It is not I who made the fog! Naturally it has caused the disruptions. One must accommodate oneself with the good humour—that is what I say, however displeasing it is to have one’s plans altered. Après tout, Madame, a little delay of an hour or two hours or three hours, what does it matter? How can it matter by what plane one arrives at Casablanca.”

Yet on that particular day it mattered more than the little Frenchman knew when he spoke those words. For when Hilary finally arrived and stepped out into the sunshine on to the tarmac, the porter who was moving beside her with his piled-up trolley of luggage observed:

“You have the lucky chance, Madame, not to have been on the plane before this, the regular plane for Casablanca.”

Hilary said: “Why, what happened?”

The man looked uneasily to and fro, but after all, the news could not be kept secret. He lowered his voice confidentially and leant towards her.

“Mauvaise affaire!” he muttered. “It crashed—landing. The pilot and the navigator are dead and most of the passengers. Four or five were alive and

have been taken to hospital. Some of those are badly hurt.”

Hilary’s first reaction was a kind of blinding anger. Almost unprompted there leapt into her mind the thought, “Why wasn’t I in that plane? If I had been, it would have been all over now—I should be dead, out of it all. No more heartaches, no more misery. The people in that plane wanted to live. And I—I don’t care. Why shouldn’t it have been me?”

She passed through the Customs, a perfunctory affair, and drove with her baggage to the hotel. It was a glorious, sunlit afternoon, with the sun just sinking to rest. The clear air and golden light—it was all as she had pictured it. She had arrived! She had left the fog, the cold, the darkness of London; she had left behind her misery and indecision and suffering. Here there was pulsating life and colour and sunshine.

She crossed her bedroom and threw open the shutters, looking out into the street. Yes, it was all as she had pictured it would be. Hilary turned slowly away from the window and sat down on the side of the bed. Escape, escape! That was the refrain that had hummed incessantly in her mind ever since she left England. Escape. Escape. And now she knew—knew with a horrible, stricken coldness, that there was no escape.

Everything was just the same here as it had been in London. She herself, Hilary Craven, was the same. It was from Hilary Craven that she was trying to escape, and Hilary Craven was Hilary Craven in Morocco just as much as she had been Hilary Craven in London. She said very softly to herself:

“What a fool I’ve been—what a fool I am. Why did I think that I’d feel differently if I got away from England?”

Brenda’s grave, that small pathetic mound, was in England and Nigel would shortly be marrying his new wife in England. Why had she imagined that those two things would matter less to her here? Wishful thinking, that was all. Well, that was all over now. She was up against reality. The reality of herself and what she could bear, and what she could not bear. One could bear things, Hilary thought, so long as there was a reason for bearing them. She had borne her own long illness, she had borne Nigel’s defection and the cruel and brutal circumstances in which it had operated. She had borne

these things because there was Brenda. Then had come the long, slow, losing fight for Brenda's life—the final defeat . . . Now there was nothing to live for any longer. It had taken the journey to Morocco to prove that to her. In London she had had a queer, confused feeling that if only she could get somewhere else she could forget what lay behind her and start again. And so she had booked her journey to this place which had no associations with the past, a place quite new to her which had the qualities she loved so much: sunlight, pure air and the strangeness of new people and things. Here, she had thought, things will be different. But they were not different. They were the same. The facts were quite simple and inescapable. She, Hilary Craven, had no longer any wish to go on living. It was as simple as that.

If the fog had not intervened, if she had travelled on the plane on which her reservations had been made, then her problem might have been solved by now. She might be lying in some French official mortuary, a body broken and battered with her spirit at peace, freed from suffering. Well, the same end could be achieved, but she would have to take a little trouble.

It would have been so easy, if she had had sleeping-stuff with her. She remembered how she had asked Dr. Grey and the rather queer look on his face as he had answered:

“Better not. Much better to learn to sleep naturally. May be hard at first, but it will come.”

A queer look on his face. Had he known then or suspected that it would come to this? Oh, well, it should not be difficult. She rose to her feet with decision. She would go out now to a chemist's shop.

III

Hilary had always imagined that drugs were easy to buy in foreign cities. Rather to her surprise, she found that this was not so. The chemist she went to first supplied her with only two doses. For more than that amount, he said, a doctor's prescription would be advisable. She thanked him smilingly and nonchalantly and went rather quickly out of the shop, colliding as she

did so with a tall, rather solemn-faced young man, who apologized in English. She heard him asking for toothpaste as she left the shop.

Somehow that amused her. Toothpaste. It seemed so ridiculous, so normal, so everyday. Then a sharp pang pierced her, for the toothpaste he had asked for was the brand that Nigel had always preferred. She crossed the street and went into a shop opposite. She had been to four chemists' shops by the time she returned to the hotel. It had amused her a little that in the third shop the owlish young man had again appeared, once more asking obstinately for his particular brand of toothpaste which evidently was not one commonly stocked by French chemists in Casablanca.

Hilary felt almost lighthearted as she changed her frock and made up her face before going down for dinner. She purposely went down as late as possible since she was anxious not to encounter any of her fellow travellers or the personnel of the aeroplane. That was hardly likely in any case, since the plane had gone on to Dakar, and she thought that she had been the only person put off at Casablanca.

The restaurant was almost empty by the time she came into it, though she noticed that the young Englishman with the owl-like face was just finishing his meal at the table by the wall. He was reading a French newspaper and seemed quite absorbed in it.

Hilary ordered herself a good meal with a half-bottle of wine. She was feeling a heady kind of excitement. She thought to herself, "What is this after all, but the last adventure?" Then she ordered a bottle of Vichy water to be sent up to her room and went straight up after leaving the dining room.

The waiter brought the Vichy, uncapped it, placed it on the table, and wishing her good night, left the room. Hilary drew a sigh of relief. As he closed the door after him, she went to it and turned the key in the lock. She took from the drawer of the dressing table the four little packets she had obtained from the chemists', and unwrapped them. She laid the tablets out on the table and poured herself out a glass of Vichy water. Since the drug was in tablet form, she had only to swallow the tablets, and wash them down with the Vichy water.

She undressed, wrapped her dressing gown round her and came back to sit by the table. Her heart beat faster. She felt something like fear now, but the fear was half fascination and not the kind of flinching that would have tempted her to abandon her plan. She was quite calm and clear about that. This was escape at last—real escape. She looked at the writing table, debating whether she would leave a note. She decided against it. She had no relations, no close or dear friends, there was nobody to whom she wished to say goodbye. As for Nigel, she had no wish to burden him with useless remorse even if a note from her would have achieved that object. Nigel would read presumably in the paper that a Mrs. Hilary Craven had died of an overdose of sleeping tablets in Casablanca. It would probably be quite a small paragraph. He would accept it at its face value. “Poor old Hilary,” he would say, “bad luck”—and it might be that, secretly, he would be rather relieved. Because she guessed that she was, slightly, on Nigel’s conscience, and he was a man who wished to feel comfortable with himself.

Already Nigel seemed very far away and curiously unimportant. There was nothing more to be done. She would swallow the pills and lie down on her bed and sleep. From that sleep she would not wake. She had not, or thought she had not, any religious feeling. Brenda’s death had shut down on all that. So there was nothing more to consider. She was once again a traveller as she had been at Heathrow Airport, a traveller waiting to depart for an unknown destination, unencumbered by baggage, unaffected by farewells. For the first time in her life she was free, entirely free, to act as she wished to act. Already the past was cut away from her. The long aching misery that had dragged her down in her waking hours was gone. Yes. Light, free, unencumbered! Ready to start on her journey.

She stretched out her hand towards the first tablet. As she did so there came a soft, discreet tap on the door. Hilary frowned. She sat there, her hand arrested in mid-air. Who was it—a chambermaid? No, the bed had already been turned down. Somebody, perhaps, about papers or passport? She shrugged her shoulders. She would not answer the door. Why should she bother? Presently whoever it was would go away and come back at some further opportunity.

The knock came again, a little louder this time. But Hilary did not move. There could be no real urgency, and whoever it was would soon go away.

Her eyes were on the door, and suddenly they widened with astonishment. The key was slowly turning backwards round the lock. It jerked forward and fell on the floor with a metallic clang. Then the handle turned, the door opened and a man came in. She recognized him as the solemn, owl-like young man who had been buying toothpaste. Hilary stared at him. She was too startled for the moment to say or do anything. The young man turned round, shut the door, picked the key up from the floor, put it into the lock and turned it. Then he came across towards her and sat down in a chair the other side of the table. He said, and it seemed to her a most incongruous remark:

“My name’s Jessop.”

The colour rose sharply in Hilary’s face. She leaned forward. She said with cold anger:

“What do you think you’re doing here, may I ask?”

He looked at her solemnly—and blinked.

“Funny,” he said. “I came to ask you that.” He gave a quick sideways nod towards the preparations on the table. Hilary said sharply:

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh yes, you do.”

Hilary paused, struggling for words. There were so many things she wanted to say. To express indignation. To order him out of the room. But strangely enough, it was curiosity that won the day. The question rose to her lips so naturally that she was almost unaware of asking it.

“That key,” she said, “it turned, of itself, in the lock?”

“Oh, that!” The young man gave a sudden boyish grin that transformed his face. He put his hand into his pocket and, taking out a metal instrument, he

handed it to her to examine.

“There you are,” he said, “very handy little tool. Insert it into the lock the other side, it grips the key and turns it.” He took it back from her and put it in his pocket. “Burglars use them,” he said.

“So you’re a burglar?”

“No, no, Mrs. Craven, do me justice. I did knock, you know. Burglars don’t knock. Then, when it seemed you weren’t going to let me in, I used this.”

“But why?”

Again her visitor’s eyes strayed to the preparations on the table.

“I shouldn’t do it if I were you,” he said. “It isn’t a bit what you think, you know. You think you just go to sleep and you don’t wake up. But it’s not quite like that. All sorts of unpleasant effects. Convulsions sometimes, gangrene of the skin. If you’re resistant to the drug, it takes a long time to work, and someone gets to you in time and then all sorts of unpleasant things happen. Stomach pump. Castor oil, hot coffee, slapping and pushing. All very undignified, I assure you.”

Hilary leaned back in her chair, her eyelids narrowed. She clenched her hands slightly. She forced herself to smile.

“What a ridiculous person you are,” she said. “Do you imagine that I was committing suicide, or something like that?”

“Not only imagine it,” said the young man called Jessop, “I’m quite sure of it. I was in that chemist’s, you know, when you came in. Buying toothpaste, as a matter of fact. Well, they hadn’t got the sort I like, so I went to another shop. And there you were, asking for sleeping pills again. Well, I thought that was a bit odd, you know, so I followed you. All those sleeping pills at different places. It could only add up to one thing.”

His tone was friendly, offhand, but quite assured. Looking at him Hilary Craven abandoned pretence.

“Then don’t you think it is unwarrantable impertinence on your part to try and stop me?”

He considered the point for a moment or two. Then he shook his head.

“No. It’s one of those things that you can’t not do—if you understand.”

Hilary spoke with energy. “You can stop me for the moment. I mean you can take the pills away—throw them out of the window or something like that—but you can’t stop me from buying more another day or throwing myself down from the top floor of the building, or jumping in front of a train.”

The young man considered this.

“No,” he said. “I agree I can’t stop you doing any of those things. But it’s a question, you know, whether you will do them. Tomorrow, that is.”

“You think I shall feel differently tomorrow?” asked Hilary, faint bitterness in her tone.

“People do,” said Jessop, almost apologetically.

“Yes, perhaps,” she considered. “If you’re doing things in a mood of hot despair. But when it’s cold despair, it’s different. I’ve nothing to live for, you see.”

Jessop put his rather owlish head on one side, and blinked.

“Interesting,” he remarked.

“Not really. Not interesting at all. I’m not a very interesting woman. My husband, whom I loved, left me, my only child died very painfully of meningitis. I’ve no near friends or relations. I’ve no vocation, no art or craft or work that I love doing.”

“Tough,” said Jessop appreciatively. He added, rather hesitantly: “You don’t think of it as—wrong?”

Hilary said heatedly: "Why should it be wrong? It's my life."

"Oh yes, yes," Jessop repeated hastily. "I'm not taking a high moral line myself, but there are people, you know, who think it's wrong."

Hilary said:

"I'm not one of them."

Mr. Jessop said, rather inadequately:

"Quite."

He sat there looking at her, blinking his eyes thoughtfully.

Hilary said:

"So perhaps now, Mr.—er—"

"Jessop," said the young man.

"So perhaps now, Mr. Jessop, you will leave me alone."

But Jessop shook his head.

"Not just yet," he said. "I wanted to know, you see, just what was behind it all. I've got it clear now, have I? You're not interested in life, you don't want to live any longer, you more or less welcome the idea of death?"

"Yes."

"Good," said Jessop, cheerfully. "So now we know where we are. Let's go on to the next step. Has it got to be sleeping pills?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've already told you that they're not as romantic as they sound. Throwing yourself off a building isn't too nice, either. You don't always die

at once. And the same applies to falling under a train. What I'm getting at is that there are other ways."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"I'm suggesting another method. Rather a sporting method, really. There's some excitement in it, too. I'll be fair with you. There's just a hundred to one chance that you mightn't die. But I don't believe under the circumstances, that you'd really object by that time."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you haven't," said Jessop. "I've not begun to tell you about it yet. I'm afraid I'll have to make rather a thing about it—tell you a story, I mean. Shall I go ahead?"

"I suppose so."

Jessop paid no attention to the grudgingness of the assent. He started off in his most owl-like manner.

"You're the sort of woman who reads the papers and keeps up with things generally, I expect," he said. "You'll have read about the disappearance of various scientists from time to time. There was that Italian chap about a year ago, and about two months ago a young scientist called Thomas Betterton disappeared."

Hilary nodded. "Yes, I read about that in the papers."

"Well, there's been a good deal more than has appeared in the papers. More people, I mean, have disappeared. They haven't always been scientists. Some of them have been young men who were engaged in important medical research. Some of them have been research chemists, some of them have been physicists, there was one barrister. Oh, quite a lot here and there and everywhere. Well, ours is a so-called free country. You can leave it if you like. But in these peculiar circumstances we've got to know why these people left it and where they went, and, also important, how they went. Did they go of their own free will? Were they kidnapped? Were they

blackmailed into going? What route did they take—what kind of organization is it that sets this in motion and what is its ultimate aim? Lots of questions. We want the answer to them. You might be able to help get us that answer.”

Hilary stared at him.

“Me? How? Why?”

“I’m coming down to the particular case of Thomas Betterton. He disappeared from Paris just over two months ago. He left a wife in England. She was distracted—or said she was distracted. She swore that she had no idea why he’d gone or where or how. That may be true, or it may not. Some people—and I’m one of them—think it wasn’t true.”

Hilary leaned forward in her chair. In spite of herself she was becoming interested. Jessop went on.

“We prepared to keep a nice, unobtrusive eye on Mrs. Betterton. About a fortnight ago she came to me and told me she had been ordered by her doctor to go abroad, take a thorough rest and get some distraction. She was doing no good in England, and people were continually bothering her—newspaper reporters, relations, kind friends.”

Hilary said drily: “I can imagine it.”

“Yes, tough. Quite natural she would want to get away for a bit.”

“Quite natural, I should think.”

“But we’ve got nasty, suspicious minds in our department, you know. We arranged to keep tabs on Mrs. Betterton. Yesterday she left England as arranged, for Casablanca.”

“Casablanca?”

“Yes—en route to other places in Morocco, of course. All quite open and above board, plans made, bookings ahead. But it may be that this trip to Morocco is where Mrs. Betterton steps off into the unknown.”

Hilary shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t see where I come into all this.”

Jessop smiled.

“You come into it because you’ve got a very magnificent head of red hair, Mrs. Craven.”

“Hair?”

“Yes. It’s the most noticeable thing about Mrs. Betterton—her hair. You’ve heard, perhaps, that the plane before yours today crashed on landing.”

“I know. I should have been on that plane. I actually had reservations for it.”

“Interesting,” said Jessop. “Well, Mrs. Betterton was on that plane. She wasn’t killed. She was taken out of the wreckage still alive, and she is in hospital now. But according to the doctor, she won’t be alive tomorrow morning.”

A faint glimmer of light came to Hilary. She looked at him inquiringly.

“Yes,” said Jessop, “perhaps now you see the form of suicide I’m offering you. I’m suggesting that you should become Mrs. Betterton.”

“But surely,” said Hilary, “that would be quite impossible. I mean, they’d know at once she wasn’t me.”

Jessop put his head on one side.

“That, of course, depends entirely on who you mean by ‘they.’ It’s a very vague term. Who is or are ‘they?’ Is there such a thing, are there such persons as ‘they?’ We don’t know. But I can tell you this. If the most popular explanation of ‘they’ is accepted, then these people work in very close, self-contained cells. They do that for their own security. If Mrs. Betterton’s journey had a purpose and is planned, then the people who were in charge of it here will know nothing about the English side of it. At the

appointed moment they will contact a certain woman at a certain place, and carry on from there. Mrs. Betterton's passport description is 5 ft. 7, red hair, blue-green eyes, mouth medium, no distinguishing marks. Good enough."

"But the authorities here. Surely they—"

Jessop smiled. "That part of it will be quite all right. The French have lost a few valuable young scientists and chemists of their own. They'll cooperate. The facts will be as follows. Mrs. Betterton, suffering from concussion, is taken to hospital. Mrs. Craven, another passenger in the crashed plane, will also be admitted to hospital. Within a day or two Mrs. Craven will die in hospital, and Mrs. Betterton will be discharged, suffering slightly from concussion, but able to proceed on her tour. The crash was genuine, the concussion is genuine, and concussion makes a very good cover for you. It excuses a lot of things like lapses of memory, and various unpredictable behaviour."

Hilary said:

"It would be madness!"

"Oh, yes," said Jessop, "it's madness, all right. It's a very tough assignment and if our suspicions are realized, you'll probably cop it. You see, I'm being quite frank, but according to you, you're prepared and anxious to cop it. As an alternative to throwing yourself in front of a train or something like that, I should think you'd find it far more amusing."

Suddenly and unexpectedly Hilary laughed.

"I do believe," she said, "that you're quite right."

"You'll do it?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"In that case," said Jessop, rising in his seat with sudden energy, "there's absolutely no time to be lost."

Four

I

It was not really cold in the hospital but it felt cold. There was a smell of antiseptics in the air. Occasionally in the corridor outside could be heard the rattle of glasses and instruments as a trolley was pushed by. Hilary Craven sat in a hard iron chair by a bedside.

In the bed, lying flat under a shaded light with her head bandaged, Olive Betterton lay unconscious. There was a nurse standing on one side of the bed and the doctor on the other. Jessop sat in a chair in the far corner of the room. The doctor turned to him and spoke in French.

“It will not be very long now,” he said. “The pulse is very much weaker.”

“And she will not recover consciousness?”

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

“That I cannot say. It may be, yes, at the very end.”

“There is nothing you can do—no stimulant?”

The doctor shook his head. He went out. The nurse followed him. She was replaced by a nun who moved to the head of the bed, and stood there, her fingers fingering her rosary. Hilary looked at Jessop and in obedience to a glance from him came to join him.

“You heard what the doctor said?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes. What is it you want to say to her?”

“If she regains consciousness I want any information you can possibly get, any password, any sign, any message, anything. Do you understand? She is

more likely to speak to you than to me.”

Hilary said with sudden emotion:

“You want me to betray someone who is dying?”

Jessop put his head on one side in the bird-like manner which he sometimes adopted.

“So it seems like that to you, does it?” he said, considering.

“Yes, it does.”

He looked at her thoughtfully.

“Very well then, you shall say and do what you please. For myself I can have no scruples! You understand that?”

“Of course. It’s your duty. You’ll do whatever questioning you please, but don’t ask me to do it.”

“You’re a free agent.”

“There is one question we shall have to decide. Are we to tell her that she is dying?”

“I don’t know. I shall have to think it out.”

She nodded and went back to her place by the bed. She was filled now with a deep compassion for the woman who lay there dying. The woman who was on her way to join the man she loved. Or were they all wrong? Had she come to Morocco simply to seek solace, to pass the time until perhaps some definite news could come to her as to whether her husband were alive or dead? Hilary wondered.

Time went on. It was nearly two hours later when the click of the nun’s beads stopped. She spoke in a soft impersonal voice.

“There is a change,” she said. “I think, Madame, it is the end that comes. I will fetch the doctor.”

She left the room. Jessop moved to the opposite side of the bed, standing back against the wall so that he was out of the woman’s range of vision. The eyelids flickered and opened. Pale incurious blue-green eyes looked into Hilary’s. They closed, then opened again. A faint air of perplexity seemed to come into them.

“Where . . . ?”

The word fluttered between the almost breathless lips, just as the doctor entered the room. He took her hand in his, his finger on the pulse, standing by the bed looking down on her.

“You are in hospital, Madame,” he said. “There was an accident to the plane.”

“To the plane?”

The words were repeated dreamily in that faint breathless voice.

“Is there anyone you want to see in Casablanca, Madame? Any message we can take?”

Her eyes were raised painfully to the doctor’s face. She said:

“No.”

She looked back again at Hilary.

“Who—who—”

Hilary bent forward and spoke clearly and distinctly.

“I came out from England on a plane, too—if there is anything I can do to help you, please tell me.”

“No—nothing—nothing—unless—”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

The eyes flickered again and half closed—Hilary raised her head and looked across to meet Jessop’s imperious commanding glance. Firmly, she shook her head.

Jessop moved forward. He stood close beside the doctor. The dying woman’s eyes opened again. Sudden recognition came into them. She said:

“I know you.”

“Yes, Mrs. Betterton, you know me. Will you tell me anything you can about your husband?”

“No.”

Her eyelids fell again. Jessop turned quietly and left the room. The doctor looked across at Hilary. He said very softly:

“C’est la fin!”

The dying woman’s eyes opened again. They travelled painfully round the room, then they remained fixed on Hilary. Olive Betterton made a very faint motion with her hand, and Hilary instinctively took the white cold hand between her own. The doctor, with a shrug of his shoulders and a little bow, left the room. The two women were alone together. Olive Betterton was trying to speak:

“Tell me—tell me—”

Hilary knew what she was asking, and suddenly her own course of action opened clearly before her. She leaned down over the recumbent form.

“Yes,” she said, her words clear and emphatic. “You are dying. That’s what you want to know, isn’t it? Now listen to me. I am going to try and reach your husband. Is there any message you want me to give him if I succeed?”

“Tell him—tell him—to be careful. Boris—Boris—dangerous. . . .”

The breath fluttered off again with a sigh. Hilary bent closer.

“Is there anything you can tell me to help me—help me in my journey, I mean? Help me to get in contact with your husband?”

“Snow.”

The word came so faintly that Hilary was puzzled. Snow? Snow? She repeated it uncomprehendingly. A faint, ghost-like little giggle came from Olive Betterton. Faint words came tumbling out.

Snow, snow, beautiful snow!

You slip on a lump, and over you go!

She repeated the last word. “Go . . . Go? Go and tell him about Boris. I didn’t believe it. I wouldn’t believe it. But perhaps it’s true . . . If so, if so . . .” a kind of agonized question came into her eyes which stared up into Hilary’s “. . . take care. . . .”

A queer rattle came to her throat. Her lips jerked.

Olive Betterton died.

II

The next five days were strenuous mentally, though inactive physically. Immured in a private room in the hospital, Hilary was set to work. Every evening she had to pass an examination on what she had studied that day. All the details of Olive Betterton’s life, as far as they could be ascertained, were set down on paper and she had to memorize and learn them by heart. The house she had lived in, the daily woman she had employed, her relations, the names of her pet dog and her canary, every detail of the six months of her married life with Thomas Betterton. Her wedding, the names of her bridesmaids, their dresses. The patterns of curtains, carpets and chintzes. Olive Betterton’s tastes, predilections, and day by day activities. Her preferences in food and drink. Hilary was forced to marvel at the

amount of seemingly meaningless information that had been massed together. Once she said to Jessop:

“Can any of this possibly matter?”

And to that he had replied quietly:

“Probably not. But you’ve got to make yourself into the authentic article. Think of it this way, Hilary. You’re a writer. You’re writing a book about a woman. The woman is Olive. You describe scenes of her childhood, her girlhood; you describe her marriage, the house she lived in. All the time that you do it she becomes more and more of a real person to you. Then you go over it a second time. You write it this time as an autobiography. You write it in the first person. Do you see what I mean?” She nodded slowly, impressed in spite of herself.

“You can’t think of yourself as Olive Betterton until you are Olive Betterton. It would be better if you had time to learn it up, but we can’t afford time. So I’ve got to cram you. Cram you like a schoolboy—like a student who is going in for an important examination.” He added, “You’ve got a quick brain and a good memory, thank the Lord.”

He looked at her in cool appraisal.

The passport descriptions of Olive Betterton and Hilary Craven were almost identical, but actually the two faces were entirely different. Olive Betterton had had a quality of rather commonplace and insignificant prettiness. She had looked obstinate but not intelligent. Hilary’s face had power and an intriguing quality. The deep-set bluish-green eyes under dark level brows had fire and intelligence in their depths. Her mouth curved upwards in a wide and generous line. The plane of the jaw was unusual—a sculptor would have found the angles of the face interesting.

Jessop thought: “There’s passion there—and guts—and somewhere, damped but not quenched, there’s a gay spirit that’s tough—and that enjoys life and searches out for adventure.”

“You’ll do,” he said to her. “You’re an apt pupil.”

This challenge to her intellect and her memory had stimulated Hilary. She was becoming interested now, keen to achieve success. Once or twice objections occurred to her. She voiced them to Jessop.

“You say that I shan’t be rejected as Olive Betterton. You say that they won’t know what she looks like, except in general detail. But how sure can you be of that?”

Jessop shrugged his shoulders.

“One can’t be sure—of anything. But we do know a certain amount about the set-up of these shows, and it does seem that internationally there is very little communication from one country to another. Actually, that’s a great advantage to them. If we come upon a weak link in England (and, mind you, in every organization there always will be a weak link) that weak link in the chain knows nothing about what’s going on in France, or Italy, or Germany, or wherever you like, we are brought up short by a blank wall. They know their own little part of the whole—no more. The same applies the opposite way round. I dare swear that all the cell operating here knows is that Olive Betterton will arrive on such and such a plane and is to be given such and such instructions. You see, it’s not as though she were important in herself. If they’re bringing her to her husband, it’s because her husband wants her brought to him and because they think they’ll get better work out of him if she joins him. She herself is a mere pawn in the game. You must remember too, that the idea of substituting a false Olive Betterton is definitely a spur of the moment improvisation—occasioned by the plane accident and the colour of your hair. Our plan of operation was to keep tabs on Olive Betterton and find out where she went, how she went, whom she met—and so on. That’s what the other side will be on the lookout for.”

Hilary asked:

“Haven’t you tried all that before?”

“Yes. It was tried in Switzerland. Very unobtrusively. And it failed as far as our main objective was concerned. If anyone contacted her there we didn’t know about it. So the contact must have been very brief. Naturally they’ll expect that someone will be keeping tabs on Olive Betterton. They’ll be

prepared for that. It's up to us to do our job more thoroughly than last time. We've got to try and be rather more cunning than our adversaries."

"So you'll be keeping tabs on me?"

"Of course."

"How?"

He shook his head.

"I shan't tell you that. Much better for you not to know. What you don't know you can't give away."

"Do you think I would give it away?"

Jessop put on his owl-like expression again.

"I don't know how good an actress you are—how good a liar. It's not easy, you know. It's not a question of saying anything indiscreet. It can be anything, a sudden intake of the breath, the momentary pause in some action—lighting a cigarette, for instance. Recognition of a name or a friend. You could cover it up quickly, but just a flash might be enough!"

"I see. It means—being on your guard for every single split second."

"Exactly. In the meantime, on with the lessons! Quite like going back to school, isn't it? You're pretty well word perfect on Olive Betterton, now. Let's go on to the other."

Codes, responses, various properties. The lesson went on; the questioning, the repetition, the endeavour to confuse her, to trip her up; then hypothetical schemes and her own reactions to them. In the end, Jessop nodded his head and declared himself satisfied.

"You'll do," he said. He patted her on the shoulder in an avuncular manner. "You're an apt pupil. And remember this, however much you may feel at times that you're all alone in this, you're probably not. I say probably—I won't put it higher than that. These are clever devils."

“What happens,” said Hilary, “if I reach journey’s end?”

“You mean?”

“I mean when at last I come face to face with Tom Betterton.”

Jessop nodded grimly.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s the danger moment. I can only say that at that moment, if all has gone well, you should have protection. If, that is to say, things have gone as we hope; but the very basis of this operation, as you may remember, was that there wasn’t a very high chance of survival.”

“Didn’t you say one in a hundred?” said Hilary drily.

“I think we can shorten the odds a little. I didn’t know what you were like.”

“No, I suppose not.” She was thoughtful. “To you, I suppose, I was just. . .”

He finished the sentence for her. “A woman with a noticeable head of red hair and who hadn’t the pluck to go on living.”

She flushed.

“That’s a harsh judgement.”

“It’s a true one, isn’t it? I don’t go in for being sorry for people. For one thing it’s insulting. One is only sorry for people when they’re sorry for themselves. Self pity is one of the biggest stumbling-blocks in the world today.”

Hilary said thoughtfully:

“I think perhaps you’re right. Will you permit yourself to be sorry for me when I’ve been liquidated or whatever the term is, in fulfilling this mission?”

“Sorry for you? No. I shall curse like hell because we’ve lost someone who’s worthwhile taking a bit of trouble over.”

“A compliment at last.” In spite of herself she was pleased.

She went on in a practical tone:

“There’s just one other thing that occurred to me. You say nobody’s likely to know what Olive Betterton looks like, but what about being recognized as myself? I don’t know anyone in Casablanca, but there are the people who travelled here with me in the plane. Or one may of course run across somebody one knows among the tourists here.”

“You needn’t worry about the passengers in the plane. The people who flew with you from Paris were businessmen who went on to Dakar and a man who got off here who has since flown back to Paris. You will go to a different hotel when you leave here, the hotel for which Mrs. Betterton had reservations. You will be wearing her clothes and her style of hairdressing and one or two strips of plaster at the sides of your face will make you look very different in feature. We’ve got a doctor coming to work upon you, by the way. Local anæsthetic, so it won’t hurt, but you will have to have a few genuine marks of the accident.”

“You’re very thorough,” said Hilary.

“Have to be.”

“You’ve never asked me,” said Hilary, “whether Olive Betterton told me anything before she died.”

“I understood you had scruples.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. I respect you for them. I’d like to indulge in them myself—but they’re not in the schedule.”

“She did say something that perhaps I ought to tell you. She said ‘Tell him’—Betterton, that is—‘tell him to be careful—Boris—dangerous—’ ”

“Boris.” Jessop repeated the name with interest. “Ah! Our correct foreign Major Boris Glydr.”

“You know him? Who is he?”

“A Pole. He came to see me in London. He’s supposed to be a cousin by marriage of Tom Betterton.”

“Supposed?”

“Let us say, more correctly, that if he is who he says he is, he is a cousin of the late Mrs. Betterton. But we’ve only his word for it.”

“She was frightened,” said Hilary, frowning. “Can you describe him? I’d like to be able to recognize him.”

“Yes. It might be as well. Six feet. Weight roughly, 160 pounds. Fair—rather wooden poker face—light eyes—foreign stilted manner—English very correct, but a pronounced accent, stiff military bearing.”

He added:

“I had him tailed when he left my office. Nothing doing. He went straight to the U.S. Embassy—quite correctly—he’d brought me an introductory letter from there. The usual kind they send out when they want to be polite but non-committal. I presume he left the Embassy either in somebody’s car or by the back entrance disguised as a footman or something. Anyway he evaded us. Yes—I should say that Olive Betterton was perhaps right when she said that Boris Glydr was dangerous.”

Five

I

In the small formal salon of the Hôtel St. Louis, three ladies were sitting, each engaged in her particular occupation. Mrs. Calvin Baker, short, plump, with well-blued hair, was writing letters with the same driving energy she applied to all forms of activity. No one could have mistaken Mrs. Calvin Baker for anything but a travelling American, comfortably off, with an inexhaustible thirst for precise information on every subject under the sun.

In an uncomfortable Empire-type chair, Miss Hetherington, who again could not have been mistaken for anything but travelling English, was knitting one of those melancholy shapeless-looking garments that English ladies of middle age always seem to be knitting. Miss Hetherington was tall and thin with a scraggy neck, badly arranged hair, and a general expression of moral disappointment in the universe.

Mademoiselle Jeanne Maricot was sitting gracefully in an upright chair looking out of the window and yawning. Mademoiselle Maricot was a brunette dyed blonde, with a plain but excitingly made-up face. She was wearing chic clothes and had no interest whatsoever in the other occupants of the room whom she dismissed contemptuously in her mind as being exactly what they were! She was contemplating an important change in her sex life and had no interest to spare for these animals of tourists!

Miss Hetherington and Mrs. Calvin Baker, having both spent a couple of nights under the roof of the St. Louis, had become acquainted. Mrs. Calvin Baker, with American friendliness, talked to everybody. Miss Hetherington, though just as eager for companionship, talked only to English and Americans of what she considered a certain social standing. The French she had no truck with unless guaranteed of respectable family life as evidenced by little ones who shared the parental table in the dining room.

A Frenchman looking like a prosperous business man glanced into the salon, was intimidated by its air of female solidarity, and went out again with a look of lingering regret at Mademoiselle Jeanne Maricot.

Miss Hetherington began to count stitches sotto voce.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine—now what can I have—Oh, I see.”

A tall woman with red hair looked into the room and hesitated a moment before going on down the passage towards the dining room.

Mrs. Calvin Baker and Miss Hetherington were immediately alert. Mrs. Baker slewed herself round from the writing table and spoke in a thrilled whisper.

“Did you happen to notice that woman with red hair who looked in, Miss Hetherington? They say she’s the only survivor of that terrible plane crash last week.”

“I saw her arrive this afternoon,” said Miss Hetherington, dropping another stitch in her excitement. “In an ambulance.”

“Straight from the hospital, so the manager said. I wonder now if it was wise—to leave hospital so soon. She’s had concussion, I believe.”

“She’s got strapping on her face, too—cut, perhaps, by the glass. What a mercy she wasn’t burnt. Terrible injuries from burning in these air accidents, I believe.”

“It just doesn’t bear thinking about. Poor young thing. I wonder if she had a husband with her and if he was killed?”

“I don’t think so,” Miss Hetherington shook her yellow-grey head. “It said in the paper, one woman passenger.”

“That’s right. It gave her name, too. A Mrs. Beverly—no, Betterton, that was it.”

“Betterton,” said Miss Hetherington reflectively. “Now what does that remind me of? Betterton. In the papers. Oh, dear, I’m sure that was the name.”

“Tant pis pour Pierre,” Mademoiselle Maricot said to herself. “Il est vraiment insupportable! Mais le petit Jules, lui il est bien gentil. Et son père est très bien placé dans les affaires. Enfin, je me décide!”

And with long graceful steps Mademoiselle Maricot walked out of the small salon and out of the story.

II

Mrs. Thomas Betterton had left the hospital that afternoon five days after the accident. An ambulance had driven her to the Hôtel St. Louis.

Looking pale and ill, her face strapped and bandaged, Mrs. Betterton was shown at once to the room reserved for her, a sympathetic manager hovering in attendance.

“What emotions you must have experienced, Madame!” he said, after inquiring tenderly as to whether the room reserved suited her, and turning on all the electric lights quite unnecessarily. “But what an escape! What a miracle! What good fortune! Only three survivors, I understand, and one of them in a critical condition still.”

Hilary sank down on a chair wearily.

“Yes, indeed,” she murmured. “I can hardly believe it myself. Even now I can remember so little. The last twenty-four hours before the crash are still quite vague to me.”

The manager nodded sympathetically.

“Ah, yes. That is the result of the concussion. That happens once to a sister of mine. She was in London in the war. A bomb came, she was knocked unconscious. But presently she gets up, she walks about London and she takes a train from the station of Euston and, figurez-vous, she wakes up at

Liverpool and she cannot remember anything of the bomb, of going across London, of the train or of getting there! The last thing she remembers is hanging up her skirt in the wardrobe in London. Very curious these things, are they not?"

Hilary agreed that they were, indeed. The manager bowed and departed. Hilary got up and looked at herself in the glass. So imbued was she now with her new personality that she positively felt the weakness in her limbs which would be natural to one who had just come out of hospital after a severe ordeal.

She had already inquired at the desk, but there had been no messages or letters for her there. The first steps in her new role had to be taken very much in the dark. Olive Betterton might perhaps have been told to ring a certain number or to contact a certain person at Casablanca. As to that there was no clue. All the knowledge she had to go on was Olive Betterton's passport, her Letter of Credit, and her book of Cooks' tickets and reservations. These provided for two days in Casablanca, six days in Fez and five days in Marrakesh. These reservations were now, of course, out of date, and would have to be dealt with accordingly. The passport, the Letter of Credit and the accompanying Letter of Identification had been suitably dealt with. The photograph on the passport was now that of Hilary, the signature on the Letter of Credit was Olive Betterton in Hilary's handwriting. Her credentials were all in order. Her task was to play her part adequately and to wait. Her master card must be the plane accident, and its resultant loss of memory and general haziness.

It had been a genuine accident and Olive Betterton had been genuinely on board the plane. The fact of concussion would adequately cover her failure to adopt any measures in which she might have been instructed. Bewildered, dazed, weak, Olive Betterton would await orders.

The natural thing to do would be to rest. Accordingly she lay down on the bed. For two hours she went over in her mind all that she had been taught. Olive's luggage had been destroyed in the plane. Hilary had a few things with her supplied at the hospital. She passed a comb through her hair, touched her lips with a lipstick and went down to the hotel dining room for dinner.

She was looked at, she noticed, with a certain amount of interest. There were several tables occupied by business men and these hardly vouchsafed a glance at her. But at other tables, clearly occupied by tourists, she was conscious of a murmur and a whisper going on.

“That woman over there—the one with the red hair—she’s a survivor of the plane crash, my dear. Yes, came from hospital in an ambulance. I saw her arrive. She looks terribly ill still. I wonder if they ought to have let her out so soon. What a frightful experience. What a merciful escape!”

After dinner Hilary sat for a short while in the small formal salon. She wondered if anyone would approach her in any way. There were one or two other women scattered about the room, and presently a small, plump, middle-aged woman with well-blued white hair, moved to a chair near hers. She opened proceedings in a brisk, pleasant American voice.

“I do hope you’ll excuse me, but I just felt I had to say a word. It’s you, isn’t it, who had the wonderful escape from that air crash the other day?”

Hilary put down the magazine she was reading.

“Yes,” she said.

“My! Isn’t that terrible. The crash I mean. Only three survivors, they say. Is that right?”

“Only two,” said Hilary. “One of the three died in hospital.”

“My! You don’t say! Now, if you don’t mind my asking, Miss—Mrs. . . .”

“Betterton.”

“Well, if you don’t mind my asking, just where were you sitting in that plane? Were you up at the front or near the tail?”

Hilary knew the answer to that one and gave it promptly.

“Near the tail.”

“They always say, don’t they, that’s the safest place. I just insist on always having a place near the rear doors. Did you hear that, Miss Hetherington?” She turned her head to include another middle-aged lady. This one was uncompromisingly British with a long, sad, horse-like face. “It’s just as I was saying the other day. Whenever you go into an aeroplane, don’t you let those air hostesses take you right up to the front.”

“I suppose someone has to sit at the front,” said Hilary.

“Well, it won’t be me,” said her new American friend promptly. “My name’s Baker, by the way, Mrs. Calvin Baker.”

Hilary acknowledged the introduction and Mrs. Baker plunged on, monopolizing the conversation easily.

“I’ve just come here from Mogador and Miss Hetherington has come from Tangier. We became acquainted here. Are you going to visit Marrakesh, Mrs. Betterton?”

“I’d arranged to do so,” said Hilary. “Of course, this accident has thrown out all my time schedule.”

“Why, naturally, I can see that. But you really mustn’t miss Marrakesh, wouldn’t you say so, Miss Hetherington?”

“Marrakesh is terribly expensive,” said Miss Hetherington. “This miserable travel allowance makes everything so difficult.”

“There’s a wonderful hotel, the Mamounia,” continued Mrs. Baker.

“Wickedly expensive,” said Miss Hetherington. “Out of the question for me. Of course, it’s different for you, Mrs. Baker—dollars, I mean. But someone gave me the name of a small hotel there, really very nice and clean, and the food, they say, is not at all bad.”

“Where else do you plan to go, Mrs. Betterton?” asked Mrs. Calvin Baker.

“I would like to see Fez,” said Hilary, cautiously. “I shall have to get fresh reservations, of course.”

“Oh, yes, you certainly oughtn’t to miss Fez or Rabat.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Not yet. I’m planning to go there shortly, and so is Miss Hetherington.”

“I believe the old city is quite unspoilt,” said Miss Hetherington.

The conversation continued in desultory fashion for some time further. Then Hilary pleaded fatigue from her first time out of hospital and went up to her bedroom.

The evening so far had been quite indecisive. The two women who had talked to her had been such well-known travelling types that she could hardly believe that they were other than they seemed. Tomorrow, she decided, if she had received no word or communication of any kind, she would go to Cooks, and raise the question of fresh reservations at Fez and Marrakesh.

There were no letters, messages or telephone calls the following morning and about eleven o’clock she made her way to the travel agency. There was somewhat of a queue, but when she at last reached the counter and began talking to the clerk, an interruption occurred. A somewhat more senior clerk with glasses elbowed the young man aside. He beamed at Hilary through his glasses.

“It is Madame Betterton, is it not? I have all your reservations made.”

“I am afraid,” said Hilary, “that they will be out of date. I have been in hospital and. . . .”

“Ah, mais oui, I know all that. Let me congratulate you on your escape, Madame. But I got your telephone message about fresh reservations, and we have them here ready for you.”

Hilary felt a faint quickening of her pulse. As far as she knew no one had phoned the travel agency. Here then were definite signs that Olive Betterton’s travelling arrangements were being supervised. She said:

“I wasn’t sure if they had telephoned or not.”

“But yes, Madame. Here, I will show you.”

He produced railway tickets, and vouchers for hotel accommodation, and a few minutes later the transactions were completed. Hilary was to leave for Fez on the following day.

Mrs. Calvin Baker was not in the restaurant either for lunch or dinner. Miss Hetherington was. She acknowledged Hilary’s bow as the latter passed to her table, but made no attempt to get into conversation with her. On the following day after making some necessary purchases of clothes and underclothing, Hilary left by train for Fez.

III

It was on the day of Hilary’s departure that Mrs. Calvin Baker, coming into the hotel in her usual brisk fashion, was accosted by Miss Hetherington whose long thin nose was quivering with excitement.

“I’ve remembered about the name Betterton—the disappearing scientist. It was in all the papers. About two months ago.”

“Why, now I do remember something. A British scientist—yes—he’d been at some conference in Paris.”

“Yes—that’s it. Now I wonder, do you think—if this could possibly be his wife. I looked in the register and I see her address is Harwell—Harwell, you know, is the Atom Station. I do think all these atom bombs are very wrong. And Cobalt—such a lovely colour in one’s paintbox and I used it a lot as a child; the worst of all, I understand nobody can survive. We weren’t meant to do these experiments. Somebody told me the other day that her cousin, who is a very shrewd man, said the whole world might go radioactive.”

“My, my,” said Mrs. Calvin Baker.

Six

Casablanca had vaguely disappointed Hilary by being such a prosperous-looking French town with no hint of the Orient or mystery about it, except for the crowds in the street.

The weather was still perfect, sunny and clear, and she enjoyed looking out of the train at the passing landscape as they journeyed northward. A small Frenchman who looked like a commercial traveller sat opposite to her, in the far corner was a somewhat disapproving-looking nun telling her beads, and two Moorish ladies with a great many packages, who conversed gaily with one another, completed the complement of the carriage. Offering a light for her cigarette, the little Frenchman opposite soon entered into conversation. He pointed out things of interest as they passed, and gave her various information about the country. She found him interesting and intelligent.

“You should go to Rabat, Madame. It is a great mistake not to go to Rabat.”

“I shall try to do so. But I have not very much time. Besides,” she smiled, “money is short. We can only take so much with us abroad, you know.”

“But that is simple. One arranges with a friend here.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t got a convenient friend in Morocco.”

“Next time you travel, Madame, send me a little word. I will give you my card. And I arrange everything. I travel often in England on business and you repay me there. It is all quite simple.”

“That’s very kind of you, and I hope I shall pay a second visit to Morocco.”

“It must be a change for you, Madame, to come here from England. So cold, so foggy, so disagreeable.”

“Yes, it’s a great change.”

“I, too, I travelled from Paris three weeks ago. It was then fog, rain and all of the most disgusting. I arrive here and all is sunshine. Though, mind you, the air is cold. But it is pure. Good pure air. How was the weather in England when you left?”

“Much as you say,” said Hilary. “Fog.”

“Ah yes, it is the foggy season. Snow—you have had snow this year?”

“No,” said Hilary, “there has been no snow.” She wondered to herself, amusedly, if this much-travelled little Frenchman was following what he considered to be the correct trend of English conversation, dealing principally with the weather. She asked him a question or two about the political situation in Morocco and in Algiers, and he responded willingly, showing himself to be well informed.

Glancing across at the far corner, Hilary observed the nun’s eyes fixed disapprovingly on her. The Moroccan ladies got out and other travellers got in. It was evening when they arrived at Fez.

“Permit me to assist you, Madame.”

Hilary was standing, rather bewildered at the bustle and noise of the station. Arab porters were seizing her luggage from her hands, shouting, yelling, calling, recommending different hotels. She turned gratefully to her new French acquaintance.

“You are going to the Palais Djamai, n’est-ce pas, Madame?”

“Yes.”

“That is right. It is eight kilometres from here, you understand.”

“Eight kilometres?” Hilary was dismayed. “It’s not in the town, then.”

“It is by the old town,” the Frenchman explained. “Me, I stay here at the hotel in the commercial new city. But for the holiday, the rest, the enjoyment, naturally you go to the Palais Djamai. It was a former residence, you understand, of the Moroccan nobility. It has beautiful gardens, and you

go straight from it into the old city of Fez which is untouched. It does not seem as though the hotel had sent to meet this train. If you permit, I will arrange for a taxi for you.”

“You’re very kind, but. . . .”

The Frenchman spoke in rapid Arabic to the porters and shortly afterwards Hilary took her place in a taxi, her baggage was pushed in, and the Frenchman told her exactly what to give the rapacious porters. He also dismissed them with a few sharp words of Arabic when they protested that the remuneration was inadequate. He whipped a card from his pocket and handed it to her.

“My card, Madame, and if I can be of assistance to you at any time, tell me. I shall be at the Grand Hotel here for the next four days.”

He raised his hat and went away. Hilary looked down at the card which she could just see before they moved out of the lighted station:

Monsieur Henri Laurier

The taxi drove briskly out of the town, through the country, up a hill. Hilary tried to see, looking out of the windows, where she was going, but darkness had set in now. Except when they passed a lighted building nothing much could be seen. Was this, perhaps, where her journey diverged from the normal and entered the unknown? Was Monsieur Laurier an emissary from the organization that had persuaded Thomas Betterton to leave his work, his home and his wife? She sat in the corner of the taxi nervously apprehensive, wondering where it was taking her.

It took her, however, in the most exemplary manner to the Palais Djamai. She dismounted there, passed through an arched gateway and found herself, with a thrill of pleasure, in an oriental interior. There were long divans, coffee tables, and native rugs. From the reception desk she was taken through several rooms which led out of each other, out on to a terrace, passing by orange trees and scented flowers, and then up a winding staircase and into a pleasant bedroom, still oriental in style but equipped

with all the “conforts modernes” so necessary to twentieth-century travellers.

Dinner, the porter informed her, took place from 7:30. She unpacked a little, washed, combed her hair and went downstairs through the long oriental smoking room, out on the terrace and across and up some steps to a lighted dining room running at right angles to it.

The dinner was excellent and, as Hilary ate, various people came and went from the restaurant. She was too tired to size them up and classify them this particular evening, but one or two outstanding personalities took her eye. An elderly man, very yellow of face, with a little goatee beard. She noticed him because of the extreme deference paid to him by the staff. Plates were whisked away and placed for him at the mere raising of his head. The slightest turn of an eyebrow brought a waiter rushing to his table. She wondered who he was. The majority of diners were clearly touring on pleasure trips. There was a German at a big table in the centre, there was a middle-aged man and a fair, very beautiful girl who she thought might be Swedes, or possibly Danes. There was an English family with two children, and various groups of travelling Americans. There were three French families.

After dinner she had coffee on the terrace. It was slightly cold but not unduly so and she enjoyed the smell of scented blossoms. She went to bed early.

Sitting on the terrace the following morning in the sunshine under the red-striped umbrella that protected her from the sun, Hilary felt how fantastic the whole thing was. Here she sat, pretending to be a dead woman, expecting something melodramatic and out of the common to occur. After all, wasn't it only too likely that poor Olive Betterton had come abroad merely to distract her mind and heart from sad thoughts and feelings? Probably the poor woman had been just as much in the dark as everybody else.

Certainly the words she had said before she died admitted of a perfectly ordinary explanation. She had wanted Thomas Betterton warned against somebody called Boris. Her mind had wandered—she had quoted a strange

little jingle—she had gone on to say that she couldn't believe it at first. Couldn't believe what? Possibly only that Thomas Betterton had been spirited away the way he had been.

There had been no sinister undertones, no helpful clues. Hilary stared down at the terrace garden below her. It was beautiful here. Beautiful and peaceful. Children chattered and ran up and down the terrace, French mammas called to them or scolded them. The blonde Swedish girl came and sat down by a table and yawned. She took out a pale pink lipstick and touched up her already exquisitely painted lips. She appraised her face seriously, frowning a little.

Presently her companion—husband, Hilary wondered, or it might possibly be her father—joined her. She greeted him without a smile. She leaned forward and talked to him, apparently expostulating about something. He protested and apologized.

The old man with the yellow face and the little goatee came up the terrace from the gardens below. He went and sat at a table against the extreme wall, and immediately a waiter darted forth. He gave an order and the waiter bowed before him and went away, in all haste to execute it. The fair girl caught her companion excitedly by the arm and looked towards the elderly man.

Hilary ordered a Martini, and when it came she asked the waiter in a low voice:

“Who is the old man there against the wall?”

“Ah!” The waiter leaned forward dramatically, “That is Monsieur Aristides. He is enormously—but yes, enormously—rich.”

He sighed in ecstasy at the contemplation of so much wealth and Hilary looked over at the shrivelled-up, bent figure at the far table. Such a wrinkled, dried-up, mummified old morsel of humanity. And yet, because of his enormous wealth, waiters darted and sprang and spoke with awe in their voices. Old Monsieur Aristides shifted his position. Just for a moment his eyes met hers. He looked at her for a moment, then looked away.

“Not so insignificant after all,” Hilary thought to herself. Those eyes, even at that distance, had been wonderfully intelligent and alive.

The blonde girl and her escort got up from their table and went into the dining room. The waiter, who now seemed to consider himself as Hilary’s guide and mentor, stopped at her table as he collected glasses and gave her further information.

“Ce Monsieur-là, he is a big business magnate from Sweden. Very rich, very important. And the lady with him she is a film star—another Garbo, they say. Very chic—very beautiful—but does she make him the scenes, the histories! Nothing pleases her. She is, as you say, ‘fed up’ to be here, in Fez, where there are no jewellers’ shops—and no other expensive women to admire and envy her toilettes. She demands that he should take her somewhere more amusing tomorrow. Ah, it is not always the rich who can enjoy tranquillity and peace of mind.”

Having uttered this last in a somewhat sententious fashion, he saw a beckoning forefinger and sprang across the terrace as though galvanized.

“Monsieur?”

Most people had gone in to lunch, but Hilary had had breakfast late and was in no hurry for her midday meal. She ordered herself another drink. A good-looking young Frenchman came out of the bar and across the terrace, cast a swift discreet glance at Hilary which, thinly disguised, meant: “Is there anything doing here, I wonder?” and then went down the steps to the terrace below. As he did so he half sang, half hummed a snatch of French opera:

Le long des lauriers roses

Rêvant de douces choses.

The words formed a little pattern on Hilary’s brain. Le long des lauriers roses. Laurier. Laurier? That was the name of the Frenchman in the train. Was there a connection here or was it coincidence? She opened her bag and hunted in it for the card he had given her. Henri Laurier, 3 Rue des Croissants, Casablanca. She turned the card over and there seemed to be

faint pencil marks on the back of it. It was as though something had been written on it and then rubbed out. She tried to decipher what the marks were. "Où sont," the message began, then something which she could not decipher, and finally she made out the words "D'Antan." For a moment she had thought that it might be a message, but now she shook her head and put the card back in her bag. It must have been some quotation that he had once written on it and then rubbed out.

A shadow fell on her and she looked up, startled. Mr. Aristides was standing there between her and the sun. His eyes were not on her. He was looking across over the gardens below towards the silhouette of hills in the distance. She heard him sigh and then he turned abruptly, towards the dining room, and as he did so, the sleeve of his coat caught the glass on her table and sent it flying to the terrace where it broke. He wheeled round quickly and politely.

"Ah. Mille pardons, Madame."

Hilary assured him smilingly in French that it did not matter in the least. With the swift flick of a finger he summoned a waiter.

The waiter as usual came running. The old man ordered a replacement of Madame's drink and then, once more apologizing, he made his way into the restaurant.

The young Frenchman, still humming, came up the steps again. He lingered noticeably as he passed Hilary, but as she gave no sign, he went on into lunch with a slight philosophic shrug of the shoulders.

A French family passed across the terrace, the parents calling to their young.

"Mais viens donc, Bobo. Qu'est-ce que tu fais? Dépêcheto!" "Laisse ta balle, chérie, on va déjeuner."

They passed up the steps and into the restaurant, a happy contented little nucleus of family life. Hilary felt suddenly alone and frightened.

The waiter brought her drink. She asked him if Mr. Aristides was all alone here.

“Oh, Madame, naturally, anyone so rich as Monsieur Aristides would never travel alone. He has here his valet and two secretaries and a chauffeur.”

The waiter was quite shocked at the idea of Mr. Aristides travelling unaccompanied.

Hilary noted, however, when she at last went into the dining room, that the old man sat at a table by himself as he had done on the previous evening. At a table nearby sat two young men whom she thought were probably the secretaries since she noticed that one or the other of them was always on the alert and looked constantly towards the table where Mr. Aristides, shrivelled and monkeylike, ate his lunch and did not seem to notice their existence. Evidently to Mr. Aristides, secretaries were not human!

The afternoon passed in a vague dream-like manner. Hilary strolled through the gardens, descending from terrace to terrace. The peace and beauty seemed quite astounding. There was the splash of water, the gleam of the golden oranges, and innumerable scents and fragrances. It was the oriental atmosphere of seclusion about it that Hilary found so satisfying. As a garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse . . . This was what a garden was meant to be, a place shut away from the world—full of green and gold.

If I could stay here, thought Hilary. If I could stay here always. . . .

It was not the actual garden of the Palais Djamai that was in her thoughts, it was the state of mind it typified. When she no longer looked for peace, she had found it. And peace of mind had come to her at a moment when she was committed to adventure and danger.

But perhaps there was no danger and no adventure . . . Perhaps she could stay here awhile and nothing would happen . . . and then. . . .

And then—what?

A little cold breeze sprang up and Hilary gave a quick shiver. You strayed into the garden of peaceful living, but in the end you would be betrayed from within. The turmoil of the world, the harshness of living, the regrets and despairs, all these she carried within her.

It was late afternoon, and the sun had lost its power. Hilary went up the various terraces and into the hotel.

In the gloom of the Oriental Lounge, something voluble and cheerful resolved itself, as Hilary's eyes got attuned to the dimness, into Mrs. Calvin Baker, her hair newly blued, and her appearance immaculate as ever.

"I've just got here by air," she explained. "I simply can't stand these trains—the time they take! And the people in them, as often as not, quite unsanitary! They've no idea at all of hygiene in these countries. My dear, you should see the meat in the souks—all smothered in flies. They just seem to think it's natural to have flies settling on everything."

"I suppose it is really," said Hilary.

Mrs. Calvin Baker was not going to allow such a heretical statement to pass.

"I'm a great believer in the Clean Food movement. At home everything perishable is wrapped in Cellophane—but even in London your bread and cakes just stand about unwrapped. Now tell me, have you been getting around? You've been doing the old city today, I expect?"

"I'm afraid I haven't 'done' anything," said Hilary, smiling. "I've just been sitting about in the sun."

"Ah, of course—you're just out of hospital. I forgot." Clearly only recent illness was accepted by Mrs. Calvin Baker as an excuse for failure to sightsee. "How could I be so stupid? Why, it's perfectly true, after concussion you ought to lie down and rest in a dark room most of the day. By and by we can make some expeditions together. I'm one of those people who like a real packed day—everything planned and arranged. Every minute filled."

In Hilary's present mood, this sounded like a foretaste of hell, but she congratulated Mrs. Calvin Baker on her energy.

"Well, I will say that for a woman of my age I get around pretty well. I hardly ever feel fatigue. Do you remember Miss Hetherington at Casablanca? An Englishwoman with a long face. She'll be arriving this evening. She prefers train to flying. Who's staying in the hotel? Mostly French, I suppose. And honeymoon couples. I must run along now and see about my room. I didn't like the one they gave me and they promised to change it."

A miniature whirlwind of energy, Mrs. Calvin Baker departed.

When Hilary entered the dining room that evening, the first thing she saw was Miss Hetherington at a small table against the wall eating her dinner with a Fontana book propped up in front of her.

The three ladies had coffee together after dinner and Miss Hetherington displayed a pleasurable excitement over the Swedish magnate and the blonde film star.

"Not married, I understand," she breathed, disguising her pleasure with a correct disapproval. "One sees so much of that sort of thing abroad. That seemed a nice French family at the table by the window. The children seemed so fond of their Papa. Of course, French children are allowed to sit up far too late. Ten o' clock sometimes before they go to bed, and they go through every course on the menu instead of just having milk and biscuits as children should."

"They seem to look quite healthy on it," said Hilary, laughing.

Miss Hetherington shook her head and uttered a cluck of disapproval.

"They'll pay for it later," she said with grim foreboding. "Their parents even let them drink wine."

Horror could go no further.

Mrs. Calvin Baker began making plans for the next day.

“I don’t think I shall go to the old city,” she said. “I did that very thoroughly last time. Most interesting and quite a labyrinth, if you know what I mean. So quaint and old world. If I hadn’t had the guide with me, I don’t think I should have found my way back to the hotel. You just kind of lose your sense of direction. But the guide was a very nice man and told me quite a lot of interesting things. He has a brother in the States—in Chicago, I think he said. Then when we’d finished with the town, he took me up to a kind of eating house or tearoom, right up on the hillside looking down over the old city—a marvellous view. I had to drink that dreadful mint tea, of course, which is really very nasty. And they wanted me to buy various things, some quite nice, but some just rubbish. One has to be very firm, I find.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Miss Hetherington.

She added rather wistfully, “And, of course, one can’t really spare the money for souvenirs. These money restrictions are so worrying.”

Seven

I

Hilary hoped to avoid having to see the old city of Fez in the depressing company of Miss Hetherington. Fortunately the latter was invited by Mrs. Baker to come with her on an expedition by car. Since Mrs. Baker made it clear that she was going to pay for the car, Miss Hetherington, whose travelling allowance was dwindling in an alarming manner, accepted with avidity. Hilary, after inquiry at the desk, was supplied with a guide, and set forth to see the city of Fez.

They started from the terrace, going down through the succession of terraced gardens until they reached an enormous door in the wall at the bottom. The guide produced a key of mammoth proportions, unlocked the door which swung slowly open, and motioned Hilary to pass through.

It was like stepping into another world. All about her were the walls of old Fez. Narrow winding streets, high walls, and occasionally, through a doorway, a glimpse of an interior or a courtyard, and moving all around her were laden donkeys, men with their burdens, boys, women veiled and unveiled, the whole busy secret life of this Moorish city. Wandering through the narrow streets she forgot everything else, her mission, the past tragedy of her life, even herself. She was all eyes and ears, living and walking in a dream world. The only annoyance was the guide who talked unceasingly, and urged her into various establishments into which she had no particular wish to go.

“You look, lady. This man have very nice things, very cheap, really old, really Moorish. He have gowns and silks. You like very nice beads?”

The eternal commerce of East selling to West went on, but it hardly disturbed the charm for Hilary. She soon lost all sense of place or direction. Here within this walled city she had little idea of whether she was walking

north or south or whether she were retracing her steps over the same streets through which she had already passed. She was quite exhausted when the guide made his final suggestion, which was evidently part of the routine.

“I take you very nice house, now, very superior. Friends of mine. You have mint tea there and they show you plenty lovely things.”

Hilary recognized the well-known gambit which Mrs. Calvin Baker had described. However, she was willing to see, or be taken to see, anything that was suggested. Tomorrow, she promised herself, she would come into the Old City alone and wander around without a guide chattering by her elbow. So she allowed herself to be guided through a gateway and up a winding path climbing up more or less outside the city walls. They arrived at last at a garden surrounding an attractive house built in native style.

Here in a big room with a fine view out over the city, she was urged to sit down at a small coffee table. In due course glasses of mint tea were brought. To Hilary who did not like sugar with her tea, it was somewhat of an ordeal to drink it. But by banishing the idea of tea from her mind, and merely thinking of it as a new kind of lemonade, she managed almost to enjoy it. She enjoyed, too, being shown rugs and beads and draperies, embroideries and various other things. She made one or two small purchases more out of good manners than for any other reason. The indefatigable guide then said:

“I have a car ready now and take you very nice short drive. One hour, not more, see very beautiful scenery and country. And then back to hotel.” He added, assuming a suitable discreet expression, “This girl here, she take you first to very nice ladies’ toilet.”

The girl who had served the tea was standing by them smiling, and said at once in careful English:

“Yes, yes, Madame. You come with me. We have very fine toilet, oh very fine. Just like the Ritz Hotel. Same as in New York or Chicago. You see!”

Smiling a little, Hilary followed the girl. The toilet hardly rose to the heights claimed for it, but it did at least have running water. There was a

washbasin and a small cracked mirror which had such distorting proportions that Hilary almost shrank back in alarm at the sight of her own face. When she had washed and dried her hands, which she did on her own handkerchief, not much caring for the appearance of the towel, she turned to leave.

In some way, however, the door of the toilet appeared to have stuck. She turned and rattled the handle unavailingly. It would not move. Hilary wondered whether it had been bolted or locked from the outside. She grew angry. What was the idea of shutting her in there? Then she noticed that there was another door in a corner of the room. Going to it she turned the handle. This time the door opened easily enough. She passed through.

She found herself in a small eastern-looking room with light that came only from slits high in the wall. Sitting there on a low divan, smoking, was the little Frenchman she had met in the train, M. Henri Laurier.

II

He did not rise to greet her. He merely said, and the timbre of his voice was slightly changed:

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Betterton.”

For a moment Hilary stood motionless. Astonishment held her in its grip. So this—was it! She pulled herself together. This is what you’ve been expecting. Act as you think she would act. She came forward and said eagerly:

“You have news for me? You can help me?”

He nodded, then said reproachfully:

“I found you, Madame, somewhat obtuse upon the train. Perhaps you are too well accustomed to talk of the weather.”

“The weather?” She stared at him, bewildered.

What had he said about weather on the train? Cold? Fog? Snow?

Snow. That was what Olive Betterton had whispered as she lay dying. And she had quoted a silly little jingle—what was it?

Snow, snow, beautiful snow,

You slip on a lump and over you go.

Hilary repeated it falteringly now.

“Exactly—why did you not respond with that immediately as ordered?”

“You don’t understand. I have been ill. I was in a plane crash and afterwards in hospital with concussion. It’s affected my memory in all sorts of ways. Everything long ago is clear enough, but there are terrible blanks—great gaps.” She let her hands rise to her head. She found it easy enough to go on with a real tremor in her voice. “You can’t understand how frightening that is. I keep feeling that I’ve forgotten important things—really important things. The more I try to get them back, the less they will come.”

“Yes,” said Laurier, “the aeroplane crash was unfortunate.” He spoke in a cold businesslike way. “It is going to be a question of whether you have the necessary stamina and courage to continue your journey.”

“Of course I’m going to continue my journey,” cried Hilary. “My husband—” her voice broke.

He smiled, but not a very pleasant smile. Faintly catlike.

“Your husband,” he said, “is, I understand, awaiting you with eagerness.”

Hilary’s voice broke.

“You have no idea,” she said, “no idea what it’s been like these months since he went away.”

“Do you think the British authorities came to a definite conclusion as to what you did or did not know?”

Hilary stretched out her hands with a wide gesture.

“How do I know—how can I tell? They seemed satisfied.”

“All the same . . .” He stopped.

“I think it quite possible,” said Hilary slowly, “that I have been followed here. I can’t pick out any one particular person but I have had the feeling ever since I left England that I am under observation.”

“Naturally,” said Laurier, coldly. “We expected no less.”

“I thought I ought to warn you.”

“My dear Mrs. Betterton, we are not children. We understand what we are doing.”

“I’m sorry,” said Hilary, humbly. “I’m afraid I’m very ignorant.”

“It does not matter if you are ignorant so long as you are obedient.”

“I shall be obedient,” said Hilary in a low voice.

“You were closely watched in England, I have no doubt, ever since the day of your husband’s departure. Nevertheless, the message came to you, did it not?”

“Yes,” said Hilary.

“Now,” said Laurier in a businesslike manner, “I will give you your instructions, Madame.”

“Please do.”

“From here you will proceed to Marrakesh the day after tomorrow. That is as you planned and in accordance with your reservations.”

“Yes.”

“The day after you arrive there you will receive a telegram from England. What it will say I do not know, but it will be sufficient for you to make plans immediately to return to England.”

“I am to return to England?”

“Please listen. I have not finished. You will book a seat on a plane leaving Casablanca the following day.”

“Supposing I cannot get reservations—supposing the seats are all booked?”

“They will not be all booked. Everything is arranged for. Now, you understand your instructions?”

“I understand.”

“Then please return to where your guide is waiting. You have been long enough in this ladies’ toilet. By the way, you have become friendly with an American woman and an Englishwoman who are now staying at the Palais Djamai?”

“Yes. Has that been a mistake? It has been difficult to avoid.”

“Not at all. It suits our plans admirably. If you can persuade one or other of them to accompany you to Marrakesh, so much the better. Goodbye, Madame.”

“Au revoir, Monsieur.”

“It is unlikely,” Monsieur Laurier told her with a complete lack of interest, “that I shall meet you again.”

Hilary retraced her steps to the ladies’ toilet. This time she found the other door unfastened. A few minutes later she had rejoined the guide in the tearoom.

“I got very nice car waiting,” said the guide. “I take you now for very pleasant instructive drive.”

The expedition proceeded according to plan.

III

“So you’re leaving for Marrakesh tomorrow,” said Miss Hetherington. “You haven’t made a very long stay in Fez, have you? Wouldn’t it have been much easier to go to Marrakesh first and then to Fez, returning to Casablanca afterwards?”

“I suppose it would really,” said Hilary, “but reservations are rather difficult to obtain. It’s pretty crowded here.”

“Not with English people,” said Miss Hetherington, rather disconsolately. “It really seems dreadful nowadays the way one meets hardly any of one’s fellow-countrymen.” She looked round her disparagingly and said, “It’s the French.”

Hilary smiled faintly. The fact that Morocco was a French colonial possession did not seem to count much with Miss Hetherington. Hotels anywhere abroad she regarded as the prerogative of the English travelling public.

“The French and the Germans and the Armenians and the Greeks,” said Mrs. Calvin Baker, with a little cackle of laughter. “That scruffy little old man is a Greek, I believe.”

“I was told he was,” said Hilary.

“Seems a person of importance,” said Mrs. Baker. “You just notice how the waiters fly about for him.”

“They give the English hardly any attention nowadays,” said Miss Hetherington, gloomily. “They always give them the most terrible back bedrooms—the ones maids and valets used to have in the old days.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve found any fault with the accommodation I’ve had since I came to Morocco,” said Mrs. Calvin Baker. “I’ve managed to get a most comfortable room and bath every time.”

“You’re an American,” said Miss Hetherington, sharply, and with some venom in her voice. She clicked her knitting needles furiously.

“I wish I could persuade you two to come to Marrakesh with me,” said Hilary. “It’s been so pleasant meeting you and talking to you here. Really, it’s very lonely travelling all by oneself.”

“I’ve been to Marrakesh,” said Miss Hetherington in a shocked voice.

Mrs. Calvin Baker, however, appeared to be somewhat sold on the idea.

“Well, it certainly is an idea,” she said. “It’s over a month since I was in Marrakesh. I’d be quite happy to go there again for a spell, and I could show you round, too, Mrs. Betterton, and prevent you being imposed upon. It’s not until you’ve been to a place and looked right round it that you learn the strings. I wonder now. I’ll go right to the office and see what I can fix up.”

Miss Hetherington said acidly, when she had departed:

“That’s exactly like these American women. Rushing from place to place, never settling down anywhere. Egypt one day, Palestine the next. Sometimes I really don’t think they know what country they’re in.”

She shut her lips with a snap, and rising and gathering up her knitting carefully she left the Turkish room with a little nod to Hilary as she went. Hilary glanced down at her watch. She felt inclined not to change this evening for dinner, as she usually did. She sat on there alone in the low, rather dark room with its oriental hangings. A waiter looked in, then went away after turning on two lamps. They did not give out very much light and the room seemed pleasantly dim. It had an Eastern sort of serenity. Hilary sat back on the low divan, thinking of the future.

Only yesterday she had been wondering if the whole business upon which she had been engaged was a mare’s nest. And now—now she was on the point of starting on her real journey. She must be careful, very careful. She must make no slip. She must be Olive Betterton, moderately well-educated,

inartistic, conventional but with definite Left Wing sympathies, and a woman who was devoted to her husband.

“I must make no mistake,” said Hilary to herself, under her breath.

How strange it felt to be sitting here alone in Morocco. She felt as though she had got into a land of mystery and enchantment. That dim lamp beside her! If she were to take the carved brass between her hands and rub, would a Djinn of the Lamp appear? As the thought came to her, she started. Materializing quite suddenly from beyond the lamp, she saw the small wrinkled face and pointed beard of Mr. Aristides. He bowed politely before sitting down beside her, saying:

“You permit, Madame?” Hilary responded politely.

Taking out his cigarette case he offered her a cigarette. She accepted and he lit one himself also.

“It pleases you, this country, Madame?” he asked, after a moment or two.

“I have been here only a very short time,” said Hilary. “I find it so far quite enchanting.”

“Ah. And you have been into the old city? You liked it?”

“I think it is wonderful.”

“Yes, it is wonderful. It is the past there—the past of commerce, of intrigue, of whispering voices, shuttered activities, all the mystery and passion of a city enclosed in its narrow streets and walls. Do you know what I think of, Madame, when I walk through the streets of Fez?”

“No?”

“I think of your Great West Road in London. I think of your great factory buildings on each side of the road. I think of those buildings lit throughout with their neon lighting and the people inside, that you see so clearly from the road as you drive along in your car. There is nothing hidden, there is nothing mysterious. There are not even curtains to the windows. No, they

do their work there with the whole world observing them if it wants to do so. It is like slicing off the top of an anthill.”

“You mean,” said Hilary, interested, “that it is the contrast that interests you?”

Mr. Aristides nodded his elderly, tortoise-like head.

“Yes,” he said. “There everything is in the open and in the old streets of Fez nothing is à jour. Everything is hidden, dark . . . But—” he leant forward and tapped a finger on the little brass coffee table “—but the same things go on. The same cruelties, the same oppressions, the same wish for power, the same bargaining and haggling.”

“You think that human nature is the same everywhere?” Hilary asked.

“In every country. In the past as in the present there are always the two things that rule. Cruelty and benevolence! One or the other. Sometimes both.” He continued with hardly a change of manner. “They have told me, Madame, that you were in a very bad aeroplane accident the other day at Casablanca?”

“Yes, that is true.”

“I envy you,” Mr. Aristides said unexpectedly.

Hilary looked at him in an astonished manner. Again he wagged his head in vehement assertion.

“Yes,” he added, “you are to be envied. You have had an experience. I should like the experience of having come so near to death. To have that, yet survive—do you not feel yourself different since then, Madame?”

“In a rather unfortunate way,” said Hilary. “I had concussion and that gives me very bad headaches, and it also affects my memory.”

“Those are mere inconveniences,” said Mr. Aristides, with a wave of the hand, “but it is an adventure of the spirit you have passed through, is it not?”

“It is true,” said Hilary slowly, “that I have passed through an adventure of the spirit.”

She was thinking of a bottle of Vichy water and a little heap of sleeping pills.

“I have never had that experience,” said Mr. Aristides, in his dissatisfied voice. “So many other things, but not that.” He rose, bowed, said “Mes hommages, Madame,” and left her.

Eight

How alike, Hilary thought to herself, all airports were! They had a strange anonymity about them. They were all at some distance from the town or city they served, and in consequence you had a queer, stateless feeling of existing nowhere. You could fly from London to Madrid, to Rome, to Istanbul, to Cairo, to anywhere you liked, and if your journey was a through one by air, you would never have the faintest idea of what any of these cities looked like! If you caught a glimpse of them from the air, they were only a kind of glorified map, something built with a child's box of bricks.

And why, she thought vexedly, looking round her, does one always have to be at these places so much too early?

They had spent nearly half an hour in the waiting room. Mrs. Calvin Baker, who had decided to accompany Hilary to Marrakesh, had been talking non-stop ever since their arrival. Hilary had answered almost mechanically. But now she realized that the flow had been diverted. Mrs. Baker had now switched her attention to two other travellers who were sitting near her. They were both tall, fair young men. One an American with a broad, friendly grin, the other a rather solemn-looking Dane or Norwegian. The Dane talked heavily, slowly, and rather pedantically in careful English. The American was clearly delighted to find another American traveller. Presently, in conscientious fashion, Mrs. Calvin Baker turned to Hilary.

“Mr.—? I'd like to have you know my friend, Mrs. Betterton.”

“Andrew Peters—Andy to my friends.”

The other young man rose to his feet, bowed rather stiffly and said, “Torquil Ericsson.”

“So now we're all acquainted,” said Mrs. Baker happily. “Are we all going to Marrakesh? It's my friend's first visit there—”

“I, too,” said Ericsson. “I, too, for the first time go.”

“That goes for me, too,” said Peters.

The loudspeaker was suddenly switched on and a hoarse announcement in French was made. The words were barely distinguishable but it appeared to be their summons to the plane.

There were four passengers besides Mrs. Baker and Hilary. Besides Peters and Ericsson, there was a thin, tall Frenchman, and a severe-looking nun.

It was a clear, sunny day and flying conditions were good. Leaning back in her seat with half-closed eyes, Hilary studied her fellow-passengers, seeking to distract herself that way from the anxious questionings which were going on in her mind.

One seat ahead of her, on the other side of the aisle, Mrs. Calvin Baker in her grey travelling costume looked like a plump and contented duck. A small hat with wings was perched on her blue hair and she was turning the pages of a glossy magazine. Occasionally she leaned forward to tap the shoulder of the man sitting in front of her, who was the cheerful-looking fair young American, Peters. When she did so he turned round, displaying his good-humoured grin, and responding energetically to her remarks. How very good-natured and friendly Americans were, Hilary thought to herself. So different from the stiff travelling English. She could not imagine Miss Hetherington, for instance, falling into easy conversation with a young man even of her own nation on a plane, and she doubted if the latter would have responded as good-naturedly as this young American was doing.

Across the aisle from her was the Norwegian, Ericsson.

As she caught his eye, he made her a stiff little bow and leaning across offered her his magazine, which he was just closing. She thanked him and took it. In the seat behind him was the thin, dark Frenchman. His legs were stretched out and he seemed to be asleep.

Hilary turned her head over her shoulder. The severe-faced nun was sitting behind her, and the nun's eyes, impersonal, incurious, met Hilary's with no

expression in them. She sat immovable, her hands clasped. It seemed to Hilary an odd trick of time that a woman in traditional medieval costume should be travelling by air in the twentieth century.

Six people, thought Hilary, travelling together for a few hours, travelling to different places with different aims, scattering perhaps at the end of that few hours and never meeting again. She had read a novel which had hinged on a similar theme and where the lives of those six people were followed up. The Frenchman, she thought, must be on holiday. He seemed so tired. The young American was perhaps a student of some kind. Ericsson was perhaps going to take up a job. The nun was doubtless bound for her convent.

Hilary closed her eyes and forgot her fellow travellers. She puzzled, as she had done all last night, over the instructions that had been given her. She was to return to England! It seemed crazy! Or could it be that in some way she had been found wanting, was not trusted: had failed to supply certain words or credentials that the real Olive would have supplied. She sighed and moved restlessly. "Well," she thought, "I can do no more than I am doing. If I've failed—I've failed. At any rate, I've done my best."

Then another thought struck her. Henri Laurier had accepted it as natural and inevitable that a close watch was being kept upon her in Morocco—was this a means of disarming suspicion? With the abrupt return of Mrs. Betterton to England it would surely be assumed that she had not come to Morocco in order to "disappear" like her husband. Suspicion would relax—she would be regarded as a bona fide traveller.

She would leave for England, going by Air France via Paris—and perhaps in Paris—

Yes, of course—in Paris. In Paris where Tom Betterton had disappeared. How much easier to stage a disappearance there. Perhaps Tom Betterton had never left Paris. Perhaps—tired of profitless speculation Hilary went to sleep. She woke—dozed again, occasionally glancing without interest at the magazine she held. Awakening suddenly from a deeper sleep she noticed that the plane was rapidly losing height and circling round. She glanced at her watch, but it was still some time earlier than the estimated time of

arrival. Moreover, looking down through the window, she could not see any signs of an aerodrome beneath.

For a moment a faint qualm of apprehension struck her. The thin, dark Frenchman rose, yawned, stretched his arms and looked out and said something in French which she did not catch. But Ericsson leant across the aisle and said:

“We are coming down here, it seems—but why?”

Mrs. Calvin Baker, leaning out of her seat, turned her head and nodded brightly as Hilary said:

“We seem to be landing.”

The plane swooped round in ever lower circles. The country beneath them seemed to be practically desert. There were no signs of houses or villages. The wheels touched with a decided bump, bouncing along and taxiing until they finally stopped. It had been a somewhat rough landing, but it was a landing in the middle of nowhere.

Had something gone wrong with the engine, Hilary wondered, or had they run out of petrol? The pilot, a dark-skinned, handsome young man, came through the forward door and along the plane.

“If you please,” he said, “you will all get out.” He opened the rear door, let down a short ladder and stood there waiting for them all to pass out. They stood in a little group on the ground, shivering a little. It was chilly here, with the wind blowing sharply from the mountains in the distance. The mountains, Hilary noticed, were covered with snow and singularly beautiful. The air was crisply cold and intoxicating. The pilot descended too, and addressed them, speaking French:

“You are all here? Yes? Excuse, please, you will have to wait a little minute, perhaps. Ah, no, I see it is arriving.”

He pointed to where a small dot on the horizon was gradually growing nearer. Hilary said in a slightly bewildered voice:

“But why have we come down here? What is the matter? How long shall we have to be here?”

The French traveller said:

“There is, I understand, a station wagon arriving. We shall go on in that.”

“Did the engine fail?” asked Hilary.

Andy Peters smiled cheerfully.

“Why no, I shouldn’t say so,” he said, “the engine sounded all right to me. However, they’ll fix up something of that kind, no doubt.”

She stared, puzzled. Mrs. Calvin Baker murmured:

“My, but it’s chilly, standing about here. That’s the worst of this climate. It seems so sunny but it’s cold the moment you get near sunset.”

The pilot was murmuring under his breath, swearing, Hilary thought. He was saying something like:

“Toujours des retards insupportables.”

The station wagon came towards them at a breakneck pace. The Berber driver drew up with a grinding of brakes. He sprang down and was immediately engaged by the pilot in angry conversation. Rather to Hilary’s surprise, Mrs. Baker intervened in the dispute—speaking in French.

“Don’t waste time,” she said peremptorily. “What’s the good of arguing? We want to get out of here.”

The driver shrugged his shoulders and, going to the station wagon, he unhitched the back part of it which let down. Inside was a large packing case. Together with the pilot and with help from Ericsson and Peters, they got it down on to the ground. From the effort it took, it seemed to be heavy. Mrs. Calvin Baker put her hand on Hilary’s arm and said, as the man began to raise the lid of the case:

“I shouldn’t watch, my dear. It’s never a pretty sight.”

She led Hilary a little way away, on the other side of the wagon. The Frenchman and Peters came with them. The Frenchman said in his own language:

“What is it then, this manoeuvre there that they do?”

Mrs. Baker said:

“You are Dr. Barron?”

The Frenchman bowed.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Mrs. Baker. She stretched out her hand, rather like a hostess welcoming him to a party. Hilary said in a bewildered tone:

“But I don’t understand. What is in that case? Why is it better not to look?”

Andy Peters looked down on her consideringly. He had a nice face, Hilary thought. Something square and dependable about it. He said:

“I know what it is. The pilot told me. It’s not very pretty perhaps, but I guess it’s necessary.” He added quietly, “There are bodies in there.”

“Bodies!” She stared at him.

“Oh, they haven’t been murdered or anything,” he grinned reassuringly. “They were obtained in a perfectly legitimate way for research—medical research, you know.”

But Hilary still stared. “I don’t understand.”

“Ah. You see, Mrs. Betterton, this is where the journey ends. One journey, that is.”

“Ends?”

“Yes. They’ll arrange the bodies in that plane and then the pilot will fix things and presently, as we’re driving away from here, we shall see in the distance the flames going up in the air. Another plane that has crashed and come down in flames, and no survivors!”

“But why? How fantastic!”

“But surely—” It was Dr. Barron now who spoke to her. “But surely you know where we are going?”

Mrs. Baker, drawing near, said cheerfully:

“Of course she knows. But maybe she didn’t expect it quite so soon.”

Hilary said, after a short bewildered pause:

“But you mean—all of us?” She looked round.

“We’re fellow travellers,” said Peters gently.

The young Norwegian, nodding his head, said with an almost fanatical enthusiasm:

“Yes, we are all fellow travellers.”

Nine

I

The pilot came up to them.

“You will start now, please,” he said. “As soon as possible. There is much to be done, and we are late on schedule.”

Hilary recoiled for a moment. She put her hand nervously to her throat. The pearl choker she was wearing broke under the strain of her fingers. She picked up the loose pearls and crammed them into her pocket.

They all got into the station wagon. Hilary was on a long bench crowded up with Peters one side of her and Mrs. Baker the other. Turning her head towards the American woman, Hilary said:

“So you—so you—are what you might call the liaison officer, Mrs. Baker?”

“That hits it off exactly. And though I say it myself, I’m well qualified. Nobody is surprised to find an American woman getting around and travelling a lot.”

She was still plump and smiling, but Hilary sensed, or thought she sensed, a difference. The slight fatuity and surface conventionality had gone. This was an efficient, probably ruthless woman.

“It will make a fine sensation in the headlines,” said Mrs. Baker. She laughed with some enjoyment. “You, I mean, my dear. Persistently dogged by ill-luck, they’ll say. First nearly losing your life in the crash at Casablanca, then being killed in this further disaster.”

Hilary realized suddenly the cleverness of the plan.

“These others?” she murmured. “Are they who they say they are?”

“Why yes. Dr. Barron is a bacteriologist, I believe. Mr. Ericsson a very brilliant young physicist, Mr. Peters is a research chemist, Miss Needheim, of course, isn’t a nun, she’s an endocrinologist. Me, as I say, I’m only the liaison officer. I don’t belong in this scientific bunch.” She laughed again as she said, “That Hetherington woman never had a chance.”

“Miss Hetherington—was she—was she—”

Mrs. Baker nodded emphatically.

“If you ask me, she’s been tailing you. Took over in Casablanca from whoever followed you out.”

“But she didn’t come with us today although I urged her to?”

“That wouldn’t have been in character,” said Mrs. Baker. “It would have looked a little too obvious to go back again to Marrakesh after having been there already. No, she’ll have sent a telegram or a phone message through and there’ll be someone waiting at Marrakesh to pick you up when you arrive. When you arrive! That’s a good laugh, isn’t it? Look! Look there now! Up she goes.”

They had been driving rapidly away across the desert, and now as Hilary craned forward to look through the little window, she saw a great glow behind them. A faint sound of an explosion came to her ears. Peters threw his head back and laughed. He said:

“Six people die when plane to Marrakesh crashes!”

Hilary said almost under her breath:

“It’s—it’s rather frightening.”

“Stepping off into the unknown?” It was Peters who spoke. He was serious enough now. “Yes, but it’s the only way. We’re leaving the Past and stepping out towards the Future.” His face lit up with sudden enthusiasm. “We’ve got to get quit of all the bad, mad old stuff. Corrupt governments

and the warmongers. We've got to go into the new world—the world of science, clean away from the scum and the driftwood.”

Hilary drew a deep breath.

“That’s like the things my husband used to say,” she said, deliberately.

“Your husband?” he shot her a quick glance. “Why, was he Tom Betterton?”

Hilary nodded.

“Well, that’s great. I never knew him out in the States, though I nearly met him more than once. ZE Fission is one of the most brilliant discoveries of this age—yes, I certainly take my hat off to him. Worked with old Mannheim, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Hilary.

“Didn’t they tell me he’d married Mannheim’s daughter. But surely you’re not—”

“I’m his second wife,” said Hilary, flushing a little. “He—his—Elsa died in America.”

“I remember. Then he went to Britain to work there. Then he riled them by disappearing.” He laughed suddenly. “Walked slap out of some Paris conference into nowhere.” He added, as though in further appreciation, “Lord, you can’t say They don’t organize well.”

Hilary agreed with him. The excellence of their organization was sending a cold pang of apprehension through her. All the plans, codes, signs that had been so elaborately arranged were going to be useless now, for now there would be no trail to pick up. Things had been so arranged that everyone on the fatal plane had been fellow-travellers bound for the Unknown Destination where Thomas Betterton had gone before them. There would be no trace left. Nothing, but a burnt-out plane. There would even be charred bodies in the plane. Could they—was it possible that Jessop and his

organization could guess that she, Hilary, was not one of those charred bodies? She doubted it. The accident had been so convincing, so clever.

Peters spoke again. His voice was boyish with enthusiasm. For him there were no qualms, no looking back, only eagerness to go forward.

“I wonder,” he said, “where do we go from here?”

Hilary, too, wondered, because again much depended on that. Sooner or later there must be contacts with humanity. Sooner or later, if investigation was made, the fact that a station wagon with six people in it resembling the description of those who had left that morning by plane might possibly be noted by someone. She turned to Mrs. Baker and asked, trying to make her tone the counterpart of the childish eagerness of the young American beside her.

“Where are we going—what happens next?”

“You’ll see,” said Mrs. Baker, and for all the pleasantness of her voice, there was something somehow ominous in those words.

They drove on. Behind them the flare of the plane still showed in the sky, showed all the more clearly because the sun was now dropping below the horizon. Night fell. Still they drove. The going was bad, since they were obviously not on any main road. Sometimes they seemed to be on field tracks, at other times they drove over open country.

For a long time Hilary remained awake, thoughts and apprehensions turning round in her head excitedly. But at last, shaken and tossed from side to side, exhaustion had its way and she fell asleep. It was a broken sleep. Various ruts and jars in the road awoke her. For a moment or two she would wonder confusedly where she was, then reality would come back to her. She would remain awake for a few moments, her thoughts racing round in confused apprehension, then once more her head would drop forward and nod, and once again she would sleep.

She was awakened suddenly by the car coming to an abrupt stop. Very gently Peters shook her by the arm.

“Wake up,” he said, “we seem to have arrived somewhere.”

Everyone got out of the station wagon. They were all cramped and weary. It was still dark and they seemed to have drawn up outside a house surrounded by palm trees. Some distance away they could see a few dim lights as though there were a village there. Guided by a lantern they were ushered into the house. It was a native house with a couple of giggling Berber women who stared curiously at Hilary and Mrs. Calvin Baker. They took no interest in the nun.

The three women were taken to a small upstairs room. There were three mattresses on the floor and some heaps of coverings, but no other furniture.

“I’ll say I’m stiff,” said Mrs. Baker. “Gets you kind of cramped, riding along the way we’ve been doing.”

“Discomfort does not matter,” said the nun.

She spoke with a harsh, guttural assurance. Her English, Hilary found, was good and fluent, though her accent was bad.

“You’re living up to your part, Miss Needheim,” said the American woman. “I can just see you in the convent, kneeling on the hard stones at four in the morning.”

Miss Needheim smiled contemptuously.

“Christianity has made fools of women,” she said. “Such a worship of weakness, such snivelling humiliation! Pagan women had strength. They rejoiced and conquered! And in order to conquer, no discomfort is unbearable. Nothing is too much to suffer.”

“Right now,” said Mrs. Baker, yawning, “I wish I was in my bed at the Palais Djamai at Fez. What about you, Mrs. Betterton? That shaking hasn’t done your concussion any good, I’ll bet.”

“No, it hasn’t,” Hilary said.

“They’ll bring us something to eat presently, and then I’ll fix you up with some aspirin and you’d better get to sleep as fast as you can.”

Steps were heard coming up the stairs outside and giggling female voices. Presently the two Berber women came into the room. They carried a tray with a big dish of semolina and meat stew. They put it down on the floor, came back again with a metal basin with water in it and a towel. One of them felt Hilary’s coat, passing the stuff between her fingers and speaking to the other woman who nodded her head in rapid agreement, and did the same to Mrs. Baker. Neither of them paid any attention to the nun.

“Shoo,” said Mrs. Baker, waving them away. “Shoo, shoo.”

It was exactly like shooing chickens. The women retreated, still laughing, and left the room.

“Silly creatures,” said Mrs. Baker, “it’s hard to have patience with them. I suppose babies and clothes are their only interest in life.”

“It is all they are fit for,” said Fräulein Needheim. “They belong to a slave race. They are useful to serve their betters, but no more.”

“Aren’t you a little harsh?” said Hilary, irritated by the woman’s attitude.

“I have no patience with sentimentality. There are those that rule, the few; and there are the many that serve.”

“But surely. . . .”

Mrs. Baker broke in in an authoritative manner.

“We’ve all got our own ideas on these subjects, I guess,” she said, “and very interesting they are. But this is hardly the time for them. We’ll want to get what rest we can.”

Mint tea arrived. Hilary swallowed some aspirin willingly enough, since her headache was quite a genuine one. Then the three women lay down on the

couches and fell asleep.

They slept late into the following day. They were not to go on again until the evening, so Mrs. Baker informed them. From the room in which they had slept, there was an outside staircase leading on to a flat roof where they had a certain amount of view over the surrounding country. A little distance away was a village, but here, where they were, the house was isolated in a large palm garden. On awakening, Mrs. Baker had indicated three heaps of clothing which had been brought and laid down just inside the door.

“We’re going native for the next lap,” she explained, “we leave our other clothes here.”

So the smart little American woman’s neat suiting and Hilary’s tweed coat and skirt and the nun’s habit were all laid aside and three native Moroccan women sat on the roof of the house and chatted together. The whole thing had a curiously unreal feeling.

Hilary studied Miss Needheim more closely now that she had left the anonymity of her nun’s habit. She was a younger woman than Hilary had thought her, not more, perhaps, than thirty-three or thirty-four. There was a neat spruceness in her appearance. The pale skin, the short stubby fingers, and the cold eyes in which burned from time to time the gleam of the fanatic, repelled rather than attracted. Her speech was brusque and uncompromising. Towards both Mrs. Baker and Hilary she displayed a certain amount of contempt as towards people unworthy to associate with her. This arrogance Hilary found very irritating. Mrs. Baker, on the other hand, seemed hardly to notice it. In a queer way Hilary felt far nearer and more in sympathy with the two giggling Berber women who brought them food, than with her two companions of the Western world. The young German woman was obviously indifferent to the impression she created. There was a certain concealed impatience in her manner, and it was obvious that she was longing to get on with her journey and that she had no interest in her two companions.

Appraising Mrs. Baker’s attitude Hilary found more difficult. At first Mrs. Baker seemed a natural and normal person after the inhumanity of the German woman specialist. But as the sun sank lower in the sky she felt

almost more intrigued and repelled by Mrs. Baker than by Helga Needheim. Mrs. Baker's social manner was almost robotlike in its perfection. All her comments and remarks were natural, normal, everyday currency, but one had a suspicion that the whole thing was like an actor playing a part for perhaps the seven hundredth time. It was an automatic performance, completely divorced from what Mrs. Baker might really have been thinking or feeling. Who was Mrs. Calvin Baker, Hilary wondered? Why had she come to play her part with such machinelike perfection? Was she, too, a fanatic? Had she dreams of a brave new world—was she in violent revolt against the capitalist system? Had she given up all normal life because of her political beliefs and aspirations? Impossible to tell.

They resumed their journey that evening. It was no longer the station wagon. This time it was an open touring car. Everyone was in native dress, the men with white djellabas round them, the women with their faces hidden. Packed tightly in, they started off once more, driving all through the night.

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Betterton?”

Hilary smiled up at Andy Peters. The sun had just risen and they had stopped for breakfast. Native bread, eggs, and tea made over a Primus.

“I feel as though I were taking part in a dream,” said Hilary.

“Yes, it has rather that quality.”

“Where are we?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Who knows? Our Mrs. Calvin Baker, no doubt, but no other.”

“It's a very lonely country.”

“Yes, practically desert. But then it would have to be, wouldn't it?”

“You mean so as to leave no trace?”

“Yes. One realizes, doesn’t one, that the whole thing must be very carefully thought out. Each stage of our journey is, as it were, quite independent of the other. A plane goes up in flames. An old station wagon drives through the night. If anyone notices it, it has on it a plate stating that it belongs to a certain archæological expedition that is excavating in these parts. The following day there is a touring car full of Berbers, one of the commonest sights to be seen on the road. For the next stage”—he shrugged his shoulders—“who knows?”

“But where are we going?”

Andy Peters shook his head.

“No use to ask. We shall find out.”

The Frenchman, Dr. Barron, had joined them.

“Yes,” he said, “we shall find out. But how true it is that we cannot but ask? That is our western blood. We can never say ‘sufficient for the day.’ It is always tomorrow, tomorrow with us. To leave yesterday behind, to proceed to tomorrow. That is what we demand.”

“You want to hurry the world on, Doctor, is that it?” asked Peters.

“There is so much to achieve,” said Dr. Barron, “life is too short. One must have more time. More time, more time.” He flung out his hands in a passionate gesture.

Peters turned to Hilary.

“What are the four freedoms you talk about in your country? Freedom from want, freedom from fear. . . .”

The Frenchman interrupted. “Freedom from fools,” he said bitterly. “That is what I want! That is what my work needs. Freedom from incessant, pettifogging economics! Freedom from all the nagging restrictions that hamper one’s work!”

“You are a bacteriologist, are you not, Dr. Barron?”

“Yes, I am a bacteriologist. Ah, you have no idea, my friend, what a fascinating study that is! But it needs patience, infinite patience, repeated experiment—and money—much money! One must have equipment, assistants, raw materials! Given that you have all you ask for, what can one not achieve?”

“Happiness?” asked Hilary.

He flashed her a quick smile, suddenly human again.

“Ah, you are a woman, Madame. It is women who ask always for happiness.”

“And seldom get it?” asked Hilary.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“That may be.”

“Individual happiness does not matter,” said Peters seriously; “there must be the happiness of all, the brotherhood of the spirit! The workers, free and united, owning the means of production, free of the warmongers, of the greedy, insatiable men who keep everything in their own hands. Science is for all, and must not be held jealously by one power or the other.”

“So!” said Ericsson appreciatively, “you are right. The scientists must be masters. They must control and rule. They and they alone are the Supermen. It is only the Supermen who matter. The slaves must be well treated, but they are slaves.”

Hilary walked a little way away from the group. After a minute or two Peters followed her.

“You look just a little scared,” he said humorously.

“I think I am.” She gave a short, breathless laugh. “Of course what Dr. Barron said was quite true. I’m only a woman. I’m not a scientist, I don’t do research or surgery, or bacteriology. I haven’t, I suppose, much mental

ability. I'm looking, as Dr. Barron said, for happiness—just like any other fool of a woman.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” said Peters.

“Well, maybe I feel a little out of my depth in this company. You see, I’m just a woman who’s going to join her husband.”

“Good enough,” said Peters. “You represent the fundamental.”

“It’s nice of you to put it that way.”

“Well, it’s true.” He added in a lower voice, “You care for your husband very much?”

“Would I be here if I didn’t?”

“I suppose not. You share his views? I take it that he’s a communist?”

Hilary avoided giving a direct answer.

“Talking of being a communist,” she said, “has something about our little group struck you as curious?”

“What’s that?”

“Well, that although we’re all bound for the same destination, the views of our fellow travellers don’t seem really alike.”

Peters said thoughtfully:

“Why, no. You’ve got something there. I hadn’t thought of it quite that way—but I believe you’re right.”

“I don’t think,” said Hilary, “that Dr. Barron is politically minded at all! He wants money for his experiments. Helga Needheim talks like a fascist, not a communist. And Ericsson—”

“What about Ericsson?”

“I find him frightening—he’s got a dangerous kind of single-mindedness. He’s like a mad scientist in a film!”

“And I believe in the Brotherhood of Men, and you’re a loving wife, and our Mrs. Calvin Baker—where would you place her?”

“I don’t know. I find her more hard to place than anyone.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’d say she was easy enough.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’d say it was money all the way with her. She’s just a well-paid cog in the wheel.”

“She frightens me, too,” said Hilary.

“Why? Why on earth does she frighten you? No touch of the mad scientist about her.”

“She frightens me because she’s so ordinary. You know, just like anybody else. And yet she’s mixed up in all this.”

Peters said grimly:

“The Party is realistic, you know. It employs the best man or woman for the job.”

“But is someone who only wants money the best person for the job? Mightn’t they desert to the other side?”

“That would be a very big risk to take,” said Peters, quietly. “Mrs. Calvin Baker’s a shrewd woman. I don’t think she’d take that risk.”

Hilary shivered suddenly.

“Cold?”

“Yes. It’s a bit cold.”

“Let’s move around a little.”

They walked up and down. As they did so Peters stooped and picked up something.

“Here. You’re dropping things.”

Hilary took it from him.

“Oh, yes, it’s a pearl from my choker. I broke it the other day—no, yesterday. What ages ago that seems already.”

“Not real pearls, I hope.”

Hilary smiled.

“No, of course not. Costume jewellery.”

Peters took a cigarette case from his pocket.

“Costume jewellery,” he said; “what a term!”

He offered her a cigarette.

“It does sound foolish—here.” She took a cigarette. “What an odd cigarette case. How heavy it is.”

“Made of lead, that’s why. It’s a war souvenir—made out of a bit of a bomb that just failed to blow me up.”

“You were—in the war then?”

“I was one of the backroom boys who tickled things to see if they’d go bang. Don’t let’s talk about wars. Let’s concentrate on tomorrow.”

“Where are we going?” asked Hilary. “Nobody’s told me anything. Are we —”

He stopped her.

“Speculations,” he said, “are not encouraged. You go where you’re told and do what you’re told.”

With sudden passion Hilary said:

“Do you like being dragooned, being ordered about, having no say of your own?”

“I’m prepared to accept it if it’s necessary. And it is necessary. We’ve got to have World Peace, World Discipline, World Order.”

“Is it possible? Can it be got?”

“Anything’s better than the muddle we live in. Don’t you agree to that?”

For a moment, carried away by fatigue, by the loneliness of her surroundings and the strange beauty of the early morning light, Hilary nearly burst out into a passionate denial.

She wanted to say:

“Why do you decry the world we live in? There are good people in it. Isn’t muddle a better breeding ground for kindness and individuality than a world order that’s imposed, a world order that may be right today and wrong tomorrow? I would rather have a world of kindly, faulty, human beings, than a world of superior robots who’ve said goodbye to pity and understanding and sympathy.”

But she restrained herself in time. She said instead, with a deliberate subdued enthusiasm:

“How right you are. I was tired. We must obey and go forward.”

He grinned.

“That’s better.”

Ten

A dream journey. So it seemed; more so every day. It was as though, Hilary felt, she had been travelling all her life with these five strangely assorted companions. They had stepped off from the beaten track into the void. In one sense this journey of theirs could not be called a flight. They were all, she supposed, free agents; free, that is, to go where they chose. As far as she knew they had committed no crime, they were not wanted by the police. Yet great pains had been taken to hide their tracks. Sometimes she wondered why this was, since they were not fugitives. It was as though they were in process of becoming not themselves but someone else.

That indeed was literally true in her case. She who had left England as Hilary Craven had become Olive Betterton, and perhaps her strange feeling of unreality had something to do with that. Every day the glib political slogans seemed to come more easily to her lips. She felt herself becoming earnest and intense, and that again she put down to the influence of her companions.

She knew now that she was afraid of them. She had never before spent any time in close intimacy with people of genius. This was genius at close quarters, and genius had that something above the normal in it that was a great strain upon the ordinary mind and feeling. All five were different from each other, yet each had that curious quality of burning intensity, the single-mindedness of purpose that made such a terrifying impression. She did not know whether it were a quality of brain or rather a quality of outlook, of intensity. But each of them, she thought, was in his or her way a passionate idealist. To Dr. Barron life was a passionate desire to be once more in his laboratory, to be able to calculate and experiment and work with unlimited money and unlimited resources. To work for what? She doubted if he ever put that question to himself. He spoke to her once of the powers of destruction that he could let loose on a vast continent, which could be contained in one little phial. She had said to him:

“But could you ever do that? Actually really do it?”

And he replied, looking at her with faint surprise:

“Yes. Yes, of course, if it became necessary.”

He had said it in a merely perfunctory fashion. He had gone on:

“It would be amazingly interesting to see the exact course, the exact progress.” And he had added with a deep half sigh, “You see, there’s so much more to know, so much more to find out.”

For a moment Hilary understood. For a moment she stood where he stood, impregnated with that single-hearted desire for knowledge which swept aside life and death for millions of human beings as essentially unimportant. It was a point of view and, in a way, a not ignoble one. Towards Helga Needheim she felt more antagonistic. The young woman’s superb arrogance revolted her. Peters she liked but was from time to time repulsed and frightened by the sudden fanatical gleam in his eye. She said to him once:

“It is not a new world you want to create. It is destroying the old one that you will enjoy.”

“You’re wrong, Olive. What a thing to say.”

“No, I’m not wrong. There’s hate in you. I can feel it. Hate. The wish to destroy.”

Ericsson she found the most puzzling of all. Ericsson, she thought, was a dreamer, less practical than the Frenchman, further removed from destructive passion than the American. He had the strange, fanatical idealism of the Norseman.

“We must conquer,” he said: “we must conquer the world. Then we can rule.”

“We?” she asked.

He nodded, his face strange and gentle with a deceptive mildness about the eyes.

“Yes,” he said, “we few who count. The brains. That is all that matters.”

Hilary thought, where are we going? Where is all this leading? These people are mad, but they’re not mad in the same way as each other. It’s as though they were all going towards different goals, different mirages. Yes, that was the word. Mirages. And from them she turned to a contemplation of Mrs. Calvin Baker. Here there was no fanaticism, no hate, no dream, no arrogance, no aspiration. There was nothing here that Hilary could find or take notice of. She was a woman, Hilary thought, without either heart or conscience. She was the efficient instrument in the hands of a big unknown force.

It was the end of the third day. They had come to a small town and alighted at a small native hotel. Here, Hilary found, they were to resume European clothing. She slept that night in a small, bare white-washed room, rather like a cell. At early dawn Mrs. Baker woke her.

“We’re going off right now,” said Mrs. Baker. “The plane’s waiting.”

“The plane?”

“Why yes, my dear. We’re returning to civilized travelling, thank the Lord.”

They came to the airfield and the plane after about an hour’s drive. It looked like a disused army airfield. The pilot was a Frenchman. They flew for some hours, their flight taking them over mountains. Looking down from the plane Hilary thought what a curious sameness the world has, seen from above. Mountains, valleys, roads, houses. Unless one was really an aerial expert all places looked alike. That in some the population was denser than in others, was about all that one could say. And half of the time one saw nothing owing to travelling over clouds.

In the early afternoon they began to lose height and circle down. They were in mountainous country still, but coming down in a flat plain. There was a well-marked aerodrome here and a white building beside it. They made a perfect landing.

Mrs. Baker led the way towards the building. Beside it were two powerful cars with chauffeurs standing by them. It was clearly a private aerodrome of some kind, since there appeared to be no official reception.

“Journey’s end,” said Mrs. Baker cheerfully. “We all go in and have a good wash and brush up. And then the cars will be ready.”

“Journey’s end?” Hilary stared at her. “But we’ve not—we haven’t crossed the sea at all.”

“Did you expect to?” Mrs. Baker seemed amused. Hilary said confusedly:

“Well, yes. Yes, I did. I thought . . .” She stopped.

Mrs. Baker nodded her head.

“Why, so do a lot of people. There’s a lot of nonsense talked about the Iron Curtain, but what I say is an iron curtain can be anywhere. People don’t think of that.”

Two Arab servants received them. After a wash and freshening up they sat down to coffee and sandwiches and biscuits.

Then Mrs. Baker glanced at her watch.

“Well, so long, folks,” she said. “This is where I leave you.”

“Are you going back to Morocco?” asked Hilary, surprised.

“That wouldn’t quite do,” said Mrs. Calvin Baker, “with me being supposed to be burnt up in a plane accident! No, I shall be on a different run this time.”

“But someone might still recognize you,” said Hilary. “Someone, I mean, who’d met you in hotels in Casablanca or Fez.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Baker, “but they’d be making a mistake. I’ve got a different passport now, though it’s true enough that a sister of mine, a Mrs. Calvin Baker, lost her life that way. My sister and I are supposed to be very alike.”

She added, "And to the casual people one comes across in hotels one travelling American woman is very like another."

Yes, Hilary thought, that was true enough. All the outer, unimportant characteristics were present in Mrs. Baker. The neatness, the trimness, the carefully arranged blue hair, the highly monotonous, prattling voice. Inner characteristics, she realized, were carefully masked or, indeed, absent. Mrs. Calvin Baker presented to the world and to her companions, a façade, but what was behind the facade was not easy to fathom. It was as though she had deliberately extinguished those tokens of individuality by which one personality is distinguishable from another.

Hilary felt moved to say so. She and Mrs. Baker were standing a little apart from the rest.

"One doesn't know," said Hilary, "in the least what you're really like?"

"Why should you?"

"Yes. Why should I? And yet, you know, I feel I ought to. We've travelled together in rather intimate circumstances and it seems odd to me that I know nothing about you. Nothing, I mean, of the essential you, of what you feel and think, of what you like and dislike, of what's important to you and what isn't."

"You've such a probing mind, my dear," said Mrs. Baker. "If you'll take my advice, you'll curb that tendency."

"I don't even know what part of the United States you come from."

"That doesn't matter either. I've finished with my own country. There are reasons why I can never go back there. If I can pay off a grudge against that country, I'll enjoy doing it."

For just a second or two malevolence showed both in her expression and in the tone of her voice. Then it relaxed once more into cheerful tourist tones.

“Well, so long, Mrs. Betterton, I hope you have a very agreeable reunion with your husband.”

Hilary said helplessly:

“I don’t even know where I am, what part of the world, I mean.”

“Oh, that’s easy. There needs to be no concealment about that now. A remote spot in the High Atlas. That’s near enough—”

Mrs. Baker moved away and started saying goodbye to the others. With a final gay wave of her hand she walked out across the tarmac. The plane had been refuelled and the pilot was standing waiting for her. A faint cold chill went over Hilary. Here, she felt, was her last link with the outside world. Peters, standing near her, seemed to sense her reaction.

“The place of no return,” he said softly. “That’s us, I guess.”

Dr. Barron said softly:

“Have you still courage, Madame, or do you at this moment want to run after your American friend and climb with her into the plane and go back—back to the world you have left?”

“Could I go if I wanted to?” asked Hilary.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

“One wonders.”

“Shall I call to her?” asked Andy Peters.

“Of course not,” said Hilary sharply.

Helga Needheim said scornfully:

“There is no room here for women who are weaklings.”

“She is not a weakling,” said Dr. Barron softly, “but she asks herself questions as any intelligent woman would do.” He stressed the word “intelligent” as though it were a reflection upon the German woman. She, however, was unaffected by his tone. She despised all Frenchmen and was happily assured of her own worth. Ericsson said, in his high nervous voice:

“When one has at last reached freedom, can one even contemplate going back?”

Hilary said:

“But if it is not possible to go back, or to choose to go back, then it is not freedom!”

One of the servants came to them and said:

“If you please, the cars are ready now to start.”

They went out through the opposite door of the building. Two Cadillac cars were standing there with uniformed chauffeurs. Hilary indicated a preference for sitting in front with the chauffeur. She explained the swinging motion of a large car occasionally made her feel carsick. This explanation seemed to be accepted easily enough. As they drove along Hilary made a little desultory conversation from time to time. The weather, the excellence of the car. She spoke French quite easily and well, and the chauffeur responded agreeably. His manner was entirely natural and matter-of-fact.

“How long will it take us?” she asked presently.

“From the aerodrome to the hospital? It is a drive of perhaps two hours, Madame.”

The words struck Hilary with faintly disagreeable surprise. She had noted, without thinking much about it, that Helga Needheim had changed at the rest house and was now wearing a hospital nurse’s kit. This fitted in.

“Tell me something about the hospital,” she said to the chauffeur.

His reply was enthusiastic.

“Ah, Madame, it is magnificent. The equipment, it is the most up to date in the world. Many doctors come and visit it, and all of them go away full of praise. It is a great thing that is being done there for humanity.”

“It must be,” said Hilary, “yes, yes, indeed it must.”

“These miserable ones,” said the chauffeur, “they have been sent in the past to perish miserably on a lonely island. But here this new treatment of Dr. Kolini’s cures a very high percentage. Even those who are far gone.”

“It seems a lonely place to have a hospital,” said Hilary.

“Ah, Madame, but you would have to be lonely in the circumstances. The authorities would insist upon it. But it is good air here, wonderful air. See, Madame, you can see now where we are going.” He pointed.

They were approaching the first spurs of a mountain range, and on the side of it, set flat against the hillside, was a long gleaming white building.

“What an achievement,” said the chauffeur, “to raise such a building out here. The money spent must have been fantastic. We owe much, Madame, to the rich philanthropists of this world. They are not like governments who do things always in a cheap way. Here money has been spent like water. Our patron, he is one of the richest men in the world, they say. Here truly he has built a magnificent achievement for the relief of human suffering.”

He drove up a winding track. Finally they came to rest outside great barred iron gates.

“You must dismount here, Madame,” said the chauffeur. “It is not permitted that I take the car through these gates. The garages are a kilometre away.”

The travellers got out of the car. There was a big bellpull at the gate, but before they could touch it the gates swung slowly open. A white-robed figure with a black, smiling face bowed to them and bade them enter. They passed through the gate; at one side, screened by a high fence of wire, there

was a big courtyard where men were walking up and down. As these men turned to look at the arrivals, Hilary uttered a gasp of horror.

“But they’re lepers!” she exclaimed. “Lepers!”

A shiver of horror shook her entire frame.

Eleven

The gates of the Leper Colony closed behind the travellers with a metallic clang. The noise struck on Hilary's startled consciousness with a horrible note of finality. Abandon hope, it seemed to say, all ye who enter here . . . This, she thought, was the end . . . really the end. Any way of retreat there might have been was now cut off.

She was alone now amongst enemies, and in, at most, a very few minutes, she would be confronted with discovery and failure. Subconsciously, she supposed, she had known that all day, but some undefeatable optimism of the human spirit, some persistence in the belief that that entity oneself could not possibly cease to exist, had been masking that fact from her. She had said to Jessop in Casablanca, "And when I do reach Tom Betterton?" and he had said then gravely that that was when the danger would become acute. He had added that he hoped that by then he might be in a position to give her protection, but that hope, Hilary could not but realize, had failed to materialize.

If "Miss Hetherington" had been the agent on whom Jessop was relying, "Miss Hetherington" had been outmanoeuvred and left to confess failure at Marrakesh. But in any case, what could Miss Hetherington have done?

The party of travellers had arrived at the place of no return. Hilary had gambled with death and lost. And she knew now that Jessop's diagnosis had been correct. She no longer wanted to die. She wanted to live. The zest of living had come back to her in full strength. She could think of Nigel, of Brenda's grave, with a sad wondering pity, but no longer with the cold lifeless despair that had urged her on to seek oblivion in death. She thought: "I'm alive again, sane, whole . . . and now I'm like a rat in a trap. If only there were some way out. . . ."

It was not that she had given no thought to the problem. She had. But it seemed to her, reluctantly, that once confronted with Betterton, there could be no way out. . . .

Betterton would say: “But that’s not my wife—” And that would be that! Eyes turning towards her . . . realization . . . a spy in their midst. . . .

Because what other solution could there be? Supposing she were to get in first? Supposing she were to cry out, before Tom Betterton could get in a word—“Who are you? You’re not my husband!” If she could simulate indignation, shock, horror, sufficiently well—might it, just credibly, raise a doubt? A doubt whether Betterton was Betterton—or some other scientist sent to impersonate him. A spy, in other words. But if they believed that, then it might be rather hard on Betterton! But, she thought, her mind turning in tired circles, if Betterton was a traitor, a man willing to sell his country’s secrets, could anything be “hard on him?” How difficult it was, she thought, to make any appraisal of loyalties—or indeed any judgements of people or things . . . At any rate it might be worth trying—to create a doubt.

With a giddy feeling, she returned to her immediate surroundings. Her thoughts had been running underground with the frenzied violence of a rat caught in a trap. But during that time her surface stream of consciousness had been playing its appointed part.

The little party from the outside world had been welcomed by a big handsome man—a linguist, it would seem, since he had said a word or two to each person in his or her own language.

“Enchanté de faire votre connaissance, mon cher docteur,” he was murmuring to Dr. Barron, and then turning to her:

“Ah, Mrs. Betterton, we’re very pleased to welcome you here. A long confusing journey, I’m afraid. Your husband’s very well and, naturally, awaiting you with impatience.”

He gave her a discreet smile; it was a smile, she noticed, that did not touch his cold pale eyes.

“You must,” he added, “be longing to see him.”

The giddiness increased—she felt the group around her approaching and receding like the waves of the sea. Beside her, Andy Peters put out an arm

and steadied her.

“I guess you haven’t heard,” he said to their welcoming host. “Mrs. Betterton had a bad crash at Casablanca—concussion. This journey’s done her no good. Nor the excitement of looking forward to meeting her husband. I’d say she ought to lie down right now in a darkened room.”

Hilary felt the kindness of his voice, of the supporting arm. She swayed a little more. It would be easy, incredibly easy, to crumple at the knees, to drop flaccidly down . . . to feign unconsciousness—or at any rate near unconsciousness. To be laid on a bed in a darkened room—to put off the moment of discovery just a little longer . . . But Betterton would come to her there—any husband would. He would come there and lean over the bed in the dim gloom and at the first murmur of her voice, the first dim outline of her face as his eyes became accustomed to the twilight, he would realize that she was not Olive Betterton.

Courage came back to Hilary. She straightened up. Colour came into her cheeks. She flung up her head.

If this were to be the end, let it be a gallant end! She would go to Betterton and, when he repudiated her, she would try out the last lie, come out with it confidently, fearlessly:

“No, of course I’m not your wife. Your wife—I’m terribly sorry, it’s awful—she’s dead. I was in hospital with her when she died. I promised her I’d get to you somehow and give you her last messages. I wanted to. You see, I’m in sympathy with what you did—with what all of you are doing. I agree with you politically. I want to help. . . .”

Thin, thin, all very thin . . . And such awkward trifles to explain—the faked passport—the forged Letter of Credit. Yes, but people did get by sometimes with the most audacious lies—if one lied with sufficient confidence—if you had the personality to put a thing over. One could at any rate go down fighting.

She drew herself up, gently freeing herself from Peters’s support.

“Oh, no. I must see Tom,” she said. “I must go to him—now—at once—please.”

The big man was hearty about it. Sympathetic. (Though the cold eyes were still pale and watchful.)

“Of course, of course, Mrs. Betterton. I quite understand how you are feeling. Ah, here’s Miss Jennson.”

A thin spectacled girl had joined them.

“Miss Jennson, meet Mrs. Betterton, Fräulein Needheim, Dr. Barron, Mr. Peters, Dr. Ericsson. Show them into the Registry, will you? Give them a drink. I’ll be with you in a few minutes. Just taking Mrs. Betterton along to her husband. I’ll be with you again shortly.”

He turned to Hilary again, saying:

“Follow me, Mrs. Betterton.”

He strode forward, she followed. At a bend in the passage, she gave a last look over her shoulder. Andy Peters was still watching her. He had a faintly puzzled, unhappy look—she thought for a moment he was going to come with her. He must have realized, she thought, that there’s something wrong, realized it from me, but he doesn’t know what it is.

And she thought, with a slight shiver: “It’s the last time, perhaps, that I’ll ever see him . . .” And so, as she turned the corner after her guide, she raised a hand and waved a goodbye. . . .

The big man was talking cheerfully.

“This way, Mrs. Betterton. I’m afraid you’ll find our buildings rather confusing at first, so many corridors, and all rather alike.”

Like a dream, Hilary thought, a dream of hygienic white corridors along which you pass forever, turning, going on, never finding your way out. . . .

She said:

“I didn’t realize it would be a—hospital.”

“No, no, of course. You couldn’t realize anything, could you?”

There was a faint sadistic note of amusement in his voice.

“You’ve had, as they say, to ‘fly blind’. My name’s Van Heidem, by the way. Paul Van Heidem.”

“It’s all a little strange—and rather terrifying,” said Hilary. “The lepers. . . .”

“Yes, yes, of course. Picturesque—and usually so very unexpected. It does upset newcomers. But you’ll get used to them—oh yes, you’ll get used to them in time.”

He gave a slight chuckle.

“A very good joke, I always think myself.”

He paused suddenly.

“Up one flight of stairs—now don’t hurry. Take it easy. Nearly there now.”

Nearly there—nearly there . . . So many steps to death . . . Up—up—deep steps, deeper than European steps. And now another of the hygienic passages and Van Heidem was stopping by a door. He tapped, waited, and then opened it.

“Ah, Betterton—here we are at last. Your wife!”

He stood aside with a slight flourish.

Hilary walked into the room. No holding back. No shrinking. Chin up. Forward to doom.

A man stood half turned from the window, an almost startlingly good-looking man. She noted that, recognizing his fair handsomeness with a

feeling almost of surprise. He wasn't, somehow, her idea of Tom Betterton. Surely, the photograph of him that she had been shown wasn't in the least—

It was that confused feeling of surprise that decided her. She would go all out for her first desperate expedient.

She made a quick movement forward, then drew back. Her voice rang out, startled, dismayed. . . .

“But—that isn't Tom. That isn't my husband . . .” It was well done, she felt it herself. Dramatic, but not over dramatic. Her eyes met Van Heidem's in bewildered questioning.

And then Tom Betterton laughed. A quiet, amused, almost triumphant laugh.

“Pretty good, eh, Van Heidem?” he said. “If even my own wife doesn't know me!”

With four quick steps he had crossed to her and gathered her tightly into his arms.

“Olive, darling. Of course you know me. I'm Tom all right even if I haven't got quite the same face as I used to have.”

His face pressed against hers, his lips by her ear, she caught the faint whispered addition.

“Play up. For God's sake. Danger.”

He released her for a moment, caught her to him again.

“Darling! It's seemed years—years and years. But you're here at last!”

She could feel the warning pressure of his fingers below her shoulderblades, admonishing her, giving their urgent message.

Only after a moment or two did he release her, push her a little from him and look into her face.

“I still can’t quite believe it,” he said, with an excited little laugh. “Still, you know it’s me now, don’t you?”

His eyes, burning into hers, still held that message of warning.

She didn’t understand it—couldn’t understand it. But it was a miracle from heaven and she rallied to play her part.

“Tom!” she said, and there was a catch in her voice that her listening ears approved. “Oh, Tom—but what—”

“Plastic surgery! Hertz of Vienna is here. And he’s a living marvel. Don’t say you regret my old crushed nose.”

He kissed her again, lightly, easily, this time, then turned to the watching Van Heidem with a slight apologetic laugh.

“Forgive the transports, Van Heidem,” he said.

“But naturally, naturally—” the Dutchman smiled benevolently.

“It’s been so long,” said Hilary, “and I—” she swayed a little; “I—please, can I sit down?”

Hurriedly Tom Betterton eased her into a chair.

“Of course, darling. You’re all in. That frightful journey. And the plane accident. My God, what an escape!”

(So there was full communication. They knew all about the plane crash.)

“It’s left me terribly woolly-headed,” said Hilary, with an apologetic little laugh. “I forget things and get muddled up, and have awful headaches. And then, finding you looking like a total stranger! I’m a bit of a mess, darling. I hope I won’t be a bother to you!”

“You a bother? Never. You’ll just have to take it easy for a bit, that’s all. There’s all the—time in the world here.”

Van Heidem moved gently towards the door.

“I will leave you now,” he said. “After a little you will bring your wife to the Registry, Betterton? For the moment you will like to be alone.”

He went out, shutting the door behind him.

Immediately Betterton dropped on his knees by Hilary and buried his face on her shoulder.

“Darling, darling,” he said.

And once again she felt that warning pressure of the fingers. The whisper, so faint as hardly to be heard, was urgent and insistent.

“Keep it up. There might be a microphone—one never knows.”

That was it, of course. One never knew . . . Fear—uneasiness—uncertainty—danger—always danger—she could feel it in the atmosphere.

Tom Betterton sat back on his haunches.

“It’s so wonderful to see you,” he said softly. “And yet, you know, it’s like a dream—not quite real. Do you feel like that, too?”

“Yes, that’s just it—a dream—being here—with you—at last. It doesn’t seem real, Tom.”

She had placed both hands on his shoulders. She was looking at him, a faint smile on her lips. (There might be a spy-hole as well as a microphone.)

Coolly and calmly she appraised what she saw. A nervous good-looking man of thirty-odd who was badly frightened—a man nearly at the end of his tether—a man who had, presumably, come here full of high hopes and had been reduced—to this.

Now that she had surmounted her first hurdle, Hilary felt a curious exhilaration in the playing of her part. She must be Olive Betterton. Act as Olive would have acted, feel as Olive would have felt. And life was so

unreal that that seemed quite natural. Somebody called Hilary Craven had died in an aeroplane accident. From now on she wouldn't even remember her.

Instead, she rallied her memories of the lessons she had studied so assiduously.

"It seems such ages since Firbank," she said. "Whiskers—you remember Whiskers? She had kittens—just after you went away. There are so many things, silly everyday little things, you don't even know about. That's what seems so odd."

"I know. It's breaking with an old life and beginning a new one."

"And—it's all right here? You're happy?"

A necessary wifely question that any wife would ask.

"It's wonderful." Tom Betterton squared his shoulders, threw his head back. Unhappy, frightened eyes looked out of a smiling confident face. "Every facility. No expense spared. Perfect conditions to get on with the job. And the organization! It's unbelievable."

"Oh, I'm sure it is. My journey—did you come the same way?"

"One doesn't talk about that. Oh, I'm not snubbing you, darling. But—you see, you've got to learn about everything."

"But the lepers? Is it really a Leper Colony?"

"Oh yes. Perfectly genuine. There's a team of medicos doing very fine work in research on the subject. But it's quite self-contained. It needn't worry you. It's just—clever camouflage."

"I see." Hilary looked round her. "Are these our quarters?"

"Yes. Sitting room, bathroom there, bedroom beyond. Come, I'll show you."

She got up and followed him through a well-appointed bathroom into a good-sized bedroom with twin beds, big built-in cupboards, a dressing table, and a bookshelf near the beds. Hilary looked into the cupboard space with some amusement.

“I hardly know what I’m going to put in here,” she remarked. “All I’ve got is what I can stand up in.”

“Oh that. You can fit yourself out with all you want. There’s a fashion model department and all accessories, cosmetics, everything. All first-class. The Unit is quite self-contained—all you want on the premises. No need to go outside ever again.”

He said the words lightly, but it seemed to Hilary’s sensitive ear that there was despair concealed behind the words.

“No need to go outside ever again. No chance of ever going outside again. Abandon hope all ye who enter here . . . The well-appointed cage! Was it for this,” she thought, “that all these varying personalities had abandoned their countries, their loyalties, their everyday lives? Dr. Barron, Andy Peters, young Ericsson with his dreaming face, the overbearing Helga Needheim? Did they know what they were coming to find? Would they be content? Was this what they had wanted?”

She thought: “I’d better not ask too many questions . . . if someone is listening.”

Was someone listening? Were they being spied upon? Tom Betterton evidently thought it might be so. But was he right? Or was it nerves—hysteria? Tom Betterton, she thought, was very near to a breakdown.

“Yes,” she thought grimly, “and so may you be, my girl, in six months’ time . . .” What did it do to people, she wondered, living like this?

Tom Betterton said to her:

“Would you like to lie down—to rest?”

“No—” she hesitated. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Then perhaps you’d better come with me to the Registry.”

“What’s the Registry?”

“Everyone who clocks in goes through the Registry. They record everything about you. Health, teeth, blood pressure, blood group, psychological reactions, tastes, dislikes, allergies, aptitudes, preferences.”

“It sounds very military—or do I mean medical?”

“Both,” said Tom Betterton. “Both. This organization—it’s really formidable.”

“One’s always heard so,” said Hilary. “I mean that everything behind the Iron Curtain is really properly planned.”

She tried to put a proper enthusiasm into her voice. After all, Olive Betterton had presumably been a sympathizer with the Party, although, perhaps by order, she had not been known to be a Party member.

Betterton said evasively:

“There’s a lot for you to—understand.” He added quickly: “Better not try to take in too much at once.”

He kissed her again, a curious, apparently tender and even passionate kiss, that was actually as cold as ice, murmured very low in her ear, “Keep it up,” and said aloud, “And now, come down to the Registry.”

Twelve

The Registry was presided over by a woman who looked like a strict nursery governess. Her hair was rolled into a rather hideous bun and she wore very efficient-looking pince-nez. She nodded approval as the Bettertons entered the severe office-like room.

“Ah,” she said. “You’ve brought Mrs. Betterton. That’s right.”

Her English was perfectly idiomatic but it was spoken with a stilted precision which made Hilary believe that she was probably a foreigner. Actually, her nationality was Swiss. She motioned Hilary to a chair, opened a drawer beside her and took out a sheaf of forms upon which she commenced to write rapidly. Tom Betterton said rather awkwardly:

“Well then, Olive, I’ll leave you.”

“Yes please, Dr. Betterton. It’s much better to get through all the formalities straight away.”

Betterton went out, shutting the door behind him. The Robot, for as such Hilary thought of her, continued to write.

“Now then,” she said, in a businesslike way. “Full name, please. Age. Where born. Father and mother’s names. Any serious illnesses. Tastes. Hobbies. List of any jobs held. Degrees at any university. Preferences in food and drink.”

It went on, a seemingly endless catalogue. Hilary responded vaguely, almost mechanically. She was glad now of the careful priming she had received from Jessop. She had mastered it all so well that the responses came automatically, without having to pause or think. The Robot said finally, as she made the last entry:

“Well, that seems to be all for this department. Now we’ll hand you over to Doctor Schwartz for medical examination.”

“Really!” said Hilary. “Is all this necessary? It seems most absurd.”

“Oh, we believe in being thorough, Mrs. Betterton. We like to have everything down in the records. You’ll like Dr. Schwartz very much. Then from her you go on to Doctor Rubec.”

Dr. Schwartz was fair and amiable and female. She gave Hilary a meticulous physical examination and then said:

“So! That is finished. Now you go to Dr. Rubec.”

“Who is Dr. Rubec?” Hilary asked. “Another doctor?”

“Dr. Rubec is a psychologist.”

“I don’t want a psychologist. I don’t like psychologists.”

“Now please don’t get upset, Mrs. Betterton. You’re not going to have treatment of any kind. It’s simply a question of an intelligence test and of your type-group personality.”

Dr. Rubec was a tall, melancholy Swiss of about forty years of age. He greeted Hilary, glanced at the card that had been passed on to him by Dr. Schwartz and nodded his head approvingly.

“Your health is good, I am glad to see,” he said. “You have had an aeroplane crash recently, I understand.”

“Yes,” said Hilary. “I was four or five days in hospital at Casablanca.”

“Four or five days is not enough,” said Dr. Rubec reprovingly. “You should have been there longer.”

“I didn’t want to be there longer. I wanted to get on with my journey.”

“That, of course, is understandable, but it is important with concussion that plenty of rest should be had. You may appear quite well and normal after it but it may have serious effects. Yes, I see your nerve reflexes are not quite what they should be. Partly the excitement of the journey and partly, no doubt, due to concussion. Do you get headaches?”

“Yes. Very bad headaches. And I get muddled up every now and then and can’t remember things.”

Hilary felt it well to stress this particular point. Dr. Rubec nodded soothingly.

“Yes, yes, yes. But do not trouble yourself. All that will pass. Now we will have a few association tests, so as to decide what type of mentality you are.” Hilary felt faintly nervous but all appeared to pass off well. The test seemed to be of a merely routine nature. Dr. Rubec made various entries on a long form.

“It is a pleasure,” he said at last, “to deal with someone (if you will excuse me, Madame, and not take amiss what I am going to say) to deal with someone who is not in any way a genius!”

Hilary laughed.

“Oh, I’m certainly not a genius,” she said.

“Fortunately for you,” said Dr. Rubec. “I can assure you your existence will be far more tranquil.” He sighed. “Here, as you probably understand, I deal mostly with keen intellects, but with the type of sensitive intellect that is apt to become easily unbalanced, and where the emotional stress is strong. The man of science, Madame, is not the cool, calm individual he is made out to be in fiction. In fact,” said Dr. Rubec, thoughtfully, “between a first-class tennis player, an operatic prima-donna and a nuclear physicist there is really very little difference as far as emotional stability goes.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Hilary, remembering that she was supposed to have lived for some years in close proximity to scientists. “Yes, they are rather temperamental sometimes.”

Dr. Rubec threw up a pair of expressive hands.

“You would not believe,” he said, “the emotions that arise here! The quarrels, the jealousies, the touchiness! We have to take steps to deal with all that. But you, Madame,” he smiled. “You are in a class that is in a small minority here. A fortunate class, if I may so express myself.”

“I don’t quite understand you. What kind of a minority?”

“Wives,” said Dr. Rubec. “We have not many wives here. Very few are permitted. One finds them, on the whole, refreshingly free from the brainstorms of their husbands and their husbands’ colleagues.”

“What do wives do here?” asked Hilary. She added apologetically, “You see it’s all so new to me. I don’t understand anything yet.”

“Naturally not. Naturally. That is bound to be the case. There are hobbies, recreations, amusements, instructional courses. A wide field. You will find it, I hope, an agreeable life.”

“As you do?”

It was a question, and rather an audacious one, and Hilary wondered a moment or two later whether she had been wise to ask it. But Dr. Rubec merely seemed amused.

“You are quite right, Madame,” he said. “I find life here peaceful and interesting in the extreme.”

“You don’t ever regret—Switzerland?”

“I am not homesick. No. That is partly because, in my case, my home conditions were bad. I had a wife and several children. I was not cut out, Madame, to be a family man. Here conditions are infinitely more pleasant. I have ample opportunity of studying certain aspects of the human mind which interest me and on which I am writing a book. I have no domestic cares, no distractions, no interruptions. It all suits me admirably.”

“And where do I go next?” asked Hilary, as he rose and shook her courteously and formally by the hand.

“Mademoiselle La Roche will take you to the dress department. The result, I am sure”—he bowed—“will be admirable.”

After the severe Robot-like females she had met so far, Hilary was agreeably surprised by Mademoiselle La Roche. Mademoiselle La Roche had been a vendeuse in one of the Paris houses of haute couture and her manner was thrillingly feminine.

“I am delighted, Madame, to make your acquaintance. I hope that I can be of assistance to you. Since you have just arrived and since you are, no doubt, tired, I would suggest that you select now just a few essentials. Tomorrow and indeed during the course of next week, you can examine what we have in stock at your leisure. It is tiresome, I always think, to have to select things rapidly. It destroys all the pleasure of la toilette. So I would suggest, if you agree, just a set of underclothing, a dinner dress, and perhaps a tailleur.”

“How delightful it sounds,” said Hilary. “I cannot tell you how odd it feels to own nothing but a toothbrush and a sponge.”

Mademoiselle La Roche laughed cheerfully. She took a few rapid measures and led Hilary into a big department with built-in cupboards. There were clothes here of every description, made of good material and excellent cut and in a large variety of sizes. When Hilary had selected the essentials of la toilette, they passed on to the cosmetics department where Hilary made a selection of powders, creams and various other toilet accessories. These were handed to one of the assistants, a native girl with a shining dark face, dressed in spotless white, and she was instructed to see that they were delivered to Hilary’s apartment.

All these proceedings had seemed to Hilary more and more like a dream.

“And we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again shortly, I hope,” said Mademoiselle La Roche, gracefully. “It will be a great pleasure, Madame, to assist you to select from our models. Entre nous my work is sometimes

disappointing. These scientific ladies often take very little interest in la toilette. In fact, not half an hour ago I had a fellow traveller of yours.”

“Helga Needheim?”

“Ah yes, that was the name. She is, of course, a Boche, and the Boches are not sympathetic to us. She is not actually bad-looking if she took a little care of her figure; if she chose a flattering line she could look very well. But no! She has no interest in clothes. She is a doctor, I understand. A specialist of some kind. Let us hope she takes more interest in her patients than she does in her toilette—Ah! that one, what man will look at her twice?”

Miss Jennson, the thin, dark, spectacled girl who had met the party on arrival, now entered the fashion salon.

“Have you finished here, Mrs. Betterton?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” said Hilary.

“Then perhaps you will come and see the Deputy Director.”

Hilary said au revoir to Mademoiselle La Roche and followed the earnest Miss Jennson.

“Who is the Deputy Director?” she asked.

“Doctor Nielson.”

Everybody, Hilary reflected, in this place was a doctor of something.

“Who exactly is Doctor Nielson?” she asked. “Medical, scientific, what?”

“Oh, he’s not medical, Mrs. Betterton. He’s in charge of Administration. All complaints have to go to him. He’s the administrative head of the Unit. He always has an interview with everyone when they arrive. After that I don’t suppose you’ll ever see him again unless something very important should arise.”

“I see,” said Hilary, meekly. She had an amused feeling of having been put severely in her place.

Admission to Dr. Nielson was through two antechambers where stenographers were working. She and her guide were finally admitted into the inner sanctum where Dr. Nielson rose from behind a large executive’s desk. He was a big, florid man with an urbane manner. Of transatlantic origin, Hilary thought, though he had very little American accent.

“Ah!” he said, rising and coming forward to shake Hilary by the hand. “This is—yes—let me see—yes, Mrs. Betterton. Delighted to welcome you here, Mrs. Betterton. We hope you’ll be very happy with us. Sorry to hear of the unfortunate accident during the course of your journey, but I’m glad it was no worse. Yes, you were lucky there. Very lucky indeed. Well, your husband’s been awaiting you impatiently and I hope now you’ve got here you will settle down and be very happy amongst us.”

“Thank you, Dr. Nielson.” Hilary sat down in the chair he drew forward for her.

“Any questions you want to ask me?” Dr. Nielson leant forward over his desk in an encouraging manner. Hilary laughed a little.

“That’s a most difficult thing to answer,” she said. “The real answer is, of course, that I’ve got so many questions to ask that I don’t know where to begin.”

“Quite, quite. I understand that. If you’ll take my advice—this is just advice, you know, nothing more—I shouldn’t ask anything. Just adapt yourself and see what comes. That’s the best way, believe me.”

“I feel I know so little,” said Hilary. “It’s all so—so very unexpected.”

“Yes. Most people think that. The general idea seems to have been that one was going to arrive in Moscow.” He laughed cheerfully. “Our desert home is quite a surprise to most people.”

“It was certainly a surprise to me.”

“Well, we don’t tell people too much beforehand. They mightn’t be discreet, you know, and discretion’s rather important. But you’ll be comfortable here, you’ll find. Anything you don’t like—or particularly would like to have . . . just put in a request for it and we’ll see what can be managed! Any artistic requirement, for instance. Painting, sculpture, music, we have a department for all that sort of thing.”

“I’m afraid I’m not talented that way.”

“Well, there’s plenty of social life too, of a kind. Games, you know. We have tennis courts, squash courts. It takes a week or two, we often find, for people to find their feet, especially the wives, if I may say so. Your husband’s got his job and he’s busy with it and it takes a little time, sometimes, for the wives to find—well—other wives who are congenial. All that sort of thing. You understand me.”

“But does one—does one—stay here?”

“Stay here? I don’t quite understand you, Mrs. Betterton.”

“I mean, does one stay here or go on somewhere else?”

Dr. Nielson became rather vague.

“Ah,” he said. “That depends on your husband. Ah, yes, yes, that depends very much on him. There are possibilities. Various possibilities. But it’s better not to go into all that just now. I’d suggest, you know, that you—well—come and see me again perhaps in three weeks’ time. Tell me how you’ve settled down. All that kind of thing.”

“Does one—go out at all?”

“Go out, Mrs. Betterton?”

“I mean outside the walls. The gates.”

“A very natural question,” said Dr. Nielson. His manner was now rather heavily beneficent. “Yes, very natural. Most people ask it when they come here. But the point of our Unit is that it’s a world in itself. There is nothing,

if I may so express myself, to go out to. Outside us there is only desert. Now I'm not blaming you, Mrs. Betterton. Most people feel like that when they first get here. Slight claustrophobia. That's how Dr. Rubec puts it. But I assure you that it passes off. It's a hangover, if I may so express it, from the world you have left. Have you ever observed an anthill, Mrs. Betterton? An interesting sight. Very interesting and very instructive. Hundreds of little black insects hurrying to and fro, so earnest, so eager, so purposeful. And yet the whole thing's such a muddle. That's the bad old world you have left. Here there is leisure, purpose, infinite time. I assure you," he smiled, "an earthly paradise."

Thirteen

“It’s like a school,” said Hilary.

She was back once more in her own apartment. The clothes and accessories she had chosen were awaiting her in the bedroom. She hung the clothes in the cupboard and arranged the other things to her liking.

“I know,” said Betterton, “I felt like that at first.”

Their conversation was wary and slightly stilted. The shadow of a possible microphone still hung over them. He said in an oblique manner:

“I think it’s all right, you know. I think I was probably imagining things. But all the same. . . .”

He left it at that, and Hilary realized that what he had left unsaid was, “but all the same, we had better be careful.”

The whole business was, Hilary thought, like some fantastic nightmare. Here she was, sharing a bedroom with a strange man, and yet so strong was the feeling of uncertainty, and danger, that to neither of them did the intimacy appear embarrassing. It was like, she thought, climbing a Swiss mountain where you share a hut in close proximity with guides and other climbers as a matter of course. After a minute or two Betterton said:

“It all takes a bit of getting used to, you know. Let’s just be very natural. Very ordinary. More or less as if we were at home still.”

She realized the wisdom of that. The feeling of unreality persisted and would persist, she supposed, some little time. The reasons for Betterton leaving England, his hopes, his disillusionment, could not be touched upon between them at this moment. They were two people playing a part with an undefined menace hanging over them, as it were. She said presently:

“I was taken through a lot of formalities. Medical, psychological and all that.”

“Yes. That’s always done. It’s natural, I suppose.”

“Did the same happen to you?”

“More or less.”

“Then I went in to see the—Deputy Director I think they called him?”

“That’s right. He runs this place. Very capable and a thoroughly good administrator.”

“But he’s not really the head of it all?”

“Oh no, there’s the Director himself.”

“Does one—do I—shall I see the Director?”

“Sooner or later I expect. But he doesn’t often appear. He gives us an address from time to time—he’s got a wonderfully stimulating personality.”

There was a faint frown between Betterton’s brows and Hilary thought it wise to abandon the subject. Betterton said, glancing at a watch:

“Dinner is at eight. Eight to eight-thirty, that is. We’d better be getting down, if you’re ready?”

He spoke exactly as though they were staying in a hotel.

Hilary had changed into the dress she had selected. A soft shade of grey-green that made a good background for her red hair. She clasped a necklace of rather attractive costume jewellery round her neck and said she was ready. They went down the stairs and along corridors and finally into a large dining room. Miss Jennson came forward and met them.

“I have arranged a slightly larger table for you, Tom,” she said to Betterton. “A couple of your wife’s fellow travellers will sit with you—and the

Murchisons, of course.”

They went along to the table indicated. The room contained mostly small tables seating four, eight or ten persons. Andy Peters and Ericsson were already sitting at the table and rose as Hilary and Tom approached. Hilary introduced her “husband” to the two men. They sat down, and presently they were joined by another couple. These Betterton introduced as Dr. and Mrs. Murchison.

“Simon and I work in the same lab,” he said, in an explanatory fashion.

Simon Murchison was a thin, anaemic-looking young man of about twenty-six. His wife was dark and stocky. She spoke with a strong foreign accent and was, Hilary gathered, an Italian. Her Christian name was Bianca. She greeted Hilary politely but, or so it seemed to Hilary, with a certain reserve.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “I will show you around the place. You are not a scientist, no?”

“I’m afraid,” said Hilary, “that I have had no scientific training.” She added, “I worked as a secretary before my marriage.”

“Bianca has had legal training,” said her husband. “She has studied economics and commercial law. Sometimes she gives lectures here but it is difficult to find enough to do to occupy one’s time.”

Bianca shrugged her shoulders.

“I shall manage,” she said. “After all, Simon, I came here to be with you and I think that there is much here that could be better organized. I am studying conditions. Perhaps Mrs. Betterton, since she will not be engaged on scientific work, can help me with these things.”

Hilary hastened to agree to this plan. Andy Peters made them all laugh by saying ruefully:

“I guess I feel rather like a homesick little boy who’s just gone to boarding school. I’ll be glad to get down to doing some work.”

“It’s a wonderful place for working,” said Simon Murchison with enthusiasm. “No interruptions and all the apparatus you want.”

“What’s your line?” asked Andy Peters.

Presently the three men were talking a jargon of their own which Hilary found difficult to follow. She turned to Ericsson who was leaning back in his chair, his eyes abstracted.

“And you?” she asked. “Do you feel like a homesick little boy, too?”

He looked at her as though from a long way away.

“I do not need a home,” he said. “All these things; home, ties of affection, parents, children; all these are a great hindrance. To work one should be quite free.”

“And you feel that you will be free here?”

“One cannot tell yet. One hopes so.”

Bianca spoke to Hilary.

“After dinner,” she said, “there is a choice of many things to do. There is a card room and you can play bridge; or there is a cinema, or three nights a week theatrical performances are given and occasionally there is dancing.”

Ericsson frowned disapprovingly.

“All these things are unnecessary,” he said. “They dissipate energy.”

“Not for us women,” said Bianca. “For us women they are necessary.”

He looked at her with an almost cold and impersonal dislike.

Hilary thought: “To him women are unnecessary, too.”

“I shall go to bed early,” said Hilary. She yawned deliberately. “I don’t think I want to see a film or play bridge this evening.”

“No, dear,” said Tom Betterton hastily. “Much better to go to bed really early and have a good night’s rest. You’ve had a very tiring journey, remember.”

As they rose from table, Betterton said:

“The air here is wonderful at night. We usually take a turn or two on the roof garden after dinner, before dispersing to recreations or study. We’ll go up there for a little and then you’d better go to bed.”

They went up in a lift manned by a magnificent-looking native in white robes. The attendants were darker-skinned and of a more massive build than the slight, fair Berbers—a desert type, Hilary thought. Hilary was startled by the unexpected beauty of the roof garden, and also by the lavish expenditure that must have gone to create it. Tons of earth must have been brought and carried up here. The result was like an Arabian Nights fairy tale. There was the splash of water, tall palms, the tropical leaves of bananas and other plants and paths of beautiful coloured tiles with designs of Persian flowers.

“It’s unbelievable,” said Hilary. “Here in the middle of the desert.” She spoke out what she had felt: “It’s an Arabian Nights fairy tale.”

“I agree with you, Mrs. Betterton,” said Murchison. “It looks exactly as though it has come into being by conjuring up a djinn! Ah well—I suppose even in the desert there’s nothing you can’t do, given water and money—plenty of both of them.”

“Where does the water come from?”

“Spring tapped deep in the mountain. That’s the *raison d’être* of the Unit.”

A fair sprinkling of people were on the roof garden, but little by little they dwindled away.

The Murchisons excused themselves. They were going to watch some ballet.

There were few people left now. Betterton guided Hilary with his hand on her arm to a clear space near the parapet. The stars showed above them and the air was cold now, crisp and exhilarating. They were alone here. Hilary sat down on the low concrete, and Betterton stood in front of her.

“Now then,” he said in a low nervous voice. “Who the hell are you?”

She looked up at him for a moment or two without answering. Before she replied to his question there was something that she herself had to know.

“Why did you recognize me as your wife?” she asked.

They looked at each other. Neither of them wished to be the first to answer the other’s question. It was a duel of wills between them, but Hilary knew that whatever Tom Betterton had been like when he left England, his will was now inferior to her own. She had arrived here fresh in the self-confidence of organizing her own life—Tom Betterton had been living a planned existence. She was the stronger.

He looked away from her at last, and muttered sullenly:

“It was—just an impulse. I was probably a damned fool. I fancied that you might have been sent—to get me out of here.”

“You want to get out of here, then?”

“My God, can you ask?”

“How did you get here from Paris?”

Tom Betterton gave a short unhappy laugh.

“I wasn’t kidnapped or anything like that, if that’s what you mean. I came of my own free will, under my own steam. I came keenly and enthusiastically.”

“You knew that you were coming here?”

“I’d no idea I was coming to Africa, if that’s what you mean. I was caught by the usual lure. Peace on earth, free sharing of scientific secrets amongst the scientists of the world; suppression of capitalists and warmongers—all the usual jargon! That fellow Peters who came with you is the same, he’s swallowed the same bait.”

“And when you got here—it wasn’t like that?”

Again he gave that short bitter laugh.

“You’ll see for yourself. Oh, perhaps it is that, more or less! But it’s not the way you thought it would be. It’s not—freedom.”

He sat down beside her frowning to himself.

“That’s what got me down at home, you know. The feeling of being watched and spied upon. All the security precautions. Having to account for one’s actions, for one’s friends . . . All necessary, I dare say, but it gets you down in the end . . . And so when someone comes along with a proposition—well, you listen . . . It all sounds fine . . .” He gave a short laugh. “And one ends up—here!”

Hilary said slowly:

“You mean you’ve come to exactly the same circumstances as those from which you tried to escape? You’re being watched and spied upon in just the same way—or worse?”

Betterton pushed his hair back nervously from his forehead.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Honestly. I don’t know. I can’t be sure. It may be all going on in my own mind. I don’t know that I’m being watched at all. Why should I be? Why should they bother? They’ve got me here—in prison.”

“It isn’t in the least as you imagined it?”

“That’s the odd thing. I suppose it is in a way. The working conditions are perfect. You’ve every facility, every kind of apparatus. You can work for as

long a time as you like or as short a time. You've got every comfort and accessory. Food, clothes, living-quarters, but you're conscious all the time that you're in prison."

"I know. When the gates clanged behind us today as we came in it was a horrible feeling." Hilary shuddered.

"Well," Betterton seemed to pull himself together. "I've answered your question. Now answer mine. What are you doing here pretending to be Olive?"

"Olive—" she stopped, feeling for words.

"Yes? What about Olive? What's happened to her? What are you trying to say?"

She looked with pity at his haggard, nervous face.

"I've been dreading having to tell you."

"You mean—something's happened to her?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, terribly sorry . . . Your wife's dead . . . She was coming to join you and the plane crashed. She was taken to hospital and died two days later."

He stared straight ahead of him. It was as though he was determined to show no emotion of any kind. He said quietly:

"So Olive's dead? I see. . . ."

There was a long silence. Then he turned to her.

"All right. I can go on from there. You took her place and came here, why?"

This time Hilary was ready with her response. Tom Betterton had believed that she had been sent "to get him out of here" as he had put it. That was not the case. Hilary's position was that of a spy. She had been sent to gain information, not to plan the escape of a man who had placed himself

willingly in the position he now was. Moreover, she could command no means of deliverance, she was a prisoner as much as he was.

To confide in him fully would, she felt, be dangerous. Betterton was very near a breakdown. At any moment he might go completely to pieces. In those circumstances it would be madness to expect him to keep a secret.

She said:

“I was in the hospital with your wife when she died. I offered to take her place and try and reach you. She wanted to get a message to you very badly.”

He frowned.

“But surely—”

She hurried on—before he could realize the weakness of the tale.

“It’s not so incredible as it sounds. You see I had a lot of sympathy with all these ideas—the ideas you’ve just been talking about. Scientific secrets shared with all nations—a new World Order. I was enthusiastic about it all. And then my hair—if what they expected was a red-haired woman of the right age, I thought I’d get through. It seemed worth trying anyway.”

“Yes,” he said. His eyes swept over her head. “Your hair’s exactly like Olive’s.”

“And then, you see, your wife was so insistent—about the message she wanted me to give to you.”

“Oh yes, the message. What message?”

“To tell you to be careful—very careful—that you were in danger—from someone called Boris?”

“Boris? Boris Glydr, do you mean?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

He shook his head.

“I’ve never met him. But I know him by name. He’s a relation of my first wife’s. I know about him.”

“Why should he be dangerous?”

“What?”

He spoke absently.

Hilary repeated her question.

“Oh, that.” He seemed to come back from far away. “I don’t know why he should be dangerous to me, but it’s true that by all accounts he’s a dangerous sort of chap.”

“In what way?”

“Well, he’s one of those half-balmy idealists who would quite happily kill off half humanity if they thought for some reason it would be a good thing.”

“I know the sort of person you mean.”

She felt she did know—vividly. (But why?)

“Had Olive seen him? What did he say to her?”

“I can’t tell you. That’s all she said. About danger—oh yes, she said ‘that she couldn’t believe it.’”

“Believe what?”

“I don’t know.” She hesitated a minute and then said, “You see—she was dying. . . .”

A spasm of pain convulsed his face.

“I know . . . I know . . . I shall get used to it in time. At the moment I can’t realize it. But I’m puzzled about Boris. How could he be dangerous to me here? If he’d seen Olive, he was in London, I suppose?”

“He was in London, yes.”

“Then I simply don’t get it . . . Oh well, what does it matter? What the hell does anything matter? Here we are, stuck in this bloody Unit surrounded by a lot of inhuman Robots. . . .”

“That’s just how they felt to me.”

“And we can’t get out.” He pounded with his fist on the concrete. “We can’t get out.”

“Oh yes, we can,” said Hilary.

He turned to stare at her in surprise.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“We’ll find a way,” said Hilary.

“My dear girl,” his laugh was scornful. “You haven’t the faintest idea what you’re up against in this place.”

“People escaped from the most impossible places during the war,” said Hilary stubbornly. She was not going to give in to despair. “They tunnelled, or something.”

“How can you tunnel through sheer rock? And where to? It’s desert all round.”

“Then it will have to be ‘or something.’ ”

He looked at her. She smiled with a confidence that was dogged rather than genuine.

“What an extraordinary girl you are! You sound quite sure of yourself.”

“There’s always a way. I dare say it will take time, and a lot of planning.”

His face clouded over again.

“Time,” he said. “Time . . . That’s what I can’t afford.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know exactly whether you’ll be able to understand . . . It’s like this. I can’t really—do my stuff here.” She frowned.

“How do you mean?”

“How shall I put it? I can’t work. I can’t think. In my stuff one has to have a high degree of concentration. A lot of it is—well—creative. Since coming here I’ve just lost the urge. All I can do is good sound hackwork. The sort of thing any twopenny-halfpenny scientific chap can do. But that’s not what they brought me here for. They want original stuff and I can’t do original stuff. And the more nervous and afraid I get, the less I’m fit to turn out anything worth turning out. And it’s driving me off my rocker, do you see?”

Yes, she saw now. She recalled Dr. Rubec’s remarks about prima donnas and scientists.

“If I can’t deliver the goods, what is an outfit like this going to do about it? They’ll liquidate me.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes they will. They’re not sentimentalists here. What’s saved me so far is this plastic surgery business. They do it a little at a time, you know. And naturally a fellow who’s having constant minor operations can’t be expected to concentrate. But they’ve finished the business now.”

“But why was it done at all? What’s the point?”

“Oh, that! For safety. My safety, I mean. It’s done if—if you’re a ‘wanted’ man.”

“Are you a ‘wanted’ man, then?”

“Yes, didn’t you know? Oh, I suppose they wouldn’t advertise the fact in the papers. Perhaps even Olive didn’t know. But I’m wanted right enough.”

“You mean for—treason is the word, isn’t it? You mean you’ve sold them atom secrets?”

He avoided her eyes.

“I didn’t sell anything. I gave them what I knew of our processes—gave it freely. If you can believe me, I wanted to give it to them. It was part of the whole set-up—the pooling of scientific knowledge. Oh, can’t you understand?”

She could understand. She could understand Andy Peters doing just that. She could see Ericsson with his fanatical dreamer’s eyes betraying his country with a high-souled enthusiasm.

Yet it was hard for her to visualize Tom Betterton doing it—and she realized with a shock that all that showed was the difference between Betterton a few months ago, arriving in all the zeal of enthusiasm, and Betterton now, nervous, defeated, down to earth—an ordinary, badly frightened man.

Even as she accepted the logic of that, Betterton looked round him nervously and said:

“Everyone’s gone down. We’d better—”

She rose.

“Yes. But it’s all right, you know. They’ll think it quite natural—under the circumstances.”

He said awkwardly:

“We’ll have to go on with this now, you know. I mean—you’ll have to go on being—my wife.”

“Of course.”

“And we’ll have to share a room and all that. But it will be quite all right. I mean, you needn’t be afraid that—”

He swallowed in an embarrassed manner.

“How handsome he is,” thought Hilary, looking at his profile, “and how little it moves me. . . .”

“I don’t think we need worry about that,” she said cheerfully. “The important thing is to get out of here alive.”

Fourteen

In a room at the Hôtel Mamounia, Marrakesh, the man called Jessop was talking to Miss Hetherington. A different Miss Hetherington this, from the one that Hilary had known at Casablanca and at Fez. The same appearance, the same twin set, the same depressing hairdo. But the manner had changed. It was a woman now both brisk, competent, and seeming many years younger than her appearance.

The third person in the room was a dark stocky man with intelligent eyes. He was tapping gently on the table with his fingers and humming a little French song under his breath.

“. . . and as far as you know,” Jessop was saying, “those are the only people she talked to at Fez?”

Janet Hetherington nodded.

“There was the Calvin Baker woman, who we’d already met at Casablanca. I’ll say frankly I still can’t make up my mind about her. She went out of her way to be friendly with Olive Betterton, and with me for that matter. But Americans are friendly, they do enter into conversation with people in hotels, and they like joining them on trips.”

“Yes,” said Jessop, “it’s all a little too overt for what we’re looking for.”

“And besides,” went on Janet Hetherington, “she was on this plane, too.”

“You’re assuming,” said Jessop, “that the crash was planned. He looked sideways towards the dark, stocky man. “What about it, Leblanc?” Leblanc stopped humming his tune, and stopped his little tattoo on the table for a moment or two.

“Ça se peut,” he said. “There may have been sabotage to the machine and that is why it crashed. We shall never know. The plane crashed and went up

in flames and everyone on board was killed.”

“What do you know of the pilot?”

“Alcadi? Young, reasonably competent. No more. Badly paid.” He added the two last words with a slight pause in front of them.

Jessop said:

“Open therefore to other employment, but presumably not a candidate for suicide?”

“There were seven bodies,” said Leblanc. “Badly charred, unrecognizable, but seven bodies. One cannot get away from that.”

Jessop turned back to Janet Hetherington.

“You were saying?” he said.

“There was a French family at Fez that Mrs. Betterton exchanged a few words with. There was a rich Swedish business man with a glamour girl. And the rich oil magnate, Mr. Aristides.”

“Ah,” said Leblanc, “that fabulous figure himself. What must it feel like, I have often asked myself, to have all the money in the world? For me,” he added frankly, “I would keep racehorses and women, and all the world has to offer. But old Aristides shuts himself up in his castle in Spain—literally his castle in Spain, *mon cher*—and collects, so they say, Chinese pottery of the Sung period. But one must remember,” he added, “that he is at least seventy. It is possible at that age that Chinese pottery is all that interests one.”

“According to the Chinese themselves,” said Jessop, “the years between sixty and seventy are the most rich in living and one is then most appreciative of the beauty and delight of life.”

“Pas moi!” said Leblanc.

“There were some Germans at Fez, too,” continued Janet Hetherington, “but as far as I know they didn’t exchange any remarks with Olive Betterton.”

“A waiter or a servant, perhaps,” said Jessop.

“That’s always possible.”

“And she went out into the old town alone, you say?”

“She went with one of the regular guides. Someone may have contacted her on that tour.”

“At any rate she decided quite suddenly to go to Marrakesh.”

“Not suddenly,” she corrected him. “She already had her reservations.”

“Ah, I’m wrong,” said Jessop. “What I mean is that Mrs. Calvin Baker decided rather suddenly to accompany her.” He got up and paced up and down. “She flew to Marrakesh,” he said, “and the plane crashed and came down in flames. It seems ill-omened, does it not, for anyone called Olive Betterton to travel by air. First the crash near Casablanca, and then this one. Was it an accident or was it contrived? If there were people who wished to get rid of Olive Betterton, there would be easier ways to do it than by wrecking a plane, I should say.”

“One never knows,” said Leblanc. “Understand me, mon cher. Once you have got into that state of mind where the taking of human lives no longer counts, then if it is simpler to put a little explosive package under a seat in a plane than to wait about at the corner on a dark night and stick a knife into someone, then the package will be left and the fact that six other people will die also is not even considered.”

“Of course,” said Jessop, “I know I’m in a minority of one, but I still think there’s a third solution—that they faked the crash.”

Leblanc looked at him with interest.

“That could be done, yes. The plane could be brought down and it could be set on fire. But you cannot get away from the fact, mon cher Jessop, that there were people in the plane. The charred bodies were actually there.”

“I know,” said Jessop, “that’s the stumbling block. Oh, I’ve no doubt my ideas are fantastic, but it’s such a neat ending to our hunt. Too neat. That’s what I feel. It says finish to us. We write down R.I.P. in the margin of our report and it’s ended. There’s no further trail to take up.” He turned again to Leblanc. “You are having a search instituted?”

“For two days now,” said Leblanc. “Good men, too. It’s a particularly lonely spot, of course, where the plane crashed. It was off its course, by the way.”

“Which is significant,” Jessop put in.

“The nearest villages, the nearest habitations, the nearest traces of a car, all those are being investigated fully. In this country as well as in yours, we fully realize the importance of the investigation. In France, too, we have lost some of our best young scientists. In my opinion, mon cher, it is easier to control temperamental opera singers than it is to control a scientist. They are brilliant, these young men, erratic, rebellious, and, finally and dangerously, they are most completely credulous. What do they imagine goes on là bas? Sweetness and light and desire for truth and the millennium? Alas, poor children, what disillusionment awaits them.”

“Let’s go over the passenger list once more,” said Jessop.

The Frenchman reached out a hand, picked it out of a wire basket and set it before his colleague. The two men pored over it together.

“Mrs. Calvin Baker, American. Mrs. Betterton, English. Torquil Ericsson, Norwegian—what do you know of him, by the way?”

“Nothing that I can recall,” said Leblanc. “He was young, not more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight.”

“I know his name,” said Jessop, frowning. “I think—I am almost sure—that he read a paper before the Royal Society.”

“Then there is the religieuse,” Leblanc said, turning back to the list. “Sister Marie something or other. Andrew Peters, also American. Dr. Barron. That is a celebrated name, le docteur Barron. A man of great brilliance. An expert on virus diseases.”

“Biological warfare,” said Jessop. “It fits. It all fits.”

“A man poorly paid and discontented,” said Leblanc.

“How many going to St. Ives?” murmured Jessop.

The Frenchman shot him a quick look and he smiled apologetically.

“Just an old nursery rhyme,” he said. “For St. Ives read question mark. Journey to nowhere.”

The telephone on the table buzzed and Leblanc picked up the receiver.

“Allo?” he said. “Qu’est-ce qu’il y a? Ah, yes, send them up.” He turned his head towards Jessop. His face was suddenly alive, vigorous. “One of my men reporting,” he said. “They have found something. Mon cher collègue, it is possible—I say no more—possible that your optimism is justified.”

A few moments later two men entered the room. The first bore a rough resemblance to Leblanc, the same type, stocky, dark, intelligent. His manner was respectful but exhilarated. He wore European clothes badly stained and marked, covered with dust. He had obviously just arrived from a journey. With him was a native wearing the white local dress. He had the dignified composure of the dweller in remote places. His manner was courteous but not subservient. He looked with a faint wonder round the room whilst the other man explained things in rapid French.

“The reward was offered and circulated,” the man explained, “and this fellow and his family and a great many of his friends have been searching

diligently. I let him bring you the find himself as there may be questions you want to ask him.”

Leblanc turned to the Berber.

“You have done good work,” he said, speaking now in the man’s own language. “You have the eyes of the hawk, my father. Show us then what you have discovered.” From a fold in his white robe the man took out a small object, and stepping forward laid it on the table before the Frenchman. It was rather a large-sized, pinkish-grey synthetic pearl.

“It is like the one shown to me and shown to others,” he said. “It is of value and I have found it.”

Jessop stretched out a hand and took the pearl. From his pocket he drew out another exactly like it and examined both. Then he walked across the room to the window, and examined them both through a powerful lens.

“Yes,” he said, “the mark is there.” There was jubilation now in his voice and he came back to the table. “Good girl,” he said, “good girl, good girl! She managed it!”

Leblanc was questioning the Moroccan in a rapid exchange of Arabic. Finally he turned to Jessop.

“I make my apologies, mon cher collègue,” he said. “This pearl was found at a distance of nearly half a mile from the flaming plane.”

“Which shows,” said Jessop, “that Olive Betterton was a survivor, and that though seven people left Fez in the plane and seven charred bodies were found, one of those charred bodies was definitely not hers.”

“We extend the search now,” said Leblanc. He spoke again to the Berber and the man who had brought him in. “He will be handsomely rewarded as promised,” said Leblanc, “and there will be a hunt now all over the countryside for these pearls. They have hawk eyes, these people, and the knowledge that these are worth good money in reward will pass round like

a grapevine. I think—I think, mon cher collègue, that we shall get results! If only they have not tumbled to what she was doing.”

Jessop shook his head.

“It would be such a natural occurrence,” he said. “The sudden breaking of a necklace of costume jewellery such as most women wear, the picking up apparently of what loose pearls she can find and stuffing them into her pocket, then a little hole in the pocket. Besides, why should they suspect her? She is Olive Betterton, anxious to join her husband.”

“We must review this matter in a new light,” said Leblanc. He drew the passenger list towards him. “Olive Betterton. Dr. Barron,” he said, ticking off the two names. “Two at least who are going—wherever they are going. The American woman, Mrs. Calvin Baker. As to her we keep an open mind. Torquil Ericsson you say has read papers before the Royal Society. The American, Peters, was described on his passport as a research chemist. The religieuse—well, it would make a good disguise. In fact, a whole cargo of people cleverly shepherded from different points to travel in that one plane on that particular day. And then the plane is discovered in flames and inside it the requisite number of charred bodies. How did they manage that, I wonder? Enfin, c’est colossal!”

“Yes,” said Jessop. “It was the final convincing touch. But we know now that six or seven people have started off on a fresh journey, and we know where their point of departure is. What do we do next—visit the spot?”

“But precisely,” said Leblanc. “We take up advanced headquarters. If I mistake not, now that we are on the track, other evidence will come to light.”

“If our calculations are exact,” Jessop said, “there should be results.”

The calculations were many and devious. The rate of progress of a car, the likely distance where it would refuel, possible villages where travellers might have stayed the night. The tracks were many and confusing, disappointments were continual, but every now and then there came a positive result.

“Voilà, mon capitaine! A search of the latrines, as you ordered. In a dark corner of the latrine a pearl embedded in a little piece of chewing gum in the house of one Abdul Mohammed. He and his sons have been interrogated. At first they denied, but at last they have confessed. A carload of six people said to be from the German archæological expedition spent a night at his house. Much money was paid, and they were not to mention this to anyone, the excuse being that there was some illicit digging in prospect. Children in the village of El Kaif also have brought in two more pearls. We know now the direction. There is more, Monsieur le Capitaine. The hand of Fatima has been seen as you foretold. This type here, he will tell you about it.”

“This type” was a particularly wild-looking Berber.

“I was with my flocks,” he said, “at night and I heard a car. It passed me and as it did so I saw the sign. The hand of Fatima was outlined on one side of it. It gleamed, I tell you, in the darkness.”

“The application of phosphorus on a glove can be very efficacious,” murmured Leblanc. “I congratulate you, mon cher, on that idea.”

“It’s effective,” said Jessop, “but it’s dangerous. It’s too easily noticed by the fugitives themselves, I mean.”

Leblanc shrugged his shoulders.

“It could not be seen in daylight.”

“No, but if there was a halt and they alighted from the car in the darkness —”

“Even then—it is a notable Arab superstition. It is painted often on carts and wagons. It would only be thought that some pious Muslim had painted it in luminous paint on his vehicle.”

“True enough. But we must be on our guard. For if our enemies did notice it, it is highly possible that they will lay a false trail marked for us, of hands of Fatima in phosphorus paint.”

“Ah, as to that I agree with you. One must indeed be on one’s guard. Always, always on one’s guard.”

On the following morning Leblanc had another exhibit of three false pearls arranged in a triangle, stuck together by a little piece of chewing gum.

“This should mean,” said Jessop, “that the next stage of the journey was by plane.”

He looked inquiringly at Leblanc.

“You are absolutely right,” said the other. “This was found on a disused army airfield, in a remote and desolate place. There were signs that a plane landed and left there not long ago.” He shrugged his shoulders. “An unknown plane,” he said; “and once again they took off for a destination unknown. That brings us once more to a halt and we do not know where next to take up the trail—”

Fifteen

“It’s incredible,” thought Hilary to herself, “incredible that I’ve been here ten days!” The frightening thing in life, Hilary thought, was how easily you adapted yourself. She remembered once being shown in France some peculiar torture arrangement of the Middle Ages, an iron cage wherein a prisoner had been confined and in which he could neither lie, stand nor sit. The guide had recounted how the last man imprisoned there had lived in it for eighteen years, and had been released and had lived for another twenty after that, before dying, an old man. That adaptability, thought Hilary, was what differentiated man from the animal world. Man could live in any climate and on any food and under any conditions. He could exist slave or free.

She had felt first, when introduced into the Unit, a blinding panic, a horrible feeling of imprisonment and frustration, and the fact that the imprisonment was camouflaged in circumstances of luxury had somehow made it seem all the more horrible to her. And yet now, already, even after a week here, she had begun insensibly to accept the conditions of her life as natural. It was a queer, dream-like existence. Nothing seemed particularly real, but already she had the feeling that the dream had gone on a long time and would go on for a long time more. It would, perhaps, last forever . . . She would always live here in the Unit; this was life, and there was nothing outside.

This dangerous acceptance, she thought, came partly from the fact that she was a woman. Women were adaptable by nature. It was their strength and their weakness. They examined their environment, accepted it, and like realists settled down to make the best of it. What interested her most were the reactions of the people who had arrived here with her. Helga Needheim she hardly ever saw except sometimes at meals. When they met, the German woman vouchsafed her a curt nod, but no more. As far as she could judge, Helga Needheim was happy and satisfied. The Unit obviously lived up to the picture she had formed in her mind of it. She was the type of woman absorbed by her work, and was comfortably sustained by her natural arrogance. The superiority of herself and her fellow-scientists was

the first article of Helga's creed. She had no views of a brotherhood of man, of an era of peace, of liberty of mind and spirit. For her the future was narrow but all-conquering. The super race, herself a member of it; the rest of the world in bondage, treated, if they behaved, with condescending kindness. If her fellow workers expressed different views, if their ideas were Communist rather than Fascist, Helga took little notice. If their work was good they were necessary, and their ideas would change.

Dr. Barron was more intelligent than Helga Needheim. Occasionally Hilary had brief conversations with him. He was absorbed in his work, deeply satisfied with the conditions provided for him, but his inquiring Gallic intellect led him to speculate and ponder on the media in which he found himself.

"It was not what I expected. No, frankly," he said one day, "entre nous, Mrs. Betterton, I do not care for prison conditions. And these are prison conditions, though the cage, let us say, is heavily gilded."

"There is hardly the freedom here that you came to seek?" Hilary suggested.

He smiled at her, a quick, rueful smile.

"But no," he said, "you are wrong. I did not really seek liberty. I am a civilized man. The civilized man knows there is no such thing. Only the younger and cruder nations put the word 'Liberty' on their banner. There must always be a planned framework of security. And the essence of civilization is that the way of life should be a moderate one. The middle way. Always one comes back to the middle way. No. I will be frank with you. I came here for money."

Hilary in her turn smiled. Her eyebrows rose.

"And what good is money to you here?"

"It pays for very expensive laboratory equipment," said Dr. Barron. "I am not obliged to put my hand into my own pocket, and so I can serve the cause of science and satisfy my own intellectual curiosity. I am a man who

loves his work, true, but I do not love it for the sake of humanity. I have usually found that those who do so are somewhat woolly headed, and often incompetent workers. No, it is the pure intellectual joy of research that I appreciate. For the rest, a large sum of money was paid to me before I left France. It is safely banked under another name and in due course, when all this comes to an end, I shall have it to spend as I choose.”

“When all this comes to an end?” Hilary repeated. “But why should it come to an end?”

“One must have the common sense,” said Dr. Barron, “nothing is permanent, nothing endures. I have come to the conclusion that this place is run by a madman. A madman, let me tell you, can be very logical. If you are rich and logical and also mad, you can succeed for a very long time in living out your illusion. But in the end”—he shrugged—“in the end this will break up. Because, you see, it is not reasonable, what happens here! That which is not reasonable must always pay the reckoning in the end. In the meantime”—again he shrugged his shoulders—“it suits me admirably.”

Torquil Ericsson, whom Hilary had expected to be violently disillusioned, appeared to be quite content in the atmosphere of the Unit. Less practical than the Frenchman, he existed in a single-minded vision of his own. The world in which he lived was one so unfamiliar to Hilary that she could not even understand it. It engendered a kind of austere happiness, an absorption in mathematical calculations, and an endless vista of possibilities. The strange, impersonal ruthlessness of his character frightened Hilary. He was the kind of young man, she thought, who in a moment of idealism could send three-quarters of the world to their death in order that the remaining quarter should participate in an impractical Utopia that existed only in Ericsson’s mind.

With the American, Andy Peters, Hilary felt herself far more in accord. Possibly, she thought, it was because Peters was a man of talent but not a genius. From what others said, she gathered he was a first-class man at his job, a careful and skilled chemist, but not a pioneer. Peters, like herself, had at once hated and feared the atmosphere of the Unit.

“The truth is that I didn’t know where I was going,” he said. “I thought I knew, but I was wrong. The Party has got nothing to do with this place. We’re not in touch with Moscow. This is a lone show of some kind—a Fascist show possibly.”

“Don’t you think,” said Hilary, “that you go in too much for labels?” He considered this.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Come to think of it, these words we throw around don’t mean much. But I do know this. I want to get out of here and I mean to get out of here.”

“It won’t be easy,” said Hilary, in a low voice.

They were walking together after dinner near the splashing fountains of the roof garden. With the illusion of darkness and the starlit sky they might have been in the private gardens of some sultan’s palace. The functional concrete buildings were veiled from the sight.

“No,” said Peters; “it won’t be easy, but nothing’s impossible.”

“I like to hear you say that,” said Hilary. “Oh, how I like to hear you say that!”

He looked at her sympathetically.

“Been getting you down?” he asked.

“Very much so. But that’s not what I’m really afraid of.”

“No? What then?”

“I’m afraid of getting used to it,” said Hilary.

“Yes.” He spoke thoughtfully. “Yes, I know what you mean. There’s a kind of mass suggestion going on here. I think perhaps you’re right about that.”

“It would seem to me much more natural for people to rebel,” said Hilary.

“Yes. Yes, I’ve thought the same. In fact I’ve wondered once or twice whether there’s not a little hocus-pocus going on.”

“Hocus-pocus? What do you mean by that?”

“Well, to put it frankly, dope.”

“Do you mean a drug of some kind?”

“Yes. It might be possible, you know. Something in the food or drink, something that induces—what shall I say—docility?”

“But is there such a drug?”

“Well, that’s not really my line of country. There are things that are given to people to soothe them down, to make them acquiescent before operations and that. Whether there is anything that can be administered steadily over a long period of time—and which at the same time does not impair efficiency—that I don’t know. I’m more inclined to think now that the effect is produced mentally. I mean that I think some of these organizers and administrators here are well versed in hypnosis and psychology and that, without our being aware of it, we are continually being offered suggestions of our well-being, of our attaining our ultimate aim (whatever it is), and that all this does produce a definite effect. A lot can be done that way, you know, if it’s done by people who know their stuff.”

“But we mustn’t acquiesce,” cried Hilary, hotly. “We mustn’t feel for one moment that it’s a good thing to be here.”

“What does your husband feel?”

“Tom? I—oh, I don’t know. It’s so difficult. I—” she lapsed into silence.

The whole fantasy of her life as she lived it she could hardly communicate to the man who was listening to her. For ten days now she had lived in an apartment with a man who was a stranger to her. They shared a bedroom and when she lay awake at night she could hear him breathing in the other bed. Both of them accepted the arrangement as inevitable. She was an

impostor, a spy, ready to play any part and assume any personality. Tom Betterton she quite frankly did not understand. He seemed to her a terrible example of what could happen to a brilliant young man who had lived for some months in the enervating atmosphere of the Unit. At any rate there was in him no calm acceptance of his destiny. Far from taking pleasure in his work, he was, she thought, increasingly worried by his inability to concentrate on it. Once or twice he had reiterated what he had said on that first evening.

“I can’t think. It’s just as though everything in me has dried up.”

Yes, she thought. Tom Betterton, being a real genius, needed liberty more than most. Suggestion had failed to compensate him for the loss of freedom. Only in perfect liberty was he able to produce creative work.

He was a man, she thought, very close to a serious nervous breakdown. Hilary herself he treated with curious inattention. She was not a woman to him, not even a friend. She even doubted whether he realized and suffered from the death of his wife. The thing that preoccupied him incessantly was the problem of confinement. Again and again he had said:

“I must get away from here. I must, I must.” And sometimes, “I didn’t know. I’d no idea what it was going to be like. How am I going to get out of here? How? I’ve got to. I’ve simply got to.”

It was in essence very much what Peters had said. But it was said with a great deal of difference. Peters had spoken as a young, energetic, angry, disillusioned man, sure of himself and determined to pit his wits against the brains of the establishment in which he found himself. But Tom Betterton’s rebellious utterances were those of a man at the end of his tether, a man almost crazed with the need for escape. But perhaps, Hilary thought suddenly, that was where she and Peters would be in six months’ time. Perhaps what began as healthy rebellion and a reasonable confidence in one’s own ingenuity would turn at last into the frenzied despair of a rat in a trap.

She wished she could talk of all this to the man beside her. If only she could say: “Tom Betterton isn’t my husband. I know nothing about him. I don’t

know what he was like before he came here and so I'm in the dark. I can't help him, for I don't know what to do or say." As it was she had to pick her words carefully. She said:

"Tom seems like a stranger to me now. He doesn't—tell me things. Sometimes I think the confinement, the sense of being penned up here, is driving him mad."

"It's possible," said Peters, drily; "it could act that way."

"But tell me—you speak so confidently of getting away. How can we get away—what earthly chance is there?"

"I don't mean we can walk out the day after tomorrow, Olive. The thing's got to be thought out and planned. People have escaped, you know, under the most unpromising conditions. A lot of our people, and a lot your side of the Atlantic, too, have written books about escape from fortresses in Germany."

"That was rather different."

"Not in essence. Where there's a way in there's a way out. Of course tunnelling is out of the question here, so that knocks out a good many methods. But as I say, where there's a way in, there's a way out. With ingenuity, camouflage, playing a part, deception, bribery and corruption, one ought to manage it. It's the sort of thing you've got to study and think about. I'll tell you this. I shall get out of here. Take it from me."

"I believe you will," said Hilary, then she added, "but shall I?"

"Well, it's different for you."

His voice sounded embarrassed. For a moment she wondered what he meant. Then she realized that presumably her own objective had been attained. She had come here to join the man she had loved, and having joined him her own personal need for escape should not be so great. She was almost tempted to tell Peters the truth—but some instinct of caution forbade that.

She said good night and left the roof.

Sixteen

I

“Good evening, Mrs. Betterton.”

“Good evening, Miss Jennson.”

The thin, spectacled girl was looking excited. Her eyes glinted behind the thick lenses.

“There will be a Reunion this evening,” she said. “The Director himself is going to address us!”

She spoke in an almost hushed voice.

“That’s good,” said Andy Peters, who was standing close by. “I’ve been waiting to catch a glimpse of this Director.”

Miss Jennson threw him a glance of shocked reproof.

“The Director,” she said austere, “is a very wonderful man.”

As she went away from them down one of the inevitable white corridors, Andy Peters gave a low whistle.

“Now did I, or did I not, catch a hint of the Heil Hitler attitude there?”

“It certainly sounded like it.”

“The trouble in this life is that you never really know where you’re going. If I’d known when I left the States all full of boyish ardour for the good old Brotherhood of Man that I was going to land myself in the clutches of yet another heavenborn Dictator—” he threw out his hands.

“You don’t know that yet,” Hilary reminded him.

“I can smell it—in the air,” said Peters.

“Oh,” cried Hilary. “How glad I am that you’re here!” She flushed, as he looked at her quizzically.

“You’re so nice and ordinary,” said Hilary desperately.

Peters looked amused.

“Where I come from,” he said, “the word ordinary doesn’t have your meaning. It can stand for being just plain mean.”

“You know I didn’t mean it that way. I mean you’re like everybody else. Oh dear, that sounds rude, too.”

“The common man, that’s what you’re asking for? You’ve had enough of the genius?”

“Yes, and you’ve changed, too, since you came here. You’ve lost that streak of bitterness—of hatred.”

But immediately his face grew rather grim.

“Don’t count on that,” he said. “It’s still there—underneath. I can still hate. There are things, believe me, that should be hated.”

II

The Reunion, as Miss Jennson had called it, took place after dinner. All members of the Unit assembled in the large Lecture Room.

The audience did not include what might be called the technical staff: the laboratory assistants, the Corps de Ballet, the various service personnel, and the small assembly of handsome prostitutes who also served the Unit as purveyors of sex to those men who had no wives with them and had formed no particular attachments with the female workers.

Sitting next to Betterton, Hilary awaited with keen curiosity the arrival on the platform of that almost mythical figure, the Director. Questioned by her, Tom Betterton had given unsatisfactory, almost vague answers about the personality of the man who controlled the Unit.

“He’s nothing much to look at,” he said. “But he has tremendous impact. Actually I’ve only seen him twice. He doesn’t show up often. He’s remarkable, of course, one feels that but honestly I don’t know why.”

From the reverent way Miss Jennson and some of the other women spoke about him, Hilary had formed a vague mental figure of a tall man with a golden beard wearing a white robe—a kind of godlike abstraction.

She was almost startled when, as the audience rose to their feet, a dark, rather heavily built man of middle age came quietly on to the platform. In appearance he was quite undistinguished, he might have been a business man from the Midlands. His nationality was not apparent. He spoke to them in three languages, alternating one with the other, and never exactly repeating himself. He used French, German and English, and each was spoken with equal fluency.

“Let me first,” he began, “welcome our new colleagues who have come to join us here.”

He then paid a few words of tribute to each of the new arrivals.

After that he went on to speak of the aims and beliefs of the Unit.

Trying to remember his words later, Hilary found herself unable to do so with any accuracy. Or perhaps it was that the words, as remembered, seemed trite and ordinary. But listening to them was a very different thing.

Hilary remembered once being told by a friend who had lived in Germany in the days before the war how she had gone to a meeting in mere curiosity to listen “to that absurd Hitler”—and how she had found herself crying hysterically, swept away by intense emotion. She had described how wise and inspiring every word had seemed, and how, afterwards, the remembered words in their actuality had seemed commonplace enough.

Something of the same kind was happening now. In spite of herself, Hilary was stirred and uplifted. The Director spoke very simply. He spoke primarily of Youth. With Youth lay the future of mankind.

“Accumulated Wealth, Prestige, influential Families—those have been the forces of the past. But today, power lies in the hands of the young. Power is in Brains. The brains of the chemist, the physicist, the doctor . . . From the laboratories comes the power to destroy on a vast scale. With that power you can say ‘Yield—or perish!’ That power should not be given to this or that nation. Power should be in the hands of those who create it. This Unit is a gathering place for the Power of all the world. You come here from all parts of the globe, bringing with you your creative scientific knowledge. And with you, you bring Youth! No one here is over forty-five. When the day comes, we shall create a Trust. The Brains Trust of Science. And we shall administer world affairs. We shall issue our orders to Capitalists and Kings and Armies and Industries. We shall give the World the Pax Scientifica.”

There was more of it—all the same heady intoxicating stuff—but it was not the words themselves—it was the power of the orator that carried away an assembly that could have been cold and critical had it not been swayed by that nameless emotion about which so little was known.

When the Director had ended abruptly:

“Courage and Victory! Good Night!” Hilary left the Hall, half-stumbling in a kind of exalted dream, and recognized the same feeling in the faces around her. She saw Ericsson in particular, his pale eyes gleaming, his head tossed back in exultation.

Then she felt Andy Peters’s hand on her arm and his voice said in her ear:

“Come up on the roof. We need some air.”

They went up in the lift without speaking and stepped out among the palm trees under the stars. Peters drew a deep breath.

“Yes,” he said. “This is what we need. Air to blow away the clouds of glory.”

Hilary gave a deep sigh. She still felt unreal.

He gave her arm a friendly shake.

“Snap out of it, Olive.”

“Clouds of glory,” said Hilary. “You know—it was like that!”

“Snap out of it, I tell you. Be a woman! Down to earth and basic realities! When the effects of the Glory Gas poisoning pass off you’ll realize that you’ve been listening to the same old Mixture as Before.”

“But it was fine—I mean a fine ideal.”

“Nuts to ideals. Take the facts. Youth and Brains—glory glory Alleluia! And what are the youth and brains? Helga Needheim, a ruthless egoist. Torquil Ericsson, an impractical dreamer. Dr. Barron, who’d sell his grandmother to the knacker’s yard to get equipment for his work. Take me, an ordinary guy, as you’ve said yourself, good with the test tube and the microscope but with no talent whatever for efficient administration of an office, let alone a world! Take your own husband—yes, I’m going to say it—a man whose nerves are frayed to nothing and who can think of nothing but the fear that retribution will catch up with him. I’ve given you those people we know best—but they’re all the same here—or all that I’ve come across. Geniuses, some of them, damned good at their chosen jobs—but as Administrators of the Universe—hell, don’t make me laugh! Pernicious nonsense, that’s what we’ve been listening to.”

Hilary sat down on the concrete parapet. She passed a hand across her forehead.

“You know,” she said. “I believe you’re right . . . But the clouds of glory are still trailing. How does he do it? Does he believe it himself? He must.”

Peters said gloomily:

“I suppose it always comes to the same thing in the end. A madman who believes he’s God.”

Hilary said slowly:

“I suppose so. And yet—that seems curiously unsatisfactory.”

“But it happens, my dear. Again and again throughout history it happens. And it gets one. It nearly got me, tonight. It did get you. If I hadn’t whisked you up here—” His manner changed suddenly. “I suppose I shouldn’t have done that. What will Betterton say? He’ll think it odd.”

“I don’t think so. I doubt if he’ll notice.”

He looked at her questioningly.

“I’m sorry, Olive. It must be all pretty fair hell for you. Seeing him go down the hill.”

Hilary said passionately:

“We must get out of here. We must. We must.”

“We shall.”

“You said that before—but we’ve made no progress.”

“Oh yes we have. I’ve not been idle.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“No precise plan, but I’ve initiated subversive activities. There’s a lot of dissatisfaction here, far more than our Godlike Herr Director knows. Amongst the humbler members of the Unit, I mean. Food and money and luxury and women aren’t everything, you know. I’ll get you out of here yet, Olive.”

“And Tom too?”

Peters's face darkened.

"Listen, Olive, and believe what I say. Tom will do best to stay on here. He's"—he hesitated—"safer here than he would be in the outside world."

"Safer? What a curious word."

"Safer," said Peters. "I use the word deliberately."

Hilary frowned.

"I don't really see what you mean. Tom's not—you don't think he's becoming mentally unhinged?"

"Not in the least. He's het up, but I'd say Tom Betterton's as sane as you or I."

"Then why are you saying he'd be safer here?"

Peters said slowly:

"A cage, you know, is a very safe place to be."

"Oh no," cried Hilary. "Don't tell me you're going to believe that too. Don't tell me that mass-hypnotism, or suggestion, or whatever it is, is working on you. Safe, tame, content! We must rebel still! We must want to be free!"

Peters said slowly:

"Yes, I know. But—"

"Tom, at any rate, wants desperately to get away from here."

"Tom mayn't know what's good for him."

Suddenly Hilary remembered what Tom had hinted at to her. If he had disposed of secret information he would be liable, she supposed, to prosecution under the Official Secrets Act—that, no doubt, was what Peters was hinting at in his rather embarrassed way—but Hilary was clear in her

own mind. Better to serve a prison sentence than remain on here. She said, obstinately:

“Tom must come too.”

She was startled when Peters said suddenly, in a bitter tone:

“Have it your own way. I’ve warned you. I wish I knew what the hell makes you care for that fellow so much.”

She stared at him in dismay. Words sprang to her lips, but she checked them. She realized that what she wanted to say was, “I don’t care for him. He’s nothing to me. He was another woman’s husband and I’ve a responsibility to her.” She wanted to say, “You fool, if there’s anybody I care about, it’s you. . . .”

III

“Been enjoying yourself with your tame American?”

Tom Betterton threw the words at her as she entered their bedroom. He was lying on his back on his bed, smoking.

Hilary flushed slightly.

“We arrived here together,” she said, “and we seem to think alike about certain things.”

He laughed.

“Oh! I don’t blame you.” For the first time he looked at her in a new and appraising way. “You’re a good-looking woman, Olive,” he said.

From the beginning Hilary had urged him always to call her by his wife’s name.

“Yes,” he continued, his eyes raking her up and down. “You’re a damned good-looking woman. I’d have noticed that once. As it is, nothing of that kind seems to register with me any more.”

“Perhaps it’s just as well,” said Hilary drily.

“I’m a perfectly normal man, my dear, or I used to be. God knows what I am now.”

Hilary sat down by him.

“What is the matter with you, Tom?” she said.

“I tell you. I can’t concentrate. As a scientist I’m shot to pieces. This place —”

“The others—or most of them—don’t seem to feel like you?”

“Because they’re a damned insensitive crowd, I suppose.”

“Some of them are temperamental enough,” said Hilary, drily. She went on, “If only you had a friend here—a real friend.”

“Well, there’s Murchison. Though he’s a dull dog. And I’ve seen a good deal of Torquil Ericsson lately.”

“Really?” For some reason Hilary felt surprised.

“Yes. My God, he’s brilliant. I wish I had his brains.”

“He’s an odd sort of person,” said Hilary. “I always find him rather frightening.”

“Frightening? Torquil? He’s as mild as milk. Like a child in some ways. No knowledge of the world.”

“Well I find him frightening,” repeated Hilary obstinately.

“Your nerves must be getting upset, too.”

“Not yet. I suspect they will, though. Tom—don’t get too friendly with Torquil Ericsson.”

He stared at her.

“Why ever not?”

“I don’t know. It’s a feeling I have.”

Seventeen

I

Leblanc shrugged his shoulders.

“They have left Africa, it is certain.”

“Not certain.”

“The probabilities point that way.” The Frenchman shook his head. “After all, we know, do we not, for where they are bound?”

“If they are bound for where we think, why start the journey from Africa? Anywhere in Europe would be simpler.”

“That is true. But there is the other side of it. No one would expect them to assemble and start from here.”

“I still think there’s more to it than that.” Jessop was gently insistent.

“Besides, only a small plane could have used that airfield. It would have to come down and refuel before crossing the Mediterranean. And where they refuelled some trace should have been left.”

“Mon cher, we have instituted the most searching inquiries—everywhere there has been—”

“The men with the Geiger counters must get results in the end. The number of planes to be examined is limited. Just a trace of radioactivity and we shall know that is the plane we are looking for—”

“If your agent has been able to use the spray. Alas! always so many ‘if’s’. . .
.”

“We shall get there,” said Jessop obstinately. “I wonder—”

“Yes?”

“We have assumed they are going North—towards the Mediterranean. Suppose instead, they flew South.”

“Doubled back on their tracks? But where, then, could they be flying to? There are the Mountains of the High Atlas—and after that the desert sands.”

II

“Sidi, you swear to me that it will be as you have promised? A petrol station in America, in Chicago? It is certain?”

“It is certain, Mohammed, if we get out of here, that is.”

“Success depends on the will of Allah.”

“Let us hope, then, that it is the will of Allah that you should have a petrol station in Chicago. Why Chicago?”

“Sidi, the brother of my wife went to America, and he has there a petrol pump in Chicago. Do I want to remain in a backward part of the world all my days? Here there is money and much food and many rugs and women—but it is not modern. It is not America.”

Peters looked thoughtfully into the dignified black face. Mohammed in his white robes was a magnificent sight. What strange desires rose in the human heart.

“I don’t know that you’re wise,” he said with a sigh, “but so be it. Of course, if we are found out—”

A smile on the black face revealed beautiful white teeth.

“Then it is death—for me certainly. Perhaps not for you, Sidi, since you are valuable.”

“They deal out death rather easily here, do they?”

The shoulders of the other man rose and fell contemptuously.

“What is death? That, too, is the will of Allah!”

“You know what you have to do?”

“I know, Sidi. I am to take you to the roof after dark. Also I am to put in your room clothing such as I and the other servants wear. Later—there will be other things.”

“Right. You’d better let me out of the lift now. Somebody may notice we’re riding up and down. It may give them ideas.”

III

There was dancing going on. Andy Peters was dancing with Miss Jennson. He held her close to him, and seemed to be murmuring in her ear. As they revolved slowly near where Hilary was standing he caught her eye and immediately gave her an outrageous wink.

Hilary, biting her lip to avoid a smile, averted her eyes quickly.

Her glance fell on Betterton who was standing just across the room talking to Torquil Ericsson. Hilary frowned a little as she watched them.

“Have a turn with me, Olive?” said Murchison’s voice at her elbow.

“Yes, of course, Simon.”

“Mind you, I’m not very hot at dancing,” he warned her.

Hilary concentrated on keeping her feet where he could not possibly tread on them.

“It’s exercise, that’s what I say,” said Murchison, panting slightly. He was an energetic dancer.

“Awfully jolly frock you’ve got on, Olive.”

His conversation seemed always to come out of an old-fashioned novel.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Hilary.

“Get it out of the Fashion Department?”

Resisting the temptation to reply: “Where else?” Hilary merely said, “Yes.”

“Must say, you know,” panted Murchison, as he capered perseveringly round the floor, “they do you jolly well here. Said so to Bianca only the other day. Beats the Welfare State every time. No worries about money, or income tax—or repairs or upkeep. All the worrying done for you. Must be a wonderful life for a woman, I should say.”

“Bianca finds it so, does she?”

“Well, she was restless for a bit, but now she’s managed to get up a few committees and organize one or two things—debates, you know, and lectures. She’s complaining that you don’t take as much part as you might in things.”

“I’m afraid I’m not that kind of person, Simon. I’ve never been very public spirited.”

“Yes, but you girls have got to keep yourselves amused one way or another. At least I don’t mean amused exactly—”

“Occupied?” suggested Hilary.

“Yes—I mean the modern woman wants to get her teeth into something. I quite realize that women like you and Bianca have made a definite sacrifice coming here—you’re neither of you scientists, thank goodness—really, these scientific women! Absolutely the limit, most of them! I said to Bianca, ‘Give Olive time, she’s got to get tuned in.’ It takes a little time getting used to this place. To begin with, one gets a kind of claustrophobic feeling. But it wears off—it wears off. . . .”

“You mean—one can get used to anything?”

“Well, some people feel it more than others. Tom, now, seems to take it hard. Where’s old Tom tonight? Oh yes, I see, over there with Torquil. Quite inseparable, those two.”

“I wish they weren’t. I mean, I shouldn’t have thought they had very much in common.”

“Young Torquil seems fascinated by your husband. He follows him round everywhere.”

“I’ve noticed it. I wondered—why?”

“Well, he’s always got some outlandish theory to get off his chest—it’s beyond my power to follow him—his English isn’t too good, as you know. But Tom listens and manages to take it all in.”

The dance ended. Andy Peters came up and claimed Hilary for the next one.

“I observed you suffering in a good cause,” he said. “How badly did you get trampled?”

“Oh, I was fairly agile.”

“You noticed me doing my stuff?”

“With the Jennson?”

“Yes. I think I may say without undue modesty that I have made a hit, a palpable hit in that quarter. These plain, angular, shortsighted girls respond immediately when given the treatment.”

“You certainly gave the impression of having fallen for her.”

“That was the idea. That girl, Olive, properly handled, can be very useful. She’s in the know about all the arrangements here. For instance, tomorrow there’s a party of various V.I.P.s due here. Doctors and a few Government officials and a rich patron or two.”

“Andy—do you think there might be a chance. . . .”

“No, I don’t. I bet that’s going to be taken care of. So don’t cherish false hopes. But it will be valuable because we’ll get an idea of the procedure. And on the next occasion—well, there might be something doing. So long as I can keep the Jennson eating out of my hand, I can get a lot of miscellaneous information out of her.”

“How much do the people who are coming know?”

“About us—the Unit, I mean—nothing at all. Or so I gather. They just inspect the settlement and the medical research laboratories. This place has been deliberately built like a labyrinth, just so that nobody coming into it can possibly guess its extent. I gather there are kinds of bulkheads that close, and that shut off our area.”

“It all seems so incredible.”

“I know. Half the time one feels one must be dreaming. One of the unreal things here is never seeing any children about. Thank goodness there aren’t. You must be thankful you haven’t got a child.”

He felt the sudden stiffening of her body.

“Here—I’m sorry—I said the wrong thing!” He led her off the dance floor and to a couple of chairs.

“I’m very sorry,” he repeated. “I hurt you, didn’t I?”

“It’s nothing—no, really not your fault. I did have a child—and it died—that’s all.”

“You had a child?—” he stared, surprised. “I thought you’d only been married to Betterton six months?”

Olive flushed. She said quickly:

“Yes, of course. But I was—married before. I divorced my first husband.”

“Oh, I see. That’s the worst of this place. One doesn’t know anything about people’s lives before they came here, and so one goes and says the wrong

thing. It's odd to realize sometimes that I don't know anything about you at all."

"Or I anything about you. How you were brought up—and where—your family—"

"I was brought up in a strictly scientific atmosphere. Nourished on test tubes, you might say. Nobody ever thought of anything else. But I was never the bright boy of the family. Genius lay elsewhere."

"Where exactly?"

"A girl. She was brilliant. She might have been another Madame Curie. She could have opened up new horizons."

"She—what happened to her?"

He said shortly:

"She was killed."

Hilary guessed at some wartime tragedy. She said gently:

"You cared for her?"

"More than I have ever cared for anybody."

He roused himself suddenly.

"What the heck—we've got enough troubles in the present, right here and now. Look at our Norwegian friend. Apart from his eyes, he always looks as though he were made from wood. And that wonderful little stiff bow of his—as though you'd pulled a string."

"It's because he's so very tall and thin."

"Not so very tall. About my height—five-foot-eleven or six foot, not more."

"Height is deceptive."

“Yes, it’s like descriptions on passports. Take Ericsson. Height six foot, fair hair, blue eyes, face long, demeanour wooden, nose medium, mouth ordinary. Even add what a passport wouldn’t—speaks correctly but pedantically—you still wouldn’t have the first idea what Torquil really looked like. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

She was staring across the room at Ericsson. That description of Boris Glydr! Almost word for word as she had heard it from Jessop. Was that why she had always felt nervous of Torquil Ericsson? Could it possibly be that—

Turning abruptly to Peters she said:

“I suppose he is Ericsson? He couldn’t be someone else?”

Peters looked at her in astonishment.

“Someone else? Who?”

“I mean—at least I think I mean—could he have come here pretending to be Ericsson?”

Peters considered.

“I suppose—no, I don’t think that would be feasible. He’d have to be a scientist . . . and anyway, Ericsson is quite well known.”

“But nobody here seems ever to have met him before—or I suppose he could be Ericsson, but be someone else as well.”

“You mean Ericsson could have been leading some kind of double life? That’s possible, I suppose. But it’s not very likely.”

“No,” said Hilary. “No, of course it isn’t likely.”

Of course Ericsson was not Boris Glydr. But why should Olive Betterton have been so insistent on warning Tom against Boris? Could it have been because she knew that Boris was on his way to the Unit? Supposing the

man who had come to London calling himself Boris Glydr was not Boris Glydr at all? Supposing that he was really Torquil Ericsson. The description fitted. Ever since he arrived at the Unit, he had focused his attention on Tom. Ericsson, she was sure, was a dangerous person—you didn't know what went on behind those pale dreamy eyes. . . .

She shivered.

“Olive—what's the matter? What is it?”

“Nothing. Look. The Deputy Director is going to make an announcement.”

Dr. Nielson was holding up his hand for silence. He spoke into the microphone on the platform of the Hall.

“Friends and colleagues. Tomorrow you are asked to remain in the Emergency Wing. Please assemble at eleven a.m. when there will be a roll call. Emergency orders are for twenty-four hours only. I much regret the inconvenience. A notice has been posted on the board.”

He retired smiling. Then music began again.

“I must pursue the Jennson again,” said Peters. “I see her looking earnest by a pillar. I want to hear just what these Emergency quarters consist of.”

He moved away. Hilary sat thinking. Was she an imaginative fool? Torquil Ericsson? Boris Glydr?

IV

Roll call was in the big lecture room. Everyone was present and answered to his or her name. Then they were marshalled into a long column and marched off.

The route was, as usual, through a maze of winding corridors. Hilary, walking by Peters, knew that he had, concealed in his hand, a tiny compass. From this, unobtrusively, he was calculating their direction.

“Not that it helps,” he observed ruefully in a low tone. “Or at any rate it doesn’t help at the moment. But it may do—some time.”

At the end of the corridor they were following was a door and there was a momentary halt as the door was opened.

Peters took out his cigarette case—but immediately Van Heidem’s voice was raised peremptorily.

“No smoking, please. That has already been told you.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Peters paused with the cigarette case in his hand. Then they all went forward again.

“Just like sheep,” said Hilary disgustedly.

“Cheer up,” Peters murmured. “Baa, baa, black sheep is among the flock, thinking up devilry hard.”

She flashed him a grateful glance and smiled.

“Women’s dormitory to the right,” said Miss Jennson.

She shepherded the women off in the direction indicated.

The men were marched to the left.

The dormitory was a large room of hygienic appearance rather like a hospital ward. It had beds along the walls with curtains of plastic material that could be pulled for privacy. There was a locker by each bed.

“You will find arrangements rather simple,” said Miss Jennson, “but not too primitive. The bathroom accommodation is through there to the right. The communal living room is through the door at the end.”

The communal living room where they all met again was plainly furnished rather like an airport waiting room—there was a bar and snack counter at

one side. Along the other side was a row of bookshelves.

The day passed quite agreeably. There were two cinema performances shown on a small portable screen.

The lighting was of the daylight type which tended to obscure the fact that there were no windows. Towards evening a fresh set of bulbs came on—soft and discreet night lighting.

“Clever,” said Peters appreciatively. “It all helps to minimize the feeling of being walled up alive.”

How helpless they all were, thought Hilary. Somewhere, quite near them, were a party from the outside world. And there was no means of communicating with them, of appealing for help. As usual, everything had been ruthlessly and efficiently planned.

Peters was sitting with Miss Jennson. Hilary suggested to the Murchisons that they should play bridge. Tom Betterton refused. He said he couldn’t concentrate, but Dr. Barron made a fourth.

Oddly enough, Hilary found the game enjoyable. It was half-past eleven when their third rubber came to an end, with herself and Dr. Barron the winners.

“I enjoyed that,” she said. She glanced at her watch. “It’s quite late. I suppose the V.I.P.s will have left now—or do they spend the night here?”

“I don’t really know,” said Simon Murchison. “I believe one or two of the specially keen medicos stay over. Anyway, they’ll all have gone by tomorrow midday.”

“And that’s when we’re put back into circulation?”

“Yes. About time, too. It upsets all one’s routine, this sort of thing.”

“But it is well arranged,” said Bianca with approval.

She and Hilary got up and said good night to the two men. Hilary stood back a little to allow Bianca to precede her into the dimly lit dormitory. As she did so, she felt a soft touch on her arm.

She turned sharply to find one of the tall, dark-faced servants standing beside her.

He spoke in a low urgent voice in French.

“S’il vous plaît, Madame, you are to come.”

“Come? Come where?”

“If you will please follow me.”

She stood irresolute for a moment.

Bianca had gone on into the dormitory. In the communal living room the few persons left were engaged in conversation with each other.

Again she felt that soft urgent touch on her arm.

“You will follow me please, Madame.”

He moved a few steps and stood, looking back, beckoning to her. A little doubtfully Hilary followed him.

She noticed that this particular man was far more richly dressed than most of the native servants. His robes were embroidered heavily with gold thread.

He led her through a small door in a corner of the communal living room, then once more along the inevitable anonymous white corridors. She did not think it was the same way by which they had come to the Emergency Wing, but it was always difficult to be sure because of the similarity of the passages. Once she tried to ask a question but the guide shook his head impatiently and hurried on.

He stopped finally at the end of a corridor and pressed a button in the wall. A panel slid back disclosing a small lift. He gestured her in, followed her, and the lift shot upwards.

Hilary said sharply: "Where are you taking me?"

The dark eyes held hers in a kind of dignified reproof.

"To the Master, Madame. It is for you a great honour."

"To the Director, you mean?"

"To the Master. . . ."

The lift stopped. He slid back the doors and motioned her out. Then they walked down another corridor and arrived at a door. Her guide rapped on the door and it was opened from inside. Here again were white robes, gold embroidery and a black impassive face.

The man took Hilary across the small red-carpeted anteroom and drew aside some hangings at the farther side. Hilary passed through. She found herself, unexpectedly, in an almost oriental interior. There were low couches, coffee tables, one or two beautiful rugs hanging on the walls. Sitting on a low divan was a figure at whom she stared with complete incredulity. Small, yellow, wrinkled, old, she stared unbelievably into the smiling eyes of Mr. Aristides.

Eighteen

“Asseyez-vous, chère Madame,” said Mr. Aristides.

He waved a small claw-like hand, and Hilary came forward in a dream and sat down upon another low divan opposite him. He gave a gentle little cackle of laughter.

“You are surprised,” he said. “It is not what you expected, eh?”

“No, indeed,” said Hilary. “I never thought—I never imagined—”

But already her surprise was subsiding.

With her recognition of Mr. Aristides the dream world of unreality in which she had been living for the past weeks shattered and broke. She knew now that the Unit had seemed unreal to her—because it was unreal. It had never been what it pretended to be. The Herr Director with his spellbinder’s voice had been unreal too—a mere figurehead of fiction set up to obscure the truth. The truth was here in this secret oriental room. A little old man sitting there and laughing quietly. With Mr. Aristides in the centre of the picture, everything made sense—hard, practical, everyday sense.

“I see now,” said Hilary. “This—is all yours, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“And the Director? The so-called Director?”

“He is very good,” said Mr. Aristides appreciatively. “I pay him a very high salary. He used to run Revivalist Meetings.”

He smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two. Hilary did not speak.

“There is Turkish Delight beside you, Madame. And other sweetmeats if you prefer them.” Again there was a silence. Then he went on, “I am a

philanthropist, Madame. As you know, I am rich. One of the richest men—possibly the richest man—in the world today. With my wealth I feel under the obligation to serve humanity. I have established here, in this remote spot, a colony of lepers and a vast assembly of research into the problem of the cure of leprosy. Certain types of leprosy are curable. Others, so far, have proved incurable. But all the time we are working and obtaining good results. Leprosy is not really such an easily communicated disease. It is not half so infectious or so contagious as smallpox or typhus or plague or any of these other things. And yet, if you say to people, ‘a leper colony’ they will shudder and give it a wide berth. It is an old, old fear, that. A fear that you can find in the Bible, and which has existed all down through the years. The horror of the leper. It has been useful to me in establishing this place.”

“You established it for that reason?”

“Yes. We have here also a Cancer Research department, and important work is being done on tuberculosis. There is virus research, also—for curative reasons, bien entendu—biological warfare is not mentioned. All humane, all acceptable, all redounding greatly to my honour. Well-known physicians, surgeons and research chemists come here to see our results from time to time as they have come today. The building has been cunningly constructed in such a way that a part of it is shut off and unapparent even from the air. The more secret laboratories have been tunnelled right into the rock. In any case, I am above suspicion.” He smiled and added simply: “I am so very rich, you see.”

“But why?” demanded Hilary. “Why this urge for destruction?”

“I have no urge for destruction, Madame. You wrong me.”

“But then—I simply don’t understand.”

“I am a businessman,” said Mr. Aristides simply. “I am also a collector. When wealth becomes oppressive, that is the only thing to do. I have collected many things in my time. Pictures—I have the finest art collection in Europe. Certain kinds of ceramics. Philately—my stamp collection is famous. When a collection is fully representative, one goes on to the next

thing. I am an old man, Madame, and there was not very much more for me to collect. So I came at last to collecting brains.”

“Brains?” Hilary queried.

He nodded gently.

“Yes, it is the most interesting thing to collect of all. Little by little, Madame, I am assembling here all the brains of the world. The young men, those are the ones I am bringing here. Young men of promise, young men of achievement. One day the tired nations of the world will wake up and realize that their scientists are old and stale, and that the young brains of the world, the doctors, the research chemists, the physicists, the surgeons, are all here in my keeping. And if they want a scientist, or a plastic surgeon, or a biologist, they will have to come and buy him from me!”

“You mean . . .” Hilary leaned forward, staring at him. “You mean that this is all a gigantic financial operation.”

Again Mr. Aristides nodded gently.

“Yes,” he said. “Naturally. Otherwise—it would not make sense, would it?”

Hilary gave a deep sigh.

“No,” she said. “That’s just what I’ve felt.”

“After all, you see,” said Mr. Aristides almost apologetically. “It is my profession. I am a financier.”

“And you mean there is no political side to this at all? You don’t want World Power—?”

He threw up his hand in rebuke.

“I do not want to be God,” he said. “I am a religious man. That is the occupational disease of Dictators: wanting to be God. So far I have not contracted that disease.” He reflected a moment and said: “It may come. Yes, it may come . . . But as yet, mercifully—no.”

“But how do you get all these people to come here?”

“I buy them, Madame. In the open market, like any other merchandise. Sometimes I buy them with money. More often, I buy them with ideas. Young men are dreamers. They have ideals. They have beliefs. Sometimes I buy them with safety—those that have transgressed the law.”

“That explains it,” said Hilary. “Explains, I mean, what puzzled me so on the journey here.”

“Ah! It puzzled you on the journey, did it?”

“Yes. The difference in aims. Andy Peters, the American, seemed completely Left Wing. But Ericsson was a fanatical believer in the Superman. And Helga Needheim was a Fascist of the most arrogant and pagan kind. Dr. Barron—” She hesitated.

“Yes, he came for money,” said Aristides. “Dr. Barron is civilized and cynical. He has no illusions, but he has a genuine love of his work. He wanted unlimited money, so as to pursue his researches further.” He added: “You are intelligent, Madame. I saw that at once in Fez.”

He gave a gentle little cackle of laughter.

“You did not know it, Madame, but I went to Fez simply to observe you—or rather I had you brought to Fez in order that I might observe you.”

“I see,” said Hilary.

She noted the oriental rephrasing of the sentence.

“I was pleased to think that you would be coming here. For, if you understand me, I do not find many intelligent people in this place to talk to.” He made a gesture. “These scientists, these biologists, these research chemists, they are not interesting. They are geniuses perhaps at what they do, but they are uninteresting people with whom to converse.”

“Their wives,” he added thoughtfully, “are usually very dull, too. We do not encourage wives here. I permit wives to come for only one reason.”

“What reason?”

Mr. Aristides said drily:

“In the rare cases where a husband is unable to do his work properly because he is thinking too much of his wife. That seemed to be the case with your husband, Thomas Betterton. Thomas Betterton is known to the world as a young man of genius, but since he has been here he has done only mediocre and second-class work. Yes, Betterton has disappointed me.”

“But don’t you find that constantly happening? These people are, after all, in prison here. Surely they rebel? At first, at any rate?”

“Yes,” Mr. Aristides agreed. “That is only natural and inevitable. It is so when you first cage a bird. But if the bird is in a big enough aviary; if it has all that it needs; a mate, seed, water, twigs, all the material of life, it forgets in the end that it was ever free.”

Hilary shivered a little.

“You frighten me,” she said. “You really frighten me.”

“You will grow to understand many things here, Madame. Let me assure you that though all these men of different ideologies arrive here and are disillusioned and rebellious, they will all toe the line in the end.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” said Hilary.

“One can be absolutely sure of nothing in this world. I agree with you there. But it is a ninety-five percent certainty all the same.”

Hilary looked at him with something like horror.

“It’s dreadful,” she said. “It’s like a typists’ pool! You’ve got a pool here of brains.”

“Exactly. You put it very justly, Madame.”

“And from this pool, you intend, one day, to supply scientists to whoever pays you best for them?”

“That is, roughly, the general principle, Madame.”

“But you can’t send out a scientist just as you can send out a typist.”

“Why not?”

“Because once your scientist is in the free world again, he could refuse to work for his new employer. He would be free again.”

“True up to a point. There may have to be a certain—conditioning, shall we say?”

“Conditioning—what do you mean by that?”

“You have heard of Leucotomy, Madame?” Hilary frowned.

“That’s a brain operation, isn’t it?”

“But yes. It was devised originally for the curing of melancholia. I put it to you not in medical terms, Madame, but in such terms as you and I understand. After the operation the patient has no more desire to commit suicide, no further feelings of guilt. He is carefree, conscienceless and in most cases obedient.”

“It hasn’t been a hundred percent success, has it?”

“In the past, no. But here we have made great strides in the investigation of the subject. I have here three surgeons: one Russian, one Frenchman, and an Austrian. By various operations of grafting and delicate manipulation of the brain, they are arriving gradually at a state where docility can be assured and the will can be controlled without necessarily affecting mental brilliance. It seems possible that we may in the end so condition a human being that while his powers of intellect remain unimpaired, he will exhibit perfect docility. Any suggestion made to him he will accept.”

“But that’s horrible,” cried Hilary. “Horrible!”

He corrected her serenely.

“It is useful. It is even in some ways beneficent. For the patient will be happy, contented, without fears or longings or unrest.”

“I don’t believe it will ever happen,” said Hilary defiantly.

“Chère Madame, forgive me if I say you are hardly competent to speak on the subject.”

“What I mean is,” said Hilary, “that I do not believe a contented, suggestible animal will ever produce creative work of real brilliance.”

Aristides shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps. You are intelligent. You may have something there. Time will show. Experiments are going on all the time.”

“Experiments! On human beings, do you mean?”

“But certainly. That is the only practical method.”

“But—what human beings?”

“There are always the misfits,” said Aristides. “The ones who do not adapt themselves to life here, who will not cooperate. They make good experimental material.”

Hilary dug her fingers into the cushions of the divan. She felt a deep horror of this smiling, yellow-faced little man with his inhuman outlook. Everything he said was so reasonable, so logical and so businesslike, that it made the horror worse. Here was no raving madman, just a man to whom his fellow creatures were so much raw material.

“Don’t you believe in God?” she said.

“Naturally I believe in God.” Mr. Aristides raised his eyebrows. His tone was almost shocked. “I have told you already. I am a religious man. God has blessed me with supreme power. With money and opportunity.”

“Do you read your Bible?” asked Hilary.

“Certainly, Madame.”

“Do you remember what Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh? Let my people go.”

He smiled.

“So—I am Pharaoh? And you are Moses and Aaron in one? Is that what you are saying to me, Madame? To let these people go, all of them, or just—one special case?”

“I’d like to say—all of them,” said Hilary.

“But you are well aware, chère Madame,” he said, “that that would be a waste of time. So instead, is it not your husband for whom you plead?”

“He is no good to you,” said Hilary. “Surely by now you must realize that.”

“Perhaps it is true what you say, Madame. Yes, I am very much disappointed in Thomas Betterton. I hoped that your presence here might restore him to his brilliance, for undoubtedly he has brilliance. His reputation in America leaves no doubt as to that. But your coming seems to have had little or no effect. I speak not of my own knowledge, of course, but from the reports of those fitted to know. His brother scientists who have been working with him.” He shrugged his shoulders. “He does conscientious, mediocre work. No more.”

“There are birds that cannot sing in captivity,” said Hilary. “Perhaps there are scientists who cannot attain creative thought under certain circumstances. You must admit that that is a reasonable possibility.”

“It may be so. I do not deny it.”

“Then write off Thomas Betterton as one of your failures. Let him return to the outer world.”

“That would hardly do, Madame. I am not yet prepared to have knowledge of this place broadcast to the globe.”

“You could swear him to secrecy. He would swear never to breathe a word.”

“He would swear—yes. But he would not keep that word.”

“He would! Oh, indeed, he would!”

“There speaks a wife! One cannot take the word of wives on this point. Of course,” he leaned back in his chair, and brought the tips of his yellow fingers together, “of course, he might leave a hostage behind him, and that might tie his tongue.”

“You mean?”

“I meant you, Madame . . . If Thomas Betterton went, and you remained as a hostage, how would that bargain strike you? Would you be willing?”

Hilary stared past him into the shadows. Mr. Aristides could not know the pictures that rose before her eyes. She was back in a hospital room, sitting by a dying woman. She was listening to Jessop and memorizing his instructions. If there was a chance, now, that Thomas Betterton might go free, whilst she remained, would not that be the best way to fulfil her mission? For she knew (what Mr. Aristides did not), that there would be no hostage in the usual meaning of the word, left behind. She herself meant nothing to Thomas Betterton. The wife he had loved was already dead.

She raised her head and looked across at the little old man on the divan.

“I should be willing,” she said.

“You have courage, Madame, and loyalty and devotion. They are good qualities. For the rest—” He smiled. “We will talk of it again some other time.”

“Oh no, no!” Hilary suddenly buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook. “I can’t bear it! I can’t bear it! It’s all too inhuman.”

“You must not mind so much, Madame.” The old man’s voice was tender, almost soothing. “It has pleased me tonight to tell you my aims and my aspirations. It has been interesting to me to see the effect upon a mind totally unprepared. A mind like yours, well-balanced, sane and intelligent. You are horrified. You are repulsed. Yet I think that to shock you in this way is a wise plan. At first you repel the idea, then you think of it, you reflect on it, and in the end it will seem to you natural; as though it has always existed, a commonplace.”

“Never that!” cried Hilary. “Never that! Never! Never!”

“Ah,” said Mr. Aristides. “There speaks the passion and the rebellion that go with red hair. My second wife,” he added reflectively, “had red hair. She was a beautiful woman, and she loved me. Strange, is it not? I have always admired red-haired women. Your hair is very beautiful. There are other things I like about you. Your spirit, your courage; the fact that you have a mind of your own.” He sighed. “Alas! Women as women interest me very little nowadays. I have a couple of young girls here who please me sometimes, but it is the stimulus of mental companionship that I now prefer. Believe me, Madame, your company has refreshed me greatly.”

“Supposing I repeat all that you have told me to—my husband?”

Mr. Aristides smiled indulgently.

“Ah yes, supposing you do? But will you?”

“I don’t know. I—oh, I don’t know.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Aristides. “You are wise. There is some knowledge women should keep to themselves. But you are tired—and upset. From time to time, when I pay my visits here, you shall be brought to me, and we will discuss many things.”

“Let me leave this place—” Hilary stretched her hands out to him. “Oh, let me go away. Let me leave with you when you go. Please! Please!”

He shook his head gently. His expression was indulgent, but there was a faint touch of contempt behind it.

“Now you are talking like a child,” he said reprovingly. “How could I let you go? How could I let you spread the story round the world of what you have seen here?”

“Wouldn’t you believe me if I swore I wouldn’t say a word to anyone?”

“No indeed I should not believe you,” said Mr. Aristides. “I should be very foolish if I believed anything of the kind.”

“I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to stay here in this prison. I want to get out.”

“But you have your husband. You came here to join him, deliberately, of your own free will.”

“But I didn’t know what I was coming to. I’d no idea.”

“No,” said Mr. Aristides, “you had no idea. But I can assure you this particular world you have come to is a much pleasanter world than the life beyond the Iron Curtain. Here you have everything you need! Luxury, a beautiful climate, distractions. . . .”

He got up and patted her gently on the shoulder.

“You will settle down,” he said, confidently. “Ah yes, the red-haired bird in the cage will settle down. In a year, in two years certainly, you will be very happy! Though possibly,” he added thoughtfully, “less interesting.”

Nineteen

I

Hilary awoke the following night with a start. She raised herself on her elbow, listening.

“Tom, do you hear?”

“Yes. Aircraft—flying low. Nothing in that. They come over from time to time.”

“I wondered—” She did not finish her sentence.

She lay awake thinking, going over and over that strange interview with Aristides.

The old man had got some kind of capricious liking for her.

Could she play upon that?

Could she in the end prevail upon him to take her with him, out into the world again?

Next time he came, if he sent for her, she would lead him on to talk of his dead red-haired wife. It was not the lure of the flesh that would captivate him. His blood ran too coldly now in his veins for that. Besides he had his “young girls.” But the old like to remember, to be urged on to talk of times gone by. . . .

Uncle George, who had lived at Cheltenham . . .

Hilary smiled in the darkness, remembering Uncle George.

Were Uncle George and Aristides, the man of millions, really very different under the skin? Uncle George had had a housekeeper—"such a nice, safe woman, my dear, not flashy or sexy or anything like that. Nice and plain and sane." But Uncle George had upset his family by marrying that nice, plain woman. She had been a very good listener. . . .

What had Hilary said to Tom? "I'll find a way of getting out of here?" Odd, if the way should prove to be Aristides.

II

"A message," said Leblanc. "A message at last."

His orderly had just entered and, after saluting, had laid a folded paper before him. He unfolded it, then spoke excitedly.

"This is a report from one of our reconnaissance pilots. He has been operating over a selected square of territory in the High Atlas. When flying over a certain position in a mountainous region he observed a signal being flashed. It was in Morse and was twice repeated. Here it is."

He laid the enclosure before Jessop.

COGLEPROSIESL

He separated off the last two letters with a pencil.

"SL—that is our code for 'Do not acknowledge.' "

"And COG with which the message starts," said Jessop, "is our recognition signal."

"Then the rest is the actual message." He underlined it. "LEPROSIE." He surveyed it dubiously.

"Leprosy?" said Jessop.

"And what does that mean?"

“Have you any important leper settlements? Or unimportant ones for that matter?”

Leblanc spread out a large map in front of him. He pointed with a stubby forefinger stained with nicotine.

“Here,” he marked it off, “is the area over which our pilot was operating. Let me see now. I seem to recall. . . .”

He left the room. Presently he returned.

“I have it,” he said. “There is a very famous medical research station, founded and endowed by well-known philanthropists and operating in that area—a very deserted one, by the way. Valuable work has been done there in the study of leprosy. There is a leper settlement there of about two hundred people. There is also a cancer research station, and a tubercular sanatorium. But understand this, it is all of the highest authenticity. Its reputation is of the highest. The President of the Republic himself is its Patron.”

“Yes,” said Jessop appreciatively. “Very nice work, in fact.”

“But it is open to inspection at any time. Medical men who are interested in these subjects visit there.”

“And see nothing they ought not to see! Why should they? There is no better camouflage for dubious business than an atmosphere of the highest respectability.”

“It could be,” Leblanc said dubiously, “I suppose, a halting place for parties of people bound on a journey. One or two of the mid-European doctors, perhaps, have managed to arrange something like that. A small party of people, like the one we are tracking, could lie perdu there for a few weeks before continuing their journey.”

“I think it might be something more than that,” said Jessop. “I think it might be—Journey’s End.”

“You think it is something—big?”

“A leper settlement seems to me very suggestive . . . I believe, under modern treatment, leprosy nowadays is treated at home.”

“In civilized communities, perhaps. But one could not do that in this country.”

“No. But the word leprosy still has its association with the Middle Ages when the leper carried his bell to warn away people from his path. Idle curiosity does not bring people to a leper settlement; the people who come are, as you say, the medical profession, interested only in the medical research done there, and possibly the social worker, anxious to report on the conditions under which the lepers live—all of which are no doubt admirable. Behind that facade of philanthropy and charity—anything might go on. Who, by the way, owns the place? Who are the philanthropists who endowed it and set it up?”

“That is easily ascertained. A little minute.”

He returned shortly, an official reference book in his hand.

“It was established by private enterprise. By a group of philanthropists of whom the chief is Aristides. As you know, he is a man of fabulous wealth, and gives generously to charitable enterprises. He has founded hospitals in Paris and also in Seville. This is, to all intents and purposes, his show—the other benefactors are a group of his associates.”

“So—it’s an Aristides enterprise. And Aristides was in Fez when Olive Betterton was there.”

“Aristides!” Leblanc savoured the full implication. “Mais—c’est colossal!”

“Yes.”

“C’est fantastique!”

“Quite.”

“Enfin—c’est formidable!”

“Definitely.”

“But do you realize how formidable it is?” Leblanc shook an excited forefinger in the other’s face. “This Aristides, he has a finger in every pie. He is behind nearly everything. The banks, the Government, the manufacturing industries, armaments, transport! One never sees him, one hardly hears of him! He sits in a warm room in his Spanish castle, smoking, and sometimes he scrawls a few words on a little piece of paper and throws it on the ground, and a secretary crawls forward and picks it up, and a few days later an important banker in Paris blows his brains out! It is like that!”

“How wonderfully dramatic you are, Leblanc. But it is really not very surprising. Presidents and Ministers make important pronouncements, bankers sit back behind their sumptuous desks and roll out opulent statements—but one is never surprised to find out that behind the importance and magnificence there is somewhere some scrubby little man who is the real motive power. It is really not at all surprising to find that Aristides is behind all this disappearing business—in fact if we’d had any sense we’d have thought of it before. The whole thing’s a vast commercial ramp. It’s not political at all. The question is,” he added, “what are we going to do about it?”

Leblanc’s face grew gloomy.

“It is not going to be easy, you understand. If we are wrong—I dare not think of it! And even if we are right—we have got to prove we are right. If we make investigations—those investigations can be called off—at the highest level, you understand? No, it is not going to be easy . . . But,” he wagged an emphatic stubby forefinger, “it will be done.”

Twenty.

The cars swept up the mountain road and stopped in front of the great gate set in the rock. There were four cars. In the first car was a French Minister and the American Ambassador, in the second car was the British Consul, a Member of Parliament and the Chief of Police. In the third car were two members of a former Royal Commission and two distinguished journalists. The complement of these three cars was made up with the necessary satellites. The fourth car contained certain people not known to the general public, but sufficiently distinguished in their own sphere. They included Captain Leblanc and Mr. Jessop. The chauffeurs, immaculately garbed, were now opening car doors and bowing as they assisted the distinguished visitors to alight.

“One hopes,” murmured the Minister, apprehensively, that there will be no possibility of a contact of any kind.”

One of the satellites immediately made soothing noises.

“Du tout, M. le Ministre. Every suitable precaution is taken. One inspects only from a distance.”

The Minister, who was elderly and apprehensive, looked relieved. The Ambassador said something about the better understanding and treatment of these diseases nowadays.

The great gates were flung open. On the threshold stood a small party bowing to welcome them. The Director, dark, thick-set, the Deputy Director, big and fair, two distinguished doctors and a distinguished research chemist. The greetings were French, florid and prolonged.

“And ce cher Aristides,” demanded the Minister. “I sincerely hope ill-health has not prevented him from fulfilling his promise to meet us here.”

“Mr. Aristides flew from Spain yesterday,” said the Deputy Director. “He awaits you within. Permit me, Your Excellency—M. le Ministre, to lead the way.”

The party followed him. M. le Ministre, who was slightly apprehensive, glanced through the heavy railings to his right. The lepers were drawn up to attention in a serried row as far as possible from the grating. The Minister looked relieved. His feelings about leprosy were still medieval.

In the well-furnished modern lounge Mr. Aristides was awaiting his guests. There were bows, compliments, introductions. Apéritifs were served by the dark-faced servants dressed in their white robes and turbans.

“It’s a wonderful place you have here, sir,” said one of the younger journalists to Aristides.

The latter made one of his oriental gestures.

“I am proud of this place,” he said. “It is, as you might say, my swan song. My final gift to humanity. No expense has been spared.”

“I’ll say that’s so,” said one of the doctors on the staff, heartily. “This place is a professional man’s dream. We do pretty well in the States, but what I’ve seen since I came here . . . and we’re getting results! Yes, sir, we certainly are getting results.”

His enthusiasm was of a contagious kind.

“We must make all acknowledgements to private enterprise,” said the Ambassador, bowing politely to Mr. Aristides.

Mr. Aristides spoke with humility.

“God has been very good to me,” he said.

Sitting hunched up in his chair he looked like a small yellow toad. The Member of Parliament murmured to the member of the Royal Commission, who was very old and deaf, that he presented a very interesting paradox.

“That old rascal has probably ruined millions of people,” he murmured, “and having made so much money he doesn’t know what to do with it, he pays it back with the other hand.” The elderly judge to whom he spoke murmured:

“One wonders to what extent results justify increased expenditure. Most of the great discoveries that have benefited the human race have been discovered with quite simple equipment.”

“And now,” said Aristides, when the civilities were accomplished and the apéritifs drunk, “you will honour me by partaking of a simple repast which awaits you. Dr. Van Heidem will act as your host. I myself am on a diet and eat very little these days. After the repast you will start on your tour of our building.”

Under the leadership of the genial Dr. Van Heidem the guests moved enthusiastically into the dining room. They had had a two hours’ flight followed by an hour’s drive by car and they were all sharp set. The food was delicious and was commented on with special approval by the Minister.

“We enjoy our modest comforts,” said Van Heidem. “Fresh fruit and vegetables are flown to us twice a week, arrangements are made for meat and chicken and we have, of course, substantial deep freezing units. The body must claim its due from the resources of science.”

The meal was accompanied by choice vintages. After it Turkish coffee was served. The party was then asked to start on its tour of inspection. The tour took two hours and was most comprehensive. The Minister, for one, was glad when it finished. He was quite dazed by the gleaming laboratories, the endless white, shining corridors, and still more dazed by the mass of scientific detail handed out to him.

Though the Minister’s interest was perfunctory, some of the others were more searching in their inquiries. Some curiosity was displayed as to the living conditions of the personnel and various other details. Dr. Van Heidem showed himself only too willing to show the guests all there was to see. Leblanc and Jessop, the former in attendance on the Minister and the latter accompanying the British Consul, fell a little behind the others as they all

returned to the lounge. Jessop took out an old-fashioned, loudly ticking watch and noted the time.

“There is no trace here, nothing,” murmured Leblanc in an agitated manner.

“Not a sign.”

“Mon cher, if we have, as your saying is, barked up the wrong tree, what a catastrophe! After the weeks it has taken to arrange all this! As for me—it will finish my career.”

“We’re not licked yet,” said Jessop. “Our friends are here, I’m sure of it.”

“There is no trace of them.”

“Of course there is no trace. They could not afford to have a trace of them. For these official visits everything is prepared and arranged.”

“Then how are we to get our evidence? I tell you, without evidence no one will move in the matter. They are sceptical, all of them. The Minister, the American Ambassador, the British Consul—they say all of them, that a man like Aristides is above suspicion.”

“Keep calm, Leblanc, keep calm. I tell you we’re not licked yet.”

Leblanc shrugged his shoulders. “You have the optimism, my friend,” he said. He turned for a moment to speak to one of the immaculately arrayed, moon-faced young men who formed part of the entourage, then turned back to Jessop and asked suspiciously: “Why are you smiling?”

“At the resources of science—the latest modification of the Geiger Counter, to be exact.”

“I am not a scientist.”

“No more am I, but this very sensitive detector of radioactivity tells me our friends are here. This building has been purposely built in a confusing manner. All the corridors and the rooms so resemble each other that it is

difficult to know where one is or what the plan of the building can be. There is a part of this place that we have not seen. It has not been shown to us.”

“But you deduce that it is there because of some radioactive indication?”

“Exactly.”

“In fact, it is the pearls of Madame all over again?”

“Yes. We’re still playing Hansel and Gretel, as you might say. But the signs left here cannot be so apparent or so crude as the beads of a pearl necklace, or a hand of phosphoric paint. They cannot be seen, but they can be sensed . . . by our radioactive detector—”

“But, mon Dieu, Jessop, is that enough?”

“It would be,” said Jessop. “What one is afraid of . . .” He broke off.

Leblanc finished the sentence for him.

“What you mean is that these people will not want to believe. They have been unwilling from the start. Oh yes, that is so. Even your British Consul is a man of caution. Your government at home is indebted to Aristides in many ways. As for our Government,” he shrugged his shoulders. “M. le Ministre, I know, will be exceedingly hard to convince.”

“We won’t put our faith in governments,” said Jessop. “Governments and diplomats have their hands tied. But we’ve got to have them here, because they’re the only ones with authority. But as far as believing is concerned, I’m pinning my faith elsewhere.”

“And on what in particular do you pin your faith, my friend?”

Jessop’s solemn face suddenly relaxed into a grin.

“There’s the press,” he said. “Journalists have a nose for news. They don’t want it hushed up. They’re ready always to believe anything that remotely can be believed. The other person I have faith in,” he went on, “is that very deaf old man.”

“Aha, I know the one you mean. The one who looks as though he crumbles to his grave.”

“Yes, he’s deaf and infirm and semiblind. But he’s interested in truth. He’s a former Lord Chief Justice, and though he may be deaf and blind and shaky on his legs, his mind’s as keen as ever—he’s got that keen sense that legal luminaries acquire—of knowing when there’s something fishy about and someone’s trying to prevent it being brought into the open. He’s a man who’ll listen, and will want to listen, to evidence.”

They had arrived back now in the lounge. Both tea and apéritifs were provided. The Minister congratulated Mr. Aristides in well-rounded periods. The American Ambassador added his quota. It was then that the Minister, looking round him, said in a slightly nervous tone of voice:

“And now, gentlemen, I think the time has come for us to leave our kind host. We have seen all there is to see . . .” his tone dwelt on those last words with some significance; “all here is magnificent. An establishment of the first-class! We are most grateful for the hospitality of our kind host, and we congratulate him on the achievement here. So we say our farewells now and depart. I am right, am I not?”

The words were, in a sense, conventional enough. The manner, too, was conventional. The glance that swept round the assembly of guests might have been no more than courtesy. Yet in actuality the words were a plea. In effect, the Minister was saying, “You’ve seen, gentlemen, there is nothing here, nothing of what you suspected and feared. That is a great relief and we can now leave with a clear conscience.”

But in the silence a voice spoke. It was the quiet, deferential, well-bred English voice of Mr. Jessop. He spoke to the Minister in a Britannic though idiomatic French.

“With your permission, sir,” he said, “and if I may do so, I would like to ask a favour of our kind host.”

“Certainly, certainly. Of course, Mr.—ah—Mr. Jessop—yes, yes?” Jessop addressed himself solemnly to Dr. Van Heidem. He did not look ostensibly

to Mr. Aristides.

“We’ve met so many of your people,” he said. “Quite bewildering. But there’s an old friend of mine here that I’d rather like to have a word with. I wonder if it could be arranged before I go?”

“A friend of yours?” Dr. Van Heidem said politely, surprised.

“Well, two friends really,” said Jessop. “There’s a woman, Mrs. Betterton. Olive Betterton. I believe her husband’s working here. Tom Betterton. Used to be at Harwell and before that in America. I’d very much like to have a word with them both before I go.”

Dr. Van Heidem’s reactions were perfect. His eyes opened in wide and polite surprise. He frowned in a puzzled way.

“Betterton—Mrs. Betterton—no, I’m afraid we have no one of that name here.”

“There’s an American, too,” said Jessop. “Andrew Peters. Research chemistry, I believe, is his line. I’m right, sir, aren’t I?” He turned deferentially to the American Ambassador.

The Ambassador was a shrewd, middle-aged man with keen blue eyes. He was a man of character as well as diplomatic ability. His eyes met Jessop’s. He took a full minute to decide, and then he spoke.

“Why, yes,” he said. “That’s so. Andrew Peters. I’d like to see him.” Van Heidem’s polite bewilderment grew. Jessop unobtrusively shot a quick glance at Aristides. The little yellow face betrayed no knowledge of anything amiss, no surprise, no disquietude. He looked merely uninterested.

“Andrew Peters? No, I’m afraid, Your Excellency, you’ve got your facts wrong. We’ve no one of that name here. I’m afraid I don’t even know the name.”

“You know the name of Thomas Betterton, don’t you?” said Jessop.

Just for a second Van Heidem hesitated. His head turned very slightly towards the old man in the chair, but he caught himself back in time.

“Thomas Betterton,” he said. “Why, yes, I think—”

One of the gentlemen of the press spoke up quickly on that cue.

“Thomas Betterton,” he said. “Why, I should say he was pretty well big news. Big news six months ago when he disappeared. Why, he’s made headlines in the papers all over Europe. The police have been looking for him here, there and everywhere. Do you mean to say he’s been here in this place all the time?”

“No.” Van Heidem spoke sharply. “Someone, I fear, has been misinforming you. A hoax, perhaps. You have seen today all our workers at the Unit. You have seen everything.”

“Not quite everything, I think,” said Jessop, quietly. “There’s a young man called Ericsson, too,” he added. “And Dr. Louis Barron, and possibly Mrs. Calvin Baker.”

“Ah.” Dr. Van Heidem seemed to receive enlightenment. “But those people were killed in Morocco—in a plane crash. I remember it perfectly now. At least I remember Ericsson was in the crash and Dr. Louis Barron. Ah, France sustained a great loss that day. A man such as Louis Barron is hard to replace.” He shook his head. “I do not know anything about a Mrs. Calvin Baker, but I do seem to remember that there was an English or American woman on that plane. It might well perhaps have been this Mrs. Betterton, of whom you speak. Yes, it was all very sad.” He looked across inquiringly at Jessop. “I do not know, Monsieur, why you should suppose that these people were coming here. It may possibly be that Dr. Barron mentioned at one time that he hoped to visit our settlement here while he was in North Africa. That may possibly have given rise to a misconception.”

“So you tell me,” said Jessop, “that I am mistaken? That these people are none of them here?”

“But how can they be, my dear sir, since they were all killed in this plane accident? The bodies were recovered, I believe.”

“The bodies recovered were too badly charred for identification.” Jessop spoke the last words with deliberation and significance.

There was a little stir behind him. A thin, precise, very attenuated voice said:

“Do I understand you to say that there was no precise identification?” Lord Alverstoke was leaning forward, his hand to his ear. Under bushy, overhanging eyebrows his small keen eyes looked into Jessop’s.

“There could be no formal identification, my lord,” said Jessop, “and I have reason to believe these people survived that accident.”

“Believe?” said Lord Alverstoke, with displeasure in his thin, high voice.

“I should have said I had evidence of survival.”

“Evidence? Of what nature, Mr.—er—er—Jessop.”

“Mrs. Betterton was wearing a choker of false pearls on the day she left Fez for Marrakesh,” said Jessop. “One of these pearls was found at a distance of half a mile from the burnt-out plane.”

“How can you state positively that the pearl found actually came from Mrs. Betterton’s necklace?”

“Because all the pearls of that necklace had had a mark put upon them invisible to the naked eye, but recognizable under a strong lens.”

“Who put that mark on them?”

“I did, Lord Alverstoke, in the presence of my colleague, here, Monsieur Leblanc.”

“You put those marks—you had a reason in marking those pearls in that special fashion?”

“Yes, my lord. I had reason to believe that Mrs. Betterton would lead me to her husband, Thomas Betterton, against whom a warrant is out.” Jessop continued. “Two more of these pearls came to light. Each on stages of a route between where the plane was burnt out and the settlement where we now are. Inquiries in the places where these pearls were found resulted in a description of six people, roughly approximating to those people who were supposed to have been burnt in the plane. One of these passengers had also been supplied with a glove impregnated with luminous, phosphorus paint. That mark was found on a car which had transported these passengers part of the way here.”

Lord Alverstone remarked in his dry, judicial voice:

“Very remarkable.”

In the big chair Mr. Aristides stirred. His eyelids blinked once or twice rapidly. Then he asked a question.

“Where were the last traces of this party of people found?”

“At a disused airfield, sir.” He gave precise location.

“That is many hundreds of miles from here,” said Mr. Aristides. “Granted that your very interesting speculations are correct, that for some reason the accident was faked, these passengers, I gather, then took off from this disused airport for some unknown destination. Since that airport is many hundreds of miles from here, I really cannot see on what you base your belief that these people are here. Why should they be?”

“There are certain very good reasons, sir. A signal was picked up by one of our searching aeroplanes. The signal was brought to Monsieur Leblanc here. Commencing with a special code recognition signal, it gave the information that the people in question were at a leper settlement.”

“I find this remarkable,” said Mr. Aristides. “Very remarkable. But it seems to me that there is no doubt that an attempt has been made to mislead you. These people are not here.” He spoke with a quiet, definite decision. “You are at perfect liberty to search the settlement if you like.”

“I doubt if we should find anything, sir,” said Jessop. “Not, that is, by a superficial search, although,” he added deliberately, “I am aware of the area at which the search should begin.”

“Indeed! And where is that?”

“In the fourth corridor from the second laboratory turning to the left at the end of the passage there.”

There was an abrupt movement from Dr. Van Heidem. Two glasses crashed from the table to the floor. Jessop looked at him, smiling.

“You see, Doctor,” he said, “we are well-informed.”

Van Heidem said sharply, “It’s preposterous. Absolutely preposterous! You are suggesting that we are detaining people here against their will. I deny that categorically.”

The Minister said uncomfortably:

“We seem to have arrived at an impasse.”

Mr. Aristides said gently:

“It has been an interesting theory. But it is only a theory.” He glanced at his watch. “You will excuse me, gentlemen, if I suggest that you should leave now. You have a long drive back to the airport, and there will be alarm felt if your plane is overdue.”

Both Leblanc and Jessop realized that it had come now to the showdown. Aristides was exerting all the force of his considerable personality. He was daring these men to oppose his will. If they persisted, it meant that they were willing to come out into the open against him. The Minister, as per his instructions, was anxious to capitulate. The Chief of Police was anxious only to be agreeable to the Minister. The American Ambassador was not satisfied, but he, too, would hesitate for diplomatic reasons to insist. The British Consul would have to fall in with the other two.

The journalists—Aristides considered the journalists—the journalists could be attended to! Their price might come high but he was of the opinion that they could be bought. And if they could not be bought—well, there were other ways.

As for Jessop and Leblanc, they knew. That was clear, but they could not act without authority. His eyes went on and met the eyes of a man as old as himself, cold, legal eyes. This man, he knew, could not be bought. But after all . . . his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of that cold, clear, far away little voice.

“I am of the opinion,” said the voice, “that we should not unduly hurry our departure. For there is a case here that it seems to me would bear further inquiry. Grave allegations have been made and should not, I consider, be allowed to drop. In fairness every opportunity should be given to rebut them.”

“The onus of proof,” said Mr. Aristides, “is on you.” He made a graceful gesture towards the company. “A preposterous accusation has been made, unsupported by any evidence.”

“Not unsupported.”

Dr. Van Heidem swung round in surprise. One of the Moroccan servants had stepped forward. He was a fine figure of a man in white embroidered robes with a white turban surrounding his head, his face gleamed black and oily.

What caused the entire company to gaze at him in speechless astonishment was the fact that from his full rather Negroid lips a voice of purely transatlantic origin was proceeding.

“Not unsupported,” that voice said, “you can take my evidence here and now. These gentlemen have denied that Andrew Peters, Torquil Ericsson, Mr. and Mrs. Betterton and Dr. Louis Barron are here. That’s false. They’re all here—and I speak for them.” He took a step forward towards the American Ambassador. “You may find me a bit difficult to recognize at the moment, sir,” he said, “but I am Andrew Peters.”

A very faint, sibilant hiss issued from Aristides' lips, then he settled back in his chair, his face impassive once more.

"There's a whole crowd of people hidden away here," said Peters. "There's Schwartz of Munich, there's Helga Needheim, there are Jeffreys and Davidson, the English scientists, there's Paul Wade from the U.S.A., there are the Italians, Ricochetti and Bianco, there's Murchison. They're all right here in this building. There's a system of closing bulkheads that's quite impossible to detect by the naked eye. There's a whole network of secret laboratories cut right down into the rock."

"God bless my soul," ejaculated the American Ambassador. He looked searchingly at the dignified African figure, and then he began to laugh. "I wouldn't say I'd recognize you even now," he said.

"That's the injection of paraffin in the lips, sir, to say nothing of black pigment."

"If you're Peters, what's the number you go under in the F.B.I.?"

"813471, sir."

"Right," said the Ambassador, "and the initials of your other name?"

"B.A.P.G., sir." The Ambassador nodded.

"This man is Peters," he said. He looked towards the Minister.

The Minister hesitated, then cleared his throat.

"You claim," he demanded of Peters, "that people are being detained here against their will?"

"Some are here willingly, Excellence, and some are not."

"In that case," said the Minister, "statements must be taken—er—yes, yes, statements must certainly be taken."

He looked at the Prefect of Police. The latter stepped forward.

“Just a moment, please.” Mr. Aristides raised a hand. “It would seem,” he said, in a gentle, precise voice, “that my confidence here has been greatly abused.” His cold glance went from Van Heidem to the Director and there was implacable command in it. “As to what you have permitted yourselves to do, gentlemen, in your enthusiasm for science, I am not as yet quite clear. My endowment of this place was purely in the interests of research. I have taken no part in the practical application of its policy. I would advise you, Monsieur Le Directeur, if this accusation is borne out by facts, to produce immediately those people who are suspected of being detained here unlawfully.”

“But, Monsieur, it is impossible. I—it will be—”

“Any experiment of that kind,” said Mr. Aristides, “is at an end.” His calm, financier’s gaze swept over his guests. “I need hardly assure you, Messieurs,” he said, “that if anything illegal is going on here, it has been no concern of mine.”

It was an order, and understood as such because of his wealth, because of his power and because of his influence. Mr. Aristides, that world famous figure, would not be implicated in this affair. Yet, even though he himself escaped unscathed, it was nevertheless defeat. Defeat for his purpose, defeat for that brains pool from which he had hoped to profit so greatly. Mr. Aristides was unperturbed by failure. It had happened to him occasionally, in the course of his career. He had always accepted it philosophically and gone on to the next coup.

He made an oriental gesture of his hand.

“I wash my hands of this affair,” he said.

The Prefect of Police bustled forward. He had had his cue now, he knew what his instructions were and he was prepared to go ahead with the full force of his official position.

“I want no obstructions,” he said. “It is my duty to investigate fully.”

His face very pale, Van Heidem stepped forward.

“If you will come this way,” he said, “I will show you our reserve accommodation.”

Twenty-one

“Oh, I feel as if I’d woken up out of a nightmare,” sighed Hilary.

She stretched her arms wide above her head. They were sitting on the terrace of a hotel in Tangier. They had arrived there that morning by plane. Hilary went on:

“Did it all happen? It can’t have!”

“It happened all right,” said Tom Betterton, “but I agree with you, Olive, it was a nightmare. Ah well, I’m out of it now.”

Jessop came along the terrace and sat down beside them.

“Where’s Andy Peters?” asked Hilary.

“He’ll be here presently,” said Jessop. “He has a bit of business to attend to.”

“So Peters was one of your people,” said Hilary, “and he did things with phosphorus and a lead cigarette case that squirted radioactive material. I never knew a thing about that.”

“No,” said Jessop, “you were both very discreet with each other. Strictly speaking, though, he isn’t one of my people. He represents the U.S.A.”

“That’s what you meant by saying that if I actually reached Tom here, you hoped I should have protection? You meant Andy Peters.”

Jessop nodded.

“I hope you’re not blaming me,” said Jessop in his most owl-like manner, “for not providing you with the desired end to your experience.”

Hilary looked puzzled. “What end?”

“A more sporting form of suicide,” he said.

“Oh, that!” She shook her head incredulously. “That seems just as unreal as anything else. I’ve been Olive Betterton so long now that I’m feeling quite confused to be Hilary Craven again.”

“Ah,” said Jessop, “there is my friend, Leblanc. I must go and speak to him.”

He left them and walked along the terrace. Tom Betterton said quickly:

“Do one more thing for me, will you, Olive? I call you Olive still—I’ve got used to it.”

“Yes, of course. What is it?”

“Walk along the terrace with me, then come back here and say that I’ve gone up to my room to lie down.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“Why? What are you—?”

“I’m off, my dear, while the going’s good.”

“Off, where?”

“Anywhere.”

“But why?”

“Use your head, my dear girl. I don’t know what the status is here. Tangier is an odd sort of place not under the jurisdiction of any particular country. But I know what’ll happen if I come with the rest of you to Gibraltar. The first thing that’ll happen when I get there, I shall be arrested.”

Hilary looked at him with concern. In the excitement of their escape from the Unit, she had forgotten Tom Betterton’s troubles.

“You mean the Official Secrets Act, or whatever they call it? But you can’t really hope to get away, can you, Tom? Where can you go?”

“I’ve told you. Anywhere.”

“But is that feasible nowadays? There’s money and all sorts of difficulties.”

He gave a short laugh. “The money’s all right. It’s salted away where I can get at it under a new name.”

“So you did take money?”

“Of course I took money.”

“But they’ll track you down.”

“They’ll find it hard to do that. Don’t you realize, Olive, that the description they’ll have of me is quite unlike my present appearance. That’s why I was so keen on this plastic surgery business. That’s been the whole point, you see. To get away from England, bank some money, have my appearance altered in such a way that I’m safe for life.”

Hilary looked at him doubtfully.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “I’m sure you’re wrong. It’d be far better to go back and face the music. After all, it’s not wartime. You’d only get a short term of imprisonment, I expect. What’s the good of being hounded for the rest of your life?”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “You don’t understand the first thing about it all. Come on, let’s get going. There’s no time to lose.”

“But how are you going to get away from Tangier?”

“I’ll manage. Don’t you worry.”

She got up from her seat and walked with him slowly along the terrace. She felt curiously inadequate and tongue-tied. She had fulfilled her obligations to Jessop and also to the dead woman, Olive Betterton. Now there was no

more to do. She and Tom Betterton had shared weeks of the closest association and yet she felt they were still strangers to each other. No bond of fellowship or friendship had grown up between them.

They reached the end of the terrace. There was a small side door there through the wall which led out on to a narrow road which curved down the hill to the port.

“I shall slip out this way,” Betterton said; “nobody’s watching. So long.”

“Good luck to you,” said Hilary slowly.

She stood there watching Betterton as he went to the door and turned its handle. As the door opened he stepped back a pace and stopped. Three men stood in the doorway. Two of them entered and came towards him. The first spoke formally.

“Thomas Betterton, I have here a warrant for your arrest. You will be held here in custody whilst extradition proceedings are taken.”

Betterton turned sharply, but the other man had moved quickly round the other side of him. Instead, he turned back with a laugh.

“It’s quite all right,” he said, “except that I’m not Thomas Betterton.”

The third man moved in through the doorway, came to stand by the side of the other two.

“Oh yes, you are,” he said. “You’re Thomas Betterton.”

Betterton laughed.

“What you mean is that for the last month you’ve been living with me and hearing me called Thomas Betterton and hearing me call myself Thomas Betterton. The point is that I’m not Thomas Betterton. I met Betterton in Paris. I came on and took his place. Ask this lady if you don’t believe me,” he said. “She came to join me, pretending to be my wife, and I recognized her as my wife. I did, didn’t I?”

Hilary nodded her head.

“That,” said Betterton, “was because, not being Thomas Betterton, naturally I didn’t know Thomas Betterton’s wife from Adam. I thought she was Thomas Betterton’s wife. Afterwards I had to think up some sort of explanation that would satisfy her. But that’s the truth.”

“So that’s why you pretended to know me,” cried Hilary. “When you told me to play up—to keep up the deception!”

Betterton laughed again, confidently.

“I’m not Betterton,” he said. “Look at any photograph of Betterton and you’ll see I’m speaking the truth.”

Peters stepped forward. His voice when he spoke was totally unlike the voice of the Peters that Hilary had known so well. It was quiet and implacable.

“I’ve seen photographs of Betterton,” he said, “and I agree I wouldn’t have recognized you as the man. But you are Thomas Betterton all the same, and I’ll prove it.”

He seized Betterton with a sudden strong grasp and tore off his jacket.

“If you’re Thomas Betterton,” he said, “you’ve got a scar in the shape of a Z in the crook of your right elbow.”

As he spoke he ripped up the shirt and bent back Betterton’s arm.

“There you are,” he said, pointing triumphantly. “There are two lab assistants in the U.S.A. who’ll testify to that. I know about it because Elsa wrote and told me when you did it.”

“Elsa?” Betterton stared at him. He began to shake nervously. “Elsa? What about Elsa?”

“Ask what the charge is against you?”

The police official stepped forward once more.

“The charge,” he said, “is murder in the first degree. Murder of your wife, Elsa Betterton.”

Twenty-two

“I’m sorry, Olive. You’ve got to believe I’m sorry. About you, I mean. For your sake I’d have given him one chance. I warned you that he’d be safer to stay in the Unit and yet I’d come halfway across the world to get him, and I meant to get him for what he did to Elsa.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything. Who are you?”

“I thought you knew that. I’m Boris Andrei Pavlov Glydr, Elsa’s cousin. I was sent over to America from Poland, to a University there to complete my education. And the way things were in Europe my uncle thought it best for me to take out American citizenship. I took the name of Andrew Peters. Then, when the war came, I went back to Europe. I worked for the Resistance. I got my uncle and Elsa out of Poland and they got to America. Elsa—I’ve told you about Elsa already. She was one of the first-class scientists of our time. It was Elsa who discovered ZE Fission. Betterton was a young Canadian who was attached to Mannheim to help him in his experiments. He knew his job, but there was no more to him than that. He deliberately made love to Elsa and married her so as to be associated with her in the scientific work she was doing. When her experiments neared completion and he realized what a big thing ZE Fission was going to be, he deliberately poisoned her.”

“Oh, no, no.”

“Yes. There were no suspicions at the time. Betterton appeared heartbroken, threw himself with renewed ardour into his work and then announced the ZE Fission discovery as his own. It brought him what he wanted. Fame and the recognition of being a first-class scientist. He thought it prudent after that to leave America and come to England. He went to Harwell and worked there.

“I was tied up in Europe for some time after the war ended. Since I had a good knowledge of German, Russian and Polish, I could do very useful

work there. The letter that Elsa had written to me before she died disquieted me. The illness from which she was suffering and from which she died seemed to me mysterious and unaccounted for. When at last I got back to the U.S.A. I started instituting inquiries. We won't go into it all, but I found what I was looking for. Enough, that is, to apply for an order for exhumation of the body. There was a young fellow in the District Attorney's office who had been a great friend of Betterton. He was going over on a trip to Europe about that time, and I think that he visited Betterton and in the course of his visit mentioned the exhumation. Betterton got the wind up. I imagine that he'd been already approached by agents of our friend, Mr. Aristides. Anyway, he now saw that there lay his best chance to avoid being arrested and tried for murder. He accepted the terms, stipulating that his facial appearance was to be completely changed. What actually happened, of course, was that he found himself in a very real captivity. Moreover, he found himself in a dangerous position there since he was quite unable to deliver the goods—the scientific goods, that is to say. He was not and never had been a man of genius.”

“And you followed him?”

“Yes. When the newspapers were full of the sensational disappearance of the scientist, Thomas Betterton, I came over to England. A rather brilliant scientist friend of mine had had certain overtures made to him by a woman, a Mrs. Speeder, who worked for U.N.O. I discovered on arriving in England that she had had a meeting with Betterton. I played up to her, expressing Left Wing views, rather exaggerating perhaps my scientific abilities. I thought, you see, that Betterton had gone behind the Iron Curtain where no one could reach him. Well, if nobody else could reach him, I was going to reach him.” His lips set in a grim line. “Elsa was a first-class scientist and she was a beautiful and gentle woman. She'd been killed and robbed by the man whom she loved and trusted. If necessary I was going to kill Betterton with my own hands.”

“I see,” said Hilary, “oh, I see now.”

“I wrote to you,” said Peters, “when I got to England. Wrote to you, that is, in my Polish name, telling you the facts.” He looked at her. “I suppose you didn't believe me. You never answered.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Then

I went to the Intelligence people. At first I went there putting on an act. Polish officer. Stiff, foreign and correctly formal. I was suspicious just then of everybody. However, in the end Jessop and I got together.” He paused. “This morning my quest has come to an end. Extradition will be applied for, Betterton will go to the U.S.A. and will stand his trial there. If he’s acquitted, I have no more to say.” He added grimly, “But he won’t be acquitted. The evidence is too strong.”

He paused, staring down over the sunlit gardens towards the sea.

“The hell of it is,” he said, “that you came out there to join him and I met you and fell in love with you. It has been hell, Olive. Believe me. So there we are. I’m the man who’s responsible for sending your husband to the electric chair. We can’t get away from it. It’s a thing that you’ll never be able to forget even if you forgave it.” He got up. “Well, I wanted to tell you the whole story from my own lips. This is goodbye.” He turned abruptly as Hilary stretched out a hand.

“Wait,” she said, “wait. There is something you don’t know. I’m not Betterton’s wife. Betterton’s wife, Olive Betterton, died at Casablanca. Jessop persuaded me to take her place.”

He wheeled round staring at her.

“You’re not Olive Betterton?”

“No.”

“Good lord,” said Andy Peters. “Good lord!” He dropped heavily into a chair beside her. “Olive,” he said, “Olive, my darling.”

“Don’t call me Olive. My name’s Hilary. Hilary Craven.”

“Hilary?” He said it questioningly. “I’ll have to get used to that.” He put his hand over hers.

At the other end of the terrace Jessop, discussing with Leblanc various technical difficulties in the present situation, broke off in the middle of a

sentence.

“You were saying?” he asked absently.

“I said, mon cher, that it does not seem to me that we are going to be able to proceed against this animal of an Aristides.”

“No, no. The Aristides always win. That is to say they always manage to squirm out from under. But he’ll have lost a lot of money, and he won’t like that. And even Aristides can’t keep death at bay forever. I should say he’ll be coming up before the Supreme Justice before very long, from the look of him.”

“What was it attracting your attention, my friend?”

“Those two,” said Jessop. “I sent Hilary Craven off on a journey to a destination unknown, but it seems to me that her journey’s end is the usual one after all.”

Leblanc looked puzzled for a moment then he said:

“Aha! yes! your Shakespeare!”

“You Frenchmen are so well-read,” said Jessop.

Ordeal By Innocence (1958)

By Agatha Christie

One

I

It was dusk when he came to the Ferry.

He could have been there much earlier. The truth was, he had put it off as long as he could.

First his luncheon with friends in Redquay; the light desultory conversation, the interchange of gossip about mutual friends—all that had meant only that he was inwardly shrinking from what he had to do. His friends had invited him to stay on for tea and he had accepted. But at last the time had come when he knew that he could put things off no longer.

The car he had hired was waiting. He said good-bye and left to drive the seven miles along the crowded coast road and then inland down the wooded lane that ended at the little stone quay on the river.

There was a large bell there which his driver rang vigorously to summon the ferry from the far side.

“You won’t be wanting me to wait, sir?”

“No,” said Arthur Calgary. “I’ve ordered a car to meet me over there in an hour’s time—to take me to Drymouth.”

The man received his fare and tip. He said, peering across the river in the gloom:

“Ferry’s coming now, sir.”

With a soft-spoken good night he reversed the car and drove away up the hill. Arthur Calgary was left alone waiting on the quayside. Alone with his thoughts and his apprehension of what was in front of him. How wild the scenery was here, he thought. One could fancy oneself on a Scottish loch, far from anywhere. And yet, only a few miles away, were the hotels, the

shops, the cocktail bars and the crowds of Redquay. He reflected, not for the first time, on the extraordinary contrasts of the English landscape.

He heard the soft splash of the oars as the ferry boat drew in to the side of the little quay. Arthur Calgary walked down the sloping ramp and got into the boat as the ferryman steadied it with a boat-hook. He was an old man and gave Calgary the fanciful impression that he and his boat belonged together, were one and indivisible.

A little cold wind came rustling up from the sea as they pushed off.

“ ’Tis chilly this evening,” said the ferryman.

Calgary replied suitably. He further agreed that it was colder than yesterday.

He was conscious, or thought he was conscious, of a veiled curiosity in the ferryman’s eyes. Here was a stranger. And a stranger after the close of the tourist season proper. Moreover, this stranger was crossing at an unusual hour—too late for tea at the café by the pier. He had no luggage so he could not be coming to stay. (Why, Calgary wondered, had he come so late in the day? Was it really because, subconsciously, he had been putting this moment off? Leaving as late as possible, the thing that had to be done?) Crossing the Rubicon—the river ... the river ... his mind went back to that other river—the Thames.

He had stared at it unseeingly (was it only yesterday?) then turned to look again at the man facing him across the table. Those thoughtful eyes with something in them that he had not quite been able to understand. A reserve, something that was being thought but not expressed....

“I suppose,” he thought, “they learn never to show what they are thinking.”

The whole thing was pretty frightful when one came right down to it. He must do what had to be done—and after that—forget!

He frowned as he remembered the conversation yesterday. That pleasant, quiet, noncommittal voice, saying:

“You’re quite determined on your course of action, Dr. Calgary?”

He had answered, hotly:

“What else can I do? Surely you see that? You must agree? It’s a thing I can’t possibly shirk.”

But he hadn’t understood the look in those withdrawn grey eyes, and had been faintly perplexed by the answer.

“One has to look all around a subject—consider it from all aspects.”

“Surely there can be only one aspect from the point of view of justice?”

He had spoken hotly, thinking for a moment that this was an ignoble suggestion of “hushing up” the matter.

“In a way, yes. But there’s more to it than that, you know. More than—shall we say—justice?”

“I don’t agree. There’s the family to consider.”

And the other had said quickly: “Quite—oh, yes—quite. I was thinking of them.”

Which seemed to Calgary nonsense! Because if one were thinking of them —

But immediately the other man had said, his pleasant voice unchanged:

“It’s entirely up to you, Dr. Calgary. You must, of course, do exactly as you feel you have to do.”

The boat grounded on the beach. He had crossed the Rubicon.

The ferryman’s soft West Country voice said:

“That will be fourpence, sir, or do you want a return?”

“No,” Calgary said. “There will be no return.” (How fateful the words sounded!)

He paid. Then he asked:

“Do you know a house called Sunny Point?”

Immediately the curiosity ceased to be veiled. The interest in the old man’s eyes leaped up avidly.

“Why, surely. ’Tis there, up along to your right—you can just see it through them trees. You go up the hill and along the road to the right, and then take the new road through the building estate. ’Tis the last house—at the very end.”

“Thank you.”

“You did say Sunny Point, sir? Where Mrs. Argyle—”

“Yes, yes—” Calgary cut him short. He didn’t want to discuss the matter. “Sunny Point.”

A slow and rather peculiar smile twisted the ferryman’s lips. He looked suddenly like an ancient sly faun.

“It was her called the house that—in the war. It were a new house, of course, only just been built—hadn’t got a name. But the ground ’tis built on—that wooded spit—Viper’s Point, that is! But Viper’s Point wouldn’t do for her—not for the name of her house. Called it Sunny Point, she did. But Viper’s Point’s what we allus call it.”

Calgary thanked him brusquely, said good evening, and started up the hill. Everyone seemed to be inside their houses, but he had the fancy that unseen eyes were peering through the windows of the cottages; all watching him with the knowledge of where he was going. Saying to each other, “He’s going to Viper’s Point....”

Viper’s Point. What a horrible apposite name that must have seemed....

For sharper than a serpent's tooth....

He checked his thoughts brusquely. He must pull himself together and make up his mind exactly what he was going to say....

II

Calgary came to the end of the nice new road with the nice new houses on either side of it, each with its eighth of an acre of garden; rock plants, chrysanthemums, roses, salvias, geraniums, each owner displaying his or her individual garden taste.

At the end of the road was a gate with sunny point in Gothic letters on it. He opened the gate, passed through, and went along a short drive. The house was there ahead of him, a well-built, characterless modern house, gabled and porched. It might have stood on any good-class suburban site, or a new development anywhere. It was unworthy, in Calgary's opinion, of its view. For the view was magnificent. The river here curved sharply round the point almost turning back on itself. Wooded hills rose opposite; upstream to the left was a further bend of the river with meadows and orchards in the distance.

Calgary looked for a moment up and down the river. One should have built a castle here, he thought, an impossible, ridiculous, fairy tale castle! The sort of castle that might be made of gingerbread or of frosted sugar. Instead there was good taste, restraint, moderation, plenty of money and absolutely no imagination.

For that, naturally, one did not blame the Argyles. They had only bought the house, not built it. Still, they or one of them (Mrs. Argyle?) had chosen it....

He said to himself: "You can't put it off any longer ..." and pressed the electric bell beside the door.

He stood there, waiting. After a decent interval he pressed the bell again.

He heard no footsteps inside but, without warning, the door swung suddenly open.

He moved back a step, startled. To his already overstimulated imagination, it seemed as though Tragedy herself stood there barring his way. It was a young face; indeed it was in the poignancy of its youth that tragedy had its very essence. The Tragic Mask, he thought, should always be a mask of youth ... Helpless, fore-ordained, with doom approaching ... from the future....

Rallying himself, he thought, rationalizing: “Irish type.” The deep blue of the eyes, the dark shadow round them, the upspringing black hair, the mournful beauty of the bones of the skull and cheekbones—

The girl stood there, young, watchful and hostile.

She said:

“Yes? What do you want?”

He replied conventionally.

“Is Mr. Argyle in?”

“Yes. But he doesn’t see people. I mean, people he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know you, does he?”

“No. He doesn’t know me, but—”

She began to close the door.

“Then you’d better write....”

“I’m sorry, but I particularly want to see him. Are you—Miss Argyle?”

She admitted it grudgingly.

“I’m Hester Argyle, yes. But my father doesn’t see people—not without an appointment. You’d better write.”

“I’ve come a long way ...” She was unmoved.

“They all say that. But I thought this kind of thing had stopped at last.” She went on accusingly, “You’re a reporter, I suppose?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort.”

She eyed him suspiciously as though she did not believe him.

“Well, what do you want then?”

Behind her, some way back in the hall, he saw another face. A flat homely face. Describing it, he would have called it a face like a pancake, the face of a middle-aged woman, with frizzy yellowish grey hair plastered on top of her head. She seemed to hover, waiting, like a watchful dragon.

“It concerns your brother, Miss Argyle.”

Hester Argyle drew in her breath sharply. She said, without belief, “Michael?”

“No, your brother Jack.”

She burst out: “I knew it! I knew you’d come about Jacko! Why can’t you leave us in peace? It’s all over and finished with. Why go on about it?”

“You can never really say that anything is finished.”

“But this is finished! Jacko is dead. Why can’t you let him be? All that’s over. If you’re not a journalist, I suppose you’re a doctor, or a psychologist, or something. Please go away. My father can’t be disturbed. He’s busy.”

She began to close the door. In a hurry, Calgary did what he ought to have done at first, pulled out the letter from his pocket and thrust it towards her.

“I have a letter here—from Mr. Marshall.”

She was taken aback. Her fingers closed doubtfully on the envelope. She said uncertainly:

“From Mr. Marshall—in London?”

She was joined now suddenly by the middle-aged woman who had been lurking in the recesses of the hall. She peered at Calgary suspiciously and he was reminded of foreign convents. Of course, this should have been a nun's face! It demanded the crisp white coif or whatever you called it, framed tightly round the face, and the black habit and veil. It was the face, not of a contemplative, but of the lay-sister who peers at you suspiciously through the little opening in the thick door, before grudgingly admitting you and taking you to the visiting parlour, or to Reverend Mother.

She said: "You come from Mr. Marshall?"

She made it almost an accusation.

Hester was staring down at the envelope in her hand. Then, without a word, she turned and ran up the stairs.

Calgary remained on the doorstep, sustaining the accusing and suspicious glance of the dragon-cumlay-sister.

He cast about for something to say, but he could not think of anything. Prudently, therefore, he remained silent.

Presently Hester's voice, cool and aloof, floated down to them.

"Father says he's to come up."

Somewhat unwillingly, his watchdog moved aside. Her expression of suspicion did not alter. He passed her, laid his hat on a chair, and mounted the stairs to where Hester stood waiting for him.

The inside of the house struck him as vaguely hygienic. It could almost, he thought, have been an expensive nursing home.

Hester led him along a passage and down three steps. Then she threw open a door and gestured to him to pass through it. She came in behind him, closing the door after her.

The room was a library, and Calgary raised his head with a sense of pleasure. The atmosphere of this room was quite different from the rest of

the house. This was a room where a man lived, where he both worked and took his ease. The walls were lined with books, the chairs were large, rather shabby, but easeful. There was a pleasant disorder of papers on the desk, of books lying about on tables. He had a momentary glimpse of a young woman who was leaving the room by a door at the far end, rather an attractive young woman. Then his attention was taken by the man who rose and came to greet him, the open letter in his hand.

Calgary's first impression of Leo Argyle was that he was so attenuated, so transparent, as hardly to be there at all. A wraith of a man! His voice when he spoke was pleasant, though lacking in resonance.

"Dr. Calgary?" he said. "Do sit down."

Calgary sat. He accepted a cigarette. His host sat down opposite him. All was done without hurry, as though in a world where time meant very little. There was a faint gentle smile on Leo Argyle's face as he spoke, tapping the letter gently with a bloodless finger as he did so.

"Mr. Marshall writes that you have an important communication to make to us, though he doesn't specify its nature." His smile deepened as he added: "Lawyers are always so careful not to commit themselves, aren't they?"

It occurred to Calgary with a faint shock of surprise, that this man confronting him was a happy man. Not buoyantly or zestfully happy, as is the normal way of happiness—but happy in some shadowy but satisfactory retreat of his own. This was a man on whom the outer world did not impinge and who was contented that this should be so. He did not know why he should be surprised by this—but he was.

Calgary said:

"It is very kind of you to see me." The words were a mere mechanical introduction. "I thought it better to come in person than to write." He paused—then said in a sudden rush of agitation, "It is difficult—very difficult...."

"Do take your time."

Leo Argyle was still polite and remote.

He leaned forward; in his gentle way he was obviously trying to help.

“Since you bring this letter from Marshall, I presume that your visit has to do with my unfortunate son Jacko—Jack, I mean—Jacko was our own name for him.”

All Calgary’s carefully prepared words and phrases had deserted him. He sat here, faced with the appalling reality of what he had to tell. He stammered again.

“It’s so terribly difficult....”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Leo said cautiously:

“If it helps you—we’re quite aware that Jacko was—hardly a normal personality. Nothing that you have to tell us will be likely to surprise us. Terrible as the tragedy was, I have been fully convinced all along that Jacko was not really responsible for his actions.”

“Of course he wasn’t.” It was Hester, and Calgary started at the sound of her voice. He had momentarily forgotten about her. She had sat down on the arm of a chair just behind his left shoulder. As he turned his head, she leaned forward eagerly towards him.

“Jacko was always awful,” she said confidentially. “He was just the same as a little boy—when he lost his temper, I mean. Just caught up anything he could find and—and went for you....”

“Hester—Hester—my dear.” Argyle’s voice was distressed.

Startled, the girl’s hand flew to her lips. She flushed and spoke with the sudden awkwardness of youth.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean—I forgot—I—I oughtn’t to have said a thing like that—not now that he’s—I mean, now that it’s all over and ... and....”

“Over and done with,” said Argyle. “All of this is in the past. I try—we all try—to feel that the boy must be regarded as an invalid. One of Nature’s misfits. That, I think, expresses it best.” He looked at Calgary. “You agree?”

“No,” said Calgary.

There was a moment’s silence. The sharp negative had taken both his listeners aback. It had come out with almost explosive force. Trying to mitigate its effect, he said awkwardly:

“I—I’m sorry. You see, you don’t understand yet.”

“Oh!” Argyle seemed to consider. Then he turned his head towards his daughter. “Hester, I think perhaps you’d better leave us—”

“I’m not going away! I’ve got to hear—to know what it’s all about.”

“It may be unpleasant—”

Hester cried out impatiently:

“What does it matter what other awful things Jacko may have done? That’s all over.”

Calgary spoke quickly.

“Please believe me—there is no question of anything that your brother has done—quite the opposite.”

“I don’t see—”

The door at the far end of the room opened and the young woman whom Calgary had just glimpsed earlier came back into the room. She wore an outdoor coat now, and carried a small attaché-case.

She spoke to Argyle.

“I’m going now. Is there anything else—”

There was a momentary hesitation on Argyle's part (he would always hesitate, Calgary thought) and then he laid a hand on her arm and drew her forward.

"Sit down, Gwenda," he said. "This is—er—Dr. Calgary. This is Miss Vaughan, who is who is—" Again he paused as though in doubt. "Who has been my secretary for some years now." He added: "Dr. Calgary has come to tell us something—or—ask us something—about Jacko—"

"To tell you something," Calgary interrupted. "And although you don't realize it, every moment you are making it more difficult for me."

They all looked at him in some surprise, but in Gwenda Vaughan's eyes, he saw a flicker of something that looked like comprehension. It was as though he and she were momentarily in alliance, as though she had said: "Yes—I know how difficult the Argyles can be."

She was an attractive young woman, he thought, though not so very young—perhaps thirty-seven or eight. A well-rounded figure, dark hair and eyes, a general air of vitality and good health. She gave the impression of being both competent and intelligent.

Argyle said with a frosty touch in his manner: "I am not at all aware of making things difficult for you, Dr. Calgary. Such was certainly not my intention. If you will come to the point—"

"Yes, I know. Forgive me for saying what I did. But it is the persistence with which you—and your daughter—are continually underlining that things are now over—done with—finished. They are not over. Who is it who said: 'Nothing is ever settled until—'"

"Until it is settled right," Miss Vaughan finished for him. "Kipling."

She nodded at him encouragingly. He felt grateful to her.

"But I'll come to the point," Calgary went on. "When you've heard what I have to say, you'll understand my—my reluctance. More, my distress. To begin with, I must mention a few things about myself. I am a geophysicist,

and have recently formed part of an Antarctic expedition. I only returned to England a few weeks ago.”

“The Hayes Bentley Expedition?” asked Gwenda.

He turned towards her gratefully.

“Yes. It was the Hayes Bentley Expedition. I tell you this to explain my background, and also to explain that I have been out of touch for about two years with—with current events.”

She went on helping him:

“You mean—with such things as murder trials?”

“Yes, Miss Vaughan, that is exactly what I mean.”

He turned to Argyle.

“Please forgive me if this is painful, but I must just check over with you certain times and dates. On November 9th, the year before last, at about six o’clock in the evening, your son, Jack Argyle (Jacko to you), called here and had an interview with his mother, Mrs. Argyle.”

“My wife, yes.”

“He told her that he was in trouble and demanded money. This had happened before—”

“Many times,” said Leo with a sigh.

“Mrs. Argyle refused. He became abusive, threatening. Finally he flung away and left, shouting out that he was coming back and that she had ‘jolly well got to stump up.’ He said, ‘You don’t want me to go to prison, do you?’ and she replied, ‘I am beginning to believe that it may be the best thing for you.’”

Leo Argyle moved uneasily.

“My wife and I had talked it over together. We were—very unhappy about the boy. Again and again we had come to his rescue, tried to give him a fresh start. It had seemed to us that perhaps the shock of a prison sentence—the training—” His voice died away. “But please go on.”

Calgary went on:

“Later that evening, your wife was killed. Attacked with a poker and struck down. Your son’s fingerprints were on the poker, and a large sum of money was gone from the bureau drawer where your wife had placed it earlier. The police picked up your son in Drymouth. The money was found on him, most of it was in five-pound notes, one of which had a name and address written on it which enabled it to be identified by the bank as one that had been paid out to Mrs. Argyle that morning. He was charged and stood his trial.” Calgary paused. “The verdict was wilful murder.”

It was out—the fateful word. Murder... Not an echoing word; a stifled word, a word that got absorbed into the hangings, the books, the pile carpet ... The word could be stifled—but not the act....

“I have been given to understand by Mr. Marshall, the solicitor for the defence, that your son protested his innocence when arrested, in a cheery, not to say cocksure manner. He insisted that he had a perfect alibi for the time of the murder which was placed by the police at between seven and seven-thirty. At that time, Jack Argyle said, he was hitchhiking into Drymouth, having been picked up by a car on the main road from Redmyn to Drymouth about a mile from here just before seven. He didn’t know the make of the car (it was dark by then) but it was a black or dark blue saloon driven by a middle-aged man. Every effort was made to trace this car and the man who drove it, but no confirmation of his statement could be obtained, and the lawyers themselves were quite convinced that it was a story hastily fabricated by the boy and not very cleverly fabricated at that....

“At the trial the main line of defence was the evidence of psychologists who sought to prove that Jack Argyle had always been mentally unstable. The judge was somewhat scathing in his comments on this evidence and summed up dead against the prisoner. Jack Argyle was sentenced to

imprisonment for life. He died of pneumonia in prison six months after he began to serve his sentence.”

Calgary stopped. Three pairs of eyes were fastened on him. Interest and close attention in Gwenda Vaughan’s, suspicion still in Hester’s. Leo Argyle’s seemed blank.

Calgary said, “You will confirm that I have stated the facts correctly?”

“You are perfectly correct,” said Leo, “though I do not yet see why it has been necessary to go over painful facts which we are all trying to forget.”

“Forgive me. I had to do so. You do not, I gather, dissent from the verdict?”

“I admit that the facts were as stated—that is, if you do not go behind the facts, it was, crudely, murder. But if you do go behind the facts, there is much to be said in mitigation. The boy was mentally unstable, though unfortunately not in the legal sense of the term. The McNaghten rules are narrow and unsatisfactory. I assure you, Dr. Calgary, that Rachel herself—my late wife, I mean—would have been the first to forgive and excuse that unfortunate boy for his rash act. She was a most advanced and humane thinker and had a profound knowledge of psychological factors. She would not have condemned.”

“She knew just how awful Jacko could be,” said Hester. “He always was—he just didn’t seem able to help it.”

“So you all,” said Calgary slowly, “had no doubts? No doubts of his guilt, I mean.”

Hester stared.

“How could we? Of course he was guilty.”

“Not really guilty,” Leo dissented. “I don’t like that word.”

“It isn’t a true word, either.” Calgary took a deep breath. “Jack Argyle was—innocent!”

Two

It should have been a sensational announcement. Instead, it fell flat. Calgary had expected bewilderment, incredulous gladness struggling with incomprehension, eager questions ... There was none of that. There seemed only wariness and suspicion. Gwenda Vaughan was frowning. Hester stared at him with dilated eyes. Well, perhaps it was natural—such an announcement was hard to take in all at once.

Leo Argyle said hesitantly:

“You mean, Dr. Calgary, that you agree with my attitude? You don’t feel he was responsible for his actions?”

“I mean he didn’t do it! Can’t you take it in, man? He didn’t do it. He couldn’t have done it. But for the most extraordinary and unfortunate combination of circumstances he could have proved that he was innocent. I could have proved that he was innocent.”

“You?”

“I was the man in the car.”

He said it so simply that for the moment they did not take it in. Before they could recover themselves, there was an interruption. The door opened and the woman with the homely face marched in. She spoke directly and to the point.

“I hear as I am passing the door outside. This man is saying that Jacko did not kill Mrs. Argyle. Why does he say this? How does he know?”

Her face, which had been militant and fierce, suddenly seemed to pucker.

“I must hear too,” she said piteously. “I cannot stay outside and not know.”

“Of course not, Kirsty. You’re one of the family.” Leo Argyle introduced her. “Miss Lindstrom, Dr. Calgary. Dr. Calgary is saying the most incredible

things.”

Calgary was puzzled by the Scottish name of Kirsty. Her English was excellent but a faint foreign intonation remained.

She spoke accusingly to him.

“You should not come here and say things like that—upsetting people. They have accepted tribulation. Now you upset them by what you tell. What happened was the will of God.”

He was repelled by the glib complacency of her statement. Possibly, he thought, she was one of those ghoulish people who positively welcome disaster. Well, she was going to be deprived of all that.

He spoke in a quick, dry voice.

“At five minutes to seven on that evening, I picked up a young man on the main Redmyn to Drymouth road who was thumbing for a lift. I drove him into Drymouth. We talked. He was, I thought, an engaging and likeable young man.”

“Jacko had great charm,” said Gwenda. “Everyone found him attractive. It was his temper let him down. And he was crooked, of course,” she added thoughtfully. “But people didn’t find that out for some time.”

Miss Lindstorm turned on her.

“You should not speak so when he is dead.”

Leo Argyle said with a faint asperity:

“Please go on, Dr. Calgary. Why didn’t you come forward at the time?”

“Yes.” Hester’s voice sounded breathless. “Why did you skulk away from it all? There were appeals in the paper—advertisements. How could you be so selfish, so wicked—”

“Hester—Hester—” her father checked her. “Dr. Calgary is still telling us his story.”

Calgary addressed the girl direct.

“I know only too well how you feel. I know what I feel myself—what I shall always feel ...” He pulled himself together and went on:

“To continue with my story: There was a lot of traffic on the roads that evening. It was well after half past seven when I dropped the young man, whose name I did not know, in the middle of Drymouth. That, I understand, clears him completely, since the police are quite definite that the crime was committed between seven and half past.”

“Yes,” said Hester. “But you—”

“Please be patient. To make you understand, I must go back a little. I had been staying in Drymouth for a couple of days in a friend’s flat. This friend, a naval man, was at sea. He had also lent me his car which he kept in a private lockup. On this particular day, November the 9th, I was due to return to London. I decided to go up by the evening train and to spend the afternoon seeing an old nurse of whom our family were very fond and who lived in a little cottage at Polgarth about forty miles west of Drymouth. I carried out my programme. Though very old and inclined to wander in her mind, she recognized me and was very pleased to see me, and quite excited because she had read in the papers about my ‘going to the Pole,’ as she put it. I stayed only a short time, so as not to tire her, and on leaving decided not to return direct to Drymouth along the coast road as I had come, but instead to go north to Redmyn and see old Canon Peasmarsh, who has some very rare books in his library, including an early treatise on navigation from which I was anxious to copy a passage. The old gentleman refuses to have the telephone which he regards as a device of the devil, and on a par with radio, television, cinema organs and jet planes, so I had to take a chance of finding him at home. I was unlucky. His house was shuttered and he was evidently away. I spent a little time in the Cathedral, and then started back to Drymouth by the main road, thus completing the third side of a triangle. I had left myself comfortable time to pick up my bag from the flat, return the car to its lockup, and catch my train.

“On the way, as I have told you, I picked up an unknown hitchhiker, and after dropping him in the town, I carried out my own programme. After arrival at the station, I still had time in hand, and I went outside the station into the main street to get some cigarettes. As I crossed the road a lorry came round a corner at high speed and knocked me down.

“According to the accounts of passers-by, I got up, apparently uninjured and behaving quite normally. I said I was quite all right and that I had a train to catch and hurried back to the station. When the train arrived at Paddington I was unconscious and taken by ambulance to hospital, where I was found to be suffering from concussion—apparently this delayed effect is not uncommon.

“When I regained consciousness, some days later, I remembered nothing of the accident, or of coming to London. The last thing I could remember was starting out to visit my old nurse at Polgarth. After that, a complete blank. I was reassured by being told that such an occurrence is quite common. There seemed no reason to believe that the missing hours in my life were of any importance. Neither I myself, nor anyone else, had the faintest idea that I had driven along the Redmyn—Drymouth road that evening.

“There was only a very narrow margin of time before I was due to leave England. I was kept in hospital, in absolute quiet, with no newspapers. On leaving I drove straight to the airport to fly to Australia and to join up with the Expedition. There was some doubt as to whether I was fit to go, but this I overruled. I was far too busy with my preparations and anxieties to take any interest in reports of murders, and in any case excitement died down after the arrest, and by the time the case came to trial and was fully reported, I was on my way to the Antarctic.”

He paused. They were listening to him with close attention.

“It was about a month ago, just after my return to England, that I made the discovery. I wanted some old newspapers for packing specimens. My landlady brought me up a pile of old papers out of her stokehold. Spreading one out on the table I saw the reproduced photograph of a young man whose face seemed very familiar to me. I tried to remember where I had met him and who he was. I could not do so and yet, very strangely, I

remember holding a conversation with him—it had been about eels. He had been intrigued and fascinated by hearing the saga of an eel’s life. But when? Where? I read the paragraph, read that this young man was Jack Argyle, accused of murder, read that he had told the police that he had been given a lift by a man in a black saloon car.

“And then, quite suddenly, that lost bit of my life came back. I had picked up this selfsame young man, and driven him into Drymouth, parting from him there, going back to the flat—crossing the street on foot to buy my cigarettes. I remembered just a glimpse of the lorry as it hit me—after that, nothing until hospital. I still had no memory of going to the station and taking the train to London. I read and reread the paragraph. The trial was over a year ago, the case almost forgotten. ‘A young fellow what did his mother in,’ my landlady remembered vaguely. ‘Don’t know what happened—think they hanged him.’ I read up the files of the newspapers for the appropriate dates, then I went to Marshall & Marshall, who had been the lawyers for the defence. I learned that I was too late to free the unfortunate boy. He had died of pneumonia in prison. Though justice could no longer be done to him, justice could be done to his memory. I went with Mr. Marshall to the police. The case is being laid before the Public Prosecutor. Marshall has little doubt that he will refer it to the Home Secretary.

“You will, of course, receive a full report from him. He has only delayed it because I was anxious to be the one who first acquainted you with the truth. I felt that that was an ordeal it was my duty to go through. You understand, I am sure, that I shall always feel a deep load of guilt. If I had been more careful crossing the street—” He broke off. “I understand that your feelings towards me can never be kindly—though I am, technically, blameless—you, all of you, must blame me.”

Gwenda Vaughan said quickly, her voice warm and kindly:

“Of course we don’t blame you. It’s just—one of those things. Tragic—incredible—but there it is.”

Hester said:

“Did they believe you?”

He looked at her in surprise.

“The police—did they believe you? Why shouldn’t you be making it all up?”

He smiled a little in spite of himself.

“I’m a very reputable witness,” he said gently. “I have no axe to grind, and they have gone into my story very closely; medical evidence, various corroborating details from Drymouth. Oh, yes. Marshall was cautious, of course, like all lawyers. He didn’t want to raise your hopes until he was pretty certain of success.”

Leo Argyle stirred in his chair and spoke for the first time.

“What exactly do you mean by success?”

“I apologize,” said Calgary quickly. “That is not a word that can rightly be used. Your son was accused of a crime he did not commit, was tried for it, condemned—and died in prison. Justice has come too late for him. But such justice as can be done, almost certainly will be done, and will be seen to be done. The Home Secretary will probably advise the Queen that a free pardon should be granted.”

Hester laughed.

“A free pardon—for something he didn’t do?”

“I know. The terminology always seems unrealistic. But I understand that the custom is for a question to be asked in the House, the reply to which will make it clear that Jack Argyle did not commit the crime for which he was sentenced, and the newspapers will report that fact freely.”

He stopped. Nobody spoke. It had been, he supposed, a great shock to them. But after all, a happy one.

He rose to his feet.

“I’m afraid,” he said uncertainly, “that there is nothing more that I can say ... To repeat how sorry I am, how unhappy about it all, to ask your forgiveness—all that you must already know only too well. The tragedy that ended his life, has darkened my own. But at least”—he spoke with pleading—“surely it means something—to know that he didn’t do this awful thing—that his name—your name—will be cleared in the eyes of the world ...?”

If he hoped for a reply he did not get one.

Leo Argyle sat slumped in his chair. Gwenda’s eyes were on Leo’s face. Hester sat staring ahead of her, her eyes wide and tragic. Miss Lindstrom grunted something under her breath and shook her head.

Calgary stood helplessly by the door, looking back at them.

It was Gwenda Vaughan who took charge of the situation. She came up to him and laid a hand on his arm, saying in a low voice:

“You’d better go now, Dr. Calgary. It’s been too much of a shock. They must have time to take it in.”

He nodded and went out. On the landing Miss Lindstrom joined him.

“I will let you out,” she said.

He was conscious, looking back before the door closed behind him, of Gwenda Vaughan slipping to her knees by Leo Argyle’s chair. It surprised him a little.

Facing him, on the landing, Miss Lindstrom stood like a Guardsman and spoke harshly.

“You cannot bring him back to life. So why bring it all back into their minds? Till now, they were resigned. Now they will suffer. It is better, always, to leave well alone.”

She spoke with displeasure.

“His memory must be cleared,” said Arthur Calgary.

“Fine sentiments! They are all very well. But you do not really think of what it all means. Men, they never think.” She stamped her foot. “I love them all. I came here, to help Mrs. Argyle, in 1940—when she started here a war nursery—for children whose homes had been bombed. Nothing was too good for those children. Everything was done for them. That is nearly eighteen years ago. And still, even after she is dead, I stay here—to look after them—to keep the house clean and comfortable, to see they get good food. I love them all—yes, I love them ... and Jacko—he was no good! Oh yes, I loved him too. But—he was no good!”

She turned abruptly away. It seemed she had forgotten her offer to show him out. Calgary descended the stairs slowly. As he was fumbling with the front door which had a safety lock he did not understand, he heard light footsteps on the stairs. Hester came flying down them.

She unlatched the door and opened it. They stood looking at each other. He understood less than ever why she faced him with that tragic reproachful stare.

She said, only just breathing the words:

“Why did you come? Oh, why ever did you come?”

He looked at her helplessly.

“I don’t understand you. Don’t you want your brother’s name cleared? Don’t you want him to have justice?”

“Oh, justice!” She threw the word at him.

He repeated: “I don’t understand...”

“Going on so about justice! What does it matter to Jacko now? He’s dead. It’s not Jacko who matters. It’s us!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not the guilty who matter. It’s the innocent.”

She caught his arm, digging her fingers into it.

“It’s we who matter. Don’t you see what you’ve done to us all?”

He stared at her.

Out of the darkness outside, a man’s figure loomed up.

“Dr. Calgary?” he said. “Your taxi’s here, sir. To drive you to Drymouth.”

“Oh—er—thank you.”

Calgary turned once more to Hester, but she had withdrawn into the house.

The front door banged.

Three

I

Hester went slowly up the stairs pushing back the dark hair from her high forehead. Kirsten Lindstrom met her at the top of the stairs.

“Has he gone?”

“Yes, he’s gone.”

“You have had a shock, Hester.” Kirsten Lindstrom laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Come with me. I will give you a little brandy. All this, it has been too much.”

“I don’t think I want any brandy, Kirsty.”

“Perhaps you do not want it, but it will be good for you.”

Unresisting, the young girl allowed herself to be steered along the passage and into Kirsten Lindstrom’s own small sitting room. She took the brandy that was offered her and sipped it slowly. Kirsten Lindstrom said in an exasperated voice:

“It has all been too sudden. There should have been warning. Why did not Mr. Marshall write first?”

“I suppose Dr. Calgary wouldn’t let him. He wanted to come and tell us himself.”

“Come and tell us himself, indeed! What does he think the news will do to us?”

“I suppose,” said Hester, in an odd, toneless voice, “he thought we should be pleased.”

“Pleased or not pleased, it was bound to be a shock. He should not have done it.”

“But it was brave of him, in a way,” said Hester. The colour came up in her face. “I mean, it can’t have been an easy thing to do. To come and tell a family of people that a member of it who was condemned for murder and died in prison was really innocent. Yes, I think it was brave of him—but I wish he hadn’t all the same,” she added.

“That—we all wish that,” said Miss Lindstrom briskly.

Hester looked at her with her interest suddenly aroused from her own preoccupation.

“So you feel that too, Kirsty? I thought perhaps it was only me.”

“I am not a fool,” said Miss Lindstrom sharply. “I can envisage certain possibilities that your Dr. Calgary does not seem to have thought about.”

Hester rose. “I must go to Father,” she said.

Kirsten Lindstrom agreed.

“Yes. He will have had time now to think what is best to be done.”

As Hester went into the library Gwenda Vaughan was busy with the telephone. Her father beckoned to her and Hester went over and sat on the arm of his chair.

“We’re trying to get through to Mary and to Micky,” he said. “They ought to be told at once of this.”

“Hallo,” said Gwenda Vaughan. “Is that Mrs. Durrant? Mary? Gwenda Vaughan here. Your father wants to speak to you.”

Leo went over and took up the receiver.

“Mary? How are you? How is Philip?... Good. Something rather extraordinary has happened ... I thought you ought to be told of it at once.

A Dr. Calgary has just been to see us. He brought a letter from Andrew Marshall with him. It's about Jacko. It seems—really a very extraordinary thing altogether—it seems that that story Jacko told at the trial, of having been given a lift into Drymouth in somebody's car, is perfectly true. This Dr. Calgary was the man who gave him the lift ...” He broke off, as he listened to what his daughter was saying at the other end. “Yes, well, Mary, I won't go into all the details now as to why he didn't come forward at the time. He had an accident—concussion. The whole thing seems to be perfectly well authenticated. I rang up to say that I think we should all have a meeting here together as soon as possible. Perhaps we could get Marshall to come down and talk the matter over with us. We ought, I think, to have the best legal advice. Could you and Philip?... Yes ... Yes, I know. But I really think, my dear, that it's important... Yes ... well ring me up later, if you like. I must try and get hold of Micky.” He replaced the receiver.

Gwenda Vaughan came towards the telephone.

“Shall I try and get Micky now?”

Hester said:

“If this is going to take a little time, could I ring up first, please, Gwenda? I want to ring up Donald.”

“Of course,” said Leo. “You are going out with him this evening, aren't you?”

“I was,” said Hester.

Her father gave her a sharp glance.

“Has this upset you very much, darling?”

“I don't know,” said Hester. “I don't know quite what I feel.”

Gwenda made way for her at the telephone and Hester dialed a number.

“Could I speak to Dr. Craig, please? Yes. Yes. Hester Argyle speaking.”

There was a moment or two of delay and then she said:

“Is that you, Donald?... I rang up to say that I don’t think I can come with you to the lecture tonight ... No, I’m not ill—it’s not that, it’s just—well, just that we’ve—we’ve had some rather queer news.”

Again Dr. Craig spoke.

Hester turned her head towards her father. She laid her hand over the receiver and said to him:

“It isn’t a secret, is it?”

“No,” said Leo slowly. “No, it isn’t exactly a secret but—well, I should just ask Donald to keep it to himself for the present, perhaps. You know how rumours get around, get magnified.”

“Yes, I know.” She spoke again into the receiver. “In a way I suppose it’s what you’d call good news, Donald, but—it’s rather upsetting. I’d rather not talk about it over the telephone ... No, no, don’t come here ... Please not. Not this evening. Tomorrow some time. It’s about—Jacko. Yes—yes—my brother—it’s just that we’ve found out that he didn’t kill my mother after all ... But please don’t say anything, Donald, or talk to anyone. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow ... No, Donald, no... I just can’t see anyone this evening—not even you. Please. And don’t say anything.” She put down the receiver, and motioned to Gwenda to take over.

Gwenda asked for a Drymouth number. Leo said gently:

“Why don’t you go to the lecture with Donald, Hester? It will take your mind off things.”

“I don’t want to, Father. I couldn’t.”

Leo said:

“You spoke—you gave him the impression that it wasn’t good news. But you know, Hester, that’s not so. We were startled. But we’re all very happy about it—very glad ... What else could we be?”

“That’s what we’re going to say, is it?” said Hester.

Leo said warningly:

“My dear child—”

“But it’s not true, is it?” said Hester. “It’s not good news. It’s just terribly upsetting.”

Gwenda said:

“Micky’s on the line.”

Again Leo came and took the receiver from her. He spoke to his son very much as he had spoken to his daughter. But his news was received rather differently from the way it had been received by Mary Durrant. Here there was no protest, surprise or disbelief. Instead there was quick acceptance.

“What the hell!” said Micky’s voice. “After all this time? The missing witness! Well, well, Jacko’s luck was out that night.”

Leo spoke again. Micky listened.

“Yes,” he said, “I agree with you. We’d better get together as quickly as possible, and get Marshall to advise us, too.” He gave a sudden quick laugh, the laugh that Leo remembered so well from the small boy who had played in the garden outside the window. “What’s the betting?” he said. “Which of us did it?”

Leo dropped the receiver down and left the telephone abruptly.

“What did he say?” Gwenda asked.

Leo told her.

“It seems to me a silly sort of joke to make,” said Gwenda.

Leo shot a quick glance at her. “Perhaps,” he said gently, “it wasn’t altogether a joke.”

II

Mary Durrant crossed the room and picked up some fallen petals from a vase of chrysanthemums. She put them carefully into the wastepaper basket. She was a tall, serene-looking young woman of twenty-seven who, although her face was unlined, yet looked older than her years, probably from a sedate maturity that seemed part of her makeup. She had good looks, without a trace of glamour. Regular features, a good skin, eyes of a vivid blue, and fair hair combed off her face and arranged in a large bun at the back of her neck; a style which at the moment happened to be fashionable although that was not her reason for wearing it so. She was a woman who always kept to her own style. Her appearance was like her house; neat, well kept. Any kind of dust or disorder worried her.

The man in the invalid chair watching her as she put the fallen petals carefully away, smiled a slightly twisted smile.

“Same tidy creature,” he said. “A place for everything and everything in its place.” He laughed, with a faint malicious note in the laugh. But Mary Durrant was quite undisturbed.

“I do like things to be tidy,” she agreed. “You know, Phil, you wouldn’t like it yourself if the house was like a shambles.”

Her husband said with a faint trace of bitterness:

“Well, at any rate I haven’t got the chance of making it into one.”

Soon after their marriage, Philip Durrant had fallen a victim to polio of the paralytic type. To Mary, who adored him, he had become her child as well as her husband. He himself felt at times slightly embarrassed by her possessive love. His wife had not got the imagination to understand that her pleasure in his dependence upon her sometimes irked him.

He went on now rather quickly, as though fearing some word of commiseration or sympathy from her.

“I must say your father’s news beggars description! After all this time! How can you be so calm about it?”

“I suppose I can hardly take it in ... It’s so extraordinary. At first I simply couldn’t believe what father was saying. If it had been Hester, now, I should have thought she’d imagined the whole thing. You know what Hester’s like.”

Philip Durrant’s face lost a little of its bitterness. He said softly:

“A vehement passionate creature, setting out in life to look for trouble and certain to find it.”

Mary waved away the analysis. Other people’s characters did not interest her.

She said doubtfully: “I suppose it’s true? You don’t think this man may have imagined it all?”

“The absentminded scientist? It would be nice to think so,” said Philip, “but it seems that Andrew Marshall has taken the matter seriously. And Marshall, Marshall & Marshall are a very hard-headed legal proposition, let me tell you.”

Mary Durrant said, frowning: “What will it actually mean, Phil?”

Philip said: “It means that Jacko will be completely exonerated. That is, if the authorities are satisfied—and I gather that there is going to be no question of anything else.”

“Oh, well,” said Mary, with a slight sigh, “I suppose it’s all very nice.”

Philip Durrant laughed again, the same twisted, rather bitter laughter.

“Polly!” he said, “you’ll be the death of me.”

Only her husband had ever called Mary Durrant Polly. It was a name ludicrously inappropriate to her statuesque appearance. She looked at Philip in faint surprise.

“I don’t see what I’ve said to amuse you so much.”

“You were so gracious about it!” said Philip. “Like Lady Somebody at the Sale of Work praising the Village Institute’s handiwork.”

Mary said, puzzled: “But it is very nice! You can’t pretend it’s been satisfactory to have had a murderer in the family.”

“Not really in the family.”

“Well, it’s practically the same thing. I mean, it was all very worrying, and made one most uncomfortable. Everybody was so agog and curious. I hated it all.”

“You took it very well,” said Philip. “Froze them with that icy blue gaze of yours. Made them pipe down and look ashamed of themselves. It’s wonderful the way you manage never to show emotion.”

“I disliked it all very much. It was all most unpleasant,” said Mary Durrant, “but at any rate he died and it was over. And now—now, I suppose, it will all be raked up again. So tiresome.”

“Yes,” said Philip Durrant thoughtfully. He shifted his shoulders slightly, a faint expression of pain on his face. His wife came to him quickly.

“Are you cramped? Wait. Let me just move this cushion. There. That better?”

“You ought to have been a hospital nurse,” said Philip.

“I’ve not the least wish to nurse a lot of people. Only you.”

It was said very simply but there was a depth of feeling behind the bare words.

The telephone rang and Mary went to it.

“Hallo ... yes ... speaking ... Oh, it’s you....”

She said aside to Philip: "It's Micky."

"Yes ... yes, we have heard. Father telephoned ... Well, of course ... Yes ... Yes ... Philip says if the lawyers are satisfied it must be all right ... Really, Micky, I don't see why you're so upset ... I'm not aware of being particularly dense ... Really, Micky, I do think you—Hallo?... Hallo?..." She frowned angrily. "He's rung off." She replaced the receiver. "Really, Philip, I can't understand Micky."

"What did he say exactly?"

"Well, he seems in such a state. He said that I was dense, that I didn't realize the—the repercussions. Hell to pay! That's the way he put it. But why? I don't understand."

"Got the wind up, has he?" said Philip thoughtfully.

"But why?"

"Well, he's right, you know. There will be repercussions."

Mary looked a little bewildered.

"You mean that there will be a revival of interest in the case? Of course I'm glad Jacko is cleared, but it will be rather unpleasant if people begin talking about it again."

"It's not just what the neighbours say. There's more to it than that."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"The police are going to be interested, too!"

"The police?" Mary spoke sharply. "What's it got to do with them?"

"My dear girl," said Philip. "Think."

Mary came back slowly to sit by him.

“It’s an unsolved crime again now, you see,” said Philip.

“But surely they won’t bother—after all this time?”

“A very nice bit of wishful thinking,” said Philip, “but fundamentally unsound, I fear.”

“Surely,” said Mary, “after they’ve been so stupid—making such a bad mistake over Jacko—they won’t want to rake it all up again?”

“They mayn’t want to—but they’ll probably have to! Duty is duty.”

“Oh, Philip, I’m sure you’re wrong. There will just be a bit of talk and then it will all die down.”

“And then our lives will go on happily ever afterwards,” said Philip in his mocking voice.

“Why not?”

He shook his head. “It’s not as simple as that ... Your father’s right. We must all get together and have a consultation. Get Marshall down as he said.”

“You mean—go over to Sunny Point?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not practicable. You’re an invalid and—”

“I’m not an invalid.” Philip spoke with irritation. “I’m quite strong and well. I just happen to have lost the use of my legs. I could go to Timbuctoo with the proper transport laid on.”

“I’m sure it would be very bad for you to go to Sunny Point. Having all this unpleasant business raked up—”

“It’s not my mind that’s affected.”

“—And I don’t see how we can leave the house. There have been so many burglaries lately.”

“Get someone to sleep in.”

“It’s all very well to say that—as though it was the easiest thing in the world.”

“Old Mrs. Whatsername can come in every day. Do stop making housewifely objections, Polly. It’s you, really, who doesn’t want to go.”

“No, I don’t.”

“We won’t be there long,” said Philip reassuringly. “But I think we’ve got to go. This is a time when the family’s got to present a united front to the world. We’ve got to find out exactly how we stand.”

III

At the Hotel in Drymouth, Calgary dined early and went up to his room. He felt profoundly affected by what he had passed through at Sunny Point. He had expected to find his mission painful and it had taken him all his resolution to go through with it. But the whole thing had been painful and upsetting in an entirely different way from the one he had expected. He flung himself down on his bed and lit a cigarette as he went over and over it in his mind.

The clearest picture that came to him was of Hester’s face at that parting moment. Her scornful rejection of his plea for justice! What was it that she had said? “It’s not the guilty who matter, it’s the innocent.” And then: “Don’t you see what you’ve done to us all?” But what had he done? He didn’t understand.

And the others. The woman they called Kirsty (why Kirsty? That was a Scottish name. She wasn't Scottish—Danish, perhaps, or Norwegian?) Why had she spoken so sternly—so accusingly?

There had been something odd, too, about Leo Argyle—a withdrawal, a watchfulness. No suggestion of the “Thank God my son was innocent!” which surely would have been the natural reaction!

And that girl—the girl who was Leo's secretary. She had been helpful to him, kindly. But she, too, had reacted in an odd way. He remembered the way she had knelt there by Argyle's chair. As though—as though—she were sympathizing with him, consoling him. Consoling him for what? That his son was not guilty of murder? And surely—yes, surely—there was more there than a secretary's feelings—even a secretary of some years' standing ... What was it all about? Why did they—

The telephone on the table by the bed rang. He picked up the receiver.

“Hallo?”

“Dr. Calgary? There is someone asking for you.”

“For me?”

He was surprised. As far as he was aware, nobody knew that he was spending the night in Drymouth.

“Who is it?”

There was a pause. Then the clerk said:

“It's Mr. Argyle.”

“Oh. Tell him—” Arthur Calgary checked himself on the point of saying that he would come down. If for some reason Leo Argyle had followed him to Drymouth and managed to find out where he was staying, then presumably the matter would be embarrassing to discuss in the crowded lounge downstairs.

He said instead:

“Ask him to come up to my room, will you?”

He rose from where he had been lying and paced up and down until the knock came on the door.

He went across and opened it.

“Come in, Mr. Argyle, I—”

He stopped, taken aback. It was not Leo Argyle. It was a young man in his early twenties, a young man whose dark, handsome face was marred by its expression of bitterness. A reckless, angry, unhappy face.

“Didn’t expect me,” said the young man. “Expected my—father. I’m Michael Argyle.”

“Come in.” Calgary closed the door after his visitor had entered. “How did you find out I was here?” he asked as he offered the boy his cigarette case.

Michael Argyle took one and gave a short unpleasant laugh.

“That one’s easy! Rang up the principal hotels on the chance you might be staying the night. Hit it the second try.”

“And why did you want to see me?”

Michael Argyle said slowly:

“Wanted to see what sort of a chap you were ...” His eyes ran appraisingly over Calgary, noting the slightly stooped shoulders, the greying hair, the thin sensitive face. “So you’re one of the chaps who went on the ‘Hayes Bentley’ to the Pole. You don’t look very tough.”

Arthur Calgary smiled faintly.

“Appearances are sometimes deceptive,” he said. “I was tough enough. It’s not entirely muscular force that’s needed. There are other important

qualifications; endurance, patience, technical knowledge.”

“How old are you, forty-five?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“You look more.”

“Yes—yes, I suppose I do.” For a moment a feeling of poignant sadness came over him as he confronted the virile youth of the boy facing him.

He asked rather abruptly:

“Why did you want to see me?”

The other scowled.

“It’s natural, isn’t it? When I heard about the news you’d brought. The news about my dear brother.”

Calgary did not answer.

Michael Argyle went on:

“It’s come a bit late for him, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Calgary in a low voice. “It is too late for him.”

“What did you bottle it up for? What’s all this about concussion?”

Patiently Calgary told him. Strangely enough, he felt heartened by the boy’s roughness and rudeness. Here, at any rate, was someone who felt strongly on his brother’s behalf.

“Gives Jacko an alibi, that’s the point, is it? How do you know the times were as you say they were?”

“I am quite sure about the times.” Calgary spoke with firmness.

“You may have made a mistake. You scientific blokes are apt to be absentminded sometimes about little things like times and places.”

Calgary showed slight amusement.

“You have made a picture for yourself of the absentminded professor of fiction—wearing odd socks, not quite sure what day it is or where he happens to be? My dear young man, technical work needs great precision; exact amounts, times, calculations. I assure you there is no possibility of my having made a mistake. I picked up your brother just before seven and put him down in Drymouth at five minutes after the half hour.”

“Your watch could have been wrong. Or you went by the clock in your car.”

“My watch and the clock in the car were exactly synchronized.”

“Jacko could have led you up the garden path some way. He was full of tricks.”

“There were no tricks. Why are you so anxious to prove me wrong?” With some heat, Calgary went on: “I expected it might be difficult to convince the authorities that they had convicted a man unjustly. I did not expect to find his own family so hard to convince!”

“So you’ve found all of us a little difficult to convince?”

“The reaction seemed a little—unusual.”

Micky eyed him keenly.

“They didn’t want to believe you?”

“It—almost seemed like that....”

“Not only seemed like it. It was. Natural enough, too, if you only think about it.”

“But why? Why should it be natural? Your mother is killed. Your brother is accused and convicted of the crime. Now it turns out that he was innocent.

You should be pleased—thankful. Your own brother.”

Micky said:

“He wasn’t my brother. And she wasn’t my mother.”

“What?”

“Hasn’t anyone told you? We were all adopted. The lot of us. Mary, my eldest ‘sister,’ in New York. The rest of us during the war. My ‘mother,’ as you call her, couldn’t have any children of her own. So she got herself a nice little family by adoption. Mary, myself, Tina, Hester, Jacko. Comfortable, luxurious home and plenty of mother love thrown in! I’d say she forgot we weren’t her own children in the end. But she was out of luck when she picked Jacko to be one of her darling little boys.”

“I had no idea,” said Calgary.

“So don’t pull out the ‘own mother,’ ‘own brother’ stop on me! Jacko was a louse!”

“But not a murderer,” said Calgary.

His voice was emphatic. Micky looked at him and nodded.

“All right. It’s your say so—and you’re sticking to it. Jacko didn’t kill her. Very well then—who did kill her? You haven’t thought about that one, have you? Think about it now. Think about it—and then you’ll begin to see what you’re doing to us all....”

He wheeled round and went abruptly out of the room.

Four

Calgary said apologetically, "It's very good of you to see me again, Mr. Marshall."

"Not at all," said the lawyer.

"As you know, I went down to Sunny Point and saw Jack Argyle's family."

"Quite so."

"You will have heard by now, I expect, about my visit?"

"Yes, Dr. Calgary, that is correct."

"What you may find it difficult to understand is why I have come back here to you again ... You see, things didn't turn out exactly as I thought they would."

"No," said the lawyer, "no, perhaps not." His voice was as usual dry and unemotional, yet something in it encouraged Arthur Calgary to continue.

"I thought, you see," went on Calgary, "that that would be the end of it. I was prepared for a certain amount of—what shall I say—natural resentment on their part. Although concussion may be termed, I suppose, an Act of God, yet from their viewpoint they could be forgiven for that, as I say. But at the same time I hoped it would be offset by the thankfulness they would feel over the fact that Jack Argyle's name was cleared. But things didn't turn out as I anticipated. Not at all."

"I see."

"Perhaps, Mr. Marshall, you anticipated something of what would happen? Your manner, I remember, puzzled me when I was here before. Did you foresee the attitude of mind that I was going to encounter?"

"You haven't told me yet, Dr. Calgary, what that attitude was."

Arthur Calgary drew his chair forward. "I thought that I was ending something, giving—shall we say—a different end to a chapter already written. But I was made to feel, I was made to see, that instead of ending something I was starting something. Something altogether new. Is that a true statement, do you think, of the position?"

Mr. Marshall nodded his head slowly. "Yes," he said, "it could be put that way. I did think—I admit it—that you were not realizing all the implications. You could not be expected to do so because, naturally, you knew nothing of the background or of the facts except as they were given in the law reports."

"No. No, I see that now. Only too clearly." His voice rose as he went on excitedly, "It wasn't really relief they felt, it wasn't thankfulness. It was apprehension. A dread of what might be coming next. Am I right?"

Marshall said cautiously: "I should think probably that you are quite right. Mind you, I do not speak of my own knowledge."

"And if so," went on Calgary, "then I no longer feel that I can go back to my work satisfied with having made the only amends that I can make. I'm still involved. I'm responsible for bringing a new factor into various people's lives. I can't just wash my hands of it."

The lawyer cleared his throat. "That, perhaps, is a rather fanciful point of view, Dr. Calgary."

"I don't think it is—not really. One must take responsibility for one's actions and not only one's actions but for the result of one's actions. Just on two years ago I gave a lift to a young hitchhiker on the road. When I did that I set in train a certain course of events. I don't feel that I can disassociate myself from them."

The lawyer still shook his head.

"Very well, then," said Arthur Calgary impatiently. "Call it fanciful if you like. But my feelings, my conscience, are still involved. My only wish was to make amends for something it had been outside my power to prevent. I

have not made amends. In some curious way I have made things worse for people who have already suffered. But I still don't understand clearly why."

"No," said Marshall slowly, "no, you would not see why. For the past eighteen months or so you've been out of touch with civilization. You did not read the daily papers, the account of this family that was given in the newspapers. Possibly you would not have read them anyway, but you could not have escaped, I think, hearing about them. The facts are very simple, Dr. Calgary. They are not confidential. They were made public at the time. It resolves itself very simply into this. If Jack Argyle did not (and by your account he cannot have), committed the crime, then who did? That brings us back to the circumstances in which the crime was committed. It was committed between the hours of seven and seven-thirty on a November evening in a house where the deceased woman was surrounded by the members of her own family and household. The house was securely locked and shuttered and if anyone entered from outside, then the outsider must have been admitted by Mrs. Argyle herself or have entered with their own key. In other words, it must have been someone she knew. It resembles in some ways the conditions of the Borden case in America where Mr. Borden and his wife were struck down by blows of an axe on a Sunday morning. Nobody in the house heard anything, nobody was known or seen to approach the house. You can see, Dr. Calgary, why the members of the family were, as you put it, disturbed rather than relieved by the news you brought them?"

Calgary said slowly: "They'd rather, you mean, that Jack Argyle was guilty?"

"Oh yes," said Marshall. "Oh yes, very decidedly so. If I may put it in a somewhat cynical way, Jack Argyle was the perfect answer to the unpleasant fact of murder in the family. He had been a problem child, a delinquent boy, a man of violent temper. Excuses could be and were made for him within the family circle. They could mourn for him, have sympathy with him, declare to themselves, to each other, and to the world that it was not really his fault, that psychologists could explain it all! Yes, very, very convenient."

"And now—" Calgary stopped.

“And now,” said Mr. Marshall, “it is different, of course. Quite different. Almost alarming perhaps.”

Calgary said shrewdly, “The news I brought was unwelcome to you, too, wasn’t it?”

“I must admit that. Yes. Yes, I must admit that I was—upset. A case which was closed satisfactorily—yes, I shall continue to use the word satisfactorily—is now reopened.”

“Is that official?” Calgary asked. “I mean—from the police point of view, will the case be reopened?”

“Oh, undoubtedly,” said Marshall. “When Jack Argyle was found guilty on overwhelming evidence—the jury was only out a quarter of an hour—that was an end of the matter as far as the police were concerned. But now, with the grant of a free pardon posthumously awarded, the case is opened again.”

“And the police will make fresh investigations?”

“Almost certainly I should say. Of course,” added Marshall, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “it is doubtful after this lapse of time, owing to the peculiar features of the case, whether they will be able to achieve any result ... For myself, I should doubt it. They may know that someone in the house is guilty. They may get so far as to have a very shrewd idea of who that someone is. But to get definite evidence will not be easy.”

“I see,” said Calgary. “I see ... Yes, that’s what she meant.”

The lawyer said sharply: “Of whom are you speaking?”

“The girl,” said Calgary. “Hester Argyle.”

“Ah, yes. Young Hester.” He asked curiously: “What did she say to you?”

“She spoke of the innocent,” said Calgary. “She said it wasn’t the guilty who mattered but the innocent. I understand now what she meant....”

Marshall cast a sharp glance at him. “I think possibly you do.”

“She meant just what you are saying,” said Arthur Calgary. “She meant that once more the family would be under suspicion—”

Marshall interrupted. “Hardly once more,” he said. “There was never time for the family to come under suspicion before. Jack Argyle was clearly indicated from the first.”

Calgary waved the interruption aside.

“The family would come under suspicion,” he said, “and it might remain under suspicion for a long time—perhaps for ever. If one of the family was guilty it is possible that they themselves would not know which one. They would look at each other and—wonder ... Yes, that’s what would be the worst of all. They themselves would not know which....”

There was silence. Marshall watched Calgary with a quiet, appraising glance, but he said nothing.

“That’s terrible, you know ...” said Calgary.

His thin, sensitive face showed the play of emotion on it.

“Yes, that’s terrible ... To go on year after year not knowing, looking at one another, perhaps the suspicion affecting one’s relationships with people. Destroying love, destroying trust....”

Marshall cleared his throat.

“Aren’t you—er—putting it rather too vividly?”

“No,” said Calgary, “I don’t think I am. I think, perhaps, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Marshall, I see this more clearly than you do. I can imagine, you see, what it might mean.”

Again there was silence.

“It means,” said Calgary, “that it is the innocent who are going to suffer ... And the innocent should not suffer. Only the guilty. That’s why—that’s why I can’t wash my hands of it. I can’t go away and say ‘I’ve done the right

thing, I've made what amends I can—I've served the cause of justice,' because you see what I have done has not served the cause of justice. It has not brought conviction to the guilty, it has not delivered the innocent from the shadow of guilt."

"I think you're working yourself up a little, Dr. Calgary. What you say has some foundation of truth, no doubt, but I don't see exactly what—well, what you can do about it."

"No. Nor do I," said Calgary frankly. "But it means that I've got to try. That's really why I've come to you, Mr. Marshall. I want—I think I've a right to know—the background."

"Oh, well," said Mr. Marshall, his tone slightly brisker. "There's no secret about all that. I can give you any facts you want to know. More than facts I am not in a position to give you. I've never been on intimate terms with the household. Our firm has acted for Mrs. Argyle over a number of years. We have cooperated with her over establishing various trusts and seeing to legal business. Mrs. Argyle herself I knew reasonably well and I also knew her husband. Of the atmosphere at Sunny Point, of the temperaments and characters of the various people living there, I only know as you might say, at second-hand through Mrs. Argyle herself."

"I quite understand all that," said Calgary, "but I've got to make a start somewhere. I understand that the children were not her own. That they were adopted?"

"That is so. Mrs. Argyle was born Rachel Konstam, the only daughter of Rudolph Konstam, a very rich man. Her mother was American and also a very rich woman in her own right. Rudolph Konstam had many philanthropic interests and brought his daughter up to take an interest in these benevolent schemes. He and his wife died in an aeroplane crash and Rachel then devoted the large fortune she inherited from her father and mother to what we may term, loosely, philanthropical enterprises. She took a personal interest in these benefactions and did a certain amount of settlement work herself. It was in doing the latter that she met Leo Argyle, who was an Oxford Don, with a great interest in economics and social reform. To understand Mrs. Argyle you have to realize that the great

tragedy of her life was that she was unable to have children. As is the case with many women, this disability gradually overshadowed the whole of her life. When after visits to all kinds of specialists, it seemed clear that she could never hope to be a mother, she had to find what alleviation she could. She adopted first a child from a slum tenement in New York—that is the present Mrs. Durrant. Mrs. Argyle devoted herself almost entirely to charities connected with children. On the outbreak of war in 1939 she established under the auspices of the Ministry of Health a kind of war nursery for children, purchasing the house you visited, Sunny Point.”

“Then called Viper’s Point,” said Calgary.

“Yes. Yes, I believe that was the original name. Ah, yes, perhaps in the end a more suitable name than the name she chose for it—Sunny Point. In 1940 she had about twelve to sixteen children, mostly those who had unsatisfactory guardians or who could not be evacuated with their own families. Everything was done for these children. They were given a luxurious home. I remonstrated with her, pointing out to her it was going to be difficult for the children after several years of war, to return from these luxurious surroundings to their homes. She paid no attention to me. She was deeply attached to the children and finally she formed the project of adding some of them, those from particularly unsatisfactory homes or who were orphans, to her own family. This resulted in a family of five. Mary—now married to Philip Durrant—Michael, who works in Drymouth, Tina, a half-caste child, Hester, and of course, Jacko. They grew up regarding the Argyles as their father and mother. They were given the best education money could buy. If environment counts for anything they should have gone far. They certainly had every advantage. Jack—or Jacko, as they called him—was always unsatisfactory. He stole money at school and had to be taken away. He got into trouble in his first year at the university. Twice he only avoided a jail sentence by a very narrow margin. He always had an ungovernable temper. All this, however, you probably have already gathered. Twice embezzlement on his part was made good by the Argyles. Twice money was spent in setting him up in business. Twice these business enterprises failed. After his death an allowance was paid, and indeed is still paid, to his widow.”

Calgary leant forward in astonishment.

“His widow? Nobody has ever told me that he was married.”

“Dear, dear.” The lawyer clicked his thumb irritably. “I have been remiss. I had forgotten, of course, that you had not read the newspaper reports. I may say that none of the Argyle family had any idea that he was married. Immediately after his arrest his wife appeared at Sunny Point in great distress. Mr. Argyle was very good to her. She was a young woman who had worked as a dance hostess in the Drymouth Palais de Danse. I probably forgot to tell you about her because she remarried a few weeks after Jack’s death. Her present husband is an electrician, I believe, in Drymouth.”

“I must go and see her,” said Calgary. He added, reproachfully, “She is the first person I should have gone to see.”

“Certainly, certainly. I will give you the address. I really cannot think why I did not mention it to you when you first came to me.”

Calgary was silent.

“She was such a—well—negligible factor,” said the lawyer apologetically. “Even the newspapers did not play her up much—she never visited her husband in prison—or took any further interest in him—”

Calgary had been deep in thought. He said now:

“Can you tell me exactly who was in that house on the night Mrs. Argyle was killed?”

Marshall gave him a sharp glance.

“Leo Argyle, of course, and the youngest daughter, Hester. Mary Durrant and her invalid husband were there on a visit. He had just come out of hospital. Then there was Kirsten Lindstrom—whom you probably met—she is a Swedish trained nurse and masseuse who originally came to help Mrs. Argyle with her war nursery and has remained on ever since. Michael and

Tina were not there—Michael works as a car salesman in Drymouth and Tina has a job in the County Library at Redmyn and lives in a flat there.”

Marshall paused before going on.

“There was also Miss Vaughan, Mr. Argyle’s secretary. She had left the house before the body was discovered.”

“I met her also,” said Calgary. “She seems very—attached to Mr. Argyle.”

“Yes—yes. I believe there may shortly be an engagement announced.”

“Ah!”

“He has been very lonely since his wife died,” said the lawyer, with a faint note of reproof in his voice.

“Quite so,” said Calgary.

Then he said:

“What about motive, Mr. Marshall?”

“My dear Dr. Calgary, I really cannot speculate as to that!”

“I think you can. As you have said yourself the facts are ascertainable.”

“There was no direct monetary benefit to anyone. Mrs. Argyle had entered into a series of discretionary Trusts, a formula which as you know is much adopted nowadays. These Trusts were in favour of all the children. They are administered by three Trustees, of whom I am one, Leo Argyle is one and the third is an American lawyer, a distant cousin of Mrs. Argyle’s. The very large sum of money involved is administered by these three Trustees and can be adjusted so as to benefit those beneficiaries of the Trust who need it most.”

“What about Mr. Argyle? Did he profit in a monetary sense by his wife’s death?”

“Not to any great extent. Most of her fortune, as I have told you, had gone into Trusts. She left him the residue of her estate, but that did not amount to a large sum.”

“And Miss Lindstrom?”

“Mrs. Argyle had bought a very handsome annuity for Miss Lindstrom some years previously.” Marshall added irritably, “Motive? There doesn’t seem to me a ha’porth of motive about. Certainly no financial motive.”

“And in the emotional field? Was there any special—friction?”

“There, I’m afraid, I can’t help you.” Marshall spoke with finality. “I wasn’t an observer of the family life.”

“Is there anyone who could?”

Marshall considered for a moment or two. Then he said, almost reluctantly:

“You might go and see the local doctor. Dr.—er—MacMaster, I think his name is. He’s retired now, but still lives in the neighbourhood. He was medical attendant to the war nursery. He must have known and seen a good deal of the life at Sunny Point. Whether you can persuade him to tell you anything is up to you. But I think that if he chose, he might be helpful, though—pardon me for saying this—do you think it likely that you can accomplish anything that the police cannot accomplish much more easily?”

“I don’t know,” said Calgary. “Probably not. But I do know this. I’ve got to try. Yes, I’ve got to try.”

Five

The Chief Constable's eyebrows climbed slowly up his forehead in a vain attempt to reach the receding line of his grey hair. He cast his eyes up to the ceiling and then down again to the papers on his desk.

"It beggars description!" he said.

The young man whose business it was to make the right responses to the Chief Constable, said:

"Yes, sir."

"A pretty kettle of fish," muttered Major Finney. He tapped with his fingers on the table. "Is Huish here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Superintendent Huish came about five minutes ago."

"Right," said the Chief Constable. "Send him in, will you?"

Superintendent Huish was a tall, sad-looking man. His air of melancholy was so profound that no one would have believed that he could be the life and soul of a children's party, cracking jokes and bringing pennies out of little boys' ears, much to their delight. The Chief Constable said:

"Morning, Huish, this is a pretty kettle of fish we've got here. What d'you think of it?"

Superintendent Huish breathed heavily and sat down in the chair indicated.

"It seems as though we made a mistake two years ago," he said. "This fellow—what's-his-name—"

The Chief Constable rustled his papers. "Calory—no, Calgary. Some sort of a professor. Absentminded bloke, maybe? People like that often vague about times and all that sort of thing?" There was perhaps a hint of appeal in his voice, but Huish did not respond. He said:

“He’s a kind of scientist, I understand.”

“So that you think we’ve got to accept what he says?”

“Well,” said Huish, “Sir Reginald seems to have accepted it, and I don’t suppose there’s anything would get past him.” This was a tribute to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

“No,” said Major Finney, rather unwillingly. “If the DPP’s convinced, well I suppose we’ve just got to take it. That means opening up the case again. You’ve brought the relevant data with you, have you, as I asked?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it here.”

The superintendent spread out various documents on the table.

“Been over it?” the Chief Constable asked.

“Yes, sir, I went all over it last night. My memory of it was fairly fresh. After all, it’s not so long ago.”

“Well, let’s have it, Huish. Where are we?”

“Back at the beginning, sir,” said Superintendent Huish. “The trouble is, you see, there really wasn’t any doubt at the time.”

“No,” said the Chief Constable. “It seemed a perfectly clear case. Don’t think I’m blaming you, Huish. I was behind you a hundred per cent.”

“There wasn’t anything else really that we could think,” said Huish thoughtfully. “A call came in that she’d been killed. The information that the boy had been there threatening her, the fingerprint evidence—his fingerprints on the poker, and the money. We picked him up almost at once and there the money was, in his possession.”

“What sort of impression did he make on you at the time?”

Huish considered. “Bad,” he said. “Far too cocky and plausible. Came reeling out with his times and his alibis. Cocky. You know the type.

Murderers are usually cocky. Think they're so clever. Think whatever they've done is sure to be all right, no matter how things go for other people. He was a wrong 'un all right."

"Yes," Finney agreed, "he was a wrong 'un. All his record goes to prove that. But were you convinced at once that he was a killer?"

The superintendent considered. "It's not a thing you can be sure about. He was the type, I'd say, that very often ends up as a killer. Like Harmon in 1938. Long record behind him of pinched bicycles, swindled money, frauds on elderly women, and finally he does one woman in, pickles her in acid, gets pleased with himself and starts making a habit of it. I'd have taken Jacko Argyle for one of that type."

"But it seems," said the Chief Constable slowly, "that we were wrong."

"Yes," said Huish, "yes, we were wrong. And the chap's dead. It's a bad business. Mind you," he added, with sudden animation, "he was a wrong 'un all right. He may not have been a murderer—in fact he wasn't a murderer, so we find now—but he was a wrong 'un."

"Well, come on, man," Finney snapped at him, "who did kill her? You've been over the case, you say, last night. Somebody killed her. The woman didn't hit herself on the back of her head with the poker. Somebody else did. Who was it?"

Superintendent Huish sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm wondering if we'll ever know," he said.

"Difficult as all that, eh?"

"Yes, because the scent's cold and because there'll be very little evidence to find and I should rather imagine that there never was very much evidence."

"The point being that it was someone in the house, someone close to her?"

"Don't see who else it could have been," said the superintendent. "It was someone there in the house or it was someone that she herself opened the

door to and let in. The Argyles were the locking-up type. Burglar bolts on the windows, chains, extra locks on the front door. They'd had one burglary a couple of years before and it had made them burglar conscious." He paused and went on, "The trouble is, sir, that we didn't look elsewhere at the time. The case against Jacko Argyle was complete. Of course, one can see now, the murderer took advantage of that."

"Took advantage of the fact that the boy had been there, that he'd quarrelled with her and that he'd threatened her?"

"Yes. All that person had to do was to step in the room, pick up the poker in a gloved hand, from where Jacko had thrown it down, walk up to the table where Mrs. Argyle was writing and biff her one on the head."

Major Finney said one simple word:

"Why?"

Superintendent Huish nodded slowly.

"Yes, sir, that's what we've got to find out. It's going to be one of the difficulties. Absence of motive."

"There didn't seem at the time," said the Chief Constable, "to be any obvious motive knocking about, as you might say. Like most other women who have property and a considerable fortune of their own, she'd entered into such various schemes as are legally permitted to avoid death duties. A beneficiary trust was already in existence, the children were all provided for in advance of her death. They'd get nothing further when she did die. And it wasn't as though she was an unpleasant woman, nagging or bullying or mean. She'd lavished money on them all their lives. Good education, capital sums to start them in jobs, handsome allowances to them all. Affection, kindness, benevolence."

"That's so, sir," agreed Superintendent Huish. "On the face of it there's no reason for anyone to want her out of the way. Of course—" He paused.

"Yes, Huish?"

“Mr. Argyle, I understand, is thinking of remarrying. He’s marrying Miss Gwenda Vaughan, who’s acted as his secretary over a good number of years.”

“Yes,” said Major Finney thoughtfully. “I suppose there’s a motive there. One that we didn’t know about at the time. She’s been working for him for some years, you say. Think there was anything between them at the time of the murder?”

“I should rather doubt it, sir,” said Superintendent Huish. “That sort of thing soon gets talked about in a village. I mean, I don’t think there were any goings-on, as you might say. Nothing for Mrs. Argyle to find out about or cut up rough about.”

“No,” said the Chief Constable, “but he might have wanted to marry Gwenda Vaughan quite badly.”

“She’s an attractive young woman,” said Superintendent Huish. “Not glamorous, I wouldn’t say that, but good-looking and attractive in a nice kind of way.”

“Probably been devoted to him for years,” said Major Finney. “These women secretaries always seem to be in love with their boss.”

“Well, we’ve got a motive of a kind for those two,” said Huish. “Then there’s the lady help, the Swedish woman. She mightn’t really have been as fond of Mrs. Argyle as she appeared to be. There might have been slights or imagined slights; things she resented. She didn’t benefit financially by the death because Mrs. Argyle had already bought her a very handsome annuity. She seems a nice, sensible kind of woman and not the sort you can imagine hitting anyone on the head with a poker! But you never know, do you? Look at the Lizzie Borden case.”

“No,” said the Chief Constable, “you never know. There’s no question of an outsider of any kind?”

“No trace of one,” said the superintendent. “The drawer where the money was pulled out. A sort of attempt had been made to make the room look as

though a burglar had been there, but it was a very amateurish effort. Sort of thing that fitted in perfectly with young Jacko having tried to create that particular effect.”

“The odd thing to me,” said the Chief Constable, “is the money.”

“Yes,” said Huish. “That’s very difficult to understand. One of the fivers Jack Argyle had on him was definitely one that had been given to Mrs. Argyle at the bank that morning. Mrs. Bottleberry was the name written on the back of it. He said his mother had given the money to him, but both Mr. Argyle and Gwenda Vaughan are quite definite that Mrs. Argyle came into the library at a quarter to seven and told them about Jacko’s demands for money and categorically said she’d refused to give him any.”

“It’s possible, of course,” the Chief Constable pointed out, “with what we know now, that Argyle and the Vaughan girl might have been lying.”

“Yes, that’s a possibility—or perhaps—” the superintendent broke off.

“Yes, Huish?” Finney encouraged him.

“Say someone—we’ll call him or her X for the moment—overheard the quarrel and the threats that Jacko was making. Suppose someone saw an opportunity there. Got the money, ran after the boy, said that his mother after all wanted him to have it, thus paving the way to one of the prettiest little frame-ups ever. Careful to use the poker that he’d picked up to threaten her with, without smearing his fingerprints.”

“Dammit all,” said the Chief Constable angrily. “None of it seems to fit with what I know of the family. Who else was in the house that evening besides Argyle and Gwenda Vaughan, Hester Argyle and this Lindstrom woman?”

“The eldest married daughter, Mary Durrant, and her husband were staying there.”

“He’s a cripple, isn’t he? That lets him out. What about Mary Durrant?”

“She’s a very calm piece of goods, sir. You can’t imagine her getting excited or—well, or killing anyone.”

“The servants?” demanded the Chief Constable.

“All dailies, sir, and they’d gone home by six o’clock.”

“Let me have a look at the times.”

The superintendent passed the paper to him.

“H’m—yes, I see. Quarter to seven Mrs. Argyle was in the library talking to her husband about Jacko’s threats. Gwenda Vaughan was present during part of the conversation. Gwenda Vaughan went home just after seven. Hester Argyle saw her mother alive at about two or three minutes to seven. After that, Mrs. Argyle was not seen till half past seven, when her dead body was discovered by Miss Lindstrom. Between seven and half past there was plenty of opportunity. Hester could have killed her, Gwenda Vaughan could have killed her after she left the library and before she left the house. Miss Lindstrom could have killed her when she ‘discovered the body,’ Leo Argyle was alone in his library from ten past seven until Miss Lindstrom sounded the alarm. He could have gone to his wife’s sitting room and killed her any time during that twenty minutes. Mary Durrant, who was upstairs, could have come down during that half hour and killed her mother. And”—said Finney thoughtfully—“Mrs. Argyle herself could have let anyone in by the front door as we thought she let Jack Argyle in. Leo Argyle said, if you remember, that he thought he did hear a ring at the bell, and the sound of the front door opening and closing, but he was very vague about the time. We assumed that that was when Jacko returned and killed her.”

“He needn’t have rung the bell,” said Huish. “He had a key of his own. They all had.”

“There’s another brother, isn’t there?”

“Yes, Michael. Works as a car salesman in Drymouth.”

“You’d better find out, I suppose,” said the Chief Constable, “what he was doing that evening.”

“After two years?” said Superintendent Huish. “Not likely anyone will remember, is it?”

“Was he asked at the time?”

“Out testing a customer’s car, I understand. No reason for suspecting him then, but he had a key and he could have come over and killed her.”

The Chief Constable sighed.

“I don’t know how you’re going to set about it, Huish. I don’t know whether we’re ever going to get anywhere.”

“I’d like to know myself who killed her,” said Huish. “From all I can make out, she was a fine type of woman. She’d done a lot for people. For unlucky children, for all sorts of charities. She’s the sort of person that oughtn’t to have been killed. Yes. I’d like to know. Even if we can never get enough evidence to satisfy the DPP I’d still like to know.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck, Huish,” said the Chief Constable. “Fortunately we’ve nothing very much on just now, but don’t be discouraged if you can’t get anywhere. It’s a very cold trail. Yes. It’s a very cold trail.”

Six

I

The lights went up in the cinema. Advertisements flashed on to the screen. The cinema usherettes walked round with cartons of lemonade and of ice cream. Arthur Calgary scrutinized them. A plump girl with brown hair, a tall dark one and a small, fair-haired one. That was the one he had come to see. Jacko's wife. Jacko's widow, now the wife of a man called Joe Clegg. It was a pretty, rather vapid little face, plastered with makeup, eyebrows plucked, hair hideous and stiff in a cheap perm. Arthur Calgary bought an ice-cream carton from her. He had her home address and he meant to call there, but he had wanted to see her first while she was unaware of him. Well, that was that. Not the sort of daughter-in-law, he thought, that Mrs. Argyle, from all accounts, would have cared about very much. That, no doubt, was why Jacko had kept her dark.

He sighed, concealed the ice-cream carton carefully under his chair, and leaned back as the lights went out and a new picture began to flash on the screen. Presently he got up and left the cinema.

At eleven o'clock the next morning he called at the address he had been given. A sixteen-year-old boy opened the door, and in answer to Calgary's enquiry, said:

"Cleggs? Top floor."

Calgary climbed the stairs. He knocked at a door and Maureen Clegg opened it. Without her smart uniform and her makeup, she looked a different girl. It was a silly little face, good-natured but with nothing particularly interesting about it. She looked at him doubtfully, frowned suspiciously.

"My name is Calgary. I believe you have had a letter from Mr. Marshall about me."

Her face cleared.

“Oh, so you’re the one! Come in, do.” She moved back to let him enter.

“Sorry the place is in such a mess. I haven’t had time to get around to things yet.” She swept some untidy clothes off a chair and pushed aside the remains of a breakfast consumed some time ago. “Do sit down. I’m sure it’s ever so good of you to come.”

“I felt it was the least I could do,” said Calgary.

She gave a little embarrassed laugh, as though not really taking in what he meant.

“Mr. Marshall wrote me about it,” she said. “About that story that Jackie made up—how it was all true after all. That someone did give him a lift back that night to Drymouth. So it was you, was it?”

“Yes,” said Calgary. “It was I.”

“I really can’t get over it,” said Maureen. “Talked about it half the night, Joe and I did. Really, I said, it might be something on the pictures. Two years ago, isn’t it, or nearly?”

“About that, yes.”

“Just the sort of thing you do see on the pictures, and of course you say to yourself that sort of thing’s all nonsense, it wouldn’t happen in real life. And now there it is! It does happen! It’s really quite exciting in a way, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” said Calgary, “that it might be thought of like that.” He was watching her with a vague kind of pain.

She chattered on quite happily.

“There’s poor old Jackie dead and not able to know about it. He got pneumonia, you know, in prison. I expect it was the damp or something, don’t you?”

She had, Calgary realized, a definite romantic image of prison in her mind's eye. Damp underground cells with rats gnawing one's toes.

"At the time, I must say," she went on, "him dying seemed all for the best."

"Yes, I suppose so ... Yes, I suppose it must have done."

"Well, I mean, there he was, shut up for years and years and years. Joe said I'd better get a divorce and I was just setting about it."

"You wanted to divorce him?"

"Well, it's no good being tied to a man who's going to be in prison for years, is it? Besides, you know, although I was fond of Jackie and all that, he wasn't what you call the steady type. I never did think really that our marriage would last."

"Had you actually started proceedings for divorce when he died?"

"Well, I had in a kind of way. I mean, I'd been to a lawyer. Joe got me to go. Of course, Joe never could stand Jackie."

"Joe is your husband?"

"Yes. He works in the electricity. Got a very good job and they think a lot of him. He always told me Jackie was no good, but of course I was just a kid and silly then. Jackie had a great way with him, you know."

"So it seems from all I've heard about him."

"He was wonderful at getting round women—I don't know why, really. He wasn't good-looking or anything like that. Monkey-face, I used to call him. But all the same, he'd got a way with him. You'd find you were doing anything he wanted you to do. Mind you, it came in useful once or twice. Just after we were married he got into trouble at the garage where he was working over some work done on a customer's car. I never understood the rights of it. Anyway, the boss was ever so angry. But Jackie got round the boss's wife. Quite old, she was. Must have been near on fifty, but Jackie flattered her up, played her off this way and that until she didn't know

whether she was on her head or her heels. She'd have done anything for him in the end. Got round her husband, she did, and got him to say as he wouldn't prosecute if Jackie paid the money back. But he never knew where the money came from! It was his own wife what provided it. That really gave us a laugh, Jackie and me!"

Calgary looked at her with faint repulsion. "Was it—so very funny?"

"Oh, I think so, don't you? Really, it was a scream. An old woman like that crazy about Jackie and raking out her savings for him."

Calgary sighed. Things were never, he thought, the way you imagined them to be. Every day he found himself less attracted to the man whose name he had taken such trouble to vindicate. He was almost coming to understand and share the point of view which had so astounded him at Sunny Point.

"I only came here, Mrs. Clegg," he said, "to see if there was anything I could—well, do for you to make up for what had happened."

Maureen Clegg looked faintly puzzled.

"Very nice of you, I'm sure," she said. "But why should you? We're all right. Joe is making good money and I've got my own job. I'm an usherette, you know, at the Picture-drome."

"Yes, I know."

"We're going to get a telly next month," the girl went on proudly.

"I'm very glad," said Arthur Calgary, "more glad than I can say that this—this unfortunate business hasn't left any—well, permanent shadow."

He was finding it more and more difficult to choose the right words when talking to this girl who had been married to Jacko. Everything he said sounded pompous, artificial. Why couldn't he talk naturally to her?

"I was afraid it might have been a terrible grief to you."

She stared at him, her wide, blue eyes not understanding in the least what he meant.

“It was horrid at the time,” she said. “All the neighbours talking and the worry of it all, though I must say the police were very kind, all things considered. Talked to me very politely and spoke very nice about everything.”

He wondered if she had had any feeling for the dead man. He asked her a question abruptly.

“Did you think he’d done it?” he said.

“Do you mean, do I think he’d done his mother in?”

“Yes. Just that.”

“Well, of course—well—well—yes, I suppose I did in a way. Of course, he said he hadn’t, but I mean you never could believe anything Jackie said, and it did seem as though he must have done. You see, he could get very nasty, Jackie could, if you stood up against him. I knew he was in a hole of some kind. He wouldn’t say much to me, just swore at me when I asked him about it. But he went off that day and he said that it was going to be all right. His mother, he said, would stump up. She’d have to. So of course I believed him.”

“He had never told his family about your marriage, I understand. You hadn’t met them?”

“No. You see, they were classy people, had a big house and all that. I wouldn’t have gone down very well. Jackie thought it best to keep me dark. Besides, he said if he took me along his mother’d want to run my life as well as his. She couldn’t help running people, he said, and he’d had enough of it—we did very well as we were, he said.”

She appeared to display no resentment, but to think, indeed, that her husband’s behaviour had been perfectly natural.

“I suppose it was a great shock to you when he was arrested?”

“Well, naturally. However could he do such a thing? I said to myself, but then, you can’t get away from things. He always had a very nasty temper when anything upset him.”

Calgary leaned forward.

“Let’s put it like this. It really seemed to you not at all a surprising thing that your husband should have hit his mother on the head with a poker and stolen a large quantity of money from her?”

“Well, Mr.—er—Calgary, if you’ll excuse me, that’s putting it in rather a nasty way. I don’t suppose he meant to hit her so hard. Don’t suppose he meant to do her in. She just refused to give him some money, he caught up the poker and he threatened her, and when she stuck it out he lost control of himself and gave her a swipe. I don’t suppose he meant to kill her. That was just his bad luck. You see, he needed the money very badly. He’d have gone to prison if he hadn’t got it.”

“So—you don’t blame him?”

“Well, of course I blamed him ... I don’t like all that nasty violent behaviour. And your own mother, too! No, I don’t think it was a nice thing to do at all. I began to think as Joe was right in telling me I oughtn’t to have had anything to do with Jackie. But, you know how it is. It’s ever so difficult for a girl to make up her mind. Joe, you see, was always the steady kind. I’ve known him a long time. Jackie was different. He’d got education and all that. He seemed very well off, too, always splashing his money about. And of course he had a way with him, as I’ve been telling you. He could get round anybody. He got round me all right. ‘You’ll regret it, my girl,’ that’s what Joe said. I thought that was just sour grapes and the green-eyed monster, if you understand what I mean. But Joe turned out to be quite right in the end.”

Calgary looked at her. He wondered if she still failed to understand the full implications of his story.

“Right in exactly what way?” he asked.

“Well, landing me up in the proper mess he did. I mean, we’ve always been respectable. Mother brought us up very careful. We’ve always had things nice and no talk. And there was the police arresting my husband! And all the neighbours knowing. In all the papers it was. News of the World and all the rest of them. And ever so many reporters coming round and asking questions. It put me in a very nasty position altogether.”

“But, my dear child,” said Arthur Calgary, “you do realize now that he didn’t do it?”

For a moment the fair, pretty face looked bewildered.

“Of course! I was forgetting. But all the same—well, I mean, he did go there and kick up a fuss and threaten her and all that. If he hadn’t done that he wouldn’t have been arrested at all, would he?”

“No,” said Calgary, “no. That is quite true.”

Possibly, he thought, this pretty, silly child was more of a realist than he was.

“Oo, it was awful,” went on Maureen. “I didn’t know what to do. And then Mum said better go over right away and see his people. They’d have to do something for me, she said. After all, she said, you’ve got your rights and you’d best show them as you know how to look after them. So off I went. It was that foreign lady help what opened the door to me and at first I couldn’t make her understand. Seemed as if she couldn’t believe it. ‘It’s impossible,’ she kept saying. ‘It’s impossible,’ she kept saying. ‘It’s quite impossible that Jacko should be married to you.’ Hurt my feelings a bit that did. ‘Well, married we are,’ I said, ‘and not in a registry office neither. In a church.’ It was the way my Mum wanted! And she said, ‘It’s not true. I don’t believe it.’ And then Mr. Argyle came and he was ever so kind. Told me not to worry more than I could help, and that everything possible would be done to defend Jackie. Asked me how I was off for money—and sent me a regular allowance every week. He keeps it up, too, even now. Joe doesn’t like me taking it, but I say to him, ‘Don’t be silly. They can spare it, can’t

they?’ Sent me a very nice cheque for a wedding present as well, he did, when Joe and I got married. And he said he was very glad and that he hoped this marriage would be happier than the last one. Yes, he’s ever so nice, Mr. Argyle is.”

She turned her head as the door opened.

“Oh. Here’s Joe now.”

Joe was a thin-lipped, fair-haired young man. He received Maureen’s explanations and introduction with a slight frown.

“Hoped we’d done with all that,” he said disapprovingly. “Excuse me for saying so, sir. But it does no good to go raking up the past. That’s what I feel. Maureen was unlucky, that’s all there is to say about it—”

“Yes,” said Calgary. “I quite see your point of view.”

“Of course,” said Joe Clegg, “she ought never to have taken up with a chap like that. I knew he was no good. There’d been stories about him already. He’d been under a Probation Officer twice. Once they begin like that, they go on. First it’s embezzling, or swindling women out of their savings and in the end it’s murder.”

“But this,” said Calgary, “wasn’t murder.”

“So you say, sir,” said Joe Clegg. He sounded himself completely unconvinced.

“Jack Argyle has a perfect alibi for the time the crime was committed. He was in my car being given a lift to Drymouth. So you see, Mr. Clegg, he could not possibly have committed this crime.”

“Possibly not, sir,” said Clegg. “But all the same it’s a pity raking it all up, if you’ll excuse me. After all, he’s dead now, and it can’t matter to him. And it starts the neighbours talking again and making them think things.”

Calgary rose. “Well, perhaps from your point of view that is one way of looking at it. But there is such a thing as justice, you know, Mr. Clegg.”

“I’ve always understood,” said Clegg, “that an English trial was as fair a thing as can be.”

“The finest system in the world can make a mistake,” said Calgary. “Justice is, after all, in the hands of men, and men are fallible.”

After he had left them and was walking down the street he felt more disturbed in his own mind than he could have thought possible. “Would it really have been better,” he said to himself, “if my memory of that day had never come back to me? After all, as that smug, tight-lipped fellow has just said, the boy is dead. He’s gone before a judge who makes no mistake. Whether he’s remembered as a murderer or merely as a petty thief, it can make no difference to him now.”

Then a sudden wave of anger rose in him. “But it ought to make a difference to someone!” he thought. “Someone ought to be glad. Why aren’t they? This girl, well, I can understand it well enough. She may have had an infatuation for Jacko, but she never loved him. Probably isn’t capable of loving anybody. But the others. His father. His sister, his nurse ... They should have been glad. They should have spared a thought for him before they began to fear for themselves ... Yes—someone should have cared.”

II

“Miss Argyle? At the second desk there.”

Calgary stood for a moment watching her.

Neat, small, very quiet and efficient. She was wearing a dark blue dress, with white collar and cuffs. Her blue-black hair was coiled neatly in her neck. Her skin was dark, darker than an English skin could ever be. Her bones, too, were smaller. This was the half-caste child that Mrs. Argyle had taken as a daughter into the family.

The eyes that looked up and met his were dark, quite opaque. They were eyes that told you nothing.

Her voice was low and sympathetic.

“Can I help you?”

“You are Miss Argyle? Miss Christina Argyle?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Calgary, Arthur Calgary. You may have heard—”

“Yes. I have heard about you. My father wrote to me.”

“I would like very much to talk to you.”

She glanced up at the clock.

“The library closes in half an hour. If you could wait until then?”

“Certainly. Perhaps you would come and have a cup of tea with me somewhere?”

“Thank you.” She turned from him to a man who had come up behind him.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

Arthur Calgary moved away. He wandered round, examining the contents of the shelves, observant all the time of Tina Argyle. She remained the same, calm, competent, unperturbed. The half hour passed slowly for him, but at last a bell rang and she nodded to him.

“I will meet you outside in a few minutes time.”

She did not keep him waiting. She wore no hat, merely a thick dark coat. He asked her where they should go.

“I do not know Redmyn very well,” he explained.

“There is a tea place near the Cathedral. It is not good, but for that reason it is less full than the others.”

Presently they were established at a small table, and a desiccated bored waitress had taken their order with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

“It will not be a good tea,” said Tina apologetically, “but I thought that perhaps you would like to be reasonably private.”

“That is so. I must explain my reasons for seeking you out. You see, I have met the other members of your family, including, I may say, your brother Jacko’s wife—widow. You were the only member of the family I had not met. Oh yes, and there is your married sister, of course.”

“You feel it necessary to meet us all?”

It was said quite politely—but there was a certain detachment about her voice which made Calgary a little uncomfortable.

“Hardly as a social necessity,” he agreed dryly. “And it is not mere curiosity.” (But wasn’t it?) “It is just that I wanted to express, personally, to all of you, my very deep regret that I failed to establish your brother’s innocence at the time of the trial.”

“I see....”

“If you were fond of him—Were you fond of him?”

She considered a moment; then said:

“No. I was not fond of Jacko.”

“Yet I hear from all sides that he had—great charm.”

She said clearly, but without passion:

“I distrusted and disliked him.”

“You never had—forgive me—any doubts that he had killed your mother?”

“It never occurred to me that there could be any other solution.”

The waitress brought their tea. The bread and butter was stale, the jam a curious jellyfied substance, the cakes garish and unappetizing. The tea was weak.

He sipped his and then said:

“It seems—I have been made to understand—that this information I have brought, which clears your brother of the charge of murder, may have repercussions that will not be so agreeable. It may bring fresh—anxieties to you all.”

“Because the case will have to be reopened?”

“Yes. You have already thought about that?”

“My father seems to think it is inevitable.”

“I am sorry. I am really sorry.”

“Why are you sorry, Dr. Calgary?”

“I hate to be the cause of bringing fresh trouble upon you.”

“But would you have been satisfied to remain silent?”

“You are thinking in terms of justice?”

“Yes. Weren’t you?”

“Of course. Justice seemed to me to be very important. Now—I am beginning to wonder whether there are things that are more important.”

“Such as?”

His thoughts flew to Hester.

“Such as—innocence, perhaps.”

The opaqueness of her eyes increased.

“What do you feel, Miss Argyle?”

She was silent for a moment or two, then she said:

“I am thinking of those words in Magna Carta. ‘To no man will we refuse justice.’”

“I see,” he said. “That is your answer....”

Seven

Dr. MacMaster was an old man with bushy eyebrows, shrewd grey eyes and a pugnacious chin. He leaned back in his shabby armchair and studied his visitor carefully. He found that he liked what he saw.

On Calgary's side also there was a feeling of liking. For the first time almost, since he had come back to England, he felt that he was talking to someone who appreciated his own feelings and point of view.

"It's very good of you to see me, Dr. MacMaster," he said.

"Not at all," said the doctor. "I'm bored to death since I retired from practice. Young men of my own profession tell me I must sit here like a dummy taking care of my groggy heart, but don't think it comes natural to me. It doesn't. I listen to the wireless, blah—blah—blah—and occasionally my housekeeper persuades me to look at television, flick, flick, flick. I've been a busy man, run off my feet all my life. I don't take kindly to sitting still. Reading tires my eyes. So don't apologize for taking up my time."

"The first thing I've got to make you understand," said Calgary, "is why I'm still concerning myself over all this. Logically speaking, I suppose, I've done what I came to do—told the unpalatable fact of my concussion and loss of memory, vindicated the boy's character. After that, the only sane and logical thing to do would be to go away and try to forget about it all. Eh? Isn't that right?"

"Depends," said Dr. MacMaster. "Something worrying you?" he asked in the ensuing pause.

"Yes," said Calgary. "Everything worries me. You see, my news was not received as I thought it would be."

"Oh, well," said Dr. MacMaster, "nothing odd in that. Happens every day. We rehearse a thing beforehand in our own minds, it doesn't matter what it is, consultation with another practitioner, proposal of marriage to a young

lady, talk with your boy before going back to school—when the thing comes off, it never goes as you thought it would. You’ve thought it out, you see; all the things that you are going to say and you’ve usually made up your mind what the answers are going to be. And, of course, that’s what throws you off every time. The answers never are what you think they will be. That’s what’s upset you, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Calgary.

“What did you expect? Expected them to be all over you?”

“I expected”—he considered a moment—“blame? Perhaps. Resentment? Very likely. But also thankfulness.”

MacMaster grunted. “And there’s no thankfulness, and not as much resentment as you think there ought to be?”

“Something like that,” Calgary confessed.

“That’s because you didn’t know the circumstances until you got there. Why have you come to me, exactly?”

Calgary said slowly:

“Because I want to understand more about the family. I only know the acknowledged facts. A very fine and unselfish woman doing her best for her adopted children, a public-spirited woman, a fine character. Set against that, what’s called, I believe, a problem child—a child that goes wrong. The young delinquent. That’s all I know. I don’t know anything else. I don’t know anything about Mrs. Argyle herself.”

“You’re quite right,” said MacMaster. “You’re putting your finger on the thing that matters. If you think it over, you know, that’s always the interesting part of any murder. What the person was like who was murdered. Everybody’s always so busy inquiring into the mind of the murderer. You’ve been thinking, probably, that Mrs. Argyle was the sort of woman who shouldn’t have been murdered.”

“I should imagine that everyone felt that.”

“Ethically,” said MacMaster, “you’re quite right. But you know”—he rubbed his nose—“isn’t it the Chinese who held that beneficence is to be accounted a sin rather than a virtue? They’ve got something there, you know. Beneficence does things to people. Ties ’em up in knots. We all know what human nature’s like. Do a chap a good turn and you feel kindly towards him. You like him. But the chap who’s had the good turn done to him, does he feel so kindly to you? Does he really like you? He ought to, of course, but does he?”

“Well,” said the doctor, after a moment’s pause. “There you are. Mrs. Argyle was what you might call a wonderful mother. But she overdid the beneficence. No doubt of that. Or wanted to. Or definitely tried to do so.”

“They weren’t her own children,” Calgary pointed out.

“No,” said MacMaster. “That’s just where the trouble came in, I imagine. You’ve only got to look at any normal mother cat. She has her kittens, she’s passionately protective of them, she’ll scratch anyone who goes near them. And then, in a week or so, she starts resuming her own life. She goes out, hunts a bit, takes a rest from her young. She’ll still protect them if anyone attacks them, but she is no longer obsessed by them, all the time. She’ll play with them a bit; then when they’re a bit too rough, she’ll turn on them and give them a spank and tell them she wants to be let alone for a bit. She’s reverting, you see, to nature. And as they grow up she cares less and less about them, and her thoughts go more and more to the attractive Toms in the neighbourhood. That’s what you might call the normal pattern of female life. I’ve seen many girls and women, with strong maternal instincts, keen on getting married but mainly, though they mayn’t quite know it themselves—because of their urge to motherhood. And the babies come; they’re happy and satisfied. Life goes back into proportion for them. They can take an interest in their husbands and in the local affairs and in the gossip that’s going round, and of course in their children. But it’s all in proportion. The maternal instinct, in a purely physical sense, is satisfied, you see.

“Well, with Mrs. Argyle the maternal instinct was very strong, but the physical satisfaction of bearing a child or children, never came. And so her

maternal obsession never really slackened. She wanted children, lots of children. She couldn't have enough of them. Her whole mind, night and day, was on those children. Her husband didn't count any more. He was just a pleasant abstraction in the background. No, everything was the children. Their feeding, their clothing, their playing, everything to do with them. Far too much was done for them. The thing she didn't give them and that they needed, was a little plain, honest-to-goodness neglect. They weren't just turned out into the garden to play like ordinary children in the country. No, they had to have every kind of gadget, artificial climbing things and stepping stones, a house built in the trees, sand brought and a little beach made on the river. Their food wasn't plain, ordinary food. Why, those kids even had their vegetables sieved, up to nearly five years old, and their milk sterilized and the water tested and their calories weighed and their vitamins computed! Mind you, I'm not being unprofessional in talking to you like this. Mrs. Argyle was never my patient. If she needed a doctor she went to one in Harley Street. Not that she often went. She was a very robust and healthy woman.

"But I was the local doctor who was called in to see the children, though she was inclined to think I was a bit casual over them. I told her to let 'em eat a few blackberries from the hedges. I told her it wouldn't hurt them to get their feet wet and have an occasional cold in the head, and that there's nothing much wrong with a child who's got a temperature of 99. No need to fuss till it's over 101. Those children were pampered and spoon-fed and fussed over and loved and in many ways it didn't do them any good."

"You mean," said Calgary, "it didn't do Jacko any good?"

"Well, I wasn't really only thinking of Jacko. Jacko to my mind was a liability from the start. The modern label for him is 'a crazy mixed-up kid.' It's just as good as any other label. The Argyles did their best for him; they did everything that could have been done. I've seen a good many Jackos in my lifetime. Later in life, when the boy has gone hopelessly wrong, the parents say, 'If only I'd been stricter with him when he was young,' or else they say, 'I was too harsh, if only I'd been kinder.' I don't think myself it amounts to a penn'orth of difference. There are those who go wrong because they've had an unhappy home and essentially feel unloved. And

again there are those who go wrong because at the least stress they're going to go wrong anyway. I put Jacko down as one of the latter."

"So you weren't surprised," said Calgary, "when he was arrested for murder?"

"Frankly, yes, I was surprised. Not because the idea of murder would have been particularly repugnant to Jacko. He was the sort of young man who is conscienceless but the kind of murder he'd done did surprise me. Oh, I know he had a violent temper and all that. As a child he often hurled himself on another child or hit him with some heavy toy or bit of wood. But it was usually a child smaller than himself, and it was usually not so much blind rage as the wish to hurt or get hold of something that he himself wanted. The kind of murder I'd have expected Jacko to do, if he did one, was the type where a couple of boys go out on a raid; then, when the police come after them, the Jackos say 'Biff him on the head, bud. Let him have it. Shoot him down.' They're willing for murder, ready to incite to murder, but they've not got the nerve to do murder themselves with their own hands. That's what I should have said. Now it seems," added the doctor, "I would have been right."

Calgary stared down at the carpet, a worn carpet with hardly any of its pattern remaining.

"I didn't know," he said, "what I was up against. I didn't realize what it was going to mean to the others. I didn't see that it might—that it must—"

The doctor was nodding gently.

"Yes," he said. "It looks that way, doesn't it? It looks as though you've got to put it right there amongst them."

"I think," said Calgary, "that that's really what I came to talk to you about. There doesn't seem, on the face of it, any real motive for any of them to have killed her."

"Not on the face of it," agreed the doctor. "But if you go a little behind the face of it—oh, yes, I think there's plenty of reason why someone might

have wanted to kill her.”

“Why?” asked Calgary.

“You feel it’s really your business, do you?”

“I think so. I can’t help feeling so.”

“Perhaps I should feel the same in your place ... I don’t know. Well, what I’d say is that none of them really belonged to themselves. Not so long as their mother—I’ll call her that for convenience—was alive. She had a good hold of them still, you know, all of them.”

“In what way?”

“Financially she’d provided for them. Provided for them handsomely. There was a large income. It was divided between them in such proportions as the Trustees thought fit. But although Mrs. Argyle herself was not one of the Trustees, nevertheless her wishes, so long as she was alive, were operative.” He paused a minute and then went on.

“It’s interesting in a way, how they all tried to escape. How they fought not to conform to the pattern that she’d arranged for them. Because she did arrange a pattern, and a very good pattern. She wanted to give them a good home, a good education, a good allowance and a good start in the professions that she chose for them. She wanted to treat them exactly as though they were hers and Leo Argyle’s own children. Only of course they weren’t hers and Leo Argyle’s own children. They had entirely different instincts, feelings, aptitudes and demands. Young Micky now works as a car salesman. Hester more or less ran away from home to go on the stage. She fell in love with a very undesirable type and was absolutely no good as an actress. She had to come home. She had to admit—and she didn’t like admitting—that her mother had been right. Mary Durrant insisted on marrying a man during the war whom her mother warned her not to marry. He was a brave and intelligent young man but an absolute fool when it came to business matters. Then he got polio. He was brought as a convalescent to Sunny Point. Mrs. Argyle was putting pressure on them to live there permanently. The husband was quite willing. Mary Durrant was

holding out desperately against it. She wanted her home and her husband to herself. But she'd have given in, no doubt, if her mother hadn't died.

"Micky, the other boy, has always been a young man with a chip on his shoulder; he resented bitterly being abandoned by his own mother. He resented it as a child and he never got over it. I think, at heart, he always hated his adopted mother.

"Then there's the Swedish masseuse woman. She didn't like Mrs. Argyle. She was fond of the children and she's fond of Leo. She accepted many benefits from Mrs. Argyle and probably tried to be grateful but couldn't manage it. Still I hardly think that her feelings of dislike could cause her to hit her benefactor on the head with a poker. After all, she could leave at any moment she liked. As for Leo Argyle—"

"Yes. What about him?"

"He's going to marry again," said Dr. MacMaster, "and good luck to him. A very nice young woman. Warm-hearted, kind, good company and very much in love with him. Has been for a long time. What did she feel about Mrs. Argyle? You can probably guess just as well as I can. Naturally, Mrs. Argyle's death simplified things a good deal. Leo Argyle's not the type of man to have an affair with his secretary with his wife in the same house. I don't really think he'd have left his wife, either."

Calgary said slowly:

"I saw them both; I talked to them. I can't really believe that either of them —"

"I know," said MacMaster. "One can't believe, can one? And yet—one of that household did it, you know."

"You really think so?"

"I don't see what else there is to think. The police are fairly sure that it wasn't the work of an outsider, and the police are probably right."

“But which of them?” said Calgary.

MacMaster shrugged his shoulders. “One simply doesn’t know.”

“You’ve no idea yourself from your knowledge of them all?”

“Shouldn’t tell you if I had,” said MacMaster. “After all, what have I got to go on? Unless there’s some factor that I’ve missed none of them seems a likely murderer to me. And yet—I can’t rule any one of them out as a possibility. No,” he added slowly, “my view is that we shall never know. The police will make inquiries and all that sort of thing. They’ll do their best, but to get evidence after this time and with so little to go upon—” He shook his head. “No, I don’t think that the truth will ever be known. There are cases like that, you know. One reads about them. Fifty—a hundred years ago, cases where one of three or four or five people must have done it but there wasn’t enough evidence and no one’s ever been able to say.”

“Do you think it’s going to be like that here?”

“We-ll,” said Dr. MacMaster, “yes, I do ...” Again he cast a shrewd look at Calgary. “And that’s what’s so terrible, isn’t it?” he said.

“Terrible,” said Calgary, “because of the innocent. That’s what she said to me.”

“Who? Who said what to you?”

“The girl—Hester. She said I didn’t understand that it was the innocent who mattered. It’s what you’ve just been saying to me. That we shall never know —”

“—who is innocent?” The doctor finished for him. “Yes, if we could only know the truth. Even if it doesn’t come to an arrest or trial or conviction. Just to know. Because otherwise—” He paused.

“Yes?” said Calgary.

“Work it out for yourself,” said Dr. MacMaster. “No—I don’t need to say that—you already have.”

He went on:

“It reminds me, you know, of the Bravo Case—nearly a hundred years ago now, I suppose, but books are still being written about it; making out a perfectly good case for his wife having done it, or Mrs. Cox having done it, or Dr. Gully—or even for Charles Bravo having taken the poison in spite of the Coroner’s verdict. All quite plausible theories—but no one now can ever know the truth. And so Florence Bravo, abandoned by her family, died alone of drink, and Mrs. Cox, ostracized, and with three little boys, lived to be an old woman with most of the people she knew believing her to be a murderess, and Dr. Gully was ruined professionally and socially—

“Someone was guilty—and got away with it. But the others were innocent—and didn’t get away with anything.”

“That mustn’t happen here,” said Calgary. “It mustn’t!”

Eight

I

Hester Argyle was looking at herself in the glass. There was little vanity in her gaze. It was more an anxious questioning with behind it the humility of one who has never really been sure of herself. She pushed up her hair from her forehead, pulled it to one side and frowned at the result. Then, as a face appeared behind hers in the mirror, she started, flinched and swung round apprehensively.

“Ah,” said Kirsten Lindstrom, “you are afraid!”

“What do you mean, afraid, Kirsty?”

“You are afraid of me. You think that I come up behind you quietly and that perhaps I shall strike you down.”

“Oh, Kirsty, don’t be so foolish. Of course I wouldn’t think anything like that.”

“But you did think it,” said the other. “And you are right, too, to think such things. To look at the shadows, to start when you see something that you do not quite understand. Because there is something here in this house to be afraid of. We know that now.”

“At any rate, Kirsty darling,” said Hester, “I needn’t be afraid of you.”

“How do you know?” said Kirsten Lindstrom. “Did I not read in the paper a short while back of a woman who had lived with another woman for years, and then one day suddenly she kills her. Suffocates her. Tries to scratch her eyes out. And why? Because, she tells the police very gently, for some time she has seen that the devil is inhabiting the woman. She had seen the devil looking out of the other woman’s eyes and she knows that she must be strong and brave and kill the devil!”

“Oh, well, I remember that,” said Hester. “But that woman was mad.”

“Ah,” said Kirsten. “But she did not know herself that she was mad. And she did not seem mad to those round her, because no one knew what was going on in her poor, twisted mind. And so I say to you, you do not know what is going on in my mind. Perhaps I am mad. Perhaps I looked one day at your mother and thought that she was Antichrist and that I would kill her.”

“But, Kirsty, that’s nonsense! Absolute nonsense.”

Kirsten Lindstrom sighed and sat down.

“Yes,” she admitted, “it is nonsense. I was very fond of your mother. She was good to me, always. But what I am trying to say to you, Hester, and what you have got to understand and believe, is that you cannot say ‘nonsense’ to anything or anyone. You cannot trust me or anybody else.”

Hester turned round and looked at the other woman.

“I really believe you’re serious,” she said.

“I am very serious,” said Kirsten. “We must all be serious and we must bring things out into the open. It is no good pretending that nothing has happened. That man who came here—I wish he had not come, but he did, and now he has made it, I understand, quite plain that Jacko was not a murderer. Very well then, someone else is a murderer, and that someone else must be one of us.”

“No, Kirsty, no. It could have been someone who—”

“Who what?”

“Well, who wanted to steal something, or who had a grudge against Mother for some reason in the past.”

“You think your mother would let that someone in?”

“She might,” said Hester. “You know what she was like. If somebody came with a hard luck story, if someone came to tell her about some child that was being neglected or ill-treated. Don’t you think Mother would have let

that person in and taken them to her room and listened to what they had to say?”

“It seems to me very unlikely,” said Kirsten. “At least it seems to me unlikely that your mother would sit down at a table and let that person pick up a poker and hit her on the back of the head. No, she was at her ease, confident, with someone she knew in the room.”

“I wish you wouldn’t, Kirsty,” cried Hester. “Oh, I wish you wouldn’t. You’re bringing it so near, so close.”

“Because it is near, it is close. No, I will not say any more now, but I have warned you that though you think you know someone well, though you may think you trust them, you cannot be sure. So be on your guard. Be on your guard against me and against Mary and against your father and against Gwenda Vaughan.”

“How can I go on living here and suspecting everybody?”

“If you will take my advice it will be better for you to leave this house.”

“I can’t just now.”

“Why not? Because of the young doctor?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Kirsty.” Colour flamed up in Hester’s cheeks.

“I mean Dr. Craig. He is a very nice young man. A sufficiently good doctor, amiable, conscientious. You could do worse. But all the same I think it would be better if you left here and went away.”

“The whole thing’s nonsense,” Hester cried angrily, “nonsense, nonsense, nonsense. Oh, how I wish Dr. Calgary had never come here.”

“So do I,” said Kirsten, “with all my heart.”

Leo Argyle signed the last of the letters which Gwenda Vaughan placed in front of him.

“Is that the last?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“We’ve not done too badly today.”

After a minute or two when Gwenda had stamped and stacked the letters, she asked:

“Isn’t it about time that you—took that trip abroad?”

“Trip abroad?”

Leo Argyle sounded very vague. Gwenda said:

“Yes. Don’t you remember you were going to Rome and to Siena.”

“Oh, yes, yes, so I was.”

“You were going to see those documents from the archives that Cardinal Massilini wrote to you about.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Would you like me to make the reservations by air, or would you rather go by train?”

As though coming back from a long way away, Leo looked at her and smiled faintly.

“You seem very anxious to get rid of me, Gwenda,” he said.

“Oh no, darling, no.”

She came quickly across and knelt down by his side.

“I never want you to leave me, never. But—but I think—oh, I think it would be better if you went away from here after—after....”

“After last week?” said Leo. “After Dr. Calgary’s visit?”

“I wish he hadn’t come here,” said Gwenda. “I wish things could have been left as they were.”

“With Jacko unjustly condemned for something he didn’t do?”

“He might have done it,” said Gwenda. “He might have done it any time, and it’s a pure accident, I think, that he didn’t do it.”

“It’s odd,” said Leo, thoughtfully. “I never really could believe he did do it. I mean, of course, I had to give in to the evidence—but it seemed to me so unlikely.”

“Why? He always had a terrible temper, didn’t he?”

“Yes. Oh, yes. He attacked other children. Usually children rather smaller than himself. I never really felt that he would have attacked Rachel.”

“Why not?”

“Because he was afraid of her,” said Leo. “She had great authority, you know. Jacko felt it just like everybody else.”

“But don’t you think,” said Gwenda, “that that was just why—I mean—” She paused.

Leo looked at her questioningly. Something in his glance made the colour come up into her cheeks. She turned away, went over to the fire and knelt down in front of it with her hands to the blaze. “Yes,” she thought to herself, “Rachel had authority all right. So pleased with herself, so sure of herself, so much the queen bee bossing us all. Isn’t that enough to make one want to take a poker, to make one want to strike her down, to silence her once and for all? Rachel was always right, Rachel always knew best, Rachel always got her own way.”

She got up abruptly.

“Leo,” she said. “Couldn’t we—couldn’t we be married quite soon instead of waiting until March?”

Leo looked at her. He was silent for a moment, and then he said:

“No, Gwenda, no. I don’t think that would be a good plan.”

“Why not?”

“I think,” said Leo, “it would be a pity to rush into anything.”

“What do you mean?”

She came across to him. She knelt down again beside him.

“Leo, what do you mean? You must tell me.”

He said:

“My dear, I just think that we mustn’t, as I said, rush into anything.”

“But we will be married in March, as we planned?”

“I hope so ... Yes, I hope so.”

“You don’t speak as though you were sure ... Leo, don’t you care any more?”

“Oh, my dear,” his hands rested on her shoulders, “of course I care. You mean everything in the world to me.”

“Well, then,” said Gwenda impatiently.

“No.” He got up. “No. Not yet. We must wait. We must be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

He did not answer. She said:

“You don’t think—you can’t think—”

Leo said: “I—I don’t think anything.”

The door opened and Kirsten Lindstrom came in with a tray which she put down on the desk.

“Here is your tea, Mr. Argyle. Shall I bring another cup for you, Gwenda, or will you join the others downstairs?”

Gwenda said:

“I will come down to the dining room. I’ll take these letters. They ought to go off.”

With slightly unsteady hands she picked up the letters Leo had just signed and went out of the room carrying them. Kirsten Lindstrom looked after her, then she looked back at Leo.

“What have you said to her?” she demanded. “What have you done to upset her?”

“Nothing,” said Leo. His voice was tired. “Nothing at all.”

Kirsten Lindstrom shrugged her shoulders. Then, without another word, she went out of the room. Her unseen, unspoken criticism, however, could be felt. Leo sighed, leaning back in his chair. He felt very tired. He poured out his tea but he did not drink it. Instead, he sat there in his chair staring unseeingly across the room, his mind busy in the past.

III

The social club he had been interested in in the East End of London ... It was there that he had first met Rachel Konstam. He could see her now clearly in his mind’s eye. A girl of medium height, stocky in build, wearing what he had not appreciated at the time were very expensive clothes, but wearing them with a dowdy air. A round-faced girl, serious, warm-hearted,

with an eagerness and a naïvety which had appealed to him. So much that needed doing, so much that was worth doing! She had poured out words eagerly, rather incoherently, and his heart had warmed to her. For he, too, had felt that there was much that needed doing, much that was worth doing; though he himself had a gift of natural irony that made him doubtful whether work worth doing was always as successful as it ought to be. But Rachel had had no doubts. If you did this, if you did that, if such and such an institution were endowed, the beneficial results would follow automatically.

She had never allowed, he saw now, for human nature. She had seen people always as cases, as problems to be dealt with. She had never seen that each human being was different, would react differently, had its own peculiar idiosyncrasies. He had said to her then, he remembered, not to expect too much. But she had always expected too much, although she had immediately disclaimed his accusation. She had always expected too much, and so always she had been disappointed. He had fallen in love with her quite quickly, and had been agreeably surprised to find out that she was the daughter of wealthy parents.

They had planned their life together on a basis of high thinking and not precisely plain living. But he could see now clearly what it was that had principally attracted him to her. It was her warmth of heart. Only, and there was the tragedy, that warmth of heart had not really been for him. She had been in love with him, yes. But what she had really wanted from him and from life was children. And the children had not come.

They had visited doctors, reputable doctors, disreputable doctors, even quacks, and the verdict in the end had been one she was forced to accept. She would never have children of her own. He had been sorry for her, very sorry, and he had acquiesced quite willingly in her suggestion that they should adopt a child. They were already in touch with adoption societies when on the occasion of a visit to New York their car had knocked down a child running out from a tenement in the poorer quarter of the city.

Rachel had jumped out and knelt down in the street by the child who was only bruised, not hurt; a beautiful child, golden-haired and blue-eyed. Rachel had insisted on taking her to hospital to make sure there was no

injury. She'd interviewed the child's relations; a slatternly aunt and the aunt's husband who obviously drank. It was clear that they had no feeling for the child they had taken in to live with them since her own parents were dead. Rachel had suggested that the child should come and stay with them for a few days, and the woman had agreed with alacrity.

"Can't look after her properly here," she'd said.

So Mary had been taken back to their suite at the hotel. The child had obviously enjoyed the soft bed and the luxurious bathroom. Rachel had bought her new clothes. Then the moment had come when the child had said:

"I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with you."

Rachel had looked at him, looked at him with a sudden passion of longing and delight. She had said to him as soon as they were alone:

"Let's keep her. It'll easily be arranged. We'll adopt her. She'll be our own child. That woman'll be only too pleased to be rid of her."

He had agreed easily enough. The child seemed quiet, well-behaved, docile. She'd obviously no feeling for the aunt and uncle with whom she lived. If this would make Rachel happy, they'd go ahead. Lawyers were consulted, papers were signed and henceforth Mary O'Shaughnessy was known as Mary Argyle, and sailed with them for Europe. He had thought that at last poor Rachel would be happy. And she had been happy. Happy in an excited, almost feverish kind of way, doting on Mary, giving her every kind of expensive toy. And Mary had accepted placidly, sweetly. And yet, Leo thought, there had always been something that disturbed him a little. The child's easy acquiescence. Her lack of any kind of homesickness for her own place and people. True affection, he hoped, would come later. He could see no real signs of it now. Acceptance of benefits, complacency, enjoyment of all that was provided. But of love for her new adopted mother? No, he had not seen that.

It was from that time onwards, Leo thought, that he had somehow managed to slip to the background of Rachel Argyle's life. She was a woman who

was by nature a mother, not a wife. Now with the acquiring of Mary, it was as though her maternal longings were not so much fulfilled as stimulated. One child was not enough for her.

All her enterprises from now on were connected with children. Her interest lay in orphanages, in endowments for crippled children, in cases of backward children, spastics, orthopaedics—always children. It was admirable. He felt all along that it was very admirable, but it had become the centre of her life. Little by little he began to indulge in his own activities. He began to go more deeply into the historical background of economics, which had always interested him. He withdrew more and more into his library. He engaged in research, in the writing of short, well-phrased monographs. His wife, busy, earnest, happy, ran the house and increased her activities. He was courteous and acquiescent. He encouraged her. “That is a very fine project, my dear.” “Yes, yes, I should certainly go ahead with that.” Occasionally a word of caution was slipped in. “You want, I think, to examine the position very thoroughly before you commit yourself. You mustn’t be carried away.”

She continued to consult him, but sometimes now it was almost perfunctory. As time went on she was more and more an authoritarian. She knew what was right, she knew what was best. Courteously he withdrew his criticism and his occasional admonitions.

Rachel, he thought, needed no help from him, needed no love from him. She was busy, happy, terrifically energetic.

Behind the hurt that he could not help feeling, there was also, queerly enough, a sense of pity for her. It was as though he knew that the path she was pursuing might be a perilous one.

On the outbreak of war in 1939, Mrs. Argyle’s activities were immediately redoubled. Once she had the idea of opening a war nursery for children from the London slums, she was in touch with many influential people in London. The Ministry of Health was quite willing to co-operate and she had looked for and found a suitable house for her purpose. A newly built, up-to-date house in a remote part of England likely to be free from bombing. There she could accommodate up to eighteen children between the ages of

two and seven. The children came not only from poor homes but also from unfortunate ones. They were orphans, or illegitimate children whose mothers had no intention of being evacuated with them and who were bored with looking after them. Children from homes where they had been ill-treated and neglected. Three or four of the children were cripples. For orthopaedic treatment she engaged as well as a staff of domestic workers, a Swedish masseuse and two fully trained hospital nurses. The whole thing was done not only on a comfortable but on a luxurious basis. Once he remonstrated with her.

“You mustn’t forget, Rachel, these children will have to go back to the background from which we took them. You mustn’t make it too difficult for them.”

She had replied warmly:

“Nothing’s too good for these poor mites. Nothing!”

He had urged, “Yes, but they’ve got to go back, remember.”

But she had waved that aside. “It mayn’t be necessary. It may—we’ll have to see in the future.”

The exigencies of war had soon brought changes. The hospital nurses, restive at looking after perfectly healthy children when there was real nursing work to be done, had frequently to be replaced. In the end one elderly hospital nurse and Kirsten Lindstrom were the only two left. The domestic help failed and Kirsten Lindstrom had come to the rescue there also. She had worked with great devotion and selflessness.

And Rachel Argyle had been busy and happy. There had been, Leo remembered, moments of occasional bewilderment. The day when Rachel, puzzled at the way one small boy, Micky, was slowly losing weight, his appetite failing, had called in the doctor. The doctor could find nothing wrong but had suggested to Mrs. Argyle that the child might be homesick. Quickly she’d rebuffed the idea.

“That’s impossible! You don’t know the home he has come from. He was knocked about, ill-treated. It must have been hell for him.”

“All the same,” Dr. MacMaster had said, “all the same, I shouldn’t be surprised, The thing is to get him to talk.”

And one day Micky had talked. Sobbing in his bed, he cried out, pushing Rachel away with his fists:

“I want to go home. I want to go home to our Mom and our Ernie.”

Rachel was upset, almost incredulous.

“He can’t want his mother. She didn’t care tuppence for him. She knocked him about whenever she was drunk.”

And he had said gently: “But you’re up against nature, Rachel. She is his mother and he loves her.”

“She was no kind of a mother!”

“He is her own flesh and blood. That’s what he feels. That’s what nothing can replace.”

And she had answered: “But by now, surely he ought to look on me as his mother.”

Poor Rachel, thought Leo. Poor Rachel, who could buy so many things ... Not selfish things, not things for herself; who could give to unwanted children love, care, a home. All these things she could buy for them, but not their love for her.

Then the war had ended. The children had begun to drift back to London, claimed by parents or relatives. But not all of them. Some of them had remained unwanted and it was then that Rachel had said:

“You know, Leo, they’re like our own children now. This is the moment when we can have a real family of our own. Four—five of these children

can stay with us. We'll adopt them, provide for them and they'll really be our children."

He had felt a vague uneasiness, why he did not quite know. It was not that he objected to the children, but he had felt instinctively the falseness of it. The assumption that it was easy to make a family of one's own by artificial means.

"Don't you think," he had said, "that it's rather a risk?"

But she had replied:

"A risk? What does it matter if it is a risk? It's worth doing."

Yes, he supposed it was worth doing, only he was not quite as sure as she was. By now he had grown so far away, so aloof in some cold misty region of his own, that it was not in him to object. He said as he had said so many times:

"You must do as you please, Rachel."

She had been full of triumph, full of happiness, making her plans, consulting solicitors, going about things in her usual businesslike way. And so she had acquired her family. Mary, that eldest child brought from New York; Micky, the homesick boy who had cried himself to sleep for so many nights, longing for his slum home and his negligent, bad-tempered mother; Tina, the graceful dark half-caste child whose mother was a prostitute and whose father had been a Lascar seaman. Hester, whose young Irish mother had borne an illegitimate child and who wanted to start life again. And Jacko, the engaging, monkey-faced little boy whose antics made them all laugh, who could always talk himself out of punishment, and charm extra sweets even from that disciplinarian, Miss Lindstrom. Jacko, whose father was serving a prison sentence and whose mother had gone off with some other man.

Yes, Leo thought, surely it was a worthwhile job to take these children, to give them the benefits of a home and love and a father and mother. Rachel, he thought, had had a right to be triumphant. Only it hadn't worked out

quite the way it was supposed to do ... For these children were not the children that he and Rachel would have had. Within them ran none of the blood of Rachel's hardworking thrifty forebears, none of the drive and ambition by which the less reputable members of her family had gained their assured place in society, none of the vague kindness and integrity of mind that he remembered in his own father and grandfather and grandmother. None of the intellectual brilliance of his grandparents on the other side.

Everything that environment could do was done for them. It could do a great deal, but it could not do everything. There had been those seeds of weakness which had brought them to the nursery in the first place, and under stress those seeds might bear flower. That was exemplified very fully in Jacko. Jacko, the charming, agile Jacko, with his merry quips, his charm, his easy habit of twisting everyone round his finger, was essentially of a delinquent type. It showed very early in childish thieving, in lies; all things that were put down to his original bad upbringing. Things that could be, Rachel said, easily ironed out. But they never did get ironed out.

His record at school was bad. He was sent down from the university and from then it was a long series of painful incidents where he and Rachel, doing the best they could, tried to give the boy the assurance of their love and their confidence, tried to find work that would be congenial to him where he could hope for success if he applied himself. Perhaps, Leo thought, they had been too soft with him. But no. Soft or hard, in Jacko's case, he thought the end would have been the same. What he wanted he must have. If he could not get it by any legitimate means he was quite willing to get it by any other means. He was not clever enough to be successful in crime, even petty crime. And so it had come to that last day when he had arrived broke, in fear of prison, angrily demanding money as his right, threatening. He had gone away, shouting out that he was coming back and that she had better have the money ready for him—Or else!

And so—Rachel had died. How remote all the past seemed to him. All those long years of the war with the boys and girls growing up. And he himself? Also remote, colourless. It was as though that robust energy and

zest for life that was Rachel had eaten into him, leaving him limp and exhausted, needing, oh so badly, warmth and love.

Even now he could hardly remember when he had first become aware how close these things were to him. Close at hand ... Not proffered to him, but there.

Gwenda ... The perfect, helpful secretary, working for him, always at hand, kind, helpful. There was something about her that had reminded him of what Rachel had been when he first met her. The same warmth, the same enthusiasm, the same warmheartedness. Only in Gwenda's case, that warmth, that warmheartedness, that enthusiasm were all for him. Not for the hypothetical children that she might one day have, just for him. It had been like warming one's hands at a fire ... Hands that were cold and stiff with disuse. When had he first realized that she cared for him? It was difficult to say. It had not been any sudden revelation.

But suddenly—one day—he had known that he loved her.

And that as long as Rachel lived, they could never marry.

Leo sighed, sat up in his chair and drank his stone-cold tea.

Nine

Calgary had only been gone a few minutes when Dr. MacMaster received a second visitor. This one was well known to him and he greeted him with affection.

“Ah, Don, glad to see you. Come in and tell me what’s on your mind. There is something on your mind. I always know when your forehead wrinkles in that peculiar way.”

Dr. Donald Craig smiled at him ruefully. He was a good-looking serious young man who took himself and his work in a serious manner. The old retired doctor was very fond of his young successor though there were times when he wished that it was easier for Donald Craig to see a joke.

Craig refused the offer of a drink and came straight to the point.

“I’m badly worried, Mac.”

“Not more vitamin deficiencies, I hope,” said Dr. MacMaster. From his point of view vitamin deficiency had been a good joke. It had once taken a veterinary surgeon to point out to young Craig that the cat belonging to a certain child patient was suffering with an advanced case of ringworm.

“It’s nothing to do with the patients,” said Donald Craig. “It’s my own private affairs.”

MacMaster’s face changed immediately.

“I’m sorry, my boy. Very sorry. Have you had bad news?”

The young man shook his head.

“It’s not that. It’s—look here, Mac, I’ve got to talk to someone about it and you know them all, you’ve been here for years, you know all about them. And I’ve got to know too. I’ve got to know where I stand, what I’m up against.”

MacMaster's bushy eyebrows rose slowly up his forehead.

"Let's hear the trouble," he said.

"It's the Argyles. You know—I suppose everyone knows—that Hester Argyle and I—"

The old doctor nodded his head.

"A nice little understanding," he said approvingly. "That's the old-fashioned term they used to use, and it was a very good one."

"I'm terribly in love with her," Donald said simply, "and I think—oh, I'm sure—that she cares too. And now all this happens."

A look of enlightenment came into the older doctor's face.

"Ah yes! Free pardon for Jacko Argyle," he said. "A free pardon that's come too late for him."

"Yes. That's just what makes me feel—I know it's an entirely wrong thing to feel, but I can't help it—that it would have been better if—if this new evidence hadn't come to light."

"Oh, you're not the only one who seems to feel that," said MacMaster. "It's felt, as far as I can find out, from the Chief Constable through the Argyle family down to the man who came back from the Antarctic and supplied the evidence." He added: "He's been here this afternoon."

Donald Craig looked startled.

"Has he? Did he say anything?"

"What did you expect him to say?"

"Did he have any idea of who—"

Slowly Dr. MacMaster shook his head.

“No,” he said. “He’s no idea. How could he have—coming out of the blue and seeing them all for the first time? It seems,” he went on, “that nobody has any idea.”

“No. No, I suppose not.”

“What’s upset you so much, Don?”

Donald Craig drew a deep breath.

“Hester rang me up that evening when this fellow Calgary had been there. She and I were going into Drymouth after the surgery to hear a lecture on criminal types in Shakespeare.”

“Sounds particularly suitable,” said MacMaster.

“And then she rang up. Said she wouldn’t be coming. Said there had been news of a peculiarly upsetting type.”

“Ah. Dr. Calgary’s news.”

“Yes. Yes, although she didn’t mention him at the time. But she was very upset. She sounded—I can’t explain to you how she sounded.”

“Irish blood,” said MacMaster.

“She sounded altogether stricken, terrified. Oh, I can’t explain it.”

“Well, what do you expect?” the doctor asked. “She’s not yet twenty, is she?”

“But why is she so upset? I tell you, Mac, she’s scared stiff of something.”

“M’m, yes, well—yes that might be so, I suppose,” said MacMaster.

“Do you think—what do you think?”

“It’s more to the point,” MacMaster pointed out, “what you are thinking.”

The young man said bitterly:

“I suppose, if I wasn’t a doctor, I shouldn’t even begin to think such things. She’d be my girl and my girl could do no wrong. But as it is—”

“Yes—come on. You’d better get it off your chest.”

“You see, I know something of what goes on in Hester’s mind. She—she’s a victim of early insecurity.”

“Quite so,” said MacMaster. “That’s the way we put it nowadays.”

“She hasn’t had time yet to get properly integrated. She was suffering, at the time of the murder, from a perfectly natural feeling of an adolescent young woman—resentment of authority—an attempt to escape from smother-love which is responsible for so much harm nowadays. She wanted to rebel, to get away. She’s told me all this herself. She ran away and joined a fourth-class touring theatrical company. Under the circumstances I think her mother behaved very reasonably. She suggested that Hester should go to London and go to RADA and study acting properly if she wanted to do so. But that wasn’t what Hester wanted to do. This running away to act was just a gesture really. She didn’t really want to train for the stage, or to take up the profession seriously. She just wanted to show she could be on her own. Anyway, the Argyles didn’t try to coerce her. They gave her a quite handsome allowance.”

“Which was very clever of them,” said MacMaster.

“And then she had this silly love affair with a middle-aged member of the company. In the end she realized for herself that he was no good. Mrs. Argyle came along and dealt with him and Hester came home.”

“Having learnt her lesson, as they used to say in my young days,” said MacMaster. “But of course one never liked learning one’s lessons. Hester didn’t.”

Donald Craig went on anxiously:

“She was full, still, of pent-up resentment; all the worse because she had to acknowledge secretly, if not openly, that her mother had been perfectly right; that she was no good as an actress and that the man she had lavished her affections on wasn’t worth it. And that, anyway, she didn’t really care for him. ‘Mother knows best.’ It’s always galling to the young.”

“Yes,” said MacMaster. “That was one of poor Mrs. Argyle’s troubles, though she’d never have thought of it like that. The fact was she was nearly always right, that she did know best. If she’d been one of those women who run into debt, lose their keys, miss trains, and do foolish actions that other people have to help them out of, her entire family would have been much fonder of her. Sad and cruel, but there’s life for you. And she wasn’t a clever enough woman to get her own way by guile. She was complacent, you know. Pleased with her own power and judgment and quite quite sure of herself. That’s a very difficult thing to come up against when you’re young.”

“Oh, I know,” said Donald Craig. “I realize all that. It’s because I realize it so well that I feel—that I wonder—” He stopped.

MacMaster said gently:

“I’d better say it for you, hadn’t I, Don? You’re afraid that it was your Hester who heard the quarrel between her mother and Jacko, who got worked up by hearing it, perhaps, and who, in a fit of rebellion against authority, and against her mother’s superior assumption of omniscience, went into that room, picked up the poker and killed her. That’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it?”

The young man nodded miserably.

“Not really. I don’t believe it, but—but I feel—I feel that it could have happened. I don’t feel Hester has got the poise, the balance to—I feel she’s young for her age, uncertain of herself, liable to have brainstorms. I look at that household and I don’t feel that any of them are likely to have done such a thing until I come to Hester. And then—then I’m not sure.”

“I see,” said Dr. MacMaster. “Yes, I see.”

“I don’t really blame her,” said Don Craig quickly. “I don’t think the poor child really knew what she was doing. I can’t call it murder. It was just an act of emotional defiance, of rebellion, of a longing to be free, of the conviction that she would never be free until—until her mother wasn’t there any longer.”

“And that last is probably true enough,” said MacMaster. “It’s the only kind of motive there is, and it’s rather a peculiar one. Not the kind that looks strong in the eyes of the law. Wishing to be free. Free from the impact of a stronger personality. Just because none of them inherits a large sum of money on the death of Mrs. Argyle the law won’t consider that they had a motive. But even the financial control, I should imagine, was very largely in Mrs. Argyle’s hands through her influence with the Trustees. Oh yes, her death set them free all right. Not only Hester, my boy. It set Leo free to marry another woman. It set Mary free to look after her husband in the way she liked, it set Micky free to live his own life in the way he cared about living it. Even little dark horse Tina sitting in her library may have wanted freedom.”

“I had to come and talk to you,” said Donald. “I had to know what you thought, whether you thought that—that it could be true.”

“About Hester?”

“Yes.”

“I think it could be true,” said MacMaster slowly. “I don’t know that it is.”

“You think it could have happened just as I say?”

“Yes. I think what you’ve imagined is not far-fetched and has an element of probability about it. But it’s by no means certain, Donald.”

The young man gave a shuddering sigh.

“But it’s got to be certain, Mac. That’s the one thing I do feel is necessary. I’ve got to know. If Hester tells me, if she tells me herself, then—then it will be all right. We’ll get married as soon as possible. I’ll look after her.”

“It’s as well Superintendent Huish can’t hear you,” said MacMaster dryly.

“I’m a law-abiding citizen as a rule,” said Donald, “but you know very well yourself, Mac, how they treat psychological evidence in the law courts. In my view it was a bad accident, not a case of cold-blooded murder, or even hot-blooded murder for that matter.”

“You’re in love with the girl,” said MacMaster.

“I’m talking to you in confidence, mind.”

“I understand that,” said MacMaster.

“All I’m saying is that if Hester tells me, and I know, we’ll live it down together. But she must tell me. I can’t go through life not knowing.”

“You mean, you’re not prepared to marry her with this probability overshadowing things?”

“Would you want to in my place?”

“I don’t know. In my day, if it happened to me, and I was in love with the girl, I should probably be convinced she was innocent.”

“It’s not so much the guilt or innocence that matters, as that I’ve got to know.”

“And if she did kill her mother, you’re quite prepared to marry her and live happily ever afterwards, as they say?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you believe it!” said MacMaster. “You’ll be wondering if the bitter taste in your coffee is only coffee and thinking that the poker in the grate is a bit too hefty a size. And she’ll see you thinking it. It won’t do....”

Ten

“I’m sure, Marshall, that you’ll appreciate my reasons for asking you to come here and have this conference.”

“Yes, certainly,” said Mr. Marshall. “The fact is that if you had not proposed it, Mr. Argyle, I should myself have suggested coming down. The announcement was in all the morning papers this morning and there is no doubt at all that it will lead to a revival of interest in the case on the part of the Press.”

“We’ve already had a few of them ringing up and asking for interviews,” said Mary Durrant.

“Quite so, it was only to be expected, I feel. I should advise that you take up the position that you have no comment to make. Naturally you are delighted and thankful, but you prefer not to discuss the matter.”

“Superintendent Huish, who was in charge of the case at the time, has asked to come and have an interview with us tomorrow morning,” said Leo.

“Yes. Yes, I’m afraid there will have to be a certain amount of reopening of the case, though I really cannot think that the police can have much hope of arriving at any tangible result. After all, two years have passed and anything that people might have remembered at the time—people in the village, I mean—will by now have been forgotten. A pity, of course, in some ways, but it can’t be helped.”

“The whole thing seems quite clear,” said Mary Durrant. “The house was securely locked up against burglars but if anyone had come appealing to my mother over some special case or pretending to be a friend or friends of hers I have no doubt that person would have been admitted. That, I think, is what must have happened. My father here thought he heard a ring at the bell just after seven o’clock.”

Marshall turned his head enquiringly to Leo.

“Yes, I think I did say so,” said Leo. “Of course, I can’t remember very clearly now, but at the time I was under the impression that I heard the bell. I was ready to go down and then I thought I heard the door open and close. There was no sound of voices or any question of anyone forcing an entry or behaving abusively. That I think I should have heard.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said Mr. Marshall. “Yes, I think there’s no doubt that that is what must have happened. Alas, we know only too well the large number of unprincipled persons gaining admission to a house by a plausible tale of distress, and who having gained admission are willing to cosh the householder and make off with what money they can find. Yes, I think that we must assume now that that is what did happen.”

He spoke in too persuasive a voice. He looked round the little assembly as he spoke, noting them carefully, and labelling them in his meticulous mind. Mary Durrant, good-looking, unimaginative, untroubled, even slightly aloof, apparently quite sure of herself. Behind her in his wheelchair, her husband. An intelligent fellow, Philip Durrant, Marshall thought to himself. A man who might have done a good deal and gone far had it not been for his unreliable judgment in all matters of business. He was not, Marshall thought, taking all this as calmly as his wife was. His eyes were alert and thoughtful. He realized, none better, the implications of the whole matter. Of course, though, Mary Durrant might not be as calm as she appeared to be. Both as a girl and a woman, she had always been able to conceal her feelings.

As Philip Durrant moved slightly in his chair, his bright, intelligent eyes watching the lawyer with a faint mockery in them, Mary turned her head sharply. The complete adoration of the look she gave her husband almost startled the lawyer. He had known, of course, that Mary Durrant was a devoted wife, but he had so long considered her as a calm, rather passionless creature without strong affections or dislikes that he was surprised at this sudden revelation. So that was how she felt about the fellow, was it? As for Philip Durrant, he seemed uneasy. Apprehensive, Marshall thought, about the future. As well he might be!

Opposite the lawyer sat Micky. Young, handsome, bitter. Why had he got to be so bitter, Marshall thought parenthetically? Hadn’t everything been done

for him always? Why did he have to have this look of one who was perpetually against the world. Beside him sat Tina looking rather like a small elegant black cat. Very dark, soft-voiced, big dark eyes and a rather sinuous grace of movement. Quiet, yet perhaps emotional behind the quietness? Marshall really knew very little about Tina. She had taken up the work suggested to her by Mrs. Argyle, as a librarian in the County Library. She had a flat in Redmyn and came home at weekends. Apparently a docile and contented member of the family. But who knew? Anyway, she was out of it or ought to be. She had not been here that evening. Though, for all that, Redmyn was only twenty-five miles away. Still presumably Tina and Micky had been out of it.

Marshall swept a quick glance over Kirsten Lindstrom, who was watching him with a touch of belligerence in her manner. Supposing, he thought, it was she who had gone berserk and attacked her employer? It wouldn't really surprise him. Nothing really surprised you when you'd been in the law a number of years. They'd have a word for it in the modern jargon. Repressed spinster. Envious, jealous, nursing grievances real or fancied. Oh yes, they had a word for it. And how very convenient it would be, thought Mr. Marshall rather improperly. Yes, very convenient. A foreigner. Not one of the family. But would Kirsten Lindstrom have deliberately framed Jacko; have heard the quarrel and taken advantage of it? That was a great deal more difficult to believe. For Kirsten Lindstrom adored Jacko. She had always been devoted to all the children. No, he could not believe that of her. A pity because—but really he must not let his thoughts go along that line.

His glance went on to Leo Argyle and Gwenda Vaughan. Their engagement had not been announced, which was just as well. A wise decision. He had actually written and hinted as much. Of course it was probably an open secret locally and no doubt the police were on to it. From the point of view of the police it was the right kind of answer. Innumerable precedents. Husband, wife, and the other woman. Only, somehow or other, Marshall could not believe that Leo Argyle had attacked his wife. No, he really couldn't believe it. After all, he had known Leo Argyle for a number of years and he had the highest opinion of him. An intellectual. A man of warm sympathies, deep reading and an aloof philosophical outlook upon life. Not the sort of man to murder his wife with a poker. Of course, at a

certain age, when a man fell in love—but no! That was newspaper stuff. Pleasant reading, apparently, for Sundays all over the British Isles! But really, one could not imagine Leo....

What about the woman? He didn't know so much about Gwenda Vaughan. He observed the full lips and the ripe figure. She was in love with Leo all right. Oh yes, probably been in love with him for a long time. What about a divorce, he wondered. What would Mrs. Argyle have felt about divorce? Really he had no idea, but he didn't think the idea would appeal to Leo Argyle, who was one of the old-fashioned type. He didn't think that Gwenda Vaughan was Leo Argyle's mistress, which made it all the more probable that if Gwenda Vaughan had seen a chance to eliminate Mrs. Argyle with the certainty that no suspicion would attach to her—he paused before continuing the thought. Would she have sacrificed Jacko without a qualm? He didn't really think she had ever been very fond of Jacko. Jacko's charm had not appealed to her. And women—Mr. Marshall knew only too well—were ruthless. So one couldn't rule out Gwenda Vaughan. It was very doubtful after this time if the police would ever get any evidence. He didn't see what evidence there could be against her. She had been in the house that day, she had been with Leo in his library, she had said good night to him and left him and gone down the stairs. There was no one who could say whether or not she had gone aside into Mrs. Argyle's sitting room, picked up that poker and walked up behind the unsuspecting woman as she bent over papers on the desk. And then afterwards, Mrs. Argyle having been struck down without a cry, all Gwenda Vaughan had to do was to throw down the poker and let herself out of the front door and go home, just as she always did. He couldn't see any possibility of the police or anyone else finding out if that was what she had done.

His eyes went on to Hester. A pretty child. No, not pretty, beautiful really. Beautiful in a rather strange and uncomfortable way. He'd like to know who her parents had been. Something lawless and wild about her. Yes, one could almost use the word desperate in connection with her. What had she had to be desperate about? She'd run away in a silly way to go on the stage and had had a silly affair with an undesirable man; then she had seen reason, come home with Mrs. Argyle and settled down again. All the same, you couldn't really rule out Hester, because you didn't know how her mind

worked. You didn't know what a strange moment of desperation might do to her. But the police wouldn't know either.

In fact, thought Mr. Marshall, it seemed very unlikely that the police, even if they made up their own minds as to who was responsible, could really do anything about it. So that on the whole the position was satisfactory.

Satisfactory? He gave a little start as he considered the word. But was it? Was stalemate really a satisfactory outcome to the whole thing? Did the Argyles know the truth themselves, he wondered. He decided against that. They didn't know. Apart, of course, from one person amongst them who presumably knew only too well ... No, they didn't know, but did they suspect? Well, if they didn't suspect now, they soon would, because if you didn't know you couldn't help wondering, trying to remember things ... Uncomfortable. Yes, yes, a very uncomfortable position.

All these thoughts had not taken very much time. Mr. Marshall came out of his little reverie to see Micky's eyes fixed on him with a mocking gleam in them.

"So that's your verdict, is it, Mr. Marshall?" Micky said. "The outsider, the unknown intruder, the bad character who murders, robs and gets away with it?"

"It seems," said Mr. Marshall, "as though that is what we will have to accept."

Micky threw himself back in his chair and laughed.

"That's our story, and we're going to stick to it, eh?"

"Well, yes, Michael, that is what I should advise." There was a distinct note of warning in Mr. Marshall's voice.

Micky nodded his head.

"I see," he said. "That's what you advise. Yes. Yes, I dare say you're quite right. But you don't believe it, do you?"

Mr. Marshall gave him a very cold look. That was the trouble with people who had no legal sense of discretion. They insisted on saying things which were much better not said.

“For what it is worth,” he said, “that is my opinion.”

The finality of his tone held a world of reproof. Micky looked round the table.

“What do we all think?” he asked generally. “Eh, Tina, my love, looking down your nose in your quiet way, haven’t you any ideas? Any unauthorized versions, so to speak? And you, Mary? You haven’t said much.”

“Of course I agree with Mr. Marshall,” said Mary rather sharply. “What other solution can there be?”

“Philip doesn’t agree with you,” said Micky.

Mary turned her head sharply to look at her husband. Philip Durrant said quietly:

“You’d better hold your tongue, Micky. No good ever came of talking too much when you’re in a tight place. And we are in a tight place.”

“So nobody’s going to have any opinions, are they?” said Micky. “All right. So be it. But let’s all think about it a bit when we go up to bed tonight. It might be advisable, you know. After all, one wants to know where one is, so to speak. Don’t you know a thing or two, Kirsty? You usually do. As far as I remember, you always knew what was going on, though I will say for you, you never told.”

Kirsten Lindstrom said, not without dignity:

“I think, Micky, that you should hold your tongue. Mr. Marshall is right. Too much talking is unwise.”

“We might put it to the vote,” said Micky. “Or write a name on a piece of paper and throw it into a hat. That would be interesting, wouldn’t it; to see

who got the votes?”

This time Kirsten Lindstrom’s voice was louder.

“Be quiet,” she said. “Do not be a silly, reckless little boy as you used to be. You are grown up now.”

“I only said let’s think about it,” said Micky, taken aback.

We shall think about it,” said Kirsten Lindstrom.

And her voice was bitter.

Eleven

I

Night settled down on Sunny Point.

Sheltered by its walls, seven people retired to rest, but none of them slept well....

II

Philip Durrant, since his illness and his loss of bodily activity, had found more and more solace in mental activity. Always a highly intelligent man, he now became conscious of the resources opening out to him through the medium of intelligence. He amused himself sometimes by forecasting the reactions of those around him to suitable stimuli. What he said and did was often not a natural outpouring, but a calculated one, motivated simply and solely to observe the response to it. It was a kind of game that he played; when he got the anticipated response, he chalked up, as it were, a mark to himself.

As a result of this pastime he found himself, for perhaps the first time in his life, keenly observant of the differences and realities of human personality.

Human personalities as such had not previously interested him very much. He liked or disliked, was amused or bored by, the people who surrounded him or whom he met. He had always been a man of action, and not a man of thought. His imagination, which was considerable, had been exercised in devising various schemes for making money. All these schemes had a sound core; but a complete lack of business ability always resulted in their coming to nothing. People, as such, had up till now only been considered by him as pawns in the game. Now, since his illness cut him off from his former active life, he was forced to take account of what people themselves were like.

It had started in the hospital when the love lives of the nurses, the secret warfare and the petty grievances of hospital life had been forced on his attention since there was nothing else to occupy it. And now it was fast becoming a habit with him. People—really that was all that life held for him now. Just people. People to study, to find out about, to sum up. Decide for himself what made them tick and find out if he was right. Really, it could all be very interesting....

Only this very evening, sitting in the library, he had realized how little he really knew about his wife's family. What were they really like? What were they like inside, that is, not their outer appearance which he knew well enough.

Odd, how little you knew about people. Even your own wife?

He had looked thoughtfully over at Mary. How much did he really know about Mary?

He had fallen in love with her because he liked her good looks and her calm, serious ways. Also, she had had money and that mattered to him too. He would have thought twice about marrying a penniless girl. It had all been most suitable and he had married her and teased her and called her Polly and had enjoyed the doubtful look she gave him when he made jokes she could not see. But what, really, did he know about her? Of what she thought and felt? He knew, certainly, that she loved him with a deep and passionate devotion. And at the thought of that devotion he stirred a little uneasily, twisting his shoulders as though to ease them of a burden. Devotion was all very well when you could get away from it for nine or ten hours of the day. It was a nice thing to come home to. But now he was lapped round with it; watched over, cared for, cherished. It made one yearn for a little wholesome neglect ... One had, in fact, to find ways to escape. Mental ways—since none other were possible. One had to escape to realms of fancy or speculation.

Speculation. As to who was responsible for his mother-in-law's death, for instance. He had disliked his mother-in-law, and she had disliked him. She had not wanted Mary to marry him (would she have wanted Mary to marry anybody? he wondered), but she had not been able to prevent it. He and

Mary had started life happy and independent—and then things had begun to go wrong. First that South American company—and then the Bicycle Accessories Ltd—good ideas both of them—but the financing of them had been badly judged—and then there had been the Argentine railway strike which had completed the disasters. All purely bad luck, but in some way he felt that somehow Mrs. Argyle was responsible. She hadn't wished him to succeed. Then had come his illness. It had looked as though their only solution was to come and live at Sunny Point where a welcome was assured to them. He wouldn't have minded particularly. A man who was a cripple, only half a man, what did it matter where he was?—but Mary would have minded.

Oh well, it hadn't been necessary to live permanently at Sunny Point. Mrs. Argyle had been killed. The Trustees had raised the allowance made to Mary under the Trust and they had set up on their own again.

He hadn't felt any particular grief over Mrs. Argyle's death. Pleasanter, of course, if she had died of pneumonia or something like that, in her bed. Murder was a nasty business with its notoriety and its screaming headlines. Still, as murders go, it had been quite a satisfactory murder—the perpetrator obviously having a screw loose in a way that could be served up decently in a lot of psychological jargon. Not Mary's own brother. One of those “adopted children” with a bad heredity who so often go wrong. But things weren't quite so good now. Tomorrow Superintendent Huish was coming to ask questions in his gentle West Country voice. One ought, perhaps, to think about the answers....

Mary was brushing her long fair hair in front of the mirror. Something about her calm remoteness irritated him.

He said: “Got your story pat for tomorrow, Polly?”

She turned astonished eyes upon him.

“Superintendent Huish is coming. He'll ask you all over again just what your movements were on the evening of November 9th.”

“Oh, I see. It's so long ago now. One can hardly remember.”

“But he can, Polly. That’s the point. He can. It’s all written down somewhere in a nice little police notebook.”

“Is it? Do they keep these things?”

“Probably keep everything in triplicate for ten years! Well, your movements are very simple, Polly. There weren’t any. You were here with me in this room. And if I were you I shouldn’t mention that you left it between seven and seven-thirty.”

“But that was only to go to the bathroom. After all,” said Mary reasonably, “everyone has to go to the bathroom.”

“You didn’t mention the fact to him at the time. I do remember that.”

“I suppose I forgot about it.”

“I thought it might have been an instinct of self-preservation ... Anyway, I remember backing you up. We were together here, playing picquet from six-thirty until Kirsty gave the alarm. That’s our story and we’re sticking to it.”

“Very well, darling.” Her agreement was placid—uninterested.

He thought: “Has she no imagination? Can’t she foresee that we’re in for a sticky time?”

He leaned forward.

“It’s interesting, you know ... Aren’t you interested in who killed her? We all know—Micky was quite right there—that it’s one of us. Aren’t you interested to know which?”

“It wasn’t you or I,” said Mary.

“And that’s all that interests you? Polly, you’re wonderful!”

She flushed slightly.

“I don’t see what’s so odd about that?”

“No, I can see you don’t ... Well, I’m different. I’m curious.”

“I don’t suppose we ever shall know. I don’t suppose the police will ever know.”

“Perhaps not. They’ll certainly have precious little to go upon. But we’re in rather a different position to the police.”

“What do you mean, Philip?”

“Well, we’ve got a few bits of inside knowledge. We know our little lot from inside—have a fairly good idea of what makes them tick. You should have, anyway. You’ve grown up with them all. Let’s hear your views. Who do you think it was?”

“I’ve no idea, Philip.”

“Then just make a guess.”

Mary said sharply:

“I’d rather not know who did it. I’d rather not even think about it.”

“Ostrich,” said her husband.

“Honestly, I don’t see the point of—guessing. It’s much better not to know. Then we can all go on as usual.”

“Oh no, we can’t,” said Philip. “That’s where you’re wrong, my girl. The rot’s set in already.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, take Hester and her young man—earnest young Doctor Donald. Nice chap, serious, worried. He doesn’t really think she did it—but he’s not really sure she didn’t do it! And so he looks at her, anxiously, when he thinks she isn’t noticing. But she notices all right. So there you are! Perhaps

she did do it—you'd know better than I would—but if she didn't, what the hell can she do about her young man? Keep on saying: 'Please, it wasn't me?' But that's what she'd say anyway."

"Really, Philip. I think you're imagining things."

"You can't imagine at all, Polly. Then take poor old Leo. Marriage bells with Gwenda are receding into the distance. The girl's horribly upset about it. Haven't you noticed?"

"I really don't see what Father wants to marry again for at his age."

"He sees all right! But he also sees that any hint of a love affair with Gwenda gives both of them a first-class motive for murder. Awkward!"

"It's fantastic to think for a moment that Father murdered Mother!" said Mary. "Such things don't happen."

"Yes, they do. Read the papers."

"Not our sort of people."

"Murder is no snob, Polly. Then there's Micky. Something's eating him all right. He's a queer, bitter lad. Tina seems in the clear, unworried, unaffected. But she's a little poker face if ever there was one. Then there's poor old Kirsty—"

A faint animation came into Mary's face.

"Now that might be a solution!"

"Kirsty?"

"Yes. After all, she's a foreigner. And I believe she's had very bad headaches the last year or two ... It seems much more likely that she should have done it than any of us."

"Poor devil," said Philip. "Don't you see that that's just what she is saying to herself? That we'll all agree together that she's the one? For convenience."

Because she's not a member of the family. Didn't you see tonight that she was worried stiff? And she's in the same position as Hester. What can she say or do? Say to us all: 'I did not kill my friend and employer?' What weight can that statement carry? It's worse hell for her, perhaps, than for anyone else ... Because she's alone. She'll be going over in her mind every word she's ever said, every angry look she ever gave your mother—thinking that it will be remembered against her. Helpless to prove her innocence.”

“I wish you'd calm down, Phil. After all, what can we do about it?”

“Only try to find out the truth.”

“But how is that possible?”

“There might be ways. I'd rather like to try.”

Mary looked uneasy.

“What sort of ways?”

“Oh, saying things—watching how people react—one could think up things”—he paused, his mind working—“things that would mean something to a guilty person, but not to an innocent one ...” Again he was silent, turning ideas over in his mind. He looked up and said: “Don't you want to help the innocent, Mary?”

“No.” The word came out explosively. She came over to him and knelt by his chair. “I don't want you to mix yourself up in all this, Phil. Don't start saying things and laying traps. Leave it all alone. Oh, for God's sake, leave it alone!”

Philip's eyebrows rose.

“We-ell,” he said. And he laid a hand on the smooth golden head.

III

Michael Argyle lay sleepless, staring into darkness.

His mind went round and round like a squirrel in a cage, going over the past. Why couldn't he leave it behind him? Why did he have to drag the past with him all through his life? What did it all matter anyway? Why did he have to remember so clearly the frowsty cheerful room in the London slum, and he "our Micky." The casual exciting atmosphere! Fun in the streets! Ganging up on other boys! His mother with her bright golden head (cheap rinse, he thought, in his adult wisdom), her sudden furies when she would turn and lambast him (gin, of course!) and the wild gaiety she had when she was in a good mood. Lovely suppers of fish and chips, and she'd sing songs—sentimental ballads. Sometimes they'd go to the pictures. There were always the Uncles, of course—that's what he always had to call them. His own dad had walked out before he could remember him ... But his mother wouldn't stand for the Uncle of the day laying a hand on him. "You leave our Micky alone," she'd say.

And then there had come the excitement of the war. Expecting Hitler's bombers—abortive sirens. Moaning Minnies. Going down into the Tubes and spending the nights there. The fun of it! The whole street was there with their sandwiches and their bottles of pop. And trains rushing through practically all night. That had been life, that had! In the thick of things!

And then he'd come down here—to the country. A dead and alive place where nothing ever happened!

"You'll come back, love, when it's all over," his mother had said, but lightly as though it wasn't really true. She hadn't seemed to care about his going. And why didn't she come too? Lots of the kids in the street had been evacuated with their Mums. But his mother hadn't wanted to go. She was going to the North (with the current Uncle, Uncle Harry!) to work in munitions.

He must have known then, in spite of her affectionate farewell. She didn't really care ... Gin, he thought, that was all she cared for, gin and the Uncles....

And he'd been here, captured, a prisoner, eating tasteless, unfamiliar meals; going to bed, incredibly, at six o'clock, after a silly supper of milk and

biscuits (milk and biscuits!), lying awake, crying, his head pushed down under the blankets, crying for Mom and home.

It was that woman! She'd got him and she wouldn't let him go. A lot of sloppy talk. Always making him play silly games. Wanting something from him. Something that he was determined not to give. Never mind. He'd wait. He'd be patient! And one day—one glorious day, he'd go home. Home to the streets, and the boys, and the glorious red buses and the Tube, and fish and chips, and the traffic and the area cats—his mind went longingly over the catalogue of delights. He must wait. The war couldn't go on for ever. Here he was stuck in this silly place with bombs falling all over London and half London on fire—coo! What a blaze it must make, and people being killed and houses crashing down.

He saw it in his mind all in glorious technicolour.

Never mind. When the war was over he'd go back to Mom. She'd be surprised to see how he'd grown.

IV

In the darkness Micky Argyle expelled his breath in a long hiss.

The war was over. They'd licked Hitler and Musso ... Some of the children were going back. Soon, now ... And then She had come back from London and had said that he was going to stay at Sunny Point and be her own little boy....

He had said: "Where's my Mom? Did a bomb get her?"

If she had been killed by a bomb—well, that would be not too bad. It happened to boys' mothers.

But Mrs. Argyle said "No," she hadn't been killed. But she had some rather difficult work to do and couldn't look after a child very well—that sort of thing, anyway soft soap, meaning nothing ... His Mom didn't love him, didn't want him back—he'd got to stay here, for ever....

He'd sneaked round after that, trying to overhear conversations, and at last he did hear something, just a fragment between Mrs. Argyle and her husband. "Only too pleased to get rid of him—absolutely indifferent"—and something about a hundred pounds. So then he knew—his mother had sold him for a hundred pounds....

The humiliation—the pain—he'd never got over it ... And She had bought him! He saw her, vaguely, as embodied Power, someone against whom he, in his puny strength, was helpless. But he'd grow up, he'd be strong one day, a man. And then he'd kill her....

He felt better once he'd made that resolution.

Later, when he went away to school, things were not so bad. But he hated the holidays—because of Her. Arranging everything, planning, giving him all sorts of presents. Looking puzzled, because he was so undemonstrative. He hated being kissed by her ... And later still, he'd taken a pleasure in thwarting her silly plans for him. Going into a bank! An oil company. Not he. He'd go and find work for himself.

It was when he was at the university that he'd tried to trace his mother. She'd been dead for some years, he discovered—in a car crash with a man who'd been driving roaring drunk....

So why not forget it all? Why not just have a good time and get on with life? He didn't know why not.

And now—what was going to happen now? She was dead, wasn't she? Thinking she'd bought him for a miserable hundred pounds. Thinking she could buy anything—houses and cars—and children, since she hadn't any of her own. Thinking she was God Almighty!

Well, she wasn't. Just a crack on the head with a poker and she was a corpse like any other corpse! (like the golden-haired corpse in a car smash on the Great North Road....)

She was dead, wasn't she? Why worry?

What was the matter with him? Was it—that he couldn't hate her any more because she was dead?

So that was Death....

He felt lost without his hatred—lost and afraid.

Twelve

I

In her spotlessly kept bedroom, Kirsten Lindstrom plaited her grizzled blonde hair into two unbecoming plaits and prepared for bed.

She was worried and afraid.

The police didn't like foreigners. She had been in England so long that she herself did not feel foreign. But the police could not know that.

That Dr. Calgary—why did he have to come and do this to her?

Justice had been done. She thought of Jacko—and repeated to herself that justice had been done.

She thought of him as she had known him from a small boy.

Always, yes, always, a liar and a cheat! But so charming, so engaging. Always one forgave him. Always one tried to shield him from punishment.

He lied so well. That was the horrible truth. He lied so well that one believed him—that one couldn't help believing him. Wicked, cruel Jacko.

Dr. Calgary might think he knew what he was talking about! But Dr. Calgary was wrong. Places and times and alibis indeed! Jacko could arrange things of that kind easily enough. Nobody really knew Jacko as she had known him.

Would anybody believe her if she told them just exactly what Jacko was like? And now—tomorrow, what was going to happen? The police would come. And everyone so unhappy, so suspicious. Looking at each other ... Not sure what to believe.

And she loved them all so much ... so much. She knew more about them all than anyone else could know. Far more than Mrs. Argyle had ever known.

For Mrs. Argyle had been blinded by her intense maternal possessiveness. They were her children—she saw them always as belonging to her. But Kirsten had seen them as individuals—as themselves—with all their faults and virtues. If she had had children of her own, she might have felt possessive about them, she supposed. But she was not pre-eminently a maternal woman. Her principal love would have been for the husband she had never had.

Women like Mrs. Argyle were difficult for her to understand. Crazy about a lot of children who were not her own, and treating her husband as though he were not there! A good man, too, a fine man, none better. Neglected, pushed aside. And Mrs. Argyle too self-absorbed to notice what was happening under her nose. That secretary—a good-looking girl and every inch a woman. Well, it was not too late for Leo—or was it too late now? Now, with murder raising its head from the grave in which it had been laid, would those two ever dare to come together?

Kirsten sighed unhappily. What was going to happen to them all? To Micky, who had borne that deep, almost pathological grudge against his adopted mother. To Hester, so unsure of herself, so wild. Hester, who had been on the point of finding peace and security with that nice stolid young doctor. To Leo and Gwenda, who had had motive and, yes, it had to be faced, opportunity, as they both must realize. To Tina, that sleek little catlike creature. To selfish, cold-hearted Mary, who until she had married had never shown affection for anybody.

Once, Kirsten thought, she herself had been full of affection for her employer, full of admiration. She couldn't remember exactly when she had begun to dislike her, when she had begun to judge her and finding her wanting. So sure of herself, benevolent, tyrannical—a kind of living walking embodiment of mother knows best. And not really even a mother! If she had ever borne a child, it might have kept her humble.

But why go on thinking of Rachel Argyle? Rachel Argyle was dead.

She had to think of herself—and the others.

And of what might happen tomorrow.

II

Mary Durrant woke with a start.

She had been dreaming—dreaming that she was a child, back again in New York.

How odd. She hadn't thought of those days for years.

It was really surprising that she could remember anything at all. How old had she been? Five? Six?

She had dreamed that she was being taken home to the tenement from the hotel. The Argyles were sailing for England and not taking her with them after all. Anger and rage filled her heart for a moment or two until the realization came that it had only been a dream.

How wonderful it had been. Taken into the car, going up in the elevator of the hotel to the eighteenth floor. The big suite, that wonderful bathroom; the revelation of what things there were in the world—if you were rich! If she could stay here, if she could keep all this—for ever....

Actually, there had been no difficulty at all. All that was needed was a show of affection; never easy for her, for she was not affectionate by disposition, but she had managed it. And there she was, established for life! A rich father and mother, clothes, cars, ships, aeroplanes, servants to wait on her, expensive dolls and toys. A fairy tale come true....

A pity that all those other children had had to be there, too. That was the war, of course. Or would it have happened anyway? That insatiable mother love! Really something unnatural in it. So animal.

She had always felt a faint contempt for her adopted mother. Stupid in any case to choose the children she had chosen. The under-privileged! Criminal tendencies like Jacko's. Unbalanced like Hester. A savage like Micky. And Tina, a half-caste! No wonder they had all turned out badly. Though she couldn't really blame them for rebelling. She, herself, had rebelled. She remembered her meeting with Philip, a dashing young pilot. Her mother's

disapproval. “These hurried marriages. Wait until the war is over.” But she hadn’t wanted to wait. She had as strong a will as her mother’s, and her father had backed her up. They had married, and the war had ended soon afterwards.

She had wanted to have Philip all to herself—to get away out of her mother’s shadow. It was Fate that had defeated her, not her mother. First the failure of Philip’s financial schemes and then that horrifying blow—polio of the paralytic type. As soon as Philip was able to leave hospital they had come to Sunny Point. It had seemed inevitable that they would have to make their home there. Philip himself had seemed to think it inevitable. He had gone through all his money and her allowance from the Trust was not so very big. She had asked for a larger one, but the answer had been that perhaps for a while it would be wise to live at Sunny Point. But she wanted Philip to herself, all to herself, she didn’t want him to be the last of Rachel Argyle’s “children.” She had not wanted a child of her own—she only wanted Philip.

But Philip himself had seemed quite agreeable to the idea of coming to Sunny Point.

“Easier for you,” he said. “And people always coming and going there makes a distraction. Besides, I always find your father very good company.”

Why didn’t he want only to be with her as she wanted only to be with him? Why did he crave for other company—her father’s, Hester’s?

And Mary had felt a wave of futile rage sweep over her. Her mother, as usual, would get her own way.

But she hadn’t got her own way ... she had died.

And now it was going to be all raked up again. Why, oh, why?

And why was Philip being so trying about it all? Questioning, trying to find out, mixing himself up in what was none of his business?

Laying traps....

What kind of traps?

III

Leo Argyle watched the morning light fill the room slowly with dim grey light.

He had thought out everything very carefully.

It was quite clear to him—exactly what they were up against, he and Gwenda.

He lay looking at the whole thing as Superintendent Huish would look at it. Rachel coming in and telling them about Jacko—his wildness and his threats. Gwenda had tactfully gone into the next room, and he had tried to comfort Rachel, had told her she was quite right to have been firm, that helping Jacko in the past had done no good—that for better or worse he must take what was coming to him. And she had gone away easier in her mind.

And then Gwenda had come back into the room, and gathered up the letters for the post and had asked if there was anything that she could do, her voice saying more than the actual words. And he had thanked her and said no. And she had said good night and gone out of the room. Along the passage and down the stairs and past the room where Rachel was sitting at her desk and so out of the house with no one to watch her go....

And he himself had sat on alone in the library, and there had been nobody to check whether he left it and went down to Rachel's room.

It was like that—opportunity for either of them.

And motive, because already by then he loved Gwenda and she loved him.

And there was nobody, ever, who could prove the guilt or innocence of either of them.

IV

A quarter of a mile away, Gwenda lay dry-eyed and sleepless.

Her hands clenched, she was thinking how much she had hated Rachel Argyle.

And now in the darkness, Rachel Argyle was saying: “You thought you could have my husband once I was dead. But you can’t—you can’t. You will never have my husband.”

V

Hester was dreaming. She dreamt that she was with Donald Craig and that he had left her suddenly at the edge of an abyss. She had cried out in fear and then, on the other side of it, she saw that Arthur Calgary was standing holding out his hands to her.

She cried out to him reproachfully.

“Why have you done this to me?” and he answered:

“But I’ve come to help you....”

She woke up.

VI

Lying quietly in the small spare-room bed, Tina breathed gently and regularly, but sleep did not come.

She thought of Mrs. Argyle, without gratitude and without resentment—simply with love. Because of Mrs. Argyle she had had food and drink and warmth and toys and comfort. She had loved Mrs. Argyle. She was sorry she was dead....

But it wasn’t quite as simple as that.

It hadn’t mattered when it was Jacko....

But now?

Thirteen

Superintendent Huish looked round on them all, gently and politely. His tone when he spoke was persuasive and apologetic.

“I know it must be very painful to you all,” he said, “to have to go over the whole thing again. But really, we’ve no choice in the matter. You saw the notice, I expect? It was in all the morning papers.”

“A free pardon,” said Leo.

“The phraseology always grates on people,” said Huish. “An anachronism, like so much of legal terminology. But its meaning is quite clear.”

“It means that you made a mistake,” said Leo.

“Yes.” Huish acknowledged it simply. “We made a mistake.” He added, after a minute, “Of course, without Dr. Calgry’s evidence it was really inevitable.”

Leo said coldly:

“My son told you, when you arrested him, that he had been given a lift that night.”

“Oh, yes. He told us. And we did our best to check—but we couldn’t find any confirmation of the story. I quite realize, Mr. Argyle, that you must feel exceedingly bitter about the whole business. I’m not making excuses and apologies. All we police officers have to do is to collect the evidence. The evidence goes to the Public Prosecutor and he decides if there is a case. In this case he decided there was. If it’s possible, I’d ask you to put as much bitterness as you can out of your mind and just run over the facts and times again.”

“What’s the use now?” Hester spoke up sharply. “Whoever did it is miles away and you’ll never find him.”

Superintendent Huish turned to look at her.

“That may be—and it may not,” he said mildly. “You’d be surprised at the times we do get our man—sometimes after several years. It’s patience does it—patience and never letting up.”

Hester turned her head away, and Gwenda gave a quick shiver as though a cold wind had passed over her. Her lively imagination felt the menace behind the quiet words.

“Now if you please,” said Huish. He looked expectantly at Leo. “We’ll start with you, Mr. Argyle.”

“What do you want to know exactly? You must have my original statement? I shall probably be less accurate now. Exact times are apt to slip one’s memory.”

“Oh, we realize that. But there’s always the chance that some little fact may come to light, something overlooked at the time.”

“Isn’t it even possible,” asked Philip, “that one might see things in better proportion looking back after the lapse of years?”

“It’s a possibility, yes,” said Huish, turning his head to look at Philip with some interest.

“Intelligent chap,” he thought. “I wonder if he’s got any ideas of his own about this....”

“Now, Mr. Argyle, if you’ll just run through the sequence of events. You’d had tea?”

“Yes. Tea had been in the dining room at five o’clock as usual. We were all there for it with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Durrant. Mrs. Durrant took tea for herself and her husband up to their own sitting room.”

“I was even more of a cripple then than I am now,” said Philip. “I’d only just got out of hospital.”

“Quite so.” Huish turned back to Leo. “All of you—being—?”

“My wife and myself, my daughter Hester, Miss Vaughan and Miss Lindstrom.”

“And then? Just tell me in your own words.”

“After tea I came back in here with Miss Vaughan. We were at work upon a chapter of my book on Medieval Economics which I was revising. My wife went to her sitting room and office, which is on the ground floor. She was, as you know, a very busy woman. She was looking over some plans for a new children’s playground which she was intending to present to the Council here.”

“Did you hear your son Jack’s arrival?”

“No. That is, I did not know that it was he. I heard, we both heard, the front doorbell. We did not know who it was.”

“Who did you think it was, Mr. Argyle?”

Leo looked faintly amused.

“I was in the fifteenth century at the time, not the twentieth. I didn’t think at all. It could have been anybody or anything. My wife and Miss Lindstrom and Hester and possibly one of our daily helps would all be downstairs. Nobody,” said Leo simply, “ever expected me to answer a bell.”

“After that?”

“Nothing. Until my wife came in a good deal later.”

“How much later?”

Leo frowned.

“By now I really couldn’t tell you. I must have given you my estimate at the time. Half an hour—no, more—perhaps three-quarters.”

“We finished tea just after half past five,” said Gwenda. “I think it was about twenty minutes to seven when Mrs. Argyle came into the library.”

“And she said?”

Leo sighed. He spoke distastefully.

“We have had all this so many times. She said Jacko had been with her, that he was in trouble, that he had been violent and abusive, demanding money and saying that unless he had some money at once it would be a matter of prison. That she had refused definitely to give him a penny. She was worried as to whether she had done right or not.”

“Mr. Argyle, may I ask you a question. Why, when the boy made these demands for money, did your wife not call you? Why only tell you afterwards? Did that not seem odd to you?”

“No, it did not.”

“It seems to me that that would have been the natural thing to do. You were not—on bad terms?”

“Oh no. It was simply that my wife was accustomed to dealing with all practical decisions single-handed. She would often consult me beforehand as to what I thought and she usually discussed the decisions she had taken with me afterwards. In this particular matter she and I had talked very seriously together about the problem of Jacko—what to do for the best. So far, we had been singularly unfortunate in our handling of the boy. She had paid out very considerable sums of money several times to protect him from the consequences of his actions. We had decided that if there was a next time, it would be best for Jacko to learn the hard way.”

“Nevertheless, she was upset?”

“Yes. She was upset. If he had been less violent and threatening, I think she might have been broken down and helped him once more, but his attitude only stiffened her resolution.”

“Had Jacko left the house by then?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you know that of your own knowledge, or did Mrs. Argyle tell you?”

“She told me. She said he had gone away swearing, and threatening to come back, and that he’d said she’d better have some cash ready for him then.”

“Were you—this is important—were you alarmed at the thought of the boy’s return?”

“Of course not. We were quite used to what I can only call Jacko’s bluster.”

“It never entered your head that he would return and attack her.”

“No. I told you so at the time. I was dumbfounded.”

“And it seems you were quite right,” said Huish softly. “It wasn’t he who attacked her. Mrs. Argyle left you—when exactly?”

“That I do remember. We’ve been over it so often. Just before seven—about seven minutes to.”

Huish turned to Gwenda Vaughan.

“You confirm that?”

“Yes.”

“And the conversation went as Mr. Argyle has just said? You can’t add to it? There is nothing he has forgotten?”

“I didn’t hear all of it. After Mrs. Argyle had told us about Jacko’s demands I thought I’d better remove myself in case they felt it embarrassing to talk freely before me. I went in there”—she pointed to the door at the back of the library—“to the small room where I type. When I heard Mrs. Argyle leave I came back.”

“And that was at seven minutes to seven?”

“Just before five to seven, yes.”

“And after that, Miss Vaughan?”

“I asked Mr. Argyle if he wanted to continue work, but he said his chain of thought was interrupted. I asked if there was any more I could do, but he said no. So I cleared up my things and went.”

“The time?”

“Five minutes past seven.”

“You went downstairs and through the front door?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Argyle’s sitting room was immediately to the left of the front door?”

“Yes.”

“Was the door open?”

“It was not closed—it was about a foot ajar.”

“You didn’t go inside or say good night to her?”

“No.”

“Didn’t you usually do so?”

“No. It would have been silly to disturb her at what she was doing, just to say good night.”

“If you had gone in—you might have discovered her body lying there dead.”

Gwenda shrugged her shoulders.

“I suppose so ... But I imagine—I mean we all imagined at the time, that she was killed later. Jacko would hardly have been able to—”

She stopped.

“You are still thinking on the lines of Jacko having killed her. But that is not so now. So she might have been there then, dead?”

“I suppose—yes.”

“You left the house and went straight home?”

“Yes. My landlady spoke to me when I came in.”

“Just so. And you didn’t meet anyone on the way—near the house?”

“I don’t think so ... no.” Gwenda frowned. “I can’t really remember now ... It was cold and dark and this road is a cul-de-sac. I don’t think I passed anyone until I came to the Red Lion. There were several people about there.”

“Any cars pass you?”

Gwenda looked startled.

“Oh, yes, I do remember a car. It splashed my skirt. I had to wash the mud off when I got home.”

“What kind of a car?”

“I don’t remember. I didn’t notice. It passed me just at the entrance to our road. It might have been going to any of the houses.”

Huish turned back to Leo.

“You say you heard a ring at the bell some time after your wife left the room?”

“Well—I think I did. I’ve never been quite sure.”

“What time was that?”

“I’ve no idea. I didn’t look.”

“Didn’t you think it might be your son Jacko come back?”

“I didn’t think. I was—at work again.”

“One more point, Mr. Argyle. Did you have any idea that your son was married?”

“No idea at all.”

“His mother didn’t know, either? You don’t think she knew but had not told you?”

“I’m quite sure she had no idea of such a thing. She would have come to me about it at once. It was the greatest shock to me when the wife turned up the next day. I could hardly believe it when Miss Lindstrom came into this room and said ‘There is a young woman downstairs—a girl who says she is Jacko’s wife. It can’t be true.’ She was terribly upset, weren’t you, Kirsty?”

“I could not believe it,” said Kirsten. “I made her say it twice and then I came up to Mr. Argyle. It seemed incredible.”

“You were very kind to her, I understand,” said Huish to Leo.

“I did what I could. She’s married again, you know. I’m very glad. Her husband seems a nice steady sort of chap.” Huish nodded. Then he turned to Hester.

“Now, Miss Argyle, just tell me again what you did after tea that day.”

“I don’t remember now,” said Hester sulkily. “How can I? It’s two years ago. I might have done anything.”

“Actually I believe you helped Miss Lindstrom to wash up tea.”

“That is quite right,” said Kirsten. “And then,” she added, “you went upstairs to your bedroom. You were going out later, you remember. You were going to see an amateur performance of *Waiting for Godot* at the Drymouth Playhouse.”

Hester was still looking sullen and uncooperative.

“You’ve got it all written down,” she said to Huish. “Why go on about it?”

“Because you never know what might be helpful. Now then, Miss Argyle, what time did you leave the house?”

“Seven o’clock—or thereabouts.”

“Had you heard the altercation between your mother and your brother Jack?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything. I was upstairs.”

“But you saw Mrs. Argyle before you left the house?”

“Yes. I wanted some money. I was right out. And I remembered the petrol in my car was nearly down to empty. I’d have to fill up on the way to Drymouth. So when I was ready to start I went in to Mother and asked her for some money—just a couple of pounds—that’s all I needed.”

“And she gave them to you?”

“Kirsty gave them to me.”

Huish looked slightly surprised.

“I don’t remember that in the original statement.”

“Well, that’s what happened,” said Hester defiantly. “I went in and said could I have some cash, and Kirsten heard me from the hall and called out that she’d got some and would give it to me. She was just going out herself. And Mother said, ‘Yes, get it from Kirsty.’”

“I was just going down to the Women’s Institute with some books on Flower Arrangement,” said Kirsten. “I knew Mrs. Argyle was busy and didn’t want to be disturbed.”

Hester said in an aggrieved voice:

“What does it matter who gave me the money? You wanted to know when I last saw Mother alive. That was when. She was sitting at the table poring over a lot of plans. And I said I wanted cash, and then Kirsten called out that she’d give it to me. I took it from her and then went into Mother’s room again and said good night to Mother and she said she hoped I’d enjoy the play, and to be careful driving. She always said that. And then I went out to the garage and got the car out.”

“And Miss Lindstrom.”

“Oh, she went off as soon as she’d given me the money.”

Kirsten Lindstrom said quickly: “Hester passed me in the car just as I got to the end of our road. She must have started almost immediately after me. She went on up the hill to the main road whilst I turned left to the village.”

Hester opened her mouth as though to speak, then quickly shut it again.

Huish wondered. Was Kirsten Lindstrom trying to establish that Hester would not have had time to commit the crime? Wasn’t it possible that instead of Hester’s saying a quiet good night to Mrs. Argyle, there had been an argument—a quarrel, and that Hester had struck her down?

Smoothly he turned to Kirsten and said:

“Now, Miss Lindstrom, let’s have your account of what you remember.”

She was nervous. Her hands twisted uncomfortably.

“We had tea. It was cleared away. Hester helped me. Then she went upstairs. Then Jacko came.”

“You heard him?”

“Yes. I let him in. He said he had lost his key. He went straight in to his mother. He said at once, ‘I’m in a jam. You’ve got to get me out of it.’ I did not hear any more. I went back into the kitchen. There were things to prepare for supper.”

“Did you hear him leave?”

“Yes, indeed. He was shouting. I came from the kitchen. He was standing there in the front hall—very angry—shouting out that he’d come back, that his mother had better have the money ready for him. Or else! That is what he said: ‘Or else!’ It was a threat.”

“And then?”

“He went off banging the door. Mrs. Argyle came out into the hall. She was very pale and upset. She said to me, ‘You heard?’

“I said: ‘He is in trouble?’

“She nodded. Then she went upstairs to the library to Mr. Argyle. I laid the table for supper, and then I went up to put my outdoor things on. The Women’s Institute were having a Flower Arrangement Competition next day. There were some Flower Arrangement books we had promised them.”

“You took the books to the Institute—what time did you return to the house?”

“It must have been about half past seven. I let myself in with my key. I went in at once to Mrs. Argyle’s room—to give her a message of thanks and a note—she was at the desk, her head forward on her hands. And there was the poker, flung down—and drawers of the bureau pulled out. There had been a burglar, I thought. She had been attacked. And I was right. Now you know that I was right! It was a burglar—someone from outside!”

“Someone whom Mrs. Argyle herself let in?”

“Why not?” said Kirsten defiantly. “She was kind—always very kind. And she was not afraid—of people or things. Besides it is not as though she were

alone in the house. There were others—her husband, Gwenda, Mary. She had only to call out.”

“But she didn’t call out.” Huish pointed out.

“No. Because whoever it was must have told her some very plausible story. She would always listen. And so, she sat down again at the desk—perhaps to look for her chequebook—because she was unsuspicious—so he had the chance to snatch up the poker and hit her. Perhaps, even, he did not mean to kill her. He just wanted to stun her and look for money and jewellery and go.”

“He didn’t look very far—just turned out a few drawers.”

“Perhaps he heard sounds in the house—or lost his nerve. Or found, perhaps, that he had killed her. And so, quickly, in panic, he goes.”

She leaned forward.

Her eyes were both frightened and pleading.

“It must have been like that—it must!”

He was interested in her insistence. Was it fear for herself? She could have killed her employer there and then, pulling out the drawers to lend verisimilitude to the idea of a burglar. Medical evidence could not put the time of death closer than between seven and seven-thirty.

“It seems as though it must be so,” he acquiesced pleasantly. A faint sigh of relief escaped her. She sat back. He turned to the Durrants.

“You didn’t hear anything, either of you?”

“Not a thing.”

“I took a tray with tea up to our room,” said Mary. “It’s rather shut off from the rest of the house. We were there until we heard someone screaming. It was Kirsten. She’d just found Mother dead.”

“You didn’t leave the room at all until then?”

“No.” Her limpid gaze met his. “We were playing picquet.”

Philip wondered why he felt slightly discomposed. Polly was doing what he had told her to do. Perhaps it was the perfection of her manner, calm, unhurried, carrying complete conviction.

“Polly, love, you’re a wonderful liar!” he thought.

“And I, Superintendent,” he said, “was then, and am still, quite incapable of any comings and goings.”

“But you’re a good deal better, aren’t you, Mr. Durrant,” said the superintendent cheerfully. “One of these days we’ll have you walking again.”

“It’s a long job.”

Huish turned towards the other two members of the family who up to now had sat without making a sound. Micky had sat with his arms folded and a faint sneer on his face. Tina, small and graceful, leaned back in her chair, her eyes moving occasionally from face to face.

“Neither of you two were in the house, I know,” he said. “But perhaps you’ll just refresh my memory as to what you were doing that evening?”

“Does your memory really need refreshing?” asked Micky with his sneer even more pronounced. “I can still say my piece. I was out testing a car. Clutch trouble. I gave it a good long test. From Drymouth up Minchin Hill, along the Moor Road and back through Ipsley. Unfortunately cars are dumb, they can’t testify.”

Tina had turned her head at last. She was staring straight at Micky. Her face was still expressionless.

“And you, Miss Argyle? You work at the library at Redmyn?”

“Yes. It closes at half past five. I did a little shopping in the High Street. Then I went home. I have a flat—flatlet really—in Morecombe Mansions. I cooked my own supper and enjoyed a quiet evening playing gramophone records.”

“You didn’t go out at all?”

There was a slight pause before she said:

“No, I didn’t go out.”

“Quite sure about that, Miss Argyle?”

“Yes. I am sure.”

“You have a car, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“She has a bubble,” said Micky. “Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble.”

“I have a bubble, yes,” said Tina, grave and composed.

“Where do you keep it?”

“In the street. I have no garage. There is a side street near the flats. There are cars parked all along it.”

“And you’ve—nothing helpful you can tell us?”

Huish hardly knew himself why he was so insistent.

“I do not think there is anything I could possibly tell you.”

Micky threw her a quick glance.

Huish sighed.

“I’m afraid this hasn’t helped you much, Superintendent,” said Leo.

“You never know, Mr. Argyle. You realize, I suppose, one of the oddest things about the whole business?”

“I—? I’m not quite sure that I follow you.”

“The money,” said Huish. “The money Mrs. Argyle drew from the bank including that fiver with Mrs. Bottleberry, 17 Bangor Road written on the back of it. A strong part of the case was that that fiver and others were found on Jack Argyle when he was arrested. He swore he got the money from Mrs. Argyle, but Mrs. Argyle definitely told you and Miss Vaughan that she didn’t give Jacko any money—so how did he get that fifty pounds? He couldn’t have come back here—Dr. Calgary’s evidence makes that quite clear. So he must have had it with him when he left here. Who gave it to him? Did you?”

He turned squarely on Kirsten Lindstrom, who flushed indignantly.

“Me? No, of course not. How could I?”

“Where was the money kept that Mrs. Argyle had drawn from the bank?”

“She usually kept it in a drawer of her bureau,” said Kirsten.

“Locked?”

Kirsten considered.

“She would probably lock the drawer before she went up to bed.”

Huish looked at Hester.

“Did you take the money from the drawer and give it to your brother?”

“I didn’t even know he was there. And how could I take it without Mother knowing?”

“You could have taken it quite easily when your mother went up to the library to consult your father,” Huish suggested.

He wondered whether she would see and avoid the trap.

She fell straight into it.

“But Jacko had already left by then. I—” She stopped, dismayed.

“I see you do know when your brother left,” said Huish.

Hester said quickly and vehemently:

“I—I—know now—I didn’t then. I was up in my room, I tell you. I didn’t hear anything at all. And anyway I wouldn’t have wanted to give Jacko any money.”

“And I tell you this,” said Kirsten. Her face was red and indignant. “If I had given Jacko money—it would have been my own money! I would not have stolen it!”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” said Huish. “But you see where that leads us. Mrs. Argyle, in spite of what she told you,” he looked at Leo, “must have given him that money herself.”

“I can’t believe it. Why not tell me if she had done so?”

“She wouldn’t be the first mother to be softer about her son than she wanted to admit.”

“You’re wrong, Huish. My wife never indulged in evasion.”

“I think she did this time,” said Gwenda Vaughan. “In fact she must have done ... as the superintendent says, it’s the only answer.”

“After all,” said Huish softly. “We’ve got to look at the whole thing from a different point of view now. At the time of the arrest we thought Jack Argyle was lying. But now we find he spoke the truth about the hitchhike he had from Calgary, so presumably he was speaking the truth about the money too. He said that his mother gave it to him. Therefore presumably she did.”

There was silence—an uncomfortable silence.

Huish got up. “Well, thank you. I’m afraid the trail is pretty cold by now, but you never know.”

Leo escorted him to the door. When he came back he said with a sigh, “Well, that’s over. For the present.”

“For always,” said Kirsten. “They will never know.”

“What’s the good of that to us?” cried Hester.

“My dear.” Her father went over to her. “Calm down, child. Don’t be so strung up. Time heals everything.”

“Not some things. What shall we do? Oh! what shall we do?”

“Hester, come with me.” Kirsten put a hand on her shoulder.

“I don’t want anybody.” Hester ran out of the room. A moment later they heard the front door bang.

Kirsten said:

“All this! It is not good for her.”

“I don’t think it’s really true, either,” said Philip Durrant thoughtfully.

“What isn’t true?” asked Gwenda.

“That we shall never know the truth ... I feel a kind of pricking in my thumbs.”

His face, faun-like and almost mischievous, lit up with a queer smile.

“Please, Philip, be careful,” said Tina.

He looked at her in surprise.

“Little Tina. And what do you know about it all?”

“I hope,” said Tina very clearly and distinctly, “that I do not know anything.”

Fourteen

I

“Don’t suppose you got anything?” said the Chief Constable.

“Nothing definite, sir,” said Huish. “And yet—the time wasn’t altogether wasted.”

“Let’s hear about it all.”

“Well, our main times and premises are the same. Mrs. Argyle was alive just before seven, talked with her husband and Gwenda Vaughan, was seen afterwards downstairs by Hester Argyle. Three people can’t be in cahoots. Jacko Argyle is now accounted for, so it means that she could have been killed by her husband, any time between five past seven and half past, by Gwenda Vaughan at five minutes past seven on her way out, by Hester just before that, by Kirsten Lindstrom when she came in later—just before half past seven, say. Durrant’s paralysis gives him an alibi, but his wife’s alibi depends on his word. She could have gone down and killed her mother if she wanted to between seven and half past if her husband was prepared to back her up. Don’t see why she should, though. In fact, as far as I can see, only two people have got a real motive for the crime. Leo Argyle and Gwenda Vaughan.”

“You think it’s one of them—or both of them together?”

“I don’t think they were in it together. As I see it, it was an impulsive crime—not a premeditated one. Mrs. Argyle comes into the library, tells them both about Jacko’s threats and demands for money. Put it that, later, Leo Argyle goes down to speak to her about Jacko, or about something else. The house is quiet, nobody about. He goes into her sitting room. There she is, her back to him, sitting at the desk. And there’s the poker, still perhaps where Jacko threw it down after threatening her with it. Those quiet, repressed men do break out sometimes. A handkerchief over his hand so as not to leave prints, up with the poker, down with it on her head and it’s

done. Pull out a drawer or two to suggest a search for money. Then upstairs again till someone finds her. Or put it that Gwenda Vaughan on her way out looks into the room, and the urge comes over her. Jacko will be the perfect scapegoat, and the way to marriage with Leo Argyle is open.”

Major Finney nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes. Could be. And of course they were careful not to announce an engagement too soon. Not till that poor little devil Jacko was safely convicted of murder. Yes, that seems fair enough. Crimes are very monotonous. Husband and third party, or wife and third party—always the same old pattern. But what can we do about it, Huish, eh? What can we do about it?”

“I don’t see, sir,” said Huish slowly, “what we can do about it. We may be sure—but where’s the evidence? Nothing to stand up in court.”

“No—no. But you are sure, Huish? Sure in your own mind?”

“Not as sure as I’d like to be,” said Superintendent Huish sadly.

“Ah! Why not?”

“The kind of man he is—Mr. Argyle, I mean.”

“Not the kind to do murder?”

“It’s not that so much—not the murder part of it. It’s the boy. I don’t see him deliberately framing the boy.”

“It wasn’t his own son, remember. He may not have cared much for the boy—he may even have been resentful—of the affection his wife lavished on him.”

“That may be so. Yet he seems to have been fond of all the children. He looks fond of them.”

“Of course,” said Finney, thoughtfully. “He knew the boy wouldn’t be hanged ... That might make a difference.”

“Ah, you may have something there, sir. He may have thought that ten years in prison which is what a life sentence amounts to, might have done the boy no harm.”

“What about the young woman—Gwenda Vaughan?”

“If she did it,” said Huish, “I don’t suppose she’d have any qualms about Jacko. Women are ruthless.”

“Anyway, you’re reasonably satisfied it’s between those two?”

“Reasonably satisfied, yes.”

“But no more?” the Chief Constable pressed him.

“No. There’s something going on. Undercurrents, as you might say.”

“Explain yourself, Huish.”

“What I’d really like to know is what they think themselves. About each other.”

“Oh, I see, I get you now. You’re wondering if they themselves know who it was?”

“Yes. I can’t make up my mind about it. Do they all know? And are they all agreed to keep it dark? I don’t think so. I think it’s even possible that they may all have different ideas. There’s the Swedish woman—she’s a mass of nerves. Right on edge. That may be because she did it herself. She’s the age when women go slightly off their rocker in one way or another. She may be frightened for herself or for somebody else. I’ve the impression, I may be wrong, it’s for somebody else.”

“Leo?”

“No, I don’t think it’s Leo she’s upset about. I think it’s the young one—Hester.”

“Hester, h’m? Any chance that it might have been Hester?”

“No ostensible motive. But she’s a passionate, perhaps slightly unbalanced type.”

“And Lindstrom probably knows a good deal more about the girl than we do.”

“Yes. Then there’s the little dark one who works in the County Library.”

“She wasn’t in the house that night, was she?”

“No. But I think she knows something. Knows who did it, maybe.”

“Guesses? Or knows?”

“She’s worried. I don’t think it’s only guessing.”

He went on: “And there’s the other boy. Micky. He wasn’t there, either, but he was out in a car, nobody with him. He says he was testing the car up towards the moor and Minchin Hill. We’ve only his word for it. He could have driven over, gone into the house, killed her and driven away again. Gwenda Vaughan said something that wasn’t in her original statement. She said a car passed her, just at the entrance to the private road. There are fourteen houses in the road, so it might have been going to any one of them and nobody will remember after two years—but it means there’s just a possibility that the car was Micky’s.”

“Why should he want to kill his adopted mother?”

“No reason that we know about—but there might be one.”

“Who would know?”

“They’d all know,” said Huish. “But they wouldn’t tell us. Not if they knew they were telling us, that is.”

“I perceive your devilish intention,” said Major Finney. “Who are you going to work on?”

“Lindstrom, I think. If I can break down her defences. I also hope to find out if she herself had a grudge against Mrs. Argyle.

“And there’s the paralysed chap,” he added. “Philip Durrant.”

“What about him?”

“Well, I think he’s beginning to have a few ideas about it all. I don’t suppose he’ll want to share them with me, but I may be able to get an inkling of the way his mind is working. He’s an intelligent fellow, and I should say pretty observant. He may have noticed one or two rather interesting things.”

II

“Come out, Tina, and let’s get some air.”

“Air?” Tina looked up at Micky doubtfully. “But it’s so cold, Micky.” She shivered a little.

“I believe you hate fresh air, Tina. That’s why you’re able to stand being cooped up in that library all day long.”

Tina smiled.

“I do not mind being cooped up in winter. It is very nice and warm in the library.”

Micky looked on her.

“And there you sit, all cuddled up like a cosy little kitten in front of the fire. But it’ll do you good to get out, all the same. Come on, Tina. I want to talk to you. I want to—oh, to get some air into my lungs, forget all this bloody police business.”

Tina got up from her chair with a lazy, graceful movement not unlike that of the kitten to which Micky had just compared her.

In the hall she wrapped a fur-collared tweed coat round her and they went out together.

“Aren’t you even going to put a coat on, Micky?”

“No. I never feel the cold.”

“Brr,” said Tina gently. “How I hate this country in the winter. I would like to go abroad. I would like to be somewhere where the sun was always shining and the air was moist and soft and warm.”

“I’ve just been offered a job out in the Persian Gulf,” said Micky, “with one of the oil companies. The job’s looking after motor transport.”

“Are you going?”

“No, I don’t think so ... What’s the good?”

They walked round to the back of the house and started down a zig-zag path through trees which led finally to the beach on the river below. Half-way down there was a small summerhouse sheltered from the wind. They did not at once sit down but stood in front of it, gazing out over the river.

“It’s beautiful here, isn’t it?” said Micky.

Tina looked at the view with incurious eyes.

“Yes,” she said, “yes, perhaps it is.”

“But you don’t really know, do you?” said Micky, looking at her affectionately, “you don’t realize the beauty, Tina, you never have.”

“I do not remember,” said Tina, “in all the years we lived here that you ever enjoyed the beauty of this place. You were always fretting, longing to go back to London.”

“That was different,” said Micky shortly, “I didn’t belong here.”

“That is what is the matter, isn’t it?” said Tina, “you do not belong anywhere.”

“I don’t belong anywhere,” said Micky in a dazed voice. “Perhaps that’s true. My goodness, Tina, what a frightening thought. Do you remember that old song? Kirsten used to sing it to us, I believe. Something about a dove. O fair dove, O fond dove, O dove with the white, white breast. Do you remember?”

Tina shook her head.

“Perhaps she sang it to you, but—no, I do not remember.”

Micky went on, half speaking, half humming.

“O maid most dear, I am not here. I have no place, no part, No dwelling more by sea nor shore, But only in thy heart.” He looked at Tina. “I suppose that could be true.”

Tina put a small hand on his arm.

“Come, Micky, sit down here. It is out of the wind. It is not so cold.”

As he obeyed her she went on:

“Must you be so unhappy always?”

“My dear girl, you don’t begin to understand the first thing about it.”

“I understand a good deal,” said Tina. “Why can’t you forget about her, Micky?”

“Forget about her? Who are you talking about?”

“Your mother,” said Tina.

“Forget about her!” said Micky bitterly. “Is there much chance of forgetting after this morning—after the questions! If anyone’s been murdered, they don’t let you ‘forget about her’!”

“I did not mean that,” said Tina. “I meant your real mother.”

“Why should I think about her? I never saw her after I was six years old.”

“But, Micky, you did think about her. All the time.”

“Did I ever tell you so?”

“Sometimes one knows about these things,” said Tina.

Micky turned and looked at her.

“You’re such a quiet, soft little creature, Tina. Like a little black cat. I want to stroke your fur the right way. Nice pussy! Pretty little pussy!” His hand stroked the sleeve of her coat.

Tina, sitting very still, smiled at him as he did so. Micky said:

“You didn’t hate her, did you, Tina? All the rest of us did.”

“That was very unkind,” said Tina. She shook her head at him and went on with some energy. “Look what she gave you, all of you. A home, warmth, kindness, good food, toys to play with, people to look after you and keep you safe—”

“Yes, yes,” said Micky, impatiently. “Saucers of cream and lots of fur stroking. That was all you wanted, was it, little pussy cat?”

“I was grateful for it,” said Tina. “None of you were grateful.”

“Don’t you understand, Tina, that one can’t be grateful when one ought to be? In some ways it makes it worse, feeling the obligation of gratitude. I didn’t want to be brought here. I didn’t want to be given luxurious surroundings. I didn’t want to be taken away from my own home.”

“You might have been bombed,” Tina pointed out. “You might have been killed.”

“What would it matter? I wouldn’t mind being killed. I’d have been killed in my own place, with my own people about me. Where I belonged. There you are, you see. We’re back to it again. There’s nothing so bad as not belonging. But you, little pussy cat, you only care for material things.”

“Perhaps that is true in a way,” said Tina. “Perhaps that is why I do not feel like the rest of you. I do not feel that odd resentment that you all seem to feel—you most of all, Micky. It was easy for me to be grateful because, you see, I did not want to be myself. I did not want to be where I was. I wanted to escape from myself. I wanted to be someone else. And she made me into someone else. She made me into Christina Argyle with a home and with affection. Secure. Safe. I loved Mother because she gave me all those things.”

“What about your own mother? Don’t you ever think of her?”

“Why should I? I hardly remember her. I was only three years old, remember, when I came here. I was always frightened—terrified—with her. All those noisy quarrels with seamen, and she herself—I suppose, now that I am old enough to remember properly, that she must have been drunk most of the time.” Tina spoke in a detached, wondering voice. “No, I do not think about her, or remember her. Mrs. Argyle was my mother. This is my home.”

“It’s so easy for you, Tina,” said Micky.

“And why is it hard for you? Because you make it so! It was not Mrs. Argyle you hated, Micky, it was your own mother. Yes, I know that what I am saying is true. And if you killed Mrs. Argyle, as you may have done, then it was your own mother you wanted to kill.”

“Tina! What the hell are you talking about?”

“And now,” went on Tina, talking calmly, “you have nobody to hate any longer. And that makes you quite lonely, doesn’t it? But you’ve got to learn to live without hate, Micky. It may be difficult, but it can be done.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What did you mean by saying that I may have killed her? You know perfectly well I was nowhere near here

that day. I was testing out a customer's car up on the Moor Road, by Minchin Hill."

"Were you?" said Tina.

She got up and stepped forward till she stood at the Lookout Point from where you could look down to the river below.

"What are you getting at, Tina?" Micky came up behind her.

Tina pointed down to the beach.

"Who are those two people down there?"

Micky gave a quick cursory glance.

"Hester and her doctor pal, I think," he said. "But Tina, what did you mean? For God's sake don't stand there right at the edge."

"Why—do you want to push me over? You could. I'm very small, you know."

Micky said hoarsely:

"Why do you say I may have been here that evening?"

Tina did not answer. She turned and began walking back up the path to the house.

"Tina!"

Tina said in her quiet, soft voice:

"I'm worried, Micky. I'm very worried about Hester and Don Craig."

"Never mind about Hester and her boy friend."

"But I do mind about them. I am afraid that Hester is very unhappy."

“We’re not talking about them.”

“I am talking about them. They matter, you see.”

“Have you believed all along, Tina, that I was here the night Mother was killed?”

Tina did not reply.

“You didn’t say anything at the time.”

“Why should I? There was no need. I mean, it was so obvious that Jacko had killed her.”

“And now it’s equally obvious that Jacko didn’t kill her.”

Again Tina nodded.

“And so?” Micky asked. “And so?”

She did not answer him, but continued to walk up the path to the house.

III

On the little beach by the Point, Hester scuffed the sand with the point of her shoe.

“I don’t see what there is to talk about,” she said.

“You’ve got to talk about it,” said Don Craig.

“I don’t see why ... Talking about a thing never does any good—it never makes it any better.”

“You might at least tell me what happened this morning.”

“Nothing,” said Hester.

“What do you mean—nothing? The police came along, didn’t they?”

“Oh, yes, they came along.”

“Well, then, did they question you all?”

“Yes,” said Hester, “they questioned us.”

“What sort of questions?”

“All the usual ones,” said Hester. “Really just the same as before. Where we were and what we did, and when we last saw Mother alive. Really, Don, I don’t want to talk about it any more. It’s over now.”

“But it isn’t over, dearest. That’s just the point.”

“I don’t see why you need to fuss,” said Hester. “You’re not mixed up in this.”

“Darling, I want to help you. Don’t you understand?”

“Well, talking about it doesn’t help me. I just want to forget. If you’d help me to forget, that would be different.”

“Hester, dearest, it’s no good running away from things. You must face them.”

“I’ve been facing them, as you call it, all the morning.”

“Hester, I love you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I suppose so,” said Hester.

“What do you mean, you suppose so?”

“Going on and on about it all.”

“But I have to do that.”

“I don’t see why. You’re not a policeman.”

“Who was the last person to see your mother alive?”

“I was,” said Hester.

“I know. That was just before seven, wasn’t it, just before you came out to meet me.”

“Just before I came out to go to Drymouth—to the Playhouse,” said Hester.

“Well, I was at the Playhouse, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, of course you were.”

“You did know then, didn’t you, Hester, that I loved you?”

“I wasn’t sure,” said Hester. “I wasn’t even sure then that I was beginning to love you.”

“You’d no reason, had you, no earthly reason for doing away with your mother?”

“No, not really,” said Hester.

“What do you mean by not really?”

“I often thought about killing her,” said Hester in a matter-of-fact voice. “I used to say ‘I wish she was dead, I wish she was dead.’ Sometimes,” she added, “I used to dream that I killed her.”

“In what way did you kill her in your dream?”

For a moment Don Craig was no longer the lover but the interested young doctor.

“Sometimes I shot her,” said Hester cheerfully, “and sometimes I banged her on the head.”

Dr. Craig groaned.

“That was just dreaming,” said Hester. “I’m often very violent in dreams.”

“Listen, Hester.” The young man took her hand in his. “You’ve got to tell me the truth. You’ve got to trust me.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said Hester.

“The truth, Hester. I want the truth. I love you—and I’ll stand by you. If—if you killed her I—I think I can find out the reasons why. I don’t think it will have been exactly your fault. Do you understand? Certainly I’d never go to the police about it. It will be between you and me only. Nobody else will suffer. The whole thing will die down for want of evidence. But I’ve got to know.” He stressed the last word strongly.

Hester was looking at him. Her eyes were wide, almost unfocused.

“What do you want me to say to you?” she said.

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

“You think you know the truth already, don’t you? You think—I killed her.”

“Hester, darling, don’t look at me like that.” He took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. “I’m a doctor. I know the reasons behind these things. I know that people can’t always be held responsible for their actions. I know you for what you are—sweet and lovely and essentially all right. I’ll help you. I’ll look after you. We’ll get married, then we’ll be happy. You need never feel lost, unwanted, tyrannized over. The things we do often spring from reasons most people don’t understand.”

“That’s very much what we all said about Jacko, isn’t it?” said Hester.

“Never mind Jacko. It’s you I’m thinking about. I love you so very much, Hester, but I’ve got to know the truth.”

“The truth?” said Hester.

A very slow, mocking smile curved the corners of her mouth upwards.

“Please, darling.”

Hester turned her head and looked up.

“There’s Gwenda calling me. It must be lunch time.”

“Hester!”

“Would you believe me if I told you I didn’t kill her?”

“Of course I’d—I’d believe you.”

“I don’t think you would,” said Hester.

She turned sharply away from him and began running up the path. He made a movement to follow her, then abandoned it.

“Oh, hell,” said Donald Craig. “Oh, hell!”

Fifteen

“But I don’t want to go home just yet,” said Philip Durrant. He spoke with plaintive irritability.

“But, Philip, really, there’s nothing to stay here for, any longer. I mean, we had to come to see Mr. Marshall to discuss the thing, and then wait for the police interviews. But now there’s nothing to stop us going home right away.”

“I think your father’s quite happy for us to stop on for a bit,” said Philip, “he likes having someone to play chess with in the evenings. My word, he’s a wizard at chess. I thought I wasn’t bad, but I never get the better of him.”

“Father can find someone else to play chess with,” said Mary shortly.

“What—whistle someone up from the Women’s Institute?”

“And anyway, we ought to go home,” said Mary. “Tomorrow is Mrs. Carden’s day for doing the brasses.”

“Polly, the perfect housewife!” said Philip laughing. “Anyway, Mrs. Whatsaname can do the brasses without you, can’t she? Or if she can’t, send her a telegram and tell her to let them moulder for another week.”

“You don’t understand, Philip, about household things, and how difficult they are.”

“I don’t see that any of them are difficult unless you make them difficult. Anyway, I want to stop on.”

“Oh, Philip,” Mary spoke with exasperation, “I do so hate it here.”

“But why?”

“It’s so gloomy, so miserable and—and all that’s happened here. The murder and everything.”

“Now, come, Polly, don’t tell me you’re a mass of nerves over things of that kind. I’m sure you could take murder without turning a hair. No, you want to go home because you want to see to the brasses and dust the place and make sure no moths have got into your fur coat—”

“Moths don’t go into fur coats in winter,” said Mary.

“Well, you know what I mean, Polly. The general idea. But you see, from my point of view, it’s so much more interesting here.”

“More interesting than being in our own home?” Mary sounded both shocked and hurt.

Philip looked at her quickly.

“I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t put it very well. Nothing could be nicer than our own home, and you’ve made it really lovely. Comfortable, neat, attractive. You see, it’d be quite different if—if I were like I used to be. I mean, I’d have lots of things to do all day. I’d be up to my ears in schemes. And it would be perfect coming back to you and having our own home, talking about everything that had happened during the day. But you see, it’s different now.”

“Oh, I know it’s different in that way,” said Mary. “Don’t think I ever forget that, Phil. I do mind. I mind most terribly.”

“Yes,” said Philip, and he spoke almost between his teeth. “Yes, you mind too much, Mary. You mind so much that sometimes it makes me mind more. All I want is distraction and—no”—he held up his hand—“don’t tell me that I can get distraction from jigsaw puzzles and all the gadgets of occupational therapy and having people to come and give me treatment, and reading endless books. I want so badly sometimes to get my teeth into something! And here, in this house, there is something to get one’s teeth into.”

“Philip,” Mary caught her breath, “you’re not still harping on—on that idea of yours?”

“Playing at Murder Hunt?” said Philip. “Murder, murder, who did the murder? Yes, Polly, you’re not far off. I want desperately to know who did it.”

“But why? And how can you know? If somebody broke in or found the door open—”

“Still harping on the outsider theory?” asked Philip. “It won’t wash, you know. Old Marshall put a good face upon it. But actually he was just helping us to keep face. Nobody believes in that beautiful theory. It just isn’t true.”

“Then you must see, if it isn’t true,” Mary interrupted him, “if it isn’t true—if it was, as you put it, one of us—then I don’t want to know. Why should we know? Aren’t we—aren’t we a hundred times better not knowing?”

Philip Durrant looked up at her questioningly.

“Putting your head in the sand, eh, Polly? Haven’t you any natural curiosity?”

“I tell you I don’t want to know! I think it’s all horrible. I want to forget it and not think about it.”

“Didn’t you care enough for your mother to want to know who killed her?”

“What good would it do, knowing who killed her? For two years we’ve been quite satisfied that Jacko killed her.”

“Yes,” said Philip, “lovely the way we’ve all been satisfied.”

His wife looked at him doubtfully.

“I don’t—I really don’t know what you mean, Philip.”

“Can’t you see, Polly, that in a way this is a challenge to me? A challenge to my intelligence? I don’t mean that I’ve felt your mother’s death particularly keenly or that I was particularly fond of her. I wasn’t. She’d done her very best to stop you marrying me, but I bore her no grudge for that because I

succeeded in carrying you off all right. Didn't I, my girl? No, it's not a wish for revenge, it's not even a passion for justice. I think it's—yes, mainly curiosity, though perhaps there's a better side to it than that."

"It's the sort of thing you oughtn't to meddle about with," said Mary. "No good can come of your meddling about with it. Oh, Philip, please, please don't. Let's go home and forget all about it."

"Well," said Philip, "you can pretty well cart me anywhere you like, can't you? But I want to stay here. Don't you sometimes want me to do what I want to do?"

"I want you to have everything in the world you want," said Mary.

"You don't really, darling. You just want to look after me like a baby in arms and know what's best for me every day and in every possible way." He laughed.

Mary said, looking at him doubtfully:

"I never know when you're serious or not."

"Apart from curiosity," said Philip Durrant, "somebody ought to find out the truth, you know."

"Why? What good can it do? Having someone else sent to prison. I think it's a horrible idea."

"You don't quite understand," said Philip. "I didn't say that I'd turn in whoever it was (if I discovered who it was) to the police. I don't think that I would. It depends, of course, on the circumstances. Probably it wouldn't be any use my turning them over to the police because I still think that there couldn't be any real evidence."

"Then if there isn't any real evidence," said Mary, "how are you going to find out anything?"

"Because," said Philip, "there are lots of ways of finding out things, of knowing them quite certainly once and for all. And I think, you know, that

that's becoming rather necessary. Things aren't going very well in this house and very soon they'll be getting worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed anything, Polly? What about your father and Gwenda Vaughan?"

"What about them? Why my father should want to marry again at his age —"

"I can understand that," said Philip. "After all, he had rather a raw deal in marriage. He's got a chance now of real happiness. Autumn happiness, if you like, but he's got it. Or, shall we say, he had it. Things aren't going too well between them now."

"I suppose, all this business—" said Mary vaguely.

"Exactly," said Philip. "All this business. It's shoving them further apart every day. And there could be two reasons for that. Suspicion or guilt."

"Suspicion of whom?"

"Well, let's say of each other. Or suspicion on one side and consciousness of guilt on the other and vice versa and as you were and as you like it."

"Don't, Philip, you're confusing me." Suddenly a faint trace of animation came into Mary's manner. "So you think it was Gwenda?" she said.

"Perhaps you're right. Oh, what a blessing it would be if it was Gwenda."

"Poor Gwenda. Because she's one removed from the family, you mean?"

"Yes," said Mary. "I mean then it wouldn't be one of us."

"That's all you feel about it, is it?" said Philip. "How it affects us."

"Of course," said Mary.

“Of course, of course,” said Philip irritably. “The trouble with you is, Polly, you haven’t got any imagination. You can’t put yourself in anyone else’s place.”

“Why should one?” asked Mary.

“Yes, why should one?” said Philip. “I suppose if I’m honest I’d say to pass the time away. But I can put myself in your father’s place, or in Gwenda’s, and if they’re innocent, what hell it must be. What hell for Gwenda to be held suddenly at arm’s length. To know in her heart that she’s not going to be able to marry the man she loves after all. And then put yourself in your father’s place. He knows, he can’t help knowing, that the woman he is in love with had an opportunity to do the murder and had a motive, too. He hopes she didn’t do it, he thinks she didn’t do it, but he isn’t sure. And what’s more he never will be sure.”

“At his age—” began Mary.

“Oh, at his age, at his age,” said Philip impatiently. “Don’t you realize it’s worse for a man of that age? It’s the last love of his life. He’s not likely to have another. It goes deep. And taking the other point of view,” he went on, “suppose Leo came out of the mists and shadows of the self-contained world that he’s managed to live in so long. Suppose it was he who struck down his wife? One can almost feel sorry for the poor devil, can’t one? Not,” he added meditatively, “that I really can imagine his doing anything of the sort for a moment. But I’ve no doubt the police can imagine it all right. Now, Polly, let’s hear your views. Who do you think did it?”

“How can I possibly know?” said Mary.

“Well, perhaps you can’t know,” said Philip, “but you might have a very good idea—if you thought.”

“I tell you I refuse to think about the thing at all.”

“I wonder why ... Is that just distaste? Or is it—perhaps—because you do know? Perhaps in your own cool, calm mind you’re quite sure ... So sure

that you don't want to think about it, that you don't want to tell me? Is it Hester you've got in mind?"

"Why on earth should Hester want to kill Mother?"

"No real reason, is there?" said Philip meditatively. "But you know, you do read of those things. A son or a daughter fairly well looked after, indulged, and then one day some silly little thing happens. Fond parent refuses to stump up for the cinema or for buying a new pair of shoes or says when you're going out with the boy friend you've got to be in at ten. It mayn't be anything very important but it seems to set a match to a train that's already laid, and suddenly the adolescent in question has a brainstorm and up with a hammer or an axe, or possibly a poker, and that's that. Always hard to explain, but it happens. It's the culmination of a long train of repressed rebellion. That's a pattern which would fit Hester. You see, with Hester the trouble is that one doesn't know what goes on in that rather lovely head of hers. She's weak, of course, and she resents being weak. And your mother was the sort of person who would make her feel conscious of her weakness. Yes," said Philip, leaning forward with some animation, "I think I could make out quite a good case for Hester."

"Oh, will you stop talking about it," cried Mary.

"Oh, I'll stop talking," said Philip. "Talking won't get me anywhere. Or will it? After all, one has to decide in one's own mind what the pattern of the murder might be, and apply that pattern to each of the different people concerned. And then when you've got it taped out the way it must have been, then you start laying your little pitfalls and see if they tumble into them."

"There were only four people in the house," said Mary. "You speak as though there were half a dozen or more. I agree with you that Father couldn't possibly have done it, and it's absurd to think that Hester could have any real reason for doing anything of that kind. That leaves Kirsty and Gwenda."

"Which of them do you prefer?" asked Philip, with faint mockery in his tone.

“I can’t really imagine Kirsty doing such a thing,” said Mary. “She’s always been so patient and good-tempered. Really quite devoted to Mother. I suppose she could go queer suddenly. One does hear of such thing, but she’s never seemed at all queer.”

“No,” said Philip thoughtfully, “I’d say Kirsty is a very normal woman, the sort of woman who’d have liked a normal woman’s life. In a way she’s something of the same type as Gwenda, only Gwenda is good-looking and attractive and poor old Kirsty is plain as a currant bun. I don’t suppose any man’s ever looked at her twice. But she’d have liked them to. She’d have liked to have fallen in love and married. It must be pretty fair hell to be born a woman and to be born plain and unattractive, especially if that isn’t compensated for by having any special talent or brain. The truth is she’d been here far too long. She ought to have left after the war, gone on with her profession as masseuse. She might have hooked some well off elderly patient.”

“You’re like all men,” said Mary. “You think women think of nothing but getting married.”

Philip grinned.

“I still think it’s all women’s first choice,” he said. “Hasn’t Tina any boy friends, by the way?”

“Not that I know of,” said Mary. “But she doesn’t talk much about herself.”

“No, she’s a quiet little mouse, isn’t she? Not exactly pretty, but very graceful. I wonder what she knows about this business?”

“I don’t suppose she knows anything,” said Mary.

“Don’t you?” said Philip. “I do.”

“Oh, you just imagine things,” said Mary.

“I’m not imagining this. Do you know what the girl said? She said she hoped she didn’t know anything. Rather a curious way of putting things. I

bet she does know something.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Perhaps there’s something that ties in somewhere, but she herself doesn’t quite realize where it does tie in. I hope to get it out of her.”

“Philip!”

“It’s no good, Polly. I’ve got a mission in life. I’ve persuaded myself that it’s very much in the public interest that I should get down to it. Now where shall I start? I rather think I’ll work on Kirsty first. In many ways she’s a simple soul.”

“I wish—oh, how I wish,” said Mary, “that you’d give all this crazy idea up and come home. We were so happy. Everything was going along so well—” Her voice broke as she turned away.

“Polly!” Philip was concerned. “Do you really mind so much? I didn’t realize you were quite so upset.”

Mary wheeled round, a hopeful look in her eye.

“Then you will come home and forget about it all?”

“I couldn’t forget about it all,” said Philip. “I’d only go on worrying and puzzling and thinking. Let’s stay here till the end of the week anyway, Mary, and then, well, we’ll see.”

Sixteen

“Do you mind if I stay on a bit, Dad?” asked Micky.

“No, of course not. I’m delighted. Is it all right with your firm?”

“Yes,” said Micky. “I rang ’em up. I needn’t be back until after the weekend. They’ve been very decent about it. Tina’s staying over the weekend too,” he said.

He went to the window, looked out, walked across the room with hands in his pockets, gazing up at the bookshelves. He spoke then in a jerky, awkward voice.

“You know, Dad, I do appreciate really all you’ve done for me. Just lately I’ve seen—well, I’ve seen how ungrateful I’ve always been.”

“There’s never been any question of gratitude,” said Leo Argyle. “You are my son, Micky. I have always regarded you as such.”

“An odd way of treating a son,” said Micky. “You never bossed me about.”

Leo Argyle smiled, his remote, far-away smile.

“Do you really think that’s the only function of a father?” he said. “To boss his children about?”

“No,” said Micky, “no. I suppose it isn’t.” He went on, speaking in a rush. “I’ve been a damned fool,” he said. “Yes. A damned fool. It’s comic in a way. Do you know what I’d like to do, what I’m thinking of doing? Taking a job with an oil company out in the Persian Gulf. That was what Mother wanted to put me into to begin with—an oil company. But I wasn’t having any then! Flung off on my own.”

“You were at the age,” said Leo, “when you wanted to choose for yourself, and you hated the idea of anything being chosen for you. You’ve always been rather like that, Micky. If we wanted to buy you a red sweater, you

insisted you wanted a blue one, but all the time it was probably a red one you wanted.”

“True enough,” said Micky, with a short laugh. “I’ve been an unsatisfactory sort of creature always.”

“Just young,” said Leo. “Just kicking up your heels. Apprehensive of the bridle, of the saddle, of control. We all feel like that at one time in our lives, but we have to come to it in the end.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Micky.

“I’m very glad,” said Leo, “that you have got this idea for the future. I don’t think, you know, that just working as a car salesman and demonstrator is quite good enough for you. It’s all right, but it doesn’t lead anywhere.”

“I like cars,” said Micky. “I like getting the best out of them. I can do a line of talk when I have to. Patter, patter, all the smarmy bits, but I don’t enjoy the life, blast it. This is a job to do with motor transport, anyway. Controlling the servicing of cars. Quite an important job.”

“You know,” said Leo, “that at any time you might want to finance yourself, to buy yourself into any business you thought worthwhile, the money is there, available. You know about the Discretionary Trust. I am quite prepared to authorize any necessary sum provided always that the business details are passed and acceptable. We would get expert opinion on that. But the money is there, ready for you if you want it.”

“Thanks, Dad, but I don’t want to sponge on you.”

“There’s no question of sponging, Micky, it’s your money. Definitely made over to you in common with the others. All I have is the power of appointment, the when and the how. But it’s not my money and I’m not giving it to you. It’s yours.”

“It’s Mother’s money really,” said Micky.

“The Trust was made several years ago,” said Leo.

“I don’t want any of it!” said Micky. “I don’t want to touch it! I couldn’t! As things are, I couldn’t.” He flushed suddenly as he met his father’s eye. He said uncertainly: “I didn’t—I didn’t quite mean to say that.”

“Why can’t you touch it?” said Leo. “We adopted you. That is, we took full responsibility for you, financial and otherwise. It was a business arrangement that you should be brought up as our son and properly provided for in life.”

“I want to stand on my own feet,” Micky repeated.

“Yes. I see you do ... Very well, then, Micky, but if you change your mind, remember the money is there waiting.”

“Thanks, Dad. It’s good of you to understand. Or at least, not to understand, to let me have my way. I wish I could explain better. You see, I don’t want to profit by—I can’t profit by—oh, dammit all, it’s all too difficult to talk about.”

There was a knock on the door which was almost more a bump.

“That’s Philip, I expect,” said Leo Argyle. “Will you open the door for him, Micky.”

Micky went across to open the door, and Philip, working his invalid chair, propelled himself into the room. He greeted them both with a cheerful grin.

“Are you very busy, sir?” he asked Leo. “If so, say so. I’ll keep quiet and not interrupt you and just browse along the bookshelves.”

“No,” said Leo, “I have nothing to do this morning.”

“Gwenda not here?” asked Philip.

“She rang up to say she had a headache and couldn’t come today,” said Leo. His voice was expressionless.

“I see,” said Philip.

Micky said:

“Well, I shall go and dig out Tina. Make her go for a walk. That girl hates fresh air.”

He left the room, walking with a light, springy step.

“Am I wrong,” asked Philip, “or is there a change in Micky lately? Not scowling at the world as much as usual, is he?”

“He’s growing up,” said Leo. “It’s taken rather a long time for him to do so.”

“Well, he’s chosen a curious time to cheer up,” said Philip. “Yesterday’s session with the police wasn’t exactly encouraging, did you think so?”

Leo said quietly:

“It’s painful of course, to have the whole case reopened.”

“A chap like Micky now,” said Philip, working his way along the bookshelves, pulling out a volume or two in a desultory manner, “would you say he had much of a conscience?”

“That’s an odd question, Philip.”

“No, not really. I was just wondering about him. It’s like being tone deaf. Some people can’t really feel any pangs of guilt or remorse, or even regret for their actions. Jacko didn’t.”

“No,” said Leo, “Jacko certainly didn’t.”

“And I wondered about Micky,” said Philip. He paused, and then went on in a detached voice. “Do you mind if I ask you a question, sir? How much really do you know about the background of all this adopted family of yours?”

“Why do you want to know, Philip?”

“Just curiosity, I suppose. One always wonders, you know, how much there is in heredity.”

Leo did not answer. Philip observed him with bright-eyed interest.

“Perhaps,” he said, “I’m bothering you asking these questions.”

“Well,” said Leo, rising, “after all, why shouldn’t you ask them? You’re one of the family. They are at the moment, one can’t disguise it, very pertinent questions to ask. But our family, as you put it, were not adopted in the usual regular sense of the term. Mary, your wife, was formally and legally adopted, but the others came to us in a much more informal manner. Jacko was an orphan and was handed over to us by an old grandmother. She was killed in the blitz and he stayed with us. It was as simple as that. Micky was illegitimate. His mother was only interested in men. She wanted £100 down and got it. We’ve never known what happened to Tina’s mother. She never wrote to the child, she never claimed her after the war, and it was quite impossible to trace her.”

“And Hester?”

“Hester was illegitimate too. Her mother was a young Irish hospital nurse. She married an American GI shortly after Hester came to us. She begged us to keep the child. She did not propose to tell her husband anything about its birth. She went to the States with her husband at the end of the war and we’ve never heard any more from her.”

“All tragic histories in a way,” said Philip. “All poor unwanted little devils.”

“Yes,” said Leo. “That’s what made Rachel feel so passionately about them all. She was determined to make them feel wanted, to give them a real home, be a real mother to them.”

“It was a fine thing to do,” said Philip.

“Only—only it can never work out exactly as she hoped it might,” said Leo. “It was an article of faith with her that the blood tie didn’t matter. But the blood tie does matter, you know. There is usually something in one’s own

children, some kink of temperament, some way of feeling that you recognize and can understand without having to put into words. You haven't got that tie with children you adopt. One has no instinctive knowledge of what goes on in their minds. You judge them, of course, by yourself, by your own thoughts and feelings, but it's wise to recognize that those thoughts and feelings may be very widely divergent from theirs."

"You understood that, I suppose, all along," said Philip.

"I warned Rachel about it," said Leo, "but of course she didn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. She wanted them to be her own children."

"Tina's always the dark horse, to my mind," said Philip. "Perhaps it's the half of her that isn't white. Who was the father, do you know?"

"He was a seaman of some kind, I believe. Possibly a Lascar. The mother," added Leo dryly, "was unable to say."

"One doesn't know how she reacts to things, or what she thinks about. She says so little." Philip paused, and then shot out a question: "What does she know about this business that she isn't telling?"

He saw Leo Argyle's hand, that had been turning over papers, stop. There was a moment's pause, and then Leo said:

"Why should you think she isn't telling everything she knows?"

"Come now, sir, it's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"It's not obvious to me," said Leo.

"She knows something," said Philip. "Something damaging, do you think, about some particular person?"

"I think, Philip, if you'll forgive me for saying so, that it is rather unwise to speculate about these things. One can easily imagine so much."

"Are you warning me off, sir?"

“Is it really your business, Philip?”

“Meaning I’m not a policeman?”

“Yes, that’s what I meant. Police have to do their duty. They have to enquire into things.”

“And you don’t want to enquire into them?”

“Perhaps,” said Leo, “I’m afraid of what I should find.”

Philip’s hand tightened excitedly in his chair. He said softly:

“Perhaps you know who did it. Do you, sir?”

“No.”

The abruptness and vigour of Leo’s reply startled Philip.

“No,” said Leo, bringing his hand down on the desk. He was suddenly no longer the frail, attenuated, withdrawn personality that Philip knew so well.

“I don’t know who did it! D’you hear? I don’t know. I haven’t the least idea. I don’t—I don’t want to know.”

Seventeen

“And what are you doing, Hester, my love?” asked Philip.

In his wheelchair he was propelling himself along the passage. Hester was leaning out of the window halfway along it. She started and drew her head in.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said.

“Are you observing the universe, or considering suicide?” asked Philip.

She looked at him defiantly.

“What makes you say a thing like that?”

“Obviously it was in your mind,” said Philip. “But, frankly, Hester, if you are contemplating such a step, that window is no good. The drop’s not deep enough. Think how unpleasant it would be for you with a broken arm and a broken leg, say, instead of the merciful oblivion you are craving?”

“Micky used to climb down the magnolia tree from this window. It was his secret way in and out. Mother never knew.”

“The things parents never know! One could write a book about it. But if it’s suicide you are contemplating, Hester, just by the summerhouse would be a better place to jump from.”

“Where it juts out over the river? Yes, one would be dashed on the rocks below!”

“The trouble with you, Hester, is that you’re so melodramatic in your imaginings. Most people are quite satisfied with arranging themselves tidily in the gas oven or measuring themselves out an enormous number of sleeping pills.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Hester unexpectedly. “You don’t mind talking about things, do you?”

“Well, actually, I haven’t much else to do nowadays,” said Philip. “Come into my room and we’ll do some more talking.” As she hesitated, he went on: “Mary’s downstairs, gone to prepare me some delicious little morning mess with her own fair hands.”

“Mary wouldn’t understand,” said Hester.

“No,” Philip agreed, “Mary wouldn’t understand in the least.”

Philip propelled himself along and Hester walked beside him. She opened the door of the sitting room and he wheeled himself in. Hester followed.

“But you understand,” said Hester. “Why?”

“Well, there’s a time, you know, when one thinks about such things ... When this business first happened to me, for instance, and I knew that I might be a cripple for life....”

“Yes,” said Hester, “that must have been terrible. Terrible. And you were a pilot, too, weren’t you? You flew.”

“Up above the world so high, like a tea-tray in the sky,” agreed Philip.

“I’m terribly sorry,” said Hester. “I am really. I ought to have thought about it more, and been more sympathetic!”

“Thank God you weren’t,” said Philip. “But anyway, that phase is over now. One gets used to anything, you know. That’s something, Hester, that you don’t appreciate at the moment. But you’ll come to it. Unless you do something very rash and very silly first. Now come on, tell me all about it. What’s the trouble? I suppose you’ve had a row with your boy friend, the solemn young doctor. Is that it?”

“It wasn’t a row,” said Hester. “It was much worse than a row.”

“It will come right,” said Philip.

“No, it won’t,” said Hester. “It can’t—ever.”

“You’re so extravagant in your terms. Everything’s black and white to you, isn’t it, Hester? No halftones.”

“I can’t help being like that,” said Hester. “I’ve always been like it. Everything I thought I could do or wanted to do has always gone wrong. I wanted to have a life of my own, to be someone, to do something. It was all no good. I was no good at anything. I’ve often thought of killing myself. Ever since I was fourteen.”

Philip watched her with interest. He said in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice:

“Of course people do kill themselves a good deal, between fourteen and nineteen. It’s an age in life when things are very much out of proportion. Schoolboys kill themselves because they don’t think they can pass examinations and girls kill themselves because their mothers won’t let them go to the pictures with unsuitable boy friends. It’s a kind of period where everything appears to be in glorious technicolour. Joy or despair. Gloom or unparalleled happiness. One snaps out of it. The trouble with you is, Hester, it’s taken you longer to snap out of it than most people.”

“Mother was always right,” said Hester. “All the things she wouldn’t let me do and I wanted to do. She was right about them and I was wrong. I couldn’t bear it, I simply couldn’t bear it! So I thought I’d got to be brave. I’d got to go off on my own. I’d got to test myself. And it all went wrong. I wasn’t any good at acting.”

“Of course you weren’t,” said Philip. “You’ve got no discipline. You can’t, as they say in theatrical circles, take production. You’re too busy dramatizing yourself, my girl. You’re doing it now.”

“And then I thought I’d have a proper love affair,” said Hester. “Not a silly, girlish thing. An older man. He was married, and he’d had a very unhappy life.”

“Stock situation,” said Philip, “and he exploited it, no doubt.”

“I thought it would be a—oh, a grand passion. You’re not laughing at me?” She stopped, looking at Philip suspiciously.

“No, I’m not laughing at you, Hester,” said Philip gently. “I can see quite well that it must have been hell for you.”

“It wasn’t a grand passion,” said Hester bitterly. “It was just a cheap little affair. None of the things he told me about his life, or his wife, were true. I—I’d just thrown myself at his head. I’d been a fool, a silly, cheap little fool.”

“You’ve got to learn a thing, sometimes, by experience,” said Philip. “None of that’s done you any harm, you know, Hester. It’s probably helped you to grow up. Or it would help you if you let it.”

“Mother was so—so competent about it all,” said Hester, in a tone of resentment. “She came along and settled everything and told me that if I really wanted to act I’d better go to the dramatic school and do it properly. But I didn’t really want to act, and I knew by that time I was no good. So I came home. What else could I do?”

“Probably heaps of things,” said Philip. “But that was the easiest.”

“Oh, yes,” said Hester with fervour. “How well you understand. I’m terribly weak, you see. I always do want to do the easy thing. And if I rebel against it, it’s always in some silly way that doesn’t really work.”

“You’re terribly unsure of yourself, aren’t you?” said Philip gently.

“Perhaps that’s because I’m only adopted,” said Hester. “I didn’t find out about that, you know, not till I was nearly sixteen. I knew the others were and then I asked one day, and—I found that I was adopted too. It made me feel so awful, as though I didn’t belong anywhere.”

“What a terrible girl you are for dramatizing yourself,” said Philip.

“She wasn’t my mother,” said Hester. “She never really understood a single thing I felt. Just looked at me indulgently and kindly and made plans for

me. Oh! I hated her. It's awful of me, I know it's awful of me, but I hated her!"

"Actually, you know," said Philip, "most girls go through a short period of hating their own mothers. There wasn't really anything very unusual about that."

"I hated her because she was right," said Hester. "It's so awful when people are always right. It makes you feel more and more inadequate. Oh, Philip, everything's so terrible. What am I going to do? What can I do?"

"Marry that nice young man of yours," said Philip, "and settle down. Be a good little GP's wife. Or isn't that magnificent enough for you?"

"He doesn't want to marry me now," said Hester mournfully.

"Are you sure? Did he tell you so? Or are you only imagining it?"

"He thinks I killed Mother."

"Oh," said Philip, and paused a minute. "Did you?" he asked.

She wheeled round at him.

"Why do you ask me that? Why?"

"I thought it would be interesting to know," said Philip. "All in the family, so to speak. Not for passing on to the authorities."

"If I did kill her, do you think I'd tell you?" said Hester.

"It would be much wiser not to," agreed Philip.

"He told me he knew I'd killed her," said Hester. "He told me that if I'd only admit it, if I'd confess it to him, that it would be all right, that we'd be married, that he'd look after me. That—that he wouldn't let it matter between us."

Philip whistled.

“Well, well, well,” he said.

“What’s the good?” asked Hester. “What’s the good of telling him I didn’t kill her? He wouldn’t believe it, would he?”

“He ought to,” said Philip, “if you tell him so.”

“I didn’t kill her,” said Hester. “You understand? I didn’t kill her. I didn’t, I didn’t, I didn’t.” She broke off. “That sounds unconvincing,” she said.

“The truth often does sound unconvincing,” Philip encouraged her.

“We don’t know,” said Hester. “Nobody knows. We all look at each other. Mary looks at me. And Kirsten. She’s so kind to me, so protective. She thinks it’s me, too. What chance have I? It would be better, much better, to go down to the Point, throw myself over....”

“For God’s sake, don’t be a fool, Hester. There are other things to do.”

“What other things? How can there be? I’ve lost everything. How can I go on living day after day?” She looked at Philip. “You think I’m wild, unbalanced. Well, perhaps I did kill her. Perhaps it’s remorse gnawing at me. Perhaps I can’t forget—here.” She put her hand dramatically to her heart.

“Don’t be a little idiot,” said Philip. He shot out an arm and pulled her to him.

Hester half fell across his chair. He kissed her.

“What you need is a husband, my girl,” he said. “Not that solemn young ass, Donald Craig, with his head full of psychiatry and jargon. You’re silly and idiotic and—completely lovely, Hester.”

The door opened. Mary Durrant stood abruptly still in the doorway. Hester struggled to an upright position and Philip gave his wife a sheepish grin.

“I’m just cheering up Hester, Polly,” he said.

“Oh,” said Mary.

She came in carefully, placing the tray on a small table. Then she wheeled the table up beside him. She did not look at Hester. Hester looked uncertainly from husband to wife.

“Oh, well,” she said, “perhaps I’d better go and—go and—” She didn’t finish.

She went out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Hester’s in a bad way,” said Philip. “Contemplating suicide. I was trying to dissuade her,” he added.

Mary did not answer.

He stretched out a hand towards her. She moved away from him.

“Polly, have I made you angry? Very angry?”

She did not reply.

“Because I kissed her, I suppose? Come, Polly, don’t grudge me one silly little kiss. She was so lovely and so silly—and I suddenly felt—well, I felt it would be fun to be a gay dog again and have a flirtation now and then. Come, Polly, kiss me. Kiss and make friends.”

Mary Durrant said:

“Your soup will get cold if you don’t drink it.”

She went through the door to the bedroom and shut it behind her.

Eighteen

“There’s a young lady down below wanting to see you, sir.”

“A young lady?” Calgary looked surprised. He could not think who was likely to visit him. He looked at the work which littered his desk, and frowned. The voice of the hall porter spoke again, discreetly lowered.

“A real young lady, sir, a very nice young lady.”

“Oh, well. Show her up then.”

Calgary could not help smiling to himself slightly. The discreet undertones and the assurance tickled his sense of humour. He wondered who it could be who wanted to see him. He was completely astonished when his door bell buzzed and on going to open it he was confronted by Hester Argyle.

“You!” The exclamation came out with full surprise. Then, “Come in, come in,” he said. He drew her inside and shut the door.

Strangely enough, his impression of her was almost the same as the first time he had seen her. She was dressed with no regard to the conventions of London. She was hatless, her dark hair hanging round her face in a kind of elf lock disarray. The heavy tweed coat showed a dark green skirt and sweater underneath. She looked as though she had just come in breathless from a walk on the moor.

“Please,” said Hester, “please, you’ve got to help me.”

“To help you?” He was startled. “In what way? Of course I’ll help you if I can.”

“I didn’t know what to do,” said Hester. “I didn’t know who to come to. But someone’s got to help me. I can’t go on, and you’re the person. You started it all.”

“You’re in trouble of some kind? Bad trouble?”

“We’re all in trouble,” said Hester. “But one’s so selfish, isn’t one? I mean, I only think of myself.”

“Sit down, my dear,” he said gently.

He cleared papers off an armchair and settled her there. Then he went over to his corner cupboard.

“You must have a glass of wine,” he said. “A glass of dry sherry. Will that suit you?”

“If you like. It doesn’t matter.”

“It’s very wet and cold out. You need something.”

He turned, decanter and glass in hand. Hester was slumped down in the chair with a queer kind of angular grace that touched him by its complete abandonment.

“Don’t worry,” he said gently, as he put the glass by her side and filled it. “Things are never quite so bad as they seem, you know.”

“People say that, but it’s not true,” said Hester. “Sometimes they’re worse than they seem.” She sipped the wine, then she said accusingly, “We were all right till you came. Quite all right. Then, then it all started.”

“I won’t pretend,” said Arthur Calgary, “that I don’t know what you mean. It took me completely aback when you first said that to me, but now I understand better what my—my information must have brought to you.”

“So long as we thought it was Jacko—” Hester said and broke off.

“I know, Hester, I know. But you’ve got to go behind that, you know. What you were living in was a false security. It wasn’t a real thing, it was only a thing of make-believe, of cardboard—a kind of stage scenery. Sometimes that represented security but which was not really, and could never be, security.”

“You’re saying, aren’t you,” said Hester, “that one must have courage, that it’s no good snatching at a thing because it’s false and easy?” She paused a minute and then said: “You had courage! I realize that. To come and tell us yourself. Not knowing how we’d feel, how we’d react. It was brave of you. I admire bravery because, you see, I’m not really very brave myself.”

“Tell me,” said Calgary gently, “tell me just what the trouble is now. It’s something special, isn’t it?”

“I had a dream,” said Hester. “There’s someone—a young man—a doctor —”

“I see,” said Calgary. “You are friends, or, perhaps, more than friends?”

“I thought,” said Hester, “we were more than friends ... And he thought so too. But you see, now that all this has come up—”

“Yes?” said Calgary.

“He thinks I did it,” said Hester. Her words came with a rush. “Or perhaps he doesn’t think I did it but he’s not sure. He can’t be sure. He thinks—I can see he thinks—that I’m the most likely person. Perhaps I am. Perhaps we all think that about each other. And I thought, somebody has got to help us in the terrible mess we’re in, and I thought of you because of the dream. You see, I was lost and I couldn’t find Don. He’d left me and there was a great big sort of ravine thing—an abyss. Yes, that’s the word. An abyss. It sounds so deep, doesn’t it? So deep and so—so unbridgeable. And you were there on the other side and you held out your hands and said, ‘I want to help you.’” She drew a deep breath. “So I came to you. I ran away and I came here because you’ve got to help us. If you don’t help us, I don’t know what’s going to happen. You must help us. You brought all this. You’ll say, perhaps, that it’s nothing to do with you. That having once told us—told us the truth about what happened—that it’s no business of yours. You’ll say —”

“No,” said Calgary, interrupting her. “I shall not say anything of the kind. It is my business, Hester. I agree with you. When you start a thing you have to go on with it. I feel that every bit as much as you do.”

“Oh!” Colour flamed up into Hester’s face. Suddenly, as was the way with her, she looked beautiful. “So I’m not alone!” she said. “There is someone.”

“Yes, my dear, there is someone—for what he’s worth. So far I haven’t been worth very much, but I’m trying and I’ve never stopped trying to help.” He sat down and drew his chair nearer to her. “Now tell me all about it,” he said. “Has it been very bad?”

“It’s one of us, you see,” said Hester. “We all know that. Mr. Marshall came and we pretended it must have been someone who got in, but he knew it wasn’t. It’s one of us.”

“And your young man—what’s-his-name?”

“Don. Donald Craig. He’s a doctor.”

“Don thinks it’s you?”

“He’s afraid it’s me,” said Hester. She twisted her hands in a dramatic gesture. She looked at him. “Perhaps you think it’s me, too?”

“Oh, no,” said Calgary. “Oh no, I know quite well that you’re innocent.”

“You say that as though you were really quite sure.”

“I am quite sure,” said Calgary.

“But why? How can you be so sure?”

“Because of what you said to me when I left the house after telling all of you. Do you remember? What you said to me about innocence. You couldn’t have said that—you couldn’t have felt that way—unless you were innocent.”

“Oh,” cried Hester. “Oh—the relief! To know there’s someone who really feels like that!”

“So now,” said Calgary, “we can discuss it calmly, can’t we?”

“Yes,” said Hester. “It feels—it feels quite different now.”

“Just as a matter of interest,” said Calgary, “and keeping firmly in mind that you know what I feel about it, why should anyone for one moment think that you would kill your adopted mother?”

“I might have done,” said Hester. “I often felt like it. One does sometimes feel just mad with rage. One feels so futile, so—so helpless. Mother was always so calm and so superior and knew everything, and was right about everything. Sometimes I would think, ‘Oh! I would like to kill her.’” She looked at him. “Do you understand? Didn’t you ever feel like that when you were young?”

The last words gave Calgary a sudden pang, the same pang perhaps that he had felt when Micky in the hotel at Drymouth had said to him, “You look older!” “When he was young?” Did it seem so very long ago to Hester? He cast his mind back. He remembered himself at nine years old consulting with another small boy in the gardens of his prep school, wondering ingenuously what would be the best way to dispose of Mr. Warborough, their form master. He remembered the helplessness of rage that had consumed him when Mr. Warborough had been particularly sarcastic in his comments. That, he thought, was what Hester had felt too. But whatever he and young—what was his name now?—Porch, yes, Porch had been the boy’s name—although he and young Porch had consulted and planned, they had never taken any active steps to bring about the demise of Mr. Warborough.

“You know,” he said to Hester, “you ought to have got over those sort of feelings a good many years ago. I can understand them, of course.”

“It was just that Mother had that effect upon me,” said Hester. “I’m beginning to see now, you know, that it was my own fault. I feel that if only she’d lived a little longer, just lived till I was a little older, a little more settled, that—that we’d have been friends in a curious way. That I’d have been glad of her help and her advice. But—but as it was I couldn’t bear it; because, you see, it made me feel so ineffectual, so stupid. Everything I did went wrong and I could see for myself that the things I did were foolish things. That I’d only done them because I wanted to rebel, wanted to prove

that I was myself. And I wasn't anybody. I was fluid. Yes, that's the word," said Hester. "It's exactly the word. Fluid. Never taking a shape for long. Just trying on shapes—shapes—shapes of other people that I admired. I thought, you see, if I ran away and went on the stage and had an affair with someone, that—"

"That you would feel yourself, or at any rate, feel somebody?"

"Yes," said Hester. "Yes, that's just it. And of course really I see now that I was just behaving like a silly child. But you don't know how I wish, Dr. Calgary, that Mother was alive now. Because it's so unfair—unfair on her, I mean. She did so much for us and gave us so much. We didn't give her anything back. And now it's too late." She paused. "That's why," she said, with a sudden renewal of vigour, "I've determined to stop being silly and childish. And you'll help me, won't you?"

"I've already said I'll do anything in the world to help you."

She gave him a quick, rather lovely smile.

"Tell me," he said, "exactly what has been happening."

"Just what I thought would happen," said Hester. "We've all been looking at each other and wondering and we don't know. Father looks at Gwenda and thinks perhaps it was her. She looks at father and isn't sure. I don't think they're going to get married now. It's spoilt everything. And Tina thinks Micky had something to do with it. I don't know why because he wasn't there that evening. And Kirsten thinks I did it and tries to protect me. And Mary—that's my older sister who you didn't meet—Mary thinks Kirsten did it."

"And who do you think did it, Hester?"

"Me?" Hester sounded startled.

"Yes, you," said Calgary. "I think, you know, it's rather important to know that."

Hester spread out her hands. "I don't know," she wailed. "I just don't know. I'm—it's an awful thing to say—but I'm frightened of everybody. It's as though behind each face there was another face. A—sinister sort of face that I don't know. I don't feel sure that Father's Father, and Kirsten keeps saying that I shouldn't trust anybody—not even her. And I look at Mary and I feel I don't know anything about her. And Gwenda—I've always liked Gwenda. I've been glad that Father was going to marry Gwenda. But now I'm not sure about Gwenda any more. I see her as somebody different, ruthless and—and revengeful. I don't know what anybody's like. There's an awful feeling of unhappiness."

"Yes," said Calgary, "I can well imagine that."

"There's so much unhappiness," said Hester, "that I can't help feeling perhaps there's the murderer's unhappiness too. And that might be the worst of all ... Do you think that's likely?"

"It's possible, I suppose," said Calgary, "and yet I doubt—of course I'm not an expert—I doubt if a murderer is ever really unhappy."

"But why not? I should think it would be the most terrible thing to be, to know you'd killed someone."

"Yes," said Calgary, "it is a terrible thing and therefore I think a murderer must be one of two kinds of people. Either a person to whom it has not been terrible to kill anyone, the kind of person who says to himself, 'Well, of course it was a pity to have to do that but it was necessary for my own well being. After all, it's not my fault. I just—well, just had to do it.' Or else—"

"Yes?" said Hester, "what's the other kind of murderer?"

"I'm only guessing, mind you, I don't know, but I think if you were what you call the other kind of murderer, you wouldn't be able to live with your unhappiness over what you'd done. You'd either have to confess it or else you'd have to rewrite the story for yourself, as it were. Putting the blame on someone else, saying 'I should never have done such a thing unless—' such and such a thing had happened. 'I'm not really a murderer because I didn't

mean to do it. It just happened, and so really it was fate and not myself.' Do you understand a little what I am trying to say?"

"Yes," said Hester, "and I think it's very interesting." She half-closed her eyes. "I'm just trying to think—"

"Yes, Hester," said Calgary, "think. Think as hard as you can because if I'm ever going to be able to help you I've got to see things through your mind."

"Micky hated Mother," said Hester slowly. "He always did ... I don't know why. Tina, I think, loved her. Gwenda didn't like her. Kirsten was always loyal to Mother though she didn't always think that Mother was right in all the things she did. Father—" She paused for a long time.

"Yes?" Calgary prompted her.

"Father's gone a long way away again," said Hester. "After Mother died, you know, he was quite different. Not so—what shall I call it—remote. He's been more human, more alive. But now he's gone back to some—some sort of shadowy place where you can't get at him. I don't know what he felt about Mother, really. I suppose he loved her when he married her. They never quarrelled, but I don't know what he felt about her. Oh"—her hands flew out again—"one doesn't know what anyone feels, does one, really? I mean, what goes on behind their faces, behind their nice everyday words? They may be ravaged with hate or love or despair, and one wouldn't know! It's frightening ... Oh, Dr. Calgary, it's frightening!"

He took both her hands in his.

"You're not a child any longer," he said. "Only children are frightened. You're grown-up, Hester. You're a woman." He released her hands and said in a matter-of-fact tone: "Is there anywhere you can stay in London?"

Hester looked slightly bewildered.

"I suppose so. I don't know. Mother usually stayed at Curtis's."

“Well, that’s a very nice, quiet hotel. I should go there and book a room if I were you.”

“I’ll do anything you tell me to do,” said Hester.

“Good girl,” said Calgary. “What’s the time?” He looked up at the clock.

“Hallo, it’s about seven o’clock already. Supposing you go and book yourself a room, and I’ll come along about quarter to eight to take you out to dinner. How would that suit you?”

“It sounds wonderful,” said Hester. “Do you really mean it?”

“Yes,” said Calgary, “I really mean it.”

“But after that? What’s going to happen next? I can’t go on staying, can I, at Curtis’s for ever?”

“Your horizon always seems bounded by infinity,” said Calgary.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asked him doubtfully.

“Just a little,” he said, and smiled.

Her expression wavered and then she, too, smiled.

“I suppose really,” she said confidentially, “I’ve been dramatizing myself again.”

“It’s rather a habit of yours, I suspect,” said Calgary.

“That’s why I thought I should do well on the stage,” said Hester. “But I didn’t. I was no good at all. Oh, I was a lousy actress.”

“You’ll get all the drama you want out of ordinary life, I should say,” said Calgary. “Now I’m going to put you in a taxi, my dear, and you go off to Curtis’s. And wash your face and brush your hair,” he went on. “Have you got any luggage with you?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve got a sort of overnight bag.”

“Good.” He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, Hester,” he said again. “We’ll think of something.”

Nineteen

I

“I want to talk to you, Kirsty,” said Philip.

“Yes, of course, Philip.”

Kirsten Lindstrom paused in her task. She had just brought in some washing which she was putting away in the chest of drawers.

“I want to talk to you about all this business,” said Philip. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“There is too much talk already,” said Kirsten. “That is my view.”

“But it would be as well, wouldn’t it,” said Philip, “to come to some conclusion among ourselves. You know what’s going on at present, don’t you?”

“Things are going wrong everywhere,” said Kirsten.

“Do you think Leo and Gwenda will ever get married now?”

“Why not?”

“Several reasons,” said Philip. “First of all, perhaps, because Leo Argyle being an intelligent man, realizes that a marriage between him and Gwenda will give the police what they want. A perfectly good motive for the murder of his wife. Or, alternatively, because Leo suspects that Gwenda is the murderer. And being a sensitive man, he doesn’t really like taking as a second wife the woman who killed his first wife. What do you say to that?” he added.

“Nothing,” said Kirsten, “what should I say?”

“Playing it very close to your chest, aren’t you, Kirsty?”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Who are you covering up for, Kirsten?”

“I am not ‘covering up,’ as you call it, for anyone. I think there should be less talk and I think people should not stay on in this house. It is not good for them. I think you, Philip, should go home with your wife to your own home.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Why, in particular?”

“You are asking questions,” said Kirsten. “You are trying to find out things. And your wife does not want you to do it. She is wiser than you are. You might find out something you did not want to find out, or that she did not want you to find out. You should go home, Philip. You should go home very soon.”

“I don’t want to go home,” said Philip. He spoke rather like a petulant small boy.

“That is what children say,” said Kirsten. “They say I don’t want to do this and I don’t want to do that, but those who know more of life, who see better what is happening, have to coax them to do what they do not want to do.”

“So this is your idea of coaxing, is it?” said Philip. “Giving me orders.”

“No, I do not give you orders. I only advise you.” She sighed. “I would advise all of them the same way. Micky should go back to his work as Tina has gone back to her library. I am glad Hester has gone. She should be somewhere where she is not continually reminded of all this.”

“Yes,” said Philip. “I agree with you there. You’re right about Hester. But what about you yourself, Kirsten? Oughtn’t you to go away too?”

“Yes,” said Kirsten with a sigh. “I ought to go away.”

“Why don’t you?”

“You would not understand. It is too late for me to go away.”

Philip looked at her thoughtfully. Then he said:

“There are so many variations, aren’t there—variations on a single theme. Leo thinks Gwenda did it, Gwenda thinks Leo did it. Tina knows something that makes her suspect who did it. Micky knows who did it but doesn’t care. Mary thinks Hester did it.” He paused and then went on, “But the truth is, Kirsty, that those are only variations on a theme as I said. We know who did it quite well, don’t we, Kirsty. You and I?”

She shot a quick, horrified glance at him.

“I thought as much,” said Philip exultantly.

“What do you mean?” said Kirsten. “What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t really know who did it,” said Philip. “But you do. You don’t only think you know who did it, you actually do know. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Kirsten marched to the door. She opened it, then turned back and spoke.

“It is not a polite thing to say, but I will say it. You are a fool, Philip. What you are trying to do is dangerous. You understand one kind of danger. You have been a pilot. You have faced death up there in the sky. Can you not see that if you get anywhere near the truth, you are in just as great danger as you ever were in the war?”

“And what about you, Kirsty? If you know the truth, aren’t you in danger too?”

“I can take care of myself,” said Kirsten grimly. “I can be on my guard. But you, Philip, are in an invalid chair and helpless. Think of that! Besides,” she added, “I do not air my views. I am content to let things be—because I honestly think that that is best for everyone. If everyone would go away and attend to their own business, then there would be no further trouble. If I am asked, I have my official view. I say still that it was Jacko.”

“Jacko?” Philip stared.

“Why not? Jacko was clever. Jacko could plan a thing and be sure he would not suffer from the consequences. Often he did that as a child. After all, to fake an alibi. Is that not done every day?”

“He couldn’t have faked this one. Dr. Calgary—”

“Dr. Calgary—Dr. Calgary,” said Kirsten with impatience, “because he is well known, because he has a famous name, you say, ‘Dr. Calgary’ as though he were God! But let me tell you this. When you have had concussion as he had concussion, things may be quite a different day—a different time—a different place!”

Philip looked at her, his head slightly on one side.

“So that’s your story,” he said. “And you’re sticking to it. A very creditable attempt. But you don’t believe it yourself, do you, Kirsty?”

“I’ve warned you,” said Kirsten, “I can’t do more.”

She turned away, then popped her head in again to say in her usual matter-of-fact voice:

“Tell Mary I have put the clean washing away in the second drawer there.”

Philip smiled a little at the anti-climax, then the smile died away....

His sense of inner excitement grew. He had a feeling he was getting very near indeed. His experiment with Kirsten had been highly satisfactory, but he doubted that he would get any more out of her. Her solicitude for him irritated him. Just because he was a cripple did not mean that he was as vulnerable as she made out. He, too, could be on his guard—and for heaven’s sake, wasn’t he watched over incessantly? Mary hardly ever left his side.

He drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write. Brief notes, names, question marks ... A vulnerable spot to probe....

Suddenly he nodded his head and wrote: Tina....

He thought about it....

Then he drew another sheet of paper towards him.

When Mary came in, he hardly looked up.

“What are you doing, Philip?”

“Writing a letter.”

“To Hester?”

“Hester? No. I don’t even know where she’s staying. Kirsty just had a postcard from her with London written at the top, that was all.”

He grinned at her.

“I believe you’re jealous, Polly. Are you?”

Her eyes, blue and cold, looked into his.

“Perhaps.”

He felt a little uncomfortable.

“Who are you writing to?” She came a step nearer.

“The Public Prosecutor,” said Philip cheerfully, though within him a cold anger stirred. “Couldn’t a fellow write a letter, even, without being questioned about it?”

Then he saw her face and he relented.

“Only a joke, Polly. I’m writing to Tina.”

“To Tina? Why?”

“Tina’s my next line of attack. Where are you going, Polly?”

“To the bathroom,” said Mary as she went out of the room.

Philip laughed. To the bathroom, as on the night of the murder ... He laughed again as he remembered their conversation about it.

II

“Come on, sonny,” said Superintendent Huish encouragingly. “Let’s hear all about it.”

Master Cyril Green took a deep breath. Before he could speak, his mother interposed.

“As you might say, Mr. Huish, I didn’t take much notice at the time. You know what these children are. Always talking and thinking about space ships and things. And he comes home to me and he says, ‘Mum, I’ve seen a sputnik, it’s come down.’ Well, I mean, before that it was flying saucers. It’s always something. It’s these Russians that go putting things into their heads.”

Superintendent Huish sighed and thought how much easier it would be if mothers would not insist on accompanying their sons and talking for them.

“Come on, Cyril,” he said, “you went home and told your Mum—that’s right, isn’t it?—that you’d seen this Russian sputnik—whatever it was.”

“Didn’t know no better then,” said Cyril. “I was only a kid then. That’s two years ago. Course, I know better now.”

“Them bubble cars,” his mother put in, “was quite new at the time. There hadn’t been one about locally, so naturally when he saw it—and bright red too—he didn’t realize as it was just an ordinary car. And when we heard the next morning as Mrs. Argyle had been done in, Cyril he says to me, ‘Mum,’ he says, ‘it’s them Russians,’ he says, ‘they come down in that sputnik of theirs and they must have got in and killed her.’ ‘Don’t talk such nonsense,’ I said. And then of course later in the day we hear her own son has been arrested for having done it.”

Superintendent Huish addressed himself patiently once more to Cyril.

“It was in the evening, I understand? What time, do you remember?”

“I’d had me tea,” said Cyril, breathing hard in the effort of remembrance, “and Mum was out at the Institute, so I went out again a bit with the boys and we larked around a bit up that way down the new road.”

“And what was you doing there, I’d like to know,” his mother put in.

PC Good, who’d brought in this promising piece of evidence, interposed. He knew well enough what Cyril and the boys had been doing down the new road. The disappearance of chrysanthemums had been angrily reported from several householders there, and he knew well enough that the bad characters of the village surreptitiously encouraged the younger generation to supply them with flowers which they themselves took to market. This was not the moment, PC Good knew, to go into past cases of delinquency. He said heavily:

“Boys is boys, Mrs. Green, they gets larking around.”

“Yes,” said Cyril, “just having a game or two, we were. And that’s where I saw it. ‘Coo,’ I said, ‘what’s this?’ O’ course I know now. I’m not a silly kid any longer. It was just one o’ them bubble cars. Bright red, it was.”

“And the time?” said Superintendent Huish patiently.

“Well, as I say, I’d had me tea an’ we’d gone out there and larked. I heard the clock strike and ‘Coo,’ I thought, ‘Mum’ll be home and won’t she create if I’m not there.’ So I went home. I told her that I thought I’d seen that Russian satellite come down. Mum said it were all lies, but it wasn’t. Only o’ course, I knows better now. I was just a kid then, see.”

Superintendent Huish said that he saw. After a few more questions he dismissed Mrs. Green and her offspring. PC Good, remaining behind, put on the gratified expression of a junior member of the force who has shown intelligence and hopes that it will count in his favour.

“It just come to me,” said PC Good, “what that boy’d been around saying about Russians doing Mrs. Argyle in. I thought to meself, ‘Well, that may mean something.’”

“It does mean something,” said the superintendent. “Miss Tina Argyle has a red bubble car, and it looks as though I’d have to ask her a few more questions.”

III

“You were there that night, Miss Argyle?”

Tina looked at the superintendent. Her hands lay loosely in her lap, her eyes, dark, unwinking, told nothing.

“It is so long ago,” she said, “really I cannot remember.”

“Your car was seen there,” said Huish.

“Was it?”

“Come now, Miss Argyle. When we asked you for an account of your movements on that night, you told us that you went home and didn’t go out that evening. You made yourself supper and listened to the gramophone. Now, that isn’t true. Just before seven o’clock your car was seen in the road quite near to Sunny Point. What were you doing there?”

She did not answer. Huish waited a few moments, then he spoke again.

“Did you go into the house, Miss Argyle?”

“No,” said Tina.

“But you were there?”

“You say I was there.”

“It’s not just a question of my saying so. We’ve got evidence that you were there.”

Tina sighed.

“Yes,” she said. “I did drive out there that evening.”

“But you say you didn’t go into the house?”

“No, I didn’t go into the house.”

“What did you do?”

“I drove back again to Redmyn. Then, as I told you, I made myself some supper and put on the gramophone.”

“Why did you drive out there if you didn’t go into the house?”

“I changed my mind,” said Tina.

“What made you change your mind, Miss Argyle?”

“When I got there I didn’t want to go in.”

“Because of something you saw or heard?”

She did not answer.

“Listen, Miss Argyle. That was the night that your mother was murdered. She was killed between seven and half past that evening. You were there, your car was there, at some time before seven. How long it was there we do not know. It is possible, you know, that it may have been there for some time. It may be that you went into the house—you have a key, I think—”

“Yes,” said Tina, “I have a key.”

“Perhaps you went into the house. Perhaps you went into your mother’s sitting room and found her there, dead. Or perhaps—”

Tina raised her head.

“Or perhaps I killed her? Is that what you want to say, Superintendent Huish?”

“It is one possibility,” said Huish, “but I think it’s more likely, Miss Argyle, someone else did the killing. If so, I think you know—or have a very strong suspicion—who the killer was.”

“I did not go into the house,” said Tina.

“Then you saw something or heard something. You saw someone go into the house or someone leave the house. Someone perhaps who was not known to be there. Was it your brother Michael, Miss Argyle?”

Tina said:

“I saw nobody.”

“But you heard something,” said Huish shrewdly. “What did you hear, Miss Argyle?”

“I tell you,” said Tina, “I simply changed my mind.”

“You’ll forgive me, Miss Argyle, but I don’t believe that. Why should you drive out from Redmyn to visit your family, and drive back again without seeing them? Something made you change your mind about that. Something you saw or heard.” He leaned forward. “I think you know, Miss Argyle, who killed your mother.”

Very slowly she shook her head.

“You know something,” said Huish. “Something that you are determined not to tell. But think, Miss Argyle, think very carefully. Do you realize what you are condemning your entire family to go through? Do you want them all to remain under suspicion—for that’s what’s going to happen unless we get at the truth. Whoever killed your mother doesn’t deserve to be shielded. For that’s it, isn’t it? You’re shielding someone.”

Again that dark, opaque look met his.

“I know nothing,” said Tina. “I didn’t hear anything and I didn’t see anything. I just—changed my mind.”

Twenty

I

Calgary and Huish looked at each other. Calgary saw what seemed to him one of the most depressed and gloomy-looking men he had ever seen. So profoundly disillusioned did he appear that Calgary felt tempted to suppose that Superintendent Huish's career had been one long series of failures. He was surprised to discover on a later occasion that Superintendent Huish had been extremely successful professionally. Huish saw a lean, prematurely grey-haired man with slightly stooping shoulders, a sensitive face and a singularly attractive smile.

"You don't know who I am, I'm afraid," Calgary began.

"Oh, we know all about you, Dr. Calgary," said Huish. "You're the joker in the pack who queered the Argyle case." A rather unexpected smile lifted the corners of his sad-looking mouth.

"You can hardly regard me favourably then," said Calgary.

"It's all in the day's work," said Superintendent Huish. "It seemed a clear case and nobody can be blamed for thinking it so. But these things happen," he went on. "They're sent to try us, so my old mother used to say. We don't bear malice, Dr. Calgary. After all, we do stand for Justice, don't we?"

"So I've always believed, and shall continue to believe," said Calgary. "To no man will we deny justice," he murmured softly.

"Magna Carta," said Superintendent Huish.

"Yes," said Calgary, "quoted to me by Miss Tina Argyle."

Superintendent Huish's eyebrows rose.

"Indeed. You surprise me. That young lady, I should say, has not been particularly active in helping the wheels of justice to turn."

“Now why do you say that?” asked Calgary.

“Frankly,” said Huish, “for withholding information. There’s no doubt about that.”

“Why?” asked Calgary.

“Well, it’s a family business,” said Huish. “Families stick together. But what was it you wanted to see me about?” he continued.

“I want information,” said Calgary.

“About the Argyle case?”

“Yes. I realize that I must seem to you to be butting in in a matter that’s not my concern—”

“Well, it is your concern in a way, isn’t it?”

“Ah, you do appreciate that. Yes. I feel responsible. Responsible for bringing trouble.”

“You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs, as the French say,” said Huish.

“There are things I want to know,” said Calgary.

“Such as?”

“I’d like a great deal more information about Jacko Argyle.”

“About Jacko Argyle. Well, now, I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“He’d got a bad record, I know,” said Calgary. “What I want is a few details from it.”

“Well, that’s simple enough,” said Huish. “He’d been on probation twice. On another occasion, for embezzlement of funds, he was just saved by being able to put up the money in time.”

“The budding young criminal, in fact?” asked Calgary.

“Quite right, sir,” said Huish. “Not a murderer, as you’ve made clear to us, but a good many other things. Nothing, mind you, on a grand scale. He hadn’t got the brains or the nerve to put up a big swindle. Just a small-time criminal. Pinching money out of tills, wheedling it out of women.”

“And he was good at that,” said Calgary. “Wheedling money out of women, I mean.”

“And a very nice safe line it is,” said Superintendent Huish. “Women fell for him very easily. Middle-aged or elderly were the ones he usually went for. You’d be surprised how gullible that type of woman can be. He put over a very pretty line. Got them to believe he was passionately in love with them. There’s nothing a woman won’t believe if she wants to.”

“And then?” asked Calgary.

Huish shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, sooner or later they were disillusioned. But they don’t prosecute, you know. They don’t want to tell the world that they’ve been fooled. Yes, it’s a pretty safe line.”

“Was there ever blackmail?” Calgary asked.

“Not that we know of,” said Huish. “Mind you, I wouldn’t have put it past him. Not out and out blackmail, I’d say. Just a hint or two, perhaps. Letters. Foolish letters. Things their husbands wouldn’t like to know about. He’d be able to keep a woman quiet that way.”

“I see,” said Calgary.

“Is that all you wanted to know?” asked Huish.

“There’s one member of the Argyle family I haven’t met yet,” said Calgary. “The eldest daughter.”

“Ah, Mrs. Durrant.”

“I went to her house, but it was shut up. They told me she and her husband were away.”

“They are at Sunny Point.”

“Still there?”

“Yes. He wanted to stay on. Mr. Durrant,” added Huish, “is doing a bit of detecting, I understand.”

“He’s a cripple, isn’t he?”

“Yes, polio. Very sad. He hasn’t much to do with his time, poor chap. That’s why he’s taken up this murder business so eagerly. Thinks he’s on to something too.”

“And is he?” asked Calgary.

Huish shrugged his shoulders.

“He might be, at that,” he said. “He’s a better chance than we have, you know. He knows the family and he’s a man with a good deal of intuition as well as intelligence.”

“Do you think he’ll get anywhere?”

“Possibly,” said Huish, “but he won’t tell us if he does. They’ll keep it all in the family.”

“Do you yourself know who’s guilty, Superintendent?”

“You mustn’t ask me things like that, Dr. Calgary.”

“Meaning that you do know?”

“One can think one knows a thing,” said Huish slowly, “but if you haven’t got evidence there’s not much you can do about it, is there?”

“And you’re not likely to get the evidence you want?”

“Oh! We’re very patient,” Huish said. “We shall go on trying.”

“What’s going to happen to them all if you don’t succeed?” said Calgary, leaning forward. “Have you thought of that?”

Huish looked at him.

“That’s what’s worrying you, is it, sir?”

“They’ve got to know,” said Calgary. “Whatever else happens, they’ve got to know.”

“Don’t you think they do know?”

Calgary shook his head.

“No,” he said slowly, “that’s the tragedy.”

II

“Oo,” said Maureen Clegg, “it’s you again!”

“I’m very, very sorry to bother you,” said Calgary.

“Oh, but you’re not bothering me a bit. Come in. It’s my day off.”

That fact Calgary had already found out, and was the reason for his being here.

“I’m expecting Joe back in a minute,” said Maureen. “I haven’t seen any more about Jacko in the papers. I mean not since it said how he got a free pardon and a bit about a question being asked in Parliament and then saying that it was quite clear he didn’t do it. But there’s nothing more about what the police are doing and who really did it. Can’t they find out?”

“Have you still no idea yourself?”

“Well, I haven’t really,” said Maureen. “I shouldn’t be surprised, though, if it was the other brother. Very queer and moody he is. Joe sees him

sometimes driving people around. He works for the Bence Group, you know. He's rather good-looking but terribly moody, I should think. Joe heard a rumour he was going out to Persia or somewhere and that looks bad, I think, don't you?"

"I don't see why it should look bad, Mrs. Clegg."

"Well, it's one of those places the police can't get at you, isn't it?" "You think that he is running away?"

"He may feel he's got to."

"I suppose that's the sort of thing people do say," Arthur Calgary said.

"Lots of rumours flying around," said Maureen. "They say the husband and the secretary were going on together, too. But if it was the husband I should think he would be more likely to poison her. That's what they usually do, isn't it?"

"Well, you see more films than I do, Mrs. Clegg."

"I don't really look at the screen," said Maureen. "If you work there, you know, you get terribly bored with films. Hallo, here's Joe."

Joe Clegg also looked surprised to see Calgary and possibly not too pleased. They talked together for a while and then Calgary came to the purpose of his visit.

"I wonder," he said, "if you'd mind giving me a name and address?"

He wrote it down carefully in his notebook.

III

She was about fifty, he thought, a heavy cumbrous woman who could never have been good-looking. She had nice eyes, though, brown and kindly.

"Well, really, Dr. Calgary—" She was doubtful, upset. "Well, really, I'm sure I don't know...."

He leaned forward, trying his utmost to dispel her reluctance, to soothe her, to make her feel the full force of his sympathy.

“It’s so long ago now,” she said. “It’s—I really don’t want to be reminded of—of things.”

“I do understand that,” said Calgary, “and it’s not as though there were any question of anything being made public. I do assure you of that.”

“You say you want to write a book about it, though?”

“Just a book to illustrate a certain type of character,” said Calgary.
“Interesting, you know, from a medical or psychological standpoint. No names. Just Mr. A., Mrs. B. That sort of thing.”

“You’ve been to the Antarctic, haven’t you?” she said suddenly.

He was surprised at the abruptness with which she had changed the subject.

“Yes,” he said, “yes, I was with the Hayes Bentley Expedition.”

The colour came up in her face. She looked younger. Just for a moment he could see the girl she had once been. “I used to read about it ... I’ve always been fascinated, you know, with anything to do with the Poles. That Norwegian, wasn’t it, Amundsen, who got there first? I think the Poles are much more exciting than Everest or any of these satellites, or going to the Moon or anything like that.”

He seized on his cue and began to talk to her about the Expedition. Odd that her romantic interest should lie there, in Polar Explorations. She said at last with a sigh:

“It’s wonderful hearing about it all from someone who’s actually been there.” She went on: “You want to know all about—about Jackie?”

“Yes.”

“You wouldn’t use my name or anything like that?”

“Of course not. I’ve told you so. You know how these things are done. Mrs. M. Lady Y. That sort of thing.”

“Yes. Yes, I’ve read that kind of book—and I suppose it was, as you said, path—patho—”

“Pathological,” he said.

“Yes, Jackie was definitely a pathological case. He could be ever so sweet, you know,” she said. “Wonderful, he was. He’d say things and you’d believe every word of it.”

“He probably meant them,” said Calgary.

“‘I’m old enough to be your mother,’ I used to say to him, and he’d say he didn’t care for girls. Crude, he used to say girls were. He used to say women who were experienced and mature were what attracted him.”

“Was he very much in love with you?” said Calgary.

“He said he was. He seemed to be ...” Her lips trembled. “And all the time, I suppose, he was just after the money.”

“Not necessarily,” said Calgary, straining the truth as far as he could. “He may have been genuinely attracted, you know, as well. Only—he just couldn’t help being crooked.”

The pathetic middle-aged face brightened a little.

“Yes,” she said, “it’s nice to think that. Well, there it was. We used to make plans; how we’d go away together to France, or Italy, if this scheme of his came off. It just needed a bit of capital, he said.”

The usual approach, thought Calgary, and wondered how many pathetic women fell for it.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said. “I’d have done anything for him—anything.”

“I’m sure you would,” said Calgary.

“I dare say,” she said bitterly, “I wasn’t the only one.”

Calgary rose.

“It’s been very good of you to tell me all this,” he said.

“He’s dead now ... But I shall never forget him. That monkey-face of his! The way he looked so sad and then laughed. Oh, he had a way with him. He wasn’t all bad, I’m sure he wasn’t all bad.”

She looked at him wistfully.

But for that Calgary had no answer.

Twenty-one

There had been nothing to tell Philip Durrant that this day was different from any other day.

He had no idea that today would decide his future once and for all.

He woke in good health and spirits. The sun, a pale autumnal sun, shone in at the window. Kirsten brought him a telephone message which increased his good spirits.

“Tina’s coming over for tea,” he told Mary when she came in with his breakfast.

“Is she? Oh, yes, of course, it’s her afternoon off, isn’t it?”

Mary sounded preoccupied.

“What’s the matter, Polly?”

“Nothing.”

She chipped off the top of his egg for him. At once, he felt irritated.

“I can still use my hands, Polly.”

“Oh, I thought it would save you trouble.”

“How old do you think I am? Six?”

She looked faintly surprised. Then she said abruptly:

“Hester’s coming home today.”

“Is she?” He spoke vaguely, because his mind was full of his plans for dealing with Tina. Then he caught sight of his wife’s expression.

“For goodness” sake, Polly, do you think I’ve got a guilty passion for the girl?”

She turned her head aside.

“You’re always saying she’s so lovely.”

“So she is. If you like beautiful bones and a quality of the unearthly.” He added dryly: “But I’m hardly cut out to be a seducer, am I?”

“You might wish you were.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Polly. I never knew you had this tendency to jealousy.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

He started to rebut that, but paused. It came to him, with something of a shock, that perhaps he didn’t know very much about Mary.

She went on:

“I want you to myself—all to myself. I want there to be nobody in the world but you and me.”

“We’d run out of conversation, Polly.”

He had spoken lightly, but he felt uncomfortable. The brightness of the morning seemed suddenly dimmed.

She said: “Let’s go home, Philip, please let’s go home.”

“Very soon we will, but not just yet. Things are coming along. As I told you, Tina’s coming this afternoon.” He went on, hoping to turn her thought into a new channel: “I’ve great hopes of Tina.”

“In what way?”

“Tina knows something.”

“You mean—about the murder?”

“Yes.”

“But how can she? She wasn’t even here that night.”

“I wonder now. I think, you know, that she was. Funny how odd little things turn up to help. That daily, Mrs. Narracott—the tall one, she told me something.”

“What did she tell you?”

“A bit of village gossip. Mrs. Somebody or other’s Ernie—no—Cyril. He’d had to go with his mother to the police station. Something he’d seen on the night poor Mrs. Argyle was done in.”

“What had he seen?”

“Well, there Mrs. Narracott was rather vague. She hadn’t got it out of Mrs. Somebody yet. But one can guess, can’t one, Polly? Cyril wasn’t inside the house, so he must have seen something outside. That gives us two guesses. He saw Micky or he saw Tina. It’s my guess that Tina came out here that night.”

“She’d have said so.”

“Not necessarily. It sticks out a mile that Tina knows something she isn’t telling. Say she drove out that night. Perhaps she came into the house and found your mother dead.”

“And went away again without saying anything? Nonsense.”

“There may have been reasons ... She may have seen or heard something that made her think she knew who’d done it.”

“She was never particularly fond of Jacko. I’m sure she wouldn’t have wanted to shield him.”

“Then perhaps it wasn’t Jacko she suspected ... But later, when Jacko was arrested, she thought that what she had suspected was quite wrong. Having said she wasn’t here, she had to stick to it. But now, of course, it’s different.”

Mary said impatiently:

“You just imagine things, Philip. You make up a lot of things that can’t possibly be true.”

“They’re quite likely to be true. I’m going to try and make Tina tell me what she knows.”

“I don’t believe she knows anything. Do you really think she knows who did it?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that. I think she either saw—or heard—something. I want to find out what that something is.”

“Tina won’t tell if she doesn’t want to.”

“No, I agree. And she’s a great one for keeping things to herself. Little poker face, too. Never shows anything. But she’s not really a good liar—not nearly as good a liar as you are, for instance ... My method will be to guess. Put my guess to her as a question. To be answered yes or no. Do you know what will happen then? One of three things. She’ll either say yes—and that will be that. Or she will say no—and since she isn’t a good liar I shall know whether her no is genuine. Or she will refuse to answer and put on her poker face—and that, Polly, will be as good as yes. Come now, you must admit that there are possibilities with this technique of mine.”

“Oh, leave it all alone, Phil! Do leave it alone! It will all die down and be forgotten.”

“No. This thing has got to be cleared up. Otherwise we’ll have Hester throwing herself out of windows and Kirsty having a nervous breakdown. Leo’s already freezing up into a kind of stalactite. As for poor old Gwenda, she’s on the point of accepting a post in Rhodesia.”

“What does it matter what happens to them?”

“Nobody matters but us—that’s what you mean?”

His face was stern and angry. It startled Mary. She had never seen her husband look like that before.

She faced him defiantly.

“Why should I care about other people?” she asked.

“You never have, have you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Philip gave a sharp exasperated sigh. He pushed his breakfast tray aside.

“Take this thing away. I don’t want any more.”

“But Philip—”

He made an impatient gesture. Mary picked up the tray and carried it out of the room. Philip wheeled himself over to the writing table. Pen in hand, he stared out of the window. He felt a curious oppression of spirit. He had been so full of excitement a short while ago. Now he felt uneasy and restless.

But presently he rallied. He covered two sheets of paper rapidly. Then he sat back and considered.

It was plausible. It was possible. But he wasn’t entirely satisfied. Was he really on the right tack? He couldn’t be sure. Motive. Motive was what was so damnably lacking. There was some factor, somewhere, that had escaped him.

He sighed impatiently. He could hardly wait for Tina to arrive. If only this could be cleared up. Just among themselves. That was all that was necessary. Once they knew—then they would all be free. Free of this stifling atmosphere of suspicion and hopelessness. They could all, except one, get on with their own lives. He and Mary would go back home and—

His thoughts stopped. Excitement died down again. He faced his own problem. He didn't want to go home... He thought of its orderly perfection, its shining chintzes, its gleaming brass. A clean, bright, well-tended cage! And he in the cage, tied to his invalid-chair, surrounded by the loving care of his wife.

His wife ... When he thought of his wife, he seemed to see two people. One the girl he had married, fair-haired, blue-eyed, gentle, reserved. That was the girl he had loved, the girl he teased whilst she stared at him with a puzzled frown. That was his Polly. But there was another Mary—a Mary who was hard as steel, who was passionate, but incapable of affection—a Mary to whom nobody mattered but herself. Even he only mattered because he was hers.

A line of French verse passed through his mind—how did it go.

Venus toute entière à sa proie attaché....

And that Mary he did not love. Behind the cold blue eyes of that Mary was a stranger—a stranger he did not know....

And then he laughed at himself. He was getting nervy and het up like everybody else in the house. He remembered his mother-in-law talking to him about his wife. About the sweet little fair-haired girl in New York. About the moment when the child had thrown her arms round Mrs. Argyle's neck and had cried out: "I want to stay with you. I don't want to leave you ever!"

That had been affection, hadn't it? And yet—how very unlike Mary. Could one change so much between child and woman? How difficult, almost impossible it was for Mary ever to voice affection, to be demonstrative?

Yet certainly on that occasion—His thoughts stopped dead. Or was it really quite simple? Not affection—just calculation. A means to an end. A show of affection deliberately produced. What was Mary capable of to get what she wanted?

Almost anything, he thought—and was shocked with himself for thinking it.

Angrily he dashed down his pen, and wheeled himself out of the sitting room into the bedroom next door. He wheeled himself up to the dressing table. He picked up his brushes and brushed back his hair from where it was hanging over his forehead. His own face looked strange to him.

Who am I, he thought, and where am I going? Thoughts that had never occurred to him before ... He wheeled his chair close to the window and looked out. Down below, one of the daily women stood outside the kitchen window and talked to someone inside. Their voices, softly accented in the local dialect, floated up to him....

His eyes widening, he remained as though tranced.

A sound from the next room awakened him from his preoccupation. He wheeled himself to the connecting door.

Gwenda Vaughan was standing by the writing table. She turned towards him and he was startled by the haggardness of her face in the morning sunshine.

“Hallo, Gwenda.”

“Hallo Philip. Leo thought you might like the Illustrated London News.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“This is a nice room,” said Gwenda, looking round her. “I don’t believe I’ve ever been in it before.”

“Quite the Royal Suite isn’t it?” said Philip. “Away from everybody. Ideal for invalids and honeymoon couples.”

Just too late he wished he had not used the last two words. Gwenda’s face quivered.

“I must get on with things,” she said vaguely.

“The perfect secretary.”

“Not even that nowadays. I make mistakes.”

“Don’t we all?” He added deliberately: “When are you and Leo getting married?”

“We probably never shall.”

“That would be a real mistake,” said Philip.

“Leo thinks it might cause unfavourable comment—from the police!”

Her voice was bitter.

“Dash it all, Gwenda, one has to take some risks.”

“I’m willing to take risks,” said Gwenda. “I’ve never minded taking risks. I’m willing to gamble on happiness. But Leo—”

“Yes? Leo?”

“Leo,” said Gwenda, “will probably die as he has lived, the husband of Rachel Argyle.”

The anger and bitterness in her eyes startled him.

“She might just as well be alive,” said Gwenda. “She’s here—in the house—all the time....”

Twenty-two

I

Tina parked her car on the grass by the churchyard wall. She removed the paper carefully from the flowers she had brought, then she walked in through the cemetery gates and along the main path. She did not like the new cemetery. She wished it had been possible for Mrs. Argyle to have been buried in the old churchyard which surrounded the church. There seemed an old-world peace there. The yew tree and the moss-grown stones. In this cemetery, so new, so well arranged, with its main walk and the paths radiating off it, everything seemed as slick and mass-produced as the contents of a supermarket.

Mrs. Argyle's grave was well kept. It had a square marble surround filled with granite chips, a granite cross rising from the back of it.

Tina, holding her carnations, bent to read the inscription. "In loving memory of Rachel Louise Argyle." Below it was the text:

"Her children shall rise up and call her blessed."

There was a footstep behind her and Tina turned her head, startled.

"Micky!"

"I saw your car. I followed you. At least—I was coming here anyway."

"You were coming here? Why?"

"I don't know. Just to say good-bye, perhaps."

"Good-bye to—her?"

He nodded.

“Yes. I’ve taken that job with the oil company I told you about. I’m going off in about three weeks.”

“And you came here to say good-bye to Mother first?”

“Yes. Perhaps to thank her and to say I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for, Micky?”

“I’m not sorry that I killed her if that’s what you’re trying to imply. Have you been thinking I killed her, Tina?”

“I was not sure.”

“You can’t be sure now, either, can you? I mean it’s no good my telling you that I didn’t kill her.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“She did a lot for me,” said Micky slowly. “I was never the least bit grateful. I resented every single damn thing she did. I never gave her a kind word, or a loving look. I wish now that I had, that’s all.”

“When did you stop hating her? After she was dead?”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose so.”

“It wasn’t her you hated, was it?”

“No—no. You were right about that. It was my own mother. Because I loved her. Because I loved her and she didn’t care a button for me.”

“And now you’re not even angry about that?”

“No. I don’t suppose she could help it. After all, you’re born what you are. She was a sunny, happy sort of creature. Too fond of men and too fond of the bottle, and she was nice to her kids when she felt like being nice. She wouldn’t have let anyone else hurt them. All right, so she didn’t care for me! All these years I refused to live with that idea. Now I’ve accepted it.”

He stretched out a hand. "Give me just one of your carnations, will you, Tina?" He took it from her and bending down, laid it on the grave below the inscription. "There you are, Mum," he said. "I was a rotten son to you, and I don't think you were a very wise mother to me. But you meant well." He looked at Tina. "Is that a good enough apology?"

"I think it will do," said Tina.

She bent down and put her own bunch of carnations there.

"Do you often come here and put flowers?"

"I come here once a year," said Tina.

"Little Tina," said Micky.

They turned together and walked back down the cemetery path.

"I didn't kill her, Tina," said Micky. "I swear I didn't. I want you to believe me."

"I was there that night," said Tina.

He wheeled round.

"You were there? You mean at Sunny Point?"

"Yes. I was thinking of changing my job. I wanted to consult Father and Mother about it."

"Well," said Micky, "go on."

When she did not speak, he took her arm and shook her. "Go on, Tina," he said. "You've got to tell me."

"I haven't told anyone so far," said Tina.

"Go on," said Micky again.

“I drove there. I didn’t take the car right up to the gate. You know there’s a place halfway where it’s easier to turn it?”

Micky nodded.

“I got out of the car there and I walked towards the house. I felt unsure of myself. You know how difficult it was in some ways to talk to Mother. I mean, she always had her own ideas. I wanted to put the case as clearly as I could. And so I walked to the house and then back towards the car, and then back again. Thinking things out.”

“What time was this?” asked Micky.

“I don’t know,” said Tina. “I can’t remember now. I—time doesn’t mean very much to me.”

“No, darling,” said Micky. “You always have that air of infinite leisure.”

“I was under the trees,” said Tina, “and walking very softly—”

“Like the little cat you are,” said Micky affectionately.

“—when I heard them.”

“Heard what?”

“Two people whispering.”

“Yes?” Micky’s body had tensed. “What did they say?”

“They said—one of them said, ‘Between seven and seven-thirty. That’s the time. Now remember that and don’t make a muck of it. Between seven and seven-thirty.’ The other person whispered, ‘You can trust me,’ and then the first voice said, ‘And after that, darling, everything will be wonderful.’”

There was a silence, then Micky said:

“Well—why have you held this up?”

“Because I didn’t know,” said Tina. “I didn’t know who was speaking.”

“But surely! Was it a man or a woman?”

“I don’t know,” said Tina. “Don’t you see, when two people are whispering, you don’t hear the voice. It’s just—well, just a whisper. I think, of course I think, it was a man and a woman because—”

“Because of what they said?”

“Yes. But I didn’t know who they were.”

“You thought,” said Micky, “that it might have been Father and Gwenda?”

“It’s possible, isn’t it?” said Tina. “It might have meant that Gwenda was to leave the house and come back between those times, or it might have been Gwenda telling Father to come down between seven and half past.”

“If it was Father and Gwenda, you wouldn’t want to turn them over to the police. Is that it?”

“If I was sure,” said Tina. “But I’m not sure. It could have been someone else. It could have been—Hester and someone? It could even have been Mary, but not Philip. No, not Philip, of course.”

“When you say Hester and someone, who do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t see him—the man, I mean?”

“No,” said Tina. “I didn’t see him.”

“Tina, I think you’re lying. It was a man, wasn’t it?”

“I turned back,” said Tina, “towards the car, and then someone came by on the other side of the road walking, very fast. He was just a shadow in the darkness. And then I thought—I thought I heard a car start up at the end of the road.”

“You thought it was me...” said Micky.

“I didn’t know,” said Tina. “It could have been you. It was about your size and height.”

They reached Tina’s little car.

“Come on, Tina,” said Micky, “get in. I’m coming with you. We’ll drive down to Sunny Point.”

“But, Micky—”

“It’s no use my telling you it wasn’t me, is it? What else should I say? Come on, drive to Sunny Point.”

“What are you going to do, Micky?”

“Why should you think I’m going to do anything? Weren’t you going to Sunny Point anyway?”

“Yes,” said Tina, “I was. I had a letter from Philip.” She started the little car. Micky sitting beside her, held himself very taut and rigid.

“Heard from Philip, did you? What had he to say?”

“He asked me to come over. He wanted to see me. He knows this is my half-day.”

“Oh. Did he say what he wanted to see you about?”

“He said he wanted to ask me a question and he hoped that I’d give him the answer to it. He said that I needn’t tell him anything—he’d tell me. I would only have to say yes or no. He said that whatever I told him he’d hold in confidence.”

“So he’s up to something, is he?” said Micky. “Interesting.”

It was a very short distance to Sunny Point. When they got there, Micky said:

“You go in, Tina. I’m going to walk up and down the garden a bit, thinking of things. Go on. Have your interview with Philip.”

Tina said:

“You’re not going to—you wouldn’t—”

Micky gave a short laugh.

“Suicide from Lover’s Leap? Come now, Tina, you know me better than that.”

“Sometimes,” said Tina, “I think one does not know anybody.”

She turned away from him and walked slowly into the house. Micky looked after her, his head thrust forward, his hands in his pockets. He was scowling. Then he walked round the corner of the house looking up at it thoughtfully. All his boyhood memories came back to him. There was the old magnolia tree. He’d climbed up there many a time and through the landing window. There was the small plot of earth that had been supposed to be his own garden. Not that he’d ever taken very kindly to gardens. He’d always preferred taking any mechanical toys he had to pieces. “Destructive little devil,” he thought with faint amusement.

Ah well, one didn’t really change.

II

Inside the house, Tina met Mary in the hall. Mary looked startled at seeing her.

“Tina! Have you come over from Redmyn?”

“Yes,” said Tina. “Didn’t you know I was coming?”

“I’d forgotten,” said Mary. “I believe Philip did mention it.”

She turned away.

“I’m going into the kitchen,” she said, “to see if the Ovaltine has come. Philip likes it last thing at night. Kirsten is just taking him up some coffee. He likes coffee better than tea. He says tea gives him indigestion.”

“Why do you treat him like an invalid, Mary?” said Tina. “He’s not really an invalid.”

There was a touch of cold anger in Mary’s eyes.

“When you’ve got a husband of your own, Tina,” she said, “you’ll know better how husbands like to be treated.”

Tina said gently:

“I’m sorry.”

“If only we could get out of this house,” said Mary. “It’s so bad for Philip being here. And Hester’s coming back today,” she added.

“Hester?” Tina sounded surprised. “Is she? Why?”

“How should I know? She rang up last night and said so. I don’t know what train she’s coming by. I suppose it’ll be the express, as usual. Someone will have to go into Drymouth to meet her.”

Mary disappeared along the passage to the kitchen. Tina hesitated a moment, then she walked up the stairs. On the landing the first door to the right opened and Hester came through it. She looked startled at seeing Tina.

“Hester! I heard you were coming back but I’d no idea you’d arrived.”

“Dr. Calgary drove me down,” said Hester. “I came straight up to my room—I don’t think anyone knows I’ve arrived.”

“Is Dr. Calgary here now?”

“No. He just dropped me and went on into Drymouth. He wanted to see someone there.”

“Mary didn’t know you’d arrived.”

“Mary never knows anything,” said Hester. “She and Philip isolate themselves from everything that goes on. I suppose Father and Gwenda are in the library. Everything seems to be going on just the same as usual.”

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“I don’t really know,” said Hester vaguely. “I just suspected that it would all be different somehow.”

She moved past Tina and down the stairs. Tina went on past the library and along the passage to the suite at the end which the Durrants occupied. Kirsten Lindstrom, standing just outside Philip’s door with a tray in her hand, turned her head sharply.

“Why, Tina, you made me jump,” she said. “I was just taking Philip some coffee and biscuits.” She raised a hand to knock. Tina joined her.

After knocking, Kirsten opened the door and passed in. She was a little ahead of Tina and her tall angular frame blocked Tina’s view, but Tina heard Kirsten’s gasp. Her arms gave way and the tray crashed to the ground, cup and plates smashing against the fender.

“Oh, no,” cried Kirsten, “oh, no!”

Tina said:

“Philip?”

She passed the other woman and came forward to where Philip Durrant’s chair had been brought up to the desk. He had, she supposed, been writing. There was a ballpoint pen lying close to his right hand, but his head was dropped forward in a curious twisted attitude. And at the base of his skull she saw something that looked like a bright red lozenge staining the whiteness of his collar.

“He has been killed,” said Kirsten. “He has been killed—stabbed. There, through the bottom of the brain. One little stab and it is fatal.”

She added, her voice rising:

“I warned him. I did all I could. But he was like a child—enjoying himself playing with tools that were dangerous—not seeing where he was going.”

It was like a bad dream, Tina thought. She stood there softly at Philip’s elbow, looking down at him whilst Kirsten raised his limp hand and felt the wrist for the pulse that was not there. What had he wanted to ask her? Whatever he wanted, he would never ask it now. Without really thinking objectively, Tina’s mind was taking in and registering various details. He had been writing, yes. The pen was there, but there was no paper in front of him. Nothing written. Whoever had killed him had taken away what he’d written. She said, speaking quietly and mechanically:

“We must tell the others.”

“Yes, yes, we must go down to them. We must tell your father.”

Side by side the two women went to the door. Kirsten’s arm round Tina. Tina’s eyes went to the dropped tray and the broken crockery.

“That does not matter,” said Kirsten. “All that can be cleared up later.”

Tina half stumbled and Kirsten’s arm restrained her.

“Be careful. You will fall.”

They went along the passage. The door of the library opened. Leo and Gwenda came out. Tina said in her clear, low voice:

“Philip has been killed. Stabbed.”

It was like a dream, Tina thought. The shocked exclamations of her father, and Gwenda flowing past her, going to Philip ... To Philip, who was dead. Kirsten left her and hurried down the stairs.

“I must tell Mary. It must be broken to her gently. Poor Mary. It will be a terrible shock.”

Tina followed her slowly. More than ever she felt dazed and dreamlike, a strange pain catching at her heart. Where was she going? She did not know. Nothing was real. She came to the open front door and passed through it. It was then she saw Micky coming round the corner of the house. Automatically as though this was where her footsteps had been leading her all the time, she went straight to him.

“Micky,” she said. “Oh, Micky!”

His arms were open. She went straight into them.

“It’s all right,” said Micky. “I’ve got you.”

Tina crumpled slightly in his arms. She dropped to the ground, a small huddled heap, just as Hester came running from the house.

“She’s fainted,” Micky said helplessly. “I’ve never known Tina to faint before.”

“It’s the shock,” said Hester.

“What do you mean—the shock?”

“Philip has been killed,” said Hester. “Didn’t you know?”

“How could I know? When? How?”

“Just now.”

He stared at her. Then he picked up Tina in his arms. With Hester accompanying him, he took her into Mrs. Argyle’s sitting room and laid her on the sofa.

“Ring up Dr. Craig,” he said.

“That’s his car now,” said Hester, looking out of the window. “Father was calling him on the telephone about Philip. I—” She looked round. “I don’t want to meet him.”

She ran out of the room and up the stairs.

Donald Craig got out of his car and in through the open front door. Kirsten came from the kitchen to meet him.

“Good afternoon, Miss Lindstrom. What’s this I hear? Mr. Argyle tells me that Philip Durrant has been killed. Killed?”

“It is quite true,” said Kirsten.

“Has Mr. Argyle rung up the police?”

“I do not know.”

“Any chance that he’s just wounded?” said Don. He turned to take his medical bag out of the car.

“No,” said Kirsten. Her voice was flat and tired. “He is dead. I am quite sure of that. He has been stabbed—here.”

She put her hand to the back of her own head.

Micky came out into the hall.

“Hallo, Don, you had better have a look at Tina,” he said. “She’s fainted.”

“Tina? Oh yes, that’s the—the one from Redmyn, isn’t it? Where is she?”

“She is in there.”

“I’ll just have a look at her before I go upstairs.” As he went into the room he spoke over his shoulder to Kirsten. “Keep her warm,” he said, “get some hot tea or coffee for her as soon as she comes round. But you know the drill —”

Kirsten nodded.

“Kirsty!” Mary Durrant came slowly along the hall from the kitchen—Kirsten went to her—Micky stared at her helplessly.

“It’s not true.” Mary spoke in a loud harsh voice. “It’s not true! It’s a lie you’ve made up. He was all right when I left him just now. He was quite all right. He was writing. I told him not to write. I told him not to. What made him do it? Why should he be so pig-headed. Why wouldn’t he leave this house when I wanted him to?”

Coaxing her, soothing her, Kirsten did her best to make her relax.

Donald Craig strode out of the sitting room.

“Who said that girl had fainted?” he demanded.

Micky stared at him.

“But she did faint,” he said.

“Where was she when she fainted?”

“She was with me ... She came out of the house and walked to meet me. Then—she just collapsed.”

“Collapsed, did she? Yes, she collapsed all right,” said Donald Craig grimly. He moved quickly towards the telephone “I must get hold of an ambulance,” he said, “at once.”

“An ambulance?” Both Kirsten and Micky stared at him. Mary did not seem to have heard.

“Yes.” Donald was dialling angrily. “That girl didn’t faint,” he said. “She was stabbed. Do you hear? Stabbed in the back. We’ve got to get her to hospital at once.”

Twenty-three

I

In his hotel room, Arthur Calgary went over and over the notes he had made.

From time to time, he nodded his head.

Yes ... he was on the right tack now. To begin with, he had made the mistake of concentrating on Mrs. Argyle. In nine cases out of ten that would have been the right procedure. But this was the tenth case.

All along he had felt the presence of an unknown factor. If he could once isolate and identify that factor, the case would be solved. In seeking it he had been obsessed by the dead woman. But the dead woman, he saw now, was not really important. Any victim, in a sense, would have done.

He had shifted his viewpoint—shifted it back to the moment when all this had begun. He had shifted it back to Jacko.

Not just Jacko as a young man unjustly sentenced for a crime he did not commit—but Jacko, the intrinsic human being. Was Jacko, in the words of the old Calvinistic doctrine, “a vessel appointed to destruction?” He’d been given every chance in life, hadn’t he? Dr. MacMaster’s opinion, at any rate, was that he was one of those who are born to go wrong. No environment could have helped him or saved him. Was that true? Leo Argyle had spoken of him with indulgence, with pity. How had he put it? “One of Nature’s misfits.” He had accepted the modern psychological approach. An invalid, not a criminal. What had Hester said? Bluntly, that Jacko was always awful!

A plain, childish statement. And what was it Kirsten Lindstrom had said? That Jacko was wicked! Yes, she had put it as strongly as that. Wicked! Tina had said: “I never liked him or trusted him.” So they all agreed, didn’t they, in general terms? It was only in the case of his widow that they’d come down from the general to the particular. Maureen Clegg had thought

of Jacko entirely from her own point of view. She had wasted herself on Jacko. She had been carried away by his charm and she was resentful of the fact. Now, securely remarried, she echoed her husband's views. She had given Calgary a forthright account of some of Jacko's dubious dealings, and the methods by which he had obtained money. Money....

In Arthur Calgary's fatigued brain the word seemed to dance on the wall in gigantic letters. Money! Money! Money! Like a motif in an opera, he thought. Mrs. Argyle's money! Money put into trust! Money put into an annuity! Residual estate left to her husband! Money got from the bank! Money in the bureau drawer! Hester rushing out to her car with no money in her purse, getting two pounds from Kirsten Lindstrom. Money found on Jacko, money that he swore his mother had given him.

The whole thing made a pattern—a pattern woven out of irrelevant details about money.

And surely, in that pattern, the unknown factor was becoming clear.

He looked at his watch. He had promised to ring up Hester at an agreed time. He drew the telephone towards him and asked for the number.

Presently her voice came to him, clear, rather childish.

“Hester. Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes, I'm all right.”

It took him a moment or two to grasp the implication of that accented word. Then he said sharply:

“What has happened?”

“Philip has been killed.”

“Philip! Philip Durrant?”

Calgary sounded incredulous.

“Yes. And Tina, too—at least she isn’t dead yet. She’s in hospital.”

“Tell me,” he ordered.

She told him. He questioned and requestioned her narrowly until he got all the facts.

Then he said grimly:

“Hold on, Hester, I’m coming. I’ll be with you”—he looked at his watch —“in an hour’s time. I’ve got to see Superintendent Huish first.”

II

“What exactly do you want to know, Dr. Calgary?” asked Superintendent Huish, but before Calgary could speak the telephone rang on Huish’s desk and the superintendent picked it up. “Yes. Yes, speaking. Just a moment.” He drew a piece of paper towards him, picked up a pen and prepared to write. “Yes. Go ahead. Yes.” He wrote. “What? How do you spell that last word? Oh, I see. Yes, doesn’t seem to make much sense yet, does it? Right. Nothing else? Right. Thanks.” He replaced the receiver. “That was the hospital,” he said.

“Tina?” asked Calgary.

The superintendent nodded.

“She regained consciousness for a few minutes.”

“Did she say anything?” asked Calgary.

“I don’t really know why I should tell you that, Dr. Calgary.”

“I ask you to tell me,” said Calgary, “because I think that I can help you over this business.”

Huish looked at him consideringly.

“You’ve taken all this very much to heart, haven’t you, Dr. Calgary?” he said.

“Yes, I have. You see, I felt responsible for reopening the case. I even feel responsible for these two tragedies. Will the girl live?”

“They think so,” said Huish. “The blade of the knife missed the heart, but it may be touch and go.” He shook his head. “That’s always the trouble,” he said. “People will not believe that a murderer is unsafe. Sounds a queer thing to say, but there it is. They all knew there was a murderer in their midst. They ought to have told what they knew. The only safe thing if a murderer is about is to tell the police anything you know at once. Well, they didn’t. They held out on me. Philip Durrant was a nice fellow—an intelligent fellow; but he regarded this as a kind of game. He went poking about laying traps for people. And he got somewhere, or he thought he got somewhere. And somebody else thought he was getting somewhere. Result: I get a call to say he’s dead, stabbed through the back of the neck. That’s what comes of messing about with murder and not realizing its dangers.” He stopped and cleared his throat.

“And the girl?” asked Calgary.

“The girl knew something,” said Huish. “Something she didn’t want to tell. It’s my opinion,” he said, “she was in love with the fellow.”

“You’re talking about—Micky?”

Huish nodded. “Yes. I’d say, too, that Micky was fond of her, in a way. But being fond of anyone isn’t enough if you’re mad with fear. Whatever she knew was probably more deadly than she herself realized. That’s why, after she found Durrant dead and she came rushing out straight into his arms, he took his chance and stabbed her.”

“That’s merely conjecture on your part, isn’t it, Superintendent Huish?”

“Not entirely conjecture, Dr. Calgary. The knife was in his pocket.”

“The actual knife?”

“Yes. It had blood on it. We’re going to test it, but it’ll be her blood all right. Her blood and the blood of Philip Durrant!”

“But—it couldn’t have been.”

“Who says it couldn’t have been?”

“Hester. I rang her up and she told me all about it.”

“She did, did she? Well, the facts are very simple. Mary Durrant went down to the kitchen, leaving her husband alive, at ten minutes to four—at that time there were in the house Leo Argyle and Gwenda Vaughan in the library, Hester Argyle in her bedroom on the first floor, and Kirsten Lindstrom in the kitchen. Just after four o’clock, Micky and Tina drove up. Micky went into the garden and Tina went upstairs, following close on Kirsten’s footsteps, who had just gone up with coffee and biscuits for Philip. Tina stopped to speak to Hester, then went on to join Miss Lindstrom and together they found Philip dead.”

“And all this time Micky was in the garden. Surely that’s a perfect alibi?”

“What you don’t know, Dr. Calgary, is that there’s a big magnolia tree growing up by the side of the house. The kids used to climb it. Micky in particular. It was one of his ways in and out of the house. He could have shinned up that tree, gone into Durrant’s room, stabbed him, back and out again. Oh, it needed split-second timing, but it’s astonishing what audacity will do sometimes. And he was desperate. At all costs he had to prevent Tina and Durrant meeting. To be safe, he had to kill them both.”

Calgary thought for a moment or two.

“You said just now, Superintendent, that Tina has recovered consciousness. Wasn’t she able to say definitely who stabbed her?”

“She wasn’t very coherent,” said Huish slowly. “In fact I doubt if she was conscious in the proper sense of the term.”

He gave a tired smile.

“All right, Dr. Calgary, I’ll tell you exactly what she said. First of all she said a name. Micky....”

“She has accused him, then,” said Calgary.

“That’s what it looks like,” said Huish, nodding his head. “The rest of what she said didn’t make sense. It’s a bit fantastic.”

“What did she say?”

Huish looked down at the pad in front of him.

“‘Micky.’ Then a pause. Then, ‘The cup was empty ...’ then another pause, and then, ‘The dove on the mast.’” He looked at Calgary. “Can you make any sense of that?”

“No,” said Calgary. He shook his head and said wonderingly: “The dove on the mast... That seems a very extraordinary thing to say.”

“No masts and no doves as far as we know,” said Huish. “But it meant something to her, something in her own mind. But it mayn’t, you know, have been anything to do with the murder. Goodness knows what realms of fancy she’s floating in.”

Calgary was silent for some moments. He sat thinking things over. He said: “You’ve arrested Micky?”

“We’ve detained him. He will be charged within twenty-four hours.”

Huish looked curiously at Calgary.

“I gather that this lad, Micky, wasn’t your answer to the problem?”

“No,” said Calgary. “No, Micky wasn’t my answer. Even now—I don’t know.” He got up. “I still think I’m right,” he said, “but I quite see that I’ve not got enough to go on for you to believe me. I must go out there again. I must see them all.”

“Well,” said Huish, “be careful of yourself, Dr. Calgary. What is your idea, by the way?”

“Would it mean anything to you,” said Calgary, “if I told you that it is my belief that this was a crime of passion?”

Huish’s eyebrows rose.

“There are a lot of passions, Dr. Calgary,” he said. “Hate, avarice, greed, fear, they’re all passions.”

“When I said a crime of passion,” said Calgary, “I meant exactly what one usually means by that term.”

“If you mean Gwenda Vaughan and Leo Argyle,” said Huish, “that’s what we’ve thought all along, you know, but it doesn’t seem to fit.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” said Arthur Calgary.

Twenty-four

It was again dusk when Arthur Calgary came to Sunny Point on an evening very like the evening when he had first come there. Viper's Point, he thought to himself as he rang the bell.

Once again events seemed to repeat themselves. It was Hester who opened it. There was the same defiance in her face, the same air of desperate tragedy. Behind her in the hall he saw, as he had seen before, the watchful, suspicious figure of Kirsten Lindstrom. It was history repeating itself.

Then the pattern wavered and changed. The suspicion and the desperation went out of Hester's face. It broke up into a lovely, welcoming smile.

"You," she said. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come!"

He took her hands in his.

"I want to see your father, Hester. Is he upstairs in the library?"

"Yes. Yes, he's there with Gwenda."

Kirsten Lindstrom came forward towards them.

"Why do you come here again?" she said accusingly. "Look at the trouble you brought last time! See what has happened to us all. Hester's life ruined, Mr. Argyle's life ruined—and two deaths. Two! Philip Durrant and little Tina. And it is your doing—all your doing!"

"Tina is not dead yet," said Calgary, "and I have something here to do that I cannot leave undone."

"What have you got to do?" Kirsten still stood barring his way to the staircase.

"I've got to finish what I began," said Calgary.

Very gently he put a hand on her shoulder and moved her slightly aside. He walked up the stairs and Hester followed him. He turned back over his shoulder and said to Kirsten: "Come, too, Miss Lindstrom, I would like you all to be here."

In the library, Leo Argyle was sitting in a chair by the desk. Gwenda Vaughan was kneeling in front of the fire, staring into its embers. They looked up with some surprise.

"I'm sorry to burst in upon you," said Calgary, "but as I've just been saying to these two, I've come to finish what I began." He looked round. "Is Mrs. Durrant in the house still? I should like her to be here also."

"She's lying down, I think," said Leo. "She—she's taken things terribly hard."

"I should like her to be here all the same." He looked at Kirsten. "Perhaps you would go and fetch her."

"She may not want to come," said Kirsten sullenly.

"Tell her," said Calgary, "that there are things she may want to hear about her husband's death."

"Oh, go on, Kirsty," said Hester. "Don't be so suspicious and so protective of us all. I don't know what Dr. Calgary's going to say, but we ought all to be here."

"As you please," said Kirsten.

She went out of the room.

"Sit down," said Leo. He indicated a chair on the other side of the fireplace, and Calgary sat there.

"You must forgive me," said Leo, "if I say at this moment that I wish you'd never come here in the first place, Dr. Calgary."

"That's unfair," said Hester fiercely. "That's a terribly unfair thing to say."

“I know what you must feel,” said Calgary. “I think in your place I should feel much the same. Perhaps I even shared your view for a short period, but on reflection I still cannot see that there was anything else that I could have done.”

Kirsten re-entered the room. “Mary is coming,” she said.

They sat in silence waiting and presently Mary Durrant entered the room. Calgary looked at her with interest, since it was the first time he had seen her. She looked calm and composed, neatly dressed, every hair in place. But her face was masklike in its lack of expression and there was an air about her as of a woman who walks in her sleep.

Leo made an introduction. She bowed her head slightly.

“It is good of you to come, Mrs. Durrant,” said Calgary. “I thought you ought to hear what I have to say.”

“As you please,” said Mary. “But nothing that you can say or anyone can say will bring Philip back again.”

She went a little way away from them and sat down in a chair by the window. Calgary looked round him.

“Let me first say this: When I came here the first time, when I told you that I was able to clear Jacko’s name, your reception of my news puzzled me. I understand it now. But the thing that made the greatest impression upon me was what this child here”—he looked at Hester—“said to me as I left. She said that it was not justice that mattered, it was what happened to the innocent. There is a phrase in the latest translation of the Book of Job that describes it. The calamity of the innocent. As a result of my news that is what you have all been suffering. The innocent should not suffer, and must not suffer, and it is to end the suffering of the innocent that I am here now to say what I have to say.”

He paused for a moment or two but no one spoke. In his quiet pedantic voice, Arthur Calgary went on:

“When I came here first, it was not, as I thought, to bring you what might be described as tidings of great joy. You had all accepted Jacko’s guilt. You were all, if I may say so, satisfied with it. It was the best solution that there could be in the murder of Mrs. Argyle.”

“Isn’t that speaking a little harshly?” asked Leo.

“No,” said Calgary, “it is the truth. Jacko was satisfactory to you all as the criminal since there could be no real question of an outsider having committed the crime, and because in the case of Jacko you could find the necessary excuses. He was unfortunate, a mental invalid, not responsible for his actions, a problem or delinquent boy! All the phrases that we can use nowadays so happily to excuse guilt. You said, Mr. Argyle, that you did not blame him. You said his mother, the victim, would not have blamed him. Only one person blamed him.” He looked at Kirsten Lindstrom. “You blamed him. You said fairly and squarely that he was wicked. That is the term you used. ‘Jacko was wicked,’ you said.”

“Perhaps,” said Kirsten Lindstrom. “Perhaps—yes, perhaps I said that. It was true.”

“Yes, it was true. He was wicked. If he had not been wicked none of this would have happened. Yet you know quite well,” said Calgary, “that my evidence cleared him of the actual crime.”

Kirsten said:

“One cannot always believe evidence. You had concussion. I know very well what concussion does to people. They remember things not clearly but in a kind of blur.”

“So that is still your solution?” said Calgary. “You think that Jacko actually committed that crime and that in some way he managed to fake an alibi? Is that right?”

“I do not know the details. Yes, something of that sort. I still say he did it. All the suffering that has gone on here and the deaths—yes, these terrible deaths—they are all his doing. All Jacko’s doing!”

Hester cried:

“But Kirsten, you were always devoted to Jacko.”

“Perhaps,” said Kirsten, “yes, perhaps. But I still say he was wicked.”

“There I think you are right,” said Calgary, “but in another way you are wrong. Concussion or no concussion, my memory is perfectly clear. On the night of Mrs. Argyle’s death I gave Jacko a lift at the stated time. There is no possibility—and I repeat those words strongly—there is no possibility that Jacko Argyle killed his adopted mother that night. His alibi holds.”

Leo moved with a trace of restlessness. Calgary went on:

“You think that I’m repeating the same thing over and over again? Not quite. There are other points to be considered. One of them is the statement that I got from Superintendent Huish that Jacko was very glib and assured when giving his alibi. He had it all pat and ready, the times, the place, almost as though he knew he might need it. That ties up with the conversation I had about him with Dr. MacMaster, who has had a very wide experience of borderline delinquent cases. He said he was not so surprised at Jacko having the seeds of murder in his heart, but he was surprised that he had actually carried one out. He said the type of murder he would have expected was one where Jacko egged on someone else to commit the crime. So I came to the point where I asked myself this: Did Jacko know that a crime was to be committed that night? Did he know that he would need an alibi and did he deliberately go about giving himself one? If so, someone else killed Mrs. Argyle, but—Jacko knew she was going to be killed and one may fairly say that he was the instigator of the crime.”

He said to Kirsten Lindstrom:

“You feel that, don’t you? You still feel it, or you want to feel it? You feel that it was Jacko who killed her, not you... You feel it was under his orders and under his influence you did it. Therefore you want all the blame to be his!”

“I?” said Kirsten Lindstrom. “I? What are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” said Calgary, “that there was only one person in this house who could in any way fit into the role of Jacko Argyle’s accomplice. And that is you, Miss Lindstrom. Jacko has a record behind him, a record of being able to inspire passion in middle-aged women. He employed that power deliberately. He had the gift of making himself believed.” He leaned forward. “He made love to you, didn’t he?” he said gently. “He made you believe that he cared for you, that he wanted to marry you, that after this was over and he’d got more control of his mother’s money, you would be married and go away somewhere. That is right, isn’t it?”

Kirsten stared at him. She did not speak. It was as though she were paralysed.

“It was done cruelly and heartlessly and deliberately,” said Arthur Calgary. “He came here that night desperate for some money, with the shadow over him of arrest and a jail sentence. Mrs. Argyle refused to give him money. When he was refused by her he applied to you.”

“Do you think,” said Kirsten Lindstrom, “do you think that I would have taken Mrs. Argyle’s money to give him instead of giving him my own?”

“No,” said Calgary, “you would have given him your own if you’d had any. But I don’t think you had ... You had a good income from the annuity which Mrs. Argyle had bought for you, but I think he’d already milked you dry of that. So he was desperate that evening and when Mrs. Argyle had gone up to her husband in the library, you went outside the house where he was waiting and he told you what you had to do. First you must give him the money and then, before the theft could be discovered, Mrs. Argyle had to be killed. Because she would not have covered up the theft. He said it would be easy. You had just to pull out the drawers to make it look as though a burglar had been there and to hit her on the back of the head. It would be painless, he said. She would not feel anything. He himself would establish an alibi, so that you must be careful to do this thing within the right time limits, between seven and seven-thirty.”

“It’s not true,” said Kirsten. She had begun to tremble. “You are mad to say such things.”

Yet there was no indignation in her voice. Strangely enough it was mechanical and weary.

“Even if what you say is true,” she said, “do you think I would let him be accused of the murder?”

“Oh yes,” said Calgary. “After all, he had told you he would have an alibi. You expected him, perhaps, to be arrested and then to prove his innocence. That was all part of the plan.”

“But when he couldn’t prove his innocence,” said Kirsten. “Would I not have saved him then?”

“Perhaps,” said Calgary, “perhaps—but for one fact. The fact that on the morning after the murder Jacko’s wife turned up here. You didn’t know he was married. The girl had to repeat the statement two or three times before you would believe her. At that moment your world crashed around you. You saw Jacko for what he was—heartless, scheming, without a particle of affection for you. You realized what he had made you do.”

Suddenly Kirsten Lindstrom was speaking. The words came rushing out incoherently.

“I loved him ... I loved him with all my heart. I was a fool, a credulous middle-aged doting fool. He made me think it—he made me believe it. He said he had never cared for girls. He said—I cannot tell you all the things he said. I loved him. I tell you I loved him. And then that silly, simpering child came here, that common little thing. I saw it was all lies, all wickedness, wickedness ... His wickedness, not mine.”

“The night I came here,” said Calgary, “you were afraid, weren’t you? You were afraid of what was going to happen. You were afraid for the others. Hester, whom you loved, Leo, whom you were fond of. You saw, perhaps, a little of what this might do to them. But principally you were afraid for yourself. And you see where fear has led you ... You have two more deaths on your hands now.”

“You are saying I killed Tina and Philip?”

“Of course you killed them,” said Calgary. “Tina has recovered consciousness.”

Kirsten’s shoulders dropped in the sagging of despair.

“So she has told you that I stabbed her. I did not think she even knew. I was mad, of course. I was mad by then, mad with terror. It was coming so close—so close.”

“Shall I tell you what Tina said when she regained consciousness?” said Calgary. “She said ‘The cup was empty.’ I knew what that meant. You pretended to be taking up a cup of coffee to Philip Durrant, but actually you had already stabbed him and were coming out of that room when you heard Tina coming. So you turned round and pretended you were taking the tray in. Later, although she was shocked almost into unconsciousness by his death, she noticed automatically that the cup that had dropped on the floor was an empty cup and there was no stain of coffee left by it.”

Hester cried out:

“But Kirsten couldn’t have stabbed her! Tina walked downstairs and out to Micky. She was quite all right.”

“My dear child,” said Calgary, “people who have been stabbed have walked the length of a street without even knowing what has happened to them! In the state of shock Tina was in she would hardly have felt anything. A pinprick, a slight pain perhaps.” He looked again at Kirsten. “And later,” he said, “you slipped that knife into Micky’s pocket. That was the meanest thing of all.”

Kirsten’s hands flew out pleadingly.

“I couldn’t help it—I could not help it ... It was coming so near ... They were all beginning to find out. Philip was finding out and Tina—I think Tina must have overheard Jacko talking to me outside the kitchen that evening. They were all beginning to know ... I wanted to be safe. I wanted—one can never be safe!” Her hands dropped. “I didn’t want to kill Tina. As for Philip—”

Mary Durrant rose. She came across the room slowly but with increasing purpose.

“You killed Philip?” she said. “You killed Philip.”

Suddenly, like a tigress she sprang at the other woman. It was Gwenda, quick-witted, who sprang to her feet and caught hold of her. Calgary joined her and together they held her back.

“You—you!” cried Mary Durrant.

Kirsten Lindstrom looked at her.

“What business was it of his?” she asked. “Why did he have to snoop round and ask questions? He was never threatened. It was never a matter of life or death for him. It was just—an amusement.” She turned and walked slowly towards the door. Without looking at them she went out.

“Stop her,” cried Hester. “Oh, we must stop her.”

Leo Argyle said:

“Let her go, Hester.”

“But—she’ll kill herself.”

“I rather doubt it,” said Calgary.

“She has been our faithful friend for so long,” said Leo. “Faithful, devoted—and now this!”

“Do you think she’ll—give herself up?” said Gwenda.

“It’s far more likely,” said Calgary, “that she’ll go to the nearest station and take a train for London. But she won’t of course, be able to get away with it. She’ll be traced and found.”

“Our dear Kirsten,” said Leo again. His voice shook. “So faithful, so good to us all.”

Gwenda caught him by the arm and shook it.

“How can you, Leo, how can you? Think what she did to us all—what she has made us suffer!”

“I know,” said Leo, “but she suffered herself, you know, as well. I think it is her suffering we have felt in this house.”

“We might have gone on suffering for ever,” said Gwenda, “as far as she was concerned! If it hadn’t been for Dr. Calgary here.” She turned towards him gratefully.

“So at last,” said Calgary, “I have done something to help, though rather late in the day.”

“Too late,” said Mary, bitterly. “Too late! Oh, why didn’t we know—why didn’t we guess?” She turned accusingly on Hester. “I thought it was you. I always thought it was you.”

“He didn’t,” said Hester. She looked at Calgary.

Mary Durrant said quietly:

“I wish I were dead.”

“My dear child,” said Leo, “how I wish I could help you.”

“Nobody can help me,” said Mary. “It’s all Philip’s own fault, wanting to stay on here, wanting to mess about with this business. Getting himself killed.” She looked round at them. “None of you understand.” She went out of the room.

Calgary and Hester followed her. As they went through the door, Calgary, looking back, saw Leo’s arm pass round Gwenda’s shoulders.

“She warned me, you know,” said Hester. Her eyes were wide and scared. “She told me right at the beginning not to trust her, to be as afraid of her as I was of everyone else....”

“Forget it, my dear,” said Calgary. “That is the thing you have to do now. Forget. All of you are free now. The innocent are no longer in the shadow of guilt.”

“And Tina? Will she get well? She is not going to die?”

“I don’t think she will die,” said Calgary. “She’s in love with Micky, isn’t she?”

“I suppose she might be,” said Hester, in a surprised voice. “I never thought about it. They’ve always been brother and sister, of course. But they’re not really brother and sister.”

“By the way, Hester, would you have any idea what Tina meant when she said ‘The dove on the mast.’?”

“Dove on the mast?” Hester frowned. “Wait a minute. It sounds terribly familiar. The dove on the mast, as we sailed fast. Did mourn and mourn and mourn. Is that it?”

“It might be,” said Calgary.

“It’s a song,” said Hester. “A sort of lullaby song. Kirsten used to sing it to us. I can only remember bits of it. ‘My love he stood at my right hand,’ and something something something. ‘Oh, maid most dear, I am not here, I have no place no part, No dwelling more by sea nor shore, But only in thy heart.’”

“I see,” said Calgary. “Yes, yes, I see....”

“Perhaps they’ll get married,” said Hester, “when Tina gets well, and then she can go out to Kuwait with him. Tina always wanted to be somewhere where it’s warm. It’s very warm in the Persian Gulf, isn’t it?”

“Almost too warm, I should say,” said Calgary.

“Nothing’s too warm for Tina,” Hester assured him.

“And you will be happy now, my dear,” said Calgary, taking Hester’s hands in his. He made an effort to smile. “You’ll marry your young doctor and you’ll settle down and you’ll have no more of these wild imaginings and terrific despairs.”

“Marry Don?” said Hester, in a surprised tone of voice. “Of course I’m not going to marry Don.”

“But you love him.”

“No, I don’t think I do, really ... I just thought I did. But he didn’t believe in me. He didn’t know I was innocent. He ought to have known.” She looked at Calgary. “You knew! I think I’d like to marry you.”

“But, Hester, I’m years older than you are. You can’t really—”

“That is—if you want me,” said Hester with sudden doubt.

“Oh, I want you!” said Arthur Calgary.

The Pale Horse (1961)

By Agatha Christie

Foreword

by Mark Easterbrook

There are two methods, it seems to me, of approaching this strange business of the Pale Horse. In spite of the dictum of the White King, it is difficult to achieve simplicity. One cannot, that is to say, “Begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop.” For where is the beginning?

To a historian, that always is the difficulty. At what point in history does one particular portion of history begin.

In this case, you can begin at the moment when Father Gorman set forth from his presbytery to visit a dying woman. Or you can start before that, on a certain evening in Chelsea.

Perhaps, since I am writing the greater part of this narrative myself, it is there that I should begin.

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One

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

The Espresso machine behind my shoulder hissed like an angry snake. The noise it made had a sinister, not to say devilish, suggestion about it. Perhaps, I reflected, most of our contemporary noises carry that implication. The intimidating angry scream of jet planes as they flash across the sky; the slow menacing rumble of a tube train approaching through its tunnel; the heavy road transport that shakes the very foundations of your house... Even the minor domestic noises of today, beneficial in action though they may be, yet carry a kind of alert. The dishwashers, the refrigerators, the pressure cookers, the whining vacuum cleaners—"Be careful," they all seem to say. "I am a genie harnessed to your service, but if your control of me fails...."

A dangerous world—that was it, a dangerous world.

I stirred the foaming cup placed in front of me. It smelt pleasant.

"What else will you have? Nice banana and bacon sandwich?"

It seemed an odd juxtaposition to me. Bananas I connected with my childhood—or occasionally flambé with sugar and rum. Bacon, in my mind, was firmly associated with eggs. However, when in Chelsea, eat as Chelsea does. I agreed to a nice banana and bacon sandwich.

Although I lived in Chelsea—that is to say, I had had a furnished flat there for the last three months—I was in every other way a stranger in these parts. I was writing a book on certain aspects of Mogul architecture, but for that purpose I could have lived in Hampstead or Bloomsbury or Streatham or Chelsea and it would have been all the same to me. I was oblivious of my surroundings except for the tools of my trade, and the neighbourhood in which I lived was completely indifferent to me, I existed in a world of my own.

On this particular evening, however, I had suffered from one of those sudden revulsions that all writers know.

Mogul architecture, Mogul Emperors, the Mogul way of life—and all the fascinating problems it raised, became suddenly as dust and ashes. What did they matter? Why did I want to write about them?

I flicked back various pages, rereading what I had written. It all seemed to me uniformly bad—poorly written and singularly devoid of interest. Whoever had said “History is bunk” (Henry Ford?) had been absolutely right.

I pushed back my manuscript with loathing, got up and looked at my watch. The time was close on eleven p.m. I tried to remember if I had had dinner... From my inner sensations I thought not. Lunch, yes, at the Athenaeum. That was a long time ago.

I went and looked into the refrigerator. There was a small remnant of desiccated tongue. I looked at it without favour. So it was that I wandered out into the King’s Road, and eventually turned into an Espresso Coffee Bar with the name Luigi written in red neon light across its window, and was now contemplating a bacon and banana sandwich whilst I reflected on the sinister implications of present-day noises and their atmospheric effects.

All of them, I thought, had something in common with my early memories of pantomime. Davy Jones arriving from his locker in clouds of smoke! Trap doors and windows that exuded the infernal powers of evil, challenging and defying a Good Fairy Diamond, or some such name, who in turn waved an inadequate-looking wand and recited hopeful platitudes as to the ultimate triumph of good in a flat voice, thus prefacing the inevitable “song of the moment” which never had anything to do with the story of that particular pantomime.

It came to me suddenly that evil was, perhaps, necessarily always more impressive than good. It had to make a show! It had to startle and challenge! It was instability attacking stability. And in the end, I thought, stability will always win. Stability can survive the triteness of Good Fairy Diamond; the flat voice, the rhymed couplet, even the irrelevant vocal

statement of “There’s a Winding Road runs down the Hill, To the Olde World Town I love.” All very poor weapons it would seem, and yet those weapons would inevitably prevail. The pantomime would end in the way it always ended. The staircase, and the descending cast in order of seniority, with Good Fairy Diamond, practising the Christian virtue of humility and not seeking to be first (or, in this case, last) but arriving about halfway through the procession, side by side with her late opponent, now seen to be no longer the snarling Demon King breathing fire and brimstone, but just a man dressed up in red tights.

The Espresso hissed again in my ear. I signalled for another cup of coffee and looked around me. A sister of mine was always accusing me of not being observant, not noticing what was going on. “You live in a world of your own,” she would say accusingly. Now, with a feeling of conscious virtue, I took note of what was going on. It was almost impossible not to read about the coffee bars of Chelsea and their patrons every day in the newspapers; this was my chance to make my own appraisal of contemporary life.

It was rather dark in the Espresso, so you could not see very clearly. The clientele were almost all young people. They were, I supposed vaguely, what was called the offbeat generation. The girls looked, as girls always did look to me nowadays, dirty. They also seemed to be much too warmly dressed. I had noticed that when I had gone out a few weeks ago to dine with some friends. The girl who had sat next to me had been about twenty. The restaurant was hot, but she had worn a yellow wool pullover, a black skirt and black woollen stockings, and the perspiration poured down her face all through the meal. She smelt of perspiration-soaked wool and also, strongly, of unwashed hair. She was said, according to my friends, to be very attractive. Not to me! My only reaction was a yearning to throw her into a hot bath, give her a cake of soap and urge her to get on with it! Which just showed, I suppose, how out of touch with the times I was. Perhaps it came of having lived abroad so much. I recalled with pleasure Indian women with their beautifully-coiled black hair, and their saris of pure bright colours hanging in graceful folds, and the rhythmic sway of their bodies as they walked....

I was recalled from these pleasant thoughts by a sudden accentuation of noise. Two young women at the table next to me had started a quarrel. The young men who were with them tried to adjust things, but without avail.

Suddenly they were screaming at each other. One girl slapped the other's face, the second dragged the first from her chair. They fought each other like fishwives, screaming abuse hysterically. One was a tousled redhead, the other a lank-haired blonde.

What the quarrel was about, apart from terms of abuse, I did not gather. Cries and catcalls arose from other tables.

"Attagirl! Sock her, Lou!"

The proprietor behind the bar, a slim Italian-looking fellow with sideburns, whom I had taken to be Luigi, came to intervene in a voice that was pure cockney London.

"Nah then—break it up—break it up—You'll 'ave the whole street in in a minute. You'll 'ave the coppers here. Stop it, I say."

But the lank blonde had the redhead by the hair and was tugging furiously as she screamed:

"You're nothing but a man-stealing bitch!"

"Bitch yourself."

Luigi and the two embarrassed escorts forced the girls apart. In the blonde's fingers were large tufts of red hair. She held them aloft gleefully, then dropped them on the floor.

The door from the street was pushed open and Authority, dressed in blue, stood on the threshold and uttered the regulation words majestically.

"What's going on here?"

Immediately a common front was presented to the enemy.

“Just a bit of fun,” said one of the young men.

“That’s all,” said Luigi. “Just a bit of fun among friends.”

With his foot he kicked the tufts of hair adroitly under the nearest table. The contestants smiled at each other in false amnesty.

The policeman looked at everybody suspiciously.

“We’re just going now,” said the blonde sweetly. “Come on, Doug.”

By a coincidence several other people were just going. Authority watched them go grimly. His eye said that he was overlooking it this time, but he’d got his eye on them. He withdrew slowly.

The redhead’s escort paid the check.

“You all right?” said Luigi to the girl who was adjusting a headscarf. “Lou served you pretty bad, tearing out your hair by the roots like that.”

“It didn’t hurt,” said the girl nonchalantly. She smiled at him. “Sorry for the row, Luigi.”

The party went out. The bar was now practically empty. I felt in my pocket for change.

“She’s a sport all right,” said Luigi approvingly watching the door close. He seized a floor brush and swept the tufts of red hair behind the counter.

“It must have been agony,” I said.

“I’d have hollered if it had been me,” admitted Luigi. “But she’s a real sport, Tommy is.”

“You know her well?”

“Oh, she’s in here most evenings. Tuckerton, that’s her name, Thomasina Tuckerton, if you want the whole set out. But Tommy Tucker’s what she’s called round here. Stinking rich, too. Her old man left her a fortune, and

what does she go and do? Comes to Chelsea, lives in a slummy room halfway to Wandsworth Bridge, and mooches around with a gang all doing the same thing. Beats me, half of that crowd's got money. Could have any mortal thing they want; stay at the Ritz if they liked. But they seem to get a kick out of living the way they do. Yes—it beats me.”

“It wouldn't be your choice?”

“Ar, I've got sense!” said Luigi. “As it is, I just cash in.”

I rose to go and asked what the quarrel was about.

“Oh, Tommy's got hold of the other girl's boyfriend. He's not worth fighting about, believe me!”

“The other girl seemed to think he was,” I observed.

“Oh, Lou's very romantic,” said Luigi tolerantly.

It was not my idea of romance, but I did not say so.

II

It must have been about a week later that my eye was caught by a name in the Deaths column of The Times.

TUCKERTON. On October 2nd at Fallowfield Nursing Home, Amberley, Thomasina Ann, aged twenty, only daughter of the late Thomas Tuckerton, Esq., of Carrington Park, Amberley, Surrey. Funeral private. No flowers.

III

No flowers for poor Tommy Tucker; and no more “kicks” out of life in Chelsea. I felt a sudden fleeting compassion for the Tommy Tuckers of today. Yet after all, I reminded myself, how did I know that my view was the right one? Who was I to pronounce it a wasted life? Perhaps it was my life, my quiet scholarly life, immersed in books, shut off from the world, that was the wasted one. Life at secondhand. Be honest now, was I getting

kicks out of life? A very unfamiliar idea! The truth was, of course, that I didn't want kicks. But there again, perhaps I ought to? An unfamiliar and not very welcome thought.

I dismissed Tommy Tucker from my thoughts, and turned to my correspondence.

The principal item was a letter from my cousin Rhoda Despard, asking me to do her a favour. I grasped at this, since I was not feeling in the mood for work this morning, and it made a splendid excuse for postponing it.

I went out into King's Road, hailed a taxi, and was driven to the residence of a friend of mine, a Mrs. Ariadne Oliver.

Mrs. Oliver was a well-known writer of detective stories. Her maid, Milly, was an efficient dragon who guarded her mistress from the onslaughts of the outside world.

I raised my eyebrows inquiringly, in an unspoken question. Milly nodded a vehement head.

"You'd better go right up, Mr. Mark," she said. "She's in a mood this morning. You may be able to help her snap out of it."

I mounted two flights of stairs, tapped lightly on a door, and walked in without waiting for encouragement. Mrs. Oliver's workroom was a good-sized room, the walls papered with exotic birds nesting in tropical foliage. Mrs. Oliver herself, in a state apparently bordering on insanity, was prowling round the room, muttering to herself. She threw me a brief uninterested glance and continued to prowl. Her eyes, unfocused, swept round the walls, glanced out of the window, and occasionally closed in what appeared to be a spasm of agony.

"But why," demanded Mrs. Oliver of the universe, "why doesn't the idiot say at once that he saw the cockatoo? Why shouldn't he? He couldn't have helped seeing it! But if he does mention it, it ruins everything. There must be a way...there must be...."

She groaned, ran her fingers through her short grey hair and clutched it in a frenzied hand. Then, looking at me with suddenly focused eyes, she said, “Hallo, Mark. I’m going mad,” and resumed her complaint.

“And then there’s Monica. The nicer I try to make her, the more irritating she gets... Such a stupid girl... Smug, too! Monica... Monica? I believe the name’s wrong. Nancy? Would that be better? Joan? Everybody is always Joan. Anne is the same. Susan? I’ve had a Susan. Lucia? Lucia? Lucia? I believe I can see a Lucia. Red-haired. Polo-necked jumper... Black tights? Black stockings, anyway.”

This momentary gleam of good cheer was eclipsed by the memory of the cockatoo problem, and Mrs. Oliver resumed her unhappy prowling, picking up things off tables unseeingly and putting them down again somewhere else. She fitted with some care her spectacle case into a lacquered box which already contained a Chinese fan and then gave a deep sigh and said:

“I’m glad it’s you.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“It might have been anybody. Some silly woman who wanted me to open a bazaar, or the man about Milly’s insurance card which Milly absolutely refuses to have—or the plumber (but that would be too much good fortune, wouldn’t it?). Or, it might be someone wanting an interview—asking me all those embarrassing questions which are always the same every time. What made you first think of taking up writing? How many books have you written? How much money do you make? Etc. etc. I never know the answers to any of them and it makes me look such a fool. Not that any of that matters because I think I am going mad, over this cockatoo business.”

“Something that won’t jell?” I said sympathetically. “Perhaps I’d better go away.”

“No, don’t. At any rate you’re a distraction.”

I accepted this doubtful compliment.

“Do you want a cigarette?” Mrs. Oliver asked with vague hospitality.
“There are some somewhere. Look in the typewriter lid.”

“I’ve got my own, thanks. Have one. Oh no, you don’t smoke.”

“Or drink,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I wish I did. Like those American detectives that always have pints of rye conveniently in their collar drawers. It seems to solve all their problems. You know. Mark, I really can’t think how anyone ever gets away with a murder in real life. It seems to me that the moment you’ve done a murder the whole thing is so terribly obvious.”

“Nonsense. You’ve done lots of them.”

“Fifty-five at least,” said Mrs. Oliver. “The murder part is quite easy and simple. It’s the covering up that’s so difficult. I mean, why should it be anyone else but you? You stick out a mile.”

“Not in the finished article,” I said.

“Ah, but what it costs me,” said Mrs. Oliver darkly. “Say what you like, it’s not natural for five or six people to be on the spot when B is murdered and all have a motive for killing B—unless, that is, B is absolutely madly unpleasant and in that case nobody will mind whether he’s been killed or not, and doesn’t care in the least who’s done it.”

“I see your problem,” I said. “But if you’ve dealt with it successfully fifty-five times, you will manage to deal with it once again.”

“That’s what I tell myself,” said Mrs. Oliver, “over and over again, but every single time I can’t believe it, and so I’m in agony.”

She seized her hair again and tugged it violently.

“Don’t,” I cried. “You’ll have it out by the roots.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Hair’s tough. Though when I had measles at fourteen with a very high temperature, it did come out—all round the front. Most shaming. And it was six whole months before it grew properly again. Awful for a girl—girls mind so. I thought of it yesterday when I was

visiting Mary Delafontaine in that nursing home. Her hair was coming out just like mine did. She said she'd have to get a false front when she was better. If you're sixty it doesn't always grow again, I believe."

"I saw a girl pull out another girl's hair by the roots the other night," I said. I was conscious of a slight note of pride in my voice as one who has seen life.

"What extraordinary places have you been going to?" asked Mrs. Oliver.

"This was in a coffee bar in Chelsea."

"Oh Chelsea!" said Mrs. Oliver. "Everything happens there, I believe. Beatniks and sputniks and squares and the beat generation. I don't write about them much because I'm so afraid of getting the terms wrong. It's safer, I think, to stick to what you know."

"Such as?"

"People on cruises, and in hotels, and what goes on in hospitals, and on parish councils—and sales of work—and music festivals, and girls in shops, and committees and daily women, and young men and girls who hike round the world in the interests of science, and shop assistants—"

She paused, out of breath.

"That seems fairly comprehensive to be getting on with," I said.

"All the same, you might take me out to a coffee bar in Chelsea sometime—just to widen my experience," said Mrs. Oliver wistfully.

"Any time you say. Tonight?"

"Not tonight. I'm too busy writing or rather worrying because I can't write. That's really the most tiresome thing about writing—though everything is tiresome really, except the one moment when you get what you think is going to be a wonderful idea, and can hardly wait to begin. Tell me, Mark, do you think it is possible to kill someone by remote control?"

“What do you mean by remote control? Press a button and set off a radioactive death ray?”

“No, no, not science fiction. I suppose,” she paused doubtfully, “I really mean black magic.”

“Wax figures and pins in them?”

“Oh, wax figures are right out,” said Mrs. Oliver scornfully. “But queer things do happen—in Africa or the West Indies. People are always telling you so. How natives just curl up and die. Voodoo—or juju... Anyway, you know what I mean.”

I said that much of that was attributed nowadays to the power of suggestion. Word is always conveyed to the victim that his death has been decreed by the medicine man—and his subconscious does the rest.

Mrs. Oliver snorted.

“If anyone hinted to me that I had been doomed to lie down and die, I’d take a pleasure in thwarting their expectations!”

I laughed.

“You’ve got centuries of good Occidental sceptical blood in your veins. No predispositions.”

“Then you think it can happen?”

“I don’t know enough about the subject to judge. What put it into your head? Is your new masterpiece to be *Murder by Suggestion*?”

“No, indeed. Good old-fashioned rat poison or arsenic is good enough for me. Or the reliable blunt instrument. Not firearms if possible. Firearms are so tricky. But you didn’t come here to talk to me about my books.”

“Frankly no—The fact is that my cousin Rhoda Despard has got a church fête and—”

“Never again!” said Mrs. Oliver. “You know what happened last time? I arranged a Murder Hunt, and the first thing that happened was a real corpse. I’ve never quite got over it!”

“It’s not a Murder Hunt. All you’d have to do would be to sit in a tent and sign your own books—at five bob a time.”

“We-e-l-l-l,” said Mrs. Oliver doubtfully. “That might be all right. I shouldn’t have to open the fête? Or say silly things? Or have to wear a hat?”

None of these things, I assured her, would be required of her.

“And it would only be for an hour or two,” I said coaxingly. “After that, there’ll be a cricket match—no, I suppose not this time of year. Children dancing, perhaps. Or a fancy dress competition—”

Mrs. Oliver interrupted me with a wild scream.

“That’s it,” she cried. “A cricket ball! Of course! He sees it from the window...rising up in the air...and it distracts him—and so he never mentions the cockatoo! What a good thing you came, Mark. You’ve been wonderful.”

“I don’t quite see—”

“Perhaps not, but I do,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s all rather complicated, and I don’t want to waste time explaining. Nice as it’s been to see you, what I’d really like you to do now is to go away. At once.”

“Certainly. About the fête—”

“I’ll think about it. Don’t worry me now. Now where on earth did I put my spectacles? Really, the way things just disappear....”

Two

I

Mrs. Gerahty opened the door of the presbytery in her usual sharp pouncing style. It was less like answering a bell, than a triumphant manoeuvre expressing the sentiment “I’ve caught you this time!”

“Well now, and what would you be wanting?” she demanded belligerently.

There was a boy on the doorstep, a very negligible looking boy—a boy not easily noticeable nor easily remembered—a boy like a lot of other boys. He sniffed because he had a cold in his head.

“Is this the priest’s place?”

“Is it Father Gorman you’re wanting?”

“He’s wanted,” said the boy.

“Who wants him and where and what for?”

“Benthall Street. Twenty-three. Woman as says she’s dying. Mrs. Coppins sent me. This is a Carthlick place all right, isn’t it? Woman says the vicar won’t do.”

Mrs. Gerahty reassured him on this essential point, told him to stop where he was and retired into the presbytery. Some three minutes later a tall elderly priest came out carrying a small leather case in his hand.

“I’m Father Gorman,” he said. “Benthall Street? That’s round by the railway yards, isn’t it?”

“’Sright. Not more than a step, it isn’t.”

They set out together, the priest walking with a free striding step.

“Mrs.— Coppins, did you say? Is that the name?”

“She’s the one what owns the house. Lets rooms, she does. It’s one of the lodgers wants you. Name of Davis, I think.”

“Davis. I wonder now. I don’t remember—”

“She’s one of you all right. Carthlick, I mean. Said as no vicar would do.”

The priest nodded. They came to Benthall Street in a very short time. The boy indicated a tall dingy house in a row of other tall dingy houses.

“That’s it.”

“Aren’t you coming in?”

“I don’t belong. Mrs. C. gave me a bob to take the message.”

“I see. What’s your name?”

“Mike Potter.”

“Thank you, Mike.”

“You’re welcome,” said Mike, and went off whistling. The imminence of death for someone else did not affect him.

The door of No. 23 opened and Mrs. Coppins, a large redfaced woman, stood on the threshold and welcomed the visitor with enthusiasm.

“Come in, come in. She’s bad, I’d say. Ought to be in hospital, not here. I’ve rung up, but goodness knows when anybody will come nowadays. Six hours my sister’s husband had to wait when he broke his leg. Disgraceful, I call it. Health Service, indeed! Take your money and when you want them where are they?”

She was preceding the priest up the narrow stairs as she talked.

“What’s the matter with her?”

“Flu’s what she’s had. Seemed better. Went out too soon I’d say. Anyway she comes in last night looking like death. Took to her bed. Wouldn’t eat anything. Didn’t want a doctor. This morning I could see she was in a raging fever. Gone to her lungs.”

“Pneumonia?”

Mrs. Coppins, out of breath by now, made a noise like a steam engine, which seemed to signify assent. She flung open a door, stood aside to let Father Gorman go in, said over his shoulder: “Here’s the Reverend for you. Now you’ll be all right!” in a spuriously cheerful way, and retired.

Father Gorman advanced. The room, furnished with old-fashioned Victorian furniture, was clean and neat. In the bed near the window a woman turned her head feebly. That she was very ill, the priest saw at once.

“You’ve come... There isn’t much time—” she spoke between panting breaths. “...Wickedness...such wickedness... I must... I must... I can’t die like this... Confess—confess—my sin—grievous—grievous...” the eyes wandered...half closed....

A rambling monotone of words came from her lips.

Father Gorman came to the bed. He spoke as he had spoken so often—so very often. Words of authority—of reassurance...the words of his calling and of his belief. Peace came into the room... The agony went out of the tortured eyes....

Then, as the priest ended his ministry, the dying woman spoke again.

“Stopped... It must be stopped... You will....”

The priest spoke with reassuring authority.

“I will do what is necessary. You can trust me....”

A doctor and an ambulance arrived simultaneously a little later. Mrs. Coppins received them with gloomy triumph.

“Too late as usual!” she said. “She’s gone....”

II

Father Gorman walked back through the gathering twilight. There would be fog tonight, it was growing denser rapidly. He paused for a moment, frowning. Such a fantastic extraordinary story... How much of it was born of delirium and high fever? Some of it was true, of course—but how much? Anyway it was important to make a note of certain names whilst they were fresh in his memory. The St. Francis Guild would be assembled when he got back. He turned abruptly into a small café, ordered a cup of coffee and sat down. He felt in the pocket of his cassock. Ah, Mrs. Gerahty—he’d asked her to mend the lining. As usual, she hadn’t! His notebook and a loose pencil and the few coins he carried about him, had gone through to the lining. He prised up a coin or two and the pencil, but the notebook was too difficult. The coffee came, and he asked if he could have a piece of paper.

“This do you?”

It was a torn paper bag. Father Gorman nodded and took it. He began to write—the names—it was important not to forget the names. Names were the sort of thing he did forget....

The café door opened and three young lads in Edwardian dress came in and sat down noisily.

Father Gorman finished his memorandum. He folded up the scrap of paper and was about to shove it into his pocket when he remembered the hole. He did what he had often done before, pressed the folded scrap down into his shoe.

A man came in quietly and sat down in a far corner. Father Gorman took a sip or two of the weak coffee for politeness’ sake, called for his bill, and paid. Then he got up and went out.

The man who had just come in seemed to change his mind. He looked at his watch as though he had mistaken the time, got up, and hurried out.

The fog was coming on fast. Father Gorman quickened his steps. He knew his district very well. He took a shortcut by turning down the small street which ran close by the railway. He may have been conscious of steps behind him but he thought nothing of them. Why should he?

The blow from the cosh caught him completely unaware. He heeled forward and fell....

III

Dr. Corrigan, whistling “Father O’Flynn,” walked into the D.D.I.’s room and addressed Divisional Detective-Inspector Lejeune in a chatty manner.

“I’ve done your padre for you,” he said.

“And the result?”

“We’ll save the technical terms for the coroner. Well and truly coshed. First blow probably killed him, but whoever it was made sure. Quite a nasty business.”

“Yes,” said Lejeune.

He was a sturdy man, dark haired and grey eyed. He had a misleadingly quiet manner, but his gestures were sometimes surprisingly graphic and betrayed his French Huguenot ancestry.

He said thoughtfully:

“Nastier than would be necessary for robbery?”

“Was it robbery?” asked the doctor.

“One supposes so. His pockets were turned out and the lining of his cassock ripped.”

“They couldn’t have hoped for much,” said Corrigan. “Poor as a rat, most of these parish priests.”

“They battered his head in—to make sure,” mused Lejeune. “One would like to know why.”

“Two possible answers,” said Corrigan. “One, it was done by a vicious-minded young thug, who likes violence for violence’s sake—there are plenty of them about these days, more’s the pity.”

“And the other answer?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“Somebody had it in for your Father Gorman. Was that likely?”

Lejeune shook his head.

“Most unlikely. He was a popular man, well loved in the district. No enemies, as far as one can hear. And robbery’s unlikely. Unless—”

“Unless what?” asked Corrigan. “The police have a clue! Am I right?”

“He did have something on him that wasn’t taken away. It was in his shoe, as a matter of fact.”

Corrigan whistled.

“Sounds like a spy story.”

Lejeune smiled.

“It’s much simpler than that. He had a hole in his pocket. Sergeant Pine talked to his housekeeper. She’s a bit of a slattern, it seems. Didn’t keep his clothes mended in the way she might have done. She admitted that, now and again, Father Gorman would thrust a paper or a letter down the inside of his shoe—to prevent it from going down into the lining of his cassock.”

“And the killer didn’t know that?”

“The killer never thought of that! Assuming, that is, that this piece of paper is what he may have been wanting—rather than a miserly amount of small

change.”

“What was on the paper?”

Lejeune reached into a drawer and took out a flimsy piece of creased paper.

“Just a list of names,” he said.

Corrigan looked at it curiously.

Ormerod

Sandford

Parkinson

Hesketh-Dubois

Shaw

Harmondsworth

Tuckerton

Corrigan?

Delafontaine?

His eyebrows rose.

“I see I’m on the list!”

“Do any of the names mean anything to you?” asked the inspector.

“None of them.”

“And you’ve never met Father Gorman?”

“Never.”

“Then you won’t be able to help us much.”

“Any ideas as to what this list means—if anything?”

Lejeune did not reply directly.

“A boy called at Father Gorman’s about seven o’clock in the evening. Said a woman was dying and wanted the priest. Father Gorman went with him.”

“Where to? If you know.”

“We know. It didn’t take long to check up. Twenty-three Benthall Street. House owned by a woman named Coppins. The sick woman was a Mrs. Davis. The priest got there at a quarter past seven and was with her for about half an hour. Mrs. Davis died just before the ambulance arrived to take her to hospital.”

“I see.”

“The next we hear of Father Gorman is at Tony’s Place, a small down-at-heel café. Quite decent, nothing criminal about it, serves refreshment of poor quality and isn’t much patronised. Father Gorman asked for a cup of coffee. Then apparently he felt in his pocket, couldn’t find what he wanted and asked the proprietor, Tony, for a piece of paper. This—” he gestured with his finger, “is the piece of paper.”

“And then?”

“When Tony brought the coffee, the priest was writing on the paper. Shortly afterwards he left, leaving his coffee practically untasted (for which I don’t blame him), having completed this list and shoved it into his shoe.”

“Anybody else in the place?”

“Three boys of the Teddy boy type came in and sat at one table and an elderly man came in and sat at another. The latter went away without ordering.”

“He followed the priest?”

“Could be. Tony didn’t notice when he went. Didn’t notice what he looked like, either. Described him as an inconspicuous type of man. Respectable. The kind of man that looks like everybody else. Medium height, he thinks, dark blue overcoat—or could be brown. Not very dark and not very fair. No reason he should have had anything to do with it. One just doesn’t know. He hasn’t come forward to say he saw the priest in Tony’s place—but it’s early days yet. We’re asking for anyone who saw Father Gorman between a quarter to eight and eight fifteen to communicate with us. Only two people so far have responded: a woman and a chemist who had a shop nearby. I’ll be going to see them presently. His body was found at eight fifteen by two small boys in West Street—you know it? Practically an alleyway, bounded by the railway on one side. The rest—you know.”

Corrigan nodded. He tapped the paper.

“What’s your feeling about this?”

“I think it’s important,” said Lejeune.

“The dying woman told him something and he got these names down on paper as soon as he could before he forgot them? The only thing is—would he have done that if he’d been told under seal of the confessional?”

“It needn’t have been under a seal of secrecy,” said Lejeune. “Suppose, for instance, these names have a connection of—say, blackmail—”

“That’s your idea, is it?”

“I haven’t any ideas yet. This is just a working hypothesis. These people were being blackmailed. The dying woman was either the blackmailer, or she knew about the blackmail. I’d say that the general idea was, repentance, confession, and a wish to make reparation as far as possible. Father Gorman assumed the responsibility.”

“And then?”

“Everything else is conjectural,” said Lejeune. “Say it was a paying racket, and someone didn’t want it to stop paying. Someone knew Mrs. Davis was

dying and that she'd sent for the priest. The rest follows."

"I wonder now," said Corrigan, studying the paper again. "Why do you think there's an interrogation mark after the last two names?"

"It could be that Father Gorman wasn't sure he'd remembered those two names correctly."

"It might have been Mulligan instead of Corrigan," agreed the doctor with a grin. "That's likely enough. But I'd say that with a name like Delafontaine, either you'd remember it or you wouldn't—if you know what I mean. It's odd that there isn't a single address—" He read down the list again.

"Parkinson—lots of Parkinsons. Sandford, not uncommon—Hesketh-Dubois—that's a bit of a mouthful. Can't be many of them."

On a sudden impulse he leaned forward and took the telephone directory from the desk.

"E to L. Let's see. Hesketh, Mrs. A... John and Co., Plumbers... Sir Isidore. Ah! here we are! Hesketh-Dubois, Lady, Forty-nine, Ellesmere Square, S.W.1. What say we just ring her up?"

"Saying what?"

"Inspiration will come," said Doctor Corrigan airily.

"Go ahead," said Lejeune.

"What?" Corrigan stared at him.

"I said go ahead," Lejeune spoke airily. "Don't look so taken aback." He himself picked up the receiver. "Give me an outside line." He looked at Corrigan. "Number?"

"Grosvenor 64578."

Lejeune repeated it, then handed the receiver over to Corrigan.

“Enjoy yourself,” he said.

Faintly puzzled, Corrigan looked at him as he waited. The ringing tone continued for some time before anyone answered. Then, interspersed with heavy breathing, a woman’s voice said:

“Grosvenor 64578.”

“Is that Lady Hesketh-Dubois’s house?”

“Well—well, yes— I mean—”

Doctor Corrigan ignored these uncertainties.

“Can I speak to her, please?”

“No, that you can’t do! Lady Hesketh-Dubois died last April.”

“Oh!” Startled, Dr. Corrigan ignored the “Who is it speaking, please?” and gently replaced the receiver.

He looked coldly at Inspector Lejeune.

“So that’s why you were so ready to let me ring up.”

Lejeune smiled maliciously.

“We don’t really neglect the obvious,” he pointed out.

“Last April,” said Corrigan thoughtfully. “Five months ago. Five months since blackmail or whatever it was has failed to worry her. She didn’t commit suicide, or anything like that?”

“No. She died of a tumour on the brain.”

“So now we start again,” said Corrigan, looking down at the list.

Lejeune sighed.

“We don’t really know that list had anything to do with it,” he pointed out. “It may have been just an ordinary coshing on a foggy night—and precious little hope of finding who did it unless we have a piece of luck....”

Dr. Corrigan said:

“Do you mind if I continue to concentrate on this list?”

“Go ahead. I wish you all the luck in the world.”

“Meaning I’m not likely to get anywhere if you haven’t! Don’t be too sure. I shall concentrate on Corrigan. Mr. or Mrs. or Miss Corrigan—with a big interrogation mark.”

Three

I

“Well, really, Mr. Lejeune, I don’t see what more I can tell you! I told it all before to your sergeant. I don’t know who Mrs. Davis was, or where she came from. She’d been with me about six months. She paid her rent regular, and she seemed a nice quiet respectable person, and what more you expect me to say I’m sure I don’t know.”

Mrs. Coppins paused for breath and looked at Lejeune with some displeasure. He gave her the gentle melancholy smile which he knew by experience was not without its effect.

“Not that I wouldn’t be willing to help if I could,” she amended.

“Thank you. That’s what we need—help. Women know—they feel instinctively—so much more than a man can know.”

It was a good gambit, and it worked.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Coppins. “I wish Coppins could hear you. So hoity-toity and offhand he always was. ‘Saying you know things when you haven’t got anything to go on!’ he’d say and snort. And nine times out of ten I was right.”

“That’s why I’d like to hear what ideas you have about Mrs. Davis. Was she—an unhappy woman, do you think?”

“Now as to that—no, I wouldn’t say so. Businesslike. That’s what she always seemed. Methodical. As though she’d got her life planned and was acting accordingly. She had a job, I understand, with one of these consumer research associations. Going around and asking people what soap powder they used, or flour, and what they spend on their weekly budget and how it’s divided up. Of course I’ve always felt that sort of thing is snooping really—and why the Government or anyone else wants to know beats me! All you hear at the end of it is only what everybody has known perfectly

well all along—but there, there’s a craze for that sort of thing nowadays. And if you’ve got to have it, I should say that poor Mrs. Davis would do the job very nicely. A pleasant manner, not nosy, just businesslike and matter-of-fact.”

“You don’t know the actual name of the firm or association that employed her?”

“No, I don’t, I’m afraid.”

“Did she ever mention relatives—?”

“No. I gathered she was a widow and had lost her husband many years ago. A bit of an invalid he’d been, but she never talked much about him.”

“She didn’t mention where she came from—what part of the country?”

“I don’t think she was a Londoner. Came from somewhere up north, I should say.”

“You didn’t feel there was anything—well, mysterious about her?”

Lejeune felt a doubt as he spoke. If she was a suggestible woman—But Mrs. Coppins did not take advantage of the opportunity offered to her.

“Well, I can’t say really that I did. Certainly not from anything she ever said. The only thing that perhaps might have made me wonder was her suitcase. Good quality it was, but not new. And the initials on it had been painted over. J.D.—Jessie Davis. But originally it had been J. something else. H., I think. But it might have been an A. Still, I didn’t think anything of that at the time. You can often pick up a good piece of luggage secondhand ever so cheap, and then it’s natural to get the initials altered. She hadn’t a lot of stuff—only the one case.”

Lejeune knew that. The dead woman had had curiously few personal possessions. No letters had been kept, no photographs. She had had apparently no insurance card, no bankbook, no chequebook. Her clothes were of good everyday serviceable quality, nearly new.

“She seemed quite happy?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

He pounced on the faint doubtful tone in her voice.

“You only suppose so?”

“Well, it’s not the kind of thing you think about, is it? I should say she was nicely off, with a good job, and quite satisfied with her life. She wasn’t the bubbling over sort. But of course, when she got ill—”

“Yes, when she got ill?” he prompted her.

“Vexed, she was at first. When she went down with ’flu, I mean. It would put all her schedule out, she said. Missing appointments and all that. But ’flu’s ’flu, and you can’t ignore it when it’s there. So she stopped in bed, and made herself tea on the gas ring, and took aspirin. I said why not have the doctor and she said no point in it. Nothing to do for ’flu but stay in bed and keep warm and I’d better not come near her to catch it. I did a bit of cooking for her when she got better. Hot soup and toast. And a rice pudding now and again. It got her down, of course, ’flu does—but not more than what’s usual, I’d say. It’s after the fever goes down that you get the depression—and she got that like everyone does. She sat there, by the gas fire, I remember, and said to me, ‘I wish one didn’t have so much time to think. I don’t like having time to think. It gets me down.’”

Lejeune continued to look deeply attentive and Mrs. Coppins warmed to her theme.

“Lent her some magazines, I did. But she didn’t seem able to keep her mind on reading. Said once, I remember, ‘If things aren’t all they should be, it’s better not to know about it, don’t you agree?’ and I said, ‘That’s right, dearie.’ And she said, ‘I don’t know—I’ve never really been sure.’ And I said that was all right, then. And she said, “Everything I’ve done has always been perfectly straightforward and aboveboard. I’ve nothing to reproach myself with.’ And I said, ‘Of course you haven’t, dear.’ But I did just wonder in my own mind whether in the firm that employed her there

mightn't have been some funny business with the accounts maybe, and she'd got wind of it—but had felt it wasn't really her business.”

“Possible,” agreed Lejeune.

“Anyway, she got well again—or nearly so, and went back to work. I told her it was too soon. Give yourself another day or two, I said. And there, how right I was! Come back the second evening, she did, and I could see at once she'd got a high fever. Couldn't hardly climb the stairs. You must have the doctor, I says, but no, she wouldn't. Worse and worse she got, all that day, her eyes glassy, and her cheeks like fire, and her breathing terrible. And the next day in the evening she said to me, hardly able to get the words out: 'A priest. I must have a priest. And quickly...or it will be too late.' But it wasn't our vicar she wanted. It had to be a Roman Catholic priest. I never knew she was a Roman, never any crucifix about or anything like that.”

But there had been a crucifix, tucked away at the bottom of the suitcase. Lejeune did not mention it. He sat listening.

“I saw young Mike in the street and I sent him for that Father Gorman at St. Dominic's. And I rang for the doctor, and the hospital on my own account, not saying nothing to her.”

“You took the priest up to her when he came?”

“Yes, I did. And left them together.”

“Did either of them say anything?”

“Well now, I can't exactly remember. I was talking myself, saying here was the priest and now she'd be all right, trying to cheer her up, but I do call to mind now as I closed the door I heard her say something about wickedness. Yes—and something, too, about a horse—horse racing, maybe. I like a half crown on myself occasionally—but there's a lot of crookedness goes on in racing, so they say.”

“Wickedness,” said Lejeune. He was struck by the word.

“Have to confess their sins, don’t they, Romans, before they die? So I suppose that was it.”

Lejeune did not doubt that that was it, but his imagination was stirred by the word used. Wickedness....

Something rather special in wickedness, he thought, if the priest who knew about it was followed and clubbed to death....

II

There was nothing to be learnt from the other three lodgers in the house. Two of them, a bank clerk and an elderly man who worked in a shoe shop, had been there for some years. The third was a girl of twenty-two who had come there recently and had a job in a nearby department store. All three of them barely knew Mrs. Davis by sight.

The woman who had reported having seen Father Gorman in the street that evening had no useful information to give. She was a Catholic who attended St. Dominic’s and she knew Father Gorman by sight. She had seen him turn out of Benthall Street and go into Tony’s Place about ten minutes to eight. That was all.

Mr. Osborne, the proprietor of the chemist’s shop on the corner of Barton Street, had a better contribution to make.

He was a small, middle-aged man, with a bald domed head, a round ingenuous face, and glasses.

“Good evening, Chief Inspector. Come behind, will you?” He held up the flap of an old-fashioned counter. Lejeune passed behind and through a dispensing alcove where a young man in a white overall was making up bottles of medicine with the swiftness of a professional conjurer, and so through an archway into a tiny room with a couple of easy chairs, a table and a desk. Mr. Osborne pulled the curtain of the archway behind him in a secretive manner and sat down in one chair, motioning to Lejeune to take the other. He leaned forward, his eyes glinting in pleasurable excitement.

“It just happens that I may be able to assist you. It wasn’t a busy evening—nothing much to do, the weather being unfavourable. My young lady was behind the counter. We keep open until eight on Thursdays always. The fog was coming on and there weren’t many people about. I’d gone to the door to look at the weather, thinking to myself that the fog was coming up fast. The weather forecast had said it would. I stood there for a bit—nothing going on inside that my young lady couldn’t deal with—face creams and bath salts and all that. Then I saw Father Gorman coming along on the other side of the street. I know him quite well by sight, of course. A shocking thing, this murder, attacking a man so well thought of as he is. ‘There’s Father Gorman,’ I said to myself. He was going in the direction of West Street, it’s the next turn on the left before the railway, as you know. A little way behind him there was another man. It wouldn’t have entered my head to notice or think anything of that, but quite suddenly this second man came to a stop—quite abruptly, just when he was level with my door. I wondered why he’d stopped—and then I noticed that Father Gorman, a little way ahead, was slowing down. He didn’t quite stop. It was as though he was thinking of something so hard that he almost forgot he was walking. Then he started on again, and this other man started to walk, too—rather fast. I thought—inasmuch as I thought at all, that perhaps it was someone who knew Father Gorman and wanted to catch him up and speak to him.”

“But in actual fact he could simply have been following him?”

“That’s what I’m sure he was doing now—not that I thought anything of it at the time. What with the fog coming up, I lost sight of them both almost at once.”

“Can you describe this man at all?”

Lejeune’s voice was not confident. He was prepared for the usual nondescript characteristics. But Mr. Osborne was made of different mettle to Tony of Tony’s Place.

“Well, yes, I think so,” he said with complacency. “He was a tall man—”

“Tall? How tall?”

“Well—five eleven to six feet, at least, I’d say. Though he might have seemed taller than he was because he was very thin. Sloping shoulders he had, and a definite Adam’s apple. Grew his hair rather long under his Homburg. A great beak of a nose. Very noticeable. Naturally I couldn’t say as to the colour of his eyes. I saw him in profile as you’ll appreciate. Perhaps fifty as to age. I’m going by the walk. A youngish man moves quite differently.”

Lejeune made a mental survey of the distance across the street, then back again to Mr. Osborne, and wondered. He wondered very much....

A description such as that given by the chemist could mean one of two things. It could spring from an unusually vivid imagination—he had known many examples of that kind, mostly from women. They built up a fancy portrait of what they thought a murderer ought to look like. Such fancy portraits, however, usually contained some decidedly spurious details—such as rolling eyes, beetle brows, apeline jaws, snarling ferocity. The description given by Mr. Osborne sounded like the description of a real person. In that case it was possible that here was the witness in a million—a man who observed accurately and in detail—and who would be quite unshakable as to what he had seen.

Again Lejeune considered the distance across the street. His eyes rested thoughtfully on the chemist.

He asked: “Do you think you would recognise this man if you saw him again?”

“Oh, yes.” Mr. Osborne was supremely confident. “I never forget a face. It’s one of my hobbies. I’ve always said that if one of these wife murderers came into my place and bought a nice little package of arsenic, I’d be able to swear to him at the trial. I’ve always had my hopes that something like that would happen one day.”

“But it hasn’t happened yet?”

Mr. Osborne admitted sadly that it hadn’t.

“And not likely to now,” he added wistfully. “I’m selling this business. Getting a very nice price for it, and retiring to Bournemouth.”

“It looks a nice place you’ve got here.”

“It’s got class,” said Mr. Osborne, a note of pride in his voice. “Nearly a hundred years we’ve been established here. My grandfather and my father before me. A good old-fashioned family business. Not that I saw it that way as a boy. Stuffy, I thought it. Like many a lad, I was bitten by the stage. Felt sure I could act. My father didn’t try to stop me. ‘See what you can make of it, my boy,’ he said. ‘You’ll find you’re no Sir Henry Irving.’ And how right he was! Very wise man, my father. Eighteen months or so in repertory and back I came into the business. Took a pride in it, I did. We’ve always kept good solid stuff. Old-fashioned. But quality. But nowadays”—he shook his head sadly—“disappointing for a pharmacist. All this toilet stuff. You’ve got to keep it. Half the profits come from all that muck. Powder and lipstick and face creams; and hair shampoos and fancy sponge bags. I don’t touch the stuff myself. I have a young lady behind the counter who attends to all that. No, it’s not what it used to be, having a chemist’s establishment. However, I’ve a good sum put by, and I’m getting a very good price, and I’ve made a down payment on a very nice little bungalow near Bournemouth.”

He added:

“Retire whilst you can still enjoy life. That’s my motto. I’ve got plenty of hobbies. Butterflies, for instance. And a bit of bird watching now and then. And gardening—plenty of good books on how to start a garden. And there’s travel. I might go on one of these cruises—see foreign parts before it’s too late.”

Lejeune rose.

“Well, I wish you the best of luck,” he said. “And if, before you actually leave these parts, you should catch sight of that man—”

“I’ll let you know at once, Mr. Lejeune. Naturally. You can count on me. It will be a pleasure. As I’ve told you, I’ve a very good eye for a face. I shall

be on the lookout. On the qui vive, as they say. Oh yes. You can rely on me. It will be a pleasure.”

Four

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

I came out of the Old Vic, my friend Hermia Redcliffe beside me. We had been to see a performance of Macbeth. It was raining hard. As we ran across the street to the spot where I had parked the car, Hermia remarked unjustly that whenever one went to the Old Vic it always rained.

“It’s just one of those things.”

I dissented from this view. I said that, unlike sundials, she remembered only the rainy hours.

“Now at Glyndebourne,” went on Hermia as I let in the clutch, “I’ve always been lucky. I can’t imagine it other than perfection: the music—the glorious flower borders—the white flower border in particular.”

We discussed Glyndebourne and its music for a while, and then Hermia remarked:

“We’re not going to Dover for breakfast, are we?”

“Dover? What an extraordinary idea. I thought we’d go to the Fantasie. One needs some really good food and drink after all the magnificent blood and gloom of Macbeth, Shakespeare always makes me ravenous.”

“Yes. So does Wagner. Smoked salmon sandwiches at Covent Garden in the intervals are never enough to stay the pangs. As to why Dover, it’s because you’re driving in that direction.”

“One has to go round,” I explained.

“But you’ve overdone going round. You’re well away on the Old (or is it the New?) Kent Road.”

I took stock of my surroundings and had to admit that Hermia, as usual, was quite right.

“I always get muddled here,” I said in apology.

“It is confusing,” Hermia agreed. “Round and round Waterloo Station.”

Having at last successfully negotiated Westminster Bridge we resumed our conversation, discussing the production of Macbeth that we had just been viewing. My friend Hermia Redcliffe was a handsome young woman of twenty-eight. Cast in the heroic mould, she had an almost flawless Greek profile, and a mass of dark chestnut hair, coiled on the nape of her neck. My sister always referred to her as “Mark’s girlfriend” with an intonation of inverted commas about the term that never failed to annoy me.

The Fantasie gave us a pleasant welcome and showed us to a small table against the crimson velvet wall. The Fantasie is deservedly popular, and the tables are close together. As we sat down, our neighbors at the next table greeted us cheerfully. David Ardingly was a lecturer in History at Oxford. He introduced his companion, a very pretty girl, with a fashionable hairdo, all ends, bits and pieces, sticking out at improbable angles on the crown of her head. Strange to say, it suited her. She had enormous blue eyes and a mouth that was usually half open. She was, as all David’s girls were known to be, extremely silly. David, who was a remarkably clever young man, could only find relaxation with girls who were practically half-witted.

“This is my particular pet, Poppy,” he explained. “Meet Mark and Hermia. They’re very serious and highbrow and you must try and live up to them. We’ve just come from Do it for Kicks. Lovely show! I bet you two are straight from Shakespeare or a revival of Ibsen.”

“Macbeth at the Old Vic,” said Hermia.

“Ah, what do you think of Batterson’s production?”

“I liked it,” said Hermia. “The lighting was very interesting. And I’ve never seen the banquet scene so well managed.”

“Ah, but what about the witches?”

“Awful!” said Hermia. “They always are,” she added.

David agreed.

“A pantomime element seems bound to creep in,” he said. “All of them capering about and behaving like a threefold Demon King. You can’t help expecting a Good Fairy to appear in white with spangles to say in a flat voice:

Your evil shall not triumph. In the end,

It is Macbeth who will be round the bend.”

We all laughed, but David, who was quick on the uptake, gave me a sharp glance.

“What gives with you?” he asked.

“Nothing. It was just that I was reflecting only the other day about Evil and Demon Kings in pantomime. Yes—and Good Fairies, too.”

“A propos de what?”

“Oh, in Chelsea at a coffee bar.”

“How smart and up-to-date you are, aren’t you, Mark? All among the Chelsea set. Where heiresses in tights marry corner boys on the make. That’s where Poppy ought to be, isn’t it, duckie?”

Poppy opened her enormous eyes still wider.

“I hate Chelsea,” she protested. “I like the Fantasia much better! Such lovely, lovely food.”

“Good for you, Poppy. Anyway, you’re not really rich enough for Chelsea. Tell us more about Macbeth, Mark, and the awful witches. I know how I’d produce the witches if I were doing a production.”

David had been a prominent member of the O.U.D.S. in the past.

“Well, how?”

“I’d make them very ordinary. Just sly quiet old women. Like the witches in a country village.”

“But there aren’t any witches nowadays?” said Poppy, staring at him.

“You say that because you’re a London girl. There’s still a witch in every village in rural England. Old Mrs. Black, in the third cottage up the hill. Little boys are told not to annoy her, and she’s given presents of eggs and a home-baked cake now and again. Because,” he wagged a finger impressively, “if you get across her, your cows will stop giving milk, your potato crop will fail, or little Johnnie will twist his ankle. You must keep on the right side of old Mrs. Black. Nobody says so outright—but they all know!”

“You’re joking,” said Poppy, pouting.

“No, I’m not. I’m right, aren’t I, Mark?”

“Surely all that kind of superstition has died out completely with education,” said Hermia sceptically.

“Not in the rural pockets of the land. What do you say, Mark?”

“I think perhaps you’re right,” I said slowly. “Though I wouldn’t really know. I’ve never lived in the country much.”

“I don’t see how you could produce the witches as ordinary old women,” said Hermia, reverting to David’s earlier remark. “They must have a supernatural atmosphere about them, surely.”

“Oh, but just think,” said David. “It’s rather like madness. If you have someone who raves and staggers about with straws in their hair and looks mad, it’s not frightening at all! But I remember being sent once with a message to a doctor at a mental home and I was shown into a room to wait, and there was a nice elderly lady there, sipping a glass of milk. She made

some conventional remark about the weather and then suddenly she leant forward and asked in a low voice:

“‘Is it your poor child who’s buried there behind the fireplace?’ And then she nodded her head and said ‘12:10 exactly. It’s always at the same time every day. Pretend you don’t notice the blood.’

“It was the matter-of-fact way she said it that was so spine-chilling.”

“Was there really someone buried behind the fireplace?” Poppy wanted to know.

David ignored her and went on:

“Then take mediums. At one moment trances, darkened rooms, knocks and raps. Afterwards the medium sits up, pats her hair and goes home to a meal of fish and chips, just an ordinary quite jolly woman.”

“So your idea of the witches,” I said, “is three old Scottish crones with second sight—who practise their arts in secret, muttering their spells around a cauldron, conjuring up spirits, but remaining themselves just an ordinary trio of old women. Yes—it could be impressive.”

“If you could ever get any actors to play it that way,” said Hermia drily.

“You have something there,” admitted David. “Any hint of madness in the script and an actor is immediately determined to go to town on it! The same with sudden deaths. No actor can just quietly collapse and fall down dead. He has to groan, stagger, roll his eyes, gasp, clutch his heart, clutch his head, and make a terrific performance of it. Talking of performances, what did you think of Fielding’s *Macbeth*? Great division of opinion among the critics.”

“I thought it was terrific,” said Hermia. “That scene with the doctor, after the sleepwalking scene. ‘Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d.’ He made clear what I’d never thought of before—that he was really ordering the doctor to kill her. And yet he loved his wife. He brought out the struggle

between his fear and his love. That ‘Thou shouldst have died hereafter’ was the most poignant thing I’ve ever known.”

“Shakespeare might get a few surprises if he saw his plays acted nowadays,” I said drily.

“Burbage and Co. had already quenched a good deal of his spirit, I suspect,” said David.

Hermia murmured:

“The eternal surprise of the author at what the producer has done to him.”

“Didn’t somebody called Bacon really write Shakespeare?” asked Poppy.

“That theory is quite out of date nowadays,” said David kindly. “And what do you know of Bacon?”

“He invented gunpowder,” said Poppy triumphantly.

“You see why I love this girl?” he said. “The things she knows are always so unexpected. Francis, not Roger, my love.”

“I thought it interesting,” said Hermia, “that Fielding played the part of Third Murderer. Is there a precedent for that?”

“I believe so,” said David. “How convenient it must have been in those times,” he went on, “to be able to call up a handy murderer whenever you wanted a little job done. Fun if one could do it nowadays.”

“But it is done,” protested Hermia. “Gangsters. Hoods—or whatever you call them. Chicago and all that.”

“Ah,” said David. “But what I meant was not gangsterdom, not racketeers or Crime Barons. Just ordinary everyday folk who want to get rid of someone. That business rival; Aunt Emily, so rich and so unfortunately long-lived; that awkward husband always in the way. How convenient if you could ring up Harrods and say ‘Please send along two good murderers, will you?’”

We all laughed.

“But one can do that in a way, can’t one?” said Poppy.

We turned towards her.

“What way, poppet?” asked David.

“Well, I mean, people can do that if they want to...People like us, as you said. Only I believe it’s very expensive.”

Poppy’s eyes were wide and ingenuous, her lips were slightly parted.

“What do you mean?” asked David curiously.

Poppy looked confused.

“Oh—I expect—I’ve got it mixed. I meant the Pale Horse. All that sort of thing.”

“A pale horse? What kind of a pale horse?”

Poppy flushed and her eyes dropped.

“I’m being stupid. It’s just something someone mentioned—but I must have got it all wrong.”

“Have some lovely Coupe Nesselrode,” said David kindly.

II

One of the oddest things in life, as we all know, is the way that when you have heard a thing mentioned, within twenty-four hours you nearly always come across it again. I had an instance of that the next morning.

My telephone rang and I answered it—

“Flaxman 73841.”

A kind of gasp came through the phone. Then a voice said breathlessly but defiantly:

“I’ve thought about it, and I’ll come!”

I cast round wildly in my mind.

“Splendid,” I said, stalling for time. “Er—is that—?”

“After all,” said the voice, “lightning never strikes twice.”

“Are you sure you’ve got the right number?”

“Of course I have. You’re Mark Easterbrook, aren’t you?”

“Got it!” I said. “Mrs. Oliver.”

“Oh,” said the voice, surprised. “Didn’t you know who it was? I never thought of that. It’s about that fête of Rhoda’s. I’ll come and sign books if she wants me to.”

“That’s frightfully nice of you. They’ll put you up, of course.”

“There won’t be parties, will there?” asked Mrs. Oliver apprehensively.

“You know the kind of thing,” she went on. “People coming up to me and saying am I writing something just now—when you’d think they could see I’m drinking ginger ale or tomato juice and not writing at all. And saying they like my books—which of course is pleasing, but I’ve never found the right answer. If you say ‘I’m so glad’ it sounds like ‘Pleased to meet you.’ A kind of stock phrase. Well, it is, of course. And you don’t think they’ll want me to go out to the Pink Horse and have drinks?”

“The Pink Horse?”

“Well, the Pale Horse. Pubs, I mean. I’m so bad in pubs. I can just drink beer at a pinch, but it makes me terribly gurgly.”

“Just what do you mean by the Pale Horse?”

“There’s a pub called that down there, isn’t there? Or perhaps I do mean the Pink Horse? Or perhaps that’s somewhere else. I may have just imagined it. I do imagine quite a lot of things.”

“How’s the Cockatoo getting on?” I asked.

“The Cockatoo?” Mrs. Oliver sounded at sea.

“And the cricket ball?”

“Really,” said Mrs. Oliver with dignity. “I think you must be mad or have a hangover or something. Pink Horses and cockatoos and cricket balls.”

She rang off.

I was still considering this second mention of the Pale Horse when my telephone rang again.

This time, it was Mr. Soames White, a distinguished solicitor who rang up to remind me that under the will of my godmother, Lady Hesketh-Dubois, I was entitled to choose three of her pictures.

“There is nothing outstandingly valuable, of course,” said Mr. Soames White in his defeatist melancholy tones. “But I understand that at some time you expressed admiration of some of the pictures to the deceased.”

“She had some very charming watercolours of Indian scenes,” I said. “I believe you already have written to me about this matter, but I’m afraid it slipped my memory.”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Soames White. “But probate has now been granted, and the executors, of whom I am one, are arranging for the sale of the effects of her London house. If you could go round to Ellesmere Square in the near future....”

“I’ll go now,” I said.

It seemed an unfavourable morning for work.

III

Carrying the three watercolours of my choice under my arm, I emerged from Forty-nine Ellesmere Square and immediately cannoned into someone coming up the steps to the front door. I apologised, received apologies in return, and was just about to hail a passing taxi when something clicked in my mind and I turned sharply to ask:

“Hallo—isn’t it Corrigan?”

“It is—and—yes—you’re Mark Easterbrook!”

Jim Corrigan and I had been friends in our Oxford days—but it must have been fifteen years or more since we had last met.

“Thought I knew you—but couldn’t place you for the moment,” said Corrigan. “I read your articles now and again—and enjoy them, I must say.”

“What about you? Have you gone in for research as you meant to do?”

Corrigan sighed.

“Hardly. It’s an expensive job—if you want to strike out on your own. Unless you can find a tame millionaire, or a suggestible Trust.”

“Liver flukes, wasn’t it?”

“What a memory! No, I went off liver flukes. The properties of the secretions of the Mandarian glands; that’s my present-day interest. You wouldn’t have heard of them! Connected with the spleen. Apparently serving no purpose whatever!”

He spoke with a scientist’s enthusiasm.

“What’s the big idea, then?”

“Well,” Corrigan sounded apologetic. “I have a theory that they may influence behaviour. To put it very crudely, they may act rather as the fluid in your car brakes does. No fluid—the brakes don’t act. In human beings, a

deficiency in these secretions might— I only say might—make you a criminal.”

I whistled.

“And what happens to Original Sin?”

“What indeed?” said Dr. Corrigan. “The parsons wouldn’t like it, would they? I haven’t been able to interest anyone in my theory, unfortunately. So I’m a police surgeon, in N.W. division. Quite interesting. One sees a lot of criminal types. But I won’t bore you with shop—unless you’ll come and have some lunch with me?”

“I’d like to. But you were going in there,” I nodded towards the house behind Corrigan.

“Not really,” said Corrigan. “I was just going to gatecrash.”

“There’s nobody there but a caretaker.”

“So I imagined. But I wanted to find out something about the late Lady Hesketh-Dubois if I could.”

“I daresay I can tell you more than a caretaker could. She was my godmother.”

“Was she indeed? That’s a bit of luck. Where shall we go to feed? There’s a little place off Lowndes Square—not grand, but they do a special kind of seafood soup.”

We settled ourselves in the little restaurant—a cauldron of steaming soup was brought to us by a pale-faced lad in French sailor trousers.

“Delicious,” I said, sampling the soup. “Now then, Corrigan, what do you want to know about the old lady? And incidentally, why?”

“Why’s rather a long story,” said my friend. “First tell me what kind of an old lady she was?”

I considered.

“She was an old-fashioned type,” I said. “Victorian. Widow of an ex-Governor of some obscure island. She was rich and liked her comfort. Went abroad in the winters to Estoril and places like that. Her house is hideous, full of Victorian furniture and the worst and most ornate kind of Victorian silver. She had no children, but kept a couple of fairly well-behaved poodles whom she loved dearly. She was opinionated and a staunch Conservative. Kindly, but autocratic. Very set in her ways. What more do you want to know?”

“I’m not quite sure,” said Corrigan. “Was she ever likely to have been blackmailed, would you say?”

“Blackmailed?” I asked in lively astonishment. “I can imagine nothing more unlikely. What is this all about?”

It was then I heard for the first time of the circumstances of Father Gorman’s murder.

I laid down my spoon and asked,

“This list of names? Have you got it?”

“Not the original. But I copied them out. Here you are.”

I took the paper he produced from his pocket and proceeded to study it.

“Parkinson? I know two Parkinsons. Arthur who went into the Navy. Then there’s a Henry Parkinson in one of the Ministries. Ormerod—there’s a Major Ormerod in the Blues—Sandford—our old Rector when I was a boy was Sandford. Harmondsworth? No—Tuckerton—” I paused. “Tuckerton... Not Thomasina Tuckerton, I suppose?”

Corrigan looked at me curiously.

“Could be, for all I know. Who’s she and what does she do?”

“Nothing now. Her death was in the paper about a week ago.”

“That’s not much help, then.”

I continued with my reading. “Shaw. I know a dentist called Shaw, and there’s Jerome Shaw, Q.C.... Delafontaine—I’ve heard that name lately, but I can’t remember where. Corrigan. Does that refer to you, by any chance?”

“I devoutly hope not. I’ve a feeling that it’s unlucky to have your name on that list.”

“Maybe. What made you think of blackmail in connection with it?”

“It was Detective-Inspector Lejeune’s suggestion if I remember rightly. It seemed the most likely possibility—But there are plenty of others. This may be a list of dope smugglers or drug addicts or secret agents—it may be anything in fact. There’s only one thing sure, it was important enough for murder to be committed in order to get hold of it.”

I asked curiously: “Do you always take such an interest in the police side of your work?”

He shook his head.

“Can’t say I do. My interest is in criminal character. Background, upbringing, and particularly glandular health—all that!”

“Then why the interest in this list of names?”

“Blessed if I know,” said Corrigan slowly. “Seeing my own name on the list, perhaps. Up the Corrigans! One Corrigan to the rescue of another Corrigan.”

“Rescue? Then you definitely see this as a list of victims—not a list of malefactors. But surely it could be either?”

“You’re entirely right. And it’s certainly odd that I should be so positive. Perhaps it’s just a feeling. Or perhaps it’s something to do with Father Gorman. I didn’t come across him very often, but he was a fine man, respected by everyone and loved by his own flock. He was the good tough

militant kind. I can't get it out of my head that he considered this list a matter of life or death...."

"Aren't the police getting anywhere?"

"Oh yes, but it's a long business. Checking here, checking there. Checking the antecedents of the woman who called him out that night."

"Who was she?"

"No mystery about her, apparently. Widow. We had an idea that her husband might have been connected with horse racing, but that doesn't seem to be so. She worked for a small commercial firm that does consumer research. Nothing wrong there. They are a reputable firm in a small way. They don't know much about her. She came from the north of England—Lancashire. The only odd thing about her is that she had so few personal possessions."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I expect that's true for a lot more people than we ever imagine. It's a lonely world."

"Yes, as you say."

"Anyway, you decided to take a hand?"

"Just nosing around. Hesketh-Dubois is an uncommon name. I thought if I could find out a little about the lady—" He left the sentence unfinished. "But from what you tell me, there doesn't seem to be any possible lead there."

"Neither a dope addict nor a dope smuggler," I assured him. "Certainly not a secret agent. Has led far too blameless a life to have been blackmailed. I can't imagine what kind of a list she could possibly be on. Her jewellery she keeps at the bank so she wouldn't be a hopeful prospect for robbery."

"Any other Hesketh-Dubois that you know about? Sons?"

“No children. She’s got a nephew and a niece, I think, but not of that name. Her husband was an only child.”

Corrigan told me sourly that I’d been a lot of help. He looked at his watch, remarked cheerfully that he was due to cut somebody up, and we parted.

I went home thoughtful, found it impossible to concentrate on my work, and finally, on an impulse, rang up David Ardingly.

“David? Mark here. That girl I met with you the other evening. Poppy. What’s her other name?”

“Going to pinch my girl, is that it?”

David sounded highly amused.

“You’ve got so many of them,” I retorted. “You could surely spare one.”

“You’ve got a heavyweight of your own, old boy. I thought you were going steady with her.”

“Going steady.” A repulsive term. And yet, I thought, struck suddenly with its aptitude, how well it described my relationship with Hermia. And why should it make me feel depressed? I had always felt in the back of my mind that someday Hermia and I would marry... I liked her better than anyone I knew. We had so much in common....

For no conceivable reason, I felt a terrible desire to yawn... Our future stretched out before me. Hermia and I going to plays of significance—that mattered. Discussions of art—of music. No doubt about it, Hermia was the perfect companion.

But not much fun, said some derisive imp, popping up from my subconscious. I was shocked.

“Gone to sleep?” asked David.

“Of course not. To tell the truth, I found your friend Poppy very refreshing.”

“Good word. She is—taken in small doses. Her actual name is Pamela Stirling, and she works in one of those arty flower places in Mayfair. You know, three dead twigs, a tulip with its petals pinned back and a speckled laurel leaf. Price three guineas.”

He gave me the address.

“Take her out and enjoy yourself,” he said in a kindly avuncular fashion. “You’ll find it a great relaxation. That girl knows nothing—she’s absolutely empty-headed. She’ll believe anything you tell her. She’s virtuous by the way, so don’t indulge in any false hopes.”

He rang off.

IV

I invaded the portals of Flower Studies Ltd. with some trepidation. An overpowering smell of gardenia nearly knocked me backwards. A number of girls, dressed in pale green sheaths and all looking exactly like Poppy, confused me. Finally I identified her. She was writing down an address with some difficulty, pausing doubtfully over the spelling of Fortescue Crescent. As soon as she was at liberty, after having further difficulties connected with producing the right change for a five-pound note, I claimed her attention.

“We met the other night—with David Ardingly,” I reminded her.

“Oh yes!” agreed Poppy warmly, her eyes passing vaguely over my head.

“I wanted to ask you something.” I felt sudden qualms. “Perhaps I’d better buy some flowers?”

Like an automaton who has had the right button pressed, Poppy said:

“We’ve some lovely roses, fresh in today.”

“These yellow ones, perhaps?” There were roses everywhere. “How much are they?”

“Vewy vewy cheap,” said Poppy in a honeyed persuasive voice. “Only five shillings each.”

I swallowed and said I would have six of them.

“And some of these vewy special leaves with them?”

I looked dubiously at the special leaves which appeared to be in an advanced state of decay. Instead I chose some bright green asparagus fern, which choice obviously lowered me in Poppy’s estimation.

“There was something I wanted to ask you,” I reiterated as Poppy was rather clumsily draping the asparagus fern round the roses. “The other evening you mentioned something called the Pale Horse.”

With a violent start, Poppy dropped the roses and the asparagus fern on the floor.

“Can you tell me more about it?”

Poppy straightened herself after stooping.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I was asking you about the Pale Horse.”

“A pale horse? What do you mean?”

“You mentioned it the other evening.”

“I’m sure I never did anything of the kind! I’ve never heard of any such thing.”

“Somebody told you about it. Who was it?”

Poppy drew a deep breath and spoke very fast.

“I don’t in the least know what you mean! And we’re not supposed to talk to customers.”... She slapped paper round my choice. “That will be thirty-

five shillings, please.”

I gave her two pound notes. She thrust six shillings into my hand and turned quickly to another customer.

Her hands, I noticed, were shaking slightly.

I went out slowly. When I had gone a little way, I realised she had quoted the wrong price (asparagus fern was seven and six) and had also given me too much change. Her mistakes in arithmetic had previously been in the other direction.

I saw again the rather lovely vacant face and the wide blue eyes. There had been something showing in those eyes....

“Scared,” I said to myself. “Scared stiff... Now why? Why?”

Five

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

“What a relief,” sighed Mrs. Oliver. “To think it’s over and nothing has happened!”

It was a moment of relaxation. Rhoda’s fête had passed off in the manner of fêtes. Violent anxiety about the weather which in the early morning appeared capricious in the extreme. Considerable argument as to whether any stalls should be set up in the open, or whether everything should take place in the long barn and the marquee. Various passionate local disputes regarding tea arrangements, produce stalls, et cetera. Tactful settlement of same by Rhoda. Periodical escapes of Rhoda’s delightful but undisciplined dogs who were supposed to be incarcerated in the house, owing to doubts as to their behaviour on this great occasion. Doubts fully justified! Arrival of pleasant but vague starlet in a profusion of pale fur, to open the fête, which she did very charmingly, adding a few moving words about the plight of refugees which puzzled everybody, since the object of the fête was the restoration of the church tower. Enormous success of the bottle stall. The usual difficulties about change. Pandemonium at teatime when every patron wanted to invade the marquee and partake of it simultaneously.

Finally, blessed arrival of evening. Displays of local dancing in the long barn were still going on. Fireworks and a bonfire were scheduled, but the weary household had now retired to the house, and were partaking of a sketchy cold meal in the dining room, indulging meanwhile in one of those desultory conversations where everyone utters their own thoughts, and pays little attention to those of other people. It was all disjointed and comfortable. The released dogs crunched bones happily under the table.

“We shall take more than we did for the Save the Children last year,” said Rhoda gleefully.

“It seems very extraordinary to me,” said Miss Macalister, the children’s Scottish nursery governess, “that Michael Brent should find the buried treasure three years in succession. I’m wondering if he gets some advance information?”

“Lady Brookbank won the pig,” said Rhoda. “I don’t think she wanted it. She looked terribly embarrassed.”

The party consisted of my cousin Rhoda, and her husband Colonel Despard, Miss Macalister, a young woman with red hair suitably called Ginger, Mrs. Oliver, and the vicar, the Rev. Caleb Dane Calthrop and his wife. The vicar was a charming elderly scholar whose principal pleasure was finding some apposite comment from the classics. This, though often an embarrassment, and a cause of bringing the conversation to a close, was perfectly in order now. The vicar never required acknowledgement of his sonorous Latin, his pleasure in having found an apt quotation was its own reward.

“As Horace says...” he observed, beaming round the table.

The usual pause happened and then:

“I think Mrs. Horsefall cheated over the bottle of champagne,” said Ginger thoughtfully. “Her nephew got it.”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop, a disconcerting woman with fine eyes, was studying Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully. She asked abruptly:

“What did you expect to happen at this fête?”

“Well, really, a murder or something like that?”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop looked interested.

“But why should it?”

“No reason at all. Most unlikely, really. But there was one at the last fête I went to.”

“I see. And it upset you?”

“Very much.”

The vicar changed from Latin to Greek.

After the pause, Miss Macalister cast doubts on the honesty of the raffle for the live duck.

“Very sporting of old Lugg at the King’s Arms to send us twelve dozen beer for the bottle stall,” said Despard.

“King’s Arms?” I asked sharply.

“Our local, darling,” said Rhoda.

“Isn’t there another pub round here? The—Pale Horse, didn’t you say,” I asked, turning to Mrs. Oliver.

There was no such reaction here as I had half expected. The faces turned towards me were vague and uninterested.

“The Pale Horse isn’t a pub,” said Rhoda. “I mean, not now.”

“It was an old inn,” said Despard. “Mostly sixteenth century I’d say. But it’s just an ordinary house now. I always think they should have changed the name.”

“Oh, no,” exclaimed Ginger. “It would have been awfully silly to call it Wayside, or Fairview. I think the Pale Horse is much nicer, and there’s a lovely old inn sign. They’ve got it framed in the hall.”

“Who’s they?” I asked.

“It belongs to Thyrza Grey,” said Rhoda. “I don’t know if you saw her today? Tall woman with short grey hair.”

“She’s very occult,” said Despard. “Goes in for spiritualism and trances, and magic. Not quite black masses, but that sort of thing.”

Ginger gave a sudden peal of laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she said apologetically. “I was just thinking of Miss Grey as Madame de Montespan on a black velvet altar.”

“Ginger!” said Rhoda. “Not in front of the vicar.”

“Sorry, Mr. Dane Calthrop.”

“Not at all,” said the vicar, beaming. “As the ancients put it—” he continued for some time in Greek.

After a respectful silence of appreciation, I returned to the attack.

“I still want to know who are ‘they’—Miss Grey and who else?”

“Oh, there’s a friend who lives with her. Sybil Stamfordis. She acts as medium, I believe. You must have seen her about—Lots of scarabs and beads—and sometimes she puts on a sari—I can’t think why—she’s never been in India—”

“And then there’s Bella,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “She’s their cook,” she explained. “And she’s also a witch. She comes from the village of Little Dunning. She had quite a reputation for witchcraft there. It runs in the family. Her mother was a witch, too.”

She spoke in a matter-of-fact way.

“You sound as though you believe in witchcraft, Mrs. Dane Calthrop,” I said.

“But of course! There’s nothing mysterious or secretive about it. It’s all quite matter-of-fact. It’s a family asset that you inherit. Children are told not to tease your cat, and people give you a cottage cheese or a pot of homemade jam from time to time.”

I looked at her doubtfully. She appeared to be quite serious.

“Sybil helped us today by telling fortunes,” said Rhoda. “She was in the green tent. She’s quite good at it, I believe.”

“She gave me a lovely fortune,” said Ginger. “Money in my hand. A handsome dark stranger from overseas, two husbands and six children. Really very generous.”

“I saw the Curtis girl come out giggling,” said Rhoda. “And she was very coy with her young man afterwards. Told him not to think he was the only pebble on the beach.”

“Poor Tom,” said her husband. “Did he make any comeback?”

“Oh, yes. ‘I’m not telling you what she promised me,’ he said. ‘Mebbe you wouldn’t like it too well, my girl!’”

“Good for Tom.”

“Old Mrs. Parker was quite sour,” said Ginger, laughing. “‘’Tis all foolishness,’ that’s what she said. ‘Don’t you believe none of it, you two.’ But then Mrs. Cripps piped up and said, ‘You know, Lizzie, as well as I do, that Miss Stamfordis sees things as others can’t see, and Miss Grey knows to a day when there’s going to be a death. Never wrong, she is! Fairly gives me the creeps sometimes.’ And Mrs. Parker said: ‘Death—that’s different. It’s a gift.’ And Mrs. Cripps said: ‘Anyway I wouldn’t like to offend none of those three, that I wouldn’t!’”

“It does all sound exciting. I’d love to meet them,” said Mrs. Oliver wistfully.

“We’ll take you over there tomorrow,” Colonel Despard promised. “The old inn is really worth seeing. They’ve been very clever in making it comfortable without spoiling its character.”

“I’ll ring up Thyrza tomorrow morning,” said Rhoda.

I must admit that I went to bed with a slight feeling of deflation.

The Pale Horse which had loomed in my mind as a symbol of something unknown and sinister had turned out to be nothing of the sort.

Unless, of course, there was another Pale Horse somewhere else?

I considered that idea until I fell asleep.

There was a feeling of relaxation next day, which was a Sunday. An after-the-party feeling. On the lawn the marquee and tents flapped limply in a damp breeze, awaiting removal by the caterer's men at early dawn on the morrow. On Monday we would all set to work to take stock of what damage had been done, and clear things up. Today, Rhoda had wisely decided, it would be better to go out as much as possible.

We all went to church, and listened respectfully to Mr. Dane Calthrop's scholarly sermon on a text taken from Isaiah which seemed to deal less with religion than with Persian history.

"We're going to lunch with Mr. Venables," explained Rhoda afterwards. "You'll like him, Mark. He's really a most interesting man. Been everywhere and done everything. Knows all sorts of out-of-the-way things. He bought Priors Court about three years ago. And the things he's done to it must have cost him a fortune. He had polio and is semi-crippled, so he has to go about in a wheeled chair. It's very sad for him because up to then he was a great traveller, I believe. Of course he's rolling in money, and, as I say, he's done up the house in a wonderful way—it was an absolute ruin, falling to pieces. It's full of the most gorgeous stuff. The sale rooms are his principal interest nowadays, I believe."

Priors Court was only a few miles away. We drove there and our host came wheeling himself along the hall to meet us.

"Nice of you all to come," he said heartily. "You must be exhausted after yesterday. The whole thing was a great success, Rhoda."

Mr. Venables was a man of about fifty, with a thin hawklike face and a beaked nose that stood out from it arrogantly. He wore an open wing collar which gave him a faintly old-fashioned air.

Rhoda made introductions.

Venables smiled at Mrs. Oliver.

"I met this lady yesterday in her professional capacity," he said. "Six of her books with signatures. Takes care of six presents for Christmas. Great stuff

you write, Mrs. Oliver. Give us more of it. Can't have too much of it." He grinned at Ginger. "You nearly landed me with a live duck, young woman." Then he turned to me. "I enjoyed your article in the Review last month," he said.

"It was awfully good of you to come to our fête, Mr. Venables," said Rhoda. "After that generous cheque you sent us, I didn't really hope that you'd turn up in person."

"Oh, I enjoy that kind of thing. Part of English rural life, isn't it? I came home clasping a most terrible Kewpie doll from the hoopla, and had a splendid but unrealistic future prophesied me by Our Sybil, all dressed up in a tinsel turban with about a ton of fake Egyptian beads slung over her torso."

"Good old Sybil," said Colonel Despard. "We're going there to tea with Thyrza this afternoon. It's an interesting old place."

"The Pale Horse? Yes. I rather wish it had been left as an inn. I always feel that that place has had a mysterious and unusually wicked past history. It can't have been smuggling; we're not near enough to the sea for that. A resort for highwaymen, perhaps? Or rich travellers spent the night there and were never seen again. It seems, somehow, rather tame to have turned it into a desirable residence for three old maids."

"Oh—I never think of them like that!" cried Rhoda. "Sybil Stamfordis, perhaps—with her saris and her scarabs, and always seeing auras round people's heads—she is rather ridiculous. But there's something really awe-inspiring about Thyrza, don't you agree? You feel she knows just what you're thinking. She doesn't talk about having second sight—but everyone says that she has got it."

"And Bella, far from being an old maid, has buried two husbands," added Colonel Despard.

"I sincerely beg her pardon," said Venables, laughing.

“With sinister interpretations of the deaths from the neighbours,” added Despard. “It’s said they displeased her, so she turned her eyes on them, and they slowly sickened and pined away!”

“Of course, I forgot, she is the local witch?”

“So Mrs. Dane Calthrop says.”

“Interesting thing, witchcraft,” said Venables thoughtfully. “All over the world you get variations of it—I remember when I was in East Africa—”

He talked easily, and entertainingly, on the subject. He spoke of medicine men in Africa; of little-known cults in Borneo. He promised that, after lunch, he would show us some West African sorcerers’ masks.

“There’s everything in this house,” declared Rhoda with a laugh.

“Oh well—” he shrugged his shoulders—“if you can’t go out to everything—then everything must be made to come to you.”

Just for a moment there was a sudden bitterness in his voice. He gave a swift glance downwards towards his paralysed legs.

““The world is so full of a number of things,”” he quoted. “I think that’s always been my undoing. There’s so much I want to know about—to see! Oh well I haven’t done too badly in my time. And even now—life has its consolations.”

“Why here?” asked Mrs. Oliver suddenly.

The others had been slightly ill at ease, as people become when a hint of tragedy looms in the air. Mrs. Oliver alone had been unaffected. She asked because she wanted to know. And her frank curiosity restored the lighthearted atmosphere.

Venables looked towards her inquiringly.

“I mean,” said Mrs. Oliver, “why did you come to live here, in this neighbourhood? So far away from things that are going on. Was it because

you had friends here?”

“No. I chose this part of the world, since you are interested, because I had no friends here.”

A faint ironical smile touched his lips.

How deeply, I wondered, had his disability affected him? Had the loss of unfettered movement, of liberty to explore the world, bitten deep into his soul? Or had he managed to adapt himself to altered circumstances with comparative equanimity—with a real greatness of spirit?

As though Venables had read my thoughts, he said: “In your article you questioned the meaning of the term ‘greatness’—you compared the different meanings attached to it—in the East and the West. But what do we all mean nowadays, here in England, when we use the term ‘a great man’? —”

“Greatness of intellect, certainly,” I said, “and surely moral strength as well?”

He looked at me, his eyes bright and shining.

“Is there no such thing as an evil man, then, who can be described as great?” he asked.

“Of course there is,” cried Rhoda. “Napoleon and Hitler and oh, lots of people. They were all great men.”

“Because of the effect they produced?” said Despard. “But if one had known them personally—I wonder if one would have been impressed.”

Ginger leaned forward and ran her fingers through her carrotty mop of hair.

“That’s an interesting thought,” she said. “Mightn’t they, perhaps, have seemed pathetic, undersized little figures. Strutting, posturing, feeling inadequate, determined to be someone, even if they pulled the world down round them?”

“Oh, no,” said Rhoda vehemently. “They couldn’t have produced the results they did if they had been like that.”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “After all, the stupidest child can set a house on fire quite easily.”

“Come, come,” said Venables. “I really can’t go along with this modern playing down of evil as something that doesn’t really exist. There is evil. And evil is powerful. Sometimes more powerful than good. It’s there. It has to be recognised—and fought. Otherwise—” he spread out his hands. “We go down to darkness.”

“Of course I was brought up on the devil,” said Mrs. Oliver, apologetically. “Believing in him, I mean. But you know he always did seem to me so silly. With hoofs and a tail and all that. Capering about like a ham actor. Of course I often have a master criminal in my stories—people like it—but really he gets harder and harder to do. So long as one doesn’t know who he is, I can keep him impressive—but when it all comes out—he seems, somehow, so inadequate. A kind of anticlimax. It’s much easier if you just have a bank manager who’s embezzled the funds, or a husband who wants to get rid of his wife and marry the children’s governess. So much more natural—if you know what I mean.”

Everyone laughed and Mrs. Oliver said apologetically:

“I know I haven’t put it very well—but you do see what I mean?”

We all said that we knew exactly what she meant.

Six

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

It was after four o'clock when we left Priors Court. After a particularly delicious lunch, Venables had taken us on a tour of the house. He had taken a real pleasure in showing us his various possessions—a veritable treasure-house the place was.

“He must be rolling in money,” I said when we had finally departed. “Those jades—and the African sculpture—to say nothing of all his Meissen and Bow. You're lucky to have such a neighbour.”

“Don't we know it?” said Rhoda. “Most of the people down here are nice enough—but definitely on the dull side. Mr. Venables is positively exotic by comparison.”

“How did he make his money?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “Or has he always had it?”

Despard remarked wryly that nobody nowadays could boast of such a thing as a large inherited income. Death duties and taxation had seen to that.

“Someone told me,” he added, “that he started life as a stevedore but it seems most unlikely. He never talks about his boyhood or his family—” He turned towards Mrs. Oliver. “A Mystery Man for you—”

Mrs. Oliver said that people were always offering her things she didn't want —

The Pale Horse was a half-timbered building (genuine halftimbering not faked). It was set back a little way from the village street. A walled garden could be glimpsed behind it which gave it a pleasant old-world look.

I was disappointed in it, and said so.

“Not nearly sinister enough,” I complained. “No atmosphere.”

“Wait till you get inside,” said Ginger.

We got out of the car and went up to the door, which opened as we approached.

Miss Thyrza Grey stood on the threshold, a tall, slightly masculine figure in a tweed coat and skirt. She had rough grey hair springing up from a high forehead, a large beak of a nose, and very penetrating light blue eyes.

“Here you are at last,” she said in a hearty bass voice. “Thought you’d all got lost.”

Behind her tweed-clad shoulders I became aware of a face peering out from the shadows of the dark hall. A queer, rather formless face, like something made in putty by a child who had strayed in to play in a sculptor’s studio. It was the kind of face, I thought, that you sometimes see amongst a crowd in an Italian or Flemish primitive painting.

Rhoda introduced us and explained that we had been lunching with Mr. Venables at Priors Court.

“Ah!” said Miss Grey. “That explains it! Fleshpots. That Italian cook of his! And all the treasures of the treasure-house as well. Oh well, poor fellow—got to have something to cheer him up. But come in—come in. We’re rather proud of our own little place. Fifteenth century—and some of it fourteenth.”

The hall was low and dark with a twisting staircase leading up from it. There was a wide fireplace and over it a framed picture.

“The old inn sign,” said Miss Grey, noting my glance. “Can’t see much of it in this light. The Pale Horse.”

“I’m going to clean it for you,” said Ginger. “I said I would. You let me have it and you’ll be surprised.”

“I’m a bit doubtful,” said Thyrza Grey, and added bluntly, “Suppose you ruin it?”

“Of course I shan’t ruin it,” said Ginger indignantly. “It’s my job.”

“I work for the London Galleries,” she explained to me. “Great fun.”

“Modern picture restoring takes a bit of getting used to,” said Thyrza. “I gasp every time I go into the National Gallery nowadays. All the pictures look as though they’d had a bath in the latest detergent.”

“You can’t really prefer them all dark and mustard coloured,” protested Ginger. She peered at the inn sign. “A lot more would come up. The horse may even have a rider.”

I joined her to stare into the picture. It was a crude painting with little merit except the doubtful one of old age and dirt. The pale figure of a stallion gleamed against a dark indeterminate background.

“Hi, Sybil,” cried Thyrza. “The visitors are crabbing our Horse, damn their impertinence!”

Miss Sybil Stamfordis came through a door to join us.

She was a tall willowy woman with dark, rather greasy hair, a simpering expression, and a fish-like mouth.

She was wearing a bright emerald green sari which did nothing to enhance her appearance. Her voice was faint and fluttery.

“Our dear, dear Horse,” she said. “We fell in love with that old inn sign the moment we saw it. I really think it influenced us to buy the house. Don’t you, Thyrza? But come in—come in.”

The room into which she led us was small and square and had probably been the bar in its time. It was furnished now with chintz and Chippendale and was definitely a lady’s sitting room, country style. There were bowls of chrysanthemums.

Then we were taken out to see the garden which I could see would be charming in summer, and then came back into the house to find tea had been laid. There were sandwiches and homemade cakes and as we sat down, the old woman whose face I had glimpsed for a moment in the hall came in bearing a silver teapot. She wore a plain dark green overall. The impression of a head made crudely from Plasticine by a child was borne out

on closer inspection. It had a witless primitive face but I could not imagine why I had thought it sinister.

Suddenly I felt angry with myself. All this nonsense about a converted inn and three middle-aged women!

“Thank you, Bella,” said Thyrsa.

“Got all you want?”

It came out almost as a mumble.

“Yes, thanks.”

Bella withdrew to the door. She had looked at nobody, but just before she went out, she raised her eyes and took a speedy glance at me. There was something in that look that startled me—though it was difficult to describe why. There was malice in it, and a curious intimate knowledge. I felt that without effort, and almost without curiosity, she had known exactly what thoughts were in my mind.

Thyrsa Grey had noticed my reaction.

“Bella is disconcerting, isn’t she, Mr. Easterbrook?” she said softly. “I noticed her look at you.”

“She’s a local woman, isn’t she?” I strove to appear merely politely interested.

“Yes. I daresay someone will have told you she’s the local witch.”

Sybil Stamfordis clanked her beads.

“Now do confess, Mr.— Mr.—”

“Easterbrook.”

“Easterbrook. I’m sure you’ve heard that we all practice witchcraft. Confess now. We’ve got quite a reputation, you know—”

“Not undeserved, perhaps,” said Thyrsa. She seemed amused. “Sybil here has great gifts.”

Sybil sighed pleasantly.

“I was always attracted by the occult,” she murmured. “Even as a child I realised that I had unusual powers. Automatic writing came to me quite naturally. I didn’t even know what it was! I’d just sit there with a pencil in my hand—and not know a thing about what was happening. And of course I was always ultrasensitive. I fainted once when taken to tea in a friend’s house. Something awful had happened in that very room... I knew it! We got the explanation later. There had been a murder there—twenty-five years ago. In that very room!”

She nodded her head and looked round at us with great satisfaction.

“Very remarkable,” said Colonel Despard with polite distaste.

“Sinister things have happened in this house,” said Sybil darkly. “But we have taken the necessary steps. The earthbound spirits have been freed.”

“A kind of spiritual spring cleaning?” I suggested.

Sybil looked at me rather doubtfully.

“What a lovely coloured sari you are wearing,” said Rhoda.

Sybil brightened.

“Yes, I got it when I was in India. I had an interesting time there. I explored yoga, you know, and all that. But I could not help feeling that it was all too sophisticated—not near enough to the natural and the primitive. One must go back, I feel, to the beginnings, to the early primitive powers. I am one of the few women who have visited Haiti. Now there you really do touch the original springs of the occult. Overlaid, of course, by a certain amount of corruption and distortion. But the root of the matter is there.

“I was shown a great deal, especially when they learnt that I had twin sisters a little older than myself. The child who is born next after twins has special

powers, so they told me. Interesting, wasn't it? Their death dances are wonderful. All the panoply of death, skulls and crossbones, and the tools of a gravedigger, spade, pick and hoe. They dress up as undertakers' mutes, top hats, black clothes—

“The Grand Master is Baron Samedi, and the Legba is the god he invokes, the god who ‘removes the barrier.’ You send the dead forth—to cause death. Weird idea, isn't it?

“Now this,” Sybil rose and fetched an object from the window sill. “This is my Asson. It's a dried gourd with a network of beads and—you see these bits?—dried snake vertebrae.”

We looked politely, though without enthusiasm.

Sybil rattled her horrid toy affectionately.

“Very interesting,” said Despard courteously.

“I could tell you lots more—”

At this point my attention wandered. Words came to me hazily as Sybil continued to air her knowledge of sorcery and voodoo—Maître Carrefour, the Coa, the Guidé family—

I turned my head to find Thyrsa looking at me quizzically.

“You don't believe any of it, do you?” she murmured. “But you're wrong, you know. You can't explain away everything as superstition, or fear, or religious bigotry. There are elemental truths and elemental powers. There always have been. There always will be.”

“I don't think I would dispute that,” I said.

“Wise man. Come and see my library.”

I followed her out through the french windows into the garden and along the side of the house.

“We made it out of the old stables,” she explained.

The stables and outbuildings had been reconstituted as one large room. The whole of one long wall was lined with books. I went across to them and was presently exclaiming.

“You’ve got some very rare works here, Miss Grey. Is this an original *Malleus Maleficorum*? My word, you have some treasures.”

“I have, haven’t I?”

“That Grimoire—very rare indeed.” I took down volume after volume from the shelves. Thyrza watched me—there was an air of quiet satisfaction about her which I did not understand.

I put back *Sadducismus Triumphatus* as Thyrza said:

“It’s nice to meet someone who can appreciate one’s treasures. Most people just yawn or gape.”

“There can’t be much about the practice of witchcraft, sorcery, and all the rest of it that you don’t know,” I said. “What gave you an interest in it in the first place?”

“Hard to say now... It’s been so long... One looks into a thing idly—and then—one gets gripped! It’s a fascinating study. The things people believed—and the damn’ fool things they did!”

I laughed.

“That’s refreshing. I’m glad you don’t believe all you read.”

“You mustn’t judge me by poor Sybil. Oh yes, I saw you looking superior! But you were wrong. She’s a silly woman in a lot of ways. She takes voodoo, and demonology, and black magic and mixes everything up into a glorious occult pie—but she has the power.”

“The power?”

“I don’t know what else you can call it... There are people who can become a living bridge between this world and a world of strange uncanny powers. Sybil is one of them. She is a first-class medium. She has never done it for money. But her gift is quite exceptional. When she and I and Bella—”

“Bella?”

“Oh yes. Bella has her own powers. We all have, in our different degrees. As a team—”

She broke off.

“Sorcerers Ltd?” I suggested with a smile.

“One could put it that way.”

I glanced down at the volume I was holding in my hand.

“Nostradamus and all that?”

“Nostradamus and all that.”

I said quietly: “You do believe it, don’t you?”

“I don’t believe. I know.”

She spoke triumphantly— I looked at her.

“But how? In what way? For what reason?”

She swept her hand out towards the bookshelves—

“All that! So much of it nonsense! Such grand ridiculous phraseology! But sweep away the superstitions and the prejudices of the times—and the core is truth! You only dress it up—it’s always been dressed up—to impress people.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“My dear man, why have people come throughout the ages to the necromancer—to the sorcerer—to the witch doctor? Only two reasons really. There are only two things that are wanted badly enough to risk damnation. The love potion or the cup of poison.”

“Ah.”

“So simple, isn’t it? Love—and death. The love potion—to win the man you want—the black mass—to keep your lover. A draught to be taken at the full of the moon. Recite the names of devils or of spirits. Draw patterns on the floor or on the wall. All that’s window dressing. The truth is the aphrodisiac in the draught!”

“And death?” I asked.

“Death?” She laughed, a queer little laugh that made me uncomfortable. “Are you so interested in death?”

“Who isn’t?” I said lightly.

“I wonder.” She shot me a glance, keen, searching. It took me aback.

“Death. There’s always been a greater trade in that than there ever has been in love potions. And yet—how childish it all was in the past! The Borgias and their famous secret poisons. Do you know what they really used? Ordinary white arsenic! Just the same as any little wife poisoner in the back streets. But we’ve progressed a long way beyond that nowadays. Science has enlarged our frontiers.”

“With untraceable poisons?” My voice was sceptical.

“Poisons! That’s vieux jeu. Childish stuff. There are new horizons.”

“Such as?”

“The mind. Knowledge of what the mind is—what it can do—what it can be made to do.”

“Please go on. This is most interesting.”

“The principle is well known. Medicine men have used it in primitive communities for centuries. You don’t need to kill your victim. All you need do is—tell him to die.”

“Suggestion? But it won’t work unless the victim believes in it.”

“It doesn’t work on Europeans, you mean,” she corrected me. “It does sometimes. But that’s not the point. We’ve gone further ahead than the witch doctor has ever gone. The psychologists have shown the way. The desire for death! It’s there—in everyone. Work on that! Work on the death wish.”

“It’s an interesting idea.” I spoke with a muted scientific interest. “Influence your subject to commit suicide? Is that it?”

“You’re still lagging behind. You’ve heard of traumatic illnesses?”

“Of course.”

“People who, because of an unconscious wish to avoid returning to work, develop real ailments. Not malingering—real illnesses with symptoms, with actual pain. It’s been a puzzle to doctors for a long time.”

“I’m beginning to get the hang of what you mean,” I said slowly.

“To destroy your subject, power must be exerted on his secret unconscious self. The death wish that exists in all of us must be stimulated, heightened.” Her excitement was growing. “Don’t you see? A real illness will be induced, caused by that death seeking self. You wish to be ill, you wish to die—and so—you do get ill, and die.”

She had flung her head up now, triumphantly. I felt suddenly very cold. All nonsense, of course. This woman was slightly mad... And yet—

Thyrza Grey laughed suddenly.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“It’s a fascinating theory, Miss Grey—quite in line with modern thought, I’ll admit. But how do you propose to stimulate this death wish that we all possess?”

“That’s my secret. The way! The means! There are communications without contact. You’ve only to think of wireless, radar, television. Experiments in extrasensory perception haven’t gone ahead as people hoped, but that’s because they haven’t grasped the first simple principle. You can accomplish it sometimes by accident—but once you know how it works, you could do it every time....”

“Can you do it?”

She didn’t answer at once—then she said, moving away:

“You mustn’t ask me, Mr. Easterbrook, to give all my secrets away.”

I followed her towards the garden door—

“Why have you told me all this?” I asked.

“You understand my books. One needs sometimes to—to—well—talk to someone. And besides—”

“Yes?”

“I had the idea— Bella has it, too—that you—may need us.”

“Need you?”

“Bella thinks you came here—to find us. She is seldom at fault.”

“Why should I want to—‘find you,’ as you put it?”

“That,” said Thyrsa Grey softly, “I do not know—yet.”

Seven

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

“So there you are! We wondered where you were.” Rhoda came through the open door, the others behind her. She looked round her. “This is where you hold your séances, isn’t it?”

“You’re well informed,” Thyrza Grey laughed breezily. “In a village everyone knows your business better than you do. We’ve a splendid sinister reputation, so I’ve heard. A hundred years ago it would have been sink or swim or the funeral pyre. My great-great-aunt—or one or two more greats—was burned as a witch, I believe, in Ireland. Those were the days!”

“I always thought you were Scottish?”

“On my father’s side—hence the second sight. Irish on my mother’s. Sybil is our pythoness, originally of Greek extraction. Bella represents Old English.”

“A macabre human cocktail,” remarked Colonel Despard.

“As you say.”

“Fun!” said Ginger.

Thyrza shot her a quick glance.

“Yes, it is in a way.” She turned to Mrs. Oliver. “You should write one of your books about a murder by black magic. I can give you a lot of dope about it.”

Mrs. Oliver blinked and looked embarrassed.

“I only write very plain murders,” she said apologetically.

Her tone was of one who says “I only do plain cooking.”

“Just about people who want other people out of the way and try to be clever about it,” she added.

“They’re usually too clever for me,” said Colonel Despard. He glanced at his watch. “Rhoda, I think—”

“Oh yes, we must go. It’s much later than I thought.”

Thanks and good-byes were said. We did not go back through the house but round to a side gate.

“You keep a lot of poultry,” remarked Colonel Despard, looking into a wired enclosure.

“I hate hens,” said Ginger. “They cluck in such an irritating way.”

“Mostly cockerels they be.” It was Bella who spoke. She had come out from a back door.

“White cockerels,” I said.

“Table birds?” asked Despard.

Bella said, “They’re useful to us.”

Her mouth widened in a long curving line across the pudgy shapelessness of her face. Her eyes had a sly knowing look.

“They’re Bella’s province,” said Thyrza Grey lightly.

We said good-bye and Sybil Stamfordis appeared from the open front door to join in speeding the parting guests.

“I don’t like that woman,” said Mrs. Oliver, as we drove off. “I don’t like her at all.”

“You mustn’t take old Thyrza too seriously,” said Despard indulgently. “She enjoys spouting all that stuff and seeing what effect it has on you.”

“I didn’t mean her. She’s an unscrupulous woman, with a keen eye on the main chance. But she’s not dangerous like the other one.”

“Bella? She is a bit uncanny, I’ll admit.”

“I didn’t mean her either. I meant the Sybil one. She seems just silly. All those beads and draperies and all the stuff about voodoo, and all those fantastic reincarnations she was telling us about. (Why is it that anybody who was a kitchen maid or an ugly old peasant never seems to get reincarnated? It’s always Egyptian Princesses or beautiful Babylonian slaves. Very fishy.) But all the same, though she’s stupid, I have a feeling that she could really do things—make queer things happen. I always put things badly—but I mean she could be used—by something—in a way just because she is so silly. I don’t suppose anyone understands what I mean,” she finished pathetically.

“I do,” said Ginger. “And I shouldn’t wonder if you weren’t right.”

“We really ought to go to one of their séances,” said Rhoda wistfully. “It might be rather fun.”

“No, you don’t,” said Despard firmly. “I’m not having you getting mixed up in anything of that sort.”

They fell into a laughing argument. I roused myself only when I heard Mrs. Oliver asking about trains the next morning.

“You can drive back with me,” I said.

Mrs. Oliver looked doubtful.

“I think I’d better go by train—”

“Oh, come now. You’ve driven with me before. I’m a most reliable driver.”

“It’s not that, Mark. But I’ve got to go to a funeral tomorrow. So I mustn’t be late in getting back to town.” She sighed. “I do hate going to funerals.”

“Must you?”

“I think I must in this case. Mary Delafontaine was a very old friend—and I think she’d want me to go. She was that sort of person.”

“Of course,” I exclaimed. “Delafontaine—of course.”

The others stared at me, surprised.

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s only—that—well, I was wondering where I’d heard the name Delafontaine lately. It was you, wasn’t it?” I looked at Mrs. Oliver.

“You said something about visiting her—in a nursing home.”

“Did I? Quite likely.”

“What did she die of?”

Mrs. Oliver wrinkled her forehead.

“Toxic polyneuritis—something like that.”

Ginger was looking at me curiously. She had a sharp penetrating glance.

As we got out of the car, I said abruptly:

“I think I’ll go for a bit of a walk. Such a lot of food. That wonderful lunch and tea on top of it. It’s got to be worked off somehow.”

I went off briskly before anyone could offer to accompany me. I wanted badly to get by myself and sort out my ideas.

What was all this business? Let me at least get it clear to myself. It had started, had it not, with that casual but startling remark by Poppy, that if you wanted to “get rid of someone” the Pale Horse was the place to go.

Following on that, there had been my meeting with Jim Corrigan, and his list of “names”—as connected with the death of Father Gorman. On that list had been the name of Hesketh-Dubois, and the name of Tuckerton, causing me to hark back to that evening at Luigi’s coffee bar. There had been the name of Delafontaine, too, vaguely familiar. It was Mrs. Oliver who had

mentioned it, in connection with a sick friend. The sick friend was now dead.

After that, I had, for some reason which I couldn't quite identify, gone to beard Poppy in her floral bower. And Poppy had denied vehemently any knowledge of such an institution as the Pale Horse. More significant still, Poppy had been afraid.

Today—there had been Thyrza Grey.

But surely the Pale Horse and its occupants was one thing and that list of names something separate, quite unconnected. Why on earth was I coupling them together in my mind?

Why should I imagine for one moment that there was any connection between them?

Mrs. Delafontaine had presumably lived in London. Thomasina Tuckerton's home had been somewhere in Surrey. No one on the list had any connection with the little village of Much Deeping. Unless—

I was just coming abreast of the King's Arms. The King's Arms was a genuine pub with a superior look about it and a freshly painted announcement of Lunches, Dinners and Teas.

I pushed its door open and went inside. The bar, not yet open, was on my left, on my right was a minute lounge smelling of stale smoke. By the stairs was a notice: Office. The office consisted of a glass window, firmly closed and a printed card. PRESS BELL. The whole place had the deserted air of a pub at this particular time of day. On a shelf by the office window was a battered registration book for visitors. I opened it and flicked through the pages. It was not much patronised. There were five or six entries, perhaps, in a week, mostly for one night only. I flicked back the pages, noting the names.

It was not long before I shut the book. There was still no one about. There were really no questions I wanted to ask at this stage. I went out again into the soft damp afternoon.

Was it only coincidence that someone called Sandford and someone else called Parkinson had stayed at the King's Arms during the last year? Both names were on Corrigan's list. Yes, but they were not particularly uncommon names. But I had noted one other name—the name of Martin Digby. If it was the Martin Digby I knew, he was the great-nephew of the woman I had always called Aunt Min—Lady Hesketh-Dubois.

I strode along, not seeing where I was going. I wanted very badly to talk to someone. To Jim Corrigan. Or to David Ardingly. Or to Hermia with her calm good sense. I was alone with my chaotic thoughts and I didn't want to be alone. What I wanted, frankly, was someone who would argue me out of the things that I was thinking.

It was after about half an hour of tramping muddy lanes that I finally turned in at the gates of the vicarage, and made my way up a singularly ill-kept drive, to pull a rusty looking bell at the side of the front door.

II

"It doesn't ring," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, appearing at the door with the unexpectedness of a genie.

I had already suspected that fact.

"They've mended it twice," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "But it never lasts. So I have to keep alert. In case it's something important. It's important with you, isn't it?"

"It—well—yes, it is important—to me, I mean."

"That's what I meant, too..." She looked at me thoughtfully. "Yes, it's quite bad, I can see— Who do you want? The vicar?"

"I— I'm not sure—"

It had been the vicar I came to see—but now, unexpectedly, I was doubtful. I didn't quite know why. But immediately Mrs. Dane Calthrop told me.

“My husband’s a very good man,” she said. “Besides being the vicar, I mean. And that makes things difficult sometimes. Good people, you see, don’t really understand evil.” She paused and then said with a kind of brisk efficiency, “I think it had better be me.”

A faint smile came to my lips. “Is evil your department?” I asked.

“Yes, it is. It’s important in a parish to know all about the various—well—sins that are going on.”

“Isn’t sin your husband’s province? His official business, so to speak.”

“The forgiveness of sins,” she corrected me. “He can give absolution. I can’t. But I,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop with the utmost cheerfulness, “can get sin arranged and classified for him. And if one knows about it one can help to prevent its harming other people. One can’t help the people themselves. I can’t, I mean. Only God can call to repentance, you know—or perhaps you don’t know. A lot of people don’t nowadays.”

“I can’t compete with your expert knowledge,” I said, “but I would like to prevent people being—harmed.”

She shot me a quick glance.

“It’s like that, is it? You’d better come in and we’ll be comfortable.”

The vicarage sitting room was big and shabby. It was much shaded by a gargantuan Victorian shrubbery that no one seemed to have had the energy to curb. But the dimness was not gloomy for some peculiar reason. It was, on the contrary, restful. All the large shabby chairs bore the impress of resting bodies in them over the years. A fat clock on the chimneypiece ticked with a heavy comfortable regularity. Here there would always be time to talk, to say what you wanted to say, to relax from the cares brought about by the bright day outside.

Here, I felt, round-eyed girls who had tearfully discovered themselves to be prospective mothers, had confided their troubles to Mrs. Dane Calthrop and received sound, if not always orthodox, advice; here angry relatives had

unburdened themselves of their resentment over their in-laws; here mothers had explained that their Bob was not a bad boy; just high-spirited, and that to send him away to an approved school was absurd. Husbands and wives had disclosed marital difficulties.

And here was I, Mark Easterbrook, scholar, author, man of the world, confronting a grey-haired weather-beaten woman with fine eyes, prepared to lay my troubles in her lap. Why? I didn't know. I only had that odd surety that she was the right person.

"We've just had tea with Thyrza Grey," I began.

Explaining things to Mrs. Dane Calthrop was never difficult. She leaped to meet you.

"Oh I see. It's upset you? These three are a bit much to take, I agree. I've wondered myself... So much boasting. As a rule, in my experience, the really wicked don't boast. They can keep quiet about their wickedness. It's if your sins aren't really bad that you want so much to talk about them. Sin's such a wretched, mean, ignoble little thing. It's terribly necessary to make it seem grand and important. Village witches are usually silly ill-natured old women who like frightening people and getting something for nothing that way. Terribly easy to do, of course. When Mrs. Brown's hens die all you have to do is nod your head and say darkly: 'Ah, her Billy teased my Pussy last Tuesday week.' Bella Webb might, be only a witch of that kind. But she might, she just might, be something more... Something that's lasted on from a very early age and which crops up now and then in country places. It's frightening when it does, because there's real malevolence—not just a desire to impress. Sybil Stamford is one of the silliest women I've ever met—but she really is a medium—whatever a medium may be. Thyrza—I don't know... What did she say to you? It was something that she said that's upset you, I suppose?"

"You have great experience, Mrs. Dane Calthrop. Would you say, from all you know and have heard, that a human being could be destroyed from a distance, without visible connection, by another human being?"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop's eyes opened a little wider.

“When you say destroyed, you mean, I take it, killed? A plain physical fact?”

“Yes.”

“I should say it was nonsense,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop robustly.

“Ah!” I said, relieved.

“But of course I might be wrong,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “My father said that airships were nonsense, and my great-grandfather probably said that railway trains were nonsense. They were both quite right. At that time they both were impossible. But they’re not impossible now. What does Thyrza do, activate a death ray or something? Or do they all three draw pentagrams and wish?”

I smiled.

“You’re making things come into focus,” I said. “I must have let that woman hypnotise me.”

“Oh no,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “You wouldn’t do that. You’re not really the suggestible type. There must have been something else. Something that happened first. Before all this.”

“You’re quite right.” I told her, then, as simply as I could with an economy of words, of the murder of Father Gorman, and of the casual mention in the nightclub of the Pale Horse. Then I took from my pocket the list of names I had copied from the paper Dr. Corrigan had shown me.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop looked down at it, frowning.

“I see,” she said. “And these people? What have they all in common?”

“We’re not sure. It might be blackmail—or dope—”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “That’s not what’s worrying you. What you really believe is—that they’re all dead?”

I gave a deep sigh.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s what I believe. But I don’t really know that that is so. Three of them are dead. Minnie Hesketh-Dubois, Thomasina Tuckerton, Mary Delafontaine. All three died in their beds from natural causes. Which is what Thyrza Grey claims would happen.”

“You mean she claims she made it happen?”

“No, no. She wasn’t speaking of any actual people. She was expounding what she believes to be a scientific possibility.”

“Which appears on the face of it to be nonsense,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop thoughtfully.

“I know. I would just have been polite about it and laughed to myself, if it hadn’t been for that curious mention of the Pale Horse.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop musingly. “The Pale Horse. That’s suggestive.”

She was silent a moment. Then she raised her head.

“It’s bad,” she said. “It’s very bad. Whatever is behind it, it’s got to be stopped. But you know that.”

“Well yes... But what can one do?”

“That you’ll have to find out. But there’s no time to be lost.” Mrs. Dane Calthrop rose to her feet, a whirlwind of activity. “You must get down to it—at once.” She considered. “Haven’t you got some friend who could help you?”

I thought. Jim Corrigan? A busy man with little time, and already probably doing all he could. David Ardingly—but would David believe a word? Hermia? Yes, there was Hermia. A clear brain, admirable logic. A tower of strength if she could be persuaded to become an ally. After all, she and I—I did not finish the sentence. Hermia was my steady—Hermia was the person.

“You’ve thought of someone? Good.”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop was brisk and businesslike.

“I’ll keep an eye on the Three Witches. I still feel that they are—somehow—not really the answer. It’s like when the Stamfordis woman dishes out a lot of idiocy about Egyptian mysteries and prophecies from the Pyramid texts. All she says is plain balderdash, but there are Pyramids and texts and temple mysteries. I can’t help feeling that Thyrza Grey has got hold of something, found out about it, or heard it talked about, and is using it in a kind of wild hotchpotch to boost her own importance and control of occult powers. People are so proud of wickedness. Odd, isn’t it, that people who are good are never proud of it? That’s where Christian humility comes in, I suppose. They don’t even know they are good.”

She was silent for a moment and then said:

“What we really need is a link of some kind. A link between one of these names and the Pale Horse. Something tangible.”

Eight

Detective-Inspector Lejeune heard the well-known tune “Father O’Flynn” being whistled outside in the passage and raised his head as Dr. Corrigan came in.

“Sorry to disoblige everybody,” said Corrigan, “but the driver of that Jaguar hadn’t any alcohol in him at all... What P.C. Ellis smelt on his breath must have been Ellis’s imagination or halitosis.”

But Lejeune at the moment was uninterested in the daily run of motorists’ offences.

“Come and take a look at this,” he said.

Corrigan took the letter handed to him. It was written in a small neat script. The heading was Everest, Glendower Close, Bournemouth.

Dear Inspector Lejeune,

You may remember that you asked me to get in touch with you if I should happen to see the man who was following Father Gorman on the night that he was killed. I kept a good lookout in the neighbourhood of my establishment, but never caught a glimpse of him again.

Yesterday, however, I attended a church fête in a village about twenty miles from here. I was attracted by the fact that Mrs. Oliver, the well-known detective writer, was going to be there autographing her own books. I am a great reader of detective stories and I was quite curious to see the lady.

What I did see, to my great surprise, was the man I described to you as having passed my shop the night Father Gorman was killed. Since then, it would seem, he must have met with an accident, as on this occasion he was propelling himself in a wheeled chair. I made some discreet inquiries as to who he might be, and it seems he is a local

resident of the name of Venables. His place of residence is Priors Court, Much Deeping. He is said to be a man of considerable means.

Hoping these details may be of some service to you,

Yours truly,
Zachariah Osborne

“Well?” said Lejeune.

“Sounds most unlikely,” said Corrigan dampingly.

“On the face of it, perhaps. But I’m not so sure—”

“This Osborne fellow—he couldn’t really have seen anyone’s face very clearly on a foggy night like that. I expect this is just a chance resemblance. You know what people are. Ring up all over the country to say they’ve seen a missing person—and nine times out of ten there’s no resemblance even to the printed description!”

“Osborne’s not like that,” said Lejeune.

“What is he like?”

“He’s a respectable dapper little chemist, old-fashioned, quite a character, and a great observer of persons. One of the dreams of his life is to be able to come forward and identify a wife poisoner who has purchased arsenic at his shop.”

Corrigan laughed.

“In that case, this is clearly an example of wishful thinking.”

“Perhaps.”

Corrigan looked at him curiously.

“So you think there may be something in it? What are you going to do about it?”

“There will be no harm, in any case, in making a few discreet inquiries about this Mr. Venables of—” he referred to the letter— “of Priors Court, Much Deeping.”

Nine

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

"What exciting things happen in the country!" said Hermia lightly.

We had just finished dinner. A pot of black coffee was in front of us—

I looked at her. The words were not quite what I had expected. I had spent the last quarter of an hour telling her my story. She had listened intelligently and with interest. But her response was not at all what I had expected. The tone of her voice was indulgent—she seemed neither shocked nor stirred.

"People who say that the country is dull and the towns full of excitement don't know what they are talking about," she went on. "The last of the witches have gone to cover in the tumbledown cottage, black masses are celebrated in remote manor houses by decadent young men. Superstition runs rife in isolated hamlets. Middle-aged spinsters clank their false scarabs and hold séances and planchettes run luridly over sheets of blank paper. One could really write a very amusing series of articles on it all. Why don't you try your hand?"

"I don't think you really understand what I've been telling you, Hermia."

"But I do, Mark! I think it's all tremendously interesting. It's a page out of history, all the lingering forgotten lore of the Middle Ages."

"I'm not interested historically," I said irritably. "I'm interested in the facts. In a list of names on a sheet of paper. I know what has happened to some of those people. What's going to happen or has happened to the rest?"

"Aren't you letting yourself get rather carried away?"

"No," I said obstinately. "I don't think so. I think the menace is real. And I'm not alone in thinking so. The vicar's wife agrees with me."

"Oh, the vicar's wife!" Hermia's voice was scornful.

“No, not ‘the vicar’s wife’ like that! She’s a very unusual woman. This whole thing is real, Hermia.”

Hermia shrugged her shoulders.

“Perhaps.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“I think your imagination is running away with you a little, Mark. I daresay your middle-aged pussies are quite genuine in believing it all themselves. I’m sure they’re very nasty old pussies!”

“But not really sinister?”

“Really, Mark, how can they be?”

I was silent for a moment. My mind wavered—turning from light to darkness and back again. The darkness of the Pale Horse, the light that Hermia represented. Good everyday sensible light—the electric light bulb firmly fixed in its socket, illuminating all the dark corners. Nothing there—nothing at all—just the everyday objects you always find in a room. But yet—but yet—Hermia’s light, clear as it might make things seem, was after all an artificial light....

My mind swung back, resolutely, obstinately....

“I want to look into it all, Hermia. Get to the bottom of what’s going on.”

“I agree. I think you should. It might be quite interesting. In fact, really rather fun.”

“Not fun!” I said sharply.

I went on:

“I wanted to ask if you’d help me, Hermia.”

“Help you? How?”

“Help me to investigate. Get right down to what this is all about.”

“But Mark dear, just at present I’m most terribly busy. There’s my article for the Journal. And the Byzantium thing. And I’ve promised two of my students—”

Her voice went on reasonably—sensibly— I hardly listened.

“I see,” I said. “You’ve too much on your plate already.”

“That’s it.” Hermia was clearly relieved at my acquiescence. She smiled at me. Once again I was struck by her expression of indulgence. Such indulgence as a mother might show over her little son’s absorption in his new toy.

Damn it all, I wasn’t a little boy. I wasn’t looking for a mother—certainly not that kind of a mother. My own mother had been charming and feckless; and everyone in sight, including her son, had adored looking after her.

I considered Hermia dispassionately across the table.

So handsome, so mature, so intellectual, so well read! And so—how could one put it? So— yes, so damnably dull!

II

The next morning I tried to get hold of Jim Corrigan—without success. I left a message, however, that I’d be in between six and seven, if he could come for a drink. He was a busy man, I knew, and I doubted if he would be able to come at such short notice, but he turned up all right at about ten minutes to seven. While I was getting him a whisky he wandered round looking at my pictures and books. He remarked finally that he wouldn’t have minded being a Mogul Emperor himself instead of a hard-pressed overworked police surgeon.

“Though, I daresay,” he remarked as he settled down in a chair, “that they suffered a good deal from woman trouble. At least I escape that.”

“You’re not married, then?”

“No fear. And no more are you, I should say, from the comfortable mess in which you live. A wife would tidy all that up in next to no time.”

I told him that I didn’t think women were as bad as he made out.

I took my drink to the chair opposite him and began:

“You must wonder why I wanted to get hold of you so urgently, but as a matter of fact something has come up that may have a bearing on what we were discussing the last time we met.”

“What was that?—oh, of course. The Father Gorman business.”

“Yes—But first, does the phrase The Pale Horse mean anything to you?”

“The Pale Horse... The Pale Horse—No, I don’t think so—why?”

“Because I think it’s possible that it might have a connection with that list of names you showed me—I’ve been down in the country with friends—at a place called Much Deeping, and they took me to an old pub, or what was once a pub, called the Pale Horse.”

“Wait a bit! Much Deeping? Much Deeping... Is it anywhere near Bournemouth?”

“It’s about fifteen miles or so from Bournemouth.”

“I suppose you didn’t come across anyone called Venables down there?”

“Certainly I did.”

“You did?” Corrigan sat up in some excitement. “You certainly have a knack of going places! What is he like?”

“He’s a most remarkable man.”

“He is, is he? Remarkable in what way?”

“Principally in the force of his personality. Although he’s completely crippled by polio—”

“Corrigan interrupted me sharply—

“What?”

“He had polio some years ago. He’s paralysed from the waist down.”

Corrigan threw himself back in his chair with a look of disgust.

“That tears it! I thought it was too good to be true.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

Corrigan said, “You’ll have to meet the D.D.I. Divisional Detective-Inspector Lejeune. He’ll be interested in what you have to say. When Gorman was killed, Lejeune asked for information from anyone who had seen him in the street that night. Most of the answers were useless, as is usual. But there was a pharmacist, name of Osborne, who has a shop in those parts. He reported having seen Gorman pass his place that night, and he also saw a man who followed close after him—naturally he didn’t think anything of it at that time. But he managed to describe this chap pretty closely—seemed quite sure he’d know him again. Well, a couple of days ago Lejeune got a letter from Osborne. He’s retired, and living in Bournemouth. He’d been over to some local fête and he said he’d seen the man in question there. He was at the fête in a wheeled chair. Osborne asked who he was and was told his name was Venables.”

He looked at me questioningly. I nodded.

“Quite right,” I said. “It was Venables. He was at the fête. But he couldn’t have been the man who was walking along a street in Paddington following Father Gorman. It’s physically impossible. Osborne made a mistake.”

“He described him very meticulously. Height about six feet, a prominent beaked nose, and a noticeable Adam’s apple. Correct?”

“Yes. It fits Venables. But all the same—”

“I know. Mr. Osborne isn’t necessarily as good as he thinks he is at recognising people. Clearly he was misled by the coincidence of a chance resemblance. But it’s disturbing to have you come along shooting your mouth off about that very district—talking about some pale horse or other. What is this pale horse? Let’s have your story.”

“You won’t believe it,” I warned him. “I don’t really believe it myself.”

“Come on. Let’s have it.”

I told him of my conversation with Thyrza Grey. His reaction was immediate.

“What unutterable balderdash!”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is! What’s the matter with you, Mark? White cockerels. Sacrifices, I suppose! A medium, the local witch, and a middle-aged country spinster who can send out a death ray guaranteed lethal. It’s mad, man—absolutely mad!”

“Yes, it’s mad,” I said heavily.

“Oh! stop agreeing with me, Mark. You make me feel there’s something in it when you do that. You believe there’s something in it, don’t you?”

“Let me ask you a question first. This stuff about everybody having a secret urge or wish for death. Is there any scientific truth in that?”

Corrigan hesitated for a moment. Then he said:

“I’m not a psychiatrist. Strictly between you and me I think half these fellows are slightly barmy themselves. They’re punch drunk on theories. And they go much too far. I can tell you that the police aren’t at all fond of the expert medical witness who’s always being called in for the defence to explain away a man’s having killed some helpless old woman for the money in the till.”

“You prefer your glandular theory?”

He grinned.

“All right. All right. I’m a theorist, too. Admitted. But there’s a good physical reason behind my theory—if I can ever get at it. But all this subconscious stuff! Pah!”

“You don’t believe in it?”

“Of course I believe in it. But these chaps take it much too far. The unconscious ‘death wish’ and all that, there’s something in it, of course, but not nearly so much as they make out.”

“But there is such a thing,” I persisted.

“You’d better go and buy yourself a book on psychology and read all about it.”

“Thyrza Grey claims that she knows all there is to know.”

“Thyrza Grey!” he snorted. “What does a half-baked spinster in a country village know about mental psychology?”

“She says she knows a lot.”

“As I said before, balderdash!”

“That,” I remarked, “is what people have always said about any discovery that doesn’t accord with recognised ideas. Frogs twitching their legs on railings—”

He interrupted me.

“So you’ve swallowed all this, hook, line and sinker?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I just wanted to know if there is any scientific basis for it.”

Corrigan snorted.

“Scientific basis my foot!”

“All right. I just wanted to know.”

“You’ll be saying next she’s the Woman with the Box.”

“What Woman with a box?”

“Just one of the wild stories that turns up from time to time—by Nostradamus out of Mother Shipton. Some people will swallow anything.”

“You might at least tell me how you are getting on with that list of names.”

“The boys have been hard at work, but these things take time and a lot of routine work. Names without addresses or Christian names aren’t easy to trace or identify.”

“Let’s take it from a different angle. I’d be willing to bet you one thing. Within a fairly recent period—say a year to a year and a half—every one of those names has appeared on a death certificate. Am I right?”

He gave me a queer look.

“You’re right—for what it’s worth.”

“That’s the thing they all have in common—death.”

“Yes, but that mayn’t mean as much as it sounds, Mark. Have you any idea how many people die every day in the British Isles? And some of those names are quite common—which doesn’t help.”

“Delafontaine,” I said. “Mary Delafontaine. That’s not a very common name, is it? The funeral was last Tuesday, I understand.”

He shot me a quick glance.

“How do you know that? Saw it in the paper. I suppose.”

“I heard it from a friend of hers.”

“There was nothing fishy about her death. I can tell you that. In fact, there’s been nothing questionable about any of the deaths the police have been investigating. If they were ‘accidents’ it might be suspicious. But the deaths are all perfectly normal deaths. Pneumonia, cerebral haemorrhage, tumour on the brain, gallstones, one case of polio—nothing in the least suspicious.”

I nodded.

“Not accident,” I said. “Not poisoning. Just plain illnesses leading to death. Just as Thyrsa Grey claims.”

“Are you really suggesting that that woman can cause someone she’s never seen, miles away, to catch pneumonia and die of it?”

“I’m not suggesting such a thing. She did. I think it’s fantastic and I’d like to think it’s impossible. But there are certain curious factors. There’s the casual mention of a Pale Horse—in connection with the removal of unwanted persons. There is a place called the Pale Horse—and the woman who lives there practically boasts that such an operation is possible. Living in that neighbourhood is a man who is recognised very positively as the man who was seen following Father Gorman on the night that he was killed—the night when he had been called to a dying woman who was heard to speak of ‘great wickedness.’ Rather a lot of coincidences, don’t you think?”

“The man couldn’t have been Venables, since according to you, he’s been paralysed for years.”

“It isn’t possible, from the medical point of view, that that paralysis could be faked?”

“Of course not. The limbs would be atrophied.”

“That certainly seems to settle the question,” I admitted. I sighed. “A pity. If there is a—I don’t know quite what to call it—an organisation that specialises in ‘Removals—Human’ Venables is the kind of brain I can see

running it. The things he has in that house of his represent a fantastic amount of money. Where does that money come from?"

I paused—and then said:

"All these people who have died—tidily—in their beds, of this, that and the other—were there people who profited by their deaths?"

"Someone always profits by a death—in greater or lesser degree. There were no notably suspicious circumstances, if that is what you mean."

"It isn't quite."

"Lady Hesketh-Dubois, as you probably know, left about fifty thousand net. A niece and a nephew inherit. Nephew lives in Canada. Niece is married and lives in North of England. Both could do with the money. Thomasina Tuckerton was left a very large fortune by her father. If she died unmarried before the age of twenty-one, it reverts to her stepmother. Stepmother seems quite a blameless creature. Then there's your Mrs. Delafontaine—money left to a cousin—"

"Ah yes. And the cousin?"

"In Kenya with her husband."

"All splendidly absent," I commented.

Corrigan threw me an annoyed glance.

"Of the three Sandfords who've kicked the bucket, one left a wife much younger than himself who has married again—rather quickly. Deceased Sandford was an R.C., and wouldn't have given her a divorce. A fellow called Sidney Harmondsworth who died of cerebral haemorrhage was suspected at the Yard of augmenting his income by discreet blackmail. Several people in high places must be greatly relieved that he is no more."

"What you're saying in effect is that all these deaths were convenient deaths. What about Corrigan?"

Corrigan grinned.

“Corrigan is a common name. Quite a lot of Corriganes have died—but not to the particular advantage of anyone in particular so far as we can learn.”

“That settles it. You’re the next prospective victim. Take good care of yourself.”

“I will. And don’t think that your Witch of Endor is going to strike me down with a duodenal ulcer, or Spanish ’flu. Not a casehardened doctor!”

“Listen, Jim. I want to investigate this claim of Thyrza Grey’s. Will you help me?”

“No, I won’t! I can’t understand a clever educated fellow like you being taken in by such balderdash.”

I sighed.

“Can’t you use another word? I’m tired of that one.”

“Poppycock, if you like it better.”

“I don’t much.”

“Obstinate fellow, aren’t you, Mark?”

“As I see it,” I said, “somebody has to be!”

Ten

Glendower Close was very very new. It swept round in an uneven semicircle and at its lower end the builders were still at work. About halfway along its length was a gate inscribed with the name of Everest.

Visible, bent over the garden border, planting bulbs, was a rounded back which Inspector Lejeune recognised without difficulty as that of Mr. Zachariah Osborne. He opened the gate and passed inside. Mr. Osborne rose from his stooping position and turned to see who had entered his domain. On recognising his visitor, an additional flush of pleasure rose to his already flushed face. Mr. Osborne in the country was looking very much the same as Mr. Osborne in his shop in London. He wore stout country shoes and was in his shirt sleeves, but even this déshabillé detracted little from the dapper neatness of his appearance. A fine dew of perspiration showed on the shining baldness of his domed head. This he carefully wiped with a pocket handkerchief before advancing to meet his visitor.

“Inspector Lejeune!” he exclaimed pleurably. “I take this as an honour. I do indeed, sir. I received your acknowledgement of my letter, but I never hoped to see you in person. Welcome to my little abode. Welcome to Everest. The name surprises you perhaps? I have always been deeply interested in the Himalayas. I followed every detail of the Everest expedition. What a triumph for our country. Sir Edmund Hillary! What a man! What endurance! As one who has never had to suffer any personal discomfort, I do appreciate the courage of those who go forth to scale unconquered mountains or sail through icebound seas to discover the secrets of the Pole. But come inside and partake, I beg of you, of some simple refreshment.”

Leading the way, Mr. Osborne ushered Lejeune into the small bungalow which was the acme of neatness, though rather sparsely furnished.

“Not quite settled yet,” explained Mr. Osborne. “I attend local sales whenever possible. There is good stuff to be picked up that way, at a quarter

of the cost one would have to pay in a shop. Now what can I offer you? A glass of sherry? Beer? A cup of tea? I could have the kettle on in a jiffy.”

Lejeune expressed a preference for beer.

“Here we are, then,” said Mr. Osborne, returning a moment later with two brimming pewter tankards. “We will sit and take our rest. Everest. Ha ha! The name of my house has a double meaning. I am always fond of a little joke.”

Those social amenities satisfied, Mr. Osborne leaned forward hopefully.

“My information was of service to you?”

Lejeune softened the blow as much as possible.

“Not as much as we hoped, I am afraid.”

“Ah, I confess I am disappointed. Though, really, there is, I realise, no reason to suppose that a gentleman proceeding in the same direction as Father Gorman should necessarily be his murderer. That was really too much to hope for. And this Mr. Venables is well-to-do and much respected locally, I understand, moving in the best social circles.”

“The point is,” said Lejeune, “that it could not have been Mr. Venables that you saw on that particular evening.”

“Oh, but it was. I have absolutely no doubt in my own mind. I am never mistaken about a face.”

“I’m afraid you must have been this time,” said Lejeune gently. “You see, Mr. Venables is a victim of polio. For over three years he has been paralysed from the waist down, and is unable to use his legs.”

“Polio!” ejaculated Mr. Osborne. “Oh dear, dear... That does seem to settle the matter. And yet—You’ll excuse me, Inspector Lejeune. I hope you won’t take offence. But that really is so? I mean you have definite medical evidence as to that?”

“Yes, Mr. Osborne. We have. Mr. Venables is a patient of Sir William Dugdale of Harley Street, a most eminent member of the medical profession.”

“Of course, of course. F.R.C.P. A very well-known name! Oh dear, I seem to have fallen down badly. I was so very sure. And to trouble you for nothing.”

“You mustn’t take it like that,” said Lejeune quickly. “Your information is still very valuable. It is clear that the man you saw must bear a very close resemblance to Mr. Venables—and since Mr. Venables is a man of distinctly unusual appearance, that is extremely valuable knowledge to have. There cannot be many persons answering to that description.”

“True, true.” Mr. Osborne cheered up a little. “A man of the criminal classes resembling Mr. Venables in appearance. There certainly cannot be many such. In the files at Scotland Yard—”

He looked hopefully at the inspector.

“It may not be quite so simple as that,” said Lejeune slowly. “The man may not have a record. And in any case, as you said just now there is as yet no reason to assume that this particular man had anything to do with the attack on Father Gorman.”

Mr. Osborne looked depressed again.

“You must forgive me. Wishful thinking, I am afraid, on my part... I should so like to have been able to give evidence at a murder trial... And they would not have been able to shake me, I assure you of that. Oh no, I should have stuck to my guns!”

Lejeune was silent, considering his host thoughtfully. Mr. Osborne responded to the silent scrutiny.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Osborne, why would you have stuck to your guns, as you put it?”

Mr. Osborne looked astonished.

“Because I am so certain—oh—oh yes, I see what you mean. The man was not the man. So I have no business to feel certain. And yet I do—”

Lejeune leaned forward. “You may have wondered why I have come to see you today. Having received medical evidence that the man seen by you could not have been Mr. Venables, why am I here?”

“Quite. Quite. Well, then, Inspector Lejeune, why did you come?”

“I came,” said Lejeune, “because the very positiveness of your identification impressed me. I wanted to know on what grounds your certainty was based. It was a foggy night, remember. I have been to your shop. I have stood where you stood in your doorway and looked across the street. On a foggy night it seemed to me that a figure at that distance would be very insubstantial, that it would be almost impossible to distinguish features clearly.”

“Up to a point, of course, you are quite right. Fog was setting in. But it came, if you understand me, in patches. It cleared for a short space every now and then. It did so at the moment that I saw Father Gorman walking fast along the opposite pavement. That is why I saw him and the man who followed shortly after him so clearly. Moreover, just when the second man was abreast of me, he flicked on a lighter to relight his cigarette. His profile at that moment was very clear—the nose, the chin, the pronounced Adam’s apple. That’s a striking-looking man, I thought. I’ve never seen him about before. If he’d ever been into my shop I’d have remembered him, I thought. So, you see—”

Mr. Osborne broke off.

“Yes, I see,” said Lejeune thoughtfully.

“A brother,” suggested Mr. Osborne hopefully. “A twin brother, perhaps? Now that would be a solution.”

“The identical twin solution?” Lejeune smiled and shook his head. “So very convenient in fiction. But in real life—” he shook his head. “It doesn’t happen, you know. It really doesn’t happen.”

“No... No, I suppose not. But possibly an ordinary brother. A close family resemblance—” Mr. Osborne looked wistful.

“As far as we can ascertain,” Lejeune spoke carefully, “Mr. Venables has not got a brother.”

“As far as you can ascertain?” Mr. Osborne repeated the words.

“Though of British nationality, he was born abroad, his parents only brought him to England when he was eleven years old.”

“You don’t know very much about him really, then? About his family, I mean?”

“No,” said Lejeune, thoughtfully. “It isn’t easy to find out very much about Mr. Venables—without, that is to say, going and asking him—and we’ve no grounds for doing that.”

He spoke deliberately. There were ways of finding out things without going and asking, but he had no intention of telling Mr. Osborne so.

“So if it wasn’t for the medical evidence,” he said, getting to his feet, “you’d be sure about the identification?”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Osborne, following suit. “It’s quite a hobby of mine, you know, memorising faces.” He chuckled. “Many a customer I’ve surprised that way. ‘How’s the asthma?’ I’d say to someone—and she’d look quite surprised. ‘You came in last March,’ I’d say, ‘with a prescription. One of Dr. Hargreaves’s.’ And wouldn’t she look surprised! Did me a lot of good in business. It pleases people to be remembered, though I wasn’t as good with names as with faces. I started making a hobby of the thing quite young. If Royalty can do it, I used to say to myself, you can do it, Zachariah Osborne! After a while it becomes automatic. You hardly have to make an effort.”

Lejeune sighed.

“I’d like to have a witness like you in the box,” he said. “Identification is always a tricky business. Most people can’t tell you anything at all. They’ll say things like: ‘Oh, tallish, I think. Fair-haired—well, not very fair, sort of middling. Ordinary sort of face. Eyes blue—or grey—or perhaps brown. Grey mackintosh—or it may have been dark blue.’”

Mr. Osborne laughed.

“Not much good to you, that sort of thing.”

“Frankly, a witness like you would be a godsend!”

Mr. Osborne looked pleased.

“It’s a gift,” he said modestly. “But mind you, I’ve cultivated my gift. You know the game they play at children’s parties—a lot of objects brought in on a tray and a few minutes given to memorise them. I can score a hundred percent every time. Quite surprises people. How wonderful, they say. It’s not wonderful. It’s a knack. Comes with practice.” He chuckled. “I’m not a bad conjurer either. I do a bit to amuse the kiddies at Christmastime. Excuse me, Mr. Lejeune, what have you got in your breast pocket?”

He leaned forward and extracted a small ashtray.

“Tut, tut, sir, and you in the police force!”

He laughed heartily and Lejeune laughed with him. Then Mr. Osborne sighed.

“It’s a nice little place I’ve got here, sir. The neighbours seem pleasant and friendly. It’s the life I’ve been looking forward to for years, but I’ll admit to you, Mr. Lejeune, that I miss the interest of my own business. Always someone coming in and out. Types, you know, lots of types to study. I’ve looked forward to having my little bit of garden, and I’ve got quite a lot of interests. Butterflies, as I told you, and a bit of bird-watching now and

again. I didn't realise that I'd miss what I might call the human element so much.

"I'd looked forward to going abroad in a small way. Well, I've taken one weekend trip to France. Quite nice, I must say—but I felt, very strongly, that England's really good enough for me. I didn't care for the foreign cooking, for one thing. They haven't the least idea, as far as I can see, how to do eggs and bacon."

He sighed again.

"Just shows you what human nature is. Looked forward no end to retiring, I did. And now—do you know I've actually played with the idea of buying a small share in a pharmaceutical business here in Bournemouth—just enough to give me an interest, no need to be tied to the shop all the time. But I'd feel in the middle of things again. It will be the same with you, I expect. You'll make plans ahead, but when the time comes, you'll miss the excitement of your present life."

Lejeune smiled.

"A policeman's life is not such a romantically exciting one as you think, Mr. Osborne. You've got the amateur's view of crime. Most of it is dull routine. We're not always chasing down criminals, and following up mysterious clues. It can be quite a dull business, really."

Mr. Osborne looked unconvinced.

"You know best," he said. "Good-bye, Mr. Lejeune, and I'm sorry indeed that I haven't been able to help you. If there was anything—anytime—"

"I'll let you know," Lejeune promised him.

"That day at the fête, it seemed such a chance," Osborne murmured sadly.

"I know. A pity the medical evidence is so definite, but one can't get over that sort of thing, can one?"

“Well—” Mr. Osborne let the word linger, but Lejeune did not notice it. He strode away briskly. Mr. Osborne stood by the gate looking after him.

“Medical evidence,” he said. “Doctors indeed! If he knew half what I know about doctors—innocents, that’s what they are! Doctors indeed!”

Eleven

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

First Hermia. Now Corrigan.

All right, then, I was making a fool of myself!

I was accepting balderdash as solid truth. I had been hypnotised by that phony woman Thyrza Grey into accepting a farrago of nonsense. I was a credulous, superstitious ass.

I decided to forget the whole damned business. What was it to do with me anyway?

Through the mist of disillusionment, I heard the echoes of Mrs. Dane Calthrop's urgent tones.

"You've got to DO something!"

All very well—to say things like that.

"You need someone to help you..."

I had needed Hermia. I had needed Corrigan. But neither of them would play. There was no one else.

Unless—

I sat—considering the idea.

On an impulse I went to the telephone and rang Mrs. Oliver.

"Hallo. Mark Easterbrook here."

"Yes?"

“Can you tell me the name of that girl who was staying in the house for the fête?”

“I expect so. Let me see... Yes, of course, Ginger. That was her name.”

“I know that. But her other name.”

“What other name?”

“I doubt if she was christened Ginger. And she must have a surname.”

“Well, of course. But I’ve no idea what it is. One never seems to hear any surnames nowadays. It’s the first time I’d ever met her.” There was a slight pause and then Mrs. Oliver said, “You’ll have to ring up Rhoda and ask her.”

I didn’t like that idea. Somehow I felt shy about it.

“Oh, I can’t do that,” I said.

“It’s perfectly simple,” said Mrs. Oliver encouragingly. “Just say you’ve lost her address and can’t remember her name and you’d promised to send her one of your books, or the name of a shop that sells cheap caviare, or to return a handkerchief which she lent you when your nose bled one day, or the address of a rich friend who wants a picture restored. Any of those do? I can think of lots more if you’d like.”

“One of those will do beautifully,” I assured her.

I rang off, dialled 100 and presently was speaking to Rhoda.

“Ginger?” said Rhoda. “Oh, she lives in a Mews. Calgary Place. Forty-five. Wait a minute. I’ll give you her telephone number.” She went away and returned a minute later. “It’s Capricorn 35987. Got it?”

“Yes, thanks. But I haven’t got her name. I never heard it.”

“Her name? Oh, her surname, you mean. Corrigan. Katherine Corrigan. What did you say?”

“Nothing. Thanks, Rhoda.”

It seemed to me an odd coincidence. Corrigan. Two Corrigans. Perhaps it was an omen.

I dialled Capricorn 35987.

II

Ginger sat opposite me at a table in the White Cockatoo where we had met for a drink. She looked refreshingly the same as she had looked at Much Deeping—a tousled mop of red hair, an engaging freckled face and alert green eyes. She was wearing her London artistic livery of skintight pants, a Sloppy Joe jersey and black woollen stockings—but otherwise she was the same Ginger. I liked her very much.

“I’ve had to do a lot of work to track you down,” I said. “Your surname and your address and your telephone number—all unknown. I’ve got a problem.”

“That’s what my daily always says. It usually means that I have to buy her a new saucepan scourer or a carpet brush, or something dull.”

“You don’t have to buy anything,” I assured her.

Then I told her. It didn’t take quite so long as the story I had told to Hermia, because she was already familiar with the Pale Horse and its occupants. I averted my eyes from her as I finished the tale. I didn’t want to see her reaction. I didn’t want to see indulgent amusement, or stark incredulity. The whole thing sounded more idiotic than ever. No one (except Mrs. Dane Calthrop) could possibly feel about it as I felt. I drew patterns on the plastic tabletop with a stray fork.

Ginger’s voice came briskly.

“That’s all, is it?”

“That’s all,” I admitted.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“You think— I should do something about it?”

“Well, of course! Someone’s got to do something! You can’t have an organisation going about bumping people off and not do anything.”

“But what can I do?”

I could have fallen on her neck and hugged her.

She was sipping Pernod and frowning. Warmth spread over me. I was no longer alone.

Presently she said musingly:

“You’ll have to find out what it all means.”

“I agree. But how?”

“There seem to be one or two leads. Perhaps I can help.”

“Would you? But there’s your job.”

“Plenty could be done out of office hours.” She frowned again as she thought.

“That girl,” she said at last. “The one at supper after the Old Vic. Poppy or something. She knows about it—she must do—to say what she did.”

“Yes, but she got frightened, and sheered off when I tried to ask her questions. She was scared. She definitely wouldn’t talk.”

“That’s where I can help,” said Ginger confidently. “She’d tell me things she wouldn’t tell you. Can you arrange for us to meet? Your friend and her and you and me? A show, or dinner or something?” Then she looked doubtful. “Or is that too expensive?”

I assured her that I could support the expense.

“As for you—” Ginger thought a minute. “I believe,” she said slowly, “that your best bet would be the Thomasina Tuckerton angle.”

“But how? She’s dead.”

“And somebody wanted her dead, if your ideas are correct! And arranged it with the Pale Horse. There seem two possibilities. The stepmother, or else the girl she had the fight with at Luigi’s and whose young man she had pinched. She was going to marry him, perhaps. That wouldn’t suit the stepmother’s book—or the girl’s—if she was crazy enough about the young man. Either of them might have gone to the Pale Horse. We might get a lead there. What was the girl’s name, or don’t you know?”

“I think it was Lou.”

“Ash-blond lank hair, medium height, rather bosomy?”

I agreed with the description.

“I think I’ve met her about. Lou Ellis. She’s got a bit of money herself—”

“She didn’t look like it.”

“They don’t—but she has, all right. Anyway, she could afford to pay the Pale Horse’s fees. They don’t do it for nothing, I suppose.”

“One would hardly imagine so.”

“You’ll have to tackle the stepmother. It’s more up your street than mine. Go and see her—”

“I don’t know where she lives or anything.”

“Luigi knows something about Tommy’s home. He’ll know what county she lives in, I should imagine. A few books of reference ought to do the rest. But what idiots we are! You saw the notice in The Times of her death. You’ve only got to go and look in their files.”

“I’ll have to have a pretext for tackling the stepmother,” I said thoughtfully.

Ginger said that that would be easy.

“You’re someone, you see,” she pointed out. “A historian, and you lecture and you’ve got letters after your name. Mrs. Tuckerton will be impressed, and probably tickled to death to see you.”

“And the pretext?”

“Some feature of interest about her house?” suggested Ginger vaguely.
“Sure to have something if it’s an old one.”

“Nothing to do with my period,” I objected.

“She won’t know that,” said Ginger. “People always think that anything over a hundred years old must interest a historian or an archaeologist. Or how about a picture? There must be some old pictures of some kind. Anyway, you make an appointment and you arrive and you butter her up and be charming, and then you say you once met her daughter—her stepdaughter—and say how sad etc.... And then, bring in, quite suddenly, a reference to the Pale Horse. Be a little sinister if you like.”

“And then?”

“And then you observe the reaction. If you mention the Pale Horse out of the blue, and she has a guilty conscience, I defy anyone not to show some sign.”

“And if she does—what next?”

“The important thing is, that we’ll know we’re on the right track. Once we’re sure, we can go full steam ahead.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“There’s something else. Why do you think the Grey woman told you all she did tell you? Why was she so forthcoming?”

“The commonsense answer is because she’s potty.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean—why you? You in particular? I just wondered if there might be some kind of tie-up?”

“Tie-up with what?”

“Wait just a minute—while I get my ideas in order.”

I waited. Ginger nodded twice emphatically and then spoke.

“Supposing—just supposing—it went like this. The Poppy girl knows all about the Pale Horse in a vague kind of way—not through personal knowledge, but by hearing it talked about. She sounds the sort of girl that wouldn’t be noticed much by anyone when they were talking—but she’d quite likely take in a lot more than they thought she did. Rather silly people are often like that. Say she was overheard talking to you about it that night, and someone ticks her off. Next day you come and ask her questions, and she’s been scared, so she won’t talk. But the fact that you’ve come and asked her also gets around. Now what would be the reason for your asking questions? You’re not the police. The likely reason would be that you’re a possible client.”

“But surely—”

“It’s logical, I tell you. You’ve heard rumours of this thing—you want to find out about it—for your own purposes. Presently you appear at the fête in Much Deeping. You are brought to the Pale Horse—presumably because you’ve asked to be taken there—and what happens? Thyrza Grey goes straight into her sales talk.”

“I suppose it’s a possibility.” I considered... “Do you think she can do what she claims to do, Ginger?”

“Personally I’d be inclined to say of course she can’t! But odd things can happen. Especially with things like hypnotism. Telling someone to go and take a bite out of a candle the next afternoon at four o’clock, and they do it without having any idea why. That sort of thing. And electric boxes where you put in a drop of blood and it tells you if you’re going to have cancer in

two years' time. It all sounds rather bogus—but perhaps not entirely bogus. About Thyrza—I don't think it's true—but I'm terribly afraid it might be!"

"Yes," I said sombrely, "that explains it very well."

"I might put in a bit of work on Lou," said Ginger thoughtfully. "I know lots of places where I can run across her. Luigi might know a few things too."

"But the first thing," she added, "is to get in touch with Poppy."

The latter was arranged fairly easily. David was free three nights ahead, we settled on a musical show, and he arrived, with Poppy in tow. We went to the Fantasie for supper and I noticed that Ginger and Poppy after a prolonged retirement to powder their noses, reappeared on excellent terms with each other. No controversial subjects were raised during the party on Ginger's instructions. We finally parted and I drove Ginger home.

"Not much to report," she said cheerfully. "I've been onto Lou. The man they quarrelled about was Gene Pleydon, by the way. A nasty bit of goods, if you ask me. Very much on the make. The girls all adore him. He was making quite a play for Lou and then Tommy came along. Lou says he didn't care for her a bit, he was after her money—but she'd probably want to think that. Anyway, he dropped Lou like a hot coal and she was naturally sore about it. According to her, it wasn't much of a row—just a few girlish high spirits."

"Girlish high spirits! She tugged Tommy's hair out by the roots."

"I'm just telling you what Lou told me."

"She seems to have been very forthcoming."

"Oh, they all like talking about their affairs. They'll talk to anyone who will listen. Anyway, Lou has got another boyfriend now—another dud, I'd say, but she's already crazy about him. So it doesn't look to me as though she'd been a client of the Pale Horse. I brought the term up, but it didn't register. I think we can wash her out. Luigi doesn't think there was much in it, either."

On the other hand, he thinks Tommy was serious about Gene. And Gene was going for her in a big way. What have you done about the stepmother?"

"She was abroad. She comes back tomorrow. I've written her a letter—or rather I got my secretary to write it, asking for an appointment."

"Good. We're getting things moving. I hope everything doesn't peter out."

"If it gets us anywhere!"

"Something will," said Ginger enthusiastically. "That reminds me. To go back to the beginning of all this, the theory is that Father Gorman was killed after being called out to a dying woman, and that he was murdered because of something she told him or confessed to him. What happened to that woman? Did she die? And who was she? There ought to be some lead there."

"She died. I don't really know much about her. I think her name was Davis."

"Well, couldn't you find out more?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"If we could get at her background, we might find out how she knew what she did know."

"I see your point."

I got Jim Corrigan on the telephone early the next morning and put my query to him.

"Let me see now. We did get a bit further, but not much. Davis wasn't her real name, that's why it took a little time to check up on her. Half a moment, I jotted down a few things... Oh yes, here we are. Her real name was Archer, and her husband had been a smalltime crook. She left him and went back to her maiden name."

"What sort of a crook was Archer? And where is he now?"

“Oh, very small stuff. Pinched things from department stores. Unconsidered trifles here and there. He had a few convictions. As to where he is now, he’s dead.”

“Not much there.”

“No, there isn’t. The firm Mrs. Davis was working for at the time of her death, the C.R.C. (Customers’ Reactions Classified), apparently didn’t know anything about her, or her background.”

I thanked him and rang off.

Twelve

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

Three days later Ginger rang me up.

"I've got something for you," she said. "A name and address. Write it down."

I took out my notebook.

"Go ahead."

"Bradley is the name and the address is Seventy-eight Municipal Square Buildings, Birmingham."

"Well, I'm damned, what is all this?"

"Goodness knows! I don't. I doubt if Poppy does really!"

"Poppy? Is this—"

"Yes. I've been working on Poppy in a big way. I told you I could get something out of her if I tried. Once I got her softened up, it was easy."

"How did you set about it?" I asked curiously.

Ginger laughed.

"Girls-together stuff. You wouldn't understand. The point is that if a girl tells things to another girl it doesn't really count. She doesn't think it matters."

"All in the trade union so to speak?"

"You could put it like that. Anyway, we lunched together, and I yapped a bit about my love life—and various obstacles—married man with impossible wife—Catholic—wouldn't divorce him—made his life hell. And how she was an invalid, always in pain, but not likely to die for years. Really much

better for her if she could die. Said I'd a good mind to try the Pale Horse, but I didn't really know how to set about it—and would it be terribly expensive? And Poppy said yes, she thought it would. She'd heard they charged the earth. And I said 'Well, I have expectations.' Which I have, you know—a great-uncle—a poppet and I'd hate him to die, but the fact came in useful. Perhaps, I said, they'd take something on account? But how did one set about it? And then Poppy came across with that name and address. You had to go to him first, she said, to settle the business side."

"It's fantastic!" I said.

"It is, rather."

We were both silent for a moment.

I said incredulously: "She told you quite openly? She didn't seem—scared?"

Ginger said impatiently: "You don't understand. Telling me didn't count. And after all, Mark, if what we think is true the business has to be more or less advertised, hasn't it? I mean they must want new 'clients' all the time."

"We're mad to believe anything of the kind."

"All right. We're mad. Are you going to Birmingham to see Mr. Bradley?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to see Mr. Bradley. If he exists."

I hardly believed that he did. But I was wrong. Mr. Bradley did exist.

Municipal Square Buildings was an enormous honeycomb of offices. Seventy-eight was on the third floor. On the ground glass door was neatly printed in black: C. R. Bradley, COMMISSION AGENT. And below, in smaller letters: Please enter.

I entered.

There was a small outer office, empty, and a door marked PRIVATE, half ajar. A voice from behind it said:

“Come in, please.”

The inner office was larger. It had a desk, one or two comfortable chairs, a telephone, a stack of box files, and Mr. Bradley sitting behind the desk.

He was a small dark man, with shrewd dark eyes. He wore a dark business suit and looked the acme of respectability.

“Just shut the door, will you?” he said pleasantly. “And sit down. That chair’s quite comfortable. Cigarette? No? Well now, what can I do for you?”

I looked at him. I didn’t know how to begin. I hadn’t the least idea what to say. It was, I think, sheer desperation that led me to attack with the phrase I did. Or it may have been the small beady eyes.

“How much?” I said.

It startled him a little, I was glad to note, but not in the way that he ought to have been startled. He did not assume, as I would have assumed in his place, that someone not quite right in the head had come into his office.

His eyebrows rose.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “You don’t waste much time, do you?”

I held to my line.

“What’s the answer?”

He shook his head gently in a slightly reproving manner.

“That’s not the way to go about things. We must proceed in the proper manner.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“As you like. What’s the proper manner?”

“We haven’t introduced ourselves yet, have we? I don’t know your name.”

“At the moment,” I said, “I don’t really think I feel inclined to tell it to you.”

“Cautious.”

“Cautious.”

“An admirable quality—though not always practicable. Now who sent you to me? Who’s our mutual friend?”

“Again I can’t tell you. A friend of mine has a friend who knows a friend of yours.”

Mr. Bradley nodded his head.

“That’s the way a lot of my clients come,” he said. “Some of the problems are rather—delicate. You know my profession, I presume?”

He had no intention of waiting for my reply. He hastened to give me the answer.

“Turf Commission Agent,” he said. “You’re interested, perhaps, in—horses?”

There was just the faintest pause before the last word.

“I’m not a racing man,” I said noncommittally.

“There are many aspects of the horse. Racing, hunting, hacking. It’s the sporting aspect that interests me. Betting.” He paused for a moment and then asked casually—almost too casually:

“Any particular horse you had in mind?”

I shrugged my shoulders and burnt my boats.

“A pale horse....”

“Ah, very good, excellent. You yourself, if I may say so, seem to be rather a dark horse. Ha ha! You mustn’t be nervous. There really is no need to be nervous.”

“That’s what you say,” I said rather rudely.

Mr. Bradley’s manner became more bland and soothing.

“I can quite understand your feelings. But I can assure you that you needn’t have any anxiety. I’m a lawyer myself—disbarred, of course,” he added parenthetically, in what was really almost an engaging way. “Otherwise I shouldn’t be here. But I can assure you that I know my law. Everything I recommend is perfectly legal and aboveboard. It’s just a question of a bet. A man can bet on anything he pleases, whether it will rain tomorrow, whether the Russians can send a man to the moon, or whether your wife’s going to have twins. You can bet whether Mrs. B. will die before Christmas, or whether Mrs. C. will live to be a hundred. You back your judgement or your intuition or whatever you like to call it. It’s as simple as that.”

I felt exactly as though I were being reassured by a surgeon before an operation. Mr. Bradley’s consulting room manner was perfect.

I said slowly:

“I don’t really understand this business of the Pale Horse.”

“And that worries you? Yes, it worries a lot of people. More things in heaven and earth, Horatio, and so on and so on. Frankly, I don’t understand it myself. But it gets results. It gets results in the most marvellous way.”

“If you could tell me more about it—”

I had settled on my role now—cautious, eager—but scared. It was obviously an attitude with which Mr. Bradley had frequently had to cope.

“Do you know the place at all?”

I made a quick decision. It would be unwise to lie.

“I—well—yes—I was with some friends. They took me there—”

“Charming old pub. Full of historical interest. And they’ve done wonders in restoring it. You met her, then. My friend, Miss Grey, I mean?”

“Yes—yes, of course. An extraordinary woman.”

“Isn’t she? Yes, isn’t she? You’ve hit it exactly. An extraordinary woman. And with extraordinary powers.”

“The things she claims! Surely—quite—well—impossible?”

“Exactly. That’s the whole point. The things she claims to be able to know and do are impossible! Everybody would say so. In a court of law, for instance—”

The black beady eyes were boring into mine. Mr. Bradley repeated the words with designed emphasis.

“In a court of law, for instance—the whole thing would be ridiculed! If that woman stood up and confessed to murder, murder by remote control or ‘will power’ or whatever nonsensical name she likes to use, that confession couldn’t be acted upon! Even if her statement was true (which of course sensible men like you and I don’t believe for one moment!) it couldn’t be admitted legally. Murder by remote control isn’t murder in the eyes of the law. It’s just nonsense. That’s the whole beauty of the thing—as you’ll appreciate if you think for a moment.”

I understood that I was being reassured. Murder committed by occult powers was not murder in an English court of law. If I were to hire a gangster to commit murder with a cosh or a knife, I was committed with him—an accomplice before the fact—I had conspired with him. But if I commissioned Thyrza Grey to use her black arts—those black arts were not admissible. That was what, according to Mr. Bradley, was the beauty of the thing.

All my natural scepticism rose up in protest. I burst out heatedly:

“But damn it all, it’s fantastic,” I shouted. “I don’t believe it. It’s impossible.”

“I agree with you. I really do. Thyrsa Grey is an extraordinary woman, and she certainly has some extraordinary powers, but one can’t believe all the things she claims for herself. As you say, it’s too fantastic. In this age, one really can’t credit that someone can send out thought waves or whatever it is, either oneself or through a medium, sitting in a cottage in England and cause someone to sicken and die of a convenient disease out in Capri or somewhere like that.”

“But that is what she claims?”

“Oh yes. Oh course she has powers—she is Scottish and what is called second sight is a peculiarity of that race. It really does exist. What I do believe, and believe without a doubt, is this,” he leaned forward, wagging a forefinger impressively, “Thyrsa Grey does know—beforehand—when someone is going to die. It’s a gift. And she has it.”

He leaned back, studying me. I waited.

“Let’s assume a hypothetical case. Someone, yourself or another, would like very much to know when—let’s say Great-Aunt Eliza—is going to die. It’s useful, you must admit, to know something like that. Nothing unkind in it, nothing wrong—just a matter of business convenience. What plans to make? Will there be, shall we say, a useful sum of money coming in by next November? If you knew that, definitely, you might take up some valuable option. Death is such a chancy matter. Dear old Eliza might live, pepped up by doctors, for another ten years. You’d be delighted, of course, you’re fond of the dear old girl, but how useful it would be to know.”

He paused and then leaned a little farther forward.

“Now that’s where I come in. I’m a betting man. I’ll bet on anything—naturally on my own terms. You come to see me. Naturally you wouldn’t want to bet on the old girl’s passing out. That would be repulsive to your finer feelings. So we put it this way. You bet me a certain sum that Aunt Eliza will be hale and hearty still next Christmas, I bet you that she won’t.”

The beady eyes were on me, watching....

“Nothing against that, is there? Simple. We have an argument on the subject. I say Aunt E. is lined up for death, you say she isn’t. We draw up a contract and sign it. I give you a date. I say that a fortnight either way from that date Auntie E.’s funeral service will be read. You say it won’t. If you’re right—I pay you. If you’re wrong, you—pay me!”

I looked at him. I tried to summon up the feelings of a man who wants a rich old lady out of the way. I shifted it to a blackmailer. Easier to throw oneself into that part. Some man had been bleeding me for years. I couldn’t bear it any longer. I wanted him dead. I hadn’t the nerve to kill him myself, but I’d give anything—yes, anything—”

I spoke—my voice was hoarse. I was acting the part with some confidence.

“What terms?”

Mr. Bradley’s manner underwent a rapid change. It was gay, almost facetious.

“That’s where we came in, isn’t it? Or rather where you came in, ha ha. ‘How much?’ you said. Really quite startled me. Never heard anyone come to the point so soon.”

“What terms?”

“That depends. It depends on several different factors. Roughly it depends on the amount there is at stake. In some cases it depends on the funds available to the client. An inconvenient husband—or a blackmailer or something of that kind—would depend on how much my client could afford to pay. I don’t—let me make that clear—bet with poor clients—except in the kind of case I have just been outlining. In that case it would depend on the amount of Aunt Eliza’s estate. Terms are by mutual agreement. We both want something out of it, don’t we? The odds, however, work out usually at five hundred to one.”

“Five hundred to one? That’s pretty steep.”

“My wager is pretty steep. If Aunt Eliza were pretty well booked for the tomb, you’d know it already, and you wouldn’t come to me. To prophesy somebody’s death to within two weeks means pretty long odds. Five thousand pounds to one hundred isn’t at all out of the way.”

“Supposing you lose?”

Mr. Bradley shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s just too bad. I pay up.”

“And if I lose, I pay up. Supposing I don’t?”

Mr. Bradley leaned back in his chair. He half closed his eyes.

“I shouldn’t advise that,” he said softly. “I really shouldn’t.”

Despite the soft tone, I felt a faint shiver pass over me. He had uttered no direct menace. But the menace was there.

I got up. I said:

“I— I must think it over.”

Mr. Bradley was once more his pleasant and urbane self.

“Certainly think it over. Never rush into anything. If you decide to do business, come back, and we will go into the matter fully. Take your time. No hurry in the world. Take your time.”

I went out with those words echoing in my ears.

“Take your time....”

Thirteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I approached my task of interviewing Mrs. Tuckerton with the utmost reluctance. Goaded to it by Ginger, I was still far from convinced of its wisdom. To begin with I felt myself unfitted for the task I had set myself. I was doubtful of my ability to produce the needed reaction, and I was acutely conscious of masquerading under false colours.

Ginger, with the almost terrifying efficiency which she was able to display when it suited her, had briefed me by telephone.

"It will be quite simple. It's a Nash house. Not the usual style one associates with him. One of his near-Gothic flights of fancy."

"And why should I want to see it?"

"You're considering writing an article or a book on the influences that cause fluctuation of an architect's style. That sort of thing."

"Sounds very bogus to me," I said.

"Nonsense," said Ginger robustly. "When you get on to learned subjects, or arty ones, the most incredible theories are propounded and written about, in the utmost seriousness, by the most unlikely people. I could quote you chapters of tosh."

"That's why you would really be a much better person to do this than I am."

"That's where you are wrong," Ginger told me. "Mrs. T. can look you up in Who's Who and be properly impressed. She can't look me up there."

I remained unconvinced, though temporarily defeated.

On my return from my incredible interview with Mr. Bradley, Ginger and I had put our heads together. It was less incredible to her than it was to me. It afforded her, indeed, a distinct satisfaction.

“It puts an end to whether we’re imagining things or not,” she pointed out. “Now we know that an organisation does exist for getting unwanted people out of the way.”

“By supernatural means!”

“You’re so hidebound in your thinking. It’s all that wispieness and the false scarabs that Sybil wears. It puts you off. And if Mr. Bradley had turned out to be a quack practitioner, or a pseudoastrologer, you’d still be unconvinced. But since he turns out to be a nasty down-to-earth little legal crook—or that’s the impression you give me—”

“Near enough,” I said.

“Then that makes the whole thing come into line. However phony it may sound, those three women at the Pale Horse have got hold of something that works.”

“If you’re so convinced, then why Mrs. Tuckerton?”

“Extra check,” said Ginger. “We know what Thyrza Grey says she can do. We know how the financial side is worked. We know a little about three of the victims. We want to know more about the client angle.”

“And suppose Mrs. Tuckerton shows no signs of having been a client?”

“Then we’ll have to investigate elsewhere.”

“Of course, I may boob it,” I said gloomily.

Ginger said that I must think better of myself than that.

So here I was, arriving at the front door of Carraway Park. It certainly did not look like my preconceived idea of a Nash house. In many ways it was a near castle of modest proportions. Ginger had promised to supply me with a recent book on Nash architecture, but it had not arrived in time, so I was here somewhat inadequately briefed.

I rang the bell, and a rather seedy-looking man in an alpaca coat opened the door.

“Mr. Easterbrook?” he said. “Mrs. Tuckerton’s expecting you.”

He showed me into an elaborately furnished drawing room. The room made a disagreeable impression upon me. Everything in it was expensive, but chosen without taste. Left to itself, it could have been a room of pleasant proportions. There were one or two good pictures, and a great many bad ones. There was a great deal of yellow brocade. Further cogitations were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Tuckerton herself. I arose with difficulty from the depths of a bright yellow brocade sofa.

I don’t know what I had expected, but I suffered a complete reversal of feeling. There was nothing sinister here; merely a completely ordinary young to middle-aged woman. Not a very interesting woman, and not, I thought, a particularly nice woman. The lips, in spite of a generous application of lipstick, were thin and bad-tempered. The chin receded a little. The eyes were pale blue and gave the impression that she was appraising the price of everything. She was the sort of woman who undertipped porters and cloakroom attendants. There are a lot of women of her type to be met in the world, though mainly less expensively dressed, and not so well made-up.

“Mr. Easterbrook?” She was clearly delighted by my visit. She even gushed a little. “I’m so pleased to meet you. Fancy your being interested in this house. Of course I knew it was built by John Nash, my husband told me so, but I never realised that it would be interesting to a person like you!”

“Well, you see, Mrs. Tuckerton, it’s not quite his usual style, and that makes it interesting to—er—”

She saved me the trouble of continuing.

“I’m afraid I’m terribly stupid about that sort of thing—architecture, I mean, and archaeology and all that. But you mustn’t mind my ignorance—”

I didn’t mind at all. I preferred it.

“Of course all that sort of thing is terribly interesting,” said Mrs. Tuckerton.

I said that we specialists, on the contrary, were usually terribly dull and very boring on our own particular subject.

Mrs. Tuckerton said she was sure that that wasn’t true, and would I like to have tea first and see the house afterwards, or see round the house and then have tea.

I hadn’t bargained for tea—my appointment had been for three thirty, but I said that perhaps the house first.

She showed me round, chatting vivaciously most of the time, and thus relieving me of uttering any architectural judgements.

It was lucky, she said, that I’d come now. The house was up for sale—“It’s too big for me—since my husband’s death”—and she believed there was a purchaser already, though the agents had only had it on their books for just over a week.

“I wouldn’t have liked you to see it when it was empty. I think a house needs to be lived in, if one is really to appreciate it, don’t you, Mr. Easterbrook?”

I would have preferred this house unlived in, and unfurnished, but naturally I could not say so. I asked her if she was going to remain in the neighborhood.

“Really, I’m not quite sure. I shall travel a little first. Get into the sunshine. I hate this miserable climate. Actually I think I shall winter in Egypt. I was there two years ago. Such a wonderful country, but I expect you know all about it.”

I knew nothing about Egypt and said so.

“I expect you’re just being modest,” she said gaily and vaguely. “This is the dining room. It’s octagonal. That’s right, isn’t it? No corners.”

I said she was quite right and praised the proportions.

Presently, the tour was completed, we returned to the drawing room and Mrs. Tuckerton rang for tea. It was brought in by the seedy-looking manservant. There was a vast Victorian silver teapot which could have done with a clean.

Mrs. Tuckerton sighed as he left the room.

“After my husband died, the married couple he had had for nearly twenty years insisted on leaving. They said they were retiring, but I heard afterwards that they took another post. A very highly-paid one. I think it’s absurd, myself, to pay these high wages. When you think what servants’ board and lodging costs—to say nothing of their laundry.”

Yes, I thought, mean. The pale eyes, the tight mouth—avarice was there.

There was no difficulty in getting Mrs. Tuckerton to talk. She liked talking. She liked, in particular, talking about herself. Presently, by listening with close attention, and uttering an encouraging word now and then, I knew a good deal about Mrs. Tuckerton. I knew, too, more than she was conscious of telling me.

I knew that she had married Thomas Tuckerton, a widower, five years ago. She had been “much, much younger than he was.” She had met him at a big seaside hotel where she had been a bridge hostess. She was not aware that that last fact had slipped out. He had had a daughter at school near there —“so difficult for a man to know what to do with a girl when he takes her out.

“Poor Thomas, he was so lonely... His first wife had died some years back and he missed her very much.”

Mrs. Tuckerton’s picture of herself continued. A gracious kindly woman taking pity on this ageing lonely man. His deteriorating health and her devotion.

“Though, of course, in the last stages of his illness I couldn’t really have any friends of my own.”

Had there been, I wondered, some men friends whom Thomas Tuckerton had thought undesirable? It might explain the terms of his will.

Ginger had looked up the terms of his will for me at Somerset House.

Bequests to old servants, to a couple of godchildren, and then provision for his wife—sufficient, but not unduly generous. A sum in trust, the income to be enjoyed during her lifetime. The residue of his estate, which ran into a sum of six figures, to his daughter Thomasina Ann, to be hers absolutely at the age of twenty-one, or on her marriage. If she died before twenty-one unmarried, the money was to go to her stepmother. There had been, it seemed, no other members of the family.

The prize, I thought, had been a big one. And Mrs. Tuckerton liked money... It stuck out all over her. She had never had any money of her own, I was sure, till she married her elderly widower. And then, perhaps, it had gone to her head. Hampered, in her life with an invalid husband, she had looked forward to the time when she would be free, still young, and rich beyond her wildest dreams.

The will, perhaps, had been a disappointment. She had dreamed of something better than a moderate income. She had looked forward to expensive travel, to luxury cruises, to clothes, jewels—or possibly to the sheer pleasure of money itself—mounting up in the bank.

Instead the girl was to have all that money! The girl was to be a wealthy heiress. The girl who, very likely, had disliked her stepmother and shown it with the careless ruthlessness of youth. The girl was to be the rich one—unless....

Unless...? Was that enough? Could I really believe that the blonde-haired meretricious creature talking platitudes so glibly was capable of seeking out the Pale Horse, and arranging for a young girl to die?

No, I couldn't believe it....

Nevertheless, I must do my stuff. I said, rather abruptly:

“I believe, you know, I met your daughter—stepdaughter—once.”

She looked at me in mild surprise, though without much interest.

“Thomasina? Did you?”

“Yes, in Chelsea.”

“Oh, Chelsea! Yes, it would be...” She sighed. “These girls nowadays. So difficult. One doesn’t seem to have any control over them. It upset her father very much. I couldn’t do anything about it, of course. She never listened to anything I said.” She sighed again. “She was nearly grown-up, you know, when we married. A stepmother—” she shook her head.

“Always a difficult position,” I said sympathetically.

“I made allowances—did my best in every way.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“But it was absolutely no use. Of course Tom wouldn’t allow her to be actually rude to me, but she sailed as near to the wind as she could. She really made life quite impossible. In a way it was a relief to me when she insisted on leaving home, but I could quite understand how Tom felt about it. She got in with a most undesirable set.”

“I—rather gathered that,” I said.

“Poor Thomasina,” said Mrs. Tuckerton. She adjusted a stray lock of blonde hair. Then she looked at me. “Oh, but perhaps you don’t know. She died about a month ago. Encephalitis—very sudden. It’s a disease that attacks young people, I believe—so sad.”

“I did know she was dead,” I said.

I got up.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tuckerton, very much indeed for showing me your house.” I shook hands.

Then as I moved away, I turned back.

“By the way,” I said, “I think you know the Pale Horse, don’t you?”

There wasn’t any doubt of the reaction. Panic, sheer panic, showed in those pale eyes. Beneath the makeup, her face was suddenly white and afraid.

Her voice came shrill and high:

“Pale Horse? What do you mean by the Pale Horse? I don’t know anything about the Pale Horse.”

I let mild surprise show in my eyes.

“Oh—my mistake. There’s a very interesting old pub—in Much Deeping. I was down there the other day and was taken to see it. It’s been charmingly converted, keeping all the atmosphere. I certainly thought your name was mentioned—but perhaps it was your stepdaughter who had been down there—or someone else of the same name.” I paused. “The place has got—quite a reputation.”

I enjoyed my exit line. In one of the mirrors on the wall I saw Mrs. Tuckerton’s face reflected. She was staring after me. She was very, very frightened and I saw just how she would look in years to come... It was not a pleasant sight.

Fourteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

“So now we’re quite sure,” said Ginger.

“We were sure before.”

“Yes—reasonably so. But this does clinch it.”

I was silent for a moment or two. I was visualising Mrs. Tuckerton journeying to Birmingham. Entering the Municipal Square Buildings—meeting Mr. Bradley. Her nervous apprehension... his reassuring bonhomie. His skilful underlining of the lack of risk. (He would have had to underline that very hard with Mrs. Tuckerton.) I could see her going away, not committing herself. Letting the idea take root in her mind. Perhaps she went to see her stepdaughter, or her stepdaughter came home for a weekend. There could have been talk, hints of marriage. And all the time the thought of the MONEY—not just a little money, not a miserly pittance—but lots of money, big money, money that enabled you to do everything you had ever wanted! And all going to this degenerate, ill-mannered girl, slouching about in the coffee bars of Chelsea in her jeans and her sloppy jumpers, with her undesirable degenerate friends. Why should a girl like that, a girl who was no good and would never be any good, have all that beautiful money?

And so—another visit to Birmingham. More caution, more reassurance. Finally, a discussion on terms. I smiled involuntarily. Mr. Bradley would not have had it all his own way. She would have been a hard bargainer. But in the end, the terms had been agreed, some document duly signed, and then what?

That was where imagination stopped. That was what we didn’t know.

I came out of my meditation to see Ginger watching me.

She asked: “Got it all worked out?”

“How did you know what I was doing?”

“I’m beginning to know the way your mind works. You were working it out, weren’t you, following her—to Birmingham and all the rest of it?”

“Yes. But I was brought up short. At the moment when she had settled things in Birmingham—What happens next?”

We looked at each other.

“Sooner or later,” said Ginger, “someone has got to find out exactly what happens at the Pale Horse.”

“How?”

“I don’t know... It won’t be easy. Nobody who’s actually been there, who’s actually done it, will ever tell. At the same time, they’re the only people who can tell. It’s difficult... I wonder....”

“We could go to the police?” I suggested.

“Yes. After all, we’ve got something fairly definite now. Enough to act upon, do you think?”

I shook my head doubtfully.

“Evidence of intent. But is that enough? It’s this death wish nonsense. Oh,” I forestalled her interruption, “it mayn’t be nonsense—but it would sound like it in court. We’ve no idea, even, of what the actual procedure is.”

“Well, then, we’ve got to know. But how?”

“One would have to see—or hear—with one’s own eyes and ears. But there’s absolutely no place one could hide oneself in that great barn of a room—and I suppose that’s where it—whatever ‘it’ is—must take place.”

Ginger sat up very straight, gave her head a kind of toss, rather like an energetic terrier, and said:

“There’s only one way to find out what does really happen. You’ve got to be a genuine client.”

I stared at her.

“A genuine client?”

“Yes. You or I, it doesn’t matter which, has got to want somebody put out of the way. One of us has got to go to Bradley and fix it up.”

“I don’t like it,” I said sharply.

“Why?”

“Well—it opens up dangerous possibilities.”

“For us?”

“Perhaps. But I was really thinking about the—victim. We’ve got to have a victim—we’ve got to give him a name. It can’t be just invention. They might check up—in fact, they’d almost certainly check up, don’t you agree?”

Ginger thought a minute and then nodded.

“Yes. The victim’s got to be a real person with a real address.”

“That’s what I don’t like,” I said.

“And we’ve got to have a real reason for getting rid of him.”

We were silent for a moment, considering this aspect of the situation.

“The person, whoever it was, would have to agree,” I said slowly. “It’s a lot to ask.”

“The whole setup has got to be good,” said Ginger, thinking it out. “But there’s one thing, you were absolutely right in what you were saying the other day. The weakness of the whole thing is that they’re in a cleft stick.

The business has got to be secret—but not too secret. Possible clients have got to be able to hear about it.”

“What puzzles me,” I said, “is that the police don’t seem to have heard about it. After all, they’re usually aware of what kind of criminal activities are going on.”

“Yes, but I think that the reason for that is, that this is in every sense of the word, an amateur show. It’s not professional. No professional criminals are employed or involved. It’s not like hiring gangsters to bump people off. It’s all—private.”

I said that I thought she had something there.

Ginger went on:

“Suppose now that you, or I (we’ll examine both possibilities), are desperate to get rid of someone. Now who is there that you and I could want to do away with? There’s my dear old Uncle Mervyn—I’ll come into a very nice packet when he pops off. I and some cousin in Australia are the only ones left of the family. So there’s a motive there. But he’s over seventy and more or less gaga, so it would really seem more sensible for me to wait for natural causes—unless I was in some terrible hole for money—and that really would be quite difficult to fake. Besides, he’s a pet, and I’m very fond of him, and gaga or not gaga, he quite enjoys life, and I wouldn’t want to deprive him of a minute of it—or even risk such a thing! What about you? Have you got any relatives who are going to leave you money?”

I shook my head.

“No one at all.”

“Bother. It could be blackmail, perhaps? That would take a lot of fixing, though. You’re not really vulnerable enough. If you were an M.P., or in the Foreign Office, or an up and coming Minister it would be different. The same with me. Fifty years ago it would have been easy. Compromising letters, or photographs in the altogether, but really nowadays, who cares? One can be like the Duke of Wellington and say ‘Publish and be damned!’

Well, now, what else is there? Bigamy?” She fixed me with a reproachful stare. “What a pity it is you’ve never been married. We could have cooked something up if you had.”

Some expression on my face must have given me away. Ginger was quick.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Have I raked up something that hurts?”

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t hurt. It was a long time ago, I rather doubt if there’s anyone now who knows about it.”

“You married someone?”

“Yes. Whilst I was at the University. We kept it dark. She wasn’t—well, my people would have cut up rough. I wasn’t even of age. We lied about our ages.”

I was silent a moment or two, reliving the past.

“It wouldn’t have lasted,” I said slowly. “I know that now. She was pretty and she could be very sweet... but...”

“What happened?”

“We went to Italy in the long vacation. There was an accident—a car accident. She was killed outright.”

“And you?”

“I wasn’t in the car. She was—with a friend.”

Ginger gave me a quick glance. I think she understood the way it had been. The shock of my discovery that the girl I had married was not the kind that makes a faithful wife.

Ginger reverted to practical matters.

“You were married in England?”

“Yes. Registry office in Peterborough.”

“But she died in Italy?”

“Yes.”

“So there will be no record of her death in England?”

“No.”

“Then what more do you want? It’s an answer to prayer! Nothing could be simpler! You’re desperately in love with someone and you want to marry her—but you don’t know whether your wife is still alive. You’ve parted years ago and never heard from her since. Dare you risk it? While you’re thinking it out, sudden reappearance of the wife! She turns up out of the blue, refuses to give you a divorce, and threatens to go to your young woman and spill the beans.”

“Who’s my young woman?” I asked, slightly confused. “You?”

Ginger looked shocked.

“Certainly not. I’m quite the wrong type—I’d probably go and live in sin with you. No, you know quite well who I mean—and she’ll be exactly right, I should say. The statuesque brunette you go around with. Very highbrow and serious.”

“Hermia Redcliffe?”

“That’s right. Your steady.”

“Who told you about her?”

“Poppy, of course. She’s rich, too, isn’t she?”

“She’s extremely well-off. But really—”

“All right, all right. I’m not saying you’re marrying her for her money. You’re not the kind. But nasty minds like Bradley’s could easily think so...

Very well then. Here's the position. You are about to pop the question to Hermia when up turns the unwanted wife from the past. She arrives in London and the fat's in the fire. You urge a divorce—she won't play. She's vindictive. And then—you hear of the Pale Horse. I'll bet anything you like that Thyrza, and that half-witted peasant Bella, thought that that was why you came that day. They took it as a tentative approach, and that's why Thyrza was so forthcoming. It was a sales talk they were giving you."

"It could have been, I suppose." I went over that day in my mind.

"And your going to Bradley soon after fits in perfectly. You're hooked! You're a prospect—"

She paused triumphantly. There was something in what she said—but I didn't quite see....

"I still think," I said, "that they'll investigate very carefully."

"Sure to," Ginger agreed.

"It's all very well to invent a fictitious wife, resurrected from the past—but they'll want details—where she lives—all that. And when I try to hedge—"

"You won't need to hedge. To do the thing properly the wife has got to be there—and she will be there!—"

"Brace yourself," said Ginger. "I'm your wife!"

II

I stared at her. Goggled, I suppose, would be a better term. I wonder, really, that she didn't burst out laughing.

I was just recovering myself when she spoke again.

"There's no need to be so taken aback," she said. "It's not a proposal."

I found my tongue.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Of course I do. What I’m suggesting is perfectly feasible—and it has the advantage of not dragging some innocent person into possible danger.”

“It’s putting yourself in danger.”

“That’s my lookout.”

“No, it isn’t. And anyway, it wouldn’t hold water for a moment.”

“Oh yes, it would. I’ve been thinking it out. I arrive at a furnished flat, with a suitcase or two with foreign labels. I take the flat in the name of Mrs. Easterbrook—and who on earth is to say I’m not Mrs. Easterbrook?”

“Anyone who knows you.”

“Anyone who knows me won’t see me. I’m away from my job, ill. A spot of hair dye—what was your wife, by the way, dark or blonde?—not that it really matters.”

“Dark,” I said mechanically.

“Good, I’d hate a bleach. Different clothes and lots of makeup, and my best friend wouldn’t look at me twice! And since you haven’t had a wife in evidence for the last fifteen years or so—no one’s likely to spot that I’m not her. Why should anyone in the Pale Horse doubt that I’m who I say I am? If you’re prepared to sign papers wagering large sums of money that I’ll stay alive, there’s not likely to be any doubt as to my being the bona fide article. You’re not connected with the police in any way—you’re a genuine client. They can verify the marriage by looking up old records in Somerset House. They can check up on your friendship with Hermia and all that—so why should there be any doubts?”

“You don’t realise the difficulties—the risk.”

“Risk—Hell!” said Ginger. “I’d love to help you win a miserly hundred pounds or whatever it is from that shark Bradley.”

I looked at her. I liked her very much... Her red hair, her freckles, her gallant spirit. But I couldn't let her take the risks she wanted to take.

"I can't stand for it, Ginger," I said. "Suppose—something happened."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that my affair?"

"No. I got you in on all this."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, perhaps you did. But who got there first doesn't matter much. We're both in it now—and we've got to do something. I'm being serious now, Mark. I'm not pretending this is all just fun. If what we believe to be true is true, it's a sickening beastly thing. And it's got to be stopped! You see, it's not hot-blooded murder, from hate or jealousy; it's not even murder from cupidity, the human frailty of murder for gain but taking the risk yourself. It's murder as a business—murder that takes no account of who or what the victim may be.

"That is," she added, "if the whole thing is true?"

She looked at me in momentary doubt.

"It is true," I said. "That's why I'm afraid for you."

Ginger put both elbows on the table, and began to argue.

We thrashed it out, to and fro, ding-dong, repeating ourselves whilst the hands of the clock on my mantelpiece moved slowly round.

Finally Ginger summed up.

"It's like this. I'm forewarned and forearmed. I know what someone is trying to do to me. And I don't believe for one moment she can do it! If

everyone's got a 'desire for death' mine isn't well developed! I've good health. And I simply cannot believe that I'll develop gallstones, or meningitis just because—old Thyrza draws pentagrams on the floor, or Sybil throws a trance—or whatever it is those women do do.”

“Bella sacrifices a white cock, I should imagine,” I said thoughtfully.

“You must admit it's all terribly bogus!”

“We don't know what actually does happen,” I pointed out.

“No. That's why it's important to find out. But do you believe, really believe, that because of what three women can do in the barn of the Pale Horse, I, in a flat in London, will develop some fatal disease? You can't!”

“No,” I said. “I can't believe it.

“But,” I added. “I do....”

We looked at each other.

“Yes,” said Ginger. “That's our weakness.”

“Look here,” I said. “Let's make it the other way round. Let me be the one in London. You be the client. We can cook up something—”

But Ginger was vigorously shaking her head.

“No, Mark,” she said. “It won't work that way. For several reasons. The most important is that I'm known at the Pale Horse already—as my carefree self. They could get all the dope about my life from Rhoda—and there's nothing there. But you are in the ideal position already—you're a nervous client, sniffing around, not able yet to commit yourself. No, it's got to be this way.”

“I don't like it. I don't like to think of you—alone in some place under a false name—with nobody to keep an eye on you. I think, before we embark on this, we ought to go to the police—now—before we try anything else.”

“I’m agreeable to that,” said Ginger slowly. “In fact I think it’s what you ought to do. You’ve got something to go on. What police? Scotland Yard?”

“No,” I said. “I think Divisional Detective-Inspector Lejeune is the best bet.”

Fifteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I liked Divisional Detective-Inspector Lejeune at first sight. He had an air of quiet ability. I thought, too, that he was an imaginative man—the kind of man who would be willing to consider possibilities that were not orthodox.

He said:

“Dr. Corrigan has told me of his meeting with you. He’s taken a great interest in this business from the first. Father Gorman, of course, was very well known and respected in the district. Now you say you have some special information for us?”

“It concerns,” I said, “a place called the Pale Horse.”

“In, I understand, a village called Much Deeping?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about it.”

I told him of the first mention of the Pale Horse at the Fantasie. Then I described my visit to Rhoda, and my introduction to the “three weird sisters.” I related, as accurately as I could, Thyrza Grey’s conversation on that particular afternoon.

“And you were impressed by what she said?”

I felt embarrassed.

“Well, not really. I mean, I didn’t seriously believe—”

“Didn’t you, Mr. Easterbrook? I rather think you did.”

“I suppose you’re right. One just doesn’t like admitting how credulous one is.”

Lejeune smiled.

“But you’ve left something out, haven’t you? You were already interested when you came to Much Deeping—why?”

“I think it was the girl looking so scared.”

“The young lady in the flower shop?”

“Yes. She’d thrown out her remark about the Pale Horse so casually. Her being so scared seemed to underline the fact that there was—well, something to be scared about. And then I met Dr. Corrigan and he told me about the list of names. Two of them I already knew. Both were dead. A third name seemed familiar. Afterwards I found that she, too, had died.”

“That would be Mrs. Delafontaine?”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“I made up my mind that I’d got to find out more about this business.”

“And you set about it. How?”

I told him of my call on Mrs. Tuckerton. Finally I came to Mr. Bradley and the Municipal Square Buildings in Birmingham.

I had his full interest now. He repeated the name.

“Bradley,” he said. “So Bradley’s in this?”

“You know him?”

“Oh yes, we know all about Mr. Bradley. He’s given us a lot of trouble. He’s a smooth dealer, an adept at never doing anything that we can pin on him. He knows every trick and dodge of the legal game. He’s always just on the right side of the line. He’s the kind of man who could write a book like those old cookery books, “A hundred ways of evading the law.” But

murder, such a thing as organised murder—I should have said that that was right off his beat. Yes—right off his beat—”

“Now that I’ve told you about our conversation, could you act upon it?”

Lejeune slowly shook his head.

“No, we couldn’t act on it. To begin with, there were no witnesses to your conversation. It was just between the two of you and he could deny the whole thing if he wanted to! Apart from that, he was quite right when he told you that a man can bet on anything. He bets somebody won’t die—and he loses. What is there criminal about that? Unless we can connect Bradley in some way with the actual crime in question—and that, I imagine, will not be easy.”

He left it with a shrug of his shoulders. He paused a minute and then said,

“Did you, by any chance, come across a man called Venables when you were down in Much Deeping?”

“Yes,” I said, “I did. I was taken over to lunch with him one day.”

“Ah! What impression, if I may ask, did he make upon you?”

“A very powerful impression. He’s a man of great personality. An invalid.”

“Yes. Crippled by polio.”

“He can only move about in a wheeled chair. But his disability seems to have heightened his determination to live and enjoy living.”

“Tell me all you can about him.”

I described Venables’s house, his art treasures, the range and sweep of his interests.

Lejeune said:

“It’s a pity.”

“What is a pity?”

He said drily: “That Venables is a cripple.”

“Excuse me, but you are quite certain he really is a cripple? He couldn’t be—well—faking the whole thing?”

“We’re as sure of his being a cripple as one can be sure of anything. His doctor is Sir William Dugdale of Harley Street, a man absolutely above suspicion. We have Sir William’s assurance that the limbs are atrophied. Our little Mr. Osborne may be certain that Venables was the man he saw walking along Barton Street that night. But he’s wrong.”

“I see.”

“As I say, it’s a pity, because if there is such a thing as an organisation for private murder, Venables is the kind of man who would be capable of planning it.”

“Yes; that’s what I thought.”

With his forefinger Lejeune traced interlacing circles on the table in front of him. Then he looked up sharply.

“Let’s assemble what we’ve got; adding to our own knowledge the knowledge you’ve brought us. It seems reasonably certain that there is some agency or organisation that specialises in what one might call the removal of unwanted persons. There’s nothing crude about the organisation. It doesn’t employ ordinary thugs or gunmen... There’s nothing to show that the victims haven’t died a perfectly natural death. I may say that in addition to the three deaths you’ve mentioned, we’ve got a certain amount of rather indefinite information about some of the others—deaths were from natural causes in each instance, but there were those who profited by these deaths. No evidence, mind you.

“It’s clever, damnably clever, Mr. Easterbrook. Whoever thought it out—and it’s been thought out in great detail—has brains. We’ve only got hold of a few scattered names. Heaven knows how many more of them there are—

how widespread the whole thing may be. And we've only got the few names we have got, by the accident of a woman knowing herself to be dying, and wanting to make her peace with heaven."

He shook his head angrily, and then went on:

"This woman, Thyrza Grey; you say she boasted to you about her powers! Well, she can do so with impunity. Charge her with murder, put her in the dock, let her trumpet to heaven and a jury that she has released people from the toils of this world by will power or weaving spells—or what have you. She wouldn't be guilty according to the law. She's never been near the people who died, we've checked on that, she hasn't sent them poisoned chocolates through the post or anything of that kind. According to her own account, she just sits in a room and employs telepathy! Why, the whole thing would be laughed out of Court!"

I murmured:

"But Lu and Aengus laugh not. Nor any in the high celestial House."

"What's that?"

"Sorry. A quotation from the 'Immortal Hour.'"

"Well, it's true enough. The devils in Hell are laughing but not the Host of Heaven. It's an—an evil business, Mr. Easterbrook."

"Yes," I said. "It's a word that we don't use very much nowadays. But it's the only word applicable here. That's why—"

"Yes?"

Lejeune looked at me inquiringly.

I spoke in a rush. "I think there's a chance—a possible chance—of getting to know a bit more about all this. I and a friend of mine have worked out a plan. You may think it very silly—"

"I'll be the judge of that."

“First of all, I take it from what you’ve said, that you are sure in your mind that there is such an organisation as the one we’ve been discussing, and that it works?”

“It certainly works.”

“But you don’t know how it works? The first steps are already formulated. The individual I call the client hears vaguely about this organisation, gets to know more about it, is sent to Mr. Bradley in Birmingham, and decides that he will go ahead. He enters into some agreement with Bradley, and then is, or so I presume, sent to the Pale Horse. But what happens after that, we don’t know! What, exactly, happens at the Pale Horse? Somebody’s got to go and find out.”

“Go on.”

“Because until we do know, exactly, what Thyrsa Grey actually does, we can’t get any further—Your police doctor, Jim Corrigan, says the whole idea is poppycock—but is it? Inspector Lejeune, is it?”

Lejeune sighed.

“You know what I’d answer—what any sane person would answer—the answer would be ‘Yes, of course it is!’—but I’m speaking now unofficially. Very odd things have happened during the last hundred years. Would anyone have believed seventy years ago that a person could hear Big Ben strike twelve on a little box and, after it had finished striking, hear it again with his own ears through the window, from the actual clock itself—and no jiggery pokery. But Big Ben struck once—not twice—the sound was brought to the ears of the person by two different kinds of waves! Would you believe you could hear a man speaking in New York in your own drawing room, without so much as a connecting wire? Would you have believed—? Oh! a dozen other things—things that are now everyday knowledge that a child gabbles off!”

“In other words, anything’s possible?”

“That’s what I mean. If you ask me if Thyrza Grey can kill someone by rolling her eyes or going into a trance, or projecting her will, I still say ‘No.’ But—I’m not sure—How can I be? If she’s stumbled on something —”

“Yes,” I said. “The supernatural seems supernatural. But the science of tomorrow is the supernatural of today.”

“I’m not talking officially, mind,” Lejeune warned me.

“Man, you’re talking sense. And the answer is, someone has got to go and see what actually happens. That’s what I propose to do—go and see.”

Lejeune stared at me.

“The way’s already paved,” I said.

I settled down then, and told him about it. I told him exactly what I and a friend of mine planned to do.

He listened, frowning and pulling at his lower lip.

“Mr. Easterbrook, I see your point. Circumstances have, so to speak, given you the entrée. But I don’t know whether you fully realise that what you are proposing to do may be dangerous—these are dangerous people. It may be dangerous for you—but it will certainly be dangerous for your friend.”

“I know,” I said, “I know... We’ve been over it a hundred times. I don’t like her playing the part she’s going to play. But she’s determined—absolutely determined. Damn it all, she wants to!”

Lejeune said unexpectedly:

“She’s a redhead, didn’t you say?”

“Yes,” I said, startled.

“You can never argue with a redhead,” said Lejeune. “Don’t I know it!”

I wondered if his wife was one.

Sixteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I felt absolutely no nervousness on my second visit to Bradley. In fact, I enjoyed it.

“Think yourself into the part,” Ginger urged me, before I set off, and that was exactly what I tried to do.

Mr. Bradley greeted me with a welcoming smile.

“Very pleased to see you,” he said, advancing a podgy hand. “So you’ve been thinking your little problem over, have you? Well, as I said, no hurry. Take your time.”

I said, “That’s just what I can’t do. It’s—well—it’s rather urgent....”

Bradley looked me over. He noted my nervous manner, the way I avoided his eyes, the clumsiness of my hands as I dropped my hat.

“Well, well,” he said. “Let’s see what we can do about things. You want to have a little bet on something, is that it? Nothing like a sporting flutter to take one’s mind off one’s—er—troubles.”

“It’s like this—” I said, and came to a dead stop.

I left it to Bradley to do his stuff. He did it.

“I see you’re a bit nervous,” he said. “Cautious. I approve of caution. Never say anything your mother shouldn’t hear about! Now, perhaps you have some idea that this office of mine might have a bug in it?”

I didn’t understand and my face showed it.

“Slang term for a microphone,” he explained. “Tape recorders. All that sort of thing. No, I give you my personal word of honour that there’s nothing of that sort here. Our conversation will not be recorded in any way. And if you don’t believe me,” his candour was quite engaging—“and why should you?”

—you’ve a perfect right to name a place of your own, a restaurant, the waiting room in one of our dear English railway stations; and we’ll discuss the matter there instead.”

I said that I was sure it was quite all right here.

“Sensible! That sort of thing wouldn’t pay us, I assure you. Neither you nor I is going to say a word that, in legal parlance, could be ‘used against us.’ Now let’s start this way. There’s something worrying you. You find me sympathetic and you feel you’d like to tell me about it. I’m a man of experience and I might be able to advise you. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, as they say. Suppose we put it like that?”

We put it like that, and I stumbled into my story.

Mr. Bradley was very adroit. He prompted; eased over difficult words and phrases. So good was he, that I felt no difficulty at all in telling him about my youthful infatuation for Doreen and our secretive marriage.

“Happens so often,” he said, shaking his head. “So often. Understandable! Young man with ideals. Genuinely pretty girl. And there you are. Man and wife before you can say Jack Robinson. And what comes of it?”

I went on to tell him what came of it.

Here I was purposefully vague over details. The man I was trying to present would not have gone into sordid details. I presented only a picture of disillusionment—a young fool realising that he had been a young fool.

I let it be assumed that there had been a final quarrel. If Bradley took it that my young wife had gone off with another man, or that there had been another man in the offing all along—that was good enough.

“But you know,” I said anxiously, “although she wasn’t—well, wasn’t quite what I thought her, she was really a very sweet girl. I’d never have thought that she’d be like this—that she’d behave like this, I mean.”

“What exactly has she been doing to you?”

What my “wife” had done to me, I explained, was to come back.

“What did you think happened to her?”

“I suppose it seems extraordinary—but I really didn’t think. Actually, I suppose, I assumed she must be dead.”

Bradley shook his head at me.

“Wishful thinking. Wishful thinking. Why should she be dead?”

“She never wrote or anything. I never heard from her.”

“The truth is you wanted to forget all about her.”

He was a psychologist in his way, this beady-eyed little lawyer.

“Yes,” I said gratefully. “You see, it wasn’t as though I wanted to marry someone else.”

“But you do now, eh, is that it?”

“Well—” I showed reluctance.

“Come now, tell Papa,” said the odious Bradley.

I admitted, shamefacedly, that, yes, lately, I had considered marrying....

But I stuck my toes in and refused firmly to give him any details about the girl in question. I wasn’t going to have her brought into this. I wasn’t going to tell him a thing about her.

Again, I think my reaction here was the correct one. He did not insist. Instead he said:

“Quite natural, my dear sir. You’ve got over your nasty experience in the past. You’ve found someone, no doubt, thoroughly suited to you. Able to share your literary tastes and your way of life. A true companion.”

I saw then that he knew about Hermia. It would have been easy. Any inquiries made about me would have revealed the fact that I had only one close woman friend. Bradley, since receiving my letter making the appointment, must have found out all about me, all about Hermia. He was fully briefed.

“What about divorce?” he asked. “Isn’t that the natural solution?”

I said: “There’s no question of divorce. She—my wife—won’t hear of it!”

“Dear, dear. What is her attitude towards you, if I may ask?”

“She—er—she wants to come back to me. She—she’s utterly unreasonable. She knows there’s someone, and—and—”

“Acting nasty...I see...Doesn’t look as though there’s any way out, unless of course... But she’s quite young....”

“She’ll live for years,” I said bitterly.

“Oh, but you never know, Mr. Easterbrook. She’s been living abroad, you say?”

“So she tells me. I don’t know where she’s been.”

“May have been out East. Sometimes, you know, you pick up a germ out in those parts—dormant for years! And then you came back home, and suddenly it blows up. I’ve known two or three cases like that. Might happen in this case. If it will cheer you up,” he paused, “I’d bet a small amount on it.”

I shook my head.

“She’ll live for years.”

“Well, the odds are on your side, I admit... But let’s have a wager on it. Fifteen hundred to one the lady dies between now and Christmas: how’s that?”

“Sooner! It will have to be sooner. I can’t wait. There are things—”

I was purposely incoherent. I don’t know whether he thought that matters between Hermia and myself had gone so far that I couldn’t stall for time—or that my “wife” threatened to go to Hermia and make trouble. He may have thought that there was another man making a play for Hermia. I didn’t mind what he thought. I wanted to stress urgency.

“Alter the odds a bit,” he said. “We’ll say eighteen hundred to one your wife’s a goner in under a month. I’ve got a sort of feeling about it.”

I thought it was time to bargain—and I bargained. Protested that I hadn’t got that amount of money. Bradley was skillful. He knew, by some means or other, just what sum I could raise in an emergency. He knew that Hermia had money. His delicate hint that later, when I was married, I wouldn’t feel the loss of my bet, was proof of that. Moreover, my urgency put him in a fine position. He wouldn’t come down.

When I left him the fantastic wager was laid and accepted.

I signed some form of I.O.U. The phraseology was too full of legal phrases for me to understand. Actually I very much doubted that it had any legal significance whatever.

“Is this legally binding?” I asked him.

“I don’t think,” said Mr. Bradley, showing his excellent dentures, “that it will ever be put to the test.” His smile was not a very nice one. “A bet’s a bet. If a man doesn’t pay up—”

I looked at him.

“I shouldn’t advise it,” he said softly. “No, I shouldn’t advise it. We don’t like welshers.”

“I shan’t welsh,” I said.

“I’m sure you won’t, Mr. Easterbrook. Now for the er—arrangements. Mrs. Easterbrook, you say, is in London. Where, exactly?”

“Do you have to know?”

“I have to have full details—the next thing to do is to arrange an appointment with Miss Grey—you remember Miss Grey?”

I said of course I remembered Miss Grey.

“An amazing woman. Really an amazing woman. Most gifted. She’ll want something your wife has worn—a glove—handkerchief—anything like that —”

“But why? In the name of—”

“I know, I know. Don’t ask me why. I’ve not the least idea. Miss Grey keeps her secrets to herself.”

“But what happens? What does she do?”

“You really must believe me, Mr. Easterbrook, when I tell you that honestly I haven’t the least idea! I don’t know—and what is more, I don’t want to know—let’s leave it at that.”

He paused, and then went on in an almost fatherly tone.

“My advice is as follows, Mr. Easterbrook. Pay a visit to your wife. Soothe her down, let her think that you’re coming round to the idea of a reconciliation. I should suggest that you have to go abroad for a few weeks, but that on your return etc., etc....”

“And then?”

“Having purloined a trifle of daily wear in an unobtrusive manner, you will go down to Much Deeping.” He paused thoughtfully. “Let me see. I think you mentioned on your previous visit that you had friends—relations—in the neighbourhood?”

“A cousin.”

“That makes it very simple. This cousin will doubtless put you up for a day or so.”

“What do most people do? Stay at the local inn?”

“Sometimes, I believe—or they motor over from Bournemouth. Something of that kind—but I know very little about the matter.”

“What—er—is my cousin likely to think?”

“You express yourself as intrigued by the inhabitants of the Pale Horse. You want to participate in a séance there. Nothing can sound simpler. Miss Grey and her medium friend often indulge in séances. You know what spiritualists are. You go protesting that of course it’s nonsense, but that it will interest you. That is all, Mr. Easterbrook. As you see, nothing can be simpler—”

“And—and, after that?”

He shook his head smiling.

“That’s all I can tell you. All, in fact, that I know. Miss Thyrza Grey will then be in charge. Don’t forget to take the glove, or handkerchief, or whatever it is with you. Afterwards, I would suggest that you take a little trip abroad. The Italian Riviera is very pleasant at this time of year. Just for a week or two, say.”

I said that I didn’t want to go abroad. I said I wanted to stay in England.

“Very well, then, but definitely not London. No, I must strongly advise, not London.”

“Why not?”

Mr. Bradley looked at me reprovingly.

“Clients are guaranteed complete—er—safety,” he said. “If they obey orders.”

“What about Bournemouth? Would Bournemouth do?”

“Yes, Bournemouth would be adequate. Stay at a hotel, make a few acquaintances, be seen in their company. The blameless life—that is what we aim at. You can always go on to Torquay if you get tired of Bournemouth.”

He spoke with the affability of a travel agent.

Once again I had to shake his podgy hand.

Seventeen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

“Are you really going to a séance at Thyrza’s?” Rhoda demanded.

“Why not?”

“I never knew you were interested in that sort of thing, Mark.”

“I’m not really,” I said truthfully. “But it’s such a queer setup, those three. I’m curious to see what sort of a show they put on.”

I did not find it really easy to put on a light manner. Out of the tail of my eye, I saw Hugh Despard looking at me thoughtfully. He was a shrewd man, with an adventurous life behind him. One of those men who have a kind of sixth sense where danger is concerned. I think he scented its presence now—realised that something more important than idle curiosity was at stake.

“Then I shall come with you,” said Rhoda gleefully. “I’ve always wanted to go.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, Rhoda,” growled Despard.

“But I don’t really believe in spirits and all that, Hugh. You know I don’t. I just want to go for the fun of it!”

“That sort of business isn’t fun,” said Despard. “There may be something genuine to it, there probably is. But it doesn’t have a good effect on people who go out of ‘idle curiosity.’”

“Then you ought to dissuade Mark, too.”

“Mark’s not my responsibility,” said Despard.

But again he gave me that quick sidelong look. He knew, I was quite sure, that I had a purpose.

Rhoda was annoyed, but she got over it, and when we chanced to meet Thyrza Grey in the village a little later that morning, Thyrza herself was blunt upon the matter.

“Hallo, Mr. Easterbrook, we’re expecting you this evening. Hope we can put on a good show for you. Sybil’s a wonderful medium, but one never knows beforehand what results one will get. So you mustn’t be disappointed. One thing I do ask you. Keep an open mind. An honest inquirer is always welcome—but a frivolous, scoffing approach is bad.”

“I wanted to come too,” said Rhoda. “But Hugh is so frightfully prejudiced. You know what he’s like.”

“I wouldn’t have had you, anyway,” said Thyrza. “One outsider is quite enough.”

She turned to me.

“Suppose you come and have a light meal with us first,” she said. “We never eat much before a séance. About seven o’clock? Good, we’ll be expecting you.”

She nodded, smiled, and strode briskly away. I stared after her, so engrossed in my surmises, that I entirely missed what Rhoda was saying to me.

“What did you say? I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been very odd lately, Mark. Ever since you arrived. Is anything the matter?”

“No, of course not. What should be the matter?”

“Have you got stuck with the book? Something like that?”

“The book?” Just for a moment I couldn’t remember anything about the book. Then I said hastily, “Oh yes, the book. It’s getting on more or less all right.”

“I believe you’re in love,” said Rhoda accusingly. “Yes, that’s it. Being in love has a very bad effect on men—it seems to addle their wits. Now women are just the opposite—on top of the world, looking radiant and twice as good-looking as usual. Funny, isn’t it, that it should suit women, and only make a man look like a sick sheep?”

“Thank you!” I said.

“Oh, don’t be cross with me, Mark. I think it’s a very good thing really—and I’m delighted. She’s really very nice.”

“Who’s nice?”

“Hermia Redcliffe, of course. You seem to think I know nothing about anything. I’ve seen it coming on for ages. And she really is just the person for you—good-looking and clever; absolutely suitable.”

“That,” I said, “is one of the cattiest things you could say about anyone.”

Rhoda looked at me.

“It is rather,” she said.

She turned away and said she had to go and give a pep talk to the butcher. I said that I would go and pay a call at the vicarage.

“But not”—I forestalled any comment—“in order to ask the vicar to put the banns up!”

II

Coming to the vicarage was like coming home.

The front door was hospitably open, and as I stepped inside I was conscious of a burden slipping from my shoulders.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop came through a door at the back of the hall, carrying for some reason unfathomable to me an enormous plastic pail of bright green.

“Hallo, it’s you,” she said. “I thought it would be.”

She handed me the pail. I had no idea what to do with it and stood looking awkward.

“Outside the door, on the step,” said Mrs. Calthrop impatiently, as though I ought to have known.

I obeyed. Then I followed her into the same dark shabby room we had sat in before. There was a rather moribund fire there, but Mrs. Dane Calthrop poked it into flame and dumped a log on it. Then she motioned me to sit down, plumped down herself, and fixed me with a bright impatient eye.

“Well?” she demanded. “What have you done?”

From the vigour of her manner we might have had a train to catch.

“You told me to do something. I am doing something.”

“Good. What?”

I told her. I told her everything. In some unspoken way I told her things I did not quite know myself.

“Tonight?” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

She was silent for a minute, obviously thinking. Unable to help myself I blurted out,

“I don’t like it. My God, I don’t like it.”

“Why should you?”

That, of course, was unanswerable.

“I’m so horribly afraid for her.”

She looked at me kindly.

“You don’t know,” I said, “how—how brave she is. If, in some way, they manage to harm her....”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said slowly:

“I don’t see—I really don’t see—how they can harm her in the way you mean.”

“But they have harmed—other people.”

“It would seem so, yes...” She sounded dissatisfied.

“In any other way, she will be all right. We’ve taken every imaginable precaution. No material harm can happen to her.”

“But it’s material harm that these people claim to be able to produce,” Mrs. Dane Calthrop pointed out. “They claim to be able to work through the mind on the body. Illness—disease. Very interesting if they can. But quite horrible! And it’s got to be stopped, as we’ve already agreed.”

“But she’s the one who’s taking the risk,” I muttered.

“Someone has to,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop calmly. “It upsets your pride, that it shouldn’t be you. You’ve got to swallow that. Ginger’s ideally suited for the part she’s playing. She can control her nerves and she’s intelligent. She won’t let you down.”

“I’m not worrying about that!”

“Well, stop worrying at all. It won’t do her any good. Don’t let’s shirk the issue. If she dies as a result of this experiment, then she dies in a good cause.”

“My God, you’re brutal!”

“Somebody has to be,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “Always envisage the worst. You’ve no idea how that steadies the nerves. You begin at once to be

sure that it can't be as bad as what you imagine."

She nodded at me reassuringly.

"You may be right," I said doubtfully.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said with complete certainty that of course she was right.

I proceeded to details.

"You're on the telephone here?"

"Naturally."

I explained what I wanted to do.

"After this—this business tonight is over, I may want to keep in close touch with Ginger. Ring her up every day. If I could telephone from here?"

"Of course. Too much coming and going at Rhoda's. You want to be sure of not being overheard."

"I shall stay on at Rhoda's for a bit. Then perhaps go to Bournemouth. I'm not supposed to—go back to London."

"No use looking ahead," Mrs. Dane Calthrop said. "Not beyond tonight."

"Tonight..." I got up. I said a thing that was out of character. "Pray for me—for us," I said.

"Naturally," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, surprised that I should need to ask.

As I went out of the front door a sudden curiosity made me say,

"Why the pail? What's it for?"

"The pail? Oh, it's for the schoolchildren, to pick berries and leaves from the hedges—for the church. Hideous, isn't it, but so handy."

I looked out over the richness of the autumn world. Such soft still beauty....

“Angels and Ministers of grace defend us,” I said.

“Amen,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

III

My reception at the Pale Horse was conventional in the extreme. I don’t know what particular atmospheric effect I had expected—but it was not this.

Thyrza Grey, wearing a plain dark wool dress, opened the door, said in a businesslike tone: “Ah, here you are. Good. We’ll have supper straightaway —”

Nothing could have been more matter-of-fact, more completely ordinary....

The table was laid for a simple meal at the end of the panelled hall. We had soup, an omelette, and cheese. Bella waited on us. She wore a black stuff dress and looked more than ever like one of the crowd in an Italian primitive. Sybil struck a more exotic note. She had on a long dress of some woven peacock-coloured fabric, shot with gold. Her beads were absent on this occasion, but she had two heavy gold bracelets clasping her wrists. She ate a minute portion of omelette but nothing else. She spoke little, treating us to a faraway wrapped-up-in-higher-things mood. It ought to have been impressive. Actually it was not. The effect was theatrical and unreal.

Thyrza Grey provided what conversation there was—a brisk chatty commentary on local happenings. She was this evening the British country spinster to the life, pleasant, efficient, uninterested in anything beyond her immediate surroundings.

I thought to myself, I’m mad, completely mad. What is there to fear here? Even Bella seemed tonight only a half-witted old peasant woman—like hundreds of other women of her kind—inbred, untouched by education or a broader outlook.

My conversation with Mrs. Dane Calthrop seemed fantastic in retrospect. We had worked ourselves up to imagine goodness knows what. The idea of Ginger—Ginger with her dyed hair and assumed name—being in danger from anything these three very ordinary women could do, was positively ludicrous!

The meal came to an end.

“No coffee,” said Thyrza apologetically. “One doesn’t want to be overstimulated.” She rose. “Sybil?”

“Yes,” said Sybil, her face taking on what she clearly thought was an ecstatic and otherworld expression. “I must go and PREPARE....”

Bella began to clear the table. I wandered over to where the old inn sign hung. Thyrza followed me.

“You can’t really see it at all by this light,” she said.

That was quite true. The faint pale image against the dark encrusted grime of the panel could hardly be distinguished as that of a horse. The hall was lit by feeble electric bulbs shielded by thick vellum shades.

“That red-haired girl—what’s her name?—Ginger something—who was staying down here—said she’d do a spot of cleaning and restoring on it,” said Thyrza. “Don’t suppose she’ll ever remember about it, though.” She added casually, “She works for some gallery or other in London.”

It gave me a strange feeling to hear Ginger referred to lightly and casually.

I said, staring at the picture:

“It might be interesting.”

“It’s not a good painting, of course,” said Thyrza. “Just a daub. But it goes with the place—and it’s certainly well over three hundred years old.”

“Ready.”

We wheeled abruptly.

Bella, emerging out of the gloom, was beckoning.

“Time to get on with things,” said Thyrza, still brisk and matter-of-fact.

I followed her as she led the way out to the converted barn.

As I have said, there was no entrance to it from the house. It was a dark overcast night, no stars. We came out of the dense outer blackness into the long lighted room.

The barn, by night, was transformed. By day it had seemed a pleasant library. Now it had become something more. There were lamps, but these were not turned on. The lighting was indirect and flooded the room with a soft but cold light. In the centre of the floor was a kind of raised bed or divan. It was spread with a purple cloth, embroidered with various cabbalistic signs.

On the far side of the room was what appeared to be a small brazier, and next to it a big copper basin—an old one by the look of it.

On the other side, set back almost touching the wall, was a heavy oak-backed chair. Thyrza motioned me towards it.

“Sit there,” she said.

I sat obediently. Thyrza’s manner had changed. The odd thing was that I could not define exactly in what the change consisted. There was none of Sybil’s spurious occultism about it. It was more as though an everyday curtain of normal trivial life had been lifted. Behind it was the real woman, displaying something of the manner of a surgeon approaching the operating table for a difficult and dangerous operation. This impression was heightened when she went to a cupboard in the wall and took from it what appeared to be a kind of long overall. It seemed to be made, when the light caught it, of some metallic woven tissue. She drew on long gauntlets of what looked like a kind of fine mesh rather resembling a “bulletproof vest” I had once been shown.

“One has to take precautions,” she said.

The phrase struck me as slightly sinister.

Then she addressed me in an emphatic deep voice.

“I must impress upon you, Mr. Easterbrook, the necessity of remaining absolutely still where you are. On no account must you move from that chair. It might not be safe to do so. This is no child’s game. I am dealing with forces that are dangerous to those who do not know how to handle them!” She paused and then asked, “You have brought what you were instructed to bring?”

Without a word, I drew from my pocket a brown suède glove and handed it to her.

She took it and moved over to a metal lamp with a gooseneck shade. She switched on the lamp and held the glove under its rays which were of a peculiar sickly colour, turning the glove from its rich brown to a characterless grey.

She switched off the lamp, nodding in approval.

“Most suitable,” she said. “The physical emanations from its wearer are quite strong.”

She put it down on top of what appeared to be a large radio cabinet at the end of the room. Then she raised her voice a little. “Bella. Sybil. We are ready.”

Sybil came in first. She wore a long black cloak over her peacock dress. This she flung aside with a dramatic gesture. It slid down, looking like an inky pool on the floor. She came forward.

“I do hope it will be all right,” she said. “One never knows. Please don’t adopt a sceptical frame of mind, Mr. Easterbrook. It does so hinder things.”

“Mr. Easterbrook has not come here to mock,” said Thyrsa.

There was a certain grimness in her tone.

Sybil lay down on the purple divan. Thyrza bent over her, arranging her draperies.

“Quite comfortable?” she asked solicitously.

“Yes, thank you, dear.”

Thyrza switched off some lights. Then she wheeled up what was, in effect, a kind of canopy on wheels. This she placed so that it overshadowed the divan and left Sybil in a deep shadow in the middle of outlying dim twilight.

“Too much light is harmful to a complete trance,” she said.

“Now, I think, we are ready. Bella?”

Bella came out of the shadows. The two women approached me. With her right hand Thyrza took my left. Her left hand took Bella’s right. Bella’s left hand found my right hand. Thyrza’s hand was dry and hard, Bella’s was cold and boneless—it felt like a slug in mine and I shivered in revulsion.

Thyrza must have touched a switch somewhere, for music sounded faintly from the ceiling. I recognised it as Mendelssohn’s funeral march.

“Mise en scène,” I said to myself rather scornfully. “Meretricious trappings!” I was cool and critical—but nevertheless aware of an undercurrent of some unwanted emotional apprehension.

The music stopped. There was a long wait. There was only the sound of breathing. Bella’s slightly wheezy, Sybil’s deep and regular.

And then, suddenly, Sybil spoke. Not, however, in her own voice. It was a man’s voice, as unlike her own mincing accents as could be. It had a guttural foreign accent.

“I am here,” the voice said.

My hands were released. Bella flitted away into the shadows. Thyrza said: “Good evening. Is that Macandal?”

“I am Macandal.”

Thyrza went to the divan and drew away the protecting canopy. The soft light flowed down onto Sybil’s face. She appeared to be deeply asleep. In this repose her face looked quite different.

The lines were smoothed away. She looked years younger. One could almost say that she looked beautiful.

Thyrza said:

“Are you prepared, Macandal, to submit to my desire and my will?”

The new deep voice said:

“I am.”

“Will you undertake to protect the body of the Dossu that lies here and which you now inhabit, from all physical injury and harm? Will you dedicate its vital force to my purpose, that that purpose may be accomplished through it?”

“I will.”

“Will you so dedicate this body that death may pass through it, obeying such natural laws as may be available in the body of the recipient?”

“The dead must be sent to cause death. It shall be so.”

Thyrza drew back a step. Bella came up and held out what I saw was a crucifix. Thyrza placed it on Sybil’s breast in a reversed position. Then Bella brought a small green phial. From this Thyrza poured out a drop or two onto Sybil’s forehead, and traced something with her finger. Again I fancied that it was the sign of the cross upside down.

She said to me, briefly, “Holy water from the Catholic church at Garsington.”

Her voice was quite ordinary, and this, which ought to have broken the spell, did not do so. It made the whole business, somehow, more alarming.

Finally she brought that rather horrible rattle we had seen before. She shook it three times and then clasped Sybil’s hand round it.

She stepped back and said:

“All is ready—”

Bella repeated the words:

“All is ready—”

Thyrza addressed me in a low tone:

“I don’t suppose you’re much impressed, are you, by all the ritual? Some of our visitors are. To you, I daresay, it’s all so much mumbo jumbo... But don’t be too sure. Ritual—a pattern of words and phrases sanctified by time and usage, has an effect on the human spirit. What causes the mass hysteria of crowds? We don’t know exactly. But it’s a phenomenon that exists. These old-time usages, they have their part—a necessary part, I think.”

Bella had left the room. She came back now, carrying a white cock. It was alive and struggling to be free.

Now with white chalk she knelt down and began to draw signs on the floor round the brazier and the copper bowl. She set down the cock with its back on the white curving line round the bowl and it stayed there motionless.

She drew more signs, chanting as she did so, in a low guttural voice. The words were incomprehensible to me, but as she knelt and swayed, she was clearly working herself up to some pitch of obscene ecstasy.

Watching me, Thyrza said: “You don’t like it much? It’s old, you know, very old. The death spell according to old recipes handed from mother to

daughter.”

I couldn't fathom Thyrsa. She did nothing to further the effect on my senses which Bella's rather horrible performances might well have had. She seemed deliberately to take the part of a commentator.

Bella stretched out her hands to the brazier and a flickering flame sprang up. She sprinkled something on the flames and a thick cloying perfume filled the air.

“We are ready,” said Thyrsa.

The surgeon, I thought, picks up his scalpel....

She went over to what I had taken to be a radio cabinet. It opened up and I saw that it was a large electrical contrivance of some complicated kind.

It moved like a trolley and she wheeled it slowly and carefully to a position near the divan.

She bent over it, adjusted the controls, murmuring to herself:

“Compass, north-northeast...degrees...that's about right.” She took the glove and adjusted it in a particular position, switching on a small violet light beside it.

Then she spoke to the inert figure on the divan.

“Sybil Diana Helen, you are set free from your mortal sheath which the spirit Macandal guards safely for you. You are free to be at one with the owner of this glove. Like all human beings, her goal in life is towards death. There is no final satisfaction but death. Only death solves all problems. Only death gives true peace. All great ones have known it. Remember Macbeth. ‘After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.’ Remember the ecstasy of Tristan and Isolde. Love and death. Love and death. But the greatest of these is death....”

The words rang out, echoing, repeating—the big box-like machine had started to emit a low hum, the bulbs in it glowed—I felt dazed, carried

away. This, I felt, was no longer something at which I could mock. Thyrza, her power unleashed, was holding that prone figure on the divan completely enslaved. She was using her. Using her for a definite end. I realised vaguely why Mrs. Oliver had been frightened, not of Thyrza but of the seemingly silly Sybil. Sybil had a power, a natural gift, nothing to do with mind or intellect; it was a physical power, the power to separate herself from her body. And, so separated, her mind was not hers, but Thyrza's. And Thyrza was using her temporary possession.

Yes, but the box? Where did the box come in?

And suddenly all my fear was transferred to the box! What devilish secret was being practised through its agency? Could there be physically produced rays of some kind that acted on the cells of the mind? Of a particular mind?

Thyrza's voice went on:

"The weak spot...there is always a weak spot...deep in the tissues of the flesh... Through weakness comes strength—the strength and peace of death... Towards death—slowly, naturally, towards death—the true way, the natural way. The tissues of the body obey the mind... Command them—command them... Towards death... Death, the Conqueror... Death... soon...very soon... Death... Death... DEATH!"

Her voice rose in a great swelling cry... And another horrible animal cry came from Bella. She rose up, a knife flashed...there was a horrible strangled squawk from the cockerel... Blood dripped into the copper bowl. Bella came running, the bowl held out....

She screamed out:

"Blood...the blood... BLOOD!"

Thyrza whipped out the glove from the machine. Bella took it, dipped it in the blood, returned it to Thyrza who replaced it.

Bella's voice rose again in that high ecstatic call....

“The blood...the blood...the blood...”

She ran round and round the brazier, then dropped twitching to the floor.
The brazier flickered and went out.

I felt horribly sick. Unseeing, clutching the arm of my chair, my head
seemed to be whirling in space....

I heard a click, the hum of the machine ceased.

Then Thyrza’s voice rose, clear and composed:

“The old magic and the new. The old knowledge of belief, the new
knowledge of science. Together, they will prevail....”

Eighteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

"Well, what was it like?" demanded Rhoda eagerly at the breakfast table.

"Oh, the usual stuff," I said nonchalantly.

I was uneasily conscious of Despard's eye on me. A perceptive man.

"Pentagrams drawn on the floor?"

"Lots of them."

"Any white cocks?"

"Naturally. That was Bella's part of the fun and games."

"And trances and things?"

"As you say, trances and things."

Rhoda looked disappointed.

"You seem to have found it rather dull," she said in an aggrieved voice.

I said that these things were all much of a muchness. At any rate, I'd satisfied my curiosity.

Later, when Rhoda had departed to the kitchen, Despard said to me:

"Shook you up a bit, didn't it?"

"Well—"

I was anxious to make light of the whole thing, but Despard was not an easy man to deceive.

I said slowly, "It was—in a way—rather beastly."

He nodded.

“One doesn’t really believe in it,” said Despard. “Not with one’s reasoning mind—but these things have their effect. I’ve seen a good deal of it in East Africa. The witch doctors there have a terrific hold on the people, and one has to admit that odd things happen which can’t be explained in any rational manner.”

“Deaths?”

“Oh yes. If a man knows he’s been marked down to die, he dies.”

“The power of suggestion, I suppose.”

“Presumably.”

“But that doesn’t quite satisfy you?”

“No—not quite. There are cases difficult of explanation by any of our glib Western scientific theories. The stuff doesn’t usually work on Europeans—(though I have known cases). But if the belief is there in your blood—you’ve had it!” He left it there.

I said thoughtfully: “I agree with you that one can’t be too didactic. Odd things happen even in this country. I was at a hospital one day in London. A girl had come in—neurotic subject, complaining of terrible pain in bones, arm, etc. Nothing to account for it. They suspected she was a victim of hysteria. Doctor told her cure could be effected by a red-hot rod being drawn down the arm. Would she agree to try it? She did.

“The girl turned her head away and screwed up her eyes. The doctor dipped a glass rod in cold water and drew it down the inside of her arm. The girl screamed with agony. He said, ‘You’ll be all right now.’ She said, ‘I expect so, but it was awful. It burnt.’ The queer thing to me was—not that she believed that she had been burnt, but that her arm actually was burnt. The flesh was actually blistered everywhere the rod had touched it.”

“Was she cured?” Despard asked curiously.

“Oh yes. The neuritis, or whatever it was, never reappeared. She had to be treated for the burnt arm, though.”

“Extraordinary,” said Despard. “It goes to show, doesn’t it?”

“The doctor was startled himself.”

“I bet he was...” He looked at me curiously.

“Why were you really so keen to go to that séance last night?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Those three women intrigue me. I wanted to see what sort of show they would put up.”

Despard said no more. I don’t think he believed me. As I have said, he was a perceptive man.

Presently I went along to the vicarage. The door was open but there seemed to be no one in the house.

I went to the little room where the telephone was, and rang up Ginger.

It seemed an eternity before I heard her voice.

“Hallo!”

“Ginger!”

“Oh, it’s you. What happened?”

“You’re all right?”

“Of course I’m all right. Why shouldn’t I be?”

Waves of relief swept over me.

There was nothing wrong with Ginger; the familiar challenge of her manner did me a world of good. How could I ever have believed that a lot of mumbo jumbo could hurt so normal a creature as Ginger?

“I just thought you might have had bad dreams or something,” I said rather lamely.

“Well, I didn’t. I expected to have, but all that happened was that I kept waking up and wondering if I felt anything peculiar happening to me. I really felt almost indignant because nothing did happen to me—”

I laughed.

“But go on—tell me,” said Ginger. “What’s it all about?”

“Nothing much out of the ordinary. Sybil lay on a purple couch and went into a trance.”

Ginger gave a spurt of laughter.

“Did she? How wonderful! Was it a velvet one and did she have nothing on?”

“Sybil is no Madame de Montespan. And it wasn’t a black mass. Actually Sybil wore quite a lot of clothes, peacock blue, and lots of embroidered symbols.”

“Sounds most appropriate and Sybil-like. What did Bella do?”

“That really was rather beastly. She killed a white cock and then dipped your glove in the blood.”

“Oo—nasty...What else?”

“Lots of things,” I said.

I thought that I was doing quite well. I went on:

“Thyrza gave me the whole bag of tricks. Summoned up a spirit—Macandal was, I think, the name. And there were coloured lights and chanting. The whole thing would have been quite impressive to some people—scared ’em out of their wits.”

“But it didn’t scare you?”

“Bella did scare me a bit,” I said. “She had a very nasty-looking knife, and I thought she might lose her head and add me to the cock as a second victim.”

Ginger persisted:

“Nothing else frightened you?”

“I’m not influenced by that sort of thing.”

“Then why did you sound so thankful to hear I was all right?”

“Well, because—” I stopped.

“All right,” said Ginger obligingly. “You needn’t answer that one. And you needn’t go out of your way to play down the whole thing. Something about it impressed you.”

“Only, I think, because they—Thyrza, I mean—seemed so calmly confident of the result.”

“Confident that what you’ve been telling me about could actually kill a person?”

Ginger’s voice was incredulous.

“It’s daft,” I agreed.

“Wasn’t Bella confident, too?”

I considered. I said:

“I think Bella was just enjoying herself killing cocks and working herself up into a kind of orgy of ill-wishing. To hear her moaning out “The Blood...the blood” was really something.”

“I wish I’d heard it,” said Ginger regretfully.

“I wish you had,” I said. “Frankly, the whole thing was quite a performance.”

“You’re all right now, aren’t you?” said Ginger.

“What do you mean—all right?”

“You weren’t when you rang me up, but you are now.”

She was quite correct in her assumption. The sound of her cheerful normal voice had done wonders for me. Secretly, though, I took off my hat to Thyrsa Grey. Bogus though the whole business might have been, it had infected my mind with doubt and apprehension. But nothing mattered now. Ginger was all right—she hadn’t had so much as a bad dream.

“And what do we do next?” demanded Ginger. “Have I got to stay put for another week or so?”

“If I want to collect a hundred pounds from Mr. Bradley, yes.”

“You’ll do that if it’s the last thing you ever do... Are you staying on with Rhoda?”

“For a bit. Then I’ll move on to Bournemouth. You’re to ring me every day, mind, or I’ll ring you—that’s better. I’m ringing from the vicarage now.”

“How’s Mrs. Dane Calthrop?”

“In great form. I told her all about it, by the way.”

“I thought you would. Well, good-bye for now. Life is going to be very boring for the next week or two. I’ve brought some work with me to do—

and a good many of the books that one always means to read but never has the time to.”

“What does your gallery think?”

“That I’m on a cruise.”

“Don’t you wish you were?”

“Not really,” said Ginger... Her voice was a little odd.

“No suspicious characters approached you?”

“Only what you might expect. The milkman, the man to read the gas meter, a woman asking me what patent medicines and cosmetics I used, someone asking me to sign a petition to abolish nuclear bombs and a woman who wanted a subscription for the blind. Oh, and the various flat porters, of course. Very helpful. One of them mended a fuse for me.”

“Seems harmless enough,” I commented.

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t really know.”

I had wished, I suppose, for something overt that I could tackle.

But the victims of the Pale Horse died of their own free will... No, the word free was not the one to use. Seeds of physical weakness in them developed by a process that I did not understand.

Ginger rebuffed a weak suggestion of mine about a false gas meter man.

“He had genuine credentials,” she said. “I asked for them! He was only the man who gets up on a ladder inside the bathroom and reads off the figures and writes them down. He’s far too grand to touch pipes or gas jets. And I can assure you he hasn’t arranged an escape of gas in my bedroom.”

No, the Pale Horse did not deal with accidental gas escapes—nothing so concrete!

“Oh! I had one other visitor,” said Ginger. “Your friend, Dr. Corrigan. He’s nice.”

“I suppose Lejeune sent him.”

“He seemed to think he ought to rally to a namesake. Up the Corrigans!”

I rang off, much relieved in mind.

I got back to find Rhoda busy on the lawn with one of her dogs. She was anointing it with some unguent.

“The vet’s just gone,” she said. “He says it’s ringworm. It’s frightfully catching, I believe. I don’t want the children getting it—or the other dogs.”

“Or even adult human beings,” I suggested.

“Oh, it’s usually children who get it. Thank goodness they’re away at school all day—keep quiet, Sheila. Don’t wriggle.

“This stuff makes the hair fall out,” she went on. “It leaves bald spots for a bit but it grows again.”

I nodded, offered to help, was refused, for which I was thankful, and wandered off again.

The curse of the country, I have always thought, is that there are seldom more than three directions in which you can go for a walk. In Much Deeping, you could either take the Garsington road, or the road to Long Cottenham, or you could go up Shadhanger Lane to the main London–Bournemouth road two miles away.

By the following day at lunchtime, I had sampled both the Garsington and the Long Cottenham roads. Shadhanger Lane was the next prospect.

I started off, and on my way was struck by an idea. The entrance to Priors Court opened off Shadhanger Lane. Why should I not go and call on Mr. Venables?

The more I considered the idea, the more I liked it. There would be nothing suspicious about my doing so. When I had been staying down here before, Rhoda had taken me over there. It would be easy and natural to call and ask if I might be shown again some particular object that I had not had time really to look at and enjoy on that occasion.

The recognition of Venables by this chemist—what was his name—Ogden?—Osborne?—was interesting, to say the least of it. Granted that, according to Lejeune, it would have been quite impossible for the man in question to have been Venables owing to the latter's disability, yet it was intriguing that a mistake should have been made about a man living in this particular neighbourhood—and a man, one had to admit, who fitted in so well in character.

There was something mysterious about Venables. I had felt it from the first. He had, I was sure, first-class brains. And there was something about him—what word could I use?—the word vulpine came to me. Predatory—destructive. A man, perhaps, too clever to be a killer himself—but a man who could organise killing very well if he wanted to.

As far as all that went, I could fit Venables into the part perfectly. The mastermind behind the scenes. But this chemist, Osborne, had claimed that he had seen Venables walking along a London street. Since that was impossible, then the identification was worthless, and the fact that Venables lived in the vicinity of the Pale Horse meant nothing.

All the same, I thought, I would like to have another look at Mr. Venables. So in due course I turned in at the gates of Priors Court and walked up the quarter mile of winding drive.

The same manservant answered the door, and said that Mr. Venables was at home. Excusing himself for leaving me in the hall, "Mr. Venables is not always well enough to see visitors," he went away, returning a few

moments later with the information that Mr. Venables would be delighted to see me.

Venables gave me a most cordial welcome, wheeling his chair forward and greeting me quite as an old friend.

“Very nice of you to look me up, my dear fellow. I heard you were down here again, and was going to ring up our dear Rhoda this evening and suggest you all come over for lunch or dinner.”

I apologised for dropping in as I had, but said that it was a sudden impulse. I had gone for a walk, found that I was passing his gate, and decided to gate-crash.

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “I’d love to have another look at your Mogul miniatures. I hadn’t nearly enough time to see them properly the other day.”

“Of course you hadn’t. I’m glad you appreciate them. Such exquisite detail.”

Our talk was entirely technical after this. I must admit that I enjoyed enormously having a closer look at some of the really wonderful things he had in his possession.

Tea was brought in and he insisted that I partake of it.

Tea is not one of my favourite meals but I appreciated the smoky China tea, and the delicate cups in which it was served. There was hot buttered anchovy toast, and a plum cake of the luscious old-fashioned kind that took me back to teatime at my grandmother’s house when I was a little boy.

“Homemade,” I said approvingly.

“Naturally! A bought cake never comes into this house.”

“You have a wonderful cook, I know. Don’t you find it difficult to keep a staff in the country, as far away from things as you are here?”

Venables shrugged his shoulders. "I must have the best. I insist upon it. Naturally—one has to pay! I pay."

All the natural arrogance of the man showed here. I said dryly: "If one is fortunate enough to be able to do that, it certainly solves many problems."

"It all depends, you know, on what one wants out of life. If one's desires are strong enough—that is what matters. So many people make money without a notion of what they want it to do for them! As a result they get entangled in what one might call the moneymaking machine. They are slaves. They go to their offices early and leave late; they never stop to enjoy. And what do they get for it? Larger cars, bigger houses, more expensive mistresses or wives—and, let me say, bigger headaches."

He leaned forward.

"Just the getting of money—that is really the be all and end all for most rich men. Plough it back into bigger enterprises, make more money still. But why? Do they ever stop to ask themselves why? They don't know."

"And you?" I asked.

"I—" he smiled. "I knew what I wanted. Infinite leisure in which to contemplate the beautiful things of this world, natural and artificial. Since to go and see them in their natural surroundings has of late years been denied me, I have them brought from all over the world to me."

"But money still has to be got before that can happen."

"Yes, one must plan one's coups—and that involves quite a lot of planning—but there is no need, really no need nowadays, to serve any sordid apprenticeship."

"I don't know if I quite understand you."

"It's a changing world, Easterbrook. It always has been—but now the changes come more rapidly. The tempo has quickened—one must take advantage of that."

“A changing world,” I said thoughtfully.

“It opens up new vistas.”

I said apologetically:

“I’m afraid, you know, that you’re talking to a man whose face is set in the opposite direction—towards the past—not towards the future.”

Venables shrugged his shoulders.

“The future? Who can foresee that? I speak of today—now—the immediate moment! I take no account of anything else. The new techniques are here to use. Already we have machines that can supply us with the answer to questions in seconds—compared to hours or days of human labour.”

“Computers? The electronic brain?”

“Things of that kind.”

“Will machines take the place of men eventually?”

“Of men, yes. Men who are only units of manpower—that is. But Man, no. There has to be Man the Controller, Man the Thinker, who works out the questions to ask the machines.”

I shook my head doubtfully.

“Man, the Superman?” I put a faint inflection of ridicule into my voice.

“Why not, Easterbrook? Why not? Remember, we know—or are beginning to know—something about Man the human animal. The practice of what is sometimes, incorrectly, called brainwashing has opened up enormously interesting possibilities in that direction. Not only the body, but the mind of man, responds to certain stimuli.”

“A dangerous doctrine,” I said.

“Dangerous?”

“Dangerous to the doctored man.”

Venables shrugged his shoulders.

“All life is dangerous. We forget that, we who have been reared in one of the small pockets of civilisation. For that is all that civilisation really is, Easterbrook. Small pockets of men here and there who have gathered together for mutual protection and who thereby are able to outwit and control Nature. They have beaten the jungle—but that victory is only temporary. At any moment, the jungle will once more take command. Proud cities that were, are now mere mounds of earth, overgrown with rank vegetation, and the poor hovels of men who just manage to keep alive, no more. Life is always dangerous—never forget that. In the end, perhaps, not only great natural forces, but the work of our own hands may destroy it. We are very near to that happening at this moment....”

“No one can deny that, certainly. But I’m interested in your theory of power—power over mind.”

“Oh that—” Venables looked suddenly embarrassed. “Probably I exaggerated.”

I found his embarrassment and partial withdrawal of his former claim interesting. Venables was a man who lived much alone. A man who is alone develops the need to talk—to someone—anyone. Venables had talked to me—and perhaps not wisely.

“Man the Superman,” I said. “You’ve rather sold me on some modern version of the idea, you know.”

“There’s nothing new about it, certainly. The formula of the Superman goes back a long way. Whole philosophies have been built on it.”

“Of course. But it seems to me that your Superman is—a Superman with a difference... A man who could wield power—and never be known to wield power. A man who sits in his chair and pulls the strings.”

I looked at him as I spoke. He smiled.

“Are you casting me for the part, Easterbrook? I wish it were indeed so. One needs something to compensate for—this!”

His hand struck down on the rug across his knees, and I heard the sudden sharp bitterness in his voice.

“I won’t offer you my sympathy,” I said. “Sympathy is very little good to a man in your position. But let me say that if we are imagining such a character—a man who can turn unforeseen disaster into triumph—you would be, in my opinion, exactly that type of man.”

He laughed easily.

“You’re flattering me.”

But he was pleased, I saw that.

“No,” I said. “I have met enough people in my life to recognise the unusual, the extra-gifted man, when I meet him.”

I was afraid of going too far; but can one ever, really, go too far with flattery? A depressing thought! One must take it to heart and avoid the pitfall oneself.

“I wondered,” he said thoughtfully, “what actually makes you say that? All this?” He swept a careless hand round the room.

“That is a proof,” I said, “that you are a rich man who knows how to buy wisely, who has appreciation and taste. But I feel that there is more to it than mere possession. You set out to acquire beautiful and interesting things—and you have practically hinted that they were not acquired through the medium of laborious toil.”

“Quite right, Easterbrook, quite right. As I said, only the fool toils. One must think, plan the campaign in every detail. The secret of all success is something quite simple—but it has to be thought of! Something simple. One thinks of it, and puts it into execution—and there you are!”

I stared at him. Something simple—something as simple as the removal of unwanted persons? Fulfilling a need. An action performed without danger to anybody except the victim. Planned by Mr. Venables sitting in his wheeled chair, with his great hooked nose like the beak of a bird of prey, and his prominent Adam's apple moving up and down. Executed by—whom? Thyrza Grey?

I watched him as I said:

“All this talk of remote control reminds me of something that odd Miss Grey said.”

“Ah, our dear Thyrza!” His tone was smooth, indulgent (but had there been a faint flicker of the eyelids?). “Such nonsense as those two dear ladies talk! And they believe it, you know, they really believe it. Have you been yet—(I'm sure they'll insist on your going)—to one of these ridiculous séances of theirs?”

I had a momentary hesitation whilst I decided rapidly what my attitude here ought to be.

“Yes,” I said, “I— I did go to a séance.”

“And you found it great nonsense? Or were you impressed?”

I avoided his eyes and presented to my best ability a man who is ill at ease.

“I—oh well—of course I didn't really believe in any of it. They seem very sincere but—” I looked at my watch. “I'd no idea it was so late. I must hurry back. My cousin will wonder what I am doing.”

“You have been cheering up an invalid on a dull afternoon. My regards to Rhoda. We must arrange another luncheon party soon. Tomorrow I am going to London. There is an interesting sale at Sotheby's. Medieval French ivories. Exquisite! You will appreciate them, I am sure, if I succeed in acquiring them.”

We parted on this amicable note. Was there an amused and malicious twinkle in his eye as he registered my awkwardness over the séance? I thought so, but I could not be sure. I felt it quite likely that I was now imagining things.

Nineteen

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I went out into the late afternoon. Darkness had already fallen, and since the sky was overcast, I moved rather uncertainly down the winding drive. I looked back once at the lighted windows of the house. In doing so, I stepped off the gravel onto the grass and collided with someone moving in the opposite direction.

It was a small man, solidly made. We exchanged apologies. His voice was a rich deep bass with a rather fruity and pedantic tone.

"I'm so sorry...."

"Not at all. Entirely my fault, I assure you...."

"I have never been here before," I explained, "so I don't quite know where I'm going. I ought to have brought a torch."

"Allow me."

The stranger produced a torch from his pocket, switched it on and handed it to me. By its light I saw that he was a man of middle age, with a round cherubic face, a black moustache and spectacles. He wore a good quality dark raincoat and can only be described as the acme of respectability. All the same, it did just cross my mind to wonder why he was not using his torch himself since he had it with him.

"Ah," I said rather idiotically. "I see. I have stepped off the drive."

I stepped back on it, then offered him back the torch.

"I can find my way now."

"No, no, pray keep it until you get to the gate."

"But you—you are going to the house?"

“No, no. I am going the same way that you are. Er—down the drive. And then up to the bus stop. I am catching a bus back to Bournemouth.”

I said, “I see,” and we fell into step side by side. My companion seemed a little ill at ease. He inquired if I also were going to the bus stop. I replied that I was staying in the neighbourhood.

There was again a pause and I could feel my companion’s embarrassment growing. He was the kind of man who does not like feeling in any way in a false position.

“You have been to visit Mr. Venables?” he asked, clearing his throat.

I said that that was so, adding, “I took it that you also were on your way to the house?”

“No,” he said. “No... As a matter of fact—” he paused. “I live in Bournemouth—or at least near Bournemouth. I have just moved into a small bungalow there.”

I felt a faint stirring in my mind. What had I recently heard about a bungalow at Bournemouth? Whilst I was trying to remember, my companion, becoming even more ill at ease, was finally impelled to speak.

“You must think it very odd—I admit, of course, it is odd—to find someone wandering in the grounds of a house when the—er—person in question is not acquainted with the owner of the house. My reasons are a little difficult to explain, though I assure you that I have reasons. But I can only say that although I have only recently settled in Bournemouth, I am quite well known there, and I could bring forward several esteemed residents to vouch for me personally. Actually, I am a pharmacist who has recently sold an old established business in London, and I have retired to this part of the world which I have always found very pleasant—very pleasant indeed.”

Enlightenment came to me. I thought I knew who the little man was. Meanwhile he was continuing in full spate.

“My name is Osborne, Zachariah Osborne, and as I say I have—had rather—a very nice business in London—Barton Street—Paddington Green. Quite a good neighbourhood in my father’s time, but sadly changed now—oh yes, very much changed. Gone down in the world.”

He sighed, and shook his head.

Then he resumed:

“This is Mr. Venables’s house, is it not? I suppose—er—he is a friend of yours?”

I said with deliberation:

“Hardly a friend. I have only met him once before today, when I was taken to lunch with him by some friends of mine.”

“Ah yes—I see... Yes, precisely.”

We had come now to the entrance gates. We passed through them. Mr. Osborne paused irresolutely. I handed him back his torch.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Not at all. You’re welcome. I—” He paused, then words came from him in a rush.

“I shouldn’t like you to think... I mean, technically, of course, I was trespassing. But not, I assure you, from any motive of vulgar curiosity. It must have seemed to you most peculiar—my position—and open to misconstruction. I really would like to explain—to—er—clarify my position.”

I waited. It seemed the best thing to do. My curiosity, vulgar or not, was certainly aroused. I wanted it satisfied.

Mr. Osborne was silent for about a minute, then he made up his mind.

“I really would like to explain to you, Mr.—er—”

“Easterbrook. Mark Easterbrook.”

“Mr. Easterbrook. As I say, I would welcome the chance of explaining my rather odd behaviour. If you have the time—? It is only five minutes’ walk up the lane to the main road. There is quite a respectable little café at the petrol station close to the bus stop. My bus is not due for over twenty minutes. If you would allow me to offer you a cup of coffee?”

I accepted. We walked up the lane together. Mr. Osborne, his anguished respectability appeased, chatted cosily of the amenities of Bournemouth, its excellent climate, its concerts and the nice class of people who lived there.

We reached the main road. The petrol station was on the corner with the bus stop just beyond it. There was a small clean café, empty except for a young couple in a corner. We entered and Mr. Osborne ordered coffee and biscuits for two.

Then he leaned forward across the table and unburdened himself.

“This all stems from a case you may have seen reported in the newspapers some time ago. It was not a very sensational case, so it did not make the headlines—if that is the correct expression. It concerned the Roman Catholic parish priest of the district in London where I have—had—my shop. He was set upon one night and killed. Very distressing. Such happenings are far too frequent nowadays. He was, I believe, a good man—though I myself do not hold with the Roman doctrine. However that may be, I must explain my particular interest. There was a police announcement that they were anxious to interview anyone who had seen Father Gorman on the night in question. By chance I had happened to be standing outside the door of my establishment that evening about eight o’clock and had seen Father Gorman go by. Following him at a short distance was a man whose appearance was unusual enough to attract my attention. At the time, of course, I thought nothing of the matter, but I am an observant man, Mr. Easterbrook, and I have the habit of mentally registering what people look like. It is quite a hobby of mine, and several people who have come to my shop have been surprised when I say to them, ‘Ah yes, I think you came in for this same preparation last March?’ It pleases them, you know, to be

remembered. Good business, I have found it. Anyway, I described the man I had seen to the police. They thanked me and that was that.

“Now I come to the rather surprising part of my story. About ten days ago I came over to a church fête in the little village at the bottom of the lane we have just walked up—and what was my surprise to see this same man I have mentioned. He must have had, or so I thought, an accident, since he was propelling himself in a wheeled chair. I inquired about him and was told he was a rich local resident of the name of Venables. After a day or two to debate the matter, I wrote to the police officer to whom I had made my original statement. He came down to Bournemouth—Inspector Lejeune was his name. He seemed sceptical, however, as to whether this was indeed the man I had seen on the night of the murder. He informed me that Mr. Venables had been crippled for some years, as a result of polio. I must, he said, have been misled by a chance resemblance.”

Mr. Osborne came to an abrupt halt. I stirred the pale fluid in front of me and took a cautious sip. Mr. Osborne added three lumps of sugar to his own cup.

“Well, that seems to settle that,” I said.

“Yes,” said Mr. Osborne. “Yes...” His voice was markedly dissatisfied. Then he leaned forward again, his round bald head shining under the electric bulb, his eyes quite fanatical behind his spectacles....

“I must explain a little more. As a boy, Mr. Easterbrook, a friend of my father’s, another pharmacist, was called to give evidence in the case of Jean Paul Marigot. You may remember—he poisoned his English wife—an arsenical preparation. My father’s friend identified him in court as the man who signed a false name in his poison register. Marigot was convicted and hanged. It made a great impression on me—I was nine years old at the time—an impressionable age. It was my great hope that someday, I, too, might figure in a cause célèbre and be the instrument of bringing a murderer to justice! Perhaps it was then that I began to make a study of memorising faces. I will confess to you, Mr. Easterbrook, though it may seem to you quite ridiculous, that for many, many years now I have contemplated the

possibility that some man, determined to do away with his wife, might enter my shop to purchase what he needed.”

“Or, I suppose, a second Madeleine Smith,” I suggested.

“Exactly. Alas,” Mr. Osborne sighed, “that has never happened. Or, if so, the person in question has never been brought to justice. That occurs, I would say, more frequently than it is quite comfortable to believe. So this identification, though not what I had hoped, opened up at least a possibility that I might be a witness in a murder case!”

His face beamed with childish pleasure.

“Very disappointing for you,” I said sympathetically.

“Ye-es.” Again Mr. Osborne’s voice held that odd note of dissatisfaction.

“I’m an obstinate man, Mr. Easterbrook. As the days have passed by I have felt more and more sure that I was right. That the man I saw was Venables and no other. Oh!” he raised a hand in protest as I was about to speak. “I know. It was inclined to be foggy. I was some distance away—but what the police have not taken into consideration is that I have made a study of recognition. It was not just the features, the pronounced nose, the Adam’s apple; there is the carriage of the head, the angle of the neck on the shoulders. I said to myself ‘Come, come, admit you were mistaken.’ But I continued to feel that I had not been mistaken. The police said it was impossible. But was it impossible? That’s what I asked myself.”

“Surely, with a disability of that kind—”

He stopped me by waving an agitated forefinger.

“Yes, yes, but my experiences, under the National Health—Well, really it would surprise you what people are prepared to do—and what they get away with! I wouldn’t like to say that the medical profession are credulous—a plain case of malingering they will spot soon enough. But there are ways—ways that a chemist is more likely to appreciate than a doctor. Certain drugs, for instance, other quite harmless-seeming preparations.

Fever can be induced—various rashes and skin irritations—dryness of throat, or increase of secretions—”

“But hardly atrophied limbs,” I pointed out.

“Quite, quite. But who says that Mr. Venables’s limbs are atrophied?”

“Well—his doctor, I suppose?”

“Quite. But I have tried to get a little information on that point. Mr. Venables’s doctor is in London, a Harley Street man—true, he was seen by the local doctor here when he first arrived. But that doctor has now retired and gone to live abroad. The present man has never attended Mr. Venables. Mr. Venables goes up once a month to Harley Street.”

I looked at him curiously.

“That still seems to me to present no loophole for er—er—”

“You don’t know the things I know,” said Mr. Osborne. “A humble example will suffice. Mrs. H.—drawing insurance benefits for over a year. Drew them in three separate places—only in one place she was Mrs. C. and in another place Mrs. T.... Mrs. C. and Mrs. T. lent her their cards for a consideration, and so she collected the money three times over.”

“I don’t see—”

“Suppose—just suppose—” The forefinger was now wiggling excitedly, “our Mr. V. makes contact with a genuine polio case in poor circumstances. He makes a proposition. The man resembles him, let us say, in a general kind of way, no more. Genuine sufferer calling himself Mr. V. calls in specialist, and is examined, so that the case history is all correct. Then Mr. V. takes house in country. Local G.P. wants to retire soon. Again genuine sufferer calls in doctor, is examined. And there you are! Mr. Venables well documented as a polio sufferer with atrophied limbs. He is seen locally (when he is seen) in a wheeled chair, etc.”

“His servants would know, surely,” I objected. “His valet.”

“But supposing it is a gang—the valet is one of the gang. What could be simpler? Some of the other servants, too, perhaps.”

“But why?”

“Ah,” said Mr. Osborne. “That’s another question, isn’t it? I won’t tell you my theory—I expect you’d laugh at it. But there you are—a very nice alibi set up for a man who might want an alibi. He could be here, there and everywhere, and nobody would know. Seen walking about in Paddington? Impossible! He’s a helpless cripple living in the country, etc.” Mr. Osborne paused and glanced at his watch. “My bus is due. I must be quick. I get to brooding about this you see. Wondered if I could do anything to prove it, as you might say. So I thought I’d come out here (I’ve time on my hands, these days. I almost miss my business sometimes), go into the grounds and—well, not to put too fine a point upon it, do a bit of spying. Not very nice, you’ll say—and I agree. But if it’s a case of getting at the truth—of bringing a criminal to book... If, for instance, I spotted our Mr. Venables having a quiet walk around in the grounds, well, there you are! And then I thought, if they don’t pull the curtains too soon—(and you may have noticed people don’t when daylight saving first ends—they’ve got in the habit of expecting it to be dark an hour later)—I might creep up and take a peep. Walking about his library, maybe, never dreaming that anyone would be spying on him? Why should he? No one suspects him as far as he knows!”

“Why are you so sure the man you saw that night was Venables?”

“I know it was Venables!”

He shot to his feet.

“My bus is coming. Pleased to have met you, Mr. Easterbrook, and it’s a weight off my mind to have explained what I was doing there at Priors Court. I daresay it seems a lot of nonsense to you.”

“It doesn’t altogether,” I said. “But you haven’t told me what you think Mr. Venables is up to.”

Mr. Osborne looked embarrassed and a little sheepish.

“You’ll laugh, I daresay. Everybody says he’s rich but nobody seems to know how he made his money. I’ll tell you what I think. I think he’s one of those master criminals you read about. You know—plans things, and has a gang that carries them out. It may sound silly to you but I—”

The bus had stopped. Mr. Osborne ran for it—

I walked home down the lane very thoughtful... It was a fantastic theory that Mr. Osborne had outlined, but I had to admit that there might just possibly be something in it.

Twenty.

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

Ringling up Ginger on the following morning, I told her that I was moving to Bournemouth the next day.

“I’ve found a nice quiet little hotel called (heaven knows why) the Deer Park. It’s got a couple of nice unobtrusive side exits. I might sneak up to London and see you.”

“You oughtn’t to really, I suppose. But I must say it would be rather heaven if you did. The boredom! You’ve no idea! If you couldn’t come here, I could sneak out and meet you somewhere.”

Something suddenly struck me.

“Ginger! Your voice... It’s different somehow....”

“Oh that! It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“But your voice?”

“I’ve just got a bit of a sore throat or something, that’s all.”

“Ginger!”

“Now look, Mark, anyone can have a sore throat. I’m starting a cold, I expect. Or a touch of ’flu.”

“’Flu? Look here, don’t evade the point. Are you all right, or aren’t you?”

“Don’t fuss. I’m all right.”

“Tell me exactly how you’re feeling. Do you feel as though you might be starting ’flu?”

“Well—perhaps... Aching a bit all over, you know the kind of thing—”

“Temperature?”

“Well, perhaps a bit of a temperature....”

I sat there, a horrible cold sort of feeling stealing over me. I was frightened. I knew, too, that however much Ginger might refuse to admit it, Ginger was frightened also.

Her voice spoke again.

“Mark—don’t panic. You are panicking—and really there’s nothing to panic about.”

“Perhaps not. But we’ve got to take every precaution. Ring up your doctor and get him to come and see you. At once.”

“All right... But—he’ll think I’m a terrible fusspot.”

“Never mind. Do it! Then, when he’s been, ring me back.”

After I had rung off, I sat for a long time staring at the black inhuman outline of the telephone. Panic—I mustn’t give way to panic... There was always ’flu about at this time of year... The doctor would be reassuring... perhaps it would be only a slight chill....

I saw in my mind’s eye Sybil in her peacock dress with its scrawled symbols of evil. I heard Thyrsa’s voice, willing, commanding... On the chalked floor, Bella, chanting her evil spells, held up a struggling white cock....

Nonsense, all nonsense...Of course it was all superstitious nonsense...

The box—not so easy, somehow, to dismiss the box. The box represented, not human superstition, but a development of scientific possibility... But it wasn’t possible—it couldn’t be possible that—

Mrs. Dane Calthrop found me there, sitting staring at the telephone. She said at once:

“What’s happened?”

“Ginger,” I said, “isn’t feeling well....”

I wanted her to say that it was all nonsense. I wanted her to reassure me. But she didn’t reassure me.

“That’s bad,” she said. “Yes, I think that’s bad.”

“It’s not possible,” I urged. “It’s not possible for a moment that they can do what they say!”

“Isn’t it?”

“You don’t believe—you can’t believe—”

“My dear Mark,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, “both you and Ginger have already admitted the possibility of such a thing, or you wouldn’t be doing what you are doing.”

“And our believing makes it worse—makes it more likely!”

“You don’t go so far as believing—you just admit that, with evidence, you might believe.”

“Evidence? What evidence?”

“Ginger’s becoming ill is evidence,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

I hated her. My voice rose angrily.

“Why must you be so pessimistic? It’s just a simple cold—something of that kind. Why must you persist in believing the worst?”

“Because if it’s the worst, we’ve got to face it—not bury our heads in the sand until it’s too late.”

“You think that this ridiculous mumbo jumbo works? These trances and spells and cock sacrifices and all the bag of tricks?”

“Something works,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “That’s what we’ve got to face. A lot of it, most of it, I think, is trappings. It’s just to create atmosphere—atmosphere is important. But concealed amongst the trappings, there must be the real thing—the thing that does work.”

“Something like radioactivity at a distance?”

“Something of that kind. You see, people are discovering things all the time—frightening things. Some variation of this new knowledge might be adapted by some unscrupulous person for their own purposes—Thyrza’s father was a physicist, you know—”

“But what? What? That damned box! If we could get it examined? If the police—”

“Police aren’t very keen on getting a search warrant and removing property without a good deal more to go on than we’ve got.”

“If I went round there and smashed up the damned thing?”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop shook her head.

“From what you told me, the damage, if there has been damage, was done that night.”

I dropped my head in my hands and groaned.

“I wish we’d never started this damned business.”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said firmly: “Your motives were excellent. And what’s done is done. You’ll know more when Ginger rings back after the doctor has been. She’ll ring Rhoda’s, I suppose—”

I took the hint.

“I’d better get back.”

“I’m being stupid,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop suddenly as I left. “I know I’m being stupid. Trappings! We’re letting ourselves be obsessed by trappings. I can’t help feeling that we’re thinking the way they want us to think.”

Perhaps she was right. But I couldn’t see any other way of thinking.

Ginger rang me two hours later.

“He’s been,” she said. “He seemed a bit puzzled, but he says it’s probably ’flu. There’s quite a lot about. He’s sent me to bed and is sending along some medicine. My temperature is quite high. But it would be with ’flu, wouldn’t it?”

There was a forlorn appeal in her hoarse voice, under its surface bravery.

“You’ll be all right,” I said miserably. “Do you hear? You’ll be all right. Do you feel very awful?”

“Well—fever—and aching, and everything hurts, my feet and my skin. I hate anything touching me... And I’m so hot.”

“That’s the fever, darling. Listen, I’m coming up to you! I’m leaving now—at once. No, don’t protest.”

“All right. I’m glad you’re coming, Mark. I daresay—I’m not so brave as I thought....”

II

I rang up Lejeune.

“Miss Corrigan’s ill,” I said.

“What?”

“You heard me. She’s ill. She’s called her own doctor. He says perhaps ’flu. It may be. But it may not. I don’t know what you can do. The only idea that occurs to me is to get some kind of specialist onto it.”

“What kind of specialist?”

“A psychiatrist—or psychoanalyst, or psychologist. A psycho something. A man who knows about suggestion and hypnotism and brainwashing and all that kind of thing. There are people who deal with that kind of thing?”

“Of course there are. Yes. There are one or two Home Office men who specialise in it. I think you’re dead right. It may be just ’flu—but it may be some kind of psycho business about which nothing much is known. Lord, Easterbrook, this may be just what we’ve been hoping for!”

I slammed down the receiver. We might be learning something about psychological weapons—but all that I cared about was Ginger, gallant and frightened. We hadn’t really believed, either of us—or had we? No, of course we hadn’t. It had been a game—a cops and robbers game. But it wasn’t a game.

The Pale Horse was proving itself a reality.

I dropped my head into my hands and groaned.

Twenty-one

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

I doubt if I shall ever forget the next few days. It appears to me now as a kind of bewildered kaleidoscope without sequence or form. Ginger was removed from the flat to a private nursing home. I was allowed to see her only at visiting hours.

Her own doctor, I gather, was inclined to stand on his high horse about the whole business. He could not understand what the fuss was all about. His own diagnosis was quite clear—bronchopneumonia following on influenza, though complicated by certain slightly unusual symptoms, but that, as he pointed out, “happens all the time. No case is ever ‘typical.’ And some people don’t respond to antibiotics.”

And, of course, all that he said was true. Ginger had bronchopneumonia. There was nothing mysterious about the disease from which she was suffering. She just had it—and had it badly.

I had one interview with the Home Office psychologist. He was a quaint little cock robin of a man, rising up and down on his toes, with eyes twinkling through very thick lenses.

He asked me innumerable questions, half of which I could see no point in whatever, but there must have been a point, for he nodded sapiently at my answers. He entirely refused to commit himself, wherein he was probably wise. He made occasional pronouncements in what I took to be the jargon of his trade. He tried, I think, various forms of hypnotism on Ginger, but by what seemed to be universal consent, no one would tell me very much. Possibly because there was nothing to tell.

I avoided my own friends and acquaintances, yet the loneliness of my existence was insupportable.

Finally, in an excess of desperation, I rang up Poppy at her flower shop. Would she come out and dine with me. Poppy would love to do so.

I took her to the Fantasie. Poppy prattled happily and I found her company very soothing. But I had not asked her out only for her soothing qualities. Having lulled her into a happy stupor with delicious food and drink, I began a little cautious probing. It seemed to be possible that Poppy might know something without being wholly conscious of what it was she knew. I asked her if she remembered my friend Ginger. Poppy said, “Of course,” opening her big blue eyes, and asked what Ginger was doing nowadays.

“She’s very ill,” I said.

“Poor pet.” Poppy looked as concerned as it was possible for her to look, which was not very much.

“She got herself mixed up with something,” I said. “I believe she asked your advice about it. Pale Horse stuff. Cost her a terrible lot of money.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Poppy, eyes wider still. “So it was you!”

For a moment or two I didn’t understand. Then it dawned upon me that Poppy was identifying me with the “man” whose invalid wife was the bar to Ginger’s happiness. So excited was she by this revelation of our love life that she quite failed to be alarmed by the mention of the Pale Horse.

She breathed excitedly:

“Did it work?”

“It went a bit wrong somehow,” I added, “The dog it was that died.”

“What dog?” asked Poppy, at sea.

I saw that words of one syllable would always be needed where Poppy was concerned.

“The—er—business seems to have recoiled upon Ginger. Did you ever hear of that happening before?”

Poppy never had.

“Of course,” I said, “this stuff they do at the Pale Horse down in Much Deeping—you know about that, don’t you?”

“I didn’t know where it was. Down in the country somewhere.”

“I couldn’t quite make out from Ginger what it is they do....”

I waited carefully.

“Rays, isn’t it?” said Poppy vaguely. “Something like that. From outer space,” she added helpfully. “Like the Russians!”

I decided that Poppy was now relying on her limited imagination.

“Something of that kind,” I agreed. “But it must be quite dangerous. I mean, for Ginger to get ill like this.”

“But it was your wife who was to be ill and die, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said, accepting the role Ginger and Poppy had planted on me. “But it seems to have gone wrong—backfired.”

“You mean—?” Poppy made a terrific mental effort. “Like when you plug an electric iron in wrong and you get a shock?”

“Exactly,” I said. “Just like that. Did you ever know that sort of thing happen before?”

“Well, not that way—”

“What way, then?”

“Well, I mean if one didn’t pay up—afterwards. A man I knew wouldn’t.” Her voice dropped in an awestricken fashion. “He was killed in the tube—fell off the platform in front of a train.”

“It might have been an accident.”

“Oh no,” said Poppy, shocked at the thought. “It was THEM.”

I poured some more champagne into Poppy’s glass. Here, I felt, in front of me was someone who might be helpful if only you could tear out of her the disassociated facts that were flitting about in what she called her brain. She had heard things said, and assimilated about half of them, and got them jumbled up and nobody had been very careful what they said because it was “only Poppy.”

The maddening thing was that I didn’t know what to ask her. If I said the wrong thing she would shut up in alarm like a clam and go dumb on me.

“My wife,” I said, “is still an invalid, but she doesn’t seem any worse.”

“That’s too bad,” said Poppy sympathetically, sipping champagne.

“So what do I do next?”

Poppy didn’t seem to know.

“You see it was Ginger who—I didn’t make any of the arrangements. Is there anyone I could get at?”

“There’s a place in Birmingham,” said Poppy doubtfully.

“That’s closed down,” I said. “Don’t you know anyone else who’d know anything about it?”

“Eileen Brandon might know something—but I don’t think so.”

The introduction of a totally unexpected Eileen Brandon startled me. I asked who Eileen Brandon was.

“She’s terrible really,” said Poppy. “Very dim. Has her hair very tightly permed, and never wears stiletto heels. She’s the end.” She added by way of explanation, “I was at school with her—but she was pretty dim then. She was frightfully good at geography.”

“What’s she got to do with the Pale Horse?”

“Nothing really. It was only an idea she got. And so she chucked it up.”

“Chucked what up?” I asked, bewildered.

“Her job with C.R.C.”

“What’s C.R.C.?”

“Well, I don’t really know exactly. They just say C.R.C. Something about Customers’ Reactions or Research. It’s quite a small show.”

“And Eileen Brandon worked for them? What did she have to do?”

“Just go round and ask questions—about toothpaste or gas stoves, and what kind of sponges you used. Too too depressing and dull. I mean, who cares?”

“Presumably C.R.C.” I felt a slight prickling of excitement.

It was a woman employed by an association of this kind who had been visited by Father Gorman on the fatal night. And—yes—of course, someone of that kind had called on Ginger at the flat...

Here was a link of some kind.

“Why did she chuck up her job? Because she got bored?”

“I don’t think so. They paid quite well. But she got a sort of idea about it—that it wasn’t what it seemed.”

“She thought that it might be connected, in some way, with the Pale Horse? Is that it?”

“Well, I don’t know. Something of that kind... Anyway, she’s working in an Espresso coffee bar off Tottenham Court Road now.”

“Give me her address.”

“She’s not a bit your type.”

“I don’t want to make sexual advances to her,” I said brutally. “I want some hints on Customers Research. I’m thinking of buying some shares in one of those things.”

“Oh, I see,” said Poppy, quite satisfied with this explanation.

There was nothing more to be got out of her, so we finished up the champagne, and I took her home and thanked her for a lovely evening.

II

I tried to ring Lejeune next morning—but failed. However, after some difficulty I managed to get through to Jim Corrigan.

“What about that psychological pipsqueak you brought along to see me, Corrigan? What does he say about Ginger?”

“A lot of long words. But I rather think, Mark, that he’s truly baffled. And you know, people do get pneumonia. There’s nothing mysterious or out of the way about that.”

“Yes,” I said. “And several people we know of, whose names were on a certain list, have died of bronchopneumonia, gastroenteritis, bulbar paralysis, tumour on the brain, epilepsy, paratyphoid and other well-authenticated diseases.”

“I know how you feel... But what can we do?”

“She’s worse, isn’t she?” I asked.

“Well—yes...”

“Then something’s got to be done.”

“Such as?”

“I’ve got one or two ideas. Going down to Much Deeping, getting hold of Thyrsa Grey and forcing her, by scaring the living daylights out of her, to reverse the spell or whatever it is—”

“Well—that might work.”

“Or—I might go to Venables—”

Corrigan said sharply:

“Venables? But he’s out. How can he possibly have any connection with it? He’s a cripple.”

“I wonder. I might go there and snatch off that rug affair and see if this atrophied limbs business is true or false!”

“We’ve looked into all that—”

“Wait. I ran into that little chemist chap, Osborne, down in Much Deeping. I want to repeat to you what he suggested to me.”

I outlined to him Osborne’s theory of impersonation.

“That man’s got a bee in his bonnet,” said Corrigan. “He’s the kind of man who has always got to be right.”

“But Corrigan, tell me, couldn’t it be as he said? It’s possible, isn’t it?”

After a moment or two Corrigan said slowly,

“Yes. I have to admit it’s possible... But several people would have to be in the know—and would have to be paid very heavily for holding their tongues.”

“What of that? He’s rolling in money, isn’t he? Has Lejeune found out yet how he’s made all that money?”

“No. Not exactly... I’ll admit this to you. There’s something wrong about the fellow. He’s got a past of some kind. The money’s all very cleverly accounted for, in a lot of ways. It isn’t possible to check up on it all without an investigation which might take years. The police have had to do that before—when they’ve been up against a financial crook who has covered his traces by a web of infinite complexity. I believe the Inland Revenue has

been smelling around Venables for some time. But he's clever. What do you see him as—the head of the show?"

"Yes. I do. I think he's the man who plans it all."

"Perhaps. He sounds as though he'd have the kind of brains for that, I agree. But surely he wouldn't have done anything so crude as killing Father Gorman himself!"

"He might have if there was sufficient urgency. Father Gorman might have had to be silenced before he could pass on what he had learnt from that woman about the activities of the Pale Horse. Besides—"

I stopped short.

"Hallo—you still there?"

"Yes, I was thinking... Just an idea that occurred to me..."

"What was it?"

"I've not got it clear yet... Just that real safety could only be achieved one way. I haven't worked it out yet... Anyway, I must go now. I've got a rendezvous at a coffee bar."

"Didn't know you were in the Chelsea coffee bar set!"

"I'm not. My coffee bar is in Tottenham Court Road, as a matter of fact."

I rang off and glanced at the clock.

I started for the door when the telephone rang.

I hesitated. Ten to one, it was Jim Corrigan again, ringing back to know more about my idea.

I didn't want to talk to Jim Corrigan just now.

I moved towards the door whilst the telephone rang on persistently, naggingly.

Of course, it might be the hospital— Ginger—

I couldn't risk that. I strode across impatiently and jerked the receiver off its hook.

"Hallo?"

"Is that you, Mark?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's me, of course," said the voice reproachfully. "Listen, I want to tell you something."

"Oh, it's you." I recognised the voice of Mrs. Oliver. "Look here, I'm in a great hurry, got to go out. I'll ring you back later."

"That won't do at all," said Mrs. Oliver, firmly. "You've got to listen to me now. It's important."

"Well, you'll have to be quick. I've got an appointment."

"Pooh," said Mrs. Oliver. "You can always be late for an appointment. Everybody is. They'll think all the more of you."

"No, really, I've got to—"

"Listen, Mark. This is important. I'm sure it is. It must be!"

I curbed my impatience as best I could, glancing at the clock.

"Well?"

"My Milly had tonsillitis. She was quite bad and she's gone to the country—to her sister—"

I gritted my teeth.

“I’m frightfully sorry about that, but really—”

“Listen. I’ve not begun yet. Where was I? Oh yes. Milly had to go to the country and so I rang up the agency I always go to—the Regency—such a silly name I always think—like a cinema—”

“I really must—”

“And said what could they send? And they said it was very difficult just now—which they always say as a matter of fact—but they’d do what they could—”

Never had I found my friend Ariadne Oliver so maddening.

“—and so, this morning a woman came along, and who do you think she turned out to be?”

“I can’t imagine. Look—”

“A woman called Edith Binns—comic name, isn’t it?—and you actually know her.”

“No, I don’t. I never heard of a woman called Edith Binns.”

“But you do know her and you saw her not very long ago. She had been with that godmother of yours for years. Lady Hesketh-Dubois.”

“Oh, with her!”

“Yes. She saw you the day you came to collect some pictures.”

“Well, that’s all very nice and I expect you’re very lucky to find her. I believe she’s most trustworthy and reliable and all that. Aunt Min said so. But really—now—”

“Wait, can’t you? I haven’t got to the point. She sat and talked a great deal about Lady Hesketh-Dubois and her last illness, and all that sort of thing,

because they do love illnesses and death and then she said it.”

“Said what?”

“The thing that caught my attention. She said something like: ‘Poor dear lady, suffering like she did. That nasty thing on her brain, a growth, they say, and she in quite good health up to just before. And pitiful it was to see her in the nursing home and all her hair, nice thick white hair it was, and always blued regularly once a fortnight, to see it coming out all over the pillow. Coming out in handfuls. And then, Mark, I thought of Mary Delafontaine, that friend of mine. Her hair came out. And I remembered what you told me about some girl you’d seen in a Chelsea coffee place fighting with another girl, and getting her hair all pulled out in handfuls. Hair doesn’t come out as easily as that, Mark. You try—just try to pull your own hair, just a little bit of it, out by the roots! Just try it! You’ll see. It’s not natural, Mark, for all those people to have hair that comes out by the roots. It’s not natural. It must be some special kind of new illness—it must mean something.”

I clutched the receiver and my head swam. Things, half-remembered scraps of knowledge, drew together. Rhoda and her dogs on the lawn—an article I had read in a medical journal in New York—Of course... Of course!

I was suddenly aware that Mrs. Oliver was still quacking happily.

“Bless you,” I said. “You’re wonderful!”

I slammed back the receiver, then took it off again. I dialled a number and was lucky enough this time to get Lejeune straightaway.

“Listen,” I said, “is Ginger’s hair coming out by the roots in handfuls?”

“Well—as a matter of fact I believe it is. High fever, I suppose.”

“Fever my foot,” I said. “What Ginger’s suffering from, what they’ve all suffered from, is thallium poisoning. Please God, we may be in time....”

Twenty-two

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

“Are we in time? Will she live?”

I wandered up and down. I couldn't sit still.

Lejeune sat watching me. He was patient and kind.

“You can be sure that everything possible is being done.”

It was the same old answer. It did nothing to comfort me.

“Do they know how to treat thallium poisoning?”

“You don't often get a case of it. But everything possible will be tried. If you ask me, I think she'll pull through.”

I looked at him. How could I tell if he really believed what he was saying? Was he just trying to soothe me?

“At any rate, they've verified that it was thallium.”

“Yes, they've verified that.”

“So that's the simple truth behind the Pale Horse. Poison. No witchcraft, no hypnotism, no scientific death rays. Plain poisoning! And she flung that at me, damn her. Flung it in my face. Laughing in her cheek all the while, I expect.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Thyrza Grey. That first afternoon when I went to tea there. Talked about the Borgias and all the build up of 'rare and untraceable poisons'; the poisoned gloves and all the rest of it. 'Common white arsenic,' she said, 'and nothing else.' This was just as simple. All that hooey! The trance and

the white cocks and the brazier and the pentagrams and the voodoo and the reversed crucifix—all that was for the crudely superstitious. And the famous ‘box’ was another bit of hooey for the contemporary-minded. We don’t believe in spirits and witches and spells nowadays, but we’re a gullible lot when it comes to ‘rays’ and ‘waves’ and psychological phenomena. That box, I bet, is nothing but a nice little assembly of electrical show-off, coloured bulbs and humming valves. Because we live in daily fear of radio fall out and strontium 90 and all the rest of it, we’re amenable to suggestion along the line of scientific talk. The whole setup at the Pale Horse was bogus! The Pale Horse was a stalking horse, neither more nor less. Attention was to be focused on that, so that we’d never suspect what might be going on in another direction. The beauty of it was that it was quite safe for them. Thyrza Grey could boast out loud about what occult powers she had or could command. She could never be brought into court and tried for murder on that issue. Her box could have been examined and proved to be harmless. Any court would have ruled that the whole thing was nonsense and impossible! And, of course, that’s exactly what it was.”

“Do you think they’re all three in it?” asked Lejeune.

“I shouldn’t think so. Bella’s belief in witchcraft is genuine, I should say. She believes in her own powers and rejoices in them. The same with Sybil. She’s got a genuine gift of mediumship. She goes into a trance and she doesn’t know what happens. She believes everything that Thyrza tells her.”

“So Thyrza is the ruling spirit?”

I said slowly:

“As far as the Pale Horse is concerned, yes. But she’s not the real brains of the show. The real brain works behind the scenes. He plans and organises. It’s all beautifully dovetailed, you know. Everyone has his or her job, and no one has anything on anyone else. Bradley runs the financial and legal side. Apart from that, he doesn’t know what happens elsewhere. He’s handsomely paid, of course; so is Thyrza Grey.”

“You seem to have got it all taped to your satisfaction,” said Lejeune drily.

“I haven’t. Not yet. But we know the basic necessary fact. It’s the same as it has been through the ages. Crude and simple. Just plain poison. The dear old death potion.”

“What put thallium into your head?”

“Several things suddenly came together. The beginning of the whole business was the thing I saw that night in Chelsea. A girl whose hair was being pulled out by the roots by another girl. And she said: ‘It didn’t really hurt.’ It wasn’t bravery, as I thought; it was simple fact. It didn’t hurt.

“I read an article on thallium poisoning when I was in America. A lot of workers in a factory died one after the other. Their deaths were put down to astonishingly varied causes. Amongst them, if I remember rightly, were paratyphoid, apoplexy, alcoholic neuritis, bulbar paralysis, epilepsy, gastroenteritis, and so on. Then there was a woman who poisoned seven people. Diagnosis included brain tumour, encephalitis, and lobar pneumonia. The symptoms vary a good deal, I understand. They may start with diarrhoea and vomiting, or there may be a stage of intoxication, again it may begin with pain in the limbs, and be put down as polyneuritis or rheumatic fever or polio—one patient was put in an iron lung. Sometimes there’s pigmentation of the skin.”

“You talk like a medical dictionary!”

“Naturally. I’ve been looking it up. But one thing always happens sooner or later. The hair falls out. Thallium used to be used for depilation at one time—particularly for children with ringworm. Then it was found to be dangerous. But it’s occasionally given internally, but with very careful dosage going by the weight of the patient. It’s mainly used nowadays for rats, I believe. It’s tasteless, soluble, and easy to buy. There’s only one thing, poisoning mustn’t be suspected.”

Lejeune nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “Hence the insistence by the Pale Horse that the murderer must stay away from his intended victim. No suspicion of foul play ever arises. Why should it? There’s no interested party who could have

had access to food or drink. No purchase of thallium or any other poison is ever made by him or her. That's the beauty of it. The real work is done by someone who has no connection whatever with the victim. Someone, I think, who appears once and once only."

He paused.

"Any ideas on that?"

"Only one. A common factor appears to be that on every occasion some pleasant harmless-seeming woman calls with a questionnaire on behalf of a domestic research unit."

"You think that that woman is the one who plants the poison? As a sample? Something like that?"

"I don't think it's quite as simple as that," I said slowly. "I have an idea that the women are quite genuine. But they come into it somehow. I think we may be able to find out something if we talk to a woman called Eileen Brandon, who works in an Espresso off Tottenham Court Road."

II

Eileen Brandon had been fairly accurately described by Poppy—allowing, that is to say, for Poppy's own particular point of view. Her hair was neither like a chrysanthemum, nor an unruly birds' nest. It was waved back close to her head, she wore the minimum of makeup and her feet were encased in what is called, I believe, sensible shoes. Her husband had been killed in a motor accident, she told us, and left her with two small children. Before her present employment, she had been employed by a firm called Customers' Reactions Classified for over a year. She had left of her own accord as she had not cared for the type of work.

"Why didn't you care for it, Mrs. Brandon?"

Lejeune asked the question. She looked at him.

"You're a detective-inspector of police? Is that right?"

“Quite right, Mrs. Brandon.”

“You think there’s something wrong about that firm?”

“It’s a matter I’m inquiring into. Did you suspect something of that kind? Is that why you left?”

“I’ve nothing definite to go upon. Nothing definite that I could tell you.”

“Naturally. We understand that. This is a confidential inquiry.”

“I see. But there is really very little I could say.”

“You can say why you wanted to leave.”

“I had a feeling that there were things going on that I didn’t know about.”

“You mean you didn’t think it was a genuine concern?”

“Something of the kind. It didn’t seem to me to be run in a businesslike way. I suspected that there must be some ulterior object behind it. But what that object was I still don’t know.”

Lejeune asked more questions as to exactly what work she had been asked to do. Lists of names in a certain neighbourhood had been handed out. Her job was to visit those people, ask certain questions, and note down the answers.

“And what struck you as wrong about that?”

“The questions did not seem to me to follow up any particular line of research. They seemed desultory, almost haphazard. As though—how can I put it?—they were a cloak for something else.”

“Have you any idea what the something else might have been?”

“No. That’s what puzzled me.”

She paused a moment and then said doubtfully:

“I did wonder, at one time, whether the whole thing could have been organised with a view perhaps to burglaries, a spying out of the land, so to speak. But that couldn’t be it, because I was never asked for any description of the rooms, fastenings, etc, or when the occupants of the flat or house were likely to be out or away.”

“What articles did you deal with in the questions?”

“It varied. Sometimes it was foodstuffs. Cereals, cake mixes, or it might be soap flakes and detergents. Sometimes cosmetics, face powders, lipsticks, creams, etc. Sometimes patent medicines or remedies, brands of aspirin, cough pastilles, sleeping pills, pep pills, gargles, mouthwashes, indigestion remedies and so on.”

“You were not asked,” Lejeune spoke casually, “to supply samples of any particular goods?”

“No. Nothing of that kind.”

“You merely asked questions and noted down the answers?”

“Yes.”

“What was supposed to be the object of these inquiries?”

“That was what seemed so odd. We were never told exactly. It was supposed to be done in order to supply information to certain manufacturing firms—but it was an extraordinarily amateurish way of going about it. Not systematic at all.”

“Would it be possible, do you think, that amongst the questions you were told to ask, there was just one question or one group of questions, that was the object of the enterprise, and that the others might have been camouflage?”

She considered the point, frowning a little, then she nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “That would account for the haphazard choice—but I haven’t the least idea what question or questions were the important ones.”

Lejeune looked at her keenly.

“There must be more to it than what you’ve told us,” he said gently.

“That’s the point, there isn’t really. I just felt there was something wrong about the whole setup. And then I talked to another woman, a Mrs. Davis —”

“You talked to a Mrs. Davis—yes?”

Lejeune’s voice remained quite unchanged.

“She wasn’t happy about things, either.”

“And why wasn’t she happy?”

“She’d overheard something.”

“What had she overheard?”

“I told you I couldn’t be definite. She didn’t tell me in so many words. Only that from what she had overheard, the whole setup was a racket of some kind. ‘It’s not what it seems to be.’ That is what she said. Then she said: ‘Oh well, it doesn’t affect us. The money’s very good and we’re not asked to do anything that’s against the law—so I don’t see that we need bother our heads about it.’”

“That was all?”

“There was one other thing she said. I don’t know what she meant by it. She said: ‘Sometimes I feel like Typhoid Mary.’ At the time I didn’t know what she meant.”

Lejeune took a paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Do any of the names on that list mean anything to you? Did you call upon any of them that you can remember?”

“I wouldn’t remember.” She took the paper. “I saw so many...” She paused as her eye went down the list. She said:

“Ormerod.”

“You remember an Ormerod?”

“No. But Mrs. Davis mentioned him once. He died very suddenly, didn’t he? Cerebral haemorrhage. It upset her. She said, ‘He was on my list a fortnight ago. Looked like a man in the pink of condition.’ It was after that that she made the remark about Typhoid Mary. She said, ‘Some of the people I call on seem to curl up their toes and pass out just from having one look at me.’ She laughed about it and said it was a coincidence. But I don’t think she liked it much. However, she said she wasn’t going to worry.”

“And that was all?”

“Well—”

“Tell me.”

“It was some time later. I hadn’t seen her for a while. But we met one day in a restaurant in Soho. I told her that I’d left the C.R.C. and got another job. She asked me why, and I told her I’d felt uneasy, not knowing what was going on. She said: ‘Perhaps you’ve been wise. But it’s good money and short hours. And after all, we’ve all got to take our chance in this life! I’ve not had much luck in my life and why should I care what happens to other people?’ I said: ‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about. What exactly is wrong with that show?’ She said: ‘I can’t be sure, but I’ll tell you I recognised someone the other day. Coming out of a house where he’d no business to be and carrying a bag of tools. What was he doing with those I’d like to know?’ She asked me, too, if I’d ever come across a woman who ran a pub called the Pale Horse somewhere. I asked her what the Pale Horse had to do with it.”

“And what did she say?”

“She laughed and said ‘Read your Bible.’”

Mrs. Brandon added: "I don't know what she meant. That was the last time I saw her. I don't know where she is now, whether she's still with C.R.C. or whether she's left."

"Mrs. Davis is dead," said Lejeune.

Eileen Brandon looked startled.

"Dead! But—how?"

"Pneumonia, two months ago."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry."

"Is there anything else you can tell us, Mrs. Brandon?"

"I'm afraid not. I have heard other people mention that phrase—the Pale Horse, but if you ask them about it, they shut up at once. They look afraid, too."

She looked uneasy.

"I—I don't want to be mixed up in anything dangerous, Inspector Lejeune. I've got two small children. Honestly, I don't know anything more than I've told you."

He looked at her keenly—then he nodded his head and let her go.

"That takes us a little further," said Lejeune when Eileen Brandon had gone. "Mrs. Davis got to know too much. She tried to shut her eyes to the meaning of what was going on, but she must have had a very shrewd suspicion of what it was. Then she was suddenly taken ill, and when she was dying, she sent for a priest and told him what she knew and suspected. The question is, how much did she know? That list of people, I should say, is a list of people she had called on in the course of her job, and who had subsequently died. Hence the remark about Typhoid Mary. The real question is, who was it she 'recognised' coming out of a house where he had no business to be, and pretending to be a workman of some kind? That must have been the knowledge that made her dangerous. If she recognised

him, he may have recognised her—and he may have realised that she had recognised him. If she'd passed on that particular item to Father Gorman, then it was vital that Father Gorman should be silenced at once before he could pass it on."

He looked at me.

"You agree, don't you? That must have been the way of it."

"Oh yes," I said. "I agree."

"And you've an idea, perhaps, who the man is?"

"I've an idea, but—"

"I know. We haven't a particle of evidence."

He was silent a moment. Then he got up.

"But we'll get him," he said. "Make no mistake. Once we know definitely who it is, there are always ways. We'll try every damned one of them!"

Twenty-three

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

It was some three weeks later that a car drove up to the front door of Priors Court.

Four men got out. I was one of them. There was also Detective-Inspector Lejeune and Detective-Sergeant Lee. The fourth man was Mr. Osborne, who could hardly contain his delight and excitement at being allowed to be one of the party.

“You must hold your tongue, you know,” Lejeune admonished him.

“Yes, indeed, Inspector. You can count on me absolutely. I won't utter a word.”

“Mind you don't.”

“I feel it's a privilege. A great privilege, though I don't quite understand—”

But nobody was entering into explanations at this moment.

Lejeune rang the bell and asked for Mr. Venables.

Looking rather like a deputation, the four of us were ushered in.

If Venables was surprised at our visit, he did not show it. His manner was courteous in the extreme. I thought again, as he wheeled his chair a little back so as to widen the circle round him, what a very distinctive appearance the man had. The Adam's apple moving up and down between the wings of his old-fashioned collar, the haggard profile with its curved nose like a bird of prey.

“Nice to see you again, Easterbrook. You seem to spend a lot of time down in this part of the world nowadays.”

There was a faint malice in his tone, I thought. He resumed:

“And—Detective-Inspector Lejeune, is it? That rouses my curiosity, I must admit. So peaceful in these parts, so free from crime. And yet, a detective-inspector calls! What can I do for you, Detective-Inspector?”

Lejeune was very quiet, very suave.

“There is a matter on which we think you might be able to assist us, Mr. Venables.”

“That has a rather familiar ring, does it not? In what way do you think I can assist you?”

“On October seventh—a parish priest of the name of Father Gorman was murdered in West Street, Paddington. I have been given to understand that you were in the neighbourhood at that time—between 7:45 and 8:15 in the evening, and you may have seen something that may have a bearing on the matter?”

“Was I really in the neighbourhood at that time? Do you know, I doubt it, I very much doubt it. As far as I can recall I have never been in that particular district of London. Speaking from memory, I do not even think I was in London at all just then. I go to London occasionally for an interesting day in the saleroom, and now and then for a medical checkup.”

“With Sir William Dugdale of Harley Street, I believe.”

Mr. Venables stared at him coldly.

“You are very well informed, Inspector.”

“Not quite so well as I should like to be. However, I’m disappointed that you can’t assist me in the way that I hoped. I think I owe it to you to explain the facts connected with the death of Father Gorman.”

“Certainly, if you like. It is a name I have never heard until now.”

“Father Gorman had been called out on that particular foggy evening to the deathbed of a woman nearby. She had become entangled with a criminal organisation, at first almost unwittingly, but later certain things made her

suspect the seriousness of the matter. It was an organisation which specialised in the removal of unwanted persons—for a substantial fee, naturally.”

“Hardly a new idea,” murmured Venables. “In America—”

“Ah, but there were some novel features about this particular organisation. To begin with, the removals were ostensibly brought about by what might perhaps be called psychological means. What is referred to as a ‘death wish,’ said to be present in everyone, is stimulated—”

“So that the person in question obligingly commits suicide? It sounds, if I may say so, Inspector, too good to be true.”

“Not suicide, Mr. Venables. The person in question dies a perfectly natural death.”

“Come now. Come now. Do you really believe that? How very unlike our hardheaded police force!”

“The headquarters of this organisation are said to be a place called the Pale Horse.”

“Ah, now I begin to understand. So that is what brings you to our pleasant rural neighbourhood; my friend Thyrza Grey, and her nonsense! Whether she believes it herself or not, I’ve never been able to make out. But nonsense it is! She has a silly mediumistic friend, and the local witch cooks her dinners (quite brave to eat them—hemlock in the soup any moment!). And the three old dears have worked up quite a local reputation. Very naughty, of course, but don’t tell me Scotland Yard, or wherever you come from, take it all seriously?”

“We take it very seriously indeed, Mr. Venables.”

“You really believe that Thyrza spouts some highfalutin’ nonsense, Sybil throws a trance, and Bella does black magic, and as a result somebody dies?”

“Oh no, Mr. Venables—the cause of death is simpler than that—” He paused a moment.

“The cause is thallium poisoning.”

There was a momentary pause—

“What did you say?”

“Poisoning—by thallium salts. Quite plain and straightforward. Only it had to be covered up—and what better method of covering up than a pseudoscientific, psychological setup—full of modern jargon and reinforced by old superstitions. Calculated to distract attention from the plain fact of administration of poison.”

“Thallium,” Mr. Venables frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.”

“No? Used extensively as rat poison, occasionally as a depilatory for children with ringworm. Can be obtained quite easily. Incidentally there’s a packet of it tucked away in a corner of your potting shed.”

“In my potting shed? It sounds most unlikely.”

“It’s there all right. We’ve examined some of it for testing purposes—”

Venables became slightly excited.

“Someone must have put it there. I know nothing about it! Nothing at all.”

“Is that so? You’re a man of some wealth, aren’t you, Mr. Venables?”

“What has that got to do with what we are talking about?”

“The Inland Revenue have been asking some awkward questions lately, I believe? As to source of income, that is.”

“The curse of living in England is undoubtedly our system of taxation. I have thought very seriously of late of going to live in Bermuda.”

“I don’t think you’ll be going to Bermuda just yet awhile, Mr. Venables.”

“Is that a threat, Inspector? Because if so—”

“No, no, Mr. Venables. Just an expression of opinion. Would you like to hear just how this little racket was worked?”

“You are certainly determined to tell me.”

“It’s very well organised. Financial details are arranged by a debarred solicitor called Mr. Bradley. Mr. Bradley has an office in Birmingham. Prospective clients visit him there, and do business. This is to say, there is a bet on whether someone will die within a stated period... Mr. Bradley, who is fond of a wager, is usually pessimistic in his prognostications. The client is usually more hopeful. When Mr. Bradley wins his bet, the money has to be paid over promptly—or else something unpleasant is liable to happen. That is all Mr. Bradley has to do—make a bet. Simple, isn’t it?

“The client next visits the Pale Horse. A show is put on by Miss Thyrza Grey and her friends, which usually impresses him in the way it is meant to do.

“Now for the simple facts behind the scenes.

“Certain women, bonafide employees of one of the many consumer research concerns, are detailed to canvass a particular neighbourhood with a questionnaire. ‘What bread do you prefer? What toilet articles and cosmetics? What laxative, tonics, sedatives, indigestion mixtures, etc.?’ People nowadays are conditioned to answering quizzes. They seldom object.

“And so to—the last step. Simple, bold, successful! The only action performed by the originator of the scheme in person. He may be wearing a mansion flat porter’s uniform, he may be a man calling to read the gas or the electric meter. He may be a plumber, or an electrician, or a workman of some kind. Whatever he is, he will have what appear to be the proper credentials with him if anyone asks to see them. Most people don’t. Whatever role he is playing, his real object is simple—the substitution of a

preparation he brings with him for a similar article which he knows (by reason of the C.R.C. questionnaires) that his victim uses. He may tap pipes, or examine meters, or test water pressure—but that is his real object. Having accomplished it, he leaves, and is not seen in that neighbourhood again.

“And for a few days perhaps nothing happens. But sooner or later, the victim displays symptoms of illness. A doctor is called in, but has no reason to suspect anything out of the ordinary. He may question what food and drink, etc., the patient has taken, but he is unlikely to suspect the ordinary proprietary article that the patient has taken for years.

“And you see the beauty of the scheme, Mr. Venables? The only person who knows what the head of the organisation actually does—is the head of the organisation himself. There is no one to give him away.”

“So how do you know so much?” demanded Mr. Venables pleasantly.

“When we have suspicions of a certain person, there are ways of making sure.”

“Indeed? Such as?”

“We needn’t go into all of them. But there’s the camera, for instance. All kinds of ingenious devices are possible nowadays. A man can be snapped without his suspecting the fact. We’ve got some excellent pictures, for instance, of a uniformed flat porter, and a gas man and so on. There are such things as false moustaches, different dentures, etc., but our man has been recognised, quite easily—first by Mrs. Mark Easterbrook, alias Miss Katherine Corrigan, and also by a woman called Edith Binns. Recognition is an interesting thing, Mr. Venables. For instance, this gentleman here, Mr. Osborne, is willing to swear he saw you following Father Gorman in Barton Street on the night of the seventh of October about eight o’clock.”

“And I did see you!” Mr. Osborne leaned forward, twitching with excitement. “I described you exactly!”

“Rather too exactly, perhaps,” said Lejeune. “Because you didn’t see Mr. Venables that night when you were standing outside the doorway of your shop. You weren’t standing there at all. You were across the street yourself—following Father Gorman until he turned into West Street, and you came up with him and killed him....”

Mr. Zachariah Osborne said:

“What?”

It might have been ludicrous. It was ludicrous! The dropped jaw, the staring eyes...

“Let me introduce you, Mr. Venables, to Mr. Zachariah Osborne, pharmacist, late of Barton Street, Paddington. You’ll feel a personal interest in him when I tell you that Mr. Osborne, who has been under observation for some time, was unwise enough to plant a packet of thallium salts in your potting shed. Not knowing of your disability, he’d amused himself by casting you as the villain of the piece; and being a very obstinate, as well as a very stupid man, he refused to admit he’d made a bloomer.”

“Stupid? You dare to call me stupid? If you knew—if you’d any idea what I’ve done—what I can do—I—”

Osborne shook and spluttered with rage.

Lejeune summed him up carefully. I was reminded of a man playing a fish.

“You shouldn’t have tried to be so clever, you know,” he said reprovingly.

“Why, if you’d just sat back in that shop of yours, and let well alone, I shouldn’t be here now, warning you, as it’s my duty to do, that anything you say will be taken down and—”

It was then that Mr. Osborne began to scream.

Twenty-four

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

"Look here, Lejeune, there are lots of things I want to know."

The formalities over, I had got Lejeune to myself. We were sitting together with two large tankards of beer opposite us.

"Yes, Mr. Easterbrook? I gather it was a surprise to you."

"It certainly was. My mind was set on Venables. You never gave me the least hint."

"I couldn't afford to give hints, Mr. Easterbrook. You have to play these things close to your chest. They're tricky. The truth is we hadn't a lot to go on. That's why we had to stage the show in the way we did with Venables's cooperation. We had to lead Osborne right up the garden path and then turn on him suddenly and hope to break him down. And it worked."

"Is he mad?" I asked.

"I'd say he's gone over the edge now. He wasn't to begin with, of course, but it does something to you, you know. Killing people. It makes you feel powerful and larger than life. It makes you feel you're God Almighty. But you're not. You're only a nasty bit of goods that's been found out. And when that fact's presented to you suddenly your ego just can't stand it. You scream and you rant and you boast of what you've done and how clever you are. Well, you saw him."

I nodded. "So Venables was in on the performance you put up," I said. "Did he like the idea of cooperating?"

"It amused him, I think," said Lejeune. "Besides, he was impertinent enough to say that one good turn deserves another."

"And what did he mean by that cryptic remark?"

“Well, I shouldn’t be telling you this,” said Lejeune, “this is off the record. There was a big outbreak of bank robberies about eight years ago. The same technique every time. And they got away with it! The raids were cleverly planned by someone who took no part in the actual operation. That man got away with a lot of money. We may have had our suspicions who it was, but we couldn’t prove it. He was too clever for us. Especially on the financial angle. And he’s had the sense never to try and repeat his success. I’m not saying more. He was a clever crook but he wasn’t a murderer. No lives were lost.”

My mind went back to Zachariah Osborne. “Did you always suspect Osborne?” I asked. “Right from the beginning?”

“Well, he would draw attention to himself,” said Lejeune. “As I told him, if he’d only sat back and done nothing, we’d never have dreamed that the respectable pharmacist, Mr. Zachariah Osborne, had anything to do with the business. But it’s a funny thing, that’s just what murderers can’t do. There they are, sitting pretty, safe as houses. But they can’t let well alone. I’m sure I don’t know why.”

“The desire for death,” I suggested. “A variant of Thyrsa Grey’s theme.”

“The sooner you forget all about Miss Thyrsa Grey and the things she told you, the better,” said Lejeune severely. “No,” he said thoughtfully, “I think really it’s loneliness. The knowledge that you’re such a clever chap, but that there’s nobody you can talk to about it.”

“You haven’t told me when you started to suspect him,” I said.

“Well, straightaway he started telling lies. We asked for anyone who’d seen Father Gorman that night to communicate with us. Mr. Osborne communicated and the statement he made was a palpable lie. He’d seen a man following Father Gorman and he described the features of that man, but he couldn’t possibly have seen him across the street on a foggy night. An aquiline nose in profile he might have seen, but not an Adam’s apple. That was going too far. Of course, that lie might have been innocent enough. Mr. Osborne might just want to make himself important. Lots of people are like that. But it made me focus my attention on Mr. Osborne and

he was really rather a curious person. At once he started to tell me a lot about himself. Very unwise of him. He gave me a picture of someone who had always wanted to be more important than he was. He'd not been content to go into his father's old-fashioned business. He'd gone off and tried his fortunes on the stage, but he obviously hadn't been a success. Probably, I should say, because he couldn't take production. Nobody was going to dictate to him the way he should play a part! He was probably genuine enough when he told of his ambition to be a witness in a murder trial, successfully identifying a man who had come in to buy poison. His mind ran on those lines a good deal, I should think. Of course we don't know at what point, and when, the idea occurred to him that he might become a really big criminal, a man so clever that he could never be brought to justice.

“But that's all surmise. To go back. Osborne's description of the man he had seen that night was interesting. It was so obviously a description of a real person whom he had at one time seen. It's extraordinarily difficult, you know, to make up a description of anybody. Eyes, nose, chin, ears, bearing, all the rest of it. If you try it you'll find yourself unconsciously describing somebody that you've noticed somewhere—in a tram or a train or an omnibus. Osborne was obviously describing a man with somewhat unusual characteristics. I'd say that he noticed Venables sitting in his car one day in Bournemouth and was struck by his appearance—if he'd seen him that way, he wouldn't realise the man was a cripple.

“Another reason that kept me interested in Osborne was that he was a pharmacist. I thought it just possible that that list we had might tie-up with the narcotic trade somewhere. Actually that wasn't so, and I might, therefore, have forgotten all about Mr. Osborne if Mr. Osborne himself hadn't been determined to keep in the picture. He wanted, you see, to know just what we were doing, and so he writes to say that he's seen the man in question at a church fête in Much Deeping. He still didn't know that Mr. Venables was a paralysis case. When he did find that out he hadn't the sense to shut up. That was his vanity. Typical criminal's vanity. He wasn't going to admit for one moment that he'd been wrong. Like a fool, he stuck to his guns and put forward all sorts of preposterous theories. I had a very interesting visit to him at his bungalow in Bournemouth. The name of it

ought to have given the show away. Everest. That's what he called it. And he'd hung up a picture of Mount Everest in the hall. Told me how interested he was in Himalayan exploration. But that was the kind of cheap joke that he enjoyed. Ever rest. That was his trade—his profession. He did give people eternal rest on payment of a suitable fee. It was a wonderful idea, one's got to hand him that. The whole setup was clever. Bradley in Birmingham, Thyrza Grey holding her séances in Much Deeping. And who was to suspect Mr. Osborne who had no connection with Thyrza Grey, no connection with Bradley and Birmingham, no connection with the victim. The actual mechanics of the thing was child's play to a pharmacist. As I say, if only Mr. Osborne had had the sense to keep quiet."

"But what did he do with the money?" I asked. "After all, he did it for money presumably?"

"Oh, yes, he did it for the money. Had grand visions, no doubt, of himself travelling, entertaining, being a rich and important person. But of course he wasn't the person he imagined himself to be. I think his sense of power was exhilarated by the actual performance of murder. To get away with murder again and again intoxicated him, and what's more, he'll enjoy himself in the dock. You see if he doesn't. The central figure with all eyes upon him."

"But what did he do with the money?" I demanded.

"Oh, that's very simple," said Lejeune, "though I don't know that I should have thought of it unless I'd noticed the way he'd furnished the bungalow. He was a miser, of course. He loved money and he wanted money, but not for spending. That bungalow was sparsely furnished and all with stuff that he'd bought cheap at sales. He didn't like spending money, he just wanted to have it."

"Do you mean he banked it all?"

"Oh no," said Lejeune. "I'd say we'll find it somewhere under the floor in that bungalow of his."

Both Lejeune and I were silent for some minutes while I contemplated the strange creature that was Zachariah Osborne.

“Corrigan,” said Lejeune dreamily, “would say it was all due to some gland in his spleen or his sweetbread or something either overfunctioning or underproducing—I never can remember which. I’m a simple man—I think he’s just a wrong ’un—What beats me—it always does—is how a man can be so clever and yet be such a perfect fool.”

“One imagines a mastermind,” I said, “as some grand and sinister figure of evil.”

Lejeune shook his head. “It’s not like that at all,” he said. “Evil is not something superhuman, it’s something less than human. Your criminal is someone who wants to be important, but who never will be important, because he’ll always be less than a man.”

Twenty-five

Mark Easterbrook's Narrative

I

At Much Deeping everything was refreshingly normal.

Rhoda was busy doctoring dogs. This time, I think, it was deworming. She looked up as I came in and asked me if I would like to assist. I refused and asked where Ginger was.

“She’s gone over to the Pale Horse.”

“What?”

“She said she had something to do there.”

“But the house is empty.”

“I know.”

“She’ll overtire herself. She’s not fit yet—”

“How you fuss, Mark. Ginger’s all right. Have you seen Mrs. Oliver’s new book? It’s called The White Cockatoo. It’s over on the table there.”

“God bless Mrs. Oliver. And Edith Binns, too.”

“Who on earth is Edith Binns?”

“A woman who has identified a photograph. Also faithful retainer to my late godmother.”

“Nothing you say seems to make sense. What’s the matter with you?”

I did not reply, but set out for the Pale Horse.

Just before I got there, I met Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

She greeted me enthusiastically.

“All along I knew I was being stupid,” she said. “But I didn’t see how. Taken in by trappings.”

She waved an arm towards the inn, empty and peaceful in the late autumn sunshine.

“The wickedness was never there—not in the sense it was supposed to be. No fantastic trafficking with the Devil, no black and evil splendour. Just parlour tricks done for money—and human life of no account. That’s real wickedness. Nothing grand or big—just petty and contemptible.”

“You and Inspector Lejeune would seem to agree about things.”

“I like that man,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. “Let’s go into the Pale Horse and find Ginger.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“Cleaning up something.”

We went in through the low doorway. There was a strong smell of turpentine. Ginger was busy with rags and bottles. She looked up as we entered. She was still very pale and thin, a scarf wound round her head where the hair had not yet grown, a ghost of her former self.

“She’s all right,” said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, reading my thoughts as usual.

“Look!” said Ginger triumphantly.

She indicated the old inn sign on which she was working.

The grime of years removed, the figure of the rider on the horse was plainly discernible; a grinning skeleton with gleaming bones.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop’s voice, deep and sonorous, spoke behind me:

“Revelation, Chapter Six, Verse Eight. And I looked and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him....”

We were silent for a moment or two, and then Mrs. Dane Calthrop, who was not one to be afraid of anticlimax, said,

“So that’s that,” in the tone of one who puts something in the wastepaper basket.

“I must go now,” she added. “Mothers’ Meeting.”

She paused in the doorway, nodded at Ginger, and said unexpectedly:

“You’ll make a good mother.”

For some reason Ginger blushed crimson....

“Ginger,” I said, “will you?”

“Will I what? Make a good mother?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Perhaps... But I’d prefer a firm offer.”

I made her a firm offer....

II

After an interlude, Ginger demanded:

“Are you quite sure you don’t want to marry that Hermia creature?”

“Good lord!” I said. “I quite forgot.”

I took a letter from my pocket.

“This came three days ago, asking me if I’d come to the Old Vic with her to see Love’s Labour’s Lost.”

Ginger took the letter out of my hand and tore it up.

“If you want to go to the Old Vic in future,” she said firmly, “you’ll go with me.”

Endless Night (1967)

By Agatha Christie

BOOK ONE

One

In my end is my beginning... That's a quotation I've often heard people say. It sounds all right—but what does it really mean?

Is there ever any particular spot where one can put one's finger and say: "It all began that day, at such a time and such a place, with such an incident?"

Did my story begin, perhaps, when I noticed the Sale Bill hanging on the wall of the George and Dragon, announcing Sale by Auction of that valuable property "The Towers," and giving particulars of the acreage, the miles and furlongs, and the highly idealized portrait of "The Towers" as it might have been perhaps in its prime, anything from eighty to a hundred years ago?

I was doing nothing particular, just strolling along the main street of Kingston Bishop, a place of no importance whatever, killing time. I noticed the Sale Bill. Why? Fate up to its dirty work? Or dealing out its golden handshake of good fortune? You can look at it either way.

Or you could say, perhaps, that it all had its beginnings when I met Santonix, during the talks I had with him; I can close my eyes and see: his flushed cheeks, the over-brilliant eyes, and the movement of the strong yet delicate hand that sketched and drew plans and elevations of houses. One house in particular, a beautiful house, a house that would be wonderful to own!

My longing for a house, a fine and beautiful house, such a house as I could never hope to have, flowered into life then. It was a happy fantasy shared between us, the house that Santonix would build for me—if he lasted long enough....

A house that in my dreams I would live in with the girl that I loved, a house in which just like a child's silly fairy story we should live together "happy ever afterwards." All pure fantasy, all nonsense, but it started that tide of longing in me. Longing for something I was never likely to have.

Or if this is a love story—and it is a love story, I swear—then why not begin where I first caught sight of Ellie standing in the dark fir trees of Gipsy’s Acre?

Gipsy’s Acre. Yes, perhaps I’d better begin there, at the moment when I turned away from the Sale board with a little shiver because a black cloud had come over the sun, and asked a question carelessly enough of one of the locals, who was clipping a hedge in a desultory fashion nearby.

“What’s this house, The Towers, like?”

I can still see the queer face of the old man, as he looked at me sideways and said:

“That’s not what us calls it here. What sort of a name is that?” He snorted disapproval. “It’s many a year now since folks lived in it and called it The Towers.” He snorted again.

I asked him then what he called it, and again his eyes shifted away from me in his old wrinkled face in that queer way country folk have of not speaking to you direct, looking over your shoulder or round the corner, as it were, as though they saw something you didn’t; and he said:

“It’s called hereabouts Gipsy’s Acre.”

“Why is it called that?” I asked.

“Some sort of a tale. I dunno rightly. One says one thing, one says another.” And then he went on, “Anyway, it’s where the accidents take place.”

“Car accidents?”

“All kinds of accidents. Car accidents mainly nowadays. It’s a nasty corner there, you see.”

“Well,” I said, “if it’s a nasty curve, I can well see there might be accidents.”

“Rural Council put up a Danger sign, but it don’t do no good, that don’t. There are accidents just the same.”

“Why Gipsy?” I asked him.

Again his eyes slipped past me and his answer was vague.

“Some tale or other. It was gipsies’ land once, they say, and they were turned off, and they put a curse on it.”

I laughed.

“Aye,” he said, “you can laugh but there’s places as is cursed. You smart-Alecks in town don’t know about them. But there’s places as is cursed all right, and there’s a curse on this place. People got killed here in the quarry when they got the stone out to build. Old Geordie he fell over the edge there one night and broke his neck.”

“Drunk?” I suggested.

“He may have been. He liked his drop, he did. But there’s many drunks as fall—nasty falls—but it don’t do them no lasting harm. But Geordie, he got his neck broke. In there,” he pointed up behind him to the pine-covered hill, “in Gipsy’s Acre.”

Yes, I suppose that’s how it began. Not that I paid much attention to it at the time. I just happened to remember it. That’s all. I think—that is, when I think properly—that I built it up a bit in my mind. I don’t know if it was before or later that I asked if there were still gipsies about there. He said there weren’t many anywhere nowadays. The police were always moving them on, he said. I asked:

“Why doesn’t anybody like gipsies?”

“They’re a thieving lot,” he said, disapprovingly. Then he peered more closely at me. “Happen you’ve got gipsy blood yourself?” he suggested, looking hard at me.

I said not that I knew of. It's true, I do look a bit like a gipsy. Perhaps that's what fascinated me about the name of Gipsy's Acre. I thought to myself as I was standing there, smiling back at him, amused by our conversation, that perhaps I had a bit of gipsy blood.

Gipsy's Acre. I went up the winding road that led out of the village and wound up through the dark trees and came at last to the top of the hill so that I could see out to sea and the ships. It was a marvellous view and I thought, just as one does think things: I wonder how it would be if Gipsy's Acre was my acre...Just like that...It was only a ridiculous thought. When I passed my hedge clipper again, he said:

"If you want gipsies, there's old Mrs. Lee of course. The Major, he gives her a cottage to live in."

"Who's the Major?" I asked.

He said, in a shocked voice, "Major Phillpot, of course." He seemed quite upset that I should ask! I gathered that Major Phillpot was God locally. Mrs. Lee was some kind of dependent of his, I suppose, whom he provided for. The Phillpots seemed to have lived there all their lives and more or less to have run the place.

As I wished my old boy good day and turned away he said:

"She's got the last cottage at the end of the street. You'll see her outside, maybe. Doesn't like the inside of houses. Them as has got gipsy blood don't."

So there I was, wandering down the road, whistling and thinking about Gipsy's Acre. I'd almost forgotten what I'd been told when I saw a tall black-haired old woman staring at me over a garden hedge. I knew at once it must be Mrs. Lee. I stopped and spoke to her.

"I hear you can tell me about Gipsy's Acre up there," I said.

She stared at me through a tangled fringe of black hair and she said:

“Don’t have nought to do with it, young man. You listen to me. Forget about it. You’re a good-looking lad. Nothing good comes out of Gipsy’s Acre and never will.”

“I see it’s up for sale,” I said.

“Aye, that’s so, and more fool he who buys it.”

“Who’s likely to buy it?”

“There’s a builder after it. More than one. It’ll go cheap. You’ll see.”

“Why should it go cheap?” I asked curiously. “It’s a fine site.”

She wouldn’t answer that.

“Supposing a builder buys it cheap, what will he do with it?”

She chuckled to herself. It was malicious, unpleasant laughter.

“Pull down the old ruined house and build, of course. Twenty—thirty houses, maybe—and all with a curse on them.”

I ignored the last part of the sentence. I said, speaking before I could stop myself:

“That would be a shame. A great shame.”

“Ah, you needn’t worry. They’ll get no joy of it, not those who buys and not those who lays the bricks and mortar. There’ll be a foot that slips on the ladder, and there’ll be the lorry that crashes with a load, and the slate that falls from the roof of a house and finds its mark. And the trees too.

Crashing, maybe, in a sudden gale. Ah, you’ll see! There’s none that’ll get any good out of Gipsy’s Acre. They’d do best to leave it alone. You’ll see. You’ll see.” She nodded vigorously and then she repeated softly to herself, “There’s no luck for them as meddles with Gipsy’s Acre. There never has been.”

I laughed. She spoke sharply.

“Don’t laugh, young man. It comes to me as maybe one of these days you’ll laugh on the wrong side of your mouth. There’s never been no luck there, not in the house nor yet in the land.”

“What happened in the house?” I asked. “Why has it been empty so long? Why was it left to fall down?”

“The last people that lived there died, all of them.”

“How did they die?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Best not to speak of it again. But no one cared to come and live in it afterwards. It was left to moulder and decay. It’s forgot by now and best that it should be.”

“But you could tell me the story,” I said, wheedlingly. “You know all about it.”

“I don’t gossip about Gipsy’s Acre.” Then she let her voice drop to a kind of phoney beggar’s whine. “I’ll tell your fortune now, my pretty lad, if you like. Cross my palm with silver and I’ll tell your fortune. You’re one of those that’ll go far one of these days.”

“I don’t believe nonsense about fortune-telling,” I said, “and I haven’t any silver. Not to spare, anyway.”

She came nearer to me and went on in a wheedling voice. “Sixpence now. Sixpence now. I’ll do it for sixpence. What’s that? Nothing at all. I’ll do it for sixpence because you’re a handsome lad with a ready tongue and a way with you. It could be that you’ll go far.”

I fished a sixpence out of my pocket, not because I believed in any of her foolish superstitions but because for some reason I liked the old fraud even if I did see through her. She grabbed the coin from me, and said:

“Give me your hand then. Both hands.”

She took my hands in her withered claw and stared down at the open palms. She was silent for a minute or two, staring. Then she dropped my hands

abruptly, almost pushing them away from her. She retreated a step and spoke harshly.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get out of Gipsy’s Acre here and now and you won’t come back! That’s the best advice I can give you. Don’t come back.”

“Why not? Why shouldn’t I come back?”

“Because if you do you’ll come back to sorrow and loss and danger maybe. There’s trouble, black trouble waiting for you. Forget you ever saw this place. I’m warning you.”

“Well of all the—”

But she had turned away and was retreating to the cottage. She went in and slammed the door. I’m not superstitious. I believe in luck, of course, who doesn’t? But not a lot of superstitious nonsense about ruined houses with curses on them. And yet I had an uneasy feeling that the sinister old creature had seen something in my hands. I looked down at my two palms spread out in front of me. What could anyone see in the palms of anyone’s hands? Fortune-telling was arrant nonsense—just a trick to get money out of you—money out of your silly credulity. I looked up at the sky. The sun had gone in, the day seemed different now. A sort of shadow, a kind of menace. Just an approaching storm, I thought. The wind was beginning to blow, the backs of the leaves were showing on the trees. I whistled to keep my spirits up and walked along the road through the village.

I looked again at the pasted-up bill advertising the auction of The Towers. I even made a note of the date. I had never attended a property sale in my life but I thought to myself that I’d come and attend this one. It would be interesting to see who bought The Towers. That is to say interesting to see who became the owner of Gipsy’s Acre. Yes, I think that’s really where it all began...A fantastic notion occurred to me. I’d come and pretend to myself that I was the man who was going to bid for Gipsy’s Acre! I’d bid against the local builders! They’d drop out, disappointed in their hopes of buying it cheap. I’d buy it and I’d go to Rudolf Santonix and say, “Build me

a house. I've bought the site for you." And I'd find a girl, a wonderful girl, and we'd live in it together happy ever after.

I often had dreams of that kind. Naturally they never came to anything but they were fun. That's what I thought then. Fun! Fun, my God! If I'd only known!

Two

It was pure chance that had brought me to the neighbourhood of Gipsy's Acre that day. I was driving a hired car, taking some people down from London to attend a sale, a sale not of a house but its contents. It was a big house just at the outskirts of the town, a particularly ugly one. I drove an elderly couple there who were interested, from what I could overhear of their conversation, in a collection of papier mâché, whatever papier mâché was. The only time I ever heard it mentioned before was by my mother in connection with washing-up bowls. She'd said that a papier mâché washing-up bowl was far better than a plastic one any day! It seemed an odd thing for rich people to want to come down and buy a collection of the stuff.

However I stored the fact away in my mind and I thought I would look in a dictionary or read up somewhere what papier mâché really was. Something that people thought worthwhile to hire a car for, and go down to a country sale and bid for. I liked to know about things. I was twenty-two years of age at that time and I had picked up a fair amount of knowledge one way and another. I knew a good deal about cars, was a fair mechanic and a careful driver. Once I'd worked with horses in Ireland. I nearly got entangled with a dope gang but I got wise and quit in time. A job as a chauffeur to a classy car hire firm isn't bad at all. Good money to be made with tips. And not usually too strenuous. But the work itself was boring.

Once I'd gone fruit picking in summer time. That didn't pay much, but I enjoyed myself. I'd tried a lot of things. I'd been a waiter in a third-class hotel, life guard on a summer beach, I'd sold encyclopaedias and vacuum cleaners and a few other things. I'd once done horticultural work in a botanical garden and had learnt a little about flowers.

I never stuck to anything. Why should I? I'd found nearly everything I did interesting. Some things were harder work than others but I didn't really mind that. I'm not really lazy. I suppose what I really am is restless. I want to go everywhere, see everything, do everything. I want to find something. Yes, that's it. I want to find something.

From the time I left school I wanted to find something, but I didn't yet know what that something was going to be. It was just something I was looking for in a vague, unsatisfied sort of way. It was somewhere. Sooner or later I'd know all about it. It might perhaps be a girl...I like girls, but no girl I'd met so far had been important...You liked them all right but then you went to the next one quite gladly. They were like the jobs I took. All right for a bit and then you got fed up with them and you wanted to move on to the next one. I'd gone from one thing to another ever since I'd left school.

A lot of people disapproved of my way of life. I suppose they were what you might call my well-wishers. That was because they didn't understand the first thing about me. They wanted me to go steady with a nice girl, save money, get married to her and then settle down to a nice steady job. Day after day, year after year, world without end, amen. Not for yours truly! There must be something better than that. Not just all this tame security, the good old welfare state limping along in its half-baked way! Surely, I thought, in a world where man has been able to put satellites in the sky and where men talk big about visiting the stars, there must be something that rouses you, that makes your heart beat, that's worthwhile searching all over the world to find! One day, I remember, I was walking down Bond Street. It was during my waiter period and I was due on duty. I'd been strolling looking at some shoes in a shop window. Very natty they were. Like they say in the advertisements in newspapers: "What smart men are wearing today" and there's usually a picture of the smart man in question. My word, he usually looks a twerp! Used to make me laugh, advertisements like that did.

I passed on from the shoes to the next window. It was a picture shop. Just three pictures in the window artily arranged with a drape of limp velvet in some neutral colour arranged over a corner of a gilt frame. Cissy, if you know what I mean. I'm not much of a one for Art. I dropped in to the National Gallery once out of curiosity. Fair gave me the pip, it did. Great big shiny coloured pictures of battles in rocky glens, or emaciated saints getting themselves stuck with arrows. Portraits of simpering great ladies sitting smirking in silks and velvets and lace. I decided then and there that Art wasn't for me. But the picture I was looking at now was somehow

different. There were three pictures in the window. One a landscape, nice bit of country for what I call everyday. One of a woman drawn in such a funny way, so much out of proportion, that you could hardly see she was a woman. I suppose that's what you call art nouveau. I don't know what it was about. The third picture was my picture. There wasn't really much to it, if you know what I mean. It was—how can I describe it? It was kind of simple. A lot of space in it and a few great widening circles all round each other if you can put it that way. All in different colours, odd colours that you wouldn't expect. And here and there, there were sketchy bits of colour that didn't seem to mean anything. Only somehow they did mean something! I'm no good at description. All I can say is that one wanted terribly to go on looking at it.

I just stood there, feeling queer as though something very unusual had happened to me. Those fancy shoes now, I'd have liked them to wear. I mean I take quite a bit of trouble with my clothes. I like to dress well so as to make an impression, but I never seriously thought in my life of buying a pair of shoes in Bond Street. I know the kind of fancy prices they ask there. Fifteen pounds a pair those shoes might be. Handmade or something, they call it, making it more worthwhile for some reason. Sheer waste of money that would be. A classy line in shoes, yes, but you can pay too much for class. I've got my head screwed on the right way.

But this picture, what would that cost? I wondered. Suppose I were to buy that picture? You're crazy, I said to myself. You don't go for pictures, not in a general way. That was true enough. But I wanted this picture...I'd like it to be mine. I'd like to be able to hang it and sit and look at it as long as I liked and know that I owned it! Me! Buying pictures. It seemed a crazy idea. I took a look at the picture again. Me wanting that picture didn't make sense, and anyway, I probably couldn't afford it. Actually I was in funds at just that moment. A lucky tip on a horse. This picture would probably cost a packet. Twenty pounds? Twenty-five? Anyway, there would be no harm in asking. They couldn't eat me, could they? I went in, feeling rather aggressive and on the defensive.

The inside of the place was all very hushed and grand. There was a sort of muted atmosphere with neutral-colour walls and a velvet settee on which

you could sit and look at the pictures. A man who looked a little like the model for the perfectly dressed man in advertisements came and attended to me, speaking in a rather hushed voice to match the scenery. Funnily, he didn't look superior as they usually do in high-grade Bond Street shops. He listened to what I said and then he took the picture out of the window and displayed it for me against a wall, holding it there for me to look at as long as I wanted. It came to me then—in the way you sometimes know just exactly how things are, that the same rules didn't apply over pictures as they do about other things. Somebody might come into a place like this dressed in shabby old clothes and a frayed shirt and turn out to be a millionaire who wanted to add to his collection. Or he could come in looking cheap and flashy, rather like me perhaps, but somehow or other he'd got such a yen for a picture that he managed to get the money together by some kind of sharp practice.

“A very fine example of the artist's work,” said the man who was holding the picture.

“How much?” I said briskly.

The answer took my breath away.

“Twenty-five thousand,” he said in his gentle voice.

I'm quite good at keeping a poker face. I didn't show anything. At least I don't think I did. He added some name that sounded foreign. The artist's name, I suppose, and that it had just come on the market from a house in the country, where the people who lived there had had no idea what it was. I kept my end up and sighed.

“It's a lot of money but it's worth it, I suppose,” I said.

Twenty-five thousand pounds. What a laugh!

“Yes,” he said and sighed. “Yes indeed.” He lowered the picture very gently and carried it back to the window. He looked at me and smiled. “You have good taste,” he said.

I felt that in some way he and I understood each other. I thanked him and went out into Bond Street.

Three

I don't know much about writing things down—not, I mean, in the way a proper writer would do. The bit about that picture I saw, for instance. It doesn't really have anything to do with anything. I mean, nothing came of it, it didn't lead to anything and yet I feel somehow that it is important, that it has a place somewhere. It was one of the things that happened to me that meant something. Just like Gipsy's Acre meant something to me. Like Santonix meant something to me.

I haven't really said much about him. He was an architect. Of course you'll have gathered that. Architects are another thing I'd never had much to do with, though I knew a few things about the building trade. I came across Santonix in the course of my wanderings. It was when I was working as a chauffeur, driving the rich around places. Once or twice I drove abroad, twice to Germany—I knew a bit of German—and once or twice to France—I had a smattering of French too—and once to Portugal. They were usually elderly people, who had money and bad health in about equal quantities.

When you drive people like that around, you begin to think that money isn't so hot after all. What with incipient heart attacks, lots of bottles of little pills you have to take all the time, and losing your temper over the food or the service in hotels. Most of the rich people I've known have been fairly miserable. They've got their worries, too. Taxation and investments. You hear them talking together or to friends. Worry! That's what's killing half of them. And their sex life's not so hot either. They've either got long-legged blonde sexy wives who are playing them up with boyfriends somewhere, or they're married to the complaining kind of woman, hideous as hell, who keeps telling them where they get off. No. I'd rather be myself. Michael Rogers, seeing the world, and getting off with good-looking girls when he feels like it!

Everything a bit hand-to-mouth, of course, but I put up with that. Life was good fun, and I'd been content to go on with life being fun. But I suppose I

would have in any case. That attitude goes with youth. When youth begins to pass fun isn't fun any longer.

Behind it, I think, was always the other thing—wanting someone and something...However, to go on with what I was saying, there was one old boy I used to drive down to the Riviera. He'd got a house being built there. He went down to look how it was getting on. Santonix was the architect. I don't really know what nationality Santonix was. English I thought at first, though it was a funny sort of name I'd never heard before. But I don't think he was English. Scandinavian of some kind I guess. He was an ill man. I could see that at once. He was young and very fair and thin with an odd face, a face that was askew somehow. The two sides of it didn't match. He could be quite bad-tempered to his clients. You'd have thought as they were paying the money that they'd call the tune and do the bullying. That wasn't so. Santonix bullied them and he was always quite sure of himself although they weren't.

This particular old boy of mine was frothing with rage, I remember, as soon as he arrived and had seen how things were going. I used to catch snatches here and there when I was standing by ready to assist in my chauffeurly and handyman way. It was always on the cards that Mr. Constantine would have a heart attack or a stroke.

"You have not done as I said," he half screamed. "You have spent too much money. Much too much money. It is not as we agreed. It is going to cost me more than I thought."

"You're absolutely right," said Santonix. "But the money's got to be spent."

"It shall not be spent! It shall not be spent. You have got to keep within the limits I laid down. You understand?"

"Then you won't get the kind of house you want," said Santonix. "I know what you want. The house I build you will be the house you want. I'm quite sure of that and you're quite sure of it, too. Don't give me any of your pettifogging middle-class economies. You want a house of quality and you're going to get it, and you'll boast about it to your friends and they'll

envy you. I don't build a house for anyone, I've told you that. There's more to it than money. This house isn't going to be like other people's houses!"

"It is going to be terrible. Terrible."

"Oh no it isn't. The trouble with you is that you don't know what you want. Or at least so anyone might think. But you do know what you want really, only you can't bring it out into your mind. You can't see it clearly. But I know. That's the one thing I always know. What people are after and what they want. There's a feeling in you for quality. I'm going to give you quality."

He used to say things like that. And I'd stand by and listen. Somehow or other I could see for myself that this house that was being built there amongst pine trees looking over the sea, wasn't going to be the usual house. Half of it didn't look out towards the sea in a conventional way. It looked inland, up to a certain curve of mountains, up to a glimpse of sky between hills. It was odd and unusual and very exciting.

Santonix used to talk to me sometimes when I was off duty. He said:

"I only build houses for people I want to build for."

"Rich people, you mean?"

"They have to be rich or they couldn't pay for the houses. But it's not the money I'm going to make out of it I care about. My clients have to be rich because I want to make the kind of houses that cost money. The house only isn't enough, you see. It has to have the setting. That's just as important. It's like a ruby or an emerald. A beautiful stone is only a beautiful stone. It doesn't lead you anywhere further. It doesn't mean anything, it has no form or significance until it has its setting. And the setting has to have a beautiful jewel to be worthy of it. I take the setting, you see, out of the landscape, where it exists only in its own right. It has no meaning until there is my house sitting proudly like a jewel within its grasp." He looked at me and laughed. "You don't understand?"

"I suppose not," I said slowly, "and yet—in a way—I think I do...."

“That may be.” He looked at me curiously.

We came down to the Riviera again later. By then the house was nearly finished. I won’t describe it because I couldn’t do it properly, but it was—well—something special—and it was beautiful. I could see that. It was a house you’d be proud of, proud to show to people, proud to look at yourself, proud to be in with the right person perhaps. And then suddenly one day Santonix said to me:

“I could build a house for you, you know. I’d know the kind of house you’d want.”

I shook my head.

“I shouldn’t know myself,” I said, honestly.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t. I’d know for you.” Then he added, “It’s a thousand pities you haven’t got the money.”

“And never shall have,” I said.

“You can’t say that,” said Santonix. “Born poor doesn’t mean you’ve got to stay poor. Money’s queer. It goes where it’s wanted.”

“I’m not sharp enough,” I said.

“You’re not ambitious enough. Ambition hasn’t woken up in you, but it’s there, you know.”

“Oh, well,” I said, “some day when I’ve woken up ambition and I’ve made money, then I’ll come to you and say ‘build me a house.’”

He sighed then. He said:

“I can’t wait...No, I can’t afford to wait. I’ve only a short time to go now. One house—two houses more. Not more than that. One doesn’t want to die young...Sometimes one has to...It doesn’t really matter, I suppose.”

“I’ll have to wake up my ambition quick.”

“No,” said Santonix. “You’re healthy, you’re having fun, don’t change your way of life.”

I said: “I couldn’t if I tried.”

I thought that was true then. I liked my way of life and I was having fun and there was never anything wrong with my health. I’ve driven a lot of people who’ve made money, who’ve worked hard and who’ve got ulcers and coronary thrombosis and many other things as a result of working hard. I didn’t want to work hard. I could do a job as well as another but that was all there was to it. And I hadn’t got ambition, or I didn’t think I had ambition. Santonix had had ambition, I suppose. I could see that designing houses and building them, the planning of the drawing and something else that I couldn’t quite get hold of, all that had taken it out of him. He hadn’t been a strong man to begin with. I had a fanciful idea sometimes that he was killing himself before his time by the work he had put out to drive his ambition. I didn’t want to work. It was as simple as that. I distrusted work, disliked it. I thought it was a very bad thing, that the human race had unfortunately invented for itself.

I thought about Santonix quite often. He intrigued me almost more than anyone I knew. One of the oddest things in life, I think, is the things one remembers. One chooses to remember, I suppose. Something in one must choose. Santonix and his house were one of the things and the picture in Bond Street and visiting that ruined house, The Towers, and hearing the story of Gipsy’s Acre, all those were the things that I’d chosen to remember! Sometimes girls that I met, and journeys to the foreign places in the course of driving clients about. The clients were all the same. Dull. They always stayed at the same kind of hotels and ate the same kind of unimaginative food.

I still had that queer feeling in me of waiting for something, waiting for something to be offered to me, or to happen to me, I don’t quite know which way describes it best. I suppose really I was looking for a girl, the right sort of girl—by which I don’t mean a nice, suitable girl to settle down with, which is what my mother would have meant or my Uncle Joshua or some of my friends. I didn’t know at that time anything about love. All I knew about was sex. That was all anybody of my generation seemed to

know about. We talked about it too much, I think, and heard too much about it and took it too seriously. We didn't know—any of my friends or myself—what it was really going to be when it happened. Love I mean. We were young and virile and we looked the girls over we met and we appreciated their curves and their legs and the kind of eye they gave you, and you thought to yourself: “Will they or won't they? Should I be wasting my time?” And the more girls you made the more you boasted and the finer fellow you were thought to be, and the finer fellow you thought yourself.

I'd no real idea that that wasn't all there was to it. I suppose it happens to everyone sooner or later and it happens suddenly. You don't think as you imagine you're going to think: “This might be the girl for me...This is the girl who is going to be mine.” At least, I didn't feel it that way. I didn't know that when it happened it would happen quite suddenly. That I would say: “That's the girl I belong to. I'm hers. I belong to her, utterly, for always.” No. I never dreamed it would be like that. Didn't one of the old comedians say once—wasn't it one of his stock jokes? “I've been in love once and if I felt it coming on again I tell you I'd emigrate.” It was the same with me. If I had known, if I had only known what it could all come to mean I'd have emigrated too! If I'd been wise, that is.

Four

I hadn't forgotten my plan of going to the auction.

There was three weeks to go. I'd had two more trips to the Continent, one to France and the other to Germany. It was when I was in Hamburg that things came to a crisis. For one thing I took a violent dislike to the man and his wife I was driving. They represented everything I disliked most. They were rude, inconsiderate, unpleasant to look at, and I suppose they developed in me a feeling of being unable to stand this life of sycophancy any longer. I was careful, mind you. I thought I couldn't stand them another day but I didn't tell them so. No good running yourself in bad with the firm that employs you. So I telephoned up their hotel, said I was ill and I wired London saying the same thing. I said I might be in quarantine and it would be advisable if they sent out a driver to replace me. Nobody could blame me for that. They wouldn't care enough about me to make further inquiries and they'd merely think that I was too feverish to send them any more news. Later, I'd turn up in London again, spinning them a yarn of how ill I'd been! But I didn't think I should do that. I was fed up with the driving racket.

That rebellion of mine was an important turning-point in my life. Because of that and of other things, I turned up at the auction rooms on the appointed date.

"Unless sold before by private treaty" had been pasted across the original board. But it was still there, so it hadn't been sold by private treaty. I was so excited I hardly knew what I was doing.

As I say, I had never been to a public auction of property before. I was imbued with the idea that it would be exciting but it wasn't exciting. Not in the least. It was one of the most moribund performances I have ever attended. It took place in a semi-gloomy atmosphere and there were only about six or seven people there. The auctioneer was quite different from those auctioneers that I had seen presiding at furniture sales or things of that kind; men with facetious voices and very hearty and full of jokes. This one,

in a dead and alive voice, praised the property and described the acreage and a few things like that and then he went halfheartedly into the bidding. Somebody made a bid of £5,000. The auctioneer gave a tired smile rather as one who hears a joke that isn't really funny. He made a few remarks and there were a few more bids. They were mostly country types standing around. Someone who looked like a farmer, someone who I guessed to be one of the competitive builders, a couple of lawyers, I think, one a man who looked as though he was a stranger from London, well dressed and professional-looking. I don't know if he made an actual bid, he may have done. If so it was very quietly and done more by gesture. Anyway the bidding petered to an end, the auctioneer announced in a melancholy voice that the reserve price had not been reached and the thing broke up.

"That was a dull business," I said to one of the country-looking fellows whom I was next to as I went out.

"Much the same as usual," he said. "Been to many of these?"

"No," I said, "actually it's the first."

"Come out of curiosity, did you? I didn't notice you doing any bidding."

"No fear," I said. "I just wanted to see how it would go."

"Well, it's the way it runs very often. They just want to see who's interested, you know."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"Only three of 'em in it, I should say," said my friend. "Whetherby from Helminster. He's the builder, you know. Then Dakham and Coombe, bidding on behalf of some Liverpool firm, I understand, and a dark horse from London, too, I should say a lawyer. Of course there may be more in it than that, but those seemed the main ones to me. It'll go cheap. That's what everyone says."

"Because of the place's reputation?" I asked.

“Oh, you’ve heard about Gipsy’s Acre, have you? That’s only what the country people say. Rural Council ought to have altered that road years ago—it’s a death trap.”

“But the place has got a bad reputation?”

“I tell you that’s just superstition. Anyway, as I say, the real business’ll happen now behind the scenes, you know. They’ll go and make offers. I’d say the Liverpool people might get it. I don’t think Whetherby’ll go high enough. He likes buying cheap. Plenty of properties coming into the market nowadays for development. After all, it’s not many people who could afford to buy the place, pull that ruined house down and put up another house there, could they?”

“Doesn’t seem to happen very often nowadays,” I said.

“Too difficult. What with taxation and one thing and another, and you can’t get domestic help in the country. No, people would rather pay thousands for a luxury flat in a town nowadays up on the sixteenth floor of a modern building. Big unwieldy country houses are a drag on the market.”

“But you could build a modern house,” I argued. “Labour-saving.”

“You could, but it’s an expensive business and people aren’t so fond of living lonely.”

“Some people might be,” I said.

He laughed and we parted. I walked along, frowning, puzzling to myself. My feet took me without my really noticing where I was going along the road between the trees and up, up to the curving road that led between the trees to the moorlands.

And so I came to the spot in the road where I first saw Ellie. As I said, she was standing just by a tall fir tree and she had the look, if I can explain it, of someone who hadn’t been there a moment before but had just materialized, as it were, out of the tree. She was wearing a sort of dark green tweed and her hair was the soft brown colour of an autumn leaf and there was

something a bit unsubstantial about her. I saw her and I stopped. She was looking at me, her lips just parted, looking slightly startled. I suppose I looked startled too. I wanted to say something and I didn't quite know what to say. Then I said:

"Sorry. I—I didn't mean to startle you. I didn't know there was anyone here."

She said, and her voice was very soft and gentle, it might have been a little girl's voice but not quite. She said:

"It's quite all right. I mean, I didn't think anyone would be here either." She looked round her and said, "It—it's a lonely spot." And she shivered just a little.

There was rather a chilly wind that afternoon. But perhaps it wasn't the wind. I don't know. I came a step or two nearer.

"It is a sort of scary place rather, isn't it?" I said. "I mean, the house being a ruin the way it is."

"The Towers," she said thoughtfully. "That was the name of it, wasn't it—only I mean, there don't seem to have been any towers."

"I expect that was just a name," I said. "People call their houses names like The Towers to make them sound grander than they are."

She laughed just a little. "I suppose that was it," she said. "This—perhaps you know, I'm not sure—this is the place that they're selling today or putting up for auction?"

"Yes," I said. "I've come from the auction now."

"Oh." She sounded startled. "Were you—are you—interested?"

"I'm not likely to buy a ruined house with a few hundred acres of woodland land," I said. "I'm not in that class."

"Was it sold?" she asked.

“No, it didn’t come up to reserve.”

“Oh. I see.” She sounded relieved.

“You didn’t want to buy it either, did you?” I said.

“Oh no,” she said, “of course not.” She sounded nervous about it.

I hesitated and then I blurted out the words that came to my lips. “I’m pretending,” I said. “I can’t buy it, of course, because I haven’t got any money, but I’m interested. I’d like to buy it. I want to buy it. Open your mouth and laugh at me if you like but that’s the way it is.”

“But isn’t it rather too decrepit, too—”

“Oh yes,” I said. “I don’t mean I want it like it is now. I want to pull this down, cart it all away. It’s an ugly house and I think it must have been a sad house. But this place isn’t sad or ugly. It’s beautiful. Look here. Come a little this way, through the trees. Look out at the view that way where it goes to the hills and the moors. D’you see? Clear away a vista here—and then you come this way—”

I took her by the arm and led her to a second point of the compass. If we were behaving unconventionally she did not notice it. Anyway, it wasn’t that kind of way I was holding her. I wanted to show her what I saw.

“Here,” I said, “here you see where it sweeps down to the sea and where the rocks show out there. There’s a town between us and that but we can’t see it because of the hills bulging out farther down the slope. And then you can look a third way, to a vague foresty valley. Do you see now if you cut down trees and make big vistas and clear this space round the house, do you see what a beautiful house you could have here? You wouldn’t site it where the old one is. You’d go about fifty—a hundred yards to the right, here. This is where you could have a house, a wonderful house. A house built by an architect who’s a genius.”

“Do you know any architects who are geniuses?” She sounded doubtful.

“I know one,” I said.

Then I started telling her about Santonix. We sat down side by side on a fallen tree and I talked. Yes, I talked to that slender woodland girl whom I’d never seen before and I put all I had into what I was telling her. I told her the dream that one could build up.

“It won’t happen,” I said, “I know that. It couldn’t happen. But think. Think into it just like I’m thinking into it. There we’d cut the trees and there we’d open up, and we’d plant things, rhododendrons and azaleas, and my friend Santonix would come. He’d cough a good deal because I think he’s dying of consumption or something but he could do it. He could do it before he died. He could build the most wonderful house. You don’t know what his houses are like. He builds them for very rich people and they have to be people who want the right thing. I don’t mean the right thing in the conventional sense. Things people who want a dream come true want. Something wonderful.”

“I’d want a house like that,” said Ellie. “You make me see it, feel it... Yes, this would be a lovely place to live. Everything one has dreamed of come true. One could live here and be free, not hampered, not tied round by people pushing you into doing everything you don’t want, keeping you from doing anything you do want. Oh I am so sick of my life and the people who are round me and everything!”

That’s the way it began, Ellie and I together. Me with my dreams and she with her revolt against her life. We stopped talking and looked at each other.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Mike Rogers,” I said. “Michael Rogers,” I amended. “What’s yours?”

“Fenella.” She hesitated and then said, “Fenella Goodman,” looking at me with a rather troubled expression.

This didn’t seem to take us much further but we went on looking at each other. We both wanted to see each other again—but just for the moment we didn’t know how to set about it.

Five

Well, that's how it began between Ellie and myself. It didn't really go along so very quickly, because we both had our secrets. Both had things we wanted to keep from the other and so we couldn't tell each other as much about ourselves as we might have done, and that kept bringing us up sharp, as it were, against a kind of barrier. We couldn't bring things into the open and say, "When shall we meet again? Where can I find you? Where do you live?" Because, you see, if you ask the other person that, they'd expect you to tell the same.

Fenella looked apprehensive when she gave me her name. So much so that I thought for a moment that it mightn't be her real name. I almost thought that she might have made it up! But of course I knew that that was impossible. I'd given her my real name.

We didn't know quite how to take leave of each other that day. It was awkward. It had become cold and we wanted to wander down from The Towers—but what then? Rather awkwardly, I said tentatively:

"Are you staying round here?"

She said she was staying in Market Chadwell. That was a market town not very far away. It had, I knew, a large hotel, three-starred. She'd be staying there, I guessed. She said, with something of the same awkwardness, to me:

"Do you live here?"

"No," I said, "I don't live here. I'm only here for the day."

Then a rather awkward silence fell. She gave a faint shiver. A cold little wind had come up.

"We'd better walk," I said, "and keep ourselves warm. Are you—have you got a car or are you going by bus or train?"

She said she'd left the car in the village.

“But I’ll be quite all right,” she said.

She seemed a little nervous. I thought perhaps she wanted to get rid of me but didn’t quite know how to manage it. I said:

“We’ll walk down, shall we, just as far as the village?”

She gave me a quick grateful look then. We walked slowly down the winding road on which so many car accidents had happened. As we came round a corner, a figure stepped suddenly from beneath the shelter of the fir tree. It appeared so suddenly that Ellie gave a start and said, “Oh!” It was the old woman I had seen the other day in her cottage garden. Mrs Lee. She looked a great deal wilder today with a tangle of black hair blowing in the wind and a scarlet cloak round her shoulders; the commanding stance she took up made her look taller.

“And what would you be doing, my dears?” she said. “What brings you to Gipsy’s Acre?”

“Oh,” Ellie said, “we aren’t trespassing, are we?”

“That’s as may be. Gipsies’ land this used to be. Gipsies’ land and they drove us off it. You’ll do no good here, and no good will come to you prowling about Gipsy’s Acre.”

There was no fight in Ellie, she wasn’t that kind. She said gently and politely:

“I’m very sorry if we shouldn’t have come here. I thought this place was being sold today.”

“And bad luck it will be to anyone who buys it!” said the old woman. “You listen, my pretty, for you’re pretty enough, bad luck will come to whoever buys it. There’s a curse on this land, a curse put on it long ago, many years ago. You keep clear of it. Don’t have nought to do with Gipsy’s Acre. Death it will bring you and danger. Go away home across the sea and don’t come back to Gipsy’s Acre. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“We’re doing no harm.”

“Come now, Mrs Lee,” I said, “don’t frighten this young lady.”

I turned in an explanatory way to Ellie.

“Mrs Lee lives in the village. She’s got a cottage there. She tells fortunes and prophesies the future. All that, don’t you, Mrs Lee?” I spoke to her in a jocular way.

“I’ve got the gift,” she said simply, drawing her gipsy-like figure up straighter still. “I’ve got the gift. It’s born in me. We all have it. I’ll tell your fortune, young lady. Cross my palm with silver and I’ll tell your fortune for you.”

“I don’t think I want my fortune told.”

“It’d be a wise thing to do. Know something about the future. Know what to avoid, know what’s coming to you if you don’t take care. Come now, there’s plenty of money in your pocket. Plenty of money. I know things it would be wise for you to know.”

I believe the urge to have one’s fortune told is almost invariable in women. I’ve noticed it before with girls I knew. I nearly always had to pay for them to go into the fortune-tellers’ booths if I took them to a fair. Ellie opened her bag and laid two half crowns in the old woman’s hand.

“Ah, my pretty, that’s right now. You hear what old Mother Lee will tell you.”

Ellie drew off her glove and laid her small delicate palm in the old woman’s hand. She looked down at it, muttering to herself. “What do I see now? What do I see?”

Suddenly she dropped Ellie’s hand abruptly.

“I’d go away from here if I were you. Go—and don’t come back! That’s what I told you just now and it’s true. I’ve seen it again in your palm. Forget

Gipsy's Acre, forget you ever saw it. And it's not just the ruined house up there, it's the land itself that's cursed."

"You've got a mania about that," I said roughly. "Anyway the young lady has nothing to do with the land here. She's only here for a walk today, she's nothing to do with the neighbourhood."

The old woman paid no attention to me. She said dourly:

"I'm telling you, my pretty. I'm warning you. You can have a happy life—but you must avoid danger. Don't come to a place where there's danger or where there's a curse. Go away where you're loved and taken care of and looked after. You've got to keep yourself safe. Remember that. Otherwise—otherwise—" she gave a short shiver. "I don't like to see it, I don't like to see what's in your hand."

Suddenly with a queer brisk gesture she pushed back the two half crowns into Ellie's palm, mumbling something we could hardly hear. It sounded like "It's cruel. It's cruel, what's going to happen." Turning, she stalked away at a rapid pace.

"What a—what a frightening woman," said Ellie.

"Pay no attention to her," I said gruffly. "I think she's half off her head anyway. She just wants to frighten you off. They've got a sort of feeling, I think, about this particular piece of land."

"Have there been accidents here? Have bad things happened?"

"Bound to be accidents. Look at the curve and the narrowness of the road. The Town Council ought to be shot for not doing something about it. Of course there'll be accidents here. There aren't enough signs warning you."

"Only accidents—or other things?"

"Look here," I said, "people like to collect disasters. There are plenty of disasters always to collect. That's the way stories build themselves up about a place."

“Is that one of the reasons why they say this property which is being sold will go cheap?”

“Well, it may be, I suppose. Locally, that is. But I don’t suppose it’ll be sold locally. I expect it’ll be bought for developing. You’re shivering,” I said. “Don’t shiver. Come on, we’ll walk fast.” I added, “Would you rather I left you before you got back into the town?”

“No. Of course not. Why should I?”

I made a desperate plunge.

“Look here,” I said, “I shall be in Market Chadwell tomorrow. I—I suppose—I don’t know whether you’ll still be there...I mean, would there be any chance of—seeing you?” I shuffled my feet and turned my head away. I got rather red, I think. But if I didn’t say something now, how was I going to go on with this?

“Oh yes,” she said, “I shan’t be going back to London until the evening.”

“Then perhaps—would you—I mean, I suppose it’s rather cheek—”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Well, perhaps you’d come and have tea at a café—the Blue Dog I think it’s called. It’s quite nice,” I said. “It’s—I mean, it’s—” I couldn’t get hold of the word I wanted and I used the word that I’d heard my mother use once or twice—“it’s quite ladylike,” I said anxiously.

Then Ellie laughed. I suppose it sounded rather peculiar nowadays.

“I’m sure it’ll be very nice,” she said. “Yes. I’ll come. About half past four, will that be right?”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” I said. “I—I’m glad.” I didn’t say what I was glad about.

We had come to the last turn of the road where the houses began.

“Good-bye, then,” I said, “till tomorrow. And—don’t think again about what that old hag said. She just likes scaring people, I think. She’s not all there,” I added.

“Do you feel it’s a frightening place?” Ellie asked.

“Gipsy’s Acre? No, I don’t,” I said. I said it perhaps a trifle too decidedly, but I didn’t think it was frightening. I thought as I’d thought before, that it was a beautiful place, a beautiful setting for a beautiful house....

Well, that’s how my first meeting with Ellie went. I was in Market Chadwell the next day waiting in the Blue Dog and she came. We had tea together and we talked. We still didn’t say much about ourselves, not about our lives, I mean. We talked mostly about things we thought, and felt; and then Ellie glanced at her wristwatch and said she must be going because her train to London left at 5:30—

“I thought you had a car down here,” I said.

She looked slightly embarrassed then and she said no, no, that hadn’t been her car yesterday. She didn’t say whose it had been. That shadow of embarrassment came over us again. I raised a finger to the waitress and paid the bill, then I said straight out to Ellie:

“Am I—am I ever going to see you again?”

She didn’t look at me, she looked down at the table. She said:

“I shall be in London for another fortnight.”

I said:

“Where? How?”

We made a date to meet in Regent’s Park in three days’ time. It was a fine day. We had some food in the open-air restaurant and we walked in Queen Mary’s Gardens and we sat there in two deck chairs and we talked. From that time on, we began to talk about ourselves. I’d had some good schooling, I told her, but otherwise I didn’t amount to much. I told her about

the jobs I'd had, some of them at any rate, and how I'd never stuck to things and how I'd been restless and wandered about trying this and that. Funnily enough, she was entranced to hear all this.

"So different," she said, "so wonderfully different."

"Different from what?"

"From me."

"You're a rich girl?" I said teasingly—"A poor little rich girl."

"Yes," she said, "I'm a poor little rich girl."

She talked then in a fragmentary way about her background of riches, of stifling comfort, of boredom, of not really choosing your own friends, of never doing what you wanted. Sometimes looking at people who seemed to be enjoying themselves, when she wasn't. Her mother had died when she was a baby and her father had married again. And then, not many years after, he had died, she said. I gathered she didn't care much for her stepmother. She'd lived mostly in America but also travelling abroad a fair amount.

It seemed fantastic to me listening to her that any girl in this age and time could live this sheltered, confined existence. True, she went to parties and entertainments, but it might have been fifty years ago it seemed to me from the way she talked. There didn't seem to be any intimacy, any fun! Her life was as different from mine as chalk from cheese. In a way it was fascinating to hear about it but it sounded stultifying to me.

"You haven't really got any friends of your own then?" I said, incredulously. "What about boyfriends?"

"They're chosen for me," she said rather bitterly. "They're deadly dull."

"It's like being in prison," I said.

"That's what it seems like."

“And really no friends of your own?”

“I have now. I’ve got Greta.”

“Who’s Greta?” I said.

“She came first as an au pair—no, not quite that, perhaps. But anyway I’d had a French girl who lived with us for a year, for French, and then Greta came from Germany, for German. Greta was different. Everything was different once Greta came.”

“You’re very fond of her?” I asked.

“She helps me,” said Ellie. “She’s on my side. She arranges so that I can do things and go places. She’ll tell lies for me. I couldn’t have got away to come down to Gipsy’s Acre if it hadn’t been for Greta. She’s keeping me company and looking after me in London while my stepmother’s in Paris. I write two or three letters and if I go off anywhere Greta posts them every three or four days so that they have a London postmark.”

“Why did you want to go down to Gipsy’s Acre though?” I asked. “What for?”

She didn’t answer at once.

“Greta and I arranged it,” she said. “She’s rather wonderful,” she went on. “She thinks of things, you know. She suggests ideas.”

“What’s this Greta like?” I asked.

“Oh, Greta’s beautiful,” she said. “Tall and blonde. She can do anything.”

“I don’t think I’d like her,” I said.

Ellie laughed.

“Oh yes you would. I’m sure you would. She’s very clever, too.”

“I don’t like clever girls,” I said. “And I don’t like tall blonde girls. I like small girls with hair like autumn leaves.”

“I believe you’re jealous of Greta,” said Ellie.

“Perhaps I am. You’re very fond of her, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am very fond of her. She’s made all the difference in my life.”

“And it was she who suggested you went down there. Why, I wonder? There’s not much to see or do in that part of the world. I find it rather mysterious.”

“It’s our secret,” said Ellie and looked embarrassed.

“Yours and Greta’s? Tell me.”

She shook her head. “I must have some secrets of my own,” she said.

“Does your Greta know you’re meeting me?”

“She knows I’m meeting someone. That’s all. She doesn’t ask questions. She knows I’m happy.”

After that there was a week when I didn’t see Ellie. Her stepmother had come back from Paris, also someone whom she called Uncle Frank, and she explained almost casually that she was having a birthday, and that they were giving a big party for her in London.

“I shan’t be able to get away,” she said. “Not for the next week. But after that—after that, it’ll be different.”

“Why will it be different after that?”

“I shall be able to do what I like then.”

“With Greta’s help as usual?” I said.

It used to make Ellie laugh the way I talked about Greta. She'd say, "You're so silly to be jealous of her. One day you must meet her. You'll like her."

"I don't like bossy girls," I said obstinately.

"Why do you think she's bossy?"

"By the way you talk about her. She's always busy arranging something."

"She's very efficient," said Ellie. "She arranges things very well. That's why my stepmother relies on her so much."

I asked what her Uncle Frank was like.

She said, "I don't know him really so very well. He was my father's sister's husband, not a real relation. I think he's always been rather a rolling stone and got into trouble once or twice. You know the way people talk about someone and sort of hint things."

"Not socially acceptable?" I asked. "Bad lot?"

"Oh, nothing really bad I think, but he used to get into scrapes, I believe. Financial ones. And trustees and lawyers and people used to have to get him out of them. Pay up for things."

"That's it," I said. "He's the bad hat of the family. I expect I'd get on better with him than I would with the paragon Greta."

"He can make himself very agreeable when he likes," said Ellie. "He's good company."

"But you don't really like him?" I asked sharply.

"I think I do...It's just that sometimes, oh I can't explain it. I just feel I don't know what he's thinking or planning."

"One of our planners, is he?"

"I don't know what he's really like," said Ellie again.

She didn't ever suggest that I should meet any of her family. I wondered sometimes if I ought to say something about it myself. I didn't know how she felt about the subject. I asked her straight out at last.

"Look here, Ellie," I said, "do you think I ought to—meet your family or would you rather I didn't?"

"I don't want you to meet them," she said at once.

"I know I'm not much—" I said.

"I don't mean it that way, not a bit! I mean they'd make a fuss. I can't stand a fuss."

"I sometimes feel," I said, "that this is rather a hole and corner business. It puts me in a rather bad light, don't you think?"

"I'm old enough to have my own friends," said Ellie. "I'm nearly twenty-one. When I am twenty-one I can have my own friends and nobody can stop me. But now you see—well, as I say there'd be a terrible fuss and they'd cart me off somewhere so that I couldn't meet you. There'd be—oh do, do let's go on as we are now."

"Suits me if it suits you," I said. "I just didn't want to be, well, too underhand about everything."

"It's not being underhand. It's just having a friend one can talk to and say things to. It's someone one can—" she smiled suddenly, "one can make-believe with. You don't know how wonderful that is."

Yes, there was a lot of that—make-believe! More and more our times together were to turn out that way. Sometimes it was me. More often it was Ellie who'd say, "Let's suppose that we've bought Gipsy's Acre and that we're building a house there."

I had told her a lot about Santonix and about the houses he'd built. I tried to describe to her the kind of houses they were and the way he thought about things. I don't think I described it very well because I'm not good at

describing things. Ellie no doubt had her own picture of the house—our house. We didn't say "our house" but we knew that's what we meant....

So for over a week I wasn't to see Ellie. I had taken out what savings I had (there weren't many), and I'd bought her a little green shamrock ring made of some Irish bog stone. I'd given it to her for a birthday present and she'd loved it and looked very happy.

"It's beautiful," she said.

She didn't wear much jewellery and when she did I had no doubt it was real diamonds and emeralds and things like that but she liked my Irish ring.

"It will be the birthday present I like best," she said.

Then I got a hurried note from her. She was going abroad with her family to the South of France immediately after her birthday.

"But don't worry," she wrote, "we shall be back again in two or three weeks" time, on our way to America this time. But anyway we'll meet again then. I've got something special I want to talk to you about."

I felt restless and ill at ease not seeing Ellie and knowing she'd gone abroad to France. I had a bit of news about the Gipsy's Acre property too. Apparently it had been sold by private treaty but there wasn't much information about who'd bought it. Some firm of London solicitors apparently were named as the purchasers. I tried to get more information about it, but I couldn't. The firm in question were very cagey. Naturally I didn't approach the principals. I palled up to one of their clerks and so got a little vague information. It had been bought for a very rich client who was going to hold it as a good investment capable of appreciation when the land in that part of the country was becoming more developed.

It's very hard to find out about things when you're dealing with really exclusive firms. Everything is as much of a deadly secret as though they were M.I.5 or something! Everyone is always acting on behalf of someone else who can't be named or spoken of! Takeover bids aren't in it!

I got into a terrible state of restlessness. I stopped thinking about it all and I went and saw my mother.

I hadn't been to see her for a good long time.

Six

My mother lived in the same street she had lived in for the last twenty years, a street of drab houses all highly respectable and devoid of any kind of beauty or interest. The front doorstep was nicely whitened and it looked just the same as usual. It was No. 46. I pressed the front doorbell. My mother opened the door and stood there looking at me. She looked just the same as usual, too. Tall and angular, grey hair parted in the middle, mouth like a rattrap, and eyes that were eternally suspicious. She looked hard as nails. But where I was concerned there was a core of softness somewhere in her. She never showed it, not if she could help it, but I'd found out that it was there. She'd never stopped for a moment wanting me to be different but her wishes were never going to come true. There was a perpetual state of stalemate between us.

"Oh," she said, "so it's you."

"Yes," I said, "it's me."

She drew back a little to let me pass and I came into the house and went on past the sitting room door and into the kitchen. She followed me and stood looking at me.

"It's been quite a long time," she said. "What have you been doing?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"This and that," I said.

"Ah," said my mother, "as usual, eh?"

"As usual," I agreed.

"How many jobs have you had since I saw you last?"

I thought a minute. "Five," I said.

“I wish you’d grow up.”

“I’m fully adult,” I said. “I have chosen my way of life. How have things been with you?” I added.

“Also as usual,” said my mother.

“Quite well and all that?”

“I’ve no time to waste being ill,” said my mother. Then she said abruptly, “What have you come for?”

“Should I have come for anything in particular?”

“You usually do.”

“I don’t see why you should disapprove so strongly of my seeing the world,” I said.

“Driving luxurious cars all over the Continent! Is that your idea of seeing the world?”

“Certainly.”

“You won’t make much of a success in that. Not if you throw up the job at a day’s notice and go sick, dumping your clients in some heathen town.”

“How did you know about that?”

“Your firm rang up. They wanted to know if I knew your address.”

“What did they want me for?”

“They wanted to reemploy you I suppose,” said my mother. “I can’t think why.”

“Because I’m a good driver and the clients like me. Anyway, I couldn’t help it if I went sick, could I?”

“I don’t know,” said my mother.

Her view clearly was that I could have helped it.

“Why didn’t you report to them when you got back to England?”

“Because I had other fish to fry,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows. “More notions in your head? More wild ideas? What jobs have you been doing since?”

“Petrol pump. Mechanic in a garage. Temporary clerk, washer-up in a sleazy nightclub restaurant.”

“Going down the hill in fact,” said my mother with a kind of grim satisfaction.

“Not at all,” I said. “It’s all part of the plan. My plan!”

She sighed. “What would you like, tea or coffee? I’ve got both.”

I plumped for coffee. I’ve grown out of the tea-drinking habit. We sat there with our cups in front of us and she took a home-made cake out of a tin and cut us each a slice.

“You’re different,” she said, suddenly.

“Me, how?”

“I don’t know, but you’re different. What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened. What should have happened?”

“You’re excited,” she said.

“I’m going to rob a bank,” I said.

She was not in the mood to be amused. She merely said:

“No, I’m not afraid of your doing that.”

“Why not? Seems a very easy way of getting rich quickly nowadays.”

“It would need too much work,” she said. “And a lot of planning. More brainwork than you’d like to have to do. Not safe enough, either.”

“You think you know all about me,” I said.

“No, I don’t. I don’t really know anything about you, because you and I are as different as chalk and cheese. But I know when you’re up to something. You’re up to something now. What is it, Micky? Is it a girl?”

“Why should you think it’s a girl?”

“I’ve always known it would happen some day.”

“What do you mean by ‘some day?’ I’ve had lots of girls.”

“Not the way I mean. It’s only been the way of a young man with nothing to do. You’ve kept your hand in with girls but you’ve never been really serious till now.”

“But you think I’m serious now?”

“Is it a girl, Micky?”

I didn’t meet her eyes. I looked away and said, “In a way.”

“What kind of a girl is she?”

“The right kind for me,” I said.

“Are you going to bring her to see me?”

“No,” I said.

“It’s like that, is it?”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t want to hurt your feelings but—”

“You’re not hurting my feelings. You don’t want me to see her in case I should say to you ‘Don’t.’ Is that it?”

“I wouldn’t pay any attention if you did.”

“Maybe not, but it would shake you. It would shake you somewhere inside because you take notice of what I say and think. There are things I’ve guessed about you—and maybe I’ve guessed right and you know it. I’m the only person in the world who can shake your confidence in yourself. Is this girl a bad lot who’s got hold of you?”

“Bad lot?” I said and laughed. “If you only saw her! You make me laugh.”

“What do you want from me? You want something. You always do.”

“I want some money,” I said.

“You won’t get it from me. What do you want it for—to spend on this girl?”

“No,” I said, “I want to buy a first-class suit to get married in.”

“You’re going to marry her?”

“If she’ll have me.”

That shook her.

“If you’d only tell me something!” she said. “You’ve got it badly, I can see that. It’s the thing I always feared, that you’d choose the wrong girl.”

“Wrong girl! Hell!” I shouted. I was angry.

I went out of the house and I banged the door.

Seven

When I got home there was a telegram waiting for me—it had been sent from Antibes.

Meet me tomorrow four-thirty usual place.

Ellie was different. I saw it at once. We met as always in Regent's Park and at first we were a bit strange and awkward with each other. I had something I was going to say to her and I was in a bit of a state as to how to put it. I suppose any man is when he comes to the point of proposing marriage.

And she was strange about something too. Perhaps she was considering the nicest and kindest way of saying No to me. But somehow I didn't think that. My whole belief in life was based on the fact that Ellie loved me. But there was a new independence about her, a new confidence in herself which I could hardly feel was simply because she was a year older. One more birthday can't make that difference to a girl. She and her family had been in the South of France and she told me a little about it. And then rather awkwardly she said:

"I—I saw that house there, the one you told me about. The one that architect friend of yours had built."

"What—Santonix?"

"Yes. We went there to lunch one day."

"How did you do that? Does your stepmother know the man who lives there?"

"Dmitri Constantine? Well—not exactly but she met him and—well—Greta fixed it up for us to go there as a matter of fact."

"Greta again," I said, allowing the usual exasperation to come into my voice.

“I told you,” she said, “Greta is very good at arranging things.”

“Oh all right. So she arranged that you and your stepmother—”

“And Uncle Frank,” said Ellie.

“Quite a family party,” I said, “and Greta too, I suppose.”

“Well, no, Greta didn’t come because, well—” Ellie hesitated, “—Cora, my stepmother, doesn’t treat Greta exactly like that.”

“She’s not one of the family, she’s a poor relation, is she?” I said. “Just the au pair girl, in fact. Greta must resent being treated that way sometimes.”

“She’s not an au pair girl, she’s a kind of companion to me.”

“A chaperone,” I said, “a cicerone, a duenna, a governess. There are lots of words.”

“Oh do be quiet,” said Ellie, “I want to tell you. I know now what you mean about your friend Santonix. It’s a wonderful house. It’s—it’s quite different. I can see that if he built a house for us it would be a wonderful house.”

She had used the word quite unconsciously. Us, she had said. She had gone to the Riviera and had made Greta arrange things so as to see the house I had described, because she wanted to visualize more clearly the house that we would, in the dream world we’d built ourselves, have built for us by Rudolf Santonix.

“I’m glad you felt like that about it,” I said.

She said: “What have you been doing?”

“Just my dull job,” I said, “and I’ve been to a race meeting and I put some money on an outsider. Thirty to one. I put every penny I had on it and it won by a length. Who says my luck isn’t in?”

“I’m glad you won,” said Ellie, but she said it without excitement, because putting all you had in the world on an outsider and the outsider winning

didn't mean anything to Ellie's world. Not the kind of thing it meant in mine.

"And I went to see my mother," I added.

"You've never spoken much of your mother."

"Why should I?" I said.

"Aren't you fond of her?"

I considered. "I don't know," I said. "Sometimes I don't think I am. After all, one grows up and—outgrows parents. Mothers and fathers."

"I think you do care about her," said Ellie. "You wouldn't be so uncertain when you talk about her otherwise."

"I'm afraid of her in a way," I said. "She knows me too well. She knows the worst of me, I mean."

"Somebody has to," said Ellie.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a saying by some great writer or other that no man is a hero to his valet. Perhaps everyone ought to have a valet. It must be so hard otherwise, always living up to people's good opinion of one."

"Well, you certainly have ideas, Ellie," I said. I took her hand. "Do you know all about me?" I said.

"I think so," said Ellie. She said it quite calmly and simply.

"I never told you much."

"You mean you never told me anything at all, you always clammed up. That's different. But I know quite well what you are like, you yourself."

“I wonder if you do,” I said. I went on, “It sounds rather silly saying I love you. It seems too late for that, doesn’t it? I mean, you’ve known about it a long time, practically from the beginning, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” said Ellie, “and you knew, too, didn’t you, about me?”

“The thing is,” I said, “what are we going to do about it? It’s not going to be easy, Ellie. You know pretty well what I am, what I’ve done, the sort of life I’ve led. I went back to see my mother and the grim, respectable little street she lives in. It’s not the same world as yours, Ellie. I don’t know that we can ever make them meet.”

“You could take me to see your mother.”

“Yes, I could,” I said, “but I’d rather not. I expect that sounds very harsh to you, perhaps cruel, but you see we’ve got to lead a queer life together, you and I. It’s not going to be the life that you’ve led and it’s not going to be the life that I’ve led either. It’s got to be a new life where we have a sort of meeting ground between my poverty and ignorance and your money and culture and social knowledge. My friends will think you’re stuck up and your friends will think I’m socially unpresentable. So what are we going to do?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Ellie, “exactly what we’re going to do. We’re going to live on Gipsy’s Acre in a house—a dream house—that your friend Santonix will build for us. That’s what we’re going to do.” She added, “We’ll get married first. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s what I mean. If you’re sure it’s all right with you.”

“It’s quite easy,” said Ellie, “we can get married next week. I’m of age, you see. I can do what I like now. That makes all the difference. I think perhaps you’re right about relations. I shan’t tell my people and you won’t tell your mother, not until it’s all over and then they can throw fits and it won’t matter.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, “wonderful, Ellie. But there’s one thing. I hate telling you about it. We can’t live at Gipsy’s Acre, Ellie. Wherever we build

our house it can't be there because it's sold."

"I know it's sold," said Ellie. She was laughing. "You don't understand, Mike. I'm the person who's bought it."

Eight

I sat there, on the grass by the stream among the water flowers with the little paths and the stepping stones all round us. A good many other people were sitting round about us, but we didn't notice them or even see they were there, because we were like all the others. Young couples, talking about their future. I stared at her and stared at her. I just couldn't speak.

"Mike," she said. "There's something, something I've got to tell you. Something about me, I mean."

"You don't need to," I said, "no need to tell me anything."

"Yes, but I must. I ought to have told you long ago but I didn't want to because—because I thought it might drive you away. But it explains in a way, about Gipsy's Acre."

"You bought it?" I said. "But how did you buy it?"

"Through lawyers," she said, "the usual way. It's a perfectly good investment, you know. The land will appreciate. My lawyers were quite happy about it."

It was odd suddenly to hear Ellie, the gentle and timid Ellie, speaking with such knowledge and confidence of the business world of buying and selling.

"You bought it for us?"

"Yes. I went to a lawyer of my own, not the family one. I told him what I wanted to do, I got him to look into it, I got everything set up and in train. There were two other people after it but they were not really desperate and they wouldn't go very high. The important thing was that the whole thing had to be set up and arranged ready for me to sign as soon as I came of age. It's signed and finished."

“But you must have made some deposit or something beforehand. Had you enough money to do that?”

“No,” said Ellie, “no, I hadn’t control of much money beforehand, but of course there are people who will advance you money. And if you go to a new firm of legal advisers, they will want you to go on employing them for business deals once you’ve come into what money you’re going to have so they’re willing to take the risk that you might drop down dead before your birthday comes.”

“You sound so businesslike,” I said, “you take my breath away!”

“Never mind business,” said Ellie, “I’ve got to get back to what I’m telling you. In a way I’ve told it you already, but I don’t suppose really you realize it.”

“I don’t want to know,” I said. My voice rose, I was almost shouting. “Don’t tell me anything. I don’t want to know anything about what you’ve done or who you’ve been fond of or what has happened to you.”

“It’s nothing of that kind,” she said. “I didn’t realize that that was what you were fearing it might be. No, there’s nothing of that kind. No sex secrets. There’s nobody but you. The thing is that I’m—well—I’m rich.”

“I know that,” I said, “you’ve told me already.”

“Yes,” said Ellie with a faint smile, “and you said to me, ‘poor little rich girl.’ But in a way it’s more than that. My grandfather, you see, was enormously rich. Oil. Mostly oil. And other things. The wives he paid alimony to are dead, there was only my father and myself left because his two other sons were killed. One in Korea and one in a car accident. And so it was all left in a great big huge trust and when my father died suddenly, it all came to me. My father had made provision for my stepmother before, so she didn’t get anything more. It was all mine. I’m—actually one of the richest women in America, Mike.”

“Good Lord,” I said. “I didn’t know...Yes, you’re right, I didn’t know it was like that.”

“I didn’t want you to know. I didn’t want to tell you. That was why I was afraid when I said my name—Fenella Goodman. We spell it G-u-t-e-m-a-n, and I thought you might know the name of Guteman so I slurred over it and made it into Goodman.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve seen the name Guteman vaguely. But I don’t think I’d have recognized it even then. Lots of people are called names rather like that.”

“That’s why,” she said, “I’ve been so hedged around all the time and fenced in, and imprisoned. I’ve had detectives guarding me and young men being vetted before they’re allowed even to speak to me. Whenever I’ve made a friend they’ve had to be quite sure it wasn’t an unsuitable one. You don’t know what a terrible, terrible prisoner’s life it is! But now that’s all over, and if you don’t mind—”

“Of course I don’t mind,” I said, “we shall have lots of fun. In fact,” I said, “you couldn’t be too rich a girl for me!”

We both laughed. She said: “What I like about you is that you can be natural about things.”

“Besides,” I said, “I expect you pay a lot of tax on it, don’t you? That’s one of the few nice things about being like me. Any money I make goes into my pocket and nobody can take it away from me.”

“We’ll have our house,” said Ellie, “our house on Gipsy’s Acre.” Just for a moment she gave a sudden little shiver.

“You’re not cold, darling,” I said. I looked up at the sunshine.

“No,” she said.

It was really very hot. We’d been basking. It might almost have been the South of France.

“No,” said Ellie, “it was just that—that woman, that gipsy that day.”

“Oh, don’t think of her,” I said, “she was crazy anyway.”

“Do you think she really thinks there’s a curse on the land?”

“I think gipsies are like that. You know—always wanting to make a song and dance about some curse or something.”

“Do you know much about gipsies?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I said truthfully. “If you don’t want Gipsy’s Acre, Ellie, we’ll buy a house somewhere else. On the top of a mountain in Wales, on the coast of Spain or an Italian hillside, and Santonix can build us a house there just as well.”

“No,” said Ellie, “that’s how I want it to be. It’s where I first saw you walking up the road, coming round the corner very suddenly, and then you saw me and stopped and stared at me. I’ll never forget that.”

“Nor will I,” I said.

“So that’s where it’s going to be. And your friend Santonix will build it.”

“I hope he’s still alive,” I said with an uneasy pang. “He was a sick man.”

“Oh yes,” said Ellie, “he’s alive. I went to see him.”

“You went to see him?”

“Yes. When I was in the South of France. He was in a sanitorium there.”

“Every minute, Ellie, you seem to be more and more amazing. The things you do and manage.”

“He’s rather a wonderful person I think,” said Ellie, “but rather frightening.”

“Did he frighten you?”

“Yes, he frightened me very much for some reason.”

“Did you talk to him about us?”

“Yes. Oh yes, I told him all about us and about Gipsy’s Acre and about the house. He told me then that we’d have to take a chance with him. He’s a very ill man. He said he thought he still had the life left in him to go and see the site, to draw the plans, to visualize it and get it all sketched out. He said he wouldn’t mind really if he died before the house was finished, but I told him,” added Ellie, “that he mustn’t die before the house was finished because I wanted him to see us live in it.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He asked me if I knew what I was doing marrying you, and I said of course I did.”

“And then?”

“He said he wondered if you knew what you were doing.”

“I know all right,” I said.

“He said ‘You will always know where you’re going, Miss Guteman.’ He said ‘You’ll be going always where you want to go and because it’s your chosen way.’

“‘But Mike,’ he said, ‘might take the wrong road. He hasn’t grown up enough yet to know where he’s going.’

“I said,” said Ellie, “‘He’ll be quite safe with me.’”

She had superb self-confidence. I was angry though at what Santonix had said. He was like my mother. She always seemed to know more about me than I knew myself.

“I know where I’m going,” I said. “I’m going the way I want to go and we’re going it together.”

“They’ve started pulling down the ruins of The Towers already,” said Ellie.

She began to talk practically.

“It’s to be a rush job as soon as the plans are finished. We must hurry. Santonix said so. Shall we be married next Tuesday?” said Ellie. “It’s a nice day of the week.”

“With nobody else there,” I said.

“Except Greta,” said Ellie.

“To hell with Greta,” I said, “she’s not coming to our wedding. You and I and nobody else. We can pull the necessary witnesses out of the street.”

I really think, looking back, that that was the happiest day of my life....

BOOK TWO

Nine

So that was that, and Ellie and I got married. It sounds abrupt just putting it like that, but you see it was really just the way things happened. We decided to be married and we got married.

It was part of the whole thing—not just an end to a romantic novel or a fairy story. “And so they got married and lived happily ever afterwards.” You can’t, after all, make a big drama out of living happily ever afterwards. We were married and we were both happy and it was really quite a time before anyone got on to us and began to make the usual difficulties and commotions and we’d made up our minds to those.

The whole thing was really extraordinarily simple. In her desire for freedom Ellie had covered her tracks very cleverly up to now. The useful Greta had taken all the necessary steps, and was always on guard behind her. And I had realized fairly soon on that there was nobody really whose business it was to care terribly about Ellie and what she was doing. She had a stepmother who was engrossed in her own social life and love affairs. If Ellie didn’t wish to accompany her to any particular spot on the globe there was no need for Ellie to do so. She’d had all the proper governesses and ladies’ maids and scholastic advantages and if she wanted to go to Europe, why not? If she chose to have her twenty-first birthday in London, again why not? Now that she had come into her vast fortune she had the whip hand of her family in so far as spending her money went. If she’d wanted a villa on the Riviera or a castle on the Costa Brava or a yacht or any of those things, she had only to mention the fact and someone among the retinues that surrounded millionaires would put everything in hand immediately.

Greta, I gather, was regarded by her family as an admirable stooge. Competent, able to make all arrangements with the utmost efficiency, subservient no doubt and charming to the stepmother, the uncle and a few odd cousins who seemed to be knocking about. Ellie had no fewer than three lawyers at her command, from what she let fall every now and then. She was surrounded by a vast financial network of bankers and lawyers and the administrators of trust funds. It was a world that I just got glimpses of

every now and then, mostly from things that Ellie let fall carelessly in the course of conversation. It didn't occur to her, naturally, that I wouldn't know about all those things. She had been brought up in the midst of them and she naturally concluded that the whole world knew what they were and how they worked and all the rest of it.

In fact, getting glimpses of the special peculiarities of each other's lives were unexpectedly what we enjoyed most in our early married life. To put it quite crudely—and I did put things crudely to myself, for that was the only way to get to terms with my new life—the poor don't really know how the rich live and the rich don't know how the poor live, and to find out is really enchanting to both of them. Once I said uneasily:

“Look here, Ellie, is there going to be an awful schemozzle over all this, over our marriage, I mean?”

Ellie considered without, I noticed, very much interest.

“Oh yes,” she said, “they'll probably be awful.” And she added, “I hope you won't mind too much.”

“I won't mind—why should I?—But you, will they bully you over it?”

“I expect so,” said Ellie, “but one needn't listen. The point is that they can't do anything.”

“But they'll try?”

“Oh yes,” said Ellie. “They'll try.” Then she added thoughtfully, “They'll probably try and buy you off.”

“Buy me off?”

“Don't look so shocked,” said Ellie, and she smiled, a rather happy little girl's smile. “It isn't put exactly like that.” Then she added, “They bought off Minnie Thompson's first, you know.”

“Minnie Thompson? Is that the one they always call the oil heiress?”

“Yes, that’s right. She ran off and married a life guard off the beach.”

“Look here, Ellie,” I said uneasily, “I was a life guard at Littlehampton once.”

“Oh, were you? What fun! Permanently?”

“No, of course not. Just one summer, that’s all.”

“I wish you wouldn’t worry,” said Ellie.

“What happened about Minnie Thompson?”

“They had to go up to 200,000 dollars, I think,” said Ellie, “he wouldn’t take less. Minnie was man-mad and really a half-wit,” she added.

“You take my breath away, Ellie,” I said. “I’ve not only acquired a wife, I’ve got something I can trade for solid cash at any time.”

“That’s right,” said Ellie. “Send for a high-powered lawyer and tell him you’re willing to talk turkey. Then he fixes up the divorce and the amount of alimony,” said Ellie, continuing my education. “My stepmother’s been married four times,” she added, “and she’s made quite a lot out of it.” And then she said, “Oh, Mike, don’t look so shocked.”

The funny thing is that I was shocked. I felt a priggish distaste for the corruption of modern society in its richer phases. There had been something so little-girl-like about Ellie, so simple, almost touching in her attitude that I was astonished to find how well up she was in worldly affairs and how much she took for granted. And yet I knew that I was right about her fundamentally. I knew quite well the kind of creature that Ellie was. Her simplicity, her affection, her natural sweetness. That didn’t mean she had to be ignorant of things. What she did know and took for granted was a fairly limited slice of humanity. She didn’t know much about my world, the world of scrounging for jobs, of race course gangs and dope gangs, the rough and tumble dangers of life, the sharp-Aleck flashy type that I knew so well from living amongst them all my life. She didn’t know what it was to be brought up decent and respectable but always hard up for money, with a mother who

worked her fingers to the bone in the name of respectability, determining that her son should do well in life. Every penny scrimped for and saved, and the bitterness when your gay carefree son threw away his chances or gambled his all on a good tip for the 3:30.

She enjoyed hearing about my life as much as I enjoyed hearing about hers. Both of us were exploring a foreign country.

Looking back I see what a wonderfully happy life it was, those early days with Ellie. At the time I took them for granted and so did she. We were married in a registry office in Plymouth. Guteman is not an uncommon name. Nobody, reporters or otherwise, knew the Guteman heiress was in England. There had been vague paragraphs in papers occasionally, describing her as in Italy or on someone's yacht. We were married in the Registrar's office with his clerk and a middle-aged typist as witnesses. He gave us a serious little harangue on the serious responsibilities of married life, and wished us happiness. Then we went out, free and married. Mr. and Mrs. Michael Rogers! We spent a week in a seaside hotel and then we went abroad. We had a glorious three weeks travelling about wherever the fancy took us and no expense spared.

We went to Greece and we went to Florence, and to Venice and lay on the Lido, then to the French Riviera and then to the Dolomites. Half the places I forget the names of now. We took planes or chartered a yacht or hired large and handsome cars. And while we enjoyed ourselves, Greta, I gathered from Ellie, was still on the Home Front doing her stuff.

Travelling about in her own way, sending letters and forwarding all the various post-cards and letters that Ellie had left with her.

"There'll be a day of reckoning, of course," said Ellie. "They'll come down on us like a cloud of vultures. But we might as well enjoy ourselves until that happens."

"What about Greta?" I said. "Won't they be rather angry with her when they find out?"

"Oh, of course," said Ellie, "but Greta won't mind. She's tough."

“Mightn’t it stop her getting another job?”

“Why should she get another job?” said Ellie. “She’ll come and live with us.”

“No!” I said.

“What do you mean, no, Mike?”

“We don’t want anyone living with us,” I said.

“Greta wouldn’t be in the way,” said Ellie, “and she’d be very useful. Really, I don’t know what I’d do without her. I mean, she manages and arranges everything.”

I frowned. “I don’t think I’d like that. Besides, we want our own house—our dream house, after all, Ellie—we want it to ourselves.”

“Yes,” said Ellie, “I know what you mean. But all the same—” She hesitated. “I mean, it would be very hard on Greta not to have anywhere to live. After all, she’s been with me, done everything for me for four years now. And look how she’s helped me to get married and all that.”

“I won’t have her butting in between us all the time!”

“But she’s not like that at all, Mike. You haven’t even met her yet.”

“No. No, I know I haven’t but—but it’s nothing to do with, oh with liking her or not. We want to be by ourselves, Ellie.”

“Darling Mike,” said Ellie softly.

We left it at that for the moment.

During the course of our travels we had met Santonix. That was in Greece. He had been in a small fisherman’s cottage near the sea. I was startled by how ill he looked, much worse than when I had seen him a year ago. He greeted both Ellie and myself very warmly.

“So you’ve done it, you two,” he said.

“Yes,” said Ellie, “and now we’re going to have our house built, aren’t we?”

“I’ve got the drawings for you here, the plans,” he said to me. “She’s told you, hasn’t she, how she came and ferreted me out and gave me her—commands,” he said, choosing the words thoughtfully.

“Oh! not commands,” said Ellie. “I just pleaded.”

“You know we’ve bought the site?” I said.

“Ellie wired and told me. She sent me dozens of photographs.”

“Of course you’ve got to come and see it first,” said Ellie. “You mightn’t like the site.”

“I do like it.”

“You can’t really know till you’ve seen it.”

“But I have seen it, child. I flew over five days ago. I met one of your hatchet-faced lawyers there—the English one.”

“Mr. Crawford?”

“That’s the man. In fact, operations have already started: clearing the ground, removing the ruins of the old house, foundations—drains—When you get back to England I’ll be there to meet you.” He got out his plans then and we sat talking and looking at our house to be. There was even a rough water-colour sketch of it as well as the architectural elevations and plans.

“Do you like it, Mike?”

I drew a deep breath.

“Yes,” I said, “that’s it. That’s absolutely it.”

“You used to talk about it enough, Mike. When I was in a fanciful mood I used to think that piece of land had laid a spell upon you. You were a man in love with a house that you might never own, that you might never see, that might never even be built.”

“But it’s going to be built,” said Ellie. “It’s going to be built, isn’t it?”

“If God or the devil wills it,” said Santonix. “It doesn’t depend on me.”

“You’re not any—any better?” I asked doubtfully.

“Get it into your thick head. I shall never be better. That’s not on the cards.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “People are finding cures for things all the time. Doctors are gloomy brutes. They give people up for dead and then the people laugh and cock a snook at them and live for another fifty years.”

“I admire your optimism, Mike, but my malady isn’t one of that kind. They take you to hospital and give you a change of blood and back you come again with a little leeway of life, a little span of time gained. And so on, getting weaker each time.”

“You are very brave,” said Ellie.

“Oh no, I’m not brave. When a thing is certain there’s nothing to be brave about. All you can do is find your consolation.”

“Building houses?”

“No, not that. You’ve less vitality all the time, you see, and therefore building houses becomes more difficult, not easier. The strength keeps giving out. No. But there are consolations. Sometimes very queer ones.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said.

“No, you wouldn’t, Mike. I don’t know really that Ellie would. She might.” He went on, speaking not so much to us as to himself. “Two things run together, side by side. Weakness and strength. The weakness of fading vitality and the strength of frustrated power. It doesn’t matter, you see, what

you do now! You're going to die anyway. So you can do anything you choose. There's nothing to deter you, there's nothing to hold you back. I could walk through the streets of Athens shooting down every man or woman whose face I didn't like. Think of that."

"The police could arrest you just the same," I pointed out.

"Of course they could. But what could they do? At the most take my life. Well my life's going to be taken by a greater power than the law in a very short time. What else could they do? Send me to prison for twenty—thirty years? That's rather ironical, isn't it, there aren't twenty or thirty years for me to serve. Six months—one year—eighteen months at the utmost. There's nothing anyone can do to me. So in the span that's left to me I am king. I can do what I like. Sometimes it's a very heady thought. Only—only, you see, there's not much temptation because there's nothing particularly exotic or lawless that I want to do."

After we had left him, as we were driving back to Athens, Ellie said to me:

"He's an odd person. Sometimes you know, I feel frightened of him."

"Frightened, of Rudolf Santonix—why?"

"Because he isn't like other people and because he has a—I don't know—a ruthlessness and an arrogance about him somewhere. And I think that he was trying to tell us, really, that knowing he's going to die soon has increased his arrogance. Supposing," said Ellie, looking at me in an animated way, with almost a rapt and emotional expression on her face, "supposing he built us our lovely castle, our lovely house on the cliff's edge there in the pines, supposing we were coming to live in it. There he was on the doorstep and he welcomed us in and then—"

"Well, Ellie?"

"Then supposing he came in after us, he slowly closed the doorway behind us and sacrificed us there on the threshold. Cut our throats or something."

"You frighten me, Ellie. The things you think of!"

“The trouble with you and me, Mike, is that we don’t live in the real world. We dream of fantastic things that may never happen.”

“Don’t think of sacrifices in connection with Gipsy’s Acre.”

“It’s the name, I suppose, and the curse upon it.”

“There isn’t any curse,” I shouted. “It’s all nonsense. Forget it.”

That was in Greece.

Ten

It was, I think, the day after that. We were in Athens. Suddenly, on the steps of the Acropolis Ellie ran into people that she knew. They had come ashore from one of the Hellenic cruises. A woman of about thirty-five detached herself from the group and rushed along the steps to Ellie exclaiming:

“Why, I never did. It’s really you, Ellie Guteman? Well, what are you doing here? I’d no idea. Are you on a cruise?”

“No,” said Ellie, “just staying here.”

“My, but it’s lovely to see you. How’s Cora, is she here?”

“No, Cora is at Salzburg I believe.”

“Well, well.” The woman was looking at me and Ellie said quietly, “Let me introduce—Mr. Rogers, Mrs. Bennington.”

“How d’you do. How long are you here for?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” said Ellie.

“Oh dear! My, I’ll lose my party if I don’t go, and I just don’t want to miss a word of the lecture and the descriptions. They do hustle one a bit, you know. I’m just dead beat at the end of the day. Any chance of meeting you for a drink?”

“Not today,” said Ellie, “we’re going on an excursion.”

Mrs. Bennington rushed off to rejoin her party. Ellie, who had been going with me up the steps of the Acropolis, turned round and moved down again.

“That rather settles things, doesn’t it?” she said to me.

“What does it settle?”

Ellie did not answer for a minute or two and then she said with a sigh, "I must write tonight."

"Write to whom?"

"Oh, to Cora, and to Uncle Frank, I suppose, and Uncle Andrew."

"Who's Uncle Andrew? He's a new one."

"Andrew Lippincott. Not really an uncle. He's my principal guardian or trustee or whatever you call it. He's a lawyer—a very well-known one."

"What are you going to say?"

"I'm going to tell them I'm married. I couldn't say suddenly to Nora Bennington 'Let me introduce my husband.' There would have been frightful shrieks and exclamations and 'I never heard you were married. Tell me all about it, darling' etcetera, etcetera. It's only fair that my stepmother and Uncle Frank and Uncle Andrew should be the first to know." She sighed. "Oh well, we've had a lovely time up to now."

"What will they say or do?" I asked.

"Make a fuss, I expect," said Ellie, in her placid way. "It doesn't matter if they do and they'll have sense enough to know that. We'll have to have a meeting, I expect. We could go to New York. Would you like that?" She looked at me inquiringly.

"No," I said, "I shouldn't like it in the least."

"Then they'll come to London probably, or some of them will. I don't know if you'd like that any better."

"I shouldn't like any of it. I want to be with you and see our house going up brick by brick as soon as Santonix gets there."

"So we can," said Ellie. "After all, meetings with the family won't take long. Possibly just one big splendid row would do. Get it over in one. Either we fly over there or they fly over here."

“I thought you said your stepmother was at Salzburg.”

“Oh, I just said that. It sounded odd to say I didn’t know where she was. Yes,” said Ellie with a sigh, “we’ll go home and meet them all. Mike, I hope you won’t mind too much.”

“Mind what—your family?”

“Yes. You won’t mind if they’re nasty to you.”

“I suppose it’s the price I have to pay for marrying you,” I said. “I’ll bear it.”

“There’s your mother,” said Ellie thoughtfully.

“For heaven’s sake, Ellie, you’re not going to try and arrange a meeting between your stepmother in her frills and her furbelows and my mother from her back street. What do you think they’d have to say to each other?”

“If Cora was my own mother they might have quite a lot to say to each other,” said Ellie. “I wish you wouldn’t be so obsessed with class distinctions, Mike!”

“Me!” I said incredulously. “What’s your American phrase—I come from the wrong side of the tracks, don’t I?”

“You don’t want to write it on a placard and put it on yourself.”

“I don’t know the right clothes to wear,” I said bitterly. “I don’t know the right way to talk about things and I don’t know anything really about pictures or art or music. I’m only just learning who to tip and how much to give.”

“Don’t you think, Mike, that that makes it all much more exciting for you? I think so.”

“Anyway,” I said, “you’re not to drag my mother into your family party.”

“I wasn’t proposing to drag anyone into anything, but I think, Mike, I ought to go and see your mother when we go back to England.”

“No,” I said explosively.

She looked at me rather startled.

“Why not, Mike, though? I mean, apart from anything else, I mean it’s just very rude not to. Have you told her you’re married?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

I didn’t answer.

“Wouldn’t the simplest way be to tell her you’re married and take me to see her when we get back to England?”

“No,” I said again. It was not so explosive this time but it was still fairly well underlined.

“You don’t want me to meet her,” said Ellie, slowly.

I didn’t of course. I suppose it was obvious enough but the last thing I could do was to explain. I didn’t see how I could explain.

“It wouldn’t be the right thing to do,” I said slowly. “You must see that. I’m sure it would lead to trouble.”

“You think she wouldn’t like me?”

“Nobody could help liking you, but it wouldn’t be—oh I don’t know how to put it. But she might be upset and confused. After all, well, I mean I’ve married out of my station. That’s the old-fashioned term. She wouldn’t like that.”

Ellie shook her head slowly.

“Does anybody really think like that nowadays?”

“Of course they do. They do in your country too.”

“Yes,” she said, “in a way that’s true but—if anyone makes good there—”

“You mean if a man makes a lot of money.”

“Well, not only money.”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s money. If a man makes a lot of money he’s admired and looked up to and it doesn’t matter where he was born.”

“Well, that’s the same everywhere,” said Ellie.

“Please, Ellie,” I said. “Please don’t go and see my mother.”

“I still think it’s unkind.”

“No it isn’t. Can’t you let me know what’s best for my own mother? She’d be upset. I tell you she would.”

“But you must tell her you’ve got married.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll do that.”

It occurred to me it would be easier to write to my mother from abroad. That evening when Ellie was writing to Uncle Andrew and Uncle Frank and her stepmother Cora van Stuyvesant, I, too, was writing my own letter. It was quite short.

“Dear Mum,” I wrote. “I ought to have told you before but I felt a bit awkward. I got married three weeks ago. It was all rather sudden. She’s a very pretty girl and very sweet. She’s got a lot of money which makes things a bit awkward sometimes. We’re going to build ourselves a house somewhere in the country. Just at present we’re travelling around Europe. All the best, Yours, Mike.”

The results of our evening's correspondence were somewhat varied. My mother let a week elapse before she sent a letter remarkably typical of her.

“Dear Mike. I was glad to get your letter. I hope you'll be very happy.
Your affectionate mother.”

As Ellie had prophesied, there was far more fuss on her side. We'd stirred up a regular hornet's nest of trouble. We were beset by reporters who wanted news of our romantic marriage, there were articles in the papers about the Guteman heiress and her romantic elopement, there were letters from bankers and lawyers. And finally official meetings were arranged. We met Santonix on the site of Gipsy's Acre and we looked at the plans there and discussed things, and then having seen things under way we came to London, took a suite at Claridge's and prepared, as they say in old world books, to receive cavalry.

The first to arrive was Mr. Andrew P. Lippincott. He was an elderly man, dry and precise in appearance. He was long and lean with suave and courteous manners. He was a Bostonian and from his voice I wouldn't have known he was an American. By arrangement through the telephone he called upon us in our suite at 12 o'clock. Ellie was nervous, I could tell, although she concealed it very well.

Mr. Lippincott kissed Ellie and extended a hand and a pleasant smile to me.

“Well, Ellie my dear, you are looking very well. Blooming, I might say.”

“How are you, Uncle Andrew? How did you come? Did you fly?”

“No, I had a very pleasant trip across on the Queen Mary. And this is your husband?”

“This is Mike, yes.”

I played up, or thought I did. “How are you, sir?” I said. Then I asked him if he'd have a drink, which he refused pleasantly. He sat down in an upright chair with gilt arms to it and looked, still smiling, from Ellie to me.

“Well,” he said, “you young people have been giving us shocks. All very romantic, eh?”

“I’m sorry,” said Ellie, “I really am sorry.”

“Are you?” said Mr. Lippincott, rather dryly.

“I thought it was the best way,” said Ellie.

“I am not altogether of your opinion there, my dear.”

“Uncle Andrew,” Ellie said, “you know perfectly well that if I’d done it any other way there would have been the most frightful fuss.”

“Why should there have been such a frightful fuss?”

“You know what they’d have been like,” said Ellie. “You too,” she added accusingly. She added, “I’ve had two letters from Cora. One yesterday and one this morning.”

“You must discount a certain amount of agitation, my dear. It’s only natural under the circumstances, don’t you think?”

“It’s my business who I get married to and how and where.”

“You may think so, but you will find that the women of any family would rarely agree as to that.”

“Really, I’ve saved everyone a lot of trouble.”

“You may put it that way.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?”

“But you practised, did you not, a good deal of deception, helped by someone who should have known better than to do what she did.”

Ellie flushed.

“You mean Greta? She only did what I asked her to. Are they all very upset with her?”

“Naturally. Neither she nor you could expect anything else, could you? She was, remember, in a position of trust.”

“I’m of age. I can do what I like.”

“I am speaking of the period of time before you were of age. The deceptions began then, did they not?”

“You mustn’t blame Ellie, sir,” I said. “To begin with I didn’t know what was going on and since all her relations are in another country it wasn’t easy for me to get in touch with them.”

“I quite realize,” said Mr. Lippincott, “that Greta posted certain letters and gave certain information to Mrs. van Stuyvesant and to myself as she was requested to do by Ellie here, and made, if I may say so, a very competent job of it. You have met Greta Andersen, Michael? I may call you Michael, since you are Ellie’s husband?”

“Of course,” I said, “call me Mike. No, I haven’t met Miss Andersen—”

“Indeed? That seems to me surprising.” He looked at me with a long thoughtful gaze. “I should have thought that she would have been present at your marriage.”

“No, Greta wasn’t there,” said Ellie. She threw me a look of reproach and I shifted uncomfortably.

Mr. Lippincott’s eyes were still resting on me thoughtfully. He made me uncomfortable. He seemed about to say something more then changed his mind.

“I’m afraid,” he said after a moment or two, “that you two, Michael and Ellie, will have to put up with a certain amount of reproaches and criticism from Ellie’s family.”

“I suppose they are going to descend on me in a bunch,” said Ellie.

“Very probably,” said Mr. Lippincott. “I’ve tried to pave the way,” he added.

“You’re on our side, Uncle Andrew?” said Ellie, smiling at him.

“You must hardly ask a prudent lawyer to go as far as that. I have learnt that in life it is wise to accept what is a fait accompli. You two have fallen in love with each other and have got married and have, I understood you to say, Ellie, bought a piece of property in the South of England and have already started building a house on it. You propose, therefore, to live in this country?”

“We want to make our home here, yes. Do you object to our doing that?” I said with a touch of anger in my voice. “Ellie’s married to me and she’s a British subject now. So why shouldn’t she live in England?”

“No reason at all. In fact, there is no reason why Fenella should not live in any country she chooses, or indeed have property in more than one country. The house in Nassau belongs to you, remember, Ellie.”

“I always thought it was Cora’s. She always has behaved as though it was.”

“But the actual property rights are vested in you. You also have the house in Long Island whenever you care to visit it. You are the owner of a great deal of oil-bearing property in the West.” His voice was amiable, pleasant, but I had the feeling that the words were directed at me in some curious way. Was it his idea of trying to insinuate a wedge between me and Ellie? I was not sure. It didn’t seem very sensible, rubbing it in to a man that his wife owned property all over the world and was fabulously rich. If anything I should have thought that he would have played down Ellie’s property rights and her money and all the rest of it. If I was a fortune hunter as he obviously thought, that would be all the more grist to my mill. But I did realize that Mr. Lippincott was a subtle man. It would be hard at any time to know what he was driving at; what he had in his mind behind his even and pleasant manner. Was he trying in a way of his own to make me feel uncomfortable, to make me feel that I was going to be branded almost publicly as a fortune hunter? He said to Ellie:

“I’ve brought over a certain amount of legal stuff which you’ll have to go through with me, Ellie. I shall want your signature to many of these things.”

“Yes, of course, Uncle Andrew. Any time.”

“As you say, any time. There’s no hurry. I have other business in London and I shall be over here for about ten days.”

Ten days, I thought. That’s a long time. I rather wished that Mr. Lippincott wasn’t going to be here for ten days. He appeared friendly enough towards me, though, as you might say, indicating that he still reserved his judgment on certain points, but I wondered at that moment whether he was really my enemy. If he was, he would not be the kind of man to show his hand.

“Well,” he went on, “now that we’ve all met and come to terms, as you might say, for the future, I would like to have a short interview with this husband of yours.”

Ellie said, “You can talk to us both.” She was up in arms. I put a hand on her arm.

“Now don’t flare up, ducks, you’re not a mother hen protecting a chicken.” I propelled her gently to the door in the wall that led into the bedroom. “Uncle Andrew wants to size me up,” I said. “He’s well within his rights.”

I pushed her gently through the double doors. I shut them both and came back into the room. It was a large handsome sitting room. I came back and took a chair and faced Mr. Lippincott. “All right,” I said. “Shoot.”

“Thank you, Michael,” he said. “First of all I want to assure you that I am not, as you may be thinking, your enemy in any way.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m glad to hear that.” I didn’t sound very sure about it.

“Let me speak frankly,” said Mr. Lippincott, “more frankly than I could do before that dear child to whom I am guardian and of whom I am very fond. You may not yet appreciate it fully, Michael, but Ellie is a most unusually sweet and lovable girl.”

“Don’t you worry. I’m in love with her all right.”

“That is not at all the same thing,” said Mr. Lippincott in his dry manner. “I hope that as well as being in love with her you can also appreciate what a really dear and in some ways very vulnerable person she is.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll have to try very hard. She’s the tops, Ellie is.”

“So I will go on with what I was about to say. I shall put my cards on the table with the utmost frankness. You are not the kind of young man that I should have wished Ellie to marry. I should like her, as her family would have liked her, to marry someone of her own surroundings, of her own set —”

“A toff in other words,” I said.

“No, not only that. A similar background is, I think, to be desired as a basis for matrimony. And I am not referring to the snob attitude. After all, Herman Guteman, her grandfather, started life as a dockhand. He ended up as one of the richest men in America.”

“For all you know I might do the same,” I said. “I may end up one of the richest men in England.”

“Everything is possible,” said Mr. Lippincott. “Do you have ambitions that way?”

“It’s not just the money,” I said. “I’d like to—I’d like to get somewhere and do things and—” I hesitated, stopped.

“You have ambitions, shall we say? Well, that is a very good thing, I am sure.”

“I’m starting at long odds,” I said, “starting from scratch. I’m nothing and nobody and I won’t pretend otherwise.”

He nodded approval.

“Very frankly and handsomely said, I appreciate it. Now, Michael, I am no relation to Ellie, but I have acted as her guardian, I am a trustee, left so by her grandfather, of her affairs, I manage her fortune and her investments. And I assume therefore a certain responsibility for them. Therefore I want to know all that I can know about the husband she has chosen.”

“Well,” I said, “you can make inquiries about me, I suppose, and find out anything you like easily enough.”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Lippincott. “That would be one way of doing it. A wise precaution to take. But actually, Michael, I should like to know all that I can about you from your own lips. I should like to hear your own story of what your life has been up to now.”

Of course I didn’t like it. I expect he knew I wouldn’t. Nobody in my position would like that. It’s second nature to make the best of yourself. I’d made a point of that at school and onwards, boasted about things a bit, said a few things, stretching the truth a bit. I wasn’t ashamed of it. I think it’s natural. I think it’s the sort of thing that you’ve got to do if you want to get on. Make out a good case for yourself. People take you at your own valuation and I didn’t want to be like that chap in Dickens. They read it out on the television, and I must say it’s a good yarn on its own. Uriah something his name was, always going on about being humble and rubbing his hands, and actually planning and scheming behind that humility. I didn’t want to be like that.

I was ready enough to boast a bit with the chaps I met or to put up a good case to a prospective employer. After all, you’ve got a best side and a worst side of yourself and it’s no good showing the worst side and harping on it. No, I’d always done the best for myself describing my activities up to date. But I didn’t fancy doing that sort of thing with Mr. Lippincott. He’d rather pooh-poohed the idea of making private inquiries about me but I wasn’t at all sure that he wouldn’t do so all the same. So I gave him the truth unvarnished, as you might say.

Squalid beginnings, the fact that my father had been a drunk, but that I’d had a good mother, that she’d slaved a good bit to help me get educated. I made no secret of the fact that I’d been a rolling stone, that I’d moved from

one job to another. He was a good listener, encouraging, if you know what I mean. Every now and then, though, I realized how shrewd he was. Just little questions that he slipped in, or comments, some comments that I might have rushed in unguardedly either to admit or to deny.

Yes, I had a sort of feeling that I'd better be wary and on my toes. And after ten minutes I was quite glad when he leaned back in his chair and the inquisition, if you could call it that, and it wasn't in the least like one, seemed to be over.

"You have an adventurous attitude to life, Mr. Rogers—Michael. Not a bad thing. Tell me more about this house that you and Ellie are building."

"Well," I said, "it's not far from a town called Market Chadwell."

"Yes," he said, "I know just where it is. As a matter of fact I ran down to see it. Yesterday, to be exact."

That startled me a little. It showed he was a devious kind of fellow who got round to more things than you might think he would.

"It's a beautiful site," I said defensively, "and the house we're building is going to be a beautiful house. The architect's a chap called Santonix. Rudolf Santonix. I don't know if you've ever heard of him but—"

"Oh yes," said Mr. Lippincott, "he's quite a well-known name among architects."

"He's done work in the States I believe."

"Yes, an architect of great promise and talent. Unfortunately I believe his health is not good."

"He thinks he's a dying man," I said, "but I don't believe it. I believe he'll get cured, get well again. Doctors—they'll say anything."

"I hope your optimism is justified. You are an optimist."

"I am about Santonix."

“I hope all you wish will come true. I may say that I think you and Ellie have made an extremely good purchase in the piece of property that you have bought.”

I thought it was nice of the old boy to use the pronoun “you.” It wasn’t rubbing it in that Ellie had done the buying on her own.

“I have had a consultation with Mr. Crawford—”

“Crawford?” I frowned slightly.

“Mr. Crawford of Reece & Crawford, a firm of English solicitors. Mr. Crawford was the member of the firm who put the purchase in hand. It is a good firm of solicitors and I gather that this property was acquired at a cheap figure. I may say that I wondered slightly at that. I am familiar with the present prices of land in this country and I really felt rather at a loss to account for it. I think Mr. Crawford himself was surprised to get it at so low a figure. I wondered if you knew at all why this property happened to go so cheaply. Mr. Crawford did not advance any opinion on that. In fact he seemed slightly embarrassed when I put the question to him.”

“Oh well,” I said, “it’s got a curse on it.”

“I beg your pardon, Michael, what did you say?”

“A curse, sir,” I explained. “The gipsy’s warning, that sort of thing. It is known locally as Gipsy’s Acre.”

“Ah. A story?”

“Yes. It seems rather confused and I don’t know how much people have made up and how much is true. There was a murder or something long ago. A man and his wife and another man. Some story that the husband shot the other two and then shot himself. At least that’s the verdict that was brought in. But all sorts of other stories go flying about. I don’t think anyone really knows what happened. It was a good long time ago. It’s changed hands about four or five times since, but nobody stays there long.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Lippincott appreciatively, “yes, quite a piece of English folklore.” He looked at me curiously. “And you and Ellie are not afraid of the curse?” He said it lightly, with a slight smile.

“Of course not,” I said. “Neither Ellie nor I would believe in any rubbish of that kind. Actually it’s a lucky thing since because of it we got it cheap.” When I said that a sudden thought struck me. It was lucky in one sense, but I thought that with all Ellie’s money and her property and all the rest of it, it couldn’t matter to her very much whether she bought a piece of land cheap or at the top price. Then I thought, no, I was wrong. After all, she’d had a grandfather who came up from being a dock labourer to a millionaire. Anyone of that kind would always wish to buy cheap and sell dear.

“Well, I am not superstitious,” said Mr. Lippincott, “and the view from your property is quite magnificent.” He hesitated. “I only hope that when you come to move into your house to live there, that Ellie will not hear too many of these stories that are going about.”

“I’ll keep everything from her that I can,” I said. “I don’t suppose anybody will say anything to her.”

“People in country villages are very fond of repeating stories of that kind,” said Mr. Lippincott. “And Ellie, remember, is not as tough as you are, Michael. She can be influenced easily. Only in some ways. Which brings me—” he stopped without going on to say what he had been going to. He tapped on the table with one finger. “I’m going to speak to you now on a matter of some difficulty. You said just now that you had not met this Greta Andersen.”

“No, as I said, I haven’t met her yet.”

“Odd. Very curious.”

“Well?” I looked at him inquiringly.

“I should have thought you’d have been almost sure to have met her,” he said slowly. “How much do you know about her?”

“I know that she’s been with Ellie some time.”

“She has been with Ellie since Ellie was seventeen. She has occupied a post of some responsibility and trust. She came first to the States in the capacity of secretary and companion. A kind of chaperone to Ellie when Mrs. van Stuyvesant, her stepmother, was away from home, which I may say was a quite frequent occurrence.” He spoke particularly dryly when he said this. “She is, I gather, a well-born girl with excellent references, half-Swedish half-German. Ellie became, quite naturally, very much attached to her.”

“So I gather,” I said.

“In some way Ellie was, I suppose, almost too much attached to her. You don’t mind my saying that?”

“No. Why should I mind? As a matter of fact I’ve—well, I’ve thought so myself once or twice. Greta this and Greta that. I got—well, I know I’ve no business to, but I used to get fed up sometimes.”

“And yet she expressed no wish for you to meet Greta?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s rather difficult to explain. But I think, yes, I think she probably did suggest it in a mild way once or twice but, well, we were too taken up with having met each other. Besides, oh well, I suppose I didn’t really want to meet Greta. I didn’t want to share Ellie with anyone.”

“I see. Yes, I see. And Ellie did not suggest Greta being present at your wedding?”

“She did suggest it,” I said.

“But—but you didn’t want her to come. Why?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. I just felt that this Greta, this girl or woman I’d never met, she was always horning in on everything. You know, arranging Ellie’s life for her. Sending post-cards and letters and filling in for Ellie, arranging a whole itinerary and passing it on to the family. I felt that Ellie was dependent on Greta in a way, that she let Greta run her, that she

wanted to do everything that Greta wanted. I—oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Lippincott, I oughtn’t to be saying all these things perhaps. Say I was just plain jealous. Anyway I blew up and I said I didn’t want Greta at the wedding, that the wedding was ours, that it was just our business and nobody else’s. And so we went along to the Registrar’s office and his clerk and the typist from his office were the two witnesses. I dare say it was mean of me to refuse to have Greta there, but I wanted to have Ellie to myself.”

“I see. Yes, I see, and I think, if I may say so, that you were wise, Michael.”

“You don’t like Greta either,” I said shrewdly.

“You can hardly use the word ‘either,’ Michael, if you have not even met her.”

“No, I know but, well, I mean if you hear a lot about a person you can form some sort of idea of them, some judgment of them. Oh well, call it plain jealousy. Why don’t you like Greta?”

“This is without prejudice,” said Mr. Lippincott, “but you are Ellie’s husband, Michael, and I have Ellie’s happiness very much at heart. I don’t think that the influence that Greta has over Ellie is a very desirable one. She takes too much upon herself.”

“Do you think she’ll try and make trouble between us?” I asked.

“I think,” said Mr. Lippincott, “that I have no right to say anything of that kind.”

He sat looking cautiously at me, and blinking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

I didn’t know quite what to say next. He spoke first, choosing his words with some care.

“There has been, then, no suggestion that Greta Andersen might take up her residence with you?”

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

“Ah. So that is what you feel? The idea has been mooted.”

“Ellie did say something of the kind. But we’re newly married, Mr. Lippincott. We want our house—our new home—to ourselves. Of course she’ll come and stay sometimes, I suppose. That’ll only be natural.”

“As you say, that would be only natural. But you realize, perhaps, that Greta is going to be in a somewhat difficult position as regards further employment. I mean, it is not a question of what Ellie thinks of her, but of what the people who engaged her and reposed trust in her feel.”

“You mean that you or Mrs. van What’s-her-name won’t recommend her for another post of the same kind?”

“They are hardly likely to do so except so far as to satisfy purely legal requirements.”

“And you think that she’ll want to come to England and live on Ellie.”

“I don’t want to prejudice you too much against her. After all, this is mostly in my mind. I dislike some of the things she has done and the way she has done them. I think that Ellie who has a very generous heart will be upset at having, shall we say, blighted Greta’s prospects in many ways. She might impulsively insist on her coming to live with you.”

“I don’t think Ellie will insist,” I said slowly. I sounded a little worried all the same, and I thought Lippincott noticed it. “But couldn’t we—Ellie, I mean—couldn’t Ellie pension her off?”

“We should not put it precisely like that,” said Mr. Lippincott. “There is a suggestion of age about pensioning anyone off and Greta is a young woman, and I may say a very handsome young woman. Beautiful, in fact,” he added in a deprecating, disapproving voice. “She’s very attractive to men, too.”

“Well, perhaps she’ll marry,” I said. “If she’s all that, why hasn’t she got married before this?”

“There have been people attracted, I believe, but she has not considered them. I think, however, that your suggestion is a very sound one. I think it might be carried out in a way that would not hurt anyone’s susceptibilities. It might seem quite a natural thing to do on Ellie’s having attained her majority and having had her marriage helped on by Greta’s good offices—settle a sum of money upon her in a fit of gratitude.” Mr. Lippincott made the last two words sound as sour as lemon juice.

“Well, then, that’s all right,” I said cheerfully.

“Again I see that you are an optimist. Let us hope that Greta will accept what is offered to her.”

“Why shouldn’t she? She’d be mad if she didn’t.”

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Lippincott. “I should say it would be extraordinary if she did not accept, and they will remain on terms of friendship, of course.”

“You think—what do you think?”

“I would like to see her influence over Ellie broken,” said Mr. Lippincott. He got up. “You will, I hope, assist me and do everything you can to further that end?”

“You bet I will,” I said. “The last thing I want is to have Greta in our pockets all the time.”

“You might change your mind when you see her,” said Mr. Lippincott.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I don’t like managing females, however efficient and even handsome they are.”

“Thank you, Michael, for listening to me so patiently. I hope you will give me the pleasure of dining with me, both of you. Possibly next Tuesday evening? Cora van Stuyvesant and Frank Barton will probably be in London by that time.”

“And I’ve got to meet them, I suppose?”

“Oh yes, that will be quite inevitable.” He smiled at me and this time his smile seemed more genuine than it had before. “You mustn’t mind too much,” he said. “Cora, I expect, will be very rude to you. Frank will be merely tactless. Reuben won’t be over just at present.”

I didn’t know who Reuben was—another relation I supposed.

I went across to the connecting doors and opened them. “Come on, Ellie,” I said, “the grilling is over.”

She came back in the room and looked quickly from Lippincott to myself, then she went across and kissed him.

“Dear Uncle Andrew,” she said. “I can see you’ve been nice to Michael.”

“Well, my dear, if I weren’t nice to your husband you wouldn’t have much use for me in the future, would you? I do reserve the right to give a few words of advice now and then. You’re very young you know, both of you.”

“All right,” said Ellie, “we’ll listen patiently.”

“Now, my dear, I’d like to have a word with you if I may.”

“My turn to be odd man out,” I said, and I too went into the bedroom.

I shut the two double doors ostentatiously but I opened the inner one again after I got inside. I hadn’t been as well brought up as Ellie so I felt a bit anxious to find out how double-faced Mr. Lippincott might turn out to be. But actually there was nothing I need have listened to. He gave Ellie one or two wise words of advice. He said she must realize that I might find it difficult to be a poor man married to a rich wife and then he went on to sound her about making a settlement on Greta. She agreed to it eagerly and said she’d been going to ask him that herself. He also suggested that she should make an additional settlement on Cora van Stuyvesant.

“There is no earthly need that you should do so,” he said. “She has been very well provided for in the matter of alimony from several husbands. And

she is as you know paid an income, though not a very big one, from the trust fund left by your grandfather.”

“But you think I ought to give her more still?”

“I think there is no legal or moral obligation to do so. What I think is that you will find her far less tiresome and shall I say catty if you do so. I should make it in the form of an increased income, which you could revoke at any time. If you find that she has been spreading malicious rumours about Michael or yourself or your life together, the knowledge that you can do that will keep her tongue free of those more poisonous barbs that she so well knows how to plant.”

“Cora has always hated me,” said Ellie. “I’ve known that.” She added rather shyly, “You do like Mike, don’t you, Uncle Andrew?”

“I think he’s an extremely attractive young man,” said Mr. Lippincott. “And I can quite see how you came to marry him.”

That, I suppose, was as good as I could expect. I wasn’t really his type and I knew it. I eased the door gently to and in a minute or two Ellie came to fetch me.

We were both standing saying good-bye to Lippincott when there was a knock on the door and a page boy came in with a telegram. Ellie took it and opened it. She gave a little surprised cry of pleasure.

“It’s Greta,” she said, “she’s arriving in London tonight and she’ll be coming to see us tomorrow. How lovely.” She looked at us both. “Isn’t it?” she said.

She saw two sour faces and heard two polite voices saying, one: “Yes indeed, my dear,” the other one, “Of course.”

Eleven

I had been out shopping the next morning and I arrived back at the hotel rather later than I had meant. I found Ellie sitting in the central lounge and opposite her was a tall blonde young woman. In fact Greta. Both of them were talking nineteen to the dozen.

I'm never any hand at describing people but I'll have a shot at describing Greta. To begin with one couldn't deny that she was, as Ellie had said, very beautiful and also, as Mr. Lippincott had reluctantly admitted, very handsome. The two things are not exactly the same. If you say a woman is handsome it does not mean that actually you yourself admire her. Mr. Lippincott, I gathered, had not admired Greta. All the same when Greta walked across the lounge into a hotel or in a restaurant, men's heads turned to look at her. She was a Nordic type of blonde with pure gold-corn-coloured hair. She wore it piled high on her head in the fashion of the time, not falling straight down on each side of her face in the Chelsea tradition. She looked what she was, Swedish or north German. In fact, pin on a pair of wings and she could have gone to a fancy dress ball as a Valkyrie. Her eyes were a bright clear blue and her contours were admirable. Let's admit it. She was something!

I came along to where they were sitting and joined them, greeting them both in what I hope was a natural, friendly manner, though I couldn't help feeling a bit awkward. I'm not always very good at acting a part. Ellie said immediately:

"At last, Mike, this is Greta."

I said I guessed it might be, in a rather facetious, not very happy manner. I said:

"I'm very glad to meet you at last, Greta."

Ellie said:

“As you know very well, if it hadn’t been for Greta we would never have been able to get married.”

“All the same we’d have managed it somehow,” I said.

“Not if the family had come down on us like a ton of coals. They’d have broken it up somehow. Tell me, Greta, have they been very awful?” Ellie asked. “You haven’t written or said anything to me about that.”

“I know better,” said Greta, “than to write to a happy couple when they’re on their honeymoon.”

“But were they very angry with you?”

“Of course! What do you imagine? But I was prepared for that, I can assure you.”

“What have they said or done?”

“Everything they could,” said Greta cheerfully. “Starting with the sack naturally.”

“Yes, I suppose that was inevitable. But—but what have you done? After all they can’t refuse to give you references.”

“Of course they can. And after all, from their point of view I was placed in a position of trust and abused it shamefully.” She added, “Enjoyed abusing it too.”

“But what are you going to do now?”

“Oh I’ve got a job ready to walk into.”

“In New York?”

“No. Here in London. Secretarial.”

“But are you all right?”

“Darling Ellie,” said Greta, “how can I not be all right with that lovely cheque you sent me in anticipation of what was going to happen when the balloon went up?”

Her English was very good with hardly any trace of accent though she used a lot of colloquial terms which sometimes didn’t run quite right.

“I’ve seen a bit of the world, fixed myself up in London and bought a good many things as well.”

“Mike and I have bought a lot of things too,” said Ellie, smiling at the recollection.

It was true. We’d done ourselves pretty well with our continental shopping. It was really wonderful that we had dollars to spend, no niggling Treasury restrictions. Brocades and fabrics in Italy for the house. And we’d bought pictures too, both in Italy and in Paris, paying what seemed fabulous sums for them. A whole world had opened up to me that I’d never dreamt would have come my way.

“You both look remarkably happy,” said Greta.

“You haven’t seen our house yet,” said Ellie. “It’s going to be wonderful. It’s going to be just like we dreamed it would be, isn’t it, Mike?”

“I have seen it,” said Greta. “The first day I got back to England I hired a car and drove down there.”

“Well?” said Ellie.

I said Well? too.

“Well,” said Greta consideringly. She shifted her head from side to side.

Ellie looked grief-stricken, horribly taken aback. But I wasn’t taken in. I saw at once that Greta was having a bit of fun with us. If the thought of fun wasn’t very kind, it hardly had time to take root. Greta burst out laughing, a high musical laugh that made people turn their heads and look at us.

“You should have seen your faces,” she said, “especially yours, Ellie. I have to tease you just a little. It’s a wonderful house, lovely. That man’s a genius.”

“Yes,” I said, “he’s something out of the ordinary. Wait till you meet him.”

“I have met him,” said Greta. “He was down there the day I went. Yes, he’s an extraordinary person. Rather frightening, don’t you think?”

“Frightening?” I said, surprised. “In what way?”

“Oh I don’t know. It’s as though he looks through you and—well, sees right through to the other side. That’s always disconcerting.” Then she added, “He looks rather ill.”

“He is ill. Very ill,” I said.

“What a shame. What’s the matter with him, tuberculosis, something like that?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t think it’s tuberculosis. I think it’s something to do with—oh with blood.”

“Oh I see. Doctors can do almost anything nowadays, can’t they, unless they kill you first while they’re trying to cure you. But don’t let’s think of that. Let’s think of the house. When will it be finished?”

“Quite soon, I should think, by the look of it. I’d never imagined a house could go up so quickly,” I said.

“Oh,” said Greta carelessly, “that’s money. Double shifts and bonuses—all the rest of it. You don’t really know yourself, Ellie, how wonderful it is to have all the money you have.”

But I did know. I had been learning, learning a great deal in the last few weeks. I’d stepped as a result of marriage into an entirely different world and it wasn’t the sort of world I’d imagined it to be from the outside. So far in my life, a lucky double had been my highest knowledge of affluence. A whack of money coming in, and spending it as fast as I could on the biggest

blowout I could find. Crude, of course. The crudeness of my class. But Ellie's world was a different world. It wasn't what I should have thought it to be. Just more and more super luxury. It wasn't bigger bathrooms and larger houses and more electric light fittings and bigger meals and faster cars. It wasn't just spending for spending's sake and showing off to everyone in sight. Instead, it was curiously simple. The sort of simplicity that comes when you get beyond the point of splashing for splashing's sake. You don't want three yachts or four cars and you can't eat more than three meals a day and if you buy a really top-price picture you don't want more than perhaps one of them in a room. It's as simple as that. Whatever you have is just the best of its kind, not so much because it is the best, but because there is no reason if you like or want any particular thing, why you shouldn't have it. There is no moment when you say, "I'm afraid I can't afford that one." So in a strange way it makes sometimes for such a curious simplicity that I couldn't understand it. We were considering a French Impressionist picture, a Cézanne, I think it was. I had to learn that name carefully. I always mixed it up with a tzigane which I gather is a gipsy orchestra. And then as we walked along the streets of Venice, Ellie stopped to look at some pavement artists. On the whole they were doing some terrible pictures for tourists which all looked the same. Portraits with great rows of shining teeth and usually blonde hair falling down their necks.

And then she bought quite a tiny picture, just a picture of a little glimpse through to a canal. The man who had painted it appraised the look of us and she bought it for £6 by English exchange. The funny thing was that I knew quite well that Ellie had just the same longing for that £6 picture that she had for the Cézanne.

It was the same way one day in Paris. She'd said to me suddenly:

"What fun it would be—let's get a really nice crisp French loaf of bread and have that with butter and one of those cheeses wrapped up in leaves."

So we did and Ellie I think enjoyed it more than the meal we'd had the night before which had come to about £20 English. At first I couldn't understand it, then I began to see. The awkward thing was that I could see now that being married to Ellie wasn't just fun and games. You have to do your homework, you have to learn how to go into a restaurant and the sort

of things to order and the right tips, and when for some reason you gave more than usual. You have to memorize what you drink with certain foods. I had to do most of it by observation. I couldn't ask Ellie because that was one of the things she wouldn't have understood. She'd have said "But, darling Mike, you can have anything you like. What does it matter if waiters think you ought to have one particular wine with one particular thing?" It wouldn't have mattered to her because she was born to it but it mattered to me because I couldn't do just as I liked. I wasn't simple enough. Clothes too. Ellie was more helpful there, for she could understand better. She just guided me to the right places and told me to let them have their head.

Of course I didn't look right and sound right yet. But that didn't matter much. I'd got the hang of it, enough so that I could pass muster with people like old Lippincott, and shortly, presumably, when Ellie's stepmother and uncles were around, but actually it wasn't going to matter in the future at all. When the house was finished and when we'd moved in, we were going to be far away from everybody. It could be our kingdom. I looked at Greta sitting opposite me. I wondered what she'd really thought of our house. Anyway, it was what I wanted. It satisfied me utterly. I wanted to drive down and go through a private path through the trees which led down to a small cove which would be our own beach which nobody could come to on the land side. It would be a thousand times better, I thought, plunging into the sea there. A thousand times better than a lido spread along a beach with hundreds of bodies lying there. I didn't want all the senseless rich things. I wanted—there were the words again, my own particular words—I want, I want...I could feel all the feeling surging up in me. I wanted a wonderful woman and a wonderful house like nobody else's house and I wanted my wonderful house to be full of wonderful things. Things that belonged to me. Everything would belong to me.

"He's thinking of our house," said Ellie.

It seemed that she had twice suggested to me that we should go now into the dining room. I looked at her affectionately.

Later in the day—it was that evening—when we were dressing to go out to dinner, Ellie said a little tentatively:

“Mike, you do—you do like Greta, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” I said.

“I couldn’t bear it if you didn’t like her.”

“But I do,” I protested. “What makes you think I don’t?”

“I’m not quite sure. I think it’s the way you hardly look at her even when you’re talking to her.”

“Well, I suppose that’s because—well, because I feel nervous.”

“Nervous of Greta?”

“Yes, she’s a bit awe-inspiring, you know.”

And I told Ellie how I thought Greta looked rather like a Valkyrie.

“Not as stout as an operatic one,” said Ellie and laughed. We both laughed. I said:

“It’s all very well for you because you’ve known her for years. But she is just a bit—well, I mean she’s very efficient and practical and sophisticated.” I struggled with a lot of words which didn’t seem to be quite the right ones. I said suddenly, “I feel—I feel at a disadvantage with her.”

“Oh Mike!” Ellie was conscience-stricken. “I know we’ve got a lot of things to talk about. Old jokes and old things that happened and all that. I suppose—yes, I suppose it might make you feel rather shy. But you’ll soon get to be friends. She likes you. She likes you very much. She told me so.”

“Listen, Ellie, she’d probably tell you that anyway.”

“Oh no she wouldn’t. Greta’s very outspoken. You heard her. Some of the things she said today.”

It was true that Greta had not minced her words during luncheon. She had said, addressing me rather than Ellie:

“You must have thought it queer sometimes, the way I was backing Ellie up when I’d not even seen you. But I got so mad—so mad with the life that they were making her lead. All tied up in a cocoon with their money, their traditional ideas. She never had a chance to enjoy herself, go anywhere really by herself and do what she wanted. She wanted to rebel but she didn’t know how. And so—yes, all right, I urged her on. I suggested she should look at properties in England. Then I said when she was twenty-one she could buy one of her own and say good-bye to all that New York lot.”

“Greta always has wonderful ideas,” said Ellie. “She thinks of things I’d probably never have thought of myself.”

What were those words Mr. Lippincott had said to me? “She has too much influence over Ellie.” I wondered if it was true. Queerly enough I didn’t really think so. I felt that there was a core somewhere in Ellie that Greta, for all that she knew her so well, had never quite appreciated. Ellie, I was sure, would always accept any ideas that matched with the ideas she wanted to have herself. Greta had preached rebellion to Ellie but Ellie herself wanted to rebel, only she was not sure how to do so. But I felt that Ellie, now that I was coming to know her better, was one of those very simple people who have unexpected reserves. I thought Ellie would be quite capable of taking a stand of her own if she wished to. The point was that she wouldn’t very often wish to and I thought then how difficult everyone was to understand. Even Ellie. Even Greta. Even perhaps my own mother...The way she looked at me with fear in her eyes.

I wondered about Mr. Lippincott. I said, as we were peeling some outsize peaches:

“Mr. Lippincott seems to have taken our marriage very well really. I was surprised.”

“Mr. Lippincott,” said Greta, “is an old fox.”

“You always say so, Greta,” said Ellie, “but I think he’s rather a dear. Very strict and proper and all that.”

“Well, go on thinking so if you like,” said Greta. “Myself, I wouldn’t trust him an inch.”

“Not trust him!” said Ellie.

Greta shook her head. “I know. He’s a pillar of respectability and trustworthiness. He’s everything a trustee and a lawyer should be.”

Ellie laughed and said, “Do you mean he’s embezzled my fortune? Don’t be silly, Greta. There are thousands of auditors and banks and check-ups and all that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I expect he’s all right really,” said Greta. “All the same, those are the people that do embezzle. The trustworthy ones. And then everyone says afterwards, ‘I’d never have believed it of Mr. A. or Mr. B. The last man in the world.’ Yes, that’s what they say. ‘The last man in the world.’”

Ellie said thoughtfully that her Uncle Frank, she thought, was much more likely to go in for dishonest practices. She did not seem unduly worried or surprised by the idea.

“Oh well he looks like a crook,” said Greta. “That handicaps him to start with. All that geniality and bonhomie. But he’ll never be in a position to be a crook in a big way.”

“Is he your mother’s brother?” I asked. I always got confused over Ellie’s relations.

“He’s my father’s sister’s husband,” said Ellie. “She left him and married someone else and died about six or seven years ago. Uncle Frank has more or less stuck on with the family.”

“There are three of them,” said Greta kindly and helpfully. “Three leeches hanging round, as you might say. Ellie’s actual uncles were killed, one in Korea and one in a car accident, so what she’s got is a much-damaged stepmother, an Uncle Frank, an amiable hanger-on in the family home, and her cousin Reuben whom she calls Uncle but he’s only a cousin and Andrew Lippincott, and Stanford Lloyd.”

“Who is Stanford Lloyd?” I asked, bewildered.

“Oh another sort of trustee, isn’t he, Ellie? At any rate he manages your investments and things like that. Which can’t really be very difficult because when you’ve got as much money as Ellie has, it sort of makes more money all the time without anyone having to do much about it. Those are the main surrounding group,” Greta added, “and I have no doubt that you will be meeting them fairly soon. They’ll be over here to have a look at you.”

I groaned, and looked at Ellie. Ellie said very gently and sweetly:

“Never mind, Mike, they’ll go away again.”

Twelve

They did come over. None of them stayed very long. Not that time, not on a first visit. They came over to have a look at me. I found them difficult to understand because of course they were all Americans. They were types with which I was not well acquainted. Some of them were pleasant enough. Uncle Frank, for instance. I agreed with Greta about him. I wouldn't have trusted him a yard. I had come across the same type in England. He was a big man with a bit of a paunch and pouches under his eyes that gave him a dissipated look which was not far from the truth, I imagine. He had an eye for women, I thought, and even more of an eye for the main chance. He borrowed money from me once or twice, quite small amounts, just, as it were, something to tide him over for a day or two. I thought it was not so much that he needed the money but he wanted to test me out, to see if I lent money easily. It was rather worrying because I wasn't sure which was the best way to take it. Would it have been better to refuse point blank and let him know I was a skinflint or was it better to assume an appearance of careless generosity, which I was very far from feeling? To hell with Uncle Frank, I thought.

Cora, Ellie's stepmother, was the one that interested me most. She was a woman of about forty, well turned out with tinted hair and a rather gushing manner. She was all sweetness to Ellie.

"You mustn't mind those letters I wrote you, Ellie," she said. "You must admit that it came as a terrible shock, your marrying like that. So secretly. But of course I know it was Greta who put you up to it, doing it that way."

"You mustn't blame Greta," said Ellie. "I didn't mean to upset you all so much. I just thought that—well, the less fuss—"

"Well, of course, Ellie dear, you have something there. All the men of business were simply livid. Stanford Lloyd and Andrew Lippincott. I suppose they thought everyone would blame them for not looking after you better. And of course they'd no idea what Mike would be like. They didn't realize how charming he was going to be. I didn't myself."

She smiled across at me, a very sweet smile and one of the falsest ones I'd ever seen! I thought to myself that if ever a woman hated a man, it was Cora who hated me. I thought her sweetness to Ellie was understandable enough. Andrew Lippincott had gone back to America and had, no doubt, given her a few words of caution. Ellie was selling some of her property in America, since she herself had definitely decided to live in England, but she was going to make a large allowance to Cora so that the latter could live where she chose. Nobody mentioned Cora's husband much. I gathered he'd already taken himself off to some other part of the world, and had not gone there alone. In all probability, I gathered, another divorce was pending. There wouldn't be much alimony out of this one. Cora's last marriage had been to a man a good many years younger than herself with more attractions of a physical kind than cash.

Cora wanted that allowance. She was a woman of extravagant tastes. No doubt old Andrew Lippincott had hinted clearly enough that it could be discontinued any time if Ellie chose, or if Cora so far forgot herself as to criticize Ellie's new husband too virulently.

Cousin Reuben, or Uncle Reuben, did not make the journey. He wrote instead to Ellie a pleasant, noncommittal letter hoping she'd be very happy, but doubted if she would like living in England. "If you don't, Ellie, you come right back to the States. Don't think you won't get a welcome here because you will. Certainly you will from your Uncle Reuben."

"He sounds rather nice," I said to Ellie.

"Yes," said Ellie meditatively. She wasn't, it seemed, quite so sure about it.

"Are you fond of any of them, Ellie?" I asked, "or oughtn't I to ask that?"

"Of course you can ask me anything." But she didn't answer for a moment or two all the same. Then she said, with a sort of finality and decision, "No, I don't think I am. It seems odd, but I suppose it's because they don't really belong to me. Only by environment, not by relationship. They none of them are my flesh and blood relations. I loved my father, what I remembered of him. I think he was rather a weak man and I think my grandfather was disappointed in him because he hadn't got much head for business. He

didn't want to go into the business life. He liked going to Florida and fishing, that sort of thing. And then later he married Cora and I never cared for Cora much—or Cora for me, for that matter. My own mother, of course, I don't remember. I liked Uncle Henry and Uncle Joe. They were fun. In some ways more fun than my father was. He, I think, was in some ways a quiet and rather sad man. But the uncles enjoyed themselves. Uncle Joe was, I think, a bit wild, the kind that is wild just because they've got lots of money. Anyway, he was the one who got smashed up in the car, and the other one was killed fighting in the war. My grandfather was a sick man by that time and it was a terrible blow to him that all his three sons were dead. He didn't like Cora and he didn't care much for any of his more distant relatives. Uncle Reuben for instance. He said you could never tell what Reuben was up to. That's why he made arrangements to put his money in trust. A lot of it went to museums and hospitals. He left Cora well provided for, and his daughter's husband Uncle Frank."

"But most of it to you?"

"Yes. And I think that worried him a little bit. He did his best to get it looked after for me."

"By Uncle Andrew and by Mr. Stanford Lloyd. A lawyer and a banker."

"Yes. I suppose he didn't think I could look after it very well by myself. The odd thing is that he let me come into it at the age of twenty-one. He didn't keep it in trust till I was twenty-five, as lots of people do. I expect that was because I was a girl."

"That's odd," I said, "it would seem to me that it ought to be the other way round?"

Ellie shook her head. "No," she said, "I think my grandfather thought that young males were always wild and hit things up and that blondes with evil designs got hold of them. I think he thought it would be a good thing if they had plenty of time to sow their wild oats. That's your English saying, isn't it? But he said once to me, 'If a girl is going to have any sense at all, she'll have it at twenty-one. It won't make any difference making her wait four years longer. If she's going to be a fool she'll be a fool by then just as

much.' He said, too," Ellie looked at me and smiled, "that he didn't think I was a fool. He said, 'You mayn't know very much about life, but you've got good sense, Ellie. Especially about people. I think you always will have.'"

"I don't suppose he would have liked me," I said thoughtfully.

Ellie has a lot of honesty. She didn't try and reassure me by saying anything but what was undoubtedly the truth.

"No," she said, "I think he'd have been rather horrified. To begin with, that is. He'd have had to get used to you."

"Poor Ellie," I said suddenly.

"Why do you say that?"

"I said it to you once before, do you remember?"

"Yes. You said poor little rich girl. You were quite right too."

"I didn't mean it the same way this time," I said. "I didn't mean that you were poor because you were rich. I think I meant—" I hesitated. "You've too many people," I said, "at you. All round you. Too many people who want things from you but who don't really care about you. That's true, isn't it?"

"I think Uncle Andrew really cares about me," said Ellie, a little doubtfully. "He's always been nice to me, sympathetic. The others—no, you're quite right. They only want things."

"They come and cadge off you, don't they? Borrow money off you, want favours. Want you to get them out of jams, that sort of thing. They're at you, at you, at you!"

"I suppose it's quite natural," said Ellie calmly, "but I've done with them all now. I'm coming to live here in England. I shan't see much of them."

She was wrong there, of course, but she hadn't grasped that fact yet. Stanford Lloyd came over later by himself. He brought a great many

documents and papers and things for Ellie to sign and wanted her agreement on investments. He talked to her about investments and shares and property that she owned, and the disposal of trust funds. It was all Double Dutch to me. I couldn't have helped her or advised her. I couldn't have stopped Stanford Lloyd from cheating her, either. I hoped he wasn't, but how could anyone ignorant like myself be sure?

There was something about Stanford Lloyd that was almost too good to be true. He was a banker, and he looked like a banker. He was rather a handsome man though not young. He was very polite to me and thought dirt of me though he tried not to show it.

"Well," I said when he had finally taken his departure, "that's the last of the bunch."

"You didn't think much of any of them, did you?"

"I think your stepmother, Cora, is a double-faced bitch if I ever knew one. Sorry, Ellie, perhaps I oughtn't to say that."

"Why not, if that's what you think? I expect you're not far wrong."

"You must have been lonely, Ellie," I said.

"Yes, I was lonely. I knew girls of my own age. I went to a fashionable school but I was never really free. If I made friends with people, somehow or other they'd get me separated, push another girl at me instead. You know? Everything was governed by the social register. If I'd cared enough about anybody to make a fuss—but I never got far enough. There was never anybody I really cared for. Not until Greta came, and then everything was different. For the first time someone was really fond of me. It was wonderful." Her face softened.

"I wish," I said, as I turned away towards the window.

"What do you wish?"

“Oh I don’t know...I wish perhaps that you weren’t—weren’t quite so dependent on Greta. It’s a bad thing to be as dependent as that on anyone.”

“You don’t like her, Mike,” said Ellie.

“I do,” I protested hurriedly. “Indeed I do. But you must realize, Ellie, that she is—well, she’s quite a stranger to me. I suppose, let’s face it, I’m a bit jealous of her. Jealous because she and you—well, I didn’t understand before—how linked together you were.”

“Don’t be jealous. She’s the only person who was good to me, who cared about me—till I met you.”

“But you have met me,” I said, “and you’ve married me.” Then I said again what I’d said before. “And we’re going to live happily ever afterwards.”

Thirteen

I'm trying as best I can, though that isn't saying much, to paint a picture of the people who came into our lives, that is to say: who came into my life because, of course, they were in Ellie's life already. Our mistake was that we thought they'd go out of Ellie's life. But they didn't. They'd no intention of doing so. However, we didn't know that then.

The English side of our life was the next thing that happened. Our house was finished, we had a telegram from Santonix. He'd asked us to keep away for about a week, then the telegram came. It said: "Come tomorrow."

We drove down there, and we arrived at sunset. Santonix heard the car and came out to meet us, standing in front of the house. When I saw our house, finished, something inside me leaped up, leaped up as though to burst out of my skin! It was my house—and I'd got it at last! I held Ellie's arm very tight.

"Like it?" said Santonix.

"It's the tops," I said. A silly thing to say but he knew what I meant.

"Yes," he said, "it's the best thing I've done...It's cost you a mint of money and it's worth every penny of it. I've exceeded my estimates all round. Come on, Mike," he said, "pick her up and carry her over the threshold. That's the thing to do when you enter into possession with your bride!"

I flushed and then I picked up Ellie—she was quite a light weight—and carried her as Santonix had suggested, over the threshold. As I did so, I stumbled just a little and I saw Santonix frown.

"There you are," said Santonix, "be good to her, Mike. Take care of her. Don't let harm come to her. She can't take care of herself. She thinks she can."

"Why should any harm happen to me?" said Ellie.

“Because it’s a bad world and there are bad people in it,” said Santonix, “and there are some bad people around you, my girl. I know. I’ve seen one or two of them. Seen them down here. They come nosing around, sniffing around like the rats they are. Excuse my French but somebody’s got to say it.”

“They won’t bother us,” said Ellie, “they’ve all gone back to the States.”

“Maybe,” said Santonix, “but it’s only a few hours by plane, you know.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. They were very thin now, very white-looking. He looked terribly ill.

“I’d look after you myself, child, if I could,” he said, “but I can’t. It won’t be long now. You’ll have to fend for yourself.”

“Cut out the gipsy’s warning, Santonix,” I said, “and take us round the house. Every inch of it.”

We went round the house. Some of the rooms were still empty but most of the things we’d bought, pictures and the furniture and the curtains, were there.

“We haven’t got a name for it,” said Ellie suddenly. “We can’t call it The Towers, that was a ridiculous name. What was the other name for it that you told me once?” she said to me. “Gipsy’s Acre, wasn’t it?”

“We won’t call it that,” I said sharply. “I don’t like that name.”

“It’ll always be called that hereabouts,” said Santonix.

“They’re a lot of silly superstitious people,” I said.

And then we sat down on the terrace looking at the setting sun and the view, and we thought of names for the house. It was a kind of game. We started quite seriously and then we began to think of every silly name we possibly could. “Journey’s End,” “Heart’s Delight” and names like boarding-houses. “Seaview,” “Fairhome,” “The Pines.” Then suddenly it grew dark and cold, and we went indoors. We didn’t draw the curtains, just closed the windows.

We'd brought down provisions with us. On the following day an expensively acquired domestic staff was coming.

"They'll probably hate it and say it's lonely and they'll all go away," said Ellie.

"And then you'll give them double the money to stay on," said Santonix.

"You think," said Ellie, "that everyone can be bought!" But she only said it laughingly.

We had brought pâté en croûte with us and French bread and large red prawns. We sat round the table laughing and eating and talking. Even Santonix looked strong and animated, and there was a kind of wild excitement in his eyes.

And then it happened suddenly. A stone crashed in through the window and dropped on the table. Smashed a wineglass too, and a sliver of glass slit Ellie's cheek. For a moment we sat paralysed, then I sprang up, rushed to the window, unbolted it and went out on the terrace. There was no one to be seen. I came back into the room again.

I picked up a paper napkin and bent over Ellie, wiping away a trickle of blood I saw coursing down her cheek.

"It's hurt you...There, dear, it's nothing much. It's just a wee cut from a sliver of glass."

My eyes met those of Santonix.

"Why did anyone do it?" said Ellie. She looked bewildered.

"Boys," I said, "you know, young hooligans. They knew, perhaps, we were settling in. I dare say you were lucky that they only threw a stone. They might have had an air gun or something like that."

"But why should they do it to us? Why?"

"I don't know," I said. "Just beastliness."

Ellie got up suddenly. She said:

“I’m frightened. I’m afraid.”

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” I said. “We don’t know enough about the people round here.”

“Is it because we’re rich and they’re poor?” said Ellie. She asked it not of me but of Santonix as though he would know the answer to the question better than I did.

“No,” said Santonix slowly, “I don’t think it’s that....”

Ellie said:

“It’s because they hate us...Hate Mike and hate me. Why? Because we’re happy?”

Again Santonix shook his head.

“No,” Ellie said, as though she were agreeing with him, “no, it’s something else. Something we don’t know about. Gipsy’s Acre. Anyone who lives here is going to be hated. Going to be persecuted. Perhaps they will succeed in the end in driving us away....”

I poured out a glass of wine and gave it to her.

“Don’t, Ellie,” I begged her. “Don’t say such things. Drink this. It’s a nasty thing to happen, but it was only silliness, crude horseplay.”

“I wonder,” said Ellie, “I wonder...” She looked hard at me. “Somebody is trying to drive us away, Mike. To drive us away from the house we’ve built, the house we love.”

“We won’t let them drive us away,” I said. I added, “I’ll take care of you. Nothing shall hurt you.”

She looked again at Santonix.

“You should know,” she said, “you’ve been here while the house was building. Didn’t anyone ever say anything to you? Come and throw stones—interfere with the building of the house?”

“One can imagine things,” said Santonix.

“There were accidents, then?”

“There are always a few accidents in the building of a house. Nothing serious or tragic. A man falls off a ladder, someone drops a load on his foot, someone gets a splinter in his thumb and it goes septic.”

“Nothing more than that? Nothing that might have been meant?”

“No,” said Santonix, “no. I swear to you, no!”

Ellie turned to me.

“You remember that gipsy woman, Mike. How queer she was that day, how she warned me not to come here.”

“She’s just a bit crazy, a bit off her head.”

“We’ve built on Gipsy’s Acre,” said Ellie. “We’ve done what she told us not to do.” Then she stamped her foot. “I won’t let them drive me away. I won’t let anyone drive me away!”

“Nobody shall drive us away,” I said. “We’re going to be happy here.”

We said it like a challenge to fate.

Fourteen

That's how our life began at Gipsy's Acre. We didn't find another name for the house. That first evening fixed Gipsy's Acre in our heads.

"We'll call it Gipsy's Acre," said Ellie, "just to show! A kind of challenge, don't you think? It's our Acre, and to hell with the gipsy's warning."

She was her old gay self again the next day and soon we were busy getting ourselves settled in, and getting also to know the neighbourhood and the neighbours. Ellie and I walked down to the cottage where the gipsy woman lived. I felt it would be a good thing if we found her digging in her garden. The only time Ellie had seen her before was when she told our fortunes. If Ellie saw she was just an ordinary old woman—digging up potatoes—but we didn't see her. The cottage was shut up. I asked if she were dead but the neighbour I asked shook her head.

"She must have gone away," she said. "She goes away from time to time, you know. She's a gipsy really. That's why she can't stay in houses. She wanders away and comes back again." She tapped her forehead. "Not quite right up here."

Presently she said, trying to mask curiosity, "You've come from the new house up there, haven't you, the one on the top of the hill, that's just been built?"

"That's right," I said, "we moved in last night."

"Wonderful-looking place it is," she said. "We've all been up to look at it while it was building. Makes a difference, doesn't it, seeing a house like that where all those gloomy trees used to be?" She said to Ellie rather shyly, "You're an American lady, aren't you, so we heard?"

"Yes," said Ellie, "I'm American—or I was, but now I'm married to an Englishman so I'm an Englishwoman."

"And you've come here to settle down and live, haven't you?"

We said we had.

“Well, I hope you’ll like it, I’m sure.” She sounded doubtful.

“Why shouldn’t we?”

“Oh well, it’s lonely up there, you know. People don’t always like living in a lonely place among a lot of trees.”

“Gipsy’s Acre,” said Ellie.

“Ah, you know the local name, do you? But the house that was there before was called The Towers. I don’t know why. It hadn’t any towers, at least not in my time.”

“I think The Towers is a silly name,” said Ellie. “I think we’ll go on calling it Gipsy’s Acre.”

“We’ll have to tell the post office if so,” I said, “or we shan’t get any letters.”

“No, I suppose we shan’t.”

“Though when I come to think of it,” I said, “would that matter, Ellie? Wouldn’t it be much nicer if we didn’t get any letters?”

“It might cause a lot of complications,” said Ellie. “We shouldn’t even get our bills.”

“That would be a splendid idea,” I said.

“No, it wouldn’t,” said Ellie. “Bailiffs would come in and camp there. Anyway,” she said, “I wouldn’t like not to get any letters. I’d want to hear from Greta.”

“Never mind Greta,” I said. “Let’s go on exploring.”

So we explored Kingston Bishop. It was a nice village, nice people in the shops. There was nothing sinister about the place. Our domestic help didn’t

take to it much, but we soon arranged that hired cars should take them into the nearest seaside town or into Market Chadwell on their days out. They were not enthusiastic about the location of the house, but it was not superstition that worried them. I pointed out to Ellie nobody could say the house was haunted because it had been just built.

“No,” Ellie agreed, “it’s not the house. There’s nothing wrong with the house. It’s outside. It’s that road where it curves round through the trees and that bit of rather gloomy wood where that woman stood and made me jump so that day.”

“Well, next year,” I said, “we might cut down those trees and plant a lot of rhododendrons or something like that.”

We went on making plans.

Greta came and stayed with us for a weekend. She was enthusiastic about the house, and congratulated us on all our furnishings and pictures and colour schemes. She was very tactful. After the weekend she said she wouldn’t disturb the honeymooners any longer, and anyway she’d got to get back to her job.

Ellie enjoyed showing her the house. I could see how fond Ellie was of her. I tried to behave very sensibly and pleasantly but I was glad when Greta went back to London, because her staying there had been a strain on me.

When we’d been there a couple of weeks we were accepted locally and made the acquaintance of God. He came one afternoon to call upon us. Ellie and I were arguing about where we’d have a flower border when our correct, to me slightly phoney-looking, manservant came out from the house to announce that Major Phillpot was in the drawing room. It was then that I said in a whisper to Ellie: “God!” Ellie asked me what I meant.

“Well, the locals treat him like that,” I said.

So we went in and there was Major Phillpot. He was just a pleasant, nondescript man of close on sixty. He was wearing country clothes, rather shabby, he had grey hair going a little thin on top and a short bristly

moustache. He apologized for his wife not being able to come and call on us. She was something of an invalid, he said. He sat down and chatted with us. Nothing he said was remarkable or particularly interesting. He had the knack of making people feel at their ease. He touched quite lightly on a variety of subjects. He didn't ask any direct questions, but he soon got it into his head where our particular interests lay. He talked to me about racing and to Ellie about making a garden and what things did well in this particular soil. He had been to the States once or twice. He found out that though Ellie didn't care much for race meetings, she was fond of riding. He told her that if she was going to keep horses she could go up a particular track through the pine woods and she would come out on a good stretch of moor where she could have a gallop. Then we came to the subject of our house and the stories about Gipsy's Acre.

"I see you know the local name," he said, "and all the local superstitions, too, I expect."

"Gipsies' warnings in profusion," I said. "Far too many of them. Mostly old Mrs. Lee."

"Oh dear," said Phillpot. "Poor old Esther: she's been a nuisance, has she?"

"Is she a bit dotty?" I asked.

"Not so much as she likes to make out. I feel more or less responsible for her. I settled her in that cottage," he said, "not that she's grateful for it. I'm fond of the old thing though she can be a nuisance sometimes."

"Fortune-telling?"

"No, not particularly. Why, has she told your fortune?"

"I don't know if you can call it a fortune," said Ellie. "It was more a warning to us against coming here."

"That seems rather odd to me." Major Phillpot's rather bristly eyebrows rose. "She's usually got a honeyed tongue in fortunes. Handsome stranger, marriage bells, six children and a heap of good fortune and money in your

hand, pretty lady.” He imitated rather unexpectedly the gipsy whine of her voice. “The gipsies used to camp here a lot when I was a boy,” he said. “I suppose I got fond of them then, though they were a thieving lot, of course. But I’ve always been attracted to them. As long as you don’t expect them to be law-abiding, they’re all right. Many a tin mug of gipsy stew I’ve had as a schoolboy. We felt the family owed Mrs. Lee something, she saved the life of a brother of mine when he was a child. Fished him out of a pond when he’d gone through the ice.”

I made a clumsy gesture and knocked a glass ashtray off a table. It smashed into fragments.

I picked up the pieces and Major Phillpot helped me.

“I expect Mrs. Lee’s quite harmless really,” said Ellie. “I was very foolish to have been so scared.”

“Scared, were you?” His eyebrows rose again. “It was as bad as that, was it?”

“I don’t wonder she was afraid,” I said quickly. “It was almost more like a threat than a warning.”

“A threat!” He sounded incredulous.

“Well, it sounded that way to me. And then the first night we moved in here something else happened.”

I told him about the stone crashing through the window.

“I’m afraid there are a good many young hooligans about nowadays,” he said, “though we haven’t got many of them round here—not nearly as bad as some places. Still, it happens, I’m sorry to say.” He looked at Ellie. “I’m very sorry you were frightened. It was a beastly thing to happen, your first night moving in.”

“Oh, I’ve got over it now,” said Ellie. “It wasn’t only that, it was—it was something else that happened not long afterwards.”

I told him about that too. We had come down one morning and we had found a dead bird skewered through with a knife and a small piece of paper with it which said in an illiterate scrawl, "Get out of here if you know what's good for you."

Phillpot looked really angry then. He said, "You should have reported that to the police."

"We didn't want to," I said. "After all, that would only have put whoever it is even more against us."

"Well, that kind of thing has got to be stopped," said Phillpot. Suddenly he became the magistrate. "Otherwise, you know, people will go on with the thing. Think it's funny, I suppose. Only—only this sounds a bit more than fun. Nasty—malicious—It's not," he said, rather as though he was talking to himself, "it's not as though anyone round here could have a grudge against you, a grudge against either of you personally, I mean."

"No," I said, "it couldn't be that because we're both strangers here."

"I'll look into it," Phillpot said.

He got up to go, looking round him as he did.

"You know," he said, "I like this house of yours. I didn't think I should. I'm a bit of an old square, you know, what used to be called old fogey. I like old houses and old buildings. I don't like all these matchbox factories that are going up all over the country. Big boxes. Like beehives. I like buildings with some ornament on them, some grace. But I like this house. It's plain and very modern, I suppose, but it's got shape and light. And when you look out from it you see things—well, in a different way from the way you've seen them before. It's interesting. Very interesting. Who designed it? An English architect or a foreigner?"

I told him about Santonix.

"Mm," he said, "I think I read about him somewhere. Would it have been in House and Garden?"

I said he was fairly well known.

“I’d like to meet him sometime, though I don’t suppose I’d know what to say to him. I’m not artistic.”

Then he asked us to settle a day to come and have lunch with him and his wife.

“You can see how you like my house,” he said.

“It’s an old house, I suppose?” I said.

“Built 1720. Nice period. The original house was Elizabethan. That was burnt down about 1700 and a new one built on the same spot.”

“You’ve always lived here then?” I said. I didn’t mean him personally, of course, but he understood.

“Yes. We’ve been here since Elizabethan times. Sometimes prosperous, sometimes down and out, selling land when things have gone badly, buying it back when things went well. I’ll be glad to show it to you both,” he said, and looking at Ellie he said with a smile, “Americans like old houses, I know. You’re the one who probably won’t think much of it,” he said to me.

“I won’t pretend I know much about old things,” I said.

He stumped off then. In his car there was a spaniel waiting for him. It was a battered old car with the paint rubbed off, but I was getting my values by now. I knew that in this part of the world he was still God all right, and he’d set the seal of his approval on us. I could see that. He liked Ellie. I was inclined to think that he’d liked me, too, although I’d noticed the appraising glances which he shot over me from time to time, as though he was making a quick snap judgment on something he hadn’t come across before.

Ellie was putting splinters of glass carefully in the wastepaper basket when I came back into the drawing room.

“I’m sorry it’s broken,” she said regretfully. “I liked it.”

“We can get another like it,” I said. “It’s modern.”

“I know! What startled you, Mike?”

I considered for a moment.

“Something Phillpot said. It reminded me of something that happened when I was a kid. A pal of mine at school and I played truant and went out skating on a local pond. Ice wouldn’t bear us, silly little asses that we were. He went through and was drowned before anyone could get him out.”

“How horrible.”

“Yes. I’d forgotten all about it until Phillpot mentioned about his own brother.”

“I like him, Mike, don’t you?”

“Yes, very much. I wonder what his wife is like.”

We went to lunch with the Phillpots early the following week. It was a white Georgian house, rather beautiful in its lines, though not particularly exciting. Inside it was shabby but comfortable. There were pictures of what I took to be ancestors on the walls of the long dining room. Most of them were pretty bad, I thought, though they might have looked better if they had been cleaned. There was one of a fair-haired girl in pink satin that I rather took to. Major Phillpot smiled and said:

“You’ve picked one of our best. It’s a Gainsborough, and a good one, though the subject of it caused a bit of trouble in her time. Strongly suspected of having poisoned her husband. May have been prejudice, because she was a foreigner. Gervase Phillpot picked her up abroad somewhere.”

A few other neighbours had been invited to meet us. Dr. Shaw, an elderly man with a kindly but tired manner. He had to rush away before we had finished our meal. There was the Vicar who was young and earnest, and a middle-aged woman with a bullying voice who bred corgis. And there was

a tall handsome dark girl called Claudia Hardcastle who seemed to live for horses, though hampered by having an allergy which gave her violent hay fever.

She and Ellie got on together rather well. Ellie adored riding and she too was troubled by an allergy.

“In the States it’s mostly ragwort gives it to me,” she said—“but horses too, sometimes. It doesn’t trouble me much nowadays because they have such wonderful things that doctors can give you for different kinds of allergies. I’ll give you some of my capsules. They’re bright orange. And if you remember to take one before you start out you don’t as much as sneeze once.”

Claudia Hardcastle said that would be wonderful.

“Camels do it to me worse than horses,” she said. “I was in Egypt last year—and the tears just streamed down my face all the way round the Pyramids.”

Ellie said some people got it with cats.

“And pillows.” They went on talking about allergies.

I sat next to Mrs. Phillpot who was tall and willowy and talked exclusively about her health in the intervals of eating a hearty meal. She gave me a full account of all her various ailments and of how puzzled many eminent members of the medical profession had been by her case. Occasionally she made a social diversion and asked me what I did. I parried that one, and she made half-hearted efforts to find out whom I knew. I could have answered truthfully “Nobody,” but I thought it would be well to refrain—especially as she wasn’t a real snob and didn’t really want to know. Mrs. Corgi, whose proper name I hadn’t caught, was much more thorough in her queries but I diverted her to the general iniquity and ignorance of vets! It was all quite pleasant and peaceful, if rather dull.

Later, as we were making a rather desultory tour of the garden, Claudia Hardcastle joined me.

She said, rather abruptly, “I’ve heard about you—from my brother.”

I looked surprised. I couldn’t imagine it to be possible that I knew a brother of Claudia Hardcastle’s.

“Are you sure?” I said.

She seemed amused.

“As a matter of fact, he built your house.”

“Do you mean Santonix is your brother?”

“Half-brother. I don’t know him very well. We rarely meet.”

“He’s wonderful,” I said.

“Some people think so, I know.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’m never sure. There are two sides to him. At one time he was going right down the hill...People wouldn’t have anything to do with him. And then—he seemed to change. He began to succeed in his profession in the most extraordinary way. It was as though he was—” she paused for a word —“dedicated.”

“I think he is—just that.”

Then I asked her if she had seen our house.

“No—not since it was finished.”

I told her she must come and see it.

“I shan’t like it, I warn you. I don’t like modern houses. Queen Anne is my favourite period.”

She said she was going to put Ellie up for the golf club. And they were going to ride together. Ellie was going to buy a horse, perhaps more than one. She and Ellie seemed to have made friends.

When Phillpot was showing me his stables he said a word or two about Claudia.

“Good rider to hounds,” he said. “Pity’s she’s mucked up her life.”

“Has she?”

“Married a rich man, years older than herself. An American. Name of Lloyd. It didn’t take. Came apart almost at once. She went back to her own name. Don’t think she’ll ever marry again. She’s anti man. Pity.”

When we were driving home, Ellie said: “Dull—but nice. Nice people. We’re going to be very happy here, aren’t we, Mike?”

I said: “Yes, we are.” And took my hand from the steering wheel and laid it over hers.

When we got back, I dropped Ellie at the house, and put away the car in the garage.

As I walked back to the house, I heard a faint twanging of Ellie’s guitar. She had a rather beautiful old Spanish guitar that must have been worth a lot of money. She used to sing to it in a soft low crooning voice. Very pleasant to hear. I didn’t know what most of the songs were. American spirituals partly, I think, and some old Irish and Scottish ballads—sweet and rather sad. They weren’t pop music or anything of that kind. Perhaps they were folk songs.

I went round by the terrace and paused by the window before going in.

Ellie was singing one of my favourites. I don’t know what it was called. She was crooning the words softly to herself, bending her head down over the guitar and gently plucking the strings. It had a sweet-sad haunting little tune.

Man was made for Joy and Woe

And when this we rightly know
Thro' the World we safely go...
Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are born.
Every Morn and every Night
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Endless Night...

She looked up and saw me.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Mike?”

“Like what?”

“You’re looking at me as though you loved me...”

“Of course I love you. How else should I be looking at you?”

“But what were you thinking just then?”

I answered slowly and truthfully: “I was thinking of you as I saw you first—standing by a dark fir tree.” Yes, I’d been remembering that first moment of seeing Ellie, the surprise of it and the excitement....

Ellie smiled at me and sang softly:

“Every Morn and every Night
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Sweet Delight,

Some are born to Endless Night.”

One doesn't recognize in one's life the really important moments—not until it's too late.

That day when we'd been to lunch with the Phillpots and came back so happily to our home was such a moment. But I didn't know then—not until afterwards.

I said: “Sing the song about the Fly.” And she changed to a gay little dance tune and sang:

“Little Fly,

Thy Summer's play

My thoughtless hand

Has brushed away.

Am not I

A fly like thee?

Or art not thou

A man like me?

For I dance

And drink, and sing

Till some blind hand

Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life

And strength and breath

And the want

Of thought is death;

Then am I

A happy fly

If I live

Or if I die.”

Oh, Ellie—Ellie....

Fifteen

It's astonishing in this world how things don't turn out at all the way you expect them to!

We'd moved into our house and were living there and we'd got away from everyone just the way I'd meant and planned. Only of course we hadn't got away from everyone. Things crowded back upon us across the ocean and in other ways.

First of all there was Ellie's blasted stepmother. She sent letters and cables and asked Ellie to go and see estate agents. She'd been so fascinated, she said, by our house that she really must have a house of her own in England. She said she'd love to spend a couple of months every year in England. And hard on her last cable she arrived and had to be taken round the neighbourhood with lots of orders to view. In the end she more or less settled on a house. A house about fifteen miles away from us. We didn't want her there, we hated the idea—but we couldn't tell her so. Or rather, what I really mean is even if we had told her so, it wouldn't have stopped her taking it if she'd wanted to. We couldn't order her not to come there. It was the last thing Ellie wanted. I knew that. However, while she was still awaiting a surveyor's report, some cables arrived.

Uncle Frank, it seemed, had got himself into a jam of some kind. Something crooked and fraudulent, I gathered, which would mean a big sum of money to get him out. More cables passed to and fro between Mr. Lippincott and Ellie. And then there turned out to be some trouble between Stanford Lloyd and Lippincott. There was a row about some of Ellie's investments. I had felt, in my ignorance and credulity, that people who were in America were a long way away. I'd never realized that Ellie's relations and business connections thought nothing of taking a plane over to England for twenty-four hours and then flying back again. First Stanford Lloyd flew over and back again. Then Andrew Lippincott flew over.

Ellie had to go up to London and meet them. I hadn't got the hang of these financial things. I think everybody was being fairly careful in what they

said. But it was something to do with the settling up of the trusts on Ellie, and a kind of sinister suggestion that either Mr. Lippincott had delayed the matter or it was Stanford Lloyd who was holding up the accounting.

In the lull between these worries Ellie and I discovered our Folly. We hadn't really explored all our property yet (only the part just round the house). We used to follow up tracks through the woods and see where they led. One day we followed a sort of path that had been so overgrown that you couldn't really see where it was at first. But we tracked it out and in the end it came out at what Ellie said was a Folly. A sort of little white ridiculous temple-looking place. It was in fairly good condition so we cleared it up and had it painted and we put a table, and a few chairs in it, and a divan and a corner cupboard in which we put china and glasses, and some bottles. It was fun really. Ellie said we'd have the path cleared and made easier to climb and I said no, it would be more fun if no one knew where it was except us. Ellie thought that was a romantic idea.

"We certainly won't let Cora know," I said and Ellie agreed.

It was when we were coming down from there, not the first time but later, after Cora had gone away and we were hoping to be peaceful again, that Ellie, who was skipping along ahead of me, suddenly tripped over the root of a tree and fell and sprained her ankle.

Dr. Shaw came and said she'd taken a nasty sprain but that she'd be able to get about again all right in perhaps a week. Ellie sent for Greta then. I couldn't object. There was no one really to look after her properly, no woman I mean. The servants we had were pretty useless and anyway Ellie wanted Greta. So Greta came.

She came and she was a great blessing of course to Ellie. And to me as far as that went. She arranged things and kept the household working properly. Our servants gave notice about now. They said it was too lonely—but really I think Cora had upset them. Greta put in advertisements and got another couple almost at once. She looked after Ellie's ankle, amused her, fetched things for her that she knew she liked, the kind of books and fruit and things like that—things I knew nothing about. And they seemed frightfully happy

together. Ellie was certainly delighted to see Greta. And somehow or other Greta just didn't go away again...She stopped on. Ellie said to me:

“You don't mind, do you, if Greta stays on for a bit?”

I said, “Oh no. No, of course not.”

“It's such a comfort having her,” said Ellie. “You see, there are so many sort of female things we can do together. One's awfully lonely without another woman about.”

Every day I noticed Greta was taking a bit more upon herself, giving orders, queening it over things. I pretended I liked having Greta there, but one day when Ellie was lying with her foot up inside the drawing room and Greta and I were out on the terrace, we suddenly got into a row together. I can't remember the exact words that started it. Something that Greta said, it annoyed me and I answered sharply back. And then we went on, hammer and tongs. Our voices rose. She let me have it, saying all the vicious, unkind things she could think of, and I pretty well gave her as good as I was getting. Told her she was a bossy, interfering female, that she'd far too much influence over Ellie, that I wasn't going to stand having Ellie bossed about the whole time. We shouted at each other and then suddenly Ellie came hobbling out on the terrace looking from one to the other of us, and I said:

“Darling, I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry.”

I went back into the house and settled Ellie on the sofa again. She said:

“I didn't realize. I didn't realize a bit that you—that you really hated having Greta here.”

I soothed her and calmed her and said she mustn't take any notice, that I just lost my temper, that I was rather quarrelsome sometimes. I said all that was the matter was that I thought Greta was just a bit bossy. Perhaps that was natural enough because she'd been used to being so. And in the end I said I really liked Greta very much, it was just that I'd lost my temper

because I'd been upset and worried. So it ended that I practically begged Greta to stay on.

It was quite a scene we'd had. I think quite a good many other people in the house had heard it as well. Our new manservant and his wife certainly did. When I get angry I do shout. I dare say I really overdid it a bit. I'm like that.

Greta seemed to make a point of worrying a great deal about Ellie's health, saying she oughtn't to do this, or that.

"She isn't really very strong, you know," she said to me.

"There's nothing wrong with Ellie," I said, "she's always perfectly well."

"No, she isn't, Mike. She's delicate."

When Dr. Shaw next came to have a look at Ellie's ankle and to tell her, by the way, that it was quite all right again, just bind it up if she was going to walk over rough ground, I said to him, I suppose in rather the foolish way that men do:

"She isn't delicate or anything, is she, Dr. Shaw?"

"Who says she's delicate?" Dr. Shaw was the kind of practitioner that is fairly rare nowadays and was, indeed, known locally as "Leave-it-to-Nature Shaw."

"Nothing wrong with her as far as I can see," he said. "Anyone can sprain an ankle."

"I didn't mean her ankle. I wondered if she had a weak heart or anything like that."

He looked at me through the top of his spectacles. "Don't start imagining things, young man. What put it into your head? You're not the type that worries usually about women's ailments."

"It was only what Miss Andersen said."

“Ah. Miss Andersen. What does she know about it? Not medically qualified, is she?”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Your wife’s a woman of great wealth,” he said, “according to local gossip anyway. Of course some people just imagine all Americans are rich.”

“She is wealthy,” I said.

“Well, you must remember this. Rich women get the worst of it in many ways. Some doctor or other is always giving them powders and pills, stimulants or pep pills, or tranquillizers, things that on the whole they’d be better without. Now the village women are much healthier because nobody worries about their health in the same way.”

“She does take some capsules or something,” I said.

“I’ll give her a check-up if you like. Might as well find out what muck she’s been given. I can tell you, before now I’ve said to people ‘chuck the whole lot in the wastepaper basket.’”

He spoke to Greta before he left. He said:

“Mr. Rogers asked me to give Mrs. Rogers a general check-up. I can’t find anything much wrong with her. I think more exercise in the open air might do her good. What does she take in the way of medicines?”

“She has some tablets that she takes when she’s tired, and some that she takes for sleeping if she wants them.”

She and Dr. Shaw went and had a look at Ellie’s prescriptions. Ellie was smiling a little.

“I don’t take all these things, Dr. Shaw,” she said. “Only the allergy capsules.”

Shaw took a look at the capsules, read the prescription and said there was no harm in that, and passed on to a prescription for sleeping pills.

“Any trouble with sleeping?”

“Not living in the country. I don’t think I’ve taken a single sleeping pill since I’ve been here.”

“Well, that’s a good thing.” He patted her on the shoulder. “There’s nothing wrong with you, my dear. Inclined to worry a bit sometimes, I should say. That’s all. These capsules are mild enough. Lots of people take them nowadays and they don’t do them any harm. Go on with them but leave the sleeping pills alone.”

“I don’t know why I worried,” I said to Ellie apologetically. “I suppose it was Greta.”

“Oh,” said Ellie and laughed, “Greta fusses about me. She never takes any remedies herself.” She said, “We’ll have a turnout, Mike, and throw most of these things away.”

Ellie was getting on very friendly terms with most of our neighbours now. Claudia Hardcastle came over quite often and she and Ellie went riding together occasionally. I didn’t ride, I’d dealt with cars and mechanical things all my life. I didn’t know the first thing about a horse in spite of mucking out stables in Ireland for a week or two once, but I thought to myself that some time or other when we were in London I’d go to a posh riding stable and learn how to ride properly. I didn’t want to start down here. People would laugh at me very likely. I thought riding was perhaps good for Ellie. She seemed to enjoy it.

Greta encouraged her to ride, although Greta herself also knew nothing about horses.

Ellie and Claudia went together to a sale and on Claudia’s advice Ellie bought herself a horse, a chestnut called Conquer. I urged Ellie to be careful when she went out riding by herself but she laughed at me.

“I’ve ridden since I was three years old,” she said.

So she usually went for a ride about two or three times a week. Greta used to drive the car and go into Market Chadwell to do the shopping.

One day Greta said at lunchtime: “You and your gipsies! There was a terrible-looking old woman this morning. She stood in the middle of the road. I might have run over her. Just stood smack in front of the car. I had to pull up. Coming up the hill too.”

“Why, what did she want?”

Ellie was listening to us both but she didn’t say anything. I thought, though, that she looked rather worried.

“Damn” cheek, she threatened me,” said Greta.

“Threatened you?” I said sharply.

“Well, she told me to get out of here. She said: ‘This is gipsy land here. Go back. Go back the lot of you. Go back to where you came from if you wish to be safe.’ And she lifted up her fist and shook it at me. She said: ‘If I curse you,’ she said, ‘there’ll be no good luck for you ever again. Buying our land and raising houses on our land. We don’t want houses where tent dwellers should be.’”

Greta said a lot more. Ellie said to me afterwards, frowning a little:

“It all sounded most improbable, didn’t you think so, Mike?”

“I think Greta was exaggerating a bit,” I said.

“It didn’t sound right somehow,” said Ellie. “I wonder if Greta was making some of it up.”

I considered. “Why would she want to make things up?” Then I asked sharply, “You haven’t seen our Esther lately, have you? Not when you are out riding?”

“The gipsy woman? No.”

“You don’t sound quite sure, Ellie,” I said.

“I think I’ve caught glimpses of her,” said Ellie. “You know, standing among the trees peering out but never near enough for me to be sure.”

But Ellie came back from a ride one day, white and shaking. The old woman had come out from in between the trees. Ellie had reined up and stopped to speak to her. She said the old woman was shaking her fist and muttering under her breath. Ellie said, “This time I was angry, I said to her:

‘What do you want here? This land doesn’t belong to you. It’s our land and our house.’”

The old woman had said then:

“It’ll never be your land and it’ll never belong to you. I warned you once and I’ve warned you twice. I shan’t warn you again. It won’t be long now—I can tell you that. It’s Death I see. There behind your left shoulder. It’s Death standing by you and it’s Death will have you. That horse you’re riding has got one white foot. Don’t you know that it’s bad luck to ride a horse with one white foot? It’s Death I see and the grand house you’ve built falling in ruins!”

“This has got to be stopped,” I said angrily.

Ellie didn’t laugh it off this time. Both she and Greta looked upset. I went straight down to the village. I went first to Mrs. Lee’s cottage. I hesitated for a moment but there was no light there and I went on to the police station. I knew the Sergeant in Charge, Sergeant Keene, a square, sensible man. He listened to me, then he said:

“I’m sorry you’ve had this trouble. She’s a very old woman and she may be getting tiresome. We’ve never had much real trouble with her up to now. I’ll speak to her and tell her to lay off.”

“If you would,” I said.

He hesitated a minute and then said:

“I don’t like to suggest things—but as far as you know, Mr. Rogers, is there anyone around here who might—perhaps for some trivial cause—have it in for you or your wife?”

“I should think it most unlikely. Why?”

“Old Mrs. Lee has been flush of money lately—I don’t know where it’s coming from—”

“What are you suggesting?”

“It could be someone is paying her—someone who wants you out of here. There was an incident—a good many years ago. She took money from someone in the village—to frighten a neighbour away. Doing this same sort of stuff—threats—warnings—evil eye business—Village people are superstitious. You’d be surprised at the number of villages in England that have got their private witch, so to speak. She got a warning then and so far as I know she’s never tried it on since—but it could be like that. She’s fond of money—they’ll do a lot for money—”

But I couldn’t accept that idea. I pointed out to Keene that we were complete strangers here. “We’ve not had time to make enemies,” I said.

I walked back to the house worried and perplexed. As I turned the corner of the terrace, I heard the faint sound of Ellie’s guitar, and a tall figure, who had been standing by the window looking in, wheeled round and came towards me. For a moment I thought it was a gipsy, then I relaxed as I recognized Santonix.

“Oh,” I said with a slight gasp, “it’s you. Where have you sprung from? We’ve not heard from you for ages.”

He didn’t answer me directly. He just caught my arm and drew me away from the window.

“So she’s here!” he said. “I’m not surprised. I thought she’d come sooner or later. Why did you let her? She’s dangerous. You ought to know that.”

“You mean Ellie?”

“No, no, not Ellie. The other one! What’s her name? Greta?”

I stared at him.

“Do you know what Greta’s like or don’t you? She’s come, hasn’t she? Taken possession! You won’t get rid of her now. She’s come to stay.”

“Ellie sprained her ankle,” I said. “Greta came to look after her. She’s—I suppose she’s going soon.”

“You don’t know anything of the kind. She always meant to come. I knew that. I took her measure when she came down while the house was building.”

“Ellie seems to want her,” I muttered.

“Oh yes, she’s been with Ellie some time, hasn’t she? She knows how to manage Ellie.”

That was what Lippincott had said. I’d seen for myself lately how true it was.

“Do you want her here, Mike?”

“I can’t throw her out of the house,” I said irritably. “She’s Ellie’s old friend. Her best friend. What the hell can I do about it?”

“No,” said Santonix, “I suppose you can’t do anything, can you?”

He looked at me. It was a very strange glance. Santonix was a strange man. You never knew what his words really meant.

“Do you know where you’re going, Mike?” he said. “Have you any idea? Sometimes I don’t think you know anything at all.”

“Of course I know,” I said. “I’m doing what I want to. I’m going where I wanted.”

“Are you? I wonder. I wonder if you really know what you want yourself. I’m afraid for you with Greta. She’s stronger than you are, you know.”

“I don’t see how you make that out. It isn’t a question of strength.”

“Isn’t it? I think it is. She’s the strong kind, the kind that always gets her way. You didn’t mean to have her here. That’s what you said. But here she is, and I’ve been watching them. She and Ellie sitting together, at home together, chattering and settled in. What are you, Mike? The outsider? Or aren’t you an outsider?”

“You’re crazy, the things you say. What do you mean—I’m an outsider? I’m Ellie’s husband, aren’t I?”

“Are you Ellie’s husband or is Ellie your wife?”

“You’re daft,” I said. “What’s the difference?”

He sighed. Suddenly, his shoulders sagged as though vigour went out of him.

“I can’t reach you,” said Santonix. “I can’t make you hear me. I can’t make you understand. Sometimes I think you do understand, sometimes I think you don’t know anything at all about yourself or anyone else.”

“Look here,” I said, “I’ll take so much from you, Santonix. You’re a wonderful architect—but—”

His face changed in the queer way it had.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m a good architect. This house is the best thing I have done. I’m as near as possible satisfied with it. You wanted a house like this. And Ellie wanted a house like this, too, to live in with you. She’s got it and you’ve got it. Send that other woman away, Mike, before it’s too late.”

“How can I upset Ellie?”

“That woman’s got you where she wants you,” said Santonix.

“Look here,” I said, “I don’t like Greta. She gets on my nerves. The other day I even had a frightful row with her. But none of it’s as simple as you think.”

“No, it won’t be simple with her.”

“Whoever called this place Gipsy’s Acre and said it had a curse on it may have had something,” I said angrily. “We’ve got gipsies who jump out from behind trees and shake fists at us and warn us that if we don’t get out of here, some awful fate will happen to us. This place that ought to be good and beautiful.”

They were queer words to say, those last ones. I said them as though it was somebody else saying them.

“Yes, it should be like that,” said Santonix. “It should be. But it can’t be, can it, if there is something evil possessing it?”

“You don’t believe, surely, in—”

“There are many queer things I believe...I know something about evil. Don’t you realize, haven’t you often felt, that I am partly evil myself? Always have been. That’s why I know when it’s near me, although I don’t always know exactly where it is...I want the house I built purged of evil. You understand that?” His tone was menacing. “You understand that? It matters to me.”

Then his whole manner changed.

“Come on,” he said, “don’t let’s talk a lot of nonsense. Let’s come in and see Ellie.”

So we went in through the window and Ellie greeted Santonix with enormous pleasure.

Santonix showed all his normal manner that evening. There were no more histrionics, he was his own self, charming, lighthearted. He talked mostly to Greta, giving her as it were the special benefit of his charm. And he had a

lot of charm. Anyone would have sworn that he was impressed by her, that he liked her, that he was anxious to please her. It made me feel that Santonix was really a dangerous man, there was a great deal more to him than I had ever glimpsed.

Greta always responded to admiration. She showed herself at her best. She could on occasion dim her beauty or else reveal it and tonight she looked as beautiful as I'd ever seen her. Smiling at Santonix, listening to him as though spellbound. I wondered what lay behind his manner. You never knew with Santonix. Ellie said she hoped he was staying for several days but he shook his head. He had to leave on the following day, he said.

“Are you building something now, are you busy?”

He said no, he'd just come out of hospital.

“They've patched me up once more,” he said, “but it's probably for the last time.”

“Patched you up? What do they do to you?”

“Drain the bad blood out of my body and put some good, fresh red blood in,” he said.

“Oh.” Ellie gave a little shudder.

“Don't worry,” said Santonix, “it will never happen to you.”

“But why has it got to happen to you?” said Ellie. “It's cruel.”

“Not cruel, no,” said Santonix. “I heard what you were singing just now.

“Man was made for Joy and Woe

And when this we rightly know

Thro' the World we safely go.

“I go safely because I know why I'm here. And for you, Ellie:

“Every Morn and every Night

Some are born to Sweet Delight.

“That’s you.”

“I wish I could feel safe,” said Ellie.

“Don’t you feel safe?”

“I don’t like to be threatened,” said Ellie. “I don’t like anyone to put a curse on me.”

“You’re talking about your gipsy?”

“Yes.”

“Forget it,” said Santonix. “Forget it for tonight. Let’s be happy. Ellie—your health—Long life to you—and a quick and merciful end to me—and good luck to Mike here—” He stopped, his glass raised towards Greta.

“Yes?” said Greta. “And to me?”

“And to you, what’s coming to you! Success, perhaps?” he added, half quizzically with an ironic question in his tone.

He went away next morning early.

“What a strange man he is,” Ellie said. “I’ve never understood him.”

“I never understand half of what he says,” I answered.

“He knows things,” said Ellie thoughtfully.

“You mean he knows the future?”

“No,” said Ellie, “I didn’t mean that. He knows people. I said it to you once before. He knows people better than they know themselves. Sometimes he

hates them because of that, and sometimes he's sorry for them. He's not sorry for me, though," she added meditatively.

"Why should he be?" I demanded.

"Oh, because—" said Ellie.

Sixteen

It was the next day in the afternoon that as I was walking rather rapidly in the darkest part of the wood where the shade of the pine trees was more menacing than anywhere else, I saw the figure of a tall woman standing in the drive. I took a quick impulsive step off the path. I'd taken it for granted that she was our gipsy but I stopped in sudden recoil when I saw who it actually was. It was my mother. She stood there tall and grim and grey-haired.

"Good Lord," I said, "you startled me, Mum. What are you doing here? Come to see us? We've asked you often enough, haven't we?"

We hadn't actually. I'd extended one rather lukewarm invitation, that was all. I'd put it, too, in a way which made it pretty sure that my mother wouldn't accept. I didn't want her here. I'd never wanted her here.

"You're right," she said. "I've come to see you at last. To see all's well with you. So this is the grand house you've built, and it is a grand house," she said, looking over my shoulder.

I thought I detected in her voice the disapproving acidity that I'd expected to find.

"Too grand for the likes of me, eh?" I said.

"I didn't say that, lad."

"But you thought it."

"It wasn't what you were born to, and no good comes from getting out of your station in life."

"Nobody'd ever get anywhere if they listened to you."

"Aye, I know that's what you say and think, but I don't know what good ambition's ever done to anybody. It's the kind of thing that turns to dead-sea

fruit in your mouth.”

“Ah, for God’s sake don’t croak,” I said. “Come on. Come along up to see our grand house for yourself and turn up your nose at it. And come and see my grand wife, too, and turn up your nose at her if you dare.”

“Your wife? I’ve seen her already.”

“What do you mean, you’ve seen her already?” I demanded.

“So she didn’t tell you, eh?”

“What?” I demanded.

“That she came to see me.”

“She came to see you?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes. There she was one day standing outside the door, ringing the bell and looking a little scared. She’s a pretty lass and a sweet one for all the fine clothes she had on. She said, ‘You’re Mike’s mother, aren’t you?’ and I said, ‘Yes, and who are you?’ and she said, ‘I’m his wife.’ She said, ‘I had to come to see you. It didn’t seem right that I shouldn’t know Mike’s mother...’ And I said, ‘I bet he didn’t want you to’ and she hesitated, and I said: ‘You don’t need to mind telling me that. I know my boy and I know what he’d want or not want.’ She said, ‘You think—perhaps he’s ashamed of you because he and you are poor and I’m rich, but it isn’t like that at all. That isn’t like him at all. It isn’t, really it isn’t.’ I said again, ‘You don’t need to tell me, lass. I know what faults my boy has. That’s not one of his faults. He’s not ashamed of his mother and he’s not ashamed of his beginnings.

“‘He’s not ashamed of me,’ I said to her. ‘He’s afraid of me if anything. I know too much about him, you see.’ And that seemed to amuse her. She said, ‘I expect mothers always feel like that—that they know all about their sons. And I expect sons always feel embarrassed just because of that!’

“I said in a way that might be true. When you’re young, you’re always putting on an act to the world. I mind myself, when I was a child in my auntie’s house. On the wall over my bed there was a great big eye in a gilt frame. It said ‘Thou God seest me.’ Gave me the creeps it did all up my spine before I went to sleep.”

“Ellie should have told me she’d been to see you,” I said. “I don’t see why she should keep it such a secret. She should have told me.”

I was angry. I was very angry. I’d had no idea that Ellie would keep secrets like that from me.

“She was a little scared of what she’d done, maybe, but she’d no call to be frightened of you, my boy.”

“Come on,” I said, “come on and see our house.”

I don’t know whether she liked our house or not. I think not. She looked round the rooms and raised her eyebrows and then she went into the terrace room. Ellie and Greta were sitting there. They’d just come in from outside and Greta had a scarlet wool cloak half over her shoulders. My mother looked at them both. She just stood there for a moment as though rooted to the spot. Ellie jumped up and came forward and across the room.

“Oh, it’s Mrs. Rogers,” she said, then turning to Greta, she said, “It’s Mike’s mother come to see our house and us. Isn’t that nice? This is my friend Greta Andersen.”

And she held out both her hands and took Mum’s and Mum looked hard at her and then looked over her shoulder at Greta very hard.

“I see,” she said to herself, “I see.”

“What do you see?” asked Ellie.

“I wondered,” said Mum. “I wondered what it would all be like here.” She looked round her. “Yes, it’s a fine house. Fine curtains and fine chairs and fine pictures.”

“You must have some tea,” said Ellie.

“You look as if you’ve finished tea.”

“Tea’s a thing that need never be finished,” said Ellie, then she said to Greta, “I won’t ring the bell. Greta, will you go out to the kitchen and make a fresh pot of tea?”

“Of course, darling,” said Greta and went out of the room looking over her shoulder once in a sharp, almost scared way at my mother.

My mother sat down.

“Where’s your luggage?” said Ellie. “Have you come to stay? I hope you have.”

“No, lass, I won’t stay. I’m going back by train in half an hour’s time. I just wanted to look in on you.” Then she added rather quickly, probably because she wished to get it out before Greta came back, “Now don’t worry yourself, love, I told him how you came to see me and paid me a visit.”

“I’m sorry, Mike, that I didn’t tell you,” said Ellie firmly, “only I thought perhaps I’d better not.”

“She came out of the kindness of her heart, she did,” said my mother. “She’s a good girl you’ve married, Mike, and a pretty one. Yes, a very pretty one.” Then she added half audibly, “I am sorry.”

“Sorry,” said Ellie, faintly puzzled.

“Sorry for thinking the things I did,” said my mother and added with a slight air of strain, “Well, as you say, mothers are like that. Always inclined to be suspicious of daughters-in-law. But when I saw you, I knew he’d been lucky. It seemed too good to be true to me, that it did.”

“What impertinence,” I said, but I smiled at her as I said it. “I always had excellent taste.”

“You’ve always had expensive taste, that’s what you mean,” said my mother and looked at the brocade curtains.

“I’m not really the worse for being an expensive taste,” said Ellie, smiling at her.

“You make him save a bit of money from time to time,” said Mum, “it’ll be good for his character.”

“I refuse to have my character improved,” I said. “The advantage of taking a wife is that the wife thinks everything you do is perfect. Isn’t that so, Ellie?”

Ellie was looking happy again now. She laughed and said:

“You’re above yourself, Mike! The conceit of you.”

Greta came back then with the teapot. We’d been a little ill at ease and we were just getting over it. Somehow when Greta came back the strain came out again. My mother resisted all endeavours on Ellie’s part to make her stay over and Ellie didn’t insist after a short while. She and I walked down together with my mother along the winding drive through the trees and to the gateway.

“What do you call it?” my mother asked abruptly.

Ellie said, “Gipsy’s Acre.”

“Ah,” said my mother, “yes you’ve got gipsies around here, haven’t you?”

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“I saw one as I came up. She looked at me queer, she did.”

“She’s all right really,” I said, “a little half-baked, that’s all.”

“Why do you say she’s half-baked? She’d a funny look to her when she looked at me. She’s got a grievance against you of some kind?”

“I don’t think it’s real,” said Ellie. “I think she’s imagined it all. That we’ve done her out of her land or something like that.”

“I expect she wants money,” said my mother. “Gipsies are like that. Make a big song and dance sometimes of how they’ve been done down one way or another. But they soon stop when they get some money in their itching palms.”

“You don’t like gipsies,” said Ellie.

“They’re a thieving lot. They don’t work steady and they don’t keep their hands off what doesn’t belong to them.”

“Oh well,” Ellie said, “we—we—don’t worry any more now.”

My mother said good-bye and then added, “Who’s the young lady that lives with you?”

Ellie explained how Greta had been with her for three years before she married and how but for Greta she would have had a miserable life.

“Greta’s done everything to help us. She’s a wonderful person,” said Ellie. “I wouldn’t know how—how to get on without her.”

“She’s living with you or on a visit?”

“Oh well,” said Ellie. She avoided the question. “She—she’s living with us at present because I sprained my ankle and had to have someone to look after me. But I’m all right again now.”

“Married people do best alone together when they’re starting,” my mother said.

We stood by the gate watching my mother march away.

“She’s got a very strong personality,” said Ellie thoughtfully.

I was angry with Ellie, really very angry because she’d gone and found out my mother and visited her without telling me. But when she turned and

stood looking at me with one eyebrow raised a little and the funny half-timid, half-satisfied little-girl smile on her face, I couldn't help relenting.

"What a deceitful little thing you are," I said.

"Well," said Ellie, "I've had to be sometimes, you see."

"That's like a Shakespeare play I once saw. They did it at a school I was at." I quoted self-consciously, "'She has deceiv'd her father and may thee.'"

"What did you play—Othello?"

"No," I said, "I played the girl's father. That's why I remember that speech, I suppose. It's practically the only thing I had to say."

"'She has deceiv'd her father and may thee,'" said Ellie thoughtfully. "I didn't even deceive my father as far as I know. Perhaps I would have later."

"I don't suppose he would have taken very kindly to your marrying me," I said, "any more than your stepmother did."

"No," said Ellie, "I don't suppose he would. He was pretty conventional I think." Then she gave that funny little-girl smile again. "So I suppose I'd have had to be like Desdemona and deceived my father and run away with you."

"Why did you want to see my mother so much, Ellie?" I asked curiously.

"It's not so much I wanted to see her," said Ellie, "but I felt terribly bad not doing anything about it. You haven't mentioned your mother very often but I did gather that she's always done everything she could for you. Come to the rescue about things and worked very hard to get you extra schooling and things like that. And I thought it seemed so mean and purse-proud of me not to go near her."

"Well, it wouldn't have been your fault," I said, "it would have been mine."

"Yes," said Ellie. "I can understand that perhaps you didn't want me to go and see her."

“You think I’ve got an inferiority complex about my mother? That’s not true at all, Ellie, I assure you it isn’t. It wasn’t that.”

“No,” said Ellie thoughtfully, “I know that now. It was because you didn’t want her to do a lot of mother stuff.”

“Mother stuff?” I queried.

“Well,” said Ellie, “I can see that she’s the kind of person who would know quite well what other people ought to do. I mean, she’d want you to go in for certain kinds of jobs.”

“Quite right,” I said. “Steady jobs. Settling down.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered very much now,” said Ellie. “I dare say it was very good advice. But it wouldn’t have been the right advice ever for you, Mike. You’re not a settler down. You don’t want to be steady. You want to go and see things and do things—be on top of the world.”

“I want to stay here in this house with you,” I said.

“For a while, perhaps...And I think—I think you’ll always want to come back here. And so shall I. I think we shall come here every year and I think we shall be happier here than anywhere else. But you’ll want to go places too. You’ll want to travel and see things and buy things. Perhaps think up new plans for doing the garden here. Perhaps we’ll go and look at Italian gardens, Japanese gardens, landscape gardens of all kinds.”

“You make life seem very exciting, Ellie,” I said. “I’m sorry I was cross.”

“Oh, I don’t mind your being cross,” said Ellie. “I’m not afraid of you.” Then she added, with a frown: “Your mother didn’t like Greta.”

“A lot of people don’t like Greta,” I said.

“Including you.”

“Now look here, Ellie, you’re always saying that. It’s not true. I was just a bit jealous of her at first, that was all. We get on very well now.” And I

added, "I think perhaps she makes people get rather on the defensive."

"Mr. Lippincott doesn't like her either, does he? He thinks she's got too much influence over me," said Ellie.

"Has she?"

"I wonder why you should ask that. Yes, I think perhaps she has. It's only natural, she's rather a dominant personality and I had to have someone I could trust in and rely on. Someone who'd stand up for me."

"And see you got your own way?" I asked her, laughing.

We went into the house arm in arm. For some reason it seemed dark that afternoon. I suppose because the sun had just left the terrace and left a feeling of darkness behind it. Ellie said:

"What's the matter, Mike?"

"I don't know," I said. "Just suddenly I felt as though someone were walking over my grave."

"A goose is walking over your grave. That's the real saying, isn't it?" said Ellie.

Greta wasn't about anywhere. The servants said she'd gone out for a walk.

Now that my mother knew all about my marriage and had seen Ellie, I did what I had really wanted to do for some time. I sent her a large cheque. I told her to move into a better house and to buy herself any additional furniture she wanted. Things like that. I had doubts of course as to whether she would accept it or not. It wasn't money that I'd worked for and I couldn't honestly pretend it was. As I expected, she sent the cheque back torn in two with a scrawled note. "I'll have naught to do with any of this," she wrote. "You'll never be different. I know that now, heaven help you." I flung it down in front of Ellie.

"You see what my mother's like," I said. "I married a rich girl, and I'm living on my rich wife's money and the old battleaxe disapproves of it!"

“Don’t worry,” said Ellie. “Lots of people think that way. She’ll get over it. She loves you very much, Mike,” she added.

“Then why does she want to alter me all the time? Make me into her pattern. I’m myself. I’m not anybody else’s pattern. I’m not mother’s little boy to be moulded the way she likes. I’m myself. I’m an adult. I’m me!”

“You’re you,” said Ellie, “and I love you.”

And then, perhaps to distract me, she said something rather disquieting.

“What do you think,” she said, “of this new manservant of ours?”

I hadn’t thought about him. What was there to think? If anything I preferred him to our last one who had not troubled to conceal his low opinion of my social status.

“He’s all right,” I said. “Why?”

“I just wondered whether he might be a security man.”

“A security man? What do you mean?”

“A detective. I thought Uncle Andrew might have arranged it.”

“Why should he?”

“Well—possible kidnapping, I suppose. In the States, you know, we usually had guards—especially in the country.”

Another of the disadvantages of having money that I hadn’t known about!

“What a beastly idea!”

“Oh, I don’t know...I suppose I’m used to it. What does it matter? One doesn’t really notice.”

“Is the wife in it, too?”

“She’d have to be, I think, though she cooks very well. I should think that Uncle Andrew, or perhaps Stanford Lloyd, whichever one of them thought of it, must have paid our last ones to leave, and had these two all lined up ready to take their place. It would have been quite easy.”

“Without telling you?” I was still incredulous.

“They’d never dream of telling me. I might have kicked up a fuss. Anyway, I may be quite wrong about them.” She went on dreamily. “It’s only that one gets a kind of feeling when one’s been used to people of that kind always being around.”

“Poor little rich girl,” I said savagely.

Ellie did not mind at all.

“I suppose that does describe it rather well,” she said.

“The things I’m learning about you all the time, Ellie,” I said.

Seventeen

What a mysterious thing sleep is. You go to bed worrying about gipsies and secret enemies, and detectives planted in your house and the possibilities of kidnapping and a hundred other things; and sleep whisks you away from it all. You travel very far and you don't know where you've been, but when you wake up, it's to a totally new world. No worries, no apprehensions. Instead, when I woke up on the 17th September I was in a mood of boisterous excitement.

"A wonderful day," I said to myself with conviction. "This is going to be a wonderful day." I meant it. I was like those people in advertisements that offer to go anywhere and do anything. I went over plans in my head. I had arranged to meet Major Phillpot at a sale at a country house about fifteen miles away. They had some very nice stuff there and I'd already marked down two or three items in the catalogue. I was quite excited about the whole thing.

Phillpot was very knowledgeable about period furniture and silver and things of that kind, not because he was artistic—he was entirely a sporting man—but simply because he knew. His whole family was knowledgeable.

I looked over the catalogue at breakfast. Ellie had come down in a riding habit. She rode most mornings now—sometimes alone, sometimes with Claudia. She had the American habit of drinking coffee and a glass of orange juice and nothing much else for breakfast. My tastes, now that I hadn't got to restrain them in any way, were very much those of a Victorian squire! I liked lots of hot dishes on the sideboard. I ate kidneys this morning and sausages and bacon as well. Delicious.

"What are you doing, Greta?" I asked.

Greta said she was meeting Claudia Hardcastle at the station at Market Chadwell and they were going up to London to a white sale. I asked what a white sale was.

“Does there really have to be white in it?” I asked.

Greta looked scornful and said that a white sale meant a sale of household linen and blankets and towels and sheets, etc. There were some very good bargains at a special shop in Bond Street of which she had been sent a catalogue.

I said to Ellie, “Well, if Greta is going to London for the day, why don’t you drive in and meet us at the George in Bartington. The food there’s very good, so old Phillpot said. He suggested you might come. One o’clock. You go through Market Chadwell and then you take a turning about three miles after that. It’s sign-posted, I think.”

“All right,” said Ellie, “I’ll be there.”

I mounted her and she went off riding through the trees. Ellie loved riding. She usually rode up one of the winding tracks and came out on the Downs and had a gallop before returning home. I left the smaller car for Ellie as it was easier to park and took the big Chrysler myself. I got to Bartington Manor just before the sale began. Phillpot was there already and had kept a place for me.

“Some quite nice stuff here,” he said. “One or two good pictures. A Romney and a Reynolds. I don’t know if you’re interested?”

I shook my head. My taste at the moment was entirely for modern artists.

“Several dealers here,” Phillpot went on, “a couple down from London. See that thin man over there with the pinched lips? That’s Cressington. Pretty well known. Not brought your wife?”

“No,” I said, “she’s not awfully keen on sales. Anyway, I didn’t particularly want her to come this morning.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“There’s going to be a surprise for Ellie,” I said. “Did you notice Lot 42?”

He took a glance at the catalogue and then looked across the room.

“Hm. That papier mâché desk? Yes. Rather a beautiful little piece. One of the best examples of papier mâché I’ve seen. Desk rather rare too. Plenty of hand desks to stand on tables. But this is an early example. Never seen one quite like it before.”

The little piece was inlaid with a design of Windsor Castle and the sides of it had bouquets of roses and thistles and shamrock.

“Beautiful condition,” said Phillpot. He looked at me curiously. “I shouldn’t have thought it was your taste but—”

“Oh, it isn’t,” I said. “It’s a little too flowery and ladylike for me. But Ellie loves the stuff. It’s her birthday next week and I want it as a present for her. A surprise. That’s why I didn’t want her to know I was bidding for it today. But I know there’s nothing I could give her that she’d like more. She’ll be really surprised.”

We went in and took seats and the sale began. Actually, the piece I wanted was run up pretty high. Both the London dealers seemed keen on it although one of them was so practised and reserved about it that you could hardly notice the almost infinitesimal motion of his catalogue which the auctioneer was observing closely. I bought a carved Chippendale chair as well which I thought would look well in our hall and some enormous brocade curtains in good condition.

“Well, you seem to have enjoyed yourself all right,” said Phillpot, rising to his feet when the auctioneer completed the morning’s sale. “Want to come back this afternoon?”

I shook my head.

“No, there’s nothing in the second half of the sale that I want. Mostly bedroom furniture and carpets and things like that.”

“No, I didn’t think you’d be interested. Well—” he looked at his watch, “we’d better be getting along. Is Ellie meeting us at the George?”

“Yes, she’ll be there.”

“And—er—Miss Andersen?”

“Oh, Greta’s gone to London,” I said. “She’s gone to what they call a white sale. With Miss Hardcastle, I believe.”

“Oh yes, Claudia said something about it the other day. Price of sheets and things are fantastic nowadays. Do you know what a linen pillow case costs? Thirty-five shillings. Used to buy ’em for six bob.”

“You’re very knowledgeable on household purchases,” I said.

“Well, I hear my wife complaining about them.” Phillpot smiled. “You’re looking in the pink of condition, Mike. Happy as a sandboy.”

“That’s because I’ve got the papier mâché desk,” I said, “or at any rate that’s partly it. I just woke up feeling happy this morning. You know those days when everything in the world seems right.”

“Mm,” said Phillpot, “be careful. That’s what’s known as being fey.”

“Fey?” I said. “That’s something Scottish, isn’t it?”

“It comes before disaster, my boy,” said Phillpot. “Better curb your exuberance.”

“Oh, I don’t believe those silly superstitions,” I said.

“Nor in gipsies” prophecies, eh?”

“We haven’t seen our gipsy lately,” I said. “Well, not for a week at least.”

“Perhaps she’s away from the place,” said Phillpot.

He asked me if I’d give him a lift in my car and I said I would.

“No use taking the two of them. You can drop me here on your way back, can’t you? What about Ellie, will she be bringing her car over?”

“Yes, she’s bringing the little one.”

“Hope the George will put on a good meal,” said Major Phillpot. “I’m hungry.”

“Did you buy anything?” I asked. “I was too excited to notice.”

“Yes, you’ve got to keep your wits about you when you’re bidding. Have to notice what the dealers are doing. No. I made a bid or two but everything went far above my price.”

I gathered that although Phillpot owned enormous quantities of land round about, his actual income did not amount to much. He was what you might describe as a poor man though a large landowner. Only by selling a good portion of his land would he have had money to spend and he didn’t want to sell his land. He loved it.

We got to the George and found a good many cars standing there already. Possibly some of the people from the auction. I didn’t see Ellie’s though. We went inside and I looked around for her but she hadn’t turned up yet. However, it was only just past one.

We went and had a drink at the bar while we were waiting for Ellie to arrive. The place was pretty crowded. I looked into the dining room but they were still holding our table. There were a good many local faces that I knew and sitting at a table by the window was a man whose face seemed familiar to me. I was sure I knew him but I couldn’t remember when and where we’d met. I didn’t think he was a local, because his clothes didn’t fit in with these parts. Of course I’ve knocked up against a great many people in my time and it is unlikely that I can remember them all easily. He hadn’t been at the sale as far as I could remember, though, oddly enough, there had been one face that I thought I’d recognized but couldn’t place. Faces are tricky unless you can connect up when and where you’d seen them.

The presiding goddess of the George, rustling in her usual black silk of affected Edwardian style which she always wore, came to me and said:

“Will you be coming to your table soon, Mr. Rogers? There’s one or two waiting.”

“My wife will be here in a minute or two,” I said.

I went back to rejoin Phillpot. I thought perhaps that Ellie might have had a puncture.

“We’d better go in,” I said, “they seem to be getting rather upset about it. They’ve got quite a crowd today. I’m afraid,” I added, “that Ellie isn’t the most punctual of people.”

“Ah,” said Phillpot in his old-fashioned style, “the ladies make a point of keeping us waiting, don’t they? All right, Mike, if that’s all right by you. We’ll go in and start lunch.”

We went into the dining room, chose steak and kidney pie off the menu and started.

“It’s too bad of Ellie,” I said, “to stand us up like this.” I added that it was possibly because Greta was in London. “Ellie’s very used, you know,” I said, “to Greta helping her to keep appointments, reminding her of them, and getting her off in time and all that.”

“Is she very dependent on Miss Andersen?”

“In that way, yes,” I said.

We went on eating and passed from the steak and kidney pie to apple tart with a self-conscious piece of phoney pastry on top of it.

“I wonder if she’s forgotten all about it,” I said suddenly.

“Perhaps you’d better ring up.”

“Yes, I think I’d better.”

I went out to the phone and rang. Mrs. Carson, the cook, answered.

“Oh, it’s you, Mr. Rogers, Mrs. Rogers hasn’t come home yet.”

“What do you mean, hasn’t come home? Home from where?”

“She hasn’t come back from her ride yet.”

“But that was after breakfast. She can’t have been riding the whole morning.”

“She didn’t say anything different. I was expecting her back.”

“Why didn’t you ring up sooner and let me know about it?” I asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t know where to get at you, you see. I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

I told her I was at the George at Bartington and gave her the number. She was to ring up the moment Ellie came in or she had news of her. Then I went back to join Phillpot. He saw from my face at once that something was wrong.

“Ellie hasn’t come home,” I said. “She went off riding this morning. She usually does most mornings but it only lasts half an hour to an hour.”

“Now don’t worry before you need to, boy,” he said kindly. “Your place is in a very lonely part, you know. Maybe her horse went lame and she might be walking it home. All that moorland and downs above the woods. There’s nobody much in that part to send a message by.”

“If she decided to change her plans and ride over and see anyone, anything like that,” I said, “she’d have rung here. She’d have left a message for us.”

“Well, don’t get het up yet,” Phillpot said. “I think we’d better go now, right away, and see what we can find out.”

As we went out to the car park, another car drove away. In it was the man I had noticed in the dining room and suddenly it came to me who it was. Stanford Lloyd or someone just like him. I wondered what he could be doing down here. Could he be coming to see us? If so, it was odd he hadn’t let us know. In the car with him was a woman who had looked like Claudia Hardcastle, but surely she was in London with Greta, shopping. It all floored me rather....

As we drove away Phillpot looked at me once or twice. I caught his eye once and said rather bitterly:

“All right. You said I was fey this morning.”

“Well, don’t think of that yet. She may have had a fall and sprained an ankle or something like that. She’s a good horse-woman, though,” he said. “I’ve seen her. I can’t feel an accident is really likely.”

I said, “Accidents can happen at any time.”

We drove fast and came at last to the road over the downs above our property, looking about us as we went. Now and again we stopped to ask people. We stopped a man who was digging peat and there we got the first news.

“Seen a riderless horse I have,” he said. “Two hours ago maybe or longer. I woulda caught it but it galloped off when I got near it. Didn’t see anyone though.”

“Best drive home,” suggested Phillpot, “there may be news of her there.”

We drove home but there was no news. We got hold of the groom and sent him off to ride the moorland in search of Ellie. Phillpot telephoned his own house and sent a man from there too. He and I went up a path together and through the wood, the one that Ellie often took, and came out on the downs there.

At first there was nothing to be seen. Then we walked along the edge of the wood near where some of the other paths came out and so—we found her. We saw what looked like a huddled heap of clothes. The horse had come back and was now standing cropping near that huddled heap. I began to run. Phillpot followed me faster than I’d have thought a man of his age could have kept up.

She was there—lying in a crumpled-up heap, her little white face turned up to the sky. I said:

“I can’t—I can’t—” and turned my face away.

Phillpot went and knelt down by her. He got up almost at once.

“We’ll get hold of a doctor,” he said. “Shaw. He’s the nearest. But—I don’t think it’s any use, Mike.”

“You mean—she’s dead?”

“Yes,” he said, “it’s no good pretending anything else.”

“Oh God!” I said and turned away. “I can’t believe it. Not Ellie.”

“Here, have this,” said Phillpot.

He took a flask out of his pocket, unscrewed it and handed it to me. I took a good deep pull at it.

“Thanks,” I said.

The groom came along then and Phillpot sent him off to fetch Dr. Shaw.

Eighteen

Shaw came up in a battered old Land Rover. I suppose it was the car he used for going to visit isolated farms in bad weather. He barely looked at either of us. He went straight and bent over Ellie. Then he came over to us.

“She’s been dead at least three or four hours,” he said. “How did it happen?”

I told him how she’d gone off riding as usual after breakfast that morning.

“Has she had any accidents up to this time when she’s been out riding?”

“No,” I said, “she was a good rider.”

“Yes, I know she’s a good rider. I’ve seen her once or twice. She’s ridden since she was a child, I understand. I wondered if she might have had an accident lately and that that might have affected her nerve a bit. If the horse had shied—”

“Why should the horse shy? It’s a quiet brute—”

“There’s nothing vicious about this particular horse,” said Major Phillpot. “He’s well behaved, not nervy. Has she broken any bones?”

“I haven’t made a complete examination yet but she doesn’t seem physically injured in any way. There may be some internal injury. Might be shock, I suppose.”

“But you can’t die of shock,” I said.

“People have died of shock before now. If she’d had a weak heart—”

“They said in America that she had a weak heart—some kind of weakness at least.”

“Hm. I couldn’t find much trace of it when I examined her. Still, we didn’t have a cardiograph. Anyway no point in going into that now. We shall know later. After the inquest.”

He looked at me consideringly, then he patted me on the shoulder.

“You go home and go to bed,” he said. “You’re the one who’s suffering from shock.”

In the queer way people materialize out of nowhere in the country, we had three or four people standing near us, by this time. One a hiker who had come along from the main road seeing our little group, one a rosy-faced woman who I think was going to a farm over a short cut and an old roadman. They were making exclamations and remarks.

“Poor young lady.”

“So young too. Thrown from her horse, was she?”

“Ah well, you never know with horses.”

“It’s Mrs. Rogers, isn’t it, the American lady from The Towers?”

It was not until everyone else had exclaimed in their astonished fashion, that the aged roadman spoke. He gave us information. Shaking his head he said:

“I musta seen it happen. I musta seen it happen.”

The doctor turned sharply on him.

“What did you see happen?”

“I saw a horse bolting across country.”

“Did you see the lady fall?”

“No. No, I didn’t. She were riding along the top of the woods when I saw her and after that I’d got me back turned and I was cutting the stones for the

road. And then I heard hoofs and I looked up and there was the horse agalloping. I didn't think there'd been an accident. I thought the lady perhaps had got off and let go of the horse in some way. It wasn't coming towards me, it was going in the other direction."

"You didn't see the lady lying on the ground?"

"No, I don't see very well far. I saw the horse because it showed against the sky line."

"Was she riding alone? Was there anyone with her, or near her?"

"Nobody near her. No. She was all alone. She rode not very far from me, past me, going along that way. She was bearing towards the woods, I think. No, I didn't see anyone at all except her and the horse."

"Might have been the gipsy who frightened her," said the rosy-faced woman.

I swung round.

"What gipsy? When?"

"Oh, must have been—well, it must have been three or four hours ago when I went down the road this morning. About quarter to ten maybe, I saw that gipsy woman. The one as lives in the cottages in the village. Least I think it was she. I wasn't near enough to be sure. But she's the only one as goes about hereabouts in a red cloak. She was walking up a path through the trees. Somebody told me as she'd said nasty things to the poor American young lady. Threatened her. Told her something bad would happen if she didn't get out of this place. Very threatening, I hear she was."

"The gipsy," I said. Then, bitterly, to myself, though out loud, "Gipsy's Acre. I wish I'd never seen the place."

BOOK THREE

Nineteen

I

It's extraordinary how difficult it is for me to remember what happened after that. I mean, the sequence of it all. Up to then, you see, it's all clear in my mind. I was a little doubtful where to begin, that was all. But from then on it was as though a knife fell, cutting my life into two halves. What I went on to from the moment of Ellie's death seems to me now like something for which I was not prepared. A confusion of thrusting people and elements and happenings where I wasn't myself in control of anything any more. Things happened not to me, but all around me. That's what it seemed like.

Everybody was very kind to me. That seems the thing I remember best. I stumbled about and looked dazed and didn't know what to do. Greta, I remember, came into her element. She had that amazing power that women have to take charge of a situation and deal with it. Deal, I mean, with all the small unimportant details that someone has to see to. I would have been incapable of seeing to them.

I think the first thing I remembered clearly after they'd taken Ellie away and I'd got back to my house—our house—the house—was when Dr. Shaw came along and talked to me. I don't know how long after that was. He was quiet, kind, reasonable. Just explaining things clearly and gently.

Arrangements. I remember his using the word arrangements. What a hateful word it is and all the things it stands for. The things in life that have grand words—Love—sex—life—death—hate—those aren't the things that govern existence at all. It's lots of other pettifogging, degrading things. Things you have to endure, things you never think about until they happen to you. Undertakers, arrangements for funerals, inquests. And servants coming into rooms and pulling the blinds down. Why should blinds be pulled down because Ellie was dead? Of all the stupid things!

That was why, I remember, I felt quite grateful to Dr. Shaw. He dealt with such things so kindly and sensibly, explaining gently why certain things like

an inquest had to be. Talking rather slowly, I remember, so that he could be quite sure I was taking them in.

II

I didn't know what an inquest would be like. I'd never been to one. It seemed to me curiously unreal, amateurish. The Coroner was a small fussy little man with pincenez. I had to give evidence of identification, to describe the last time I had seen Ellie at the breakfast table and her departure for her usual morning ride and the arrangement we had made to meet later for lunch. She had seemed, I said, exactly the same as usual, in perfectly good health.

Dr. Shaw's evidence was quiet, inconclusive. No serious injuries, a wrenched collar bone and bruises such as would result from a fall from the horse—not of a very serious nature, and inflicted at the time of death. She did not appear to have moved again after she had fallen. Death, he thought, had been practically instantaneous. There was no specific organic injury to have caused death, and he could give no other explanation of it than that she had died from heart failure caused by shock. As far as I could make out from the medical language used Ellie had died simply as a result of absence of breath—of asphyxia of some kind. Her organs were healthy, her stomach contents normal.

Greta, who also gave evidence, stressed rather more forcibly than she had done to Dr. Shaw before, that Ellie had suffered from some form of heart malady three or four years ago. She had never heard anything definite mentioned but Ellie's relations had occasionally said that her heart was weak and that she must take care not to overdo things. She had never heard anything more definite than that.

Then we came to the people who had seen or been in the vicinity at the time the accident happened. The old man who had been cutting peat was the first of them. He had seen the lady pass him, she'd been about fifty yards or so away. He knew who she was though he'd never spoken to her. She was the lady from the new house.

“You knew her by sight?”

“No, not exactly by sight but I knew the horse, sir. It’s got a white fetlock. Used to belong to Mr. Carey over at Shettlegroom. I’ve never heard it anything but quiet and well behaved, suitable for a lady to ride.”

“Was the horse giving any trouble when you saw it? Playing up in any way?”

“No, it was quiet enough. It was a nice morning.”

There hadn’t been many people about, he said. He hadn’t noticed many. That particular track across the moor wasn’t much used except as a short cut occasionally to one of the farms. Another track crossed it about a mile farther away. He’d seen one or two passers-by that morning but not to notice. One man on a bicycle, another man walking. They were too far away for him to see who they were and he hadn’t noticed much anyway. Earlier, he said, before he’d seen the lady riding, he’d seen old Mrs. Lee, or so he thought. She was coming up the track towards him and then she turned off and went into the woods. She often walked across the moors and in and out of the woods.

The Coroner asked why Mrs. Lee was not in court. He understood that she’d been summoned to attend. He was told, however, that Mrs. Lee had left the village some days ago—nobody knew exactly when. She had not left any address behind. It was not her habit to do so, she often went away and came back without notifying anyone. So there was nothing unusual about this. In fact one or two people said they thought she’d already left the village before the day the accident happened. The Coroner asked the old man again.

“You think, however, that it was Mrs. Lee you saw?”

“Couldn’t say, I’m sure. Wouldn’t like to be certain. It was a tall woman and striding along, and had on a scarlet cloak, like Mrs. Lee wears sometimes. But I didn’t look particular. I was busy with what I was doing. Could have been she, it could have been someone else. Who’s to say?”

As for the rest he repeated very much what he had said to us. He’d seen the lady riding nearby, he’d often seen her riding before. He hadn’t paid any

particular attention. Only later did he see the horse galloping alone. It looked as though something had frightened it, he said. "At least, it could be that way." He couldn't tell what time that was. Might have been eleven, might have been earlier. He saw the horse much later, farther away. It seemed to be returning towards the woods.

Then the Coroner recalled me and asked me a few more questions about Mrs. Lee, Mrs. Esther Lee of Vine Cottage.

"You and your wife knew Mrs. Lee by sight?"

"Yes," I said, "quite well."

"Did you talk with her?"

"Yes, several times. Or rather," I added, "she talked to us."

"Did she at any time threaten you or your wife?"

I paused a moment or two.

"In a sense she did," I said slowly, "but I never thought—"

"You never thought what?"

"I never thought she really meant it," I said.

"Did she sound as though she had any particular grudge against your wife?"

"My wife said so once. She said she thought she had some special grudge against her but she couldn't see why."

"Had you or your wife at any time ordered her off your land, threatened her, treated her roughly in any way?"

"Any aggression came from her side," I said.

"Did you ever have the impression that she was mentally unbalanced?"

I considered. “Yes,” I said, “I did. I thought she had come to believe that the land on which we had built our house belonged to her, or belonged to her tribe or whatever they call themselves. She had a kind of obsession about it.” I added slowly, “I think she was getting worse, more and more obsessed by the idea.”

“I see. She never offered your wife physical violence at any time?”

“No,” I said, slowly, “I don’t think it would be fair to say that. It was all—well all a sort of gipsy’s warning stuff. ‘You’ll have bad luck if you stay here. There’ll be a curse on you unless you go away.’”

“Did she mention the word death?”

“Yes, I think so. We didn’t take her seriously. At least,” I corrected myself, “I didn’t.”

“Do you think your wife did?”

“I’m afraid she did sometimes. The old woman, you know, could be rather alarming. I don’t think she was really responsible for what she was saying or doing.”

The proceedings ended with the Coroner adjourning the inquest for a fortnight. Everything pointed to death being due to accidental causes but there was not sufficient evidence to show what had caused the accident to occur. He would adjourn the proceedings until he had heard the evidence of Mrs. Esther Lee.

Twenty

The day after the inquest I went to see Major Phillpot and I told him point-blank that I wanted his opinion. Someone whom the old peat-cutting man had taken to be Mrs. Esther Lee had been seen going up towards the woods that morning.

“You know the old woman,” I said. “Do you actually think that she would have been capable of causing an accident by deliberate malice?”

“I can’t really believe so, Mike,” he said. “To do a thing like that you need a very strong motive. Revenge for some personal injury caused to you. Something like that. And what had Ellie ever done to her? Nothing.”

“It seems crazy, I know. Why was she constantly appearing in that queer way, threatening Ellie, telling her to go away? She seemed to have a grudge against her, but how could she have had a grudge? She’d never met Ellie or seen her before. What was Ellie to her but a perfectly strange American? There’s no past history, no link between them.”

“I know, I know,” said Phillpot. “I can’t help feeling, Mike, that there’s something here that we don’t understand. I don’t know how much your wife was over in England previous to her marriage. Did she ever live in this part of the world for any length of time?”

“No, I’m sure of that. It’s all so difficult. I don’t really know anything about Ellie. I mean, who she knew, where she went. We just—met.” I checked myself and looked at him. I said, “You don’t know how we came to meet, do you? No,” I went on, “you wouldn’t guess in a hundred years how we met.” And suddenly, in spite of myself, I began to laugh. Then I pulled myself together. I could feel that I was very near hysteria.

I could see his kind patient face just waiting till I was myself again. He was a helpful man. There was no doubt about that.

“We met here,” I said. “Here at Gipsy’s Acre. I had been reading the notice board of the sale of The Towers and I walked up the road, up the hill because I was curious about this place. And that’s how I first saw her. She was standing there under a tree. I startled her—or perhaps it was she who startled me. Anyway, that’s how it all began. That’s how we came to live here in this damned, cursed, unlucky place.”

“Have you felt that all along? That it would be unlucky?”

“No. Yes. No, I don’t know really. I’ve never admitted it. I’ve never wanted to admit it. But I think she knew. I think she’s been frightened all along.” Then I said slowly, “I think somebody deliberately wanted to frighten her.”

He said rather sharply, “What do you mean by that? Who wanted to frighten her?”

“Presumably the gipsy woman. But somehow I’m not quite sure about it... She used to lie in wait for Ellie, you know, tell her this place would bring her bad luck. Tell her she ought to go away from it.”

“Tcha!” He spoke angrily. “I wish I’d been told more about that. I’d have spoken to old Esther. Told her she couldn’t do things like that.”

“Why did she?” I asked. “What made her?”

“Like so many people,” said Phillpot, “she likes to make herself important. She likes either to give people warnings or else tell their fortunes and prophesy happy lives for them. She likes to pretend she knows the future.”

“Supposing,” I said slowly, “somebody gave her money. I’ve been told she’s fond of money.”

“Yes, she was very fond of money. If someone paid her—that’s what you’re suggesting—what put that idea into your head?”

“Sergeant Keene,” I said. “I should never have thought of it myself.”

“I see.” He shook his head doubtfully.

“I can’t believe,” he said, “that she would deliberately try to frighten your wife to the extent of causing an accident.”

“She mayn’t have counted on a fatal accident. She might have done something to frighten the horse,” I said. “Let off a squib or flapped a sheet of white paper or something. Sometimes, you know, I did feel that she had some entirely personal grudge against Ellie, a grudge for some reason that I don’t know about.”

“That sounds very far-fetched.”

“This place never belonged to her?” I asked. “The land, I mean.”

“No. Gipsies may have been warned off this property, probably more than once. Gipsies are always getting turned off places, but I doubt if they keep up a life-long resentment about it.”

“No,” I said, “that would be far-fetched. But I do wonder if for some reason that we don’t know about—she was paid—”

“A reason we don’t know about—what reason?”

I reflected a moment or two.

“Everything I say will just sound fantastic. Let’s say that, as Keene suggested, someone paid her to do the things she did. What did that someone want? Say they wanted to make us both go away from here. They concentrated on Ellie, not on me, because I wouldn’t be scared in the way Ellie would be. They frightened her to get her—and through her both of us—to leave here. If so, there must be some reason for wanting the land to come on the market again. Somebody, shall we say, for some reason wants our land.” I stopped.

“It’s a logical suggestion,” Phillpot said, “but I know of no reason why anyone should.”

“Some important mineral deposit,” I suggested, “that nobody knows about.”

“Hm, I doubt it.”

“Something like buried treasure. Oh, I know it sounds absurd. Or—well, say the proceeds of some big bank robbery.”

Phillpot was still shaking his head but rather less vehemently now.

“The only other proposition,” I said, “is to go one step farther back as you did just now. Behind Mrs. Lee to the person who paid Mrs. Lee. That might be some unknown enemy of Ellie’s.”

“But you can’t think of anyone it would be likely to be?”

“No. She didn’t know anyone down here. That I’m sure of. She had no links with this place.” I got up. “Thank you for listening to me,” I said.

“I wish I could have been more helpful.”

I went out of the door, fingering the thing that I was carrying in my pocket. Then, taking a sudden decision, I turned on my heels and went back into the room.

“There’s something I’d like to show you,” I said. “Actually, I was going to take it down to show Sergeant Keene and see what he could make of it.”

I dived into my pocket and brought out a stone round which was wrapped a crumpled bit of paper with printed writing on it.

“This was thrown through our breakfast window this morning,” I said. “I heard the crash of the glass as I came down the stairs. A stone was thrown through the window once before when we first came here. I don’t know if this is the same person or not.”

I took off the wrapping paper and held it out for him. It was a dirty, coarse bit of paper. There was some printing on it in rather faint ink. Phillpot put on his spectacles and bent over the piece of paper. The message on it was quite short. All it said was, “It was a woman who killed your wife.”

Phillpot’s eyebrows went up.

“Extraordinary,” he said. “Was the first message you got printed?”

“I can’t remember now. It was just a warning to go away from here. I can’t even remember the exact wording of it now. Anyway, it seems pretty certain that that was hooligans. This doesn’t seem quite the same.”

“Do you think it was thrown in by someone who knew something?”

“Probably just a bit of silly cruel malice in the anonymous letter class. You get it, you know, a good deal in villages.”

He handed it back to me.

“But I think your instinct was right,” he said, “to take it to Sergeant Keene. He’ll know more about these anonymous things than I should.”

I found Sergeant Keene at the police station and he was definitely interested.

“There’s queer things going on here,” he said.

“What do you think it means?” I asked.

“Hard to say. Might be just malice leading up to accusing some particular person.”

“It might be just accusing Mrs. Lee, I suppose?”

“No, I don’t think it would have been put that way. It might be—I’d like to think it was—it might be that someone saw or heard something. Heard a noise or a cry or the horse bolted right past someone, and they saw or met a woman soon afterwards. But it sounds as though it was a different woman from the gipsy, because everyone thinks the gipsy’s mixed up in this anyway. So this sounds as though another, an entirely different woman was meant.”

“What about the gipsy?” I said. “Have you had news of her, found her?”

He shook his head slowly.

“We know some of the places she used to go when she left here. East Anglia, that way. She’d friends there among the gipsy clan. She’s not been there, they say, but they’d say that anyway. They clam up, you know. She’s fairly well known by sight in those parts but nobody’s seen her. All the same, I don’t think she’s as far away as East Anglia.”

There was something peculiar about the way he said the words.

“I don’t quite understand,” I said.

“Look at it this way, she’s scared. She’s got good reason to be. She’s been threatening your wife, frightening her, and now, say, she caused an accident and your wife died. The police’ll be after her. She knows that, so she’ll go to earth, as you might say. She’ll put as big a distance between herself and us as she possibly can. But she won’t want to show herself. She’d be afraid of public transport.”

“But you’ll find her? She’s a woman of striking appearance.”

“Ah yes, we shall find her eventually. These things take a little time. That is, if it was that way.”

“But you think it was some other way.”

“Well, you know what I’ve wondered all along. Whether somebody was paying her to say the things she did?”

“Then she might be even more anxious to get away,” I pointed out.

“But somebody else would be anxious too. You’ve got to think of that, Mr. Rogers.”

“You mean,” I said slowly, “the person who paid her.”

“Yes.”

“Supposing it was a—a woman who paid her.”

“And supposing somebody else has some idea of that. And so they start sending anonymous messages. The woman would be scared too. She needn’t have meant this to happen, you know. However much she got that gipsy woman to frighten your wife away from this place she wouldn’t have meant it to result in Mrs. Rogers’ death.”

“No,” I said. “Death wasn’t meant. It was just to frighten us. To frighten my wife and to frighten me into leaving here.”

“And now who’s going to be frightened? The woman who caused the accident. And that’s Mrs. Esther Lee. And so she’s going to come clean, isn’t she? Say it wasn’t really her doing. She’ll admit even that she was paid money to do it. And she’ll mention a name. She’ll say who paid her. And somebody wouldn’t like that would they, Mr. Rogers?”

“You mean this unknown woman that we’ve more or less postulated without even knowing there’s any such person?”

“Man or woman, say someone paid her. Well, that someone would want her silenced pretty quickly, wouldn’t they?”

“You’re thinking she might be dead?”

“It’s a possibility, isn’t it?” said Keene. Then he made what seemed quite an abrupt change of subject. “You know that kind of Folly place, Mr. Rogers, that you’ve got up at the top of your woods?”

“Yes,” I said, “what of it? My wife and I had it repaired and fixed up a bit. We used to go up there occasionally but not very often. Not lately certainly. Why?”

“Well, we’ve been hunting about, you know. We looked into this Folly. It wasn’t locked.”

“No,” I said, “we never bothered to lock it. There was nothing of value in there, just a few odd bits of furniture.”

“We thought it possible old Mrs. Lee had been using it but we found no traces of her. We did find this, though. I was going to show it to you anyway.” He opened a drawer and took out a small delicate gold-chased lighter. It was a woman’s lighter and it had an initial on it in diamonds. The letter C. “It wouldn’t be your wife’s, would it?”

“Not with the initial C. No, it’s not Ellie’s,” I said. “She hadn’t anything of that kind. And it’s not Miss Andersen’s either. Her name is Greta.”

“It was up there where somebody had dropped it. It’s a classy bit of goods—cost money.”

“C,” I said, repeating the initial thoughtfully. “I can’t think of anyone who’s been with us whose initial is C except Cora,” I said. “That’s my wife’s stepmother. Mrs. van Stuyvesant, but I really can’t see her scrambling up to the Folly along that overgrown path. And anyway she hasn’t been staying with us for quite a long time. About a month. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her using this lighter. Perhaps I wouldn’t notice anyway,” I said. “Miss Andersen might know.”

“Well, take it up with you and show it to her.”

“I will. But if so, if it’s Cora’s, it seems odd that we’ve never seen it when we’ve been in the Folly lately. There’s not much stuff there. You’d notice something like this lying on the floor—it was on the floor?”

“Yes, quite near the divan. Of course anybody might use that Folly. It’s a handy place, you know, for a couple of lovers to meet any time. The locals I’m talking about. But they wouldn’t be likely to have an expensive thing of this kind.”

“There’s Claudia Hardcastle,” I said, “but I doubt if she’d have anything as fancy as this. And what would she be doing in the Folly?”

“She was quite a friend of your wife’s, wasn’t she?”

“Yes,” I said, “I think she was Ellie’s best friend down here. And she’d know we wouldn’t mind her using the Folly any time.”

“Ah,” said Sergeant Keene.

I looked at him rather hard. “You don’t think Claudia Hardcastle was a—an enemy of Ellie’s do you? That would be absurd.”

“Doesn’t seem any reason why she should be, I agree, but you never know with ladies.”

“I suppose—” I began and then stopped because what I was going to say would seem perhaps rather odd.

“Yes, Mr. Rogers?”

“I believe that Claudia Hardcastle was originally married to an American—an American named Lloyd. Actually—the name of my wife’s principal trustee in America is Stanford Lloyd. But there must be hundreds of Lloyds and anyway it would only be a coincidence if it was the same person. And what would it have to do with all this?”

“It doesn’t seem likely. But then—” he stopped.

“The funny thing is that I thought I saw Stanford Lloyd down here on the day of the—the accident—Having lunch in the George at Bartington—”

“He didn’t come to see you?”

I shook my head.

“He was with someone who looked rather like Miss Hardcastle. But probably it was just a mistake on my part. You know, I suppose, that it was her brother who built our house?”

“Does she take an interest in the house?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t think she likes her brother’s type of architecture.” Then I got up. “Well, I won’t take any more of your time. Try and find the gipsy.”

“We shan’t stop looking, I can tell you that. Coroner wants her too.”

I said good-bye and went out of the police station. In the queer way that so often happens when you suddenly meet someone you've been talking about, Claudia Hardcastle came out of the post office just as I was passing it. We both stopped. She said with that slight embarrassment that you have when you meet someone that's been recently bereaved:

"I'm so terribly sorry, Mike, about Ellie. I won't say any more. It's beastly when people say things to you. But I have just—just to say that."

"I know," I said. "You were very nice to Ellie. You made her feel at home here. I've been grateful."

"There was one thing I wanted to ask you and I thought perhaps I'd better do it now before you go to America. I hear you're going quite soon."

"As soon as I can. I've got a lot to see to there."

"It was only—if you were putting your house on the market I thought it might be a thing you'd set in motion before you went away...And if so—if so, I'd rather like to have the first refusal of it."

I stared at her. This really did surprise me. It was the last thing I'd expected.

"You mean you'd like to buy it? I thought you didn't even care for that type of architecture?"

"My brother Rudolf said to me that it was the best thing he'd done. I dare say he knows. I expect you'll want a very large price for it but I could pay it. Yes, I'd like to have it."

I couldn't help thinking it was odd. She'd never shown the faintest appreciation of our house when she'd come to it. I wondered as I'd wondered once or twice before what her links with her half-brother really were. Had she really a great devotion to him? Sometimes I'd almost thought that she disliked him, perhaps hated him. She spoke of him certainly in a very odd way. But whatever her actual emotions were, he meant something to her. Meant something important. I shook my head slowly.

“I can see that you might think I’d want to sell the place and leave here because of Ellie’s death,” I said. “But actually that’s not so at all. We lived here and were happy and this is the place I shall remember her best. I shan’t sell Gipsy’s Acre—not for any consideration! You can be quite sure of that.”

Our eyes met. It was like a kind of tussle between us. Then hers dropped.

I took my courage in both hands and spoke.

“It’s no business of mine, but you were married once. Was the name of your husband Stanford Lloyd?”

She looked at me for a moment without speaking. Then she said abruptly:

“Yes,” and turned away.

Twenty-one

Confusion—That's all I can remember when I look back. Newspapermen asking questions—wanting interviews—masses of letters and telegrams—Greta coping with them—

The first really startling thing was that Ellie's family were not as we supposed in America. It was quite a shock to find that most of them were actually in England. It was understandable, perhaps, that Cora van Stuyvesant should be. She was a very restless woman, always dashing across to Europe, to Italy, to Paris, to London and back again to America, to Palm Beach, out West to the ranch; here, there and everywhere. On the actual day of Ellie's death she had been not more than fifty miles away, still pursuing her whim of having a house in England. She had rushed over to stay in London for two or three days and gone to fresh house agents for fresh orders to view and had been touring round the country seeing half a dozen on that particular day.

Stanford Lloyd, it turned out, had flown over in the same plane ostensibly for a business meeting in London. These people learnt of Ellie's death, not from the cables which we had dispatched to the United States but from the public Press.

An ugly wrangle developed about where Ellie should be buried. I had assumed it was only natural that she'd be buried here where she had died. Here where she and I had lived.

But Ellie's family objected violently to this. They wanted the body brought to America to be buried with her forebears. Where her grandfather and her father, her mother and others had been laid to rest. I suppose it was natural, really, when one comes to think of it.

Andrew Lippincott came down to talk to me about it. He put the matter in a reasonable way.

“She never left any directions as to where she wished to be buried,” he pointed out to me.

“Why should she?” I demanded hotly. “How old was she—twenty-one? You don’t think at twenty-one you’re going to die. You don’t start thinking then the way you want to be buried. If we’d ever thought about it we’d assume we’d be buried together somewhere even if we didn’t die at the same time. But who thinks of death in the middle of life?”

“A very just observation,” said Mr. Lippincott. Then he said, “I’m afraid you’ll also have to come to America, you know. There’s a great deal of business interests you’ll have to look into.”

“What sort of business? What have I got to do with business?”

“You could have a great deal to do with it,” he said. “Don’t you realize that you’re the principal beneficiary under the will?”

“You mean because I’m Ellie’s next of kin or something?”

“No. Under her will.”

“I didn’t know she ever made a will.”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Lippincott. “Ellie was quite a businesslike young woman. She’d had to be, you know. She’d lived in the middle of that kind of thing. She made a will on coming of age and almost immediately after she was married. It was lodged with her lawyer in London with a request that one copy should be sent to me.” He hesitated and then said, “If you do come to the States, which I advise, I also think that you should place your affairs in the hands of some reputable lawyer there.”

“Why?”

“Because in the case of a vast fortune, large quantities of real estate, stocks, controlling interests in varying industries, you will need technical advice.”

“I’m not qualified to deal with things like that,” I said. “Really I’m not.”

“I quite understand,” said Mr. Lippincott.

“Couldn’t I place the whole thing in your hands?”

“You could do so.”

“Well then, why don’t I?”

“All the same, I think you should be separately represented. I am already acting for some members of the family and a conflict of interests might arise. If you will leave it in my hands, I will see that your interests are safeguarded by your being represented by a thoroughly able attorney.”

“Thank you,” I said, “you’re very kind.”

“If I may be slightly indiscreet—” he looked a little uncomfortable—it pleased me rather thinking of Lippincott being indiscreet.

“Yes?” I said.

“I should advise you to be very careful of anything you sign. Any business documents. Before you sign anything, read it thoroughly and carefully.”

“Would the kind of document you’re talking about mean anything to me if I do read it?”

“If it is not all clear to you, you will then hand it over to your legal adviser.”

“Are you warning me against somebody or someone?” I said, with a suddenly aroused interest.

“That is not at all a proper question for me to answer,” said Mr. Lippincott.

“I will go this far. Where large sums of money are concerned it is advisable to trust nobody.”

So he was warning me against someone, but he wasn’t going to give me any names. I could see that. Was it against Cora? Or had he had suspicions—perhaps suspicions of some long standing—of Stanford Lloyd, that florid banker so full of bonhomie, so rich and carefree, who had recently been

over here “on business?” Might it be Uncle Frank who might approach me with some plausible documents? I had a sudden vision of myself, a poor innocent boob, swimming in a lake surrounded by evilly disposed crocodiles, all smiling false smiles of amity.

“The world,” said Mr. Lippincott, “is a very evil place.”

It was perhaps a stupid thing to say, but quite suddenly I asked him a question.

“Does Ellie’s death benefit anyone?” I asked.

He looked at me sharply.

“That’s a very curious question. Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “it just came into my head.”

“It benefits you,” he said.

“Of course,” I said. “I take that for granted. I really meant—does it benefit anyone else?”

Mr. Lippincott was silent for quite a long time.

“If you mean,” he said, “does Fenella’s will benefit certain other people in the way of legacies, that is so in a minor degree. Some old servants, an old governess, one or two charities but nothing of any particular moment. There’s a legacy to Miss Andersen but not a large one for she has already, as you probably know, settled a very considerable sum on Miss Andersen.”

I nodded. Ellie had told me she was doing that.

“You were her husband. She had no other near relations. But I take it that your question did not mean specifically that.”

“I don’t know quite what I meant by it,” I said. “But somehow or other, you’ve succeeded, Mr. Lippincott, in making me feel suspicious. Suspicious

of I don't know who, or why. Only—well, suspicious. I don't understand finance,” I added.

“No, that is quite apparent. Let me say only that I have no exact knowledge, no exact suspicions of any kind. At someone's death there is usually an accounting of their affairs. This may take place quickly or it may be delayed for a period of many years.”

“What you really mean,” I said, “is that some of the others quite likely might put a few fast ones over and ball up things generally. Get me perhaps to sign releases—whatever you call the things.”

“If Fenella's affairs were not, shall we say, in the healthy state they ought to be, then—yes, possibly her premature death might be, shall we say, fortunate for someone, we will name no names, someone perhaps who could cover his traces more easily if he had a fairly simple person, if I may say so, like yourself to deal with. I will go that far but I do not wish to speak further on the matter. It would not be equitable to do so.”

There was a simple funeral service held in the little church. If I could have stayed away I would have done so. I hated all those people who were staring at me lining up outside the church. Curious eyes. Greta pulled me through things. I don't think I'd realized until now what a strong, reliable character she was. She made the arrangements, ordered flowers, arranged everything. I understood better now how Ellie had come to depend upon Greta as she had done. There aren't many Gretas in the world.

The people in the church were mostly our neighbours—some, even, that we had hardly known. But I noticed one face that I had seen before, but which I could not at the moment place. When I got back to the house, Carson told me there was a gentleman in the drawing room waiting to see me.

“I can't see anyone today. Send him away. You shouldn't have let him in!”

“Excuse me, sir. He said he was a relation.”

“A relation?”

Suddenly I remembered the man I'd seen in the church.

Carson was handing me a card.

It meant nothing to me for a moment. Mr. William R. Pardoe. I turned it over and shook my head. Then I handed it to Greta.

"Do you know by any chance who this is?" I said. "His face seemed familiar but I couldn't place it. Perhaps it's one of Ellie's friends."

Greta took it from me and looked at it. Then she said:

"Of course."

"Who is it?"

"Uncle Reuben. You remember. Ellie's cousin. She's spoken of him to you, surely?"

I remembered then why the face had seemed familiar to me. Ellie had had several photographs in her sitting room of her various relations carelessly placed about the room. That was why the face had been so familiar. I had seen it so far only in a photograph.

"I'll come," I said.

I went out of the room and into the drawing room. Mr. Pardoe rose to his feet, and said:

"Michael Rogers? You may not know my name but your wife was my cousin. She called me Uncle Reuben always, but we haven't met, I know. This is the first time I've been over since your marriage."

"Of course I know who you are," I said.

I don't know quite how to describe Reuben Pardoe. He was a big burly man with a large face, wide and rather absent-looking as though he were thinking of something else. Yet after you had talked to him for a few

moments you got the feeling that he was more on the ball than you would have thought.

“I don’t need to tell you how shocked and grieved I was to hear of Ellie’s death,” he said.

“Let’s skip that,” I said. “I’m not up to talking about it.”

“No, no, I can understand that.”

He had a certain sympathetic personality and yet there was something about him that made me vaguely uneasy. I said, as Greta entered:

“You know Miss Andersen?”

“Of course,” he said, “how are you, Greta?”

“Not too bad,” said Greta. “How long have you been over?”

“Just a week or two. Touring around.”

Then it came to me. On an impulse I went in. “I saw you the other day.”

“Really? Where?”

“At an auction sale at a place called Bartington Manor.”

“I remember now,” he said, “yes, yes I think I remember your face. You were with a man about sixty with a brown moustache.”

“Yes,” I said. “A Major Phillpot.”

“You seemed in good spirits,” he said, “both of you.”

“Never better,” I said, and repeated with the strange wonder that I always felt, “Never better.”

“Of course—at that time you didn’t know what had happened. That was the date of the accident, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, we were expecting Ellie to join us for lunch.”

“Tragic,” said Uncle Reuben. “Really tragic....”

“I had no idea,” I said, “that you were in England. I don’t think Ellie had any idea either?” I paused, waiting for what he would tell me.

“No,” he said, “I hadn’t written. In fact, I didn’t know how much time I should have over here, but actually I’d concluded my business earlier than I thought and I was wondering if after the sale I’d have the time to drive over and see you.”

“You came over from the States on business?” I asked.

“Well, partly yes and partly no. Cora wanted some advice from me on one or two matters. One concerning this house she’s thinking of buying.”

It was then that he told me where Cora had been staying in England. Again I said:

“We didn’t know that.”

“She was actually staying not far from here that day,” he said.

“Near here? Was she in a hotel?”

“No, she was staying with a friend.”

“I didn’t know she had any friends in this part of the world.”

“A woman called—now what was her name?—Hard—something. Hardcastle.”

“Claudia Hardcastle?” I was surprised.

“Yes. She was quite a friend of Cora’s. Cora knew her well when she was in the States. Didn’t you know?”

“I know very little,” I said. “Very little about the family.”

I looked at Greta.

“Did you know that Cora knew Claudia Hardcastle?”

“I don’t think I ever heard her speak of her,” said Greta. “So that’s why Claudia didn’t turn up that day.”

“Of course,” I said, “she was going with you to shop in London. You were to meet at Market Chadwell station—”

“Yes—and she wasn’t there. She rang up the house just after I’d left. Said some American visitor had turned up unexpectedly and she couldn’t leave home.”

“I wonder,” I said, “if the American visitor could have been Cora.”

“Obviously,” said Reuben Pardoe. He shook his head. “It all seems so confused,” he said. He went on, “I understand the inquest was adjourned.”

“Yes,” I said.

He drained his cup and got up.

“I won’t stay to worry you any more,” he said. “If there’s anything I can do, I’m staying at the Majestic Hotel in Market Chadwell.”

I said I was afraid there wasn’t anything he could do and thanked him. When he had gone away, Greta said:

“What does he want, I wonder? Why did he come over?” And then sharply: “I wish they’d all go back where they belong.”

“I wonder if it was really Stanford Lloyd I saw at the George—I only got a glimpse.”

“You said he was with someone who looked like Claudia so it probably was him. Perhaps he called to see her and Reuben came to see Cora—what a mix-up!”

“I don’t like it—all of them milling round that day.”

Greta said things often happened that way—as usual she was quite cheerful and reasonable about it.

Twenty-two

I

There was nothing more for me to do at Gipsy's Acre. I left Greta in charge of the house while I sailed to New York to wind up things there and to take part in what I felt with some dread were going to be the most ghastly gold-plated obsequies for Ellie.

"You're going into the jungle," Greta warned me. "Look after yourself. Don't let them skin you alive."

She was right about that. It was the jungle. I felt it when I got there. I didn't know about jungles—not that kind of jungle. I was out of my depth and I knew it. I wasn't the hunter, I was the hunted. There were people all round me in the undergrowth, gunning for me. Sometimes, I expect, I imagined things. Sometimes my suspicions were justified. I remember going to the lawyer supplied for me by Mr. Lippincott (a most urbane man who treated me rather as a general practitioner might have done in the medical profession). I had been advised to get rid of certain mining properties to which the title deeds were not too clear.

He asked me who had told me so and I said it was Stanford Lloyd.

"Well, we must look into it," he said. "A man like Mr. Lloyd ought to know."

He said to me afterwards:

"There's nothing wrong with your title deeds, and there is certainly no point in your selling the land in a hurry, as he seems to have advised you. Hang on to it."

I had the feeling then that I'd been right, everybody was gunning for me. They all knew I was a simpleton when it came to finance.

The funeral was splendid and, I thought, quite horrible. Gold-plated, as I had surmised. At the cemetery, masses of flowers, the cemetery itself like a public park and all the trimmings of wealthy mourning expressed in monumental marble. Ellie would have hated it, I was sure of that. But I suppose her family had a certain right to her.

Four days after my arrival in New York I had news from Kingston Bishop.

The body of old Mrs. Lee had been found in the disused quarry on the far side of the hill. She had been dead some days. There had been accidents there before, and it had been said that the place ought to be fenced in—but nothing had been done. A verdict of Accidental Death had been brought in and a further recommendation to the Council to fence the place off. In Mrs. Lee's cottage a sum of three hundred pounds had been found hidden under the floorboards, all in one-pound notes.

Major Phillpot had added in a postscript, "I'm sure you will be sorry to hear that Claudia Hardcastle was thrown from her horse and killed out hunting yesterday."

Claudia—killed? I couldn't believe it! It gave me a very nasty jolt. Two people—within a fortnight, killed in a riding accident. It seemed like an almost impossible coincidence.

II

I don't want to dwell on that time I spent in New York. I was a stranger in an alien atmosphere. I felt all the time that I had to be wary of what I said and what I did. The Ellie that I had known, the Ellie that had belonged peculiarly to me was not there. I saw her now only as an American girl, heiress to a great fortune, surrounded by friends and connections and distant relatives, one of a family that had lived there for five generations. She had come from there as a comet might have come, visiting my territory.

Now she had gone back to be buried with her own folk, to where her own home was. I was glad to have it that way. I shouldn't have been easy feeling her there in the prim little cemetery at the foot of the pine woods just outside the village. No, I shouldn't have been easy.

“Go back where you belong, Ellie,” I said to myself.

Now and again that haunting little tune of the song she used to sing to her guitar came into my mind. I remembered her fingers twanging the strings.

Every Morn and every Night

Some are born to Sweet Delight

and I thought “That was true of you. You were born to Sweet Delight. You had Sweet Delight there at Gipsy’s Acre. Only it didn’t last very long. Now it’s over. You’ve come back to where perhaps there wasn’t much delight, where you weren’t happy. But you’re at home here anyway. You’re among your own folk.”

I wondered suddenly where I should be when the time came for me to die. Gipsy’s Acre? It could be. My mother would come and see me laid in my grave—if she wasn’t dead already. But I couldn’t think of my mother being dead. I could think more easily of death for myself. Yes, she’d come and see me buried. Perhaps the sternness of her face would relax. I took my thoughts away from her. I didn’t want to think of her. I didn’t want to go near her or see her.

That last isn’t quite true. It wasn’t a question of seeing her. It was always with my mother a question of her seeing me, of her eyes looking through me, of an anxiety that swept out like a miasma embracing me. I thought: “Mothers are the devil! Why have they got to brood over their children? Why do they feel they know all about their children? They don’t. They don’t! She ought to be proud of me, happy for me, happy for the wonderful life that I’ve achieved. She ought—” Then I wrenched thoughts away from her again.

How long was I over in the States? I can’t even remember. It seemed an age of walking warily, of being watched by people with false smiles and enmity in their eyes. I said to myself every day, “I’ve got to get through this. I’ve got to get through this—and then.” Those were the two words I used. Used in my own mind, I mean. Used them every day several times. And then—

They were the two words of the future. I used them in the same way that I had once used those other two words. I want....

Everyone went out of their way to be nice to me because I was rich! Under the terms of Ellie's will I was an extremely rich man. I felt very odd. I had investments I didn't understand, shares, stocks, property. And I didn't know in the least what to do with them all.

The day before I went back to England I had a long conversation with Mr. Lippincott. I always thought of him like that in my mind—as Mr. Lippincott. He'd never become Uncle Andrew to me. I told him that I thought of withdrawing the charge of my investments from Stanford Lloyd.

"Indeed!" His grizzled eyebrows rose. He looked at me with his shrewd eyes and his poker face and I wondered what exactly his "indeed" meant.

"Do you think it's all right to do that?" I asked anxiously.

"You have reasons, I presume?"

"No," I said, "I haven't got reasons. A feeling, that's all. I suppose I can say anything to you?"

"The communication will be privileged, naturally."

"All right," I said, "I just feel that he's a crook!"

"Ah." Mr. Lippincott looked interested. "Yes, I should say your instinct was possibly sound."

So I knew then that I was right. Stanford Lloyd had been playing hanky-panky with Ellie's bonds and investments and all the rest of it. I signed a power of attorney and gave it to Andrew Lippincott.

"You're willing," I said, "to accept it?"

"As far as financial matters are concerned," said Mr. Lippincott, "you can trust me absolutely. I will do my best for you in that respect. I don't think you will have any reason to complain of my stewardship."

I wondered exactly what he meant by that. He meant something. I think he meant that he didn't like me, had never liked me, but financially he would do his best for me because I had been Ellie's husband. I signed all necessary papers. He asked me how I was going back to England. Flying? I said no, I wasn't flying, I was going by sea. "I've got to have a little time to myself," I said. "I think a sea voyage will do me good."

"And you are going to take up your residence—where?"

"Gipsy's Acre," I said.

"Ah. You propose to live there."

"Yes," I said.

"I thought perhaps you might have put it on the market for sale."

"No," I said, and the no came out rather stronger than I meant. I wasn't going to part with Gipsy's Acre. Gipsy's Acre had been part of my dream, the dream that I'd cherished since I'd been a callow boy.

"Is anybody looking after it while you have been away in the States?"

I said that I'd left Greta Andersen in charge.

"Ah," said Mr. Lippincott, "yes. Greta."

He meant something in the way he said "Greta" but I didn't take him up on it. If he disliked her, he disliked her. He always had. It left an awkward pause, then I changed my mind. I felt that I'd got to say something.

"She was very good to Ellie," I said. "She nursed her when she was ill, she came and lived with us and looked after Ellie. I—I can't be grateful enough to her. I'd like you to understand that. You don't know what she's been like. You don't know how she helped and did everything after Ellie was killed. I don't know what I'd have done without her."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Lippincott. He sounded drier than you could possibly imagine.

“So you see I owe her a lot.”

“A very competent girl,” said Mr. Lippincott.

I got up and said good-bye and I thanked him.

“You have nothing for which to thank me,” said Mr. Lippincott, dry as ever.

He added, “I wrote you a short letter. I have sent it by air mail to Gipsy’s Acre. If you are going by sea you will probably find it waiting there on arrival.” Then he said, “Have a good voyage.”

I asked him, rather hesitantly, if he’d known Stanford Lloyd’s wife—a girl called Claudia Hardcastle.

“Ah, you mean his first wife. No I never met her. The marriage I believe broke up quite soon. After the divorce, he remarried. That too ended in divorce.”

So that was that.

When I got back to my hotel I found a cable. It asked me to come to a hospital in California. It said a friend of mine, Rudolf Santonix, had asked for me, he had not long to live and he wished to see me before he died.

I changed my passage to a later boat and flew to San Francisco. He wasn’t dead yet, but he was sinking very fast. They doubted, they said, if he would recover consciousness before he died, but he had asked for me very urgently. I sat there in that hospital room watching him, watching what looked like a shell of the man I knew. He’d always looked ill, he’d always had a kind of queer transparency about him, a delicacy, a frailness. He lay now looking a deadly, waxen figure. I sat there thinking: “I wish he’d speak to me. I wish he’d say something. Just something before he dies.”

I felt so alone, so horribly alone. I’d escaped from enemies now, I’d got to a friend. My only friend, really. He was the only person who knew anything about me, except Mum, but I didn’t want to think of Mum.

Once or twice I spoke to a nurse, asked her if there wasn't anything they could do, but she shook her head and said noncommittally:

“He might recover consciousness or might not.”

I sat there. And then at last he stirred and sighed. The nurse raised him up very gently. He looked at me but I didn't know whether he recognized me or not. He was just looking at me as though he looked past me and beyond me. Then suddenly a difference came into his eyes. I thought, “He does know me, he does see me.” He said something very faintly and I bent over the bed so as to catch it. But they didn't seem words that had any meaning. Then his body had a sudden spasm and twitch, and he threw his head back and shouted out:

“You damned fool...Why didn't you go the other way?”

Then he just collapsed and died.

I don't know what he meant—or even if he knew himself what he was saying.

So that was the last I saw of Santonix. I wonder if he'd have heard me if I had said anything to him? I'd like to have told him once more that the house he'd built me was the best thing I had in the world. The thing that mattered most to me. Funny that a house could mean that. I suppose it was a sort of symbolism about it. Something you want. Something you want so much that you don't quite know what it is. But he'd known what it was and he'd given it to me. And I'd got it. And I was going home to it.

Going home. That's all I could think about when I got on the boat. That and a deadly tiredness at first...And then a rising tide of happiness oozing up as it were from the depths...I was going home. I was going home....

Home is the sailor, home from the sea

And the hunter home from the hill...

Twenty-three

I

Yes, that was what I was doing. It was all over now. The last of the fight, the last of the struggle. The last phase of the journey.

It seemed so long ago to the time of my restless youth. The days of “I want, I want.” But it wasn’t long. Less than a year....

I went over it all—lying there in my bunk, and thinking.

Meeting Ellie—our times in Regent’s Park—our marriage in the Registrar’s Office. The house—Santonix building it—the house completed. Mine, all mine. I was me—me—me as I wanted to be. As I’d always wanted to be. I’d got everything I’d wanted and I was going home to it.

Before I left New York I’d written one letter and sent it off by air mail to get there ahead of me. I’d written to Phillpot. Somehow I felt that Phillpot would understand, though others mightn’t.

It was easier to write than to tell him. Anyway, he’d got to know. Everyone had got to know. Some people probably wouldn’t understand, but I thought he would. He’d seen for himself how close Ellie and Greta had been, how Ellie had depended on Greta. I thought he’d realize how I’d come to depend upon her also, how it would be impossible for me to live alone in the house where I’d lived with Ellie unless there was someone there to help me. I don’t know if I put it very well. I did my best.

“I’d like you,” I wrote, “to be the first to know. You’ve been so kind to us, and I think you’ll be the only person to understand. I can’t face living alone at Gipsy’s Acre. I’ve been thinking all the time I’ve been in America and I’ve decided that as soon as I get home I’m going to ask Greta to marry me. She’s the only person I can really talk to about Ellie, you see. She’ll understand. Perhaps she won’t marry me, but I think she will...It will make everything as though there were the three of us together still.”

I wrote the letter three times before I could get it to express just what I wanted to say. Phillpot ought to get it two days before my return.

I came up on deck as we were approaching England. I looked out as the land came nearer. I thought, "I wish Santonix was with me." I did wish it. I wished he could know how everything was all coming true. Everything I'd planned—everything I'd thought—everything I'd wanted.

I'd shaken off America, I'd shaken off the crooks and the sycophants and all the whole lot of them whom I hated and whom I was pretty sure hated me and looked down on me for being so low class! I was back in triumph. I was coming back to the pine trees and the curling dangerous road that made its way up through Gipsy's Acre to the house on the hilltop. My house! I was coming back to the two things I wanted. My house—the house that I'd dreamed of, that I'd planned, that I'd wanted above everything. That and a wonderful woman...I'd known always that I'd meet one day a wonderful woman. I had met her. I'd seen her and she'd seen me. We'd come together. A wonderful woman. I'd known the moment I saw her that I belonged to her, belonged to her absolutely and for always. I was hers. And now—at last—I was going to her.

Nobody saw me arrive at Kingston Bishop. It was almost dark and I came by train and I walked from the station, taking a roundabout side road. I didn't want to meet any of the people in the village. Not that night....

The sun had set when I came up the road to Gipsy's Acre. I'd told Greta the time I'd arrive. She was up there in the house waiting for me. At last! We'd done with subterfuges now and all the pretences—the pretence of disliking her—I thought now, laughing to myself, of the part I'd played, a part I'd played carefully right from the beginning. Disliking Greta, not wanting her to come and stay with Ellie. Yes, I'd been very careful. Everyone must have been taken in by the pretence. I remembered the quarrel we'd faked up so that Ellie should overhear it.

Greta had known me for what I was the first moment we met. We'd never had any silly illusions about each other. She had the same kind of mind, the same kind of desires as I had. We wanted the World, nothing less! We wanted to be on top of the World. We wanted to fulfil every ambition. We

wanted to have everything, deny ourselves nothing. I remembered how I'd poured out my heart to her when I first met her in Hamburg, telling her my frenzied desire for things. I hadn't got to conceal my inordinate greed for life from Greta, she had the same greed herself. She said:

"For all you want out of life you've got to have money."

"Yes," I said, "and I don't see how I'm going to get it."

"No," said Greta, "you won't get it by hard work. You're not the kind."

"Work!" I said. "I'd have to work for years! I don't want to wait. I don't want to be middle-aged." I said, "You know the story about that chap Schliemann how he worked, toiled, and made a fortune so that he could have his life's dream come true and go to Troy and dig it up and find the graves of Troy. He got his dream but he had to wait till he was forty. But I don't want to wait till I'm a middle-aged man. Old. One foot in the grave. I want it now when I'm young and strong. You do too, don't you?"

"Yes. And I know the way you can do it. It's easy. I wonder you haven't thought of it already. You can get girls easily enough, can't you? I can see that. I can feel it."

"Do you think I care about girls—or ever have really? There's only one girl I want," I said. "You. And you know that. I belong to you. I knew it the moment I saw you. I knew always that I'd meet someone like you. And I have. I belong to you."

"Yes," said Greta, "I think you do."

"We both want the same things out of life," I said.

"I tell you it's easy," said Greta. "Easy. All you've got to do is to marry a rich girl, one of the richest girls in the world. I can put you in the way of doing that."

"Don't be fantastic," I said.

"It's not fantastic, it'll be easy."

“No,” I said, “that’s no good to me. I don’t want to be the husband of a rich wife. She’ll buy me things and we’ll do things and she’ll keep me in a golden cage, but that’s not what I want. I don’t want to be a tied-up slave.”

“You needn’t be. It’s the sort of thing that needn’t last for long. Just long enough. Wives do die, you know.”

I stared at her.

“Now you’re shocked,” she said.

“No,” I said, “I’m not shocked.”

“I thought you wouldn’t be. I thought perhaps already?” She looked at me inquiringly, but I wasn’t going to answer that. I still had some self-preservation left. There are some secrets one doesn’t want anyone to know. Not that they were much in the way of secrets, but I didn’t like to think of them. I didn’t like to think of the first one. Silly though. Puerile. Nothing that mattered. I had had a boy’s passion for a classy wristwatch that a boy... a friend of mine at school—had been given. I wanted it. I wanted it badly. It had cost a lot of money. A rich godfather had given it to him. Yes, I wanted that, but I didn’t think I’d ever have a chance of getting it. Then there was the day we went skating together. The ice wasn’t strong enough to bear. Not that we thought of it beforehand. It just happened. The ice cracked. I skated across to him. He was hanging on. He had gone through a hole and he was hanging on to the ice which was cutting his hands. I went across to pull him out, of course, but just as I got there I saw the glint of the wristwatch. I thought “Supposing he goes under and drowns.” I thought how easy it would be....

It seemed almost unconsciously, I think, that I unfastened the strap, grabbed the watch and pushed his head under instead of trying to pull him out...Just held his head under. He couldn’t struggle much, he was under the ice. People saw and came towards us. They thought I was trying to pull him out! They got him out in due course, with some difficulty. They tried artificial respiration on him but it was too late. I hid my treasure away in a special place where I kept things now and then. Things I didn’t want Mum to see because she’d ask me where I got them. She came across that watch one

day when she was fooling about with my socks. Asked me if that wasn't Pete's watch? I said of course it wasn't—it was one I'd swopped with a boy at school.

I was always nervous with Mum—I always felt she knew too much about me. I was nervous with her when she found the watch. She suspected, I think. She couldn't know, of course. Nobody knew. But she used to look at me. In a funny way. Everybody thought I'd tried to rescue Pete. I don't think she ever thought so. I think she knew. She didn't want to know, but her trouble was that she knew too much about me. I felt a bit guilty sometimes, but it wore off, fairly soon.

And then later on, when I was in camp. It was during our military training time. Chap called Ed and I had been to a sort of gambling place. I'd had no luck at all, lost everything I had, but Ed had won a packet. He changed his chips and he and I were coming home and he was stuffed up with notes. His pockets were bulging with them. Then a couple of toughs came round the corner and went for us. They were pretty handy with the flick knives they'd got. I got cut in the arm but Ed got a proper sort of stab. He went down under it. Then there was a noise of people coming. The toughs hooked it. I could see that if I was quick...I was quick! My reflexes are pretty good—I wrapped a handkerchief round my hand and I pulled out the knife from Ed's wound and I stuck the knife in again a couple of times in better places. He gave a gasp and passed out. I was scared, of course, scared for a second or two and then I knew it was going to be all right. So I felt—well—naturally I felt proud of myself for thinking and acting quick! I thought "Poor old Ed, he always was a fool." It took me no time at all to transfer those notes to my own pocket! Nothing like having quick reflexes, seizing your opportunity. The trouble is the opportunities don't come very often. Some people, I suppose, get scared when they know they've killed someone. But I wasn't scared. Not this time.

Mind you, it's not a thing you want to do too often. Not unless it might be really worth your while. I don't know how Greta sensed that about me. But she'd known. I don't mean that she'd known that I'd actually killed a couple of people. But I think she knew the idea of killing wouldn't shock or upset me. I said:

“What’s all this fantastic story, Greta?”

She said, “I am in a position to help you. I can bring you in touch with one of the richest girls in America. I more or less look after her. I live with her. I have a lot of influence over her.”

“Do you think she’d look at someone like me?” I said. I didn’t believe it for a moment. Why should a rich girl who could have her pick of any attractive, sexy man she liked go for me?

“You’ve got a lot of sex appeal,” said Greta. “Girls go for you, don’t they?”

I grinned and said I didn’t do too badly.

“She’s never had that kind of thing. She’s been looked after too well. The only young men she’s been allowed to meet are conventional kids, bankers’ sons, tycoons’ sons. She’s groomed to make a good marriage in the moneyed class. They’re terrified of her meeting handsome foreigners who might be after her money. But naturally she’s keener on people like that. They’d be new to her, something she’s never seen before. You’ve got to make a big play for her. You’ve got to fall in love with her at first sight and sweep her off her feet! It’ll be easy enough. She’s never had anyone to make a real sexy approach to her. You could do it.”

“I could try,” I said doubtfully.

“We could set it up,” said Greta.

“Her family would step in and stop it.”

“No they wouldn’t,” said Greta, “they wouldn’t know anything about it. Not until it was too late. Not until you’d got married secretly.”

“So that’s your idea.”

So we talked about it. We planned. Not in detail, mind you. Greta went back to America, but she kept in touch with me. I went on with various jobs. I’d told her about Gipsy’s Acre and that I wanted it, and she said that was just fine for setting up a romantic story. We laid our plans so that my meeting

with Ellie would take place there. Greta would work Ellie up about having a house in England and getting away from the family as soon as she came of age.

Oh yes, we set it up. Greta was a great planner. I don't think I could have planned it, but I knew I could play my part all right. I'd always enjoyed playing a part. And so that's how it happened. That's how I met Ellie.

It was fun, all of it. Mad fun because of course there was always a risk, there was always a danger that it wouldn't come off. The thing that made me really nervous were the times that I had to meet Greta. I had to be sure, you see, that I never gave myself away, by looking at Greta. I tried not to look at her. We agreed it was best that I should take a dislike to her, pretend jealousy of her. I carried that out all right. I remember the day she came down to stay. We staged a quarrel, a quarrel that Ellie could hear. I don't know whether we overdid it a bit. I don't think so. Sometimes I was nervous that Ellie might guess or something, but I don't think she did. I don't know. I don't know really. I never did know about Ellie.

It was very easy to make love to Ellie. She was very sweet. Yes, she was really sweet. Just sometimes I was afraid of her because she did things sometimes without telling me. And she knew things that I never dreamt she knew. But she loved me. Yes, she loved me. Sometimes—I think I loved her too....

I don't mean it was ever like Greta. Greta was the woman I belonged to. She was sex personified. I was made for her and I had to hold myself in. Ellie was something different. I enjoyed living with her, you know. Yes, that sounds very queer now I think back to it. I enjoyed living with her very much.

I'm putting this down now because this is what I was thinking that evening when I arrived back from America. When I arrived back on top of the world, having got all I'd longed for in spite of the risks, in spite of the dangers, in spite of having done a pretty good murder, though I say it myself!

Yes, it was tricky, I thought once or twice, but nobody could tell, not the way we'd done it. Now the risks were over, the dangers were over and here I was coming up to Gipsy's Acre. Coming as I'd come up to it that day after I'd first seen the poster on the walls, and gone up to look at the ruins of the old house. Coming up and rounding the bend—

And then—it was then I saw her. I mean it was then I saw Ellie. Just as I came round the corner of the road in the dangerous place where the accidents happened. She was there in the same place just where she'd been before, standing in the shadow of the fir tree. Just as she'd stood, when she'd started a little as she saw me and I'd started, seeing her. There we'd looked at each other first and I'd come up and spoken to her, played the part of the young man who's fallen suddenly in love. Played it jolly well too! Oh, I tell you I'm a fine actor!

But I hadn't expected to see her now...I mean, I couldn't see her now, could I? But I was seeing her...She was looking—looking straight at me. Only—there was something that frightened me—something that frightened me very much. It was, you see, just as though she didn't see me—I mean I knew she couldn't really be there. I knew she was dead—but I saw her. She was dead and her body was buried in the cemetery in the U.S.A. But all the same she was standing under the fir tree and she was looking at me. No, not at me. She was looking as though she expected to see me and there was love in her face. The same love that I had seen one day, one day when she'd been plucking the strings of her guitar. That day when she'd said to me, "What were you thinking of?" And I said, "Why do you ask me?" and she said, "You were looking at me as though you loved me." I'd said something silly like "Of course I love you."

I stopped dead. I stopped dead there in the road. I was shaking. I said out loud:

"Ellie."

She didn't move, she just stayed there, looking...Looking straight through me. That's what frightened me because I knew if I thought for a minute I'd know why she didn't see me, and I didn't want to know. No, I didn't want to know that. I was quite sure that I didn't want to know that. Looking

straight at the place where I was—not seeing me. I ran then. I ran like a coward up the rest of the road to where the lights were shining in my house, until I pulled myself out of the silly panic that I was in. This was my triumph. I’d got home. I was the hunter home from the hills, back to my house, back to the things that I’d wanted more than anything in the world, to the wonderful woman whom I belonged to body and soul.

And now we’d get married and we’d live in the House. We’d get all we’d played for! We’d won—Won hands down!

The door wasn’t latched. I went in, stamping my feet, and through the open door of the library. And there was Greta standing by the window waiting for me. She was glorious. She was the most glorious and the most lovely thing I’d ever seen. She was like a Brünnhilde, a super Valkyrie with shining golden hair. She smelt and looked and tasted of sex. We’d denied ourselves so long except for occasional brief meetings up in the Folly.

I came straight into her arms, a sailor home from the sea to where he belonged. Yes, it was one of the most wonderful moments of my life.

II

Presently we came down to earth. I sat down and she shoved a small pile of letters towards me. I picked out almost automatically one with an American stamp. It was the air mail letter from Lippincott. I wondered what he’d put in it, why he’d had to write me a letter.

“Well,” said Greta with a deep satisfied sigh, “we’ve made it.”

“V-Day all right,” I said.

We both laughed, laughed wildly. There was champagne on the table. I opened it and we drank to each other.

“This place is wonderful,” I said, looking round. “It’s more beautiful than I remember it. Santonix—But I haven’t told you. Santonix is dead.”

“Oh dear,” said Greta, “what a pity. So he really was ill?”

“Of course he was ill. I never wanted to think so. I went and saw him when he was dying.”

Greta gave a little shiver.

“I shouldn’t like to do that. Did he say anything?”

“Not really. He said I was a damned fool—I ought to have gone the other way.”

“What did he mean—what way?”

“I don’t know what he meant,” I said. “I suppose he was delirious. Didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“Well, this house is a fine monument to his memory,” said Greta. “I think we’ll stick to it, don’t you?”

I stared at her. “Of course. Do you think I’m going to live anywhere else?”

“We can’t live here all the time,” said Greta. “Not all the year round. Buried in a hole like this village?”

“But it’s where I want to live—it’s where I always meant to live.”

“Yes, of course. But after all, Mike, we’ve got all the money in the world. We can go anywhere! We can go all over the Continent—we’ll go on safari in Africa. We’ll have adventures. We’ll go and look for things—exciting pictures. We’ll go to the Angkor Vat. Don’t you want to have an adventurous life?”

“Well, I suppose so...But we’ll always come back here, won’t we?”

I had a queer feeling, a queer feeling that something had gone wrong somewhere. That’s all I’d ever thought of. My House and Greta. I hadn’t wanted anything else. But she did. I saw that. She was just beginning. Beginning to want things. Beginning to know she could have them. I had a sudden cruel foreboding. I began to shiver.

“What’s the matter with you, Mike—you’re shivering. Have you caught a cold or something?”

“It’s not that,” I said.

“What’s happened, Mike?”

“I saw Ellie,” I said.

“What do you mean, you saw Ellie?”

“As I was walking up the road I turned the corner and there she was, standing under a fir tree, looking at—I mean looking towards me.”

Greta stared.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You—you imagined things.”

“Perhaps one does imagine things. This is Gipsy’s Acre after all. Ellie was there all right, looking—looking quite happy. Just like herself as though she’d—she’d always been there and was always going to be there.”

“Mike!” Greta took hold of my shoulder. She shook me. “Mike, don’t say things like that. Had you been drinking before you got here?”

“No, I waited till I got here to you. I knew you’d have champagne waiting for us.”

“Well, let’s forget Ellie and drink to ourselves.”

“It was Ellie,” I said obstinately.

“Of course it wasn’t Ellie! It was just a trick of the light—something like that.”

“It was Ellie, and she was standing there. She was looking—looking for me and at me. But she couldn’t see me. Greta, she couldn’t see me.” My voice rose. “And I know why. I know why she couldn’t see me.”

“What do you mean?”

It was then that I whispered for the first time under my breath:

“Because that wasn’t me. I wasn’t there. There was nothing for her to see but Endless Night.” Then I shouted out in a panic-stricken voice, “Some are born to Sweet Delight, and some are born to Endless Night. Me, Greta, me.

“Do you remember, Greta,” I said, “how she sat on that sofa? She used to play that song on her guitar, singing it in her gentle voice. You must remember.

“‘Every night and every morn,’” I sang it under my breath, “‘Some to misery are born. Every morn and every night some are born to sweet delight.’ That’s Ellie, Greta. She was born to sweet delight. ‘Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night.’ That’s what Mum knew about me. She knew I was born to endless night. I hadn’t got there yet. But she knew. And Santonix knew. He knew I was heading that way. But it mightn’t have happened. There was just a moment, just one moment, the time Ellie sang that song. I could have been quite happy, couldn’t I, really, married to Ellie? I could have gone on being married to Ellie.”

“No, you couldn’t,” said Greta. “I never thought you were the type of person who lost your nerve, Mike.” She shook me roughly by the shoulder again. “Wake up.”

I stared at her.

“I’m sorry, Greta. What have I been saying?”

“I suppose they got you down over there in the States. But you did all right, didn’t you? I mean, all the investments are all right?”

“Everything’s fixed,” I said. “Everything’s fixed for our future. Our glorious, glorious future.”

“You speak very queerly. I’d like to know what Lippincott says in his letter.”

I pulled his letter towards me and opened it. There was nothing inside except a cutting from a paper. Not a new cutting, it was old and rather rubbed. I stared down at it. It was a picture of a street. I recognized the street, with rather a grand building in the background. It was a street in Hamburg with some people coming towards the photographer. Two people in the forefront walking arm in arm. They were Greta and myself. So Lippincott had known. He'd known all along that I already knew Greta. Somebody must have sent him this cutting some time, probably with no nefarious intention. Just amused perhaps to recognize Miss Greta Andersen walking along the streets of Hamburg. He had known I knew Greta and I remembered how particularly he had asked me whether I had met or not met Greta Andersen. I had denied it, of course, but he'd known I was lying. It must have begun his suspicion of me.

I was suddenly afraid of Lippincott. He couldn't suspect, of course, that I'd killed Ellie. He suspected something, though. Perhaps he suspected even that.

"Look," I said to Greta, "he knew we knew each other. He's known it all along. I've always hated that old fox and he's always hated you," I said. "When he knows that we're going to marry, he'll suspect." But then I knew that Lippincott had certainly suspected Greta and I were going to marry, he suspected that we knew each other, he suspected perhaps that we were lovers.

"Mike, will you stop being a panic-stricken rabbit? Yes, that's what I said. A panic-stricken rabbit. I admired you. I've always admired you. But now you're falling to pieces. You're afraid of everyone."

"Don't say that to me."

"Well, it's true."

"Endless night."

I couldn't think of anything else to say. I was still wondering just what it meant. Endless night. It meant blackness. It meant that I wasn't there to be seen. I could see the dead but the dead couldn't see me although I was

living. They couldn't see me because I wasn't really there. The man who loved Ellie wasn't really there. He'd entered of his own accord into endless night. I bent my head lower towards the ground.

"Endless night," I said again.

"Stop saying that," Greta screamed. "Stand up! Be a man, Mike. Don't give in to this absurd superstitious fancy."

"How can I help it?" I said. "I've sold my soul to Gipsy's Acre, haven't I? Gipsy's Acre's never been safe. It's never been safe for anyone. It wasn't safe for Ellie and it isn't safe for me. Perhaps it isn't safe for you."

"What do you mean?"

I got up. I went towards her. I loved her. Yes, I loved her still with a last tense sexual desire. But love, hate, desire—aren't they all the same? Three in one and one in three. I could never have hated Ellie, but I hated Greta. I enjoyed hating her. I hated her with all my heart and with a leaping joyous wish—I couldn't wait for the safe ways, I didn't want to wait for them, I came nearer to her.

"You filthy bitch!" I said. "You hateful, glorious, golden-haired bitch. You're not safe, Greta. You're not safe from me. Do you understand? I've learnt to enjoy—to enjoy killing people. I was excited the day that I knew Ellie had gone out with that horse to her death. I enjoyed myself all the morning because of killing, but I've never got near enough to killing until now. This is different. I want more than just knowing that someone's going to die because of a capsule they swallowed at breakfast time. I want more than pushing an old woman over a quarry. I want to use my hands."

Greta was afraid now. She, whom I'd belonged to ever since I met her that day in Hamburg, met her and gone on to pretend illness, to throw up my job, to stay there with her. Yes, I'd belonged to her then, body and soul. I didn't belong to her now. I was myself. I was coming into another kind of kingdom to the one I'd dreamed of.

She was afraid. I loved seeing her afraid and I fastened my hands round her neck. Yes, even now when I am sitting here writing down all about myself (which, mind you, is a very happy thing to do)—to write all about yourself and what you've been through and what you felt and thought and how you deceived everyone—yes, it's wonderful to do, yes I was wonderfully happy when I killed Greta....

Twenty-four

There isn't really very much to say after that. I mean, things came to a climax there. One forgets, I suppose, that there can't be anything better to follow—that you've had it all. I just sat there for a long time. I don't know when They came. I don't know whether They all came at once...They couldn't have been there all along because they wouldn't have let me kill Greta. I noticed that God was there first. I don't mean God, I'm confused, I mean Major Phillpot. I'd liked him always, he'd been nice to me. He was rather like God in some ways, I think. I mean if God had been a human being and not something supernatural—up in the sky somewhere. He was a very fair man, very fair and kind. He looked after things and people. Tried to do his best for people.

I don't know how much he'd known about me. I remembered the curious way he looked at me that morning in the sale room when he said that I was "fey." I wonder why he thought I happened to be fey that day.

Then when we were there with that little crumpled heap on the ground that was Ellie in her riding habit...I wonder if he knew then or had some idea that I'd had something to do with it.

After Greta's death, as I say I just sat there in my chair, staring down at my champagne glass. It was empty. Everything was very empty, very empty indeed. There was just one light that we'd switched on, Greta and I, but it was in the corner. It didn't give much light and the sun—I think the sun must have set a long time ago. I just sat there and wondered what was going to happen next with a sort of dull wonder.

Then, I suppose, the people began coming. Perhaps a lot of people came at once. They came very quietly, if so, or else I wasn't hearing or noticing anybody.

Perhaps if Santonix had been there he would have told me what to do. Santonix was dead. He'd gone a different way to my way, so he wouldn't be any help. Nobody really would be any help.

After a bit I noticed Dr. Shaw. He was so quiet I hardly knew he was there at first. He was sitting quite near me, just waiting for something. After a while I thought he was waiting for me to speak. I said to him:

“I’ve come home.”

There were one or two other people moving somewhere behind him. They seemed to be waiting, to be waiting for something that he was going to do.

“Greta’s dead,” I said. “I killed her. I expect you’d better take the body away, hadn’t you?”

Somebody somewhere let off a flash bulb. It must have been a police photographer photographing the body. Dr. Shaw turned his head and said sharply:

“Not yet.”

He turned his head round back to me again. I leaned towards him and said:

“I saw Ellie tonight.”

“Did you? Where?”

“Outside standing under a fir tree. It was the place I first saw her, you know.” I paused a moment and then said, “She didn’t see me...She couldn’t see me because I wasn’t there.” And after a while I said, “That upset me. It upset me very much.”

Dr. Shaw said, “It was in the capsule, wasn’t it? Cyanide in the capsule? That’s what you gave Ellie that morning?”

“It was for her hay fever,” I said, “she always took a capsule as a preventative against her allergy when she went riding. Greta and I fixed up one or two of the capsules with wasp stuff from the garden shed and joined them together again. We did it up in the Folly. Smart, wasn’t it?” And I laughed. It was an odd sort of laugh, I heard it myself. It was more like a queer little giggle. I said, “You’d examined all the things she took, hadn’t

you, when you came to see her ankle? Sleeping pills, the allergy capsules, and they were all quite all right, weren't they? No harm in any of them."

"No harm," said Dr. Shaw. "They were quite innocent."

"That was rather clever really, wasn't it?" I said.

"You've been quite clever, yes, but not clever enough."

"All the same I don't see how you found out."

"We found out when there was a second death, the death you didn't mean to happen."

"Claudia Hardcastle?"

"Yes. She died the same way as Ellie. She fell from her horse in the hunting field. Claudia was a healthy girl too, but she just fell from her horse and died. The time wasn't so long there, you see. They picked her up almost at once and there was still the smell of cyanide to go by. If she'd lain in the open air like Ellie for a couple of hours, there'd have been nothing—nothing to smell, nothing to find. I don't see how Claudia got the capsule, though. Unless you'd left one behind in the Folly. Claudia used to go to the Folly sometimes. Her fingerprints were there and she dropped a lighter there."

"We must have been careless. Filling them was rather tricky."

Then I said:

"You suspected I had something to do with Ellie's death, didn't you? All of you?" I looked round at the shadowy figures. "Perhaps all of you."

"Very often one knows. But I wasn't sure whether we'd be able to do anything about it."

"You ought to caution me," I said reprovingly.

"I'm not a police officer," said Dr. Shaw.

“What are you then?”

“I’m a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” I said.

“That remains to be seen.”

I looked at Phillipot then, and I said:

“What are you doing? Come here to judge me, to preside at my trial?”

“I’m only a Justice of the Peace,” he said. “I’m here as a friend.”

“A friend of mine?” That startled me.

“A friend of Ellie’s,” he said.

I didn’t understand. None of it made sense to me but I couldn’t help feeling rather important. All of them there! Police and doctor, Shaw and Phillipot who was a busy man in his way. The whole thing was very complicated. I began to lose count of things. I was very tired, you see. I used to get tired suddenly and go to sleep....

And all the coming and going. People came to see me, all sorts of people. Lawyers, a solicitor, I think, and another kind of lawyer with him and doctors. Several doctors. They bothered me and I didn’t want to answer them.

One of them kept asking me if there was anything I wanted. I said there was. I said there was only one thing I wanted. I said I wanted a ballpen and a lot of paper. I wanted, you see, to write all about it, how it all came to happen. I wanted to tell them what I’d felt, what I’d thought. The more I thought about myself, the more interesting I thought it would be to everybody. Because I was interesting. I was a really interesting person and I’d done interesting things.

The doctors—one doctor, anyway—seemed to think it was a good idea. I said:

“You always let people make a statement, so why can’t I write my statement out? Some day, perhaps, everybody can read it.”

They let me do it. I couldn’t write very long on end. I used to get tired. Somebody used a phrase like “diminished responsibility” and somebody else disagreed. All sorts of things you hear. Sometimes they don’t think you’re even listening. Then I had to appear in court and I wanted them to fetch me my best suit because I had to make a good figure there. It seemed they had had detectives watching me. For some time. Those new servants. I think they’d been engaged or put on my trail by Lippincott. They found out too many things about me and Greta. Funny, after she was dead I never thought of Greta much...After I’d killed her she didn’t seem to matter any more.

I tried to bring back the splendid triumphant feeling that I’d had when I strangled her. But even that was gone away....

They brought my mother to see me quite suddenly one day. There she was looking at me from the doorway. She didn’t look as anxious as she used to look. I think all she looked now was sad. She hadn’t much to say and nor had I. All she said was:

“I tried, Mike. I tried very hard to keep you safe. I failed. I was always afraid that I should fail.”

I said, “All right, Mum, it wasn’t your fault. I chose to go the way I wanted.”

And I thought suddenly, “That’s what Santonix said. He was afraid for me, too. He hadn’t been able to do anything either. Nobody could have done anything—except perhaps I myself...I don’t know. I’m not sure. But every now and then I remember—I remember that day when Ellie said to me, ‘What are you thinking of when you look at me like that?’ and I said, ‘Like what?’ She said, ‘As though you loved me.’ I suppose in a way I did love her. I could have loved her. She was so sweet, Ellie. Sweet delight....”

I suppose the trouble with me was that I wanted things too much, always. Wanted them, too, the easy way, the greedy way.

That first time, that first day I came to Gipsy's Acre and met Ellie. As we were going down the road again we met Esther. It put it into my head that day, the warning she gave Ellie, put it in my head to pay her. I knew she was the kind who would do anything for money. I'd pay her. She'd start warning Ellie and frightening her, making her feel that she was in danger. I thought it might make it seem more possible then that Ellie had died from shock. That first day, I know now, I'm sure of it, Esther was really frightened. She was really frightened for Ellie. She warned her, warned her to go away, have nothing to do with Gipsy's Acre. She was warning her, of course, to have nothing to do with me. I didn't understand that. Ellie didn't understand either.

Was it me Ellie was afraid of? I think it must have been though she didn't know it herself. She knew there was something threatening her, she knew there was danger. Santonix knew the evil in me, too, just like my mother. Perhaps all three of them knew. Ellie knew but she didn't mind, she never minded. It's odd, very odd. I know now. We were very happy together. Yes, very happy. I wish I'd known then that we were happy...I had my chance. Perhaps everyone has a chance. I—turned my back on it.

It seems odd, doesn't it, that Greta doesn't matter at all?

And even my beautiful house doesn't matter.

Only Ellie...And Ellie can never find me again—Endless Night...That's the end of my story—

In my end is the beginning—that's what people are always saying.

But what does it mean?

And just where does my story begin? I must try and think....

Passenger To Frankfurt (1970)

By Agatha Christie

Introduction

The Author speaks:

The first question put to an author, personally, or through the post, is:

‘Where do you get your ideas from?’

The temptation is great to reply: ‘I always go to Harrods,’ or ‘I get them mostly at the Army & Navy Stores,’ or, snappily, ‘Try Marks and Spencer.’

The universal opinion seems firmly established that there is a magic source of ideas which authors have discovered how to tap.

One can hardly send one’s questioners back to Elizabethan times, with Shakespeare’s:

Tell me, where is fancy bred,

Or in the heart or in the head?

How begot, how nourished?

Reply, reply.

You merely say firmly: ‘My own head.’

That, of course, is no help to anybody. If you like the look of your questioner you relent and go a little further.

‘If one idea in particular seems attractive, and you feel you could do something with it, then you toss it around, play tricks with it, work it up, tone it down, and gradually get it into shape. Then, of course, you have to start writing it. That’s not nearly such fun—it becomes hard work.

Alternatively, you can tuck it carefully away, in storage, for perhaps using in a year or two years’ time.’

A second question—or rather a statement—is then likely to be:

‘I suppose you take most of your characters from real life?’

An indignant denial to that monstrous suggestion.

‘No, I don’t. I invent them. They are mine. They’ve got to be my characters—doing what I want them to do, being what I want them to be—coming alive for me, having their own ideas sometimes, but only because I’ve made them become real.’

So the author has produced the ideas, and the characters—but now comes the third necessity—the setting. The first two come from inside sources, but the third is outside—it must be there—waiting—in existence already. You don’t invent that—it’s there—it’s real.

You have been perhaps for a cruise on the Nile—you remember it all—just the setting you want for this particular story. You have had a meal at a Chelsea café. A quarrel was going on—one girl pulled out a handful of another girl’s hair. An excellent start for the book you are going to write next. You travel on the Orient Express. What fun to make it the scene for a plot you are considering. You go to tea with a friend. As you arrive her brother closes a book he is reading—throws it aside, says: ‘Not bad, but why on earth didn’t they ask Evans?’

So you decide immediately a book of yours shortly to be written will bear the title, *Why Didn’t They Ask Evans?*

You don’t know yet who Evans is going to be. Never mind. Evans will come in due course—the title is fixed.

So, in a sense, you don’t invent your settings. They are outside you, all around you, in existence—you have only to stretch out your hand and pick and choose. A railway train, a hospital, a London hotel, a Caribbean beach, a country village, a cocktail party, a girls’ school.

But one thing only applies—they must be there—in existence. Real people, real places. A definite place in time and space. If here and now—how shall

you get full information—apart from the evidence of your own eyes and ears? The answer is frighteningly simple.

It is what the Press brings to you every day, served up in your morning paper under the general heading of News. Collect it from the front page. What is going on in the world today? What is everyone saying, thinking, doing? Hold up a mirror to 1970 in England.

Look at that front page every day for a month, make notes, consider and classify.

Every day there is a killing.

A girl strangled.

Elderly woman attacked and robbed of her meagre savings.

Young men or boys—attacking or attacked.

Buildings and telephone kiosks smashed and gutted.

Drug smuggling.

Robbery and assault.

Children missing and children's murdered bodies found not far from their homes.

Can this be England? Is England really like this? One feels—no—not yet, but it could be.

Fear is awakening—fear of what may be. Not so much because of actual happenings but because of the possible causes behind them. Some known, some unknown, but felt. And not only in our own country. There are smaller paragraphs on other pages—giving news from Europe—from Asia—from the Americas—Worldwide News.

Hi-jacking of planes.

Kidnapping.

Violence.

Riots.

Hate.

Anarchy—all growing stronger.

All seeming to lead to worship of destruction, pleasure in cruelty.

What does it all mean? An Elizabethan phrase echoes from the past, speaking of Life:

...it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

And yet one knows—of one's own knowledge—how much goodness there is in this world of ours—the kindnesses done, the goodness of heart, the acts of compassion, the kindness of neighbour to neighbour, the helpful actions of girls and boys.

Then why this fantastic atmosphere of daily news—of things that happen—that are actual facts?

To write a story in this year of Our Lord 1970—you must come to terms with your background. If the background is fantastic, then the story must accept its background. It, too, must be a fantasy—an extravaganza. The setting must include the fantastic facts of daily life.

Can one envisage a fantastic cause? A secret Campaign for Power? Can a maniacal desire for destruction create a new world? Can one go a step further and suggest deliverance by fantastic and impossible-sounding means?

Nothing is impossible, science has taught us that.

This story is in essence a fantasy. It pretends to be nothing more.

But most of the things that happen in it are happening, or giving promise of happening in the world of today.

It is not an impossible story—it is only a fantastic one.

Book 1

Interrupted Journey

Chapter 1

Passenger To Frankfurt

I

‘Fasten your seat-belts, please.’ The diverse passengers in the plane were slow to obey. There was a general feeling that they couldn’t possibly be arriving at Geneva yet. The drowsy groaned and yawned. The more than drowsy had to be gently roused by an authoritative stewardess.

‘Your seat-belts, please.’

The dry voice came authoritatively over the Tannoy. It explained in German, in French, and in English that a short period of rough weather would shortly be experienced. Sir Stafford Nye opened his mouth to its full extent, yawned and pulled himself upright in his seat. He had been dreaming very happily of fishing an English river.

He was a man of forty-five, of medium height, with a smooth, olive, clean-shaven face. In dress he rather liked to affect the bizarre. A man of excellent family, he felt fully at ease indulging any such sartorial whims. If it made the more conventionally dressed of his colleagues wince occasionally, that was merely a source of malicious pleasure to him. There was something about him of the eighteenth-century buck. He liked to be noticed.

His particular kind of affectation when travelling was a kind of bandit’s cloak which he had once purchased in Corsica. It was of a very dark purply-blue, had a scarlet lining and had a kind of burnous hanging down behind which he could draw up over his head when he wished to, so as to obviate draughts.

Sir Stafford Nye had been a disappointment in diplomatic circles. Marked out in early youth by his gifts for great things, he had singularly failed to fulfil his early promise. A peculiar and diabolical sense of humour was wont to afflict him in what should have been his most serious moments.

When it came to the point, he found that he always preferred to indulge his delicate Puckish malice to boring himself. He was a well-known figure in public life without ever having reached eminence. It was felt that Stafford Nye, though definitely brilliant, was not—and presumably never would be—a safe man. In these days of tangled politics and tangled foreign relations, safety, especially if one were to reach ambassadorial rank, was preferable to brilliance. Sir Stafford Nye was relegated to the shelf, though he was occasionally entrusted with such missions as needed the art of intrigue, but were not of too important or public a nature. Journalists sometimes referred to him as the dark horse of diplomacy.

Whether Sir Stafford himself was disappointed with his own career, nobody ever knew. Probably not even Sir Stafford himself. He was a man of a certain vanity, but he was also a man who very much enjoyed indulging his own proclivities for mischief.

He was returning now from a commission of inquiry in Malaya. He had found it singularly lacking in interest. His colleagues had, in his opinion, made up their minds beforehand what their findings were going to be. They saw and they listened, but their preconceived views were not affected. Sir Stafford had thrown a few spanners into the works, more for the hell of it than from any pronounced convictions. At all events, he thought, it had livened things up. He wished there were more possibilities of doing that sort of thing. His fellow members of the commission had been sound, dependable fellows, and remarkably dull. Even the well-known Mrs Nathaniel Edge, the only woman member, well known as having bees in her bonnet, was no fool when it came down to plain facts. She saw, she listened and she played safe.

He had met her before on the occasion of a problem to be solved in one of the Balkan capitals. It was there that Sir Stafford Nye had not been able to refrain from embarking on a few interesting suggestions. In that scandal-loving periodical *Inside News* it was insinuated that Sir Stafford Nye's presence in that Balkan capital was intimately connected with Balkan problems, and that his mission was a secret one of the greatest delicacy. A kind of friend had sent Sir Stafford a copy of this with the relevant passage marked. Sir Stafford was not taken aback. He read it with a delighted grin.

It amused him very much to reflect how ludicrously far from the truth the journalists were on this occasion. His presence in Sofiagrad had been due entirely to a blameless interest in the rarer wild flowers and to the urgencies of an elderly friend of his, Lady Lucy Cleghorn, who was indefatigable in her quest for these shy floral rarities, and who at any moment would scale a rock cliff or leap joyously into a bog at the sight of some flowerlet, the length of whose Latin name was in inverse proportion to its size.

A small band of enthusiasts had been pursuing this botanical search on the slopes of mountains for about ten days when it occurred to Sir Stafford that it was a pity the paragraph was not true. He was a little—just a little—tired of wild flowers and, fond as he was of dear Lucy, her ability despite her sixty-odd years to race up hills at top speed, easily outpacing him, sometimes annoyed him. Always just in front of him he saw the seat of those bright royal blue trousers and Lucy, though scraggy enough elsewhere, goodness knows, was decidedly too broad in the beam to wear royal blue corduroy trousers. A nice little international pie, he had thought, in which to dip his fingers, in which to play about...

In the aeroplane the metallic Tannoy voice spoke again. It told the passengers that owing to heavy fog at Geneva, the plane would be diverted to Frankfurt airport and proceed from there to London. Passengers to Geneva would be re-routed from Frankfurt as soon as possible. It made no difference to Sir Stafford Nye. If there was fog in London, he supposed they would re-route the plane to Prestwick. He hoped that would not happen. He had been to Prestwick once or twice too often. Life, he thought, and journeys by air, were really excessively boring. If only—he didn't know—if only—what?

II

It was warm in the Transit Passenger Lounge at Frankfurt, so Sir Stafford Nye slipped back his cloak, allowing its crimson lining to drape itself spectacularly round his shoulders. He was drinking a glass of beer and listening with half an ear to the various announcements as they were made.

'Flight 4387. Flying to Moscow. Flight 2381 bound for Egypt and Calcutta.'

Journeys all over the globe. How romantic it ought to be. But there was something about the atmosphere of a Passengers' Lounge in an airport that chilled romance. It was too full of people, too full of things to buy, too full of similarly coloured seats, too full of plastic, too full of human beings, too full of crying children. He tried to remember who had said:

I wish I loved the Human Race;

I wish I loved its silly face.

Chesterton perhaps? It was undoubtedly true. Put enough people together and they looked so painfully alike that one could hardly bear it. An interesting face now, thought Sir Stafford. What a difference it would make. He looked disparagingly at two young women, splendidly made up, dressed in the national uniform of their country—England he presumed—of shorter and shorter miniskirts, and another young woman, even better made up—in fact quite good-looking—who was wearing what he believed to be called a culotte suit. She had gone a little further along the road of fashion.

He wasn't very interested in nice-looking girls who looked like all the other nice-looking girls. He would like someone to be different. Someone sat down beside him on the plastic-covered artificial leather settee on which he was sitting. Her face attracted his attention at once. Not precisely because it was different, in fact he almost seemed to recognize it as a face he knew. Here was someone he had seen before. He couldn't remember where or when but it was certainly familiar. Twenty-five or six, he thought, possibly, as to age. A delicate high-bridged aquiline nose, a black heavy bush of hair reaching to her shoulders. She had a magazine in front of her but she was not paying attention to it. She was, in fact, looking with something that was almost eagerness at him. Quite suddenly she spoke. It was a deep contralto voice, almost as deep as a man's. It had a very faint foreign accent. She said,

'Can I speak to you?'

He studied her for a moment before replying. No—not what one might have thought—this wasn't a pick-up. This was something else.

‘I see no reason,’ he said, ‘why you should not do so. We have time to waste here, it seems.’

‘Fog,’ said the woman, ‘fog in Geneva, fog in London, perhaps. Fog everywhere. I don’t know what to do.’

‘Oh, you mustn’t worry,’ he said reassuringly, ‘they’ll land you somewhere all right. They’re quite efficient, you know. Where are you going?’

‘I was going to Geneva.’

‘Well, I expect you’ll get there in the end.’

‘I have to get there now. If I can get to Geneva, it will be all right. There is someone who will meet me there. I can be safe.’

‘Safe?’ He smiled a little.

She said, ‘Safe is a four-letter word but not the kind of four-letter word that people are interested in nowadays. And yet it can mean a lot. It means a lot to me.’ Then she said, ‘You see, if I can’t get to Geneva, if I have to leave this plane here, or go on in this plane to London with no arrangements made, I shall be killed.’ She looked at him sharply. ‘I suppose you don’t believe that.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t.’

‘It’s quite true. People can be. They are, every day.’

‘Who wants to kill you?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Not to me.’

‘You can believe me if you wish to believe me. I am speaking the truth. I want help. Help to get to London safely.’

‘And why should you select me to help you?’

‘Because I think that you know something about death. You have known of death, perhaps seen death happen.’

He looked sharply at her and then away again.

‘Any other reason?’ he said.

‘Yes. This.’ She stretched out her narrow olive-skinned hand and touched the folds of the voluminous cloak. ‘This,’ she said.

For the first time his interest was aroused.

‘Now what do you mean by that?’

‘It’s unusual—characteristic. It’s not what everyone wears.’

‘True enough. It’s one of my affectations, shall we say?’

‘It’s an affectation that could be useful to me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am asking you something. Probably you will refuse but you might not refuse because I think you are a man who is ready to take risks. Just as I am a woman who takes risks.’

‘I’ll listen to your project,’ he said, with a faint smile.

‘I want your cloak to wear. I want your passport. I want your boarding ticket for the plane. Presently, in twenty minutes or so, say, the flight for London will be called. I shall have your passport, I shall wear your cloak. And so I shall travel to London and arrive safely.’

‘You mean you’ll pass yourself off as me? My dear girl.’

She opened a handbag. From it she took a small square mirror.

‘Look there,’ she said. ‘Look at me and then look at your own face.’

He saw then, saw what had been vaguely nagging at his mind. His sister, Pamela, who had died about twenty years ago. They had always been very alike, he and Pamela. A strong family resemblance. She had had a slightly masculine type of face. His face, perhaps, had been, certainly in early life, of a slightly effeminate type. They had both had the high-bridged nose, the tilt of eyebrows, the slightly sideways smile of the lips. Pamela had been tall, five foot eight, he himself five foot ten. He looked at the woman who had tendered him the mirror.

‘There is a facial likeness between us, that’s what you mean, isn’t it? But my dear girl, it wouldn’t deceive anyone who knew me or knew you.’

‘Of course it wouldn’t. Don’t you understand? It doesn’t need to. I am travelling wearing slacks. You have been travelling with the hood of your cloak drawn up round your face. All I have to do is to cut off my hair, wrap it up in a twist of newspaper, throw it in one of the litter-baskets here. Then I put on your burnous, I have your boarding card, ticket, and passport. Unless there is someone who knows you well on this plane, and I presume there is not or they would have spoken to you already, then I can safely travel as you. Showing your passport when it’s necessary, keeping the burnous and cloak drawn up so that my nose and eyes and mouth are about all that are seen. I can walk out safely when the plane reaches its destination because no one will know I have travelled by it. Walk out safely and disappear into the crowds of the city of London.’

‘And what do I do?’ asked Sir Stafford, with a slight smile.

‘I can make a suggestion if you have the nerve to face it.’

‘Suggest,’ he said. ‘I always like to hear suggestions.’

‘You get up from here, you go away and buy a magazine or a newspaper, or a gift at the gift counter. You leave your cloak hanging here on the seat. When you come back with whatever it is, you sit down somewhere else—say at the end of that bench opposite here. There will be a glass in front of you, this glass still. In it there will be something that will send you to sleep. Sleep in a quiet corner.’

‘What happens next?’

‘You will have been presumably the victim of a robbery,’ she said.

‘Somebody will have added a few knock-out drops to your drink, and will have stolen your wallet from you. Something of that kind. You declare your identity, say that your passport and things are stolen. You can easily establish your identity.’

‘You know who I am? My name, I mean?’

‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘I haven’t seen your passport yet. I’ve no idea who you are.’

‘And yet you say I can establish my identity easily.’

‘I am a good judge of people. I know who is important or who isn’t. You are an important person.’

‘And why should I do all this?’

‘Perhaps to save the life of a fellow human being.’

‘Isn’t that rather a highly coloured story?’

‘Oh yes. Quite easily not believed. Do you believe it?’

He looked at her thoughtfully. ‘You know what you’re talking like? A beautiful spy in a thriller.’

‘Yes, perhaps. But I am not beautiful.’

‘And you’re not a spy?’

‘I might be so described, perhaps. I have certain information. Information I want to preserve. You will have to take my word for it, it is information that would be valuable to your country.’

‘Don’t you think you’re being rather absurd?’

‘Yes I do. If this was written down it would look absurd. But so many absurd things are true, aren’t they?’

He looked at her again. She was very like Pamela. Her voice, although foreign in intonation, was like Pamela’s. What she proposed was ridiculous, absurd, quite impossible, and probably dangerous. Dangerous to him. Unfortunately, though, that was what attracted him. To have the nerve to suggest such a thing to him! What would come of it all? It would be interesting, certainly, to find out.

‘What do I get out of it?’ he said. ‘That’s what I’d like to know.’

She looked at him consideringly. ‘Diversion,’ she said. ‘Something out of the everyday happenings? An antidote to boredom, perhaps. We’ve not got very long. It’s up to you.’

‘And what happens to your passport? Do I have to buy myself a wig, if they sell such a thing, at the counter? Do I have to impersonate a female?’

‘No. There’s no question of exchanging places. You have been robbed and drugged but you remain yourself. Make up your mind. There isn’t long. Time is passing very quickly. I have to do my own transformation.’

‘You win,’ he said. ‘One mustn’t refuse the unusual, if it is offered to one.’

‘I hoped you might feel that way, but it was a toss-up.’

From his pocket Stafford Nye took out his passport. He slipped it into the outer pocket of the cloak he had been wearing. He rose to his feet, yawned, looked round him, looked at his watch, and strolled over to the counter where various goods were displayed for sale. He did not even look back. He bought a paperback book and fingered some small woolly animals, a suitable gift for some child. Finally he chose a panda. He looked round the lounge, came back to where he had been sitting. The cloak was gone and so had the girl. A half glass of beer was on the table still. Here, he thought, is where I take the risk. He picked up the glass, moved away a little, and drank it. Not quickly. Quite slowly. It tasted much the same as it had tasted before.

‘Now I wonder,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘Now I wonder.’

He walked across the lounge to a far corner. There was a somewhat noisy family sitting there, laughing and talking together. He sat down near them, yawned, let his head fall back on the edge of the cushion. A flight was announced leaving for Teheran. A large number of passengers got up and went to queue by the requisite numbered gate. The lounge still remained half full. He opened his paperback book. He yawned again. He was really sleepy now, yes, he was very sleepy...He must just think out where it was best for him to go off to sleep. Somewhere he could remain...

Trans-European Airways announced the departure of their plane, Flight 309 for London.

III

Quite a good sprinkling of passengers rose to their feet to obey the summons. By this time though, more passengers had entered the transit lounge waiting for other planes. Announcements followed as to fog at Geneva and other disabilities of travel. A slim man of middle height wearing a dark blue cloak with its red lining showing and with a hood drawn up over a close-cropped head, not noticeably more untidy than many of the heads of young men nowadays, walked across the floor to take his place in the queue for the plane. Showing a boarding ticket, he passed out through gate No. 9.

More announcements followed. Swissair flying to Zürich. BEA to Athens and Cyprus—and then a different type of announcement.

‘Will Miss Daphne Theodofanous, passenger to Geneva, kindly come to the flight desk. Plane to Geneva is delayed owing to fog. Passengers will travel by way of Athens. The aeroplane is now ready to leave.’

Other announcements followed dealing with passengers to Japan, to Egypt, to South Africa, air lines spanning the world. Mr Sidney Cook, passenger to South Africa, was urged to come to the flight desk where there was a message for him. Daphne Theodofanous was called for again.

‘This is the last call before the departure of Flight 309.’

In a corner of the lounge a little girl was looking up at a man in a dark suit who was fast asleep, his head resting against the cushion of the red settee. In his hand he held a small woolly panda.

The little girl’s hand stretched out towards the panda. Her mother said:

‘Now, Joan, don’t touch that. The poor gentleman’s asleep.’

‘Where is he going?’

‘Perhaps he’s going to Australiatoo,’ said her mother, ‘like we are.’

‘Has he got a little girl like me?’

‘I think he must have,’ said her mother.

The little girl sighed and looked at the panda again. Sir Stafford Nye continued to sleep. He was dreaming that he was trying to shoot a leopard. A very dangerous animal, he was saying to the safari guide who was accompanying him. ‘A very dangerous animal, so I’ve always heard. You can’t trust a leopard.’

The dream switched at that moment, as dreams have a habit of doing, and he was having tea with his Great-Aunt Matilda, and trying to make her hear. She was deafer than ever! He had not heard any of the announcements except the first one for Miss Daphne Theodofanous. The little girl’s mother said:

‘I’ve always wondered, you know, about a passenger that’s missing. Nearly always, whenever you go anywhere by air, you hear it. Somebody they can’t find. Somebody who hasn’t heard the call or isn’t on the plane or something like that. I always wonder who it is and what they’re doing, and why they haven’t come. I suppose this Miss What’s-a-name or whatever it is will just have missed her plane. What will they do with her then?’

Nobody was able to answer her question because nobody had the proper information.

Chapter 2

London

Sir Stafford Nye's flat was a very pleasant one. It looked out upon Green Park. He switched on the coffee percolator and went to see what the post had left him this morning. It did not appear to have left him anything very interesting. He sorted through the letters, a bill or two, a receipt and letters with rather uninteresting postmarks. He shuffled them together and placed them on the table where some mail was already lying, accumulating from the last two days. He'd have to get down to things soon, he supposed. His secretary would be coming in some time or other this afternoon.

He went back to the kitchen, poured coffee into a cup and brought it to the table. He picked up the two or three letters that he had opened late last night when he arrived. One of them he referred to, and smiled a little as he read it.

'Eleven-thirty,' he said. 'Quite a suitable time. I wonder now. I expect I'd better just think things over, and get prepared for Chetwynd.'

Somebody pushed something through the letter-box. He went out into the hall and got the morning paper. There was very little news in the paper. A political crisis, an item of foreign news which might have been disquieting, but he didn't think it was. It was merely a journalist letting off steam and trying to make things rather more important than they were. Must give the people something to read. A girl had been strangled in the park. Girls were always being strangled. One a day, he thought callously. No child had been kidnapped or raped this morning. That was a nice surprise. He made himself a piece of toast and drank his coffee.

Later, he went out of the building, down into the street, and walked through the park in the direction of Whitehall. He was smiling to himself. Life, he felt, was rather good this morning. He began to think about Chetwynd. Chetwynd was a silly fool if there ever was one. A good façade, important-seeming, and a nicely suspicious mind. He'd rather enjoy talking to Chetwynd.

He reached Whitehall a comfortable seven minutes late. That was only due to his own importance compared with that of Chetwynd, he thought. He walked into the room. Chetwynd was sitting behind his desk and had a lot of papers on it and a secretary there. He was looking properly important, as he always did when he could make it.

‘Hullo, Nye,’ said Chetwynd, smiling all over his impressively handsome face. ‘Glad to be back? How was Malaya?’

‘Hot,’ said Stafford Nye.

‘Yes. Well, I suppose it always is. You meant atmospherically, I suppose, not politically?’

‘Oh, purely atmospherically,’ said Stafford Nye.

He accepted a cigarette and sat down.

‘Get any results to speak of?’

‘Oh, hardly. Not what you’d call results. I’ve sent in my report. All a lot of talky-talky as usual. How’s Lazenby?’

‘Oh, a nuisance as he always is. He’ll never change,’ said Chetwynd.

‘No, that would seem too much to hope for. I haven’t served on anything with Bascombe before. He can be quite fun when he likes.’

‘Can he? I don’t know him very well. Yes. I suppose he can.’

‘Well, well, well. No other news, I suppose?’

‘No, nothing. Nothing I think that would interest you.’

‘You didn’t mention in your letter quite why you wanted to see me.’

‘Oh, just to go over a few things, that’s all. You know, in case you’d brought any special dope home with you. Anything we ought to be prepared for, you know. Questions in the House. Anything like that.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Came home by air, didn’t you? Had a bit of trouble, I gather.’

Stafford Nye put on the face he had been determined to put on beforehand. It was slightly rueful, with a faint tinge of annoyance.

‘Oh, so you heard about that, did you?’ he said. ‘Silly business.’

‘Yes. Yes, must have been.’

‘Extraordinary,’ said Stafford Nye, ‘how things always get into the press. There was a paragraph in the stop press this morning.’

‘You’d rather they wouldn’t have, I suppose?’

‘Well, makes me look a bit of an ass, doesn’t it?’ said Stafford Nye. ‘Got to admit it. At my age too!’

‘What happened exactly? I wondered if the report in the paper had been exaggerating.’

‘Well, I suppose they made the most of it, that’s all. You know what these journeys are. Damn boring. There was fog at Geneva so they had to re-route the plane. Then there was two hours’ delay at Frankfurt.’

‘Is that when it happened?’

‘Yes. One’s bored stiff in these airports. Planes coming, planes going. Tannoy going full steam ahead. Flight 302 leaving for Hong Kong, Flight 109 going to Ireland. This, that and the other. People getting up, people leaving. And you just sit there yawning.’

‘What happened exactly?’ said Chetwynd.

‘Well, I’d got a drink in front of me, Pilsner as a matter of fact, then I thought I’d got to get something else to read. I’d read everything I’d got with me so I went over to the counter and bought some wretched paperback or other. Detective story, I think it was, and I bought a woolly animal for

one of my nieces. Then I came back, finished my drink, opened my paperback and then I went to sleep.'

'Yes, I see. You went to sleep.'

'Well, a very natural thing to do, isn't it? I suppose they called my flight but if they did I didn't hear it. I didn't hear it apparently for the best of reasons. I'm capable of going to sleep in an airport any time but I'm also capable of hearing an announcement that concerns me. This time I didn't. When I woke up, or came to, however you like to put it, I was having a bit of medical attention. Somebody apparently had dropped a Mickey Finn or something or other in my drink. Must have done it when I was away getting the paperback.'

'Rather an extraordinary things to happen, wasn't it?' said Chetwynd.

'Well, it's never happened to me before,' said Stafford Nye. 'I hope it never will again. It makes you feel an awful fool, you know. Besides having a hangover. There was a doctor and some nurse creature, or something. Anyway, there was no great harm done apparently. My wallet had been pinched with some money in it and my passport. It was awkward of course. Fortunately, I hadn't got much money. My travellers' cheques were in an inner pocket. There always has to be a bit of red tape and all that if you lose your passport. Anyway, I had letters and things and identification was not difficult. And in due course things were squared up and I resumed my flight.'

'Still, very annoying for you,' said Chetwynd. 'A person of your status, I mean.' His tone was disapproving.

'Yes,' said Stafford Nye. 'It doesn't show me in a very good light, does it? I mean, not as bright as a fellow of my—er—status ought to be.' The idea seemed to amuse him.

'Does this often happen, did you find out?'

'I don't think it's a matter of general occurrence. It could be. I suppose any person with a pick-pocket trend could notice a fellow asleep and slip a hand

into a pocket, and if he's accomplished in his profession, get hold of a wallet or a pocket-book or something like that, and hope for some luck.'

'Pretty awkward to lose a passport.'

'Yes, I shall have to put in for another one now. Make a lot of explanations, I suppose. As I say, the whole thing's a damn silly business. And let's face it, Chetwynd, it doesn't show me in a very favourable light, does it?'

'Oh, not your fault, my dear boy, not your fault. It could happen to anybody, anybody at all.'

'Very nice of you to say so,' said Stafford Nye, smiling at him agreeably. 'Teach me a sharp lesson, won't it?'

'You don't think anyone wanted your passport specially?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Stafford Nye. 'Why should they want my passport. Unless it was a matter of someone who wished to annoy me and that hardly seems likely. Or somebody who took a fancy to my passport photo—and that seems even less likely!'

'Did you see anyone you knew at this—where did you say you were—Frankfurt?'

'No, no. Nobody at all.'

'Talk to anyone?'

'Not particularly. Said something to a nice fat woman who'd got a small child she was trying to amuse. Came from Wigan, I think. Going to Australia. Don't remember anybody else.'

'You're sure?'

'There was some woman or other who wanted to know what she did if she wanted to study archaeology in Egypt. Said I didn't know anything about that. I told her she'd better go and ask the British Museum. And I had a

word or two with a man who I think was an anti-vivisectionist. Very passionate about it.'

'One always feels,' said Chetwynd, 'that there might be something behind things like this.'

'Things like what?'

'Well, things like what happened to you.'

'I don't see what can be behind this,' said Sir Stafford. 'I daresay journalists could make up some story, they're so clever at that sort of thing. Still, it's a silly business. For goodness' sake, let's forget it. I suppose now it's been mentioned in the press, all my friends will start asking me about it. How's old Leyland? What's he up to nowadays? I heard one or two things about him out there. Leyland always talks a bit too much.'

The two men talked amiable shop for ten minutes or so, then Sir Stafford got up and went out.

'I've got a lot of things to do this morning,' he said. 'Presents to buy for my relations. The trouble is that if one goes to Malaya, all one's relations expect you to bring exotic presents to them. I'll go round to Liberty's, I think. They have a nice stock of Eastern goods there.'

He went out cheerfully, nodding to a couple of men he knew in the corridor outside. After he had gone, Chetwynd spoke through the telephone to his secretary.

'Ask Colonel Munro if he can come to me.'

Colonel Munro came in, bringing another tall middle-aged man with him.

'Don't know whether you know Horsham,' he said, 'in Security.'

'Think I've met you,' said Chetwynd.

'Nye's just left you, hasn't he?' said Colonel Munro. 'Anything in this story about Frankfurt? Anything, I mean, that we ought to take any notice of?'

‘Doesn’t seem so,’ said Chetwynd. ‘He’s a bit put out about it. Thinks it makes him look a silly ass. Which it does, of course.’

The man called Horsham nodded his head. ‘That’s the way he takes it, is it?’

‘Well, he tried to put a good face upon it,’ said Chetwynd.

‘All the same, you know,’ said Horsham, ‘he’s not really a silly ass, is he?’

Chetwynd shrugged his shoulders. ‘These things happen,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said Colonel Munro, ‘yes, yes, I know. All the same, well, I’ve always felt in some ways that Nye is a bit unpredictable. That in some ways, you know, he mightn’t be really sound in his views.’

The man called Horsham spoke. ‘Nothing against him,’ he said. ‘Nothing at all as far as we know.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean there was. I didn’t mean that at all,’ said Chetwynd. ‘It’s just—how shall I put it?—he’s not always very serious about things.’

Mr Horsham had a moustache. He found it useful to have a moustache. It concealed moments when he found it difficult to avoid smiling.

‘He’s not a stupid man,’ said Munro. ‘Got brains, you know. You don’t think that—well, I mean you don’t think there could be anything at all doubtful about this?’

‘On his part? It doesn’t seem so.’

‘You’ve been into it all, Horsham?’

‘Well, we haven’t had very much time yet. But as far as it goes it’s all right. But his passport was used.’

‘Used? In what way?’

‘It passed through Heathrow.’

‘You mean someone represented himself as Sir Stafford Nye?’

‘No, no,’ said Horsham, ‘not in so many words. We could hardly hope for that. It went through with other passports. There was no alarm out, you know. He hadn’t even woken up, I gather, at that time, from the dope or whatever it was he was given. He was still at Frankfurt.’

‘But someone could have stolen that passport and come on the plane and so got into England?’

‘Yes,’ said Munro, ‘that’s the presumption. Either someone took a wallet which had money in it and a passport, or else someone wanted a passport and settled on Sir Stafford Nye as a convenient person to take it from. A drink was waiting on a table, put a pinch in that, wait till the man went off to sleep, take the passport and chance it.’

‘But after all, they look at a passport. Must have seen it wasn’t the right man,’ said Chetwynd.

‘Well, there must have been a certain resemblance, certainly,’ said Horsham. ‘But it isn’t as though there was any notice of his being missing, any special attention drawn to that particular passport in any way. A large crowd comes through on a plane that’s overdue. A man looks reasonably like the photograph in his passport. That’s all. Brief glance, handed back, pass it on. Anyway what they’re looking for usually is the foreigners that are coming in, not the British lot. Dark hair, dark blue eyes, clean shaven, five foot ten or whatever it is. That’s about all you want to see. Not on a list of undesirable aliens or anything like that.’

‘I know, I know. Still, you’d say if anybody wanted merely to pinch a wallet or some money or that, they wouldn’t use the passport, would they. Too much risk.’

‘Yes,’ said Horsham. ‘Yes, that is the interesting part of it. Of course,’ he said, ‘we’re making investigations, asking a few questions here and there.’

‘And what’s your own opinion?’

‘I wouldn’t like to say yet,’ said Horsham. ‘It takes a little time, you know. One can’t hurry things.’

‘They’re all the same,’ said Colonel Munro, when Horsham had left the room. ‘They never will tell you anything, those damned security people. If they think they’re on the trail of anything, they won’t admit it.’

‘Well, that’s natural,’ said Chetwynd, ‘because they might be wrong.’

It seemed a typically political view.

‘Horsham’s a pretty good man,’ said Munro. ‘They think very highly of him at headquarters. He’s not likely to be wrong.’

Chapter 3

The Man From The Cleaners

Sir Stafford Nye returned to his flat. A large woman bounced out of the small kitchen with welcoming words.

‘See you got back all right, sir. Those nasty planes. You never know, do you?’

‘Quite true, Mrs Worrit,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘Two hours late, the plane was.’

‘Same as cars, aren’t they,’ said Mrs Worrit. ‘I mean, you never know, do you, what’s going to go wrong with them. Only it’s more worrying, so to speak, being up in the air, isn’t it? Can’t just draw up to the kerb, not the same way, can you? I mean, there you are. I wouldn’t go by one myself, not if it was ever so.’ She went on, ‘I’ve ordered in a few things. I hope that’s all right. Eggs, butter, coffee, tea—’ She ran off the words with the loquacity of a Near Eastern guide showing a Pharaoh’s palace. ‘There,’ said Mrs Worrit, pausing to take breath, ‘I think that’s all as you’re likely to want. I’ve ordered the French mustard.’

‘Not Dijon, is it? They always try and give you Dijon.’

‘I don’t know who he was, but it’s Esther Dragon, the one you like, isn’t it?’

‘Quite right,’ said Sir Stafford, ‘you’re a wonder.’

Mrs Worrit looked pleased. She retired into the kitchen again, as Sir Stafford Nye put his hand on his bedroom door handle preparatory to going into the bedroom.

‘All right to give your clothes to the gentleman what called for them, I suppose, sir? You hadn’t said or left word or anything like that.’

‘What clothes?’ said Sir Stafford Nye, pausing.

‘Two suits, it was, the gentleman said as called for them. Twiss and Bonywork it was, think that’s the same name as called before. We’d had a bit of a dispute with the White Swan laundry if I remember rightly.’

‘Two suits?’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘Which suits?’

‘Well, there was the one you travelled home in, sir. I made out that would be one of them. I wasn’t quite so sure about the other, but there was the blue pinstripe that you didn’t leave no orders about when you went away. It could do with cleaning, and there was a repair wanted doing to the right-hand cuff, but I didn’t like to take it on myself while you were away. I never likes to do that,’ said Mrs Worrit with an air of palpable virtue.

‘So the chap, whoever he was, took those suits away?’

‘I hope I didn’t do wrong, sir.’ Mrs Worrit became worried.

‘I don’t mind the blue pinstripe. I daresay it’s all for the best. The suit I came home in, well—’

‘It’s a bit thin, that suit, sir, for this time of year, you know, sir. All right for those parts as you’ve been in where it’s hot. And it could do with a clean. He said as you’d rung up about them. That’s what the gentleman said as called for them.’

‘Did he go into my room and pick them out himself?’

‘Yes, sir. I thought that was best.’

‘Very interesting,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘Yes, very interesting.’

He went into his bedroom and looked round it. It was neat and tidy. The bed was made, the hand of Mrs Worrit was apparent, his electric razor was on charge, the things on the dressing-table were neatly arranged.

He went to the wardrobe and looked inside. He looked in the drawers of the tallboy that stood against the wall near the window. It was all quite tidy. It

was tidier indeed than it should have been. He had done a little unpacking last night and what little he had done had been of a cursory nature. He had thrown underclothing and various odds and ends in the appropriate drawer but he had not arranged them neatly. He would have done that himself either today or tomorrow. He would not have expected Mrs Worrit to do it for him. He expected her merely to keep things as she found them. Then, when he came back from abroad, there would be a time for rearrangements and readjustments because of climate and other matters. So someone had looked round here, someone had taken out drawers, looked through them quickly, hurriedly, had replaced things, partly because of his hurry, more tidily and neatly than he should have done. A quick careful job and he had gone away with two suits and a plausible explanation. One suit obviously worn by Sir Stafford when travelling and a suit of thin material which might have been one taken abroad and brought home. So why?

‘Because,’ said Sir Stafford thoughtfully, to himself, ‘because somebody was looking for something. But what? And who? And also perhaps why?’ Yes, it was interesting.

He sat down in a chair and thought about it. Presently his eyes strayed to the table by the bed on which sat, rather pertly, a small furry panda. It started a train of thought. He went to the telephone and rang a number.

‘That you, Aunt Matilda?’ he said. ‘Stafford here.’

‘Ah, my dear boy, so you’re back. I’m so glad. I read in the paper they’d got cholera in Malaya yesterday, at least I think it was Malaya. I always get so mixed up with those places. I hope you’re coming to see me soon? Don’t pretend you’re busy. You can’t be busy all the time. One really only accepts that sort of thing from tycoons, people in industry, you know, in the middle of mergers and takeovers. I never know what it all really means. It used to mean doing your work properly but now it means things all tied up with atom bombs and factories in concrete,’ said Aunt Matilda, rather wildly. ‘And those terrible computers that get all one’s figures wrong, to say nothing of making them the wrong shape. Really, they have made life so difficult for us nowadays. You wouldn’t believe the things they’ve done to my bank account. And to my postal address too. Well, I suppose I’ve lived too long.’

‘Don’t you believe it! All right if I come down next week?’

‘Come down tomorrow if you like. I’ve got the vicar coming to dinner, but I can easily put him off.’

‘Oh, look here, no need to do that.’

‘Yes there is, every need. He’s a most irritating man and he wants a new organ too. This one does quite well as it is. I mean the trouble is with the organist, really, not the organ. An absolutely abominable musician. The vicar’s sorry for him because he lost his mother whom he was very fond of. But really, being fond of your mother doesn’t make you play the organ any better, does it? I mean, one has to look at things as they are.’

‘Quite right. It will have to be next week—I’ve got a few things to see to. How’s Sybil?’

‘Dear child! Very naughty but such fun.’

‘I brought her home a woolly panda,’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

‘Well, that was very nice of you, dear.’

‘I hope she’ll like it,’ said Sir Stafford, catching the panda’s eye and feeling slightly nervous.

‘Well, at any rate, she’s got very good manners,’ said Aunt Matilda, which seemed a somewhat doubtful answer, the meaning of which Sir Stafford did not quite appreciate.

Aunt Matilda suggested likely trains for next week with the warning that they very often did not run, or changed their plans, and also commanded that he should bring her down a Camembert cheese and half a Stilton.

‘Impossible to get anything down here now. Our own grocer—such a nice man, so thoughtful and such good taste in what we all liked—turned suddenly into a supermarket, six times the size, all rebuilt, baskets and wire trays to carry round and try to fill up with things you don’t want and

mothers always losing their babies, and crying and having hysterics. Most exhausting. Well, I'll be expecting you, dear boy.' She rang off.

The telephone rang again at once.

'Hullo? Stafford? Eric Pugh here. Heard you were back from Malaya—what about dining tonight?'

'Like to very much.'

'Good—Limpits Club—eight-fifteen?'

Mrs Worrit panted into the room as Sir Stafford replaced the receiver.

'A gentleman downstairs wanting to see you, sir,' she said. 'At least I mean, I suppose he's that. Anyway he said he was sure you wouldn't mind.'

'What's his name?'

'Horsham, sir, like the place on the way to Brighton.'

'Horsham.' Sir Stafford Nye was a little surprised.

He went out of his bedroom, down a half flight of stairs that led to the big sitting-room on the lower floor. Mrs Worrit had made no mistake. Horsham it was, looking as he had looked half an hour ago, stalwart, trustworthy, cleft chin, rubicund cheeks, bushy grey moustache and a general air of imperturbability.

'Hope you don't mind,' he said agreeably, rising to his feet.

'Hope I don't mind what?' said Sir Stafford Nye.

'Seeing me again so soon. We met in the passage outside Mr Gordon Chetwynd's door—if you remember?'

'No objections at all,' said Sir Stafford Nye.

He pushed a cigarette-box along the table.

‘Sit down. Something forgotten, something left unsaid?’

‘Very nice man, Mr Chetwynd,’ said Horsham. ‘We’ve got him quietened down, I think. He and Colonel Munro. They’re a bit upset about it all, you know. About you, I mean.’

‘Really?’

Sir Stafford Nye sat down too. He smiled, he smoked, and he looked thoughtfully at Henry Horsham. ‘And where do we go from here?’ he asked.

‘I was just wondering if I might ask, without undue curiosity, where you’re going from here?’

‘Delighted to tell you,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘I’m going to stay with an aunt of mine, Lady Matilda Cleckheaton. I’ll give you the address if you like.’

‘I know it,’ said Henry Horsham. ‘Well, I expect that’s a very good idea. She’ll be glad to see you’ve come home safely all right. Might have been a near thing, mightn’t it?’

‘Is that what Colonel Munro thinks and Mr Chetwynd?’

‘Well, you know what it is, sir,’ said Horsham. ‘You know well enough. They’re always in a state, gentlemen in that department. They’re not sure whether they trust you or not.’

‘Trust me?’ said Sir Stafford Nye in an offended voice. ‘What do you mean by that, Mr Horsham?’

Mr Horsham was not taken aback. He merely grinned.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘you’ve got a reputation for not taking things seriously.’

‘Oh. I thought you meant I was a fellow traveller or a convert to the wrong side. Something of that kind.’

‘Oh no, sir, they just don’t think you’re serious. They think you like having a bit of a joke now and again.’

‘One cannot go entirely through life taking oneself and other people seriously,’ said Sir Stafford Nye, disapprovingly.

‘No. But you took a pretty good risk, as I’ve said before, didn’t you?’

‘I wonder if I know in the least what you are talking about.’

‘I’ll tell you. Things go wrong, sir, sometimes, and they don’t always go wrong because people have made them go wrong. What you might call the Almighty takes a hand, or the other gentleman—the one with the tail, I mean.’

Sir Stafford Nye was slightly diverted.

‘Are you referring to fog at Geneva?’ he said.

‘Exactly, sir. There was fog at Geneva and that upset people’s plans. Somebody was in a nasty hole.’

‘Tell me all about it,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘I really would like to know.’

‘Well, a passenger was missing when that plane of yours left Frankfurt yesterday. You’d drunk your beer and you were sitting in a corner snoring nicely and comfortably by yourself. One passenger didn’t report and they called her and they called her again. In the end, presumably, the plane left without her.’

‘Ah. And what had happened to her?’

‘It would be interesting to know. In any case, your passport arrived at Heathrow even if you didn’t.’

‘And where is it now? Am I supposed to have got it?’

‘No. I don’t think so. That would be rather too quick work. Good reliable stuff, that dope. Just right, if I may say so. It put you out and it didn’t

produce any particularly bad effects.'

'It gave me a very nasty hangover,' said Sir Stafford.

'Ah well, you can't avoid that. Not in the circumstances.'

'What would have happened,' Sir Stafford asked, 'since you seem to know all about everything, if I had refused to accept the proposition that may—I will only say may—have been put up to me?'

'It's quite possible that it would have been curtains for Mary Ann.'

'Mary Ann? Who's Mary Ann?'

'Miss Daphne Theodofanous.'

'That's the name I do seem to have heard—being summoned as a missing traveller?'

'Yes, that's the name she was travelling under. We call her Mary Ann.'

'Who is she—just as a matter of interest?'

'In her own line she's more or less the tops.'

'And what is her line? Is she ours or is she theirs, if you know who "theirs" is? I must say I find a little difficulty myself when making my mind up about that.'

'Yes, it's not so easy, is it? What with the Chinese and the Russkies and the rather queer crowd that's behind all the student troubles and the New Mafia and the rather odd lot in South America. And the nice little nest of financiers who seem to have got something funny up their sleeves. Yes, it's not easy to say.'

'Mary Ann,' said Sir Stafford Nye thoughtfully. 'It seems a curious name to have for her if her real one is Daphne Theodofanous.'

‘Well, her mother’s Greek, her father was an Englishman, and her grandfather was an Austrian subject.’

‘What would have happened if I hadn’t made her a—loan of a certain garment?’

‘She might have been killed.’

‘Come, come. Not really?’

‘We’re worried about the airport at Heathrow. Things have happened there lately, things that need a bit of explaining. If the plane had gone via Geneva as planned, it would have been all right. She’d have had full protection all arranged. But this other way—there wouldn’t have been time to arrange anything and you don’t know who’s who always, nowadays. Everyone’s playing a double game or a treble or a quadruple one.’

‘You alarm me,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘But she’s all right, is she? Is that what you’re telling me?’

‘I hope she’s all right. We haven’t heard anything to the contrary.’

‘If it’s any help to you,’ said Sir Stafford Nye, ‘somebody called here this morning while I was out talking to my little pals in Whitehall. He represented that I telephoned a firm of cleaners and he removed the suit that I wore yesterday, and also another suit. Of course it may have been merely that he took a fancy to the other suit, or he may have made a practice of collecting various gentlemen’s suitings who have recently returned from abroad. Or—well, perhaps you’ve got an “or” to add?’

‘He might have been looking for something.’

‘Yes, I think he was. Somebody’s been looking for something. All very nice and tidily arranged again. Not the way I left it. All right, he was looking for something. What was he looking for?’

‘I’m not sure myself,’ said Horsham, slowly. ‘I wish I was. There’s something going on—somewhere. There are bits of it sticking out, you know,

like a badly done up parcel. You get a peep here and a peep there. One moment you think it's going on at the Bayreuth Festival and the next minute you think it's tucking out of a South American estancia and then you get a bit of a lead in the USA. There's a lot of nasty business going on in different places, working up to something. Maybe politics, maybe something quite different from politics. It's probably money.' He added: 'You know Mr Robinson, don't you? Or rather Mr Robinson knows you, I think he said.'

'Robinson?' Sir Stafford Nye considered. 'Robinson. Nice English name.' He looked across to Horsham. 'Large, yellow face?' he said. 'Fat? Finger in financial pies generally?' He asked: 'Is he, too, on the side of the angels—is that what you're telling me?'

'I don't know about angels,' said Henry Horsham. 'He's pulled us out of a hole in this country more than once. People like Mr Chetwynd don't go for him much. Think he's too expensive, I suppose. Inclined to be a mean man, Mr Chetwynd. A great one for making enemies in the wrong place.'

'One used to say "Poor but honest",' said Sir Stafford Nye thoughtfully. 'I take it that you would put it differently. You would describe our Mr Robinson as expensive but honest. Or shall we put it, honest but expensive.' He sighed. 'I wish you could tell me what all this is about,' he said plaintively. 'Here I seem to be mixed up in something and no idea what it is.' He looked at Henry Horsham hopefully, but Horsham shook his head.

'None of us knows. Not exactly,' he said.

'What am I supposed to have got hidden here that someone comes fiddling and looking for?'

'Frankly, I haven't the least idea, Sir Stafford.'

'Well, that's a pity because I haven't either.'

'As far as you know you haven't got anything. Nobody gave you anything to keep, to take anywhere, to look after?'

‘Nothing whatsoever. If you mean Mary Ann, she said she wanted her life saved, that’s all.’

‘And unless there’s a paragraph in the evening papers, you have saved her life.’

‘It seems rather the end of the chapter, doesn’t it? A pity. My curiosity is rising. I find I want to know very much what’s going to happen next. All you people seem very pessimistic.’

‘Frankly, we are. Things are going badly in this country. Can you wonder?’

‘I know what you mean. I sometimes wonder myself—’

Chapter 4

Dinner With Eric

I

‘Do you mind if I tell you something, old man?’ said Eric Pugh.

Sir Stafford Nye looked at him. He had known Eric Pugh for a good many years. They had not been close friends. Old Eric, or so Sir Stafford thought, was rather a boring friend. He was, on the other hand, faithful. And he was the type of man who, though not amusing, had a knack of knowing things. People said things to him and he remembered what they said and stored them up. Sometimes he could push out a useful bit of information.

‘Come back from that Malay Conference, haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Stafford.

‘Anything particular turn up there?’

‘Just the usual,’ said Sir Stafford.

‘Oh. I wondered if something had—well, you know what I mean. Anything had occurred to put the cat among the pigeons.’

‘What, at the Conference? No, just painfully predictable. Everyone said just what you thought they’d say only they said it unfortunately at rather greater length than you could have imagined possible. I don’t know why I go on these things.’

Eric Pugh made a rather tedious remark or two as to what the Chinese were really up to.

‘I don’t think they’re really up to anything,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘All the usual rumours, you know, about the diseases poor old Mao has got and who’s

intriguing against him and why.'

'And what about the Arab-Israeli business?'

'That's proceeding according to plan also. Their plan, that is to say. And anyway, what's that got to do with Malaya?'

'Well, I didn't really mean so much Malaya.'

'You're looking rather like the Mock Turtle,' said Sir Stafford Nye. "'Soup of the evening, beautiful soup.'" Wherefore this gloom?'

'Well, I just wondered if you'd—you'll forgive me, won't you?—I mean you haven't done anything to blot your copybook, have you, in any way?'

'Me?' said Sir Stafford, looking highly surprised.

'Well, you know what you're like, Staff. You like giving people a jolt sometimes, don't you?'

'I have behaved impeccably of late,' said Sir Stafford. 'What have you been hearing about me?'

'I hear there was some trouble about something that happened in a plane on your way home.'

'Oh?' Who did you hear that from?'

'Well, you know, I saw old Cartison.'

'Terrible old bore. Always imagining things that haven't happened.'

'Yes, I know. I know he is like that. But he was just saying that somebody or other—Winterton, at least—seemed to think you'd been up to something.'

'Up to something? I wish I had,' said Sir Stafford Nye.

'There's some espionage racket going on somewhere and he got a bit worried about certain people.'

‘What do they think I am—another Philby, something of that kind?’

‘You know you’re very unwise sometimes in the things you say, the things you make jokes about.’

‘It’s very hard to resist sometimes,’ his friend told him. ‘All these politicians and diplomats and the rest of them. They’re so bloody solemn. You’d like to give them a bit of a stir up now and again.’

‘Your sense of fun is very distorted, my boy. It really is. I worry about you sometimes. They wanted to ask you some questions about something that happened on the flight back and they seem to think that you didn’t, well—that perhaps you didn’t exactly speak the truth about it all.’

‘Ah, that’s what they think, is it? Interesting. I think I must work that up a bit.’

‘Now don’t do anything rash.’

‘I must have my moments of fun sometimes.’

‘Look here, old fellow, you don’t want to go and ruin your career just by indulging your sense of humour.’

‘I am quickly coming to the conclusion that there is nothing so boring as having a career.’

‘I know, I know. You are always inclined to take that point of view, and you haven’t got on as far as you ought to have, you know. You were in the running for Vienna at one time. I don’t like to see you muck up things.’

‘I am behaving with the utmost sobriety and virtue, I assure you,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. He added, ‘Cheer up, Eric. You’re a good friend, but really, I’m not guilty of fun and games.’

Eric shook his head doubtfully.

It was a fine evening. Sir Stafford walked home across Green Park. As he crossed the road in Birdcage Walk, a car leaping down the street missed him

by a few inches. Sir Stafford was an athletic man. His leap took him safely on to the pavement. The car disappeared down the street. He wondered. Just for a moment he could have sworn that that car had deliberately tried to run him down. An interesting thought. First his flat had been searched, and now he himself might have been marked down. Probably a mere coincidence. And yet, in the course of his life, some of which had been spent in wild neighbourhoods and places, Sir Stafford Nye had come in contact with danger. He knew, as it were, the touch and feel and smell of danger. He felt it now. Someone, somewhere was gunning for him. But why? For what reason? As far as he knew, he had not stuck his neck out in any way. He wondered.

He let himself into his flat and picked up the mail that lay on the floor inside. Nothing much. A couple of bills and copy of Lifeboat periodical. He threw the bills on to his desk and put a finger through the wrapper of Lifeboat. It was a cause to which he occasionally contributed. He turned the pages without much attention because he was still absorbed in what he was thinking. Then he stopped the action of his fingers abruptly. Something was taped between two of the pages. Taped with adhesive tape. He looked at it closely. It was his passport returned to him unexpectedly in this fashion. He tore it free and looked at it. The last stamp on it was the arrival stamp at Heathrow the day before. She had used his passport, getting back here safely, and had chosen this way to return it to him. Where was she now? He would like to know.

He wondered if he would ever see her again. Who was she? Where had she gone, and why? It was like waiting for the second act of a play. Indeed, he felt the first act had hardly been played yet. What had he seen? An old-fashioned curtain-raiser, perhaps. A girl who had ridiculously wanted to dress herself up and pass herself off as of the male sex, who had passed the passport control of Heathrow without attracting suspicion of any kind to herself and who had now disappeared through that gateway into London. No, he would probably never see her again. It annoyed him. But why, he thought, why do I want to? She wasn't particularly attractive, she wasn't anything. No, that wasn't quite true. She was something, or someone, or she could not have induced him, with no particular persuasion, with no overt sex stimulation, nothing except a plain demand for help, to do what she

wanted. A demand from one human being to another human being because, or so she had intimated, not precisely in words, but nevertheless it was what she had intimated, she knew people and she recognized in him a man who was willing to take a risk to help another human being. And he had taken a risk, too, thought Sir Stafford Nye. She could have put anything in that beer glass of his. He could have been found, if she had so willed it, found as a dead body in a seat tucked away in the corner of a departure lounge in an airport. And if she had, as no doubt she must have had, a knowledgeable recourse to drugs, his death might have been passed off as an attack of heart trouble due to altitude or difficult pressurizing—something or other like that. Oh well, why think about it? He wasn't likely to see her again and he was annoyed.

Yes, he was annoyed, and he didn't like being annoyed. He considered the matter for some minutes. Then he wrote out an advertisement, to be repeated three times. 'Passenger to Frankfurt. November 3rd. Please communicate with fellow traveller to London.' No more than that. Either she would or she wouldn't. If it ever came to her eyes she would know by whom that advertisement had been inserted. She had had his passport, she knew his name. She could look him up. He might hear from her. He might not. Probably not. If not, the curtain-raiser would remain a curtain-raiser, a silly little play that received late-comers to the theatre and diverted them until the real business of the evening began. Very useful in pre-war times. In all probability, though, he would not hear from her again and one of the reasons might be that she might have accomplished whatever it was she had come to do in London, and have now left the country once more, flying abroad to Geneva, or the Middle East, or to Russia or to China or to South America, or to the United States. And why, thought Sir Stafford, do I include South America? There must be a reason. She had not mentioned South America. Nobody had mentioned South America. Except Horsham, that was true. And even Horsham had only mentioned South America among a lot of other mentions.

On the following morning as he walked slowly homeward, after handing in his advertisement, along the pathway across St James's Park his eye picked out, half unseeing, the autumn flowers. The chrysanthemums looking by now stiff and leggy with their button tops of gold and bronze. Their smell

came to him faintly, a rather goatlike smell, he had always thought, a smell that reminded him of hillsides in Greece. He must remember to keep his eye on the Personal Column. Not yet. Two or three days at least would have to pass before his own advertisement was put in and before there had been time for anyone to put in one in answer. He must not miss it if there was an answer because, after all, it was irritating not to know—not to have any idea what all this was about.

He tried to recall not the girl at the airport but his sister Pamela's face. A long time since her death. He remembered her. Of course he remembered her, but he could not somehow picture her face. It irritated him not to be able to do so. He had paused just when he was about to cross one of the roads. There was no traffic except for a car jiggling slowly along with the solemn demeanour of a bored dowager. An elderly car, he thought. An old-fashioned Daimler limousine. He shook his shoulders. Why stand here in this idiotic way, lost in thought?

He took an abrupt step to cross the road and suddenly with surprising vigour the dowager limousine, as he had thought of it in his mind, accelerated. Accelerated with a sudden astonishing speed. It bore down on him with such swiftness that he only just had time to leap across on to the opposite pavement. It disappeared with a flash, turning round the curve of the road further on.

'I wonder,' said Sir Stafford to himself. 'Now I wonder. Could it be that there is someone that doesn't like me? Someone following me, perhaps, watching me take my way home, waiting for an opportunity?'

II

Colonel Pikeaway, his bulk sprawled out in his chair in the small room in Bloomsbury where he sat from ten to five with a short interval for lunch, was surrounded as usual by an atmosphere of thick cigar smoke; with his eyes closed, only an occasional blink showed that he was awake and not asleep. He seldom raised his head. Somebody had said that he looked like a cross between an ancient Buddha and a large blue frog, with perhaps, as some impudent youngster had added, just a touch of a bar sinister from a hippopotamus in his ancestry.

The gentle buzz of the intercom on his desk roused him. He blinked three times and opened his eyes. He stretched forth a rather weary-looking hand and picked up the receiver.

‘Well?’ he said.

His secretary’s voice spoke.

‘The Minister is here waiting to see you.’

‘Is he now?’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘And what Minister is that? The Baptist minister from the church round the corner?’

‘Oh no, Colonel Pikeaway, it’s Sir George Packham.’

‘Pity,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, breathing asthmatically. ‘Great pity. The Reverend McGill is far more amusing. There’s a splendid touch of hell fire about him.’

‘Shall I bring him in, Colonel Pikeaway?’

‘I suppose he will expect to be brought in at once. Under Secretaries are far more touchy than Secretaries of State,’ said Colonel Pikeaway gloomily. ‘All these Ministers insist on coming in and having kittens all over the place.’

Sir George Packham was shown in. He coughed and wheezed. Most people did. The windows of the small room were tightly closed. Colonel Pikeaway reclined in his chair, completely smothered in cigar ash. The atmosphere was almost unbearable and the room was known in official circles as the ‘small cat-house’.

‘Ah, my dear fellow,’ said Sir George, speaking briskly and cheerfully in a way that did not match his ascetic and sad appearance. ‘Quite a long time since we’ve met, I think.’

‘Sit down, sit down do,’ said Pikeaway. ‘Have a cigar?’

Sir George shuddered slightly.

‘No, thank you,’ he said, ‘no, thanks very much.’

He looked hard at the windows. Colonel Pikeaway did not take the hint. Sir George cleared his throat and coughed again before saying:

‘Er—I believe Horsham has been to see you.’

‘Yes, Horsham’s been and said his piece,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, slowly allowing his eyes to close again.

‘I thought it was the best way. I mean, that he should call upon you here. It’s most important that things shouldn’t get round anywhere.’

‘Ah,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, ‘but they will, won’t they?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘They will,’ said Colonel Pikeaway.

‘I don’t know how much you—er—well, know about this last business.’

‘We know everything here,’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘That’s what we’re for.’

‘Oh—oh yes, yes certainly. About Sir S.N.—you know who I mean?’

‘Recently a passenger from Frankfurt,’ said Colonel Pikeaway.

‘Most extraordinary business. Most extraordinary. One wonders—one really does not know, one can’t begin to imagine...’

Colonel Pikeaway listened kindly.

‘What is one to think?’ pursued Sir George. ‘Do you know him personally?’

‘I’ve come across him once or twice,’ said Colonel Pikeaway.

‘One really cannot help wondering—’

Colonel Pikeaway subdued a yawn with some difficulty. He was rather tired of Sir George's thinking, wondering, and imagining. He had a poor opinion anyway of Sir George's process of thought. A cautious man, a man who could be relied upon to run his department in a cautious manner. Not a man of scintillating intellect. Perhaps, thought Colonel Pikeaway, all the better for that. At any rate, those who think and wonder and are not quite sure are reasonably safe in the place where God and the electors have put them.

'One cannot quite forget,' continued Sir George, 'the disillusionment we have suffered in the past.'

Colonel Pikeaway smiled kindly.

'Charleston, Conway and Courtfold,' he said. 'Fully trusted, vetted and approved of. All beginning with C, all crooked as sin.'

'Sometimes I wonder if we can trust anyone,' said Sir George unhappily.

'That's easy,' said Colonel Pikeaway, 'you can't.'

'Now take Stafford Nye,' said Sir George. 'Good family, excellent family, knew his father, his grandfather.'

'Often a slip-up in the third generation,' said Colonel Pikeaway.

The remark did not help Sir George.

'I cannot help doubting—I mean, sometimes he doesn't really seem serious.'

'Took my two nieces to see the châteaux of the Loire when I was a young man,' said Colonel Pikeaway unexpectedly. 'Man fishing on the bank. I had my fishing-rod with me, too. He said to me, "Vous n'êtes pas un pêcheur sérieux. Vous avez des femmes avec vous."'

'You mean you think Sir Stafford—?'

'No, no, never been mixed up with women much. Irony's his trouble. Likes surprising people. He can't help liking to score off people.'

‘Well, that’s not very satisfactory, is it?’

‘Why not?’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘Liking a private joke is much better than having some deal with a defector.’

‘If one could feel that he was really sound. What would you say—your personal opinion?’

‘Sound as a bell,’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘If a bell is sound. It makes a sound, but that’s different, isn’t it?’ He smiled kindly. ‘Shouldn’t worry, if I were you,’ he said.

III

Sir Stafford Nye pushed aside his cup of coffee. He picked up the newspaper, glancing over the headlines, then he turned it carefully to the page which gave Personal advertisements. He’d looked down that particular column for seven days now. It was disappointing but not surprising. Why on earth should he expect to find an answer? His eye went slowly down miscellaneous peculiarities which had always made that particular page rather fascinating in his eyes. They were not so strictly personal. Half of them or even more than half were disguised advertisements or offers of things for sale or wanted for sale. They should perhaps have been put under a different heading but they had found their way here considering that they were more likely to catch the eye that way. They included one or two of the hopeful variety.

‘Young man who objects to hard work and who would like an easy life would be glad to undertake a job that would suit him.’

‘Girl wants to travel to Cambodia. Refuses to look after children.’

‘Firearm used at Waterloo. What offers.’

‘Glorious fun-fur coat. Must be sold immediately. Owner going abroad.’

‘Do you know Jenny Capstan? Her cakes are superb.

Come to 14 Lizzard Street, S.W.3.’

For a moment Stafford Nye's finger came to a stop. Jenny Capstan. He liked the name. Was there any Lizzard Street? He supposed so. He had never heard of it. With a sigh, the finger went down the column and almost at once was arrested once more.

'Passenger from Frankfurt, Thursday Nov. 11, Hungerford Bridge 7.20.'

Thursday, November 11th. That was—yes, that was today. Sir Stafford Nye leaned back in his chair and drank more coffee. He was excited, stimulated. Hungerford. Hungerford Bridge. He got up and went into the kitchenette. Mrs Worrit was cutting potatoes into strips and throwing them into a large bowl of water. She looked up with some slight surprise.

'Anything you want, sir?'

'Yes,' said Sir Stafford Nye. 'If anyone said Hungerford Bridge to you, where would you go?'

'Where should I go?' Mrs Worrit considered. 'You mean if I wanted to go, do you?'

'We can proceed on that assumption.'

'Well, then, I suppose I'd go to Hungerford Bridge, wouldn't I?'

'You mean you would go to Hungerford in Berkshire?'

'Where is that?' said Mrs Worrit.

'Eight miles beyond Newbury.'

'I've heard of Newbury. My old man backed a horse there last year. Did well, too.'

'So you'd go to Hungerford near Newbury?'

'No, of course I wouldn't,' said Mrs Worrit. 'Go all that way—what for? I'd go to Hungerford Bridge, of course.'

‘You mean—?’

‘Well, it’s near Charing Cross. You know where it is. Over the Thames.’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘Yes, I do know where it is quite well. Thank you, Mrs Worrit.’

It had been, he felt, rather like tossing a penny heads or tails. An advertisement in a morning paper in London meant Hungerford Railway Bridge in London. Presumably therefore that is what the advertiser meant, although about this particular advertiser Sir Stafford Nye was not at all sure. Her ideas, from the brief experience he had had of her, were original ideas. They were not the normal responses to be expected. But still, what else could one do. Besides, there were probably other Hungerfords, and possibly they would also have bridges, in various parts of England. But today, well, today he would see.

IV

It was a cold windy evening with occasional bursts of thin misty rain. Sir Stafford Nye turned up the collar of his mackintosh and plodded on. It was not the first time he had gone across Hungerford Bridge, but it had never seemed to him a walk to take for pleasure. Beneath him was the river and crossing the bridge were large quantities of hurrying figures like himself. Their mackintoshes pulled round them, their hats pulled down and on the part of one and all of them an earnest desire to get home and out of the wind and rain as soon as possible. It would be, thought Sir Stafford Nye, very difficult to recognize anybody in this scurrying crowd. 7.20. Not a good moment to choose for a rendezvous of any kind. Perhaps it was Hungerford Bridge in Berkshire. Anyway, it seemed very odd.

He plodded on. He kept an even pace, not overtaking those ahead of him, pushing past those coming the opposite way. He went fast enough not to be overtaken by the others behind him, though it would be possible for them to do so if they wanted to. A joke, perhaps, thought Stafford Nye. Not quite his kind of joke, but someone else’s.

And yet—not her brand of humour either, he would have thought. Hurrying figures passed him again, pushing him slightly aside. A woman in a mackintosh was coming along, walking heavily. She collided with him, slipped, dropped to her knees. He assisted her up.

‘All right?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

She hurried on, but as she passed him, her wet hand, by which he had held her as he pulled her to her feet, slipped something into the palm of his hand, closing the fingers over it. Then she was gone, vanishing behind him, mingling with the crowd. Stafford Nye went on. He couldn’t overtake her. She did not wish to be overtaken, either. He hurried on and his hand held something firmly. And so, at long last it seemed, he came to the end of the bridge on the Surrey side.

A few minutes later he had turned into a small café and sat there behind a table, ordering coffee. Then he looked at what was in his hand. It was a very thin oilskin envelope. Inside it was a cheap quality white envelope. That too he opened. What was inside surprised him. It was a ticket.

A ticket for the Festival Hall for the following evening.

Chapter 5

Wagnerian Motif

Sir Stafford Nye adjusted himself more comfortably in his seat and listened to the persistent hammering of the Nibelungen, with which the programme began.

Though he enjoyed Wagnerian opera, Siegfried was by no means his favourite of the operas composing the Ring. Rheingold and Götterdämmerung were his two preferences. The music of the young Siegfried, listening to the songs of the birds, had always for some strange reason irritated him instead of filling him with melodic satisfaction. It might have been because he went to a performance in Munich in his young days which had displayed a magnificent tenor of unfortunately over-magnificent proportions, and he had been too young to divorce the joy of music from the visual joy of seeing a young Siegfried that looked even passably young. The fact of an outsized tenor rolling about on the ground in an access of boyishness had revolted him. He was also not particularly fond of birds and forest murmurs. No, give him the Rhine Maidens every time, although in Munich even the Rhine Maidens in those days had been of fairly solid proportions. But that mattered less. Carried away by the melodic flow of water and the joyous impersonal song, he had not allowed visual appreciation to matter.

From time to time he looked about him casually. He had taken his seat fairly early. It was a full house, as it usually was. The intermission came. Sir Stafford rose and looked about him. The seat beside his had remained empty. Someone who was supposed to have arrived had not arrived. Was that the answer, or was it merely a case of being excluded because someone had arrived late, which practice still held on the occasions when Wagnerian music was listened to.

He went out, strolled about, drank a cup of coffee, smoked a cigarette, and returned when the summons came. This time, as he drew near, he saw that the seat next to his was filled. Immediately his excitement returned. He

regained his seat and sat down. Yes, it was the woman of the Frankfurt Air Lounge. She did not look at him, she was looking straight ahead. Her face in profile was as clean-cut and pure as he remembered it. Her head turned slightly, and her eyes passed over him but without recognition. So intent was that non-recognition that it was as good as a word spoken. This was a meeting that was not to be acknowledged. Not now, at any event. The lights began to dim. The woman beside him turned.

‘Excuse me, could I look at your programme? I have dropped mine, I’m afraid, coming to my seat.’

‘Of course,’ he said.

He handed over the programme and she took it from him. She opened it, studied the items. The lights went lower. The second half of the programme began. It started with the overture to Lohengrin. At the end of it she handed back the programme to him with a few words of thanks.

‘Thank you so much. It was very kind of you.’

The next item was the Siegfried forest murmur music. He consulted the programme she had returned to him. It was then that he noticed something faintly pencilled at the foot of a page. He did not attempt to read it now. Indeed, the light would have not been sufficient. He merely closed the programme and held it. He had not, he was quite sure, written anything there himself. Not, that is, in his own programme. She had, he thought, had her own programme ready, folded perhaps in her handbag and had already written some message ready to pass to him. Altogether, it seemed to him, there was still that atmosphere of secrecy, of danger. The meeting on Hungerford Bridge and the envelope with the ticket forced into his hand. And now the silent woman who sat beside him. He glanced at her once or twice with the quick, careless glance that one gives to a stranger sitting next to one. She lolled back in her seat; her high-necked dress was of dull black crêpe, an antique torque of gold encircled her neck. Her dark hair was cropped closely and shaped to her head. She did not glance at him or return any look. He wondered. Was there someone in the seats of the Festival Hall watching her—or watching him? Noting whether they looked or spoke to each other? Presumably there must be, or there must be at least the

possibility of such a thing. She had answered his appeal in the newspaper advertisement. Let that be enough for him. His curiosity was unimpaired, but he did at least know now that Daphne Theodofanous—alias Mary Ann—was here in London. There were possibilities in the future of his learning more of what was afoot. But the plan of campaign must be left to her. He must follow her lead. As he had obeyed her in the airport, so he would obey her now and—let him admit it—life had become suddenly more interesting. This was better than the boring conferences of his political life. Had a car really tried to run him down the other night? He thought it had. Two attempts—not only one. It was easy enough to imagine that one was the target of assault, people drove so recklessly nowadays that you could easily fancy malice aforethought when it was not so. He folded his programme, did not look at it again. The music came to its end. The woman next to him spoke. She did not turn her head or appear to speak to him, but she spoke aloud, with a little sigh between the words as though she was communing with herself or possibly to her neighbour on the other side.

‘The young Siegfried,’ she said, and sighed again.

The programme ended with the March from Die Meistersinger. After enthusiastic applause, people began to leave their seats. He waited to see if she would give him any lead, but she did not. She gathered up her wrap, moved out of the row of chairs, and with a slightly accelerated step, moved along with other people and disappeared in the crowd.

Stafford Nye regained his car and drove home. Arrived there, he spread out the Festival Hall programme on his desk and examined it carefully, after putting the coffee to percolate.

The programme was disappointing to say the least of it. There did not appear to be any message inside. Only on one page above the list of the items, were the pencil marks that he had vaguely observed. But they were not words or letters or even figures. They appeared to be merely a musical notation. It was as though someone had scribbled a phrase of music with a somewhat inadequate pencil. For a moment it occurred to Stafford Nye there might perhaps be a secret message he could bring out by applying heat. Rather gingerly, and in a way rather ashamed of his melodramatic fancy, he held it towards the bar of the electric fire but nothing resulted.

With a sigh he tossed the programme back on to the table. But he felt justifiably annoyed. All this rigmarole, a rendezvous on a windy and rainy bridge overlooking the river! Sitting through a concert by the side of a woman of whom he yearned to ask at least a dozen questions—and at the end of it? Nothing! No further on. Still, she had met him. But why? If she didn't want to speak to him, to make further arrangements with him, why had she come at all?

His eyes passed idly across the room to his bookcase which he reserved for various thrillers, works of detective fiction and an occasional volume of science fiction; he shook his head. Fiction, he thought, was infinitely superior to real life. Dead bodies, mysterious telephone calls, beautiful foreign spies in profusion! However, this particular elusive lady might not have done with him yet. Next time, he thought, he would make some arrangements of his own. Two could play at the game that she was playing.

He pushed aside the programme and drank another cup of coffee and went to the window. He had the programme still in his hand. As he looked out towards the street below his eyes fell back again on the open programme in his hand and he hummed to himself, almost unconsciously. He had a good ear for music and he could hum the notes that were scrawled there quite easily. Vaguely they sounded familiar as he hummed them. He increased his voice a little. What was it now? Tum, tum, tum tum ti-tum. Tum. Yes, definitely familiar.

He started opening his letters.

They were mostly uninteresting. A couple of invitations, one from the American Embassy, one from Lady Athelhampton, a Charity Variety performance which Royalty would attend and for which it was suggested five guineas would not be an exorbitant fee to obtain a seat. He threw them aside lightly. He doubted very much whether he wished to accept any of them. He decided that instead of remaining in London he would without more ado go and see his Aunt Matilda, as he had promised. He was fond of his Aunt Matilda though he did not visit her very often. She lived in a rehabilitated apartment consisting of a series of rooms in one wing of a large Georgian manor house in the country which she had inherited from his grandfather. She had a large, beautifully proportioned sitting-room, a small

oval dining-room, a new kitchen made from the old housekeeper's room, two bedrooms for guests, a large comfortable bedroom for herself with an adjoining bathroom, and adequate quarters for a patient companion who shared her daily life. The remains of a faithful domestic staff were well provided for and housed. The rest of the house remained under dust sheets with periodical cleaning. Stafford Nye was fond of the place, having spent holidays there as a boy. It had been a gay house then. His eldest uncle had lived there with his wife and their two children. Yes, it had been pleasant there then. There had been money and a sufficient staff to run it. He had not specially noticed in those days the portraits and pictures. There had been large-sized examples of Victorian art occupying pride of place—overcrowding the walls, but there had been other masters of an older age. Yes, there had been some good portraits there. A Raeburn, two Lawrences, a Gainsborough, a Lely, two rather dubious Vandykes. A couple of Turners, too. Some of them had had to be sold to provide the family with money. He still enjoyed when visiting there strolling about and studying the family pictures.

His Aunt Matilda was a great chatterbox but she always enjoyed his visits. He was fond of her in a desultory way, but he was not quite sure why it was that he had suddenly wanted to visit her now. And what it was that had brought family portraits into his mind? Could it have been because there was a portrait of his sister Pamela by one of the leading artists of the day twenty years ago. He would like to see that portrait of Pamela and look at it more closely. See how close the resemblance had been between the stranger who had disrupted his life in this really outrageous fashion and his sister.

He picked up the Festival Hall programme again with some irritation and began to hum the pencilled notes. Tum, tum, ti tum—Then it came to him and he knew what it was. It was the Siegfried motif. Siegfried's Horn. The Young Siegfried motif. That was what the woman had said last night. Not apparently to him, not apparently to anybody. But it had been the message, a message that would have meant nothing to anyone around since it would have seemed to refer to the music that had just been played. And the motif had been written on his programme also in musical terms. The Young Siegfried. It must have meant something. Well, perhaps further enlightenment would come. The Young Siegfried. What the hell did that

mean? Why and how and when and what? Ridiculous! All those questioning words.

He rang the telephone and obtained Aunt Matilda's number.

'But of course, Staffy dear, it will be lovely to have you. Take the four-thirty train. It still runs, you know, but it gets here an hour and a half later. And it leaves Paddington later—five-fifteen. That's what they mean by improving the railways, I suppose. Stops at several most absurd stations on the way. All right. Horace will meet you at King's Marston.'

'He's still there then?'

'Of course he's still there.'

'I suppose he is,' said Sir Stafford Nye.

Horace, once a groom, then a coachman, had survived as a chauffeur, and apparently was still surviving. 'He must be at least eighty,' said Sir Stafford. He smiled to himself.

Chapter 6

Portrait Of A Lady

I

‘You look very nice and brown, dear,’ said Aunt Matilda, surveying him appreciatively. ‘That’s Malaya, I suppose. If it was Malaya you went to? Or was it Siam or Thailand? They change the names of all these places and really it makes it very difficult. Anyway, it wasn’t Vietnam, was it? You know, I don’t like the sound of Vietnam at all. It’s all very confusing, North Vietnam and South Vietnam and the Viet-Cong and the Viet—whatever the other thing is and all wanting to fight each other and nobody wanting to stop. They won’t go to Paris or wherever it is and sit round tables and talk sensibly. Don’t you think really, dear—I’ve been thinking it over and I thought it would be a very nice solution—couldn’t you make a lot of football fields and then they could all go and fight each other there, but with less lethal weapons. Not that nasty palm burning stuff. You know. Just hit each other and punch each other and all that. They’d enjoy it, everyone would enjoy it and you could charge admission for people to go and see them do it. I do think really that we don’t understand giving people the things they really want.’

‘I think it’s a very fine idea of yours, Aunt Matilda,’ said Sir Stafford Nye as he kissed a pleasantly perfumed, pale pink wrinkled cheek. ‘And how are you, my dear?’

‘Well, I’m old,’ said Lady Matilda Cleckheaton. ‘Yes, I’m old. Of course you don’t know what it is to be old. If it isn’t one thing it’s another. Rheumatism or arthritis or a nasty bit of asthma or a sore throat or an ankle you’ve turned. Always something, you know. Nothing very important. But there it is. Why have you come to see me, dear?’

Sir Stafford was slightly taken aback by the directness of the query.

‘I usually come and see you when I return from a trip abroad.’

‘You’ll have to come one chair nearer,’ said Aunt Matilda. ‘I’m just that bit deafer since you saw me last. You look different...Why do you look different?’

‘Because I’m more sunburnt. You said so.’

‘Nonsense, that’s not what I mean at all. Don’t tell me it’s a girl at last.’

‘A girl?’

‘Well, I’ve always felt it might be one some day. The trouble is you’ve got too much sense of humour.’

‘Now why should you think that?’

‘Well, it’s what people do think about you. Oh yes, they do. Your sense of humour is in the way of your career, too. You know, you’re all mixed up with all these people. Diplomatic and political. What they call younger statesmen and elder statesmen and middle statesmen too. And all those different Parties. Really I think it’s too silly to have too many Parties. First of all those awful, awful Labour people.’ She raised her Conservative nose into the air. ‘Why, when I was a girl there wasn’t such a thing as a Labour Party. Nobody would have known what you meant by it. They’d have said “nonsense”. Pity it wasn’t nonsense, too. And then there’s the Liberals, of course, but they’re terribly wet. And then there are the Tories, or the Conservatives as they call themselves again now.’

‘And what’s the matter with them?’ asked Stafford Nye, smiling slightly.

‘Too many earnest women. Makes them lack gaiety, you know.’

‘Oh well, no political party goes in for gaiety much nowadays.’

‘Just so,’ said Aunt Matilda. ‘And then of course that’s where you go wrong. You want to cheer things up. You want to have a little gaiety and so you make a little gentle fun at people and of course they don’t like it. They say “Ce n’est pas un garçon sérieux,” like that man in the fishing.’

Sir Stafford Nye laughed. His eyes were wandering round the room.

‘What are you looking at?’ said Lady Matilda.

‘Your pictures.’

‘You don’t want me to sell them, do you? Everyone seems to be selling their pictures nowadays. Old Lord Grampion, you know. He sold his Turners and he sold some of his ancestors as well. And Geoffrey Gouldman. All those lovely horses of his. By Stubbs, weren’t they? Something like that. Really, the prices one gets!

‘But I don’t want to sell my pictures. I like them. Most of them in this room have a real interest because they’re ancestors. I know nobody wants ancestors nowadays but then I’m old-fashioned. I like ancestors. My own ancestors, I mean. What are you looking at? Pamela?’

‘Yes, I was. I was thinking about her the other day.’

‘Astonishing how alike you two are. I mean, it’s not even as though you were twins, though they say that different sex twins, even if they are twins, can’t be identical, if you know what I mean.’

‘So Shakespeare must have made rather a mistake over Viola and Sebastian.’

‘Well, ordinary brothers and sisters can be alike, can’t they? You and Pamela were always very alike—to look at, I mean.’

‘Not in any other way? Don’t you think we were alike in character?’

‘No, not in the least. That’s the funny part of it. But of course you and Pamela have what I call the family face. Not a Nye face. I mean the Baldwen-White face.’

Sir Stafford Nye had never quite been able to compete when it came down to talking on a question of genealogy with his great-aunt.

‘I’ve always thought that you and Pamela both took after Alexa,’ she went on.

‘Which was Alexa?’

‘Your great-great—I think one more great-grandmother. Hungarian. A Hungarian countess or baroness or something. Your great-great-grandfather fell in love with her when he was at Vienna in the Embassy. Yes. Hungarian. That’s what she was. Very sporting too. They are sporting, you know, Hungarians. She rode to hounds, rode magnificently.’

‘Is she in the picture gallery?’

‘She’s on the first landing. Just over the head of the stairs, a little to the right.’

‘I must go and look at her when I go to bed.’

‘Why don’t you go and look at her now and then you can come back and talk about her.’

‘I will if you like.’ He smiled at her.

He ran out of the room and up the staircase. Yes, she had a sharp eye, old Matilda. That was the face. That was the face that he had seen and remembered. Remembered not for its likeness to himself, not even for its likeness to Pamela, but for a closer resemblance still to this picture here. A handsome girl brought home by his Ambassador great-great-great-grandfather if that was enough greats. Aunt Matilda was never satisfied with only a few. About twenty she had been. She had come here and been high-spirited and rode a horse magnificently and danced divinely and men had fallen in love with her. But she had been faithful, so it was always said, to great-great-great-grandfather, a very steady and sober member of the Diplomatic Service. She had gone with him to foreign Embassies and returned here and had had children—three or four children, he believed. Through one of those children the inheritance of her face, her nose, the turn of her neck had been passed down to him and to his sister, Pamela. He wondered if the young woman who had doped his beer and forced him to lend her his cloak and who had depicted herself as being in danger of death unless he did what she asked, had been possibly related as a fifth or sixth cousin removed, a descendant of the woman pictured on the wall at which

he looked. Well, it could be. They had been of the same nationality, perhaps. Anyway their faces had resembled each other a good deal. How upright she'd sat at the opera, how straight that profile, the thin, slightly arched aquiline nose. And the atmosphere that hung about her.

II

'Find it?' asked Lady Matilda, when her nephew returned to the white drawing-room, as her sitting-room was usually called. 'Interesting face, isn't it?'

'Yes, quite handsome, too.'

'It's much better to be interesting than handsome. But you haven't been in Hungary or Austria, have you? You wouldn't meet anyone like her out in Malaya? She wouldn't be sitting around a table there making little notes or correcting speeches or things like that. She was a wild creature, by all accounts. Lovely manners and all the rest of it. But wild. Wild as a wild bird. She didn't know what danger was.'

'How do you know so much about her?'

'Oh, I agree I wasn't a contemporary of hers, I wasn't born until several years after she was dead. All the same, I've always been interested in her. She was adventurous, you know. Very adventurous. Very queer stories were told about her, about things she was mixed up in.'

'And how did my great-great-great-grandfather react to that?'

'I expect it worried him to death,' said Lady Matilda. 'They say he was devoted to her, though. By the way, Staffy, did you ever read The Prisoner of Zenda?'

'Prisoner of Zenda? Sounds very familiar.'

'Well, of course it's familiar, it's a book.'

'Yes, yes, I realize it's a book.'

‘You wouldn’t know about it, I expect. After your time. But when I was a girl—that’s about the first taste of romance we got. Not pop singers or Beatles. Just a romantic novel. We weren’t allowed to read novels when I was young. Not in the morning anyway. You could read them in the afternoon.’

‘What extraordinary rules,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘Why is it wrong to read novels in the morning and not in the afternoon?’

‘Well, in the mornings, you see, girls were supposed to be doing something useful. You know, doing the flowers or cleaning the silver photograph frames. All the things we girls did. Doing a bit of studying with the governess—all that sort of thing. In the afternoon we were allowed to sit down and read a story book and *The Prisoner of Zenda* was usually one of the first ones that came our way.’

‘A very nice, respectable story, was it? I seem to remember something about it. Perhaps I did read it. All very pure, I suppose. Not too sexy?’

‘Certainly not. We didn’t have sexy books. We had romance. *The Prisoner of Zenda* was very romantic. One fell in love, usually, with the hero, Rudolf Rassendyll.’

‘I seem to remember that name too. Bit florid, isn’t it?’

‘Well, I still think it was rather a romantic name. Twelve years old, I must have been. It made me think of it, you know, your going up and looking at that portrait. Princess Flavia,’ she added.

Stafford Nye was smiling at her.

‘You look young and pink and very sentimental,’ he said.

‘Well, that’s just what I’m feeling. Girls can’t feel like that nowadays. They’re swooning with love, or they’re fainting when somebody plays the guitar or sings in a very loud voice, but they’re not sentimental. But I wasn’t in love with Rudolf Rassendyll. I was in love with the other one—his double.’

‘Did he have a double?’

‘Oh yes, a king. The King of Ruritania.’

‘Ah, of course, now I know. That’s where the word Ruritania comes from: one is always throwing it about. Yes, I think I did read it, you know. The King of Ruritania, and Rudolf Rassendyll was stand-in for the King and fell in love with Princess Flavia to whom the King was officially betrothed.’

Lady Matilda gave some more deep sighs.

‘Yes. Rudolf Rassendyll had inherited his red hair from an ancestress, and somewhere in the book he bows to the portrait and says something about the—I can’t remember the name now—the Countess Amelia or something like that from whom he inherited his looks and all the rest of it. So I looked at you and thought of you as Rudolf Rassendyll and you went out and looked at a picture of someone who might have been an ancestress of yours and saw whether she reminded you of someone. So you’re mixed up in a romance of some kind, are you?’

‘What on earth makes you say that?’

‘Well, there aren’t so many patterns in life, you know. One recognizes patterns as they come up. It’s like a book on knitting. About sixty-five different fancy stitches. Well, you know a particular stitch when you see it. Your stitch, at the moment, I should say, is the romantic adventure.’ She sighed. ‘But you won’t tell me about it, I suppose.’

‘There’s nothing to tell,’ said Sir Stafford.

‘You always were quite an accomplished liar. Well, never mind. You bring her to see me some time. That’s all I’d like, before the doctors succeed in killing me with yet another type of antibiotic that they’ve just discovered. The different coloured pills I’ve had to take by this time! You wouldn’t believe it.’

‘I don’t know why you say “she” and “her”—’

‘Don’t you? Oh, well, I know a she when I come across a she. There’s a she somewhere dodging about in your life. What beats me is how you found her. In Malaya, at the conference table? Ambassador’s daughter or minister’s daughter? Good-looking secretary from the Embassy pool? No, none of it seems to fit. Ship coming home? No, you don’t use ships nowadays. Plane, perhaps.’

‘You are getting slightly nearer,’ Sir Stafford Nye could not help saying.

‘Ah!’ She pounced. ‘Air hostess?’

He shook his head.

‘Ah well. Keep your secret. I shall find out, mind you. I’ve always had a good nose for things going on where you’re concerned. Things generally as well. Of course I’m out of everything nowadays, but I meet my old cronies from time to time and it’s quite easy, you know, to get a hint or two from them. People are worried. Everywhere—they’re worried.’

‘You mean there’s a general kind of discontent—upset?’

‘No, I didn’t mean that at all. I mean the highups are worried. Our awful governments are worried. The dear old sleepy Foreign Office is worried. There are things going on, things that shouldn’t be. Unrest.’

‘Student unrest?’

‘Oh, student unrest is just one flower on the tree. It’s blossoming everywhere and in every country, or so it seems. I’ve got a nice girl who comes, you know, and reads the papers to me in the mornings. I can’t read them properly myself. She’s got a nice voice. Takes down my letters and she reads things from the papers and she’s a good kind girl. She reads the things I want to know, not the things that she thinks are right for me to know. Yes, everyone’s worried, as far as I can make out and this, mind you, came more or less from a very old friend of mine.’

‘One of your old military cronies?’

‘He’s a major-general, if that’s what you mean, retired a good many years ago but still in the know. Youth is what you might call the spearhead of it all. But that’s not really what’s so worrying. They—whoever they are—work through youth. Youth in every country. Youth urged on. Youth chanting slogans, slogans that sound exciting, though they don’t always know what they mean. So easy to start a revolution. That’s natural to youth. All youth has always rebelled. You rebel, you pull down, you want the world to be different from what it is. But you’re blind, too. There are bandages over the eyes of youth. They can’t see where things are taking them. What’s going to come next? What’s in front of them? And who it is behind them, urging them on? That’s what’s frightening about it. You know, someone holding out the carrot to get the donkey to come along and at the same time there is someone behind the donkey urging it on with a stick.’

‘You’ve got some extraordinary fancies.’

‘They’re not only fancies, my dear boy. That’s what people said about Hitler. Hitler and the Hitler Youth. But it was a long careful preparation. It was a war that was worked out in detail. It was a fifth column being planted in different countries all ready for the supermen. The supermen were to be the flower of the German nation. That’s what they thought and believed in passionately. Somebody else is perhaps believing something like that now. It’s a creed that they’ll be willing to accept—if it’s offered cleverly enough.’

‘Who are you talking about? Do you mean the Chinese or the Russians? What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t the faintest idea. But there’s something somewhere, and it’s running on the same lines. Pattern again, you see. Pattern! The Russians? Bugged down by Communism, I should think they’re considered old-fashioned. The Chinese? I think they’ve lost their way. Too much Chairman Mao, perhaps. I don’t know who these people are who are doing the planning. As I said before, it’s why and where and when and who.’

‘Very interesting.’

‘It’s so frightening, this same idea that always recurs. History repeating itself. The young hero, the golden superman that all must follow.’ She

paused, then said, ‘Same idea, you know. The young Siegfried.’

Chapter 7

Advice From Great-Aunt Matilda

Great-Aunt Matilda looked at him. She had a very sharp and shrewd eye. Stafford Nye had noticed that before. He noticed it particularly at this moment.

‘So you’ve heard that term before,’ she said. ‘I see.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘You don’t know?’ She raised her eyebrows.

‘Cross my heart and wish to die,’ said Sir Stafford, in nursery language.

‘Yes, we always used to say that, didn’t we,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘Do you really mean what you’re saying?’

‘I don’t know anything about it.’

‘But you’d heard the term before.’

‘Yes. Someone said it to me.’

‘Anyone important?’

‘It could be. I suppose it could be. What do you mean by “anyone important”?’

‘Well, you’ve been involved in various Government missions lately, haven’t you? You’ve represented this poor, miserable country as best you could, which I shouldn’t wonder wasn’t rather better than many others could do, sitting round a table and talking. I don’t know whether anything’s come of all that.’

‘Probably not,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘After all, one isn’t optimistic when one goes into these things.’

‘One does one’s best,’ said Lady Matilda correctively.

‘A very Christian principle. Nowadays if one does one’s worst one often seems to get on a good deal better. What does all this mean, Aunt Matilda?’

‘I don’t suppose I know,’ said his aunt.

‘Well, you very often do know things.’

‘Not exactly. I just pick up things here and there.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve got a few old friends left, you know. Friends who are in the know. Of course most of them are either practically stone deaf or half blind or a little bit gone in the top storey or unable to walk straight. But something still functions. Something, shall we say, up here.’ She hit the top of her neatly arranged white head. ‘There’s a good deal of alarm and despondency about. More than usual. That’s one of the things I’ve picked up.’

‘Isn’t there always?’

‘Yes, yes, but this is a bit more than that. Active instead of passive, as you might say. For a long time, as I have noticed from the outside, and you, no doubt, from the inside, we have felt that things are in a mess. A rather bad mess. But now we’ve got to a point where we feel that perhaps something might have been done about the mess. There’s an element of danger in it. Something is going on—something is brewing. Not just in one country. In quite a lot of countries. They’ve recruited a service of their own and the danger about that is that it’s a service of young people. And the kind of people who will go anywhere, do anything, unfortunately believe anything, and so long as they are promised a certain amount of pulling down, wrecking, throwing spanners in the works, then they think the cause must be a good one and that the world will be a different place. They’re not creative, that’s the trouble—only destructive. The creative young write

poems, write books, probably compose music, paint pictures just as they always have done. They'll be all right—But once people learn to love destruction for its own sake, evil leadership gets its chance.'

'You say "they" or "them". Who do you mean?'

'Wish I knew,' said Lady Matilda. 'Yes, I wish I knew. Very much indeed. If I hear anything useful, I'll tell you. Then you can do something about it.'

'Unfortunately, I haven't got anyone to tell, I mean to pass it on to.'

'Yes, don't pass it on to just anyone. You can't trust people. Don't pass it on to any one of those idiots in the Government, or connected with government or hoping to be participating in government after this lot runs out.

Politicians don't have time to look at the world they're living in. They see the country they're living in and they see it as one vast electoral platform. That's quite enough to put on their plates for the time being. They do things which they honestly believe will make things better and then they're surprised when they don't make things better because they're not the things that people want to have. And one can't help coming to the conclusion that politicians have a feeling that they have a kind of divine right to tell lies in a good cause. It's not really so very long ago since Mr Baldwin made his famous remark—'If I had spoken the truth, I should have lost the election.' Prime Ministers still feel like that. Now and again we have a great man, thank God. But it's rare.'

'Well, what do you suggest ought to be done?'

'Are you asking my advice? Mine? Do you know how old I am?'

'Getting on for ninety,' suggested her nephew.

'Not quite as old as that,' said Lady Matilda, slightly affronted. 'Do I look it, my dear boy?'

'No, darling. You look a nice, comfortable sixty-six.'

‘That’s better,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘Quite untrue. But better. If I get a tip of any kind from one of my dear old admirals or an old general or even possibly an air marshal—they do hear things, you know—they’ve got cronies still and the old boys get together and talk. And so it gets around. There’s always been the grapevine and there still is a grapevine, no matter how elderly the people are. The young Siegfried. We want a clue to just what that means—I don’t know if he’s a person or a password or the name of a Club or a new Messiah or a Pop singer. But that term covers something. There’s the musical motif too. I’ve rather forgotten my Wagnerian days.’ Her aged voice croaked out a partially recognizable melody. ‘Siegfried’s horn call, isn’t that it? Get a recorder, why don’t you? Do I mean a recorder. I don’t mean a record that you put on a gramophone—I mean the things that schoolchildren play. They have classes for them. Went to a talk the other day. Our vicar got it up. Quite interesting. You know, tracing the history of the recorder and the kind of recorders there were from the Elizabethan age onwards. Some big, some small, all different notes and sounds. Very interesting. Interesting hearing in two senses. The recorders themselves. Some of them give out lovely noises. And the history. Yes. Well, what was I saying?’

‘You told me to get one of these instruments, I gather.’

‘Yes. Get a recorder and learn to blow Siegfried’s horn call on that. You’re musical, you always were. You can manage that, I hope?’

‘Well, it seems a very small part to play in the salvation of the world, but I dare say I could manage that.’

‘And have the thing ready. Because, you see—’ she tapped on the table with her spectacle case—‘you might want it to impress the wrong people some time. Might come in useful. They’d welcome you with open arms and then you might learn a bit.’

‘You certainly have ideas,’ said Sir Stafford admiringly.

‘What else can you have when you’re my age?’ said his great-aunt. ‘You can’t get about. You can’t meddle with people much, you can’t do any

gardening. All you can do is sit in your chair and have ideas. Remember that when you're forty years older.'

'One remark you made interested me.'

'Only one?' said Lady Matilda. 'That's rather poor measure considering how much I've been talking. What was it?'

'You suggested that I might be capable of impressing the wrong people with my recorder—did you mean that?'

'Well, it's one way, isn't it? The right people don't matter. But the wrong people—well, you've got to find out things, haven't you? You've got to permeate things. Rather like a death-watch beetle,' she said thoughtfully.

'So I should make significant noises in the night?'

'Well, that sort of thing, yes. We had death-watch beetle in the east wing here once. Very expensive it was to put it right. I dare say it will be just as expensive to put the world right.'

'In fact a good deal more expensive,' said Stafford Nye.

'That won't matter,' said Lady Matilda. 'People never mind spending a great deal of money. It impresses them. It's when you want to do things economically, they won't play. We're the same people, you know. In this country, I mean. We're the same people we always were.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'We're capable of doing big things. We were good at running an empire. We weren't good at keeping an empire running, but then you see we didn't need an empire any more And we recognized that. Too difficult to keep up. Robbie made me see that,' she added.

'Robbie?' It was faintly familiar.

'Robbie Shoreham. Robert Shoreham. He's a very old friend of mine. Paralysed down the left side. But he can talk still and he's got a moderately

good hearing-aid.'

'Besides being one of the most famous physicists in the world,' said Stafford Nye. 'So he's another of your old cronies, is he?'

'Known him since he was a boy,' said Lady Matilda. 'I suppose it surprises you that we should be friends, have a lot in common and enjoy talking together?'

'Well, I shouldn't have thought that—'

'That we had much to talk about? It's true I could never do mathematics. Fortunately, when I was a girl one didn't even try. Mathematics came easily to Robbie when he was about four years old, I believe. They say nowadays that that's quite natural. He's got plenty to talk about. He liked me always because I was frivolous and made him laugh. And I'm a good listener, too. And really, he says some very interesting things sometimes.'

'So I suppose,' said Stafford Nye drily.

'Now don't be superior. Molière married his housemaid, didn't he, and made a great success of it—if it is Molière I mean. If a man's frantic with brains he doesn't really want a woman who's also frantic with brains to talk to. It would be exhausting. He'd much prefer a lovely nitwit who can make him laugh. I wasn't bad-looking when I was young,' said Lady Matilda complacently. 'I know I have no academic distinctions. I'm not in the least intellectual. But Robert has always said that I've got a great deal of common sense, of intelligence.'

'You're a lovely person,' said Sir Stafford Nye. 'I enjoy coming to see you and I shall go away remembering all the things you've said to me. There are a good many more things, I expect, that you could tell me but you're obviously not going to.'

'Not until the right moment comes,' said Lady Matilda, 'but I've got your interests at heart. Let me know what you're doing from time to time. You're dining at the American Embassy, aren't you, next week?'

‘How did you know that? I’ve been asked.’

‘And you’ve accepted, I understand.’

‘Well, it’s all in the course of duty.’ He looked at her curiously. ‘How do you manage to be so well informed?’

‘Oh, Milly told me.’

‘Milly?’

‘Milly Jean Cortman. The American Ambassador’s wife. A most attractive creature, you know. Small and rather perfect-looking.’

‘Oh, you mean Mildred Cortman.’

‘She was christened Mildred but she preferred Milly Jean. I was talking to her on the telephone about some Charity Matinée or other—she’s what we used to call a pocket Venus.’

‘A most attractive term to use,’ said Stafford Nye.

Chapter 8

An Embassy Dinner

I

As Mrs Cortman came to meet him with outstretched hand, Stafford Nye recalled the term his great-aunt had used. Milly Jean Cortman was a woman of between thirty-five and forty. She had delicate features, big blue-grey eyes, a very perfectly shaped head with bluish-grey hair tinted to a particularly attractive shade which fitted her with a perfection of grooming. She was very popular in London. Her husband, Sam Cortman, was a big, heavy man, slightly ponderous. He was very proud of his wife. He himself was one of those slow, rather over-emphatic talkers. People found their attention occasionally straying when he was elucidating at some length a point which hardly needed making.

‘Back from Malaya, aren’t you, Sir Stafford? It must have been quite interesting to go out there, though it’s not the time of year I’d have chosen. But I’m sure we’re all glad to see you back. Let me see now. You know Lady Aldborough and Sir John, and Herr von Roken, Frau von Roken. Mr and Mrs Staggenham.’

They were all people known to Stafford Nye in more or less degree. There was a Dutchman and his wife whom he had not met before, since they had only just taken up their appointment. The Staggenhams were the Minister of Social Security and his wife. A particularly uninteresting couple, he had always thought.

‘And the Countess Renata Zerkowski. I think she said she’d met you before.’

‘It must be about a year ago. When I was last in England,’ said the Countess.

And there she was, the passenger from Frankfurt again. Self-possessed, at ease, beautifully turned out in faint grey-blue with a touch of chinchilla. Her hair dressed high (a wig?) and a ruby cross of antique design round her neck.

‘Signor Gasparo, Count Reitner, Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot.’

About twenty-six in all. At dinner Stafford Nye sat between the dreary Mrs Staggenham and Signora Gasparo on the other side of him. Renata Zerkowski sat exactly opposite him.

An Embassy dinner. A dinner such as he so often attended, holding much of the same type of guests. Various members of the Diplomatic Corps, junior ministers, one or two industrialists, a sprinkling of socialites usually included because they were good conversationalists, natural, pleasant people to meet, though one or two, thought Stafford Nye, one or two were maybe different. Even while he was busy sustaining his conversation with Signora Gasparo, a charming person to talk to, a chatterbox, slightly flirtatious; his mind was roving in the same way that his eye also roved, though the latter was not very noticeable. As it roved round the dinner table, you would not have said that he was summing up conclusions in his own mind. He had been asked here. Why? For any reason or for no reason in particular. Because his name had come up automatically on the list that the secretaries produced from time to time with checks against such members as were due for their turn. Or as the extra man or the extra woman required for the balancing of the table. He had always been in request when an extra was needed.

‘Oh yes,’ a diplomatic hostess would say, ‘Stafford Nye will do beautifully. You will put him next to Madame So-and-so, or Lady Somebody else.’

He had been asked perhaps to fill in for no further reason than that. And yet, he wondered. He knew by experience that there were certain other reasons. And so his eye with its swift social amiability, its air of not looking really at anything in particular, was busy.

Amongst these guests there was someone perhaps who for some reason mattered, was important. Someone who had been asked—not to fill in—on the

contrary—someone who had had a selection of other guests invited to fit in round him—or her. Someone who mattered. He wondered—he wondered which of them it might be.

Cortman knew, of course. Milly Jean, perhaps. One never really knew with wives. Some of them were better diplomats than their husbands. Some of them could be relied upon merely for their charm, for their adaptability, their readiness to please, their lack of curiosity. Some again, he thought ruefully to himself, were, as far as their husbands were concerned, disasters. Hostesses who, though they may have brought prestige or money to a diplomatic marriage, were yet capable at any moment of saying or doing the wrong thing, and creating an unfortunate situation. If that was to be guarded against, it would need one of the guests, or two or even three of the guests, to be what one might call professional smoothers-over.

Did this dinner party this evening mean anything but a social event? His quick and noticing eye had by now been round the dinner table picking out one or two people whom so far he had not entirely taken in. An American business man. Pleasant, not socially brilliant. A professor from one of the universities of the Middle West. A married couple, the husband German, the wife predominantly, almost aggressively American. A very beautiful woman, too. Sexually, highly attractive, Sir Stafford thought. Was one of them important? Initials floated through his mind. FBI. CIA. The business man perhaps a CIA man, there for a purpose. Things were like that nowadays. Not as they used to be. How had the formula gone? Big Brother is watching you. Yes, well it went further than that now. Transatlantic Cousin is watching you. High Finance for Middle Europe is watching you. A diplomatic difficulty has been asked here for you to watch him. Oh yes. There was often a lot behind things nowadays. But was that just another formula, just another fashion? Could it really mean more than that, something vital, something real? How did one talk of events in Europe nowadays? The Common Market. Well, that was fair enough, that dealt with trade, with economics, with the inter-relationships of countries.

That was the stage to set. But behind the stage. Back-stage. Waiting for the cue. Ready to prompt if prompting were needed. What was going on? Going on in the big world and behind the big world. He wondered.

Some things he knew, some things he guessed at, some things, he thought to himself, I know nothing about and nobody wants me to know anything about them.

His eyes rested for a moment on his vis-à-vis, her chin tilted upward, her mouth just gently curved in a polite smile, and their eyes met. Those eyes told him nothing, the smile told him nothing. What was she doing here? She was in her element, she fitted in, she knew this world. Yes, she was at home here. He could find out, he thought, without much difficulty where she figured in the diplomatic world, but would that tell him where she really had her place?

The young woman in the slacks who had spoken to him suddenly at Frankfurt had had an eager intelligent face. Was that the real woman, or was this casual social acquaintance the real woman? Was one of those personalities a part being played? And if so, which one? And there might be more than just those two personalities. He wondered. He wanted to find out.

Or had the fact that he had been asked to meet her been pure coincidence? Milly Jean was rising to her feet. The other ladies rose with her. Then suddenly an unexpected clamour arose. A clamour from outside the house. Shouts. Yells. The crash of breaking glass in a window. Shouts. Sounds—surely pistol shots. Signora Gasparo spoke, clutching Stafford Nye's arm.

‘What again!’ she exclaimed. ‘Dio!—again it is those terrible students. It is the same in our country. Why do they attack Embassies? They fight, resist the police—go marching, shouting idiotic things, lie down in the streets. Si, si. We have them in Rome—in Milan—We have them like a pest everywhere in Europe. Why are they never happy, these young ones? What do they want?’

Stafford Nye sipped his brandy and listened to the heavy accents of Mr Charles Staggenham, who was being pontifical and taking his time about it. The commotion had subsided. It would seem that the police had marched off some of the hotheads. It was one of those occurrences which once would have been thought extraordinary and even alarming but which were now taken as a matter of course.

‘A larger police force. That’s what we need. A larger police force. It’s more than these chaps can deal with. It’s the same everywhere, they say. I was talking to Herr Lurwitz the other day. They have their troubles, so have the French. Not quite so much of it in the Scandinavian countries. What do they all want—just trouble? I tell you if I had my way—’

Stafford Nye removed his mind to another subject while keeping up a flattering pretence as Charles Staggenham explained just what his way would be, which in any case was easily to be anticipated beforehand.

‘Shouting about Vietnam and all that. What do any of them know about Vietnam. None of them have ever been there, have they?’

‘One would think it very unlikely,’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

‘Man was telling me earlier this evening, they’ve had a lot of trouble in California. In the universities—If we had a sensible policy...’

Presently the men joined the ladies in the drawing-room. Stafford Nye, moving with that leisurely grace, that air of complete lack of purpose he found so useful, sat down by a golden-haired, talkative woman whom he knew moderately well, and who could be guaranteed seldom to say anything worth listening to as regards ideas or wit, but who was excessively knowledgeable about all her fellow creatures within the bounds of her acquaintance. Stafford Nye asked no direct questions but presently, without the lady being even aware of the means by which he had guided the subject of conversation, he was hearing a few remarks about the Countess Renata Zerkowski.

‘Still very good-looking isn’t she? She doesn’t come over here very often nowadays. Mostly New York, you know, or that wonderful island place. You know the one I mean. Not Minorca. One of the other ones in the Mediterranean. Her sister’s married to that soap king, at least I think it’s a soap king. Not the Greek one. He’s Swedish, I think. Rolling in money. And then of course, she spends a lot of time in some castle place in the Dolomites—or near Munich—very musical, she always has been. She said you’d met before, didn’t she?’

‘Yes. A year or two years ago, I think.’

‘Oh yes, I suppose when she was over in England before. They say she was mixed up in the Czechoslovakian business. Or do I mean the Polish trouble? Oh dear, it’s so difficult, isn’t it. All the names, I mean. They have so many z’s and k’s. Most peculiar, and so hard to spell. She’s very literary. You know, gets up petitions for people to sign. To give writers asylum here, or whatever it is. Not that anyone really pays much attention. I mean, what else can one think of nowadays except how one can possibly pay one’s own taxes. The travel allowance makes things a little better but not much. I mean, you’ve got to get the money, haven’t you, before you can take it abroad. I don’t know how anyone manages to have money now, but there’s a lot of it about. Oh yes, there’s a lot of it about.’

She looked down in a complacent fashion at her left hand, on which were two solitaire rings, one a diamond and one an emerald, which seemed to prove conclusively that a considerable amount of money had been spent upon her at least.

The evening drew on to its close. He knew very little more about his passenger from Frankfurt than he had known before. He knew that she had a façade, a façade it seemed to him, very highly faceted, if you could use those two alliterative words together. She was interested in music. Well, he had met her at the Festival Hall, had he not? Fond of outdoor sports. Rich relations who owned Mediterranean islands. Given to supporting literary charities. Somebody in fact who had good connections, was well related, had entries to the social field. Not apparently highly political and yet, quietly perhaps, affiliated to some group. Someone who moved about from place to place and country to country. Moving among the rich, amongst the talented, about the literary world.

He thought of espionage for a moment or two. That seemed the most likely answer. And yet he was not wholly satisfied with it.

The evening drew on. It came at last to be his turn to be collected by his hostess. Milly Jean was very good at her job.

‘I’ve been longing to talk to you for ages. I wanted to hear about Malaya. I’m so stupid about all these places in Asia, you know, I mix them up. Tell me, what happened out there? Anything interesting or was everything terribly boring?’

‘I’m sure you can guess the answer to that one.’

‘Well, I should guess it was very boring. But perhaps you’re not allowed to say so.’

‘Oh yes, I can think it, and I can say it. It wasn’t really my cup of tea, you know.’

‘Why did you go then?’

‘Oh well, I’m always fond of travelling, I like seeing countries.’

‘You’re such an intriguing person in many ways. Really, of course, all diplomatic life is very boring, isn’t it? I oughtn’t to say so. I only say it to you.’

Very blue eyes. Blue like bluebells in a wood. They opened a little wider and the black brows above them came down gently at the outside corners while the inside corners went up a little. It made her face look like a rather beautiful Persian cat. He wondered what Milly Jean was really like. Her soft voice was that of a southerner. The beautifully shaped little head, her profile with the perfection of a coin—what was she really like? No fool, he thought. One who could use social weapons when needed, who could charm when she wished to, who could withdraw into being enigmatic. If she wanted anything from anyone she would be adroit in getting it. He noticed the intensity of the glance she was giving him now. Did she want something of him? He didn’t know. He didn’t think it could be likely. She said, ‘Have you met Mr Staggenham?’

‘Ah yes. I was talking to him at the dinner table. I hadn’t met him before.’

‘He is said to be very important,’ said Milly Jean. ‘He’s the President of PBF as you know.’

‘One should know all those things,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘PBF and DCV. LYH. And all the world of initials.’

‘Hateful,’ said Milly Jean. ‘Hateful. All these initials, no personalities, no people any more. Just initials. What a hateful world! That’s what I sometimes think. What a hateful world. I want it to be different, quite, quite different—’

Did she mean that? He thought for one moment that perhaps she did. Interesting...

II

Grosvenor Square was quietness itself. There were traces of broken glass still on the pavements. There were even eggs, squashed tomatoes and fragments of gleaming metal. But above, the stars were peaceful. Car after car drove up to the Embassy door to collect the home-going guests. The police were there in the corners of the square but without ostentation. Everything was under control. One of the political guests leaving spoke to one of the police officers. He came back and murmured, ‘Not too many arrests. Eight. They’ll be up at Bow Street in the morning. More or less the usual lot. Petronella was here, of course, and Stephen and his crowd. Ah well. One would think they’d get tired of it one of these days.’

‘You live not very far from here, don’t you?’ said a voice in Sir Stafford Nye’s ear. A deep contralto voice. ‘I can drop you on my way.’

‘No, no. I can walk perfectly. It’s only ten minutes or so.’

‘It will be no trouble to me, I assure you,’ said the Countess Zerkowski. She added, ‘I’m staying at the St James’s Tower.’

The St James’s Tower was one of the newer hotels.

‘You are very kind.’

It was a big, expensive-looking hire car that waited. The chauffeur opened the door, the Countess Renata got in and Sir Stafford Nye followed her. It

was she who gave Sir Stafford Nye's address to the chauffeur. The car drove off.

'So you know where I live?' he said.

'Why not?'

He wondered just what that answer meant: Why not?

'Why not indeed,' he said. 'You know so much, don't you?' He added, 'It was kind of you to return my passport.'

'I thought it might save certain inconveniences. It might be simpler if you burnt it. You've been issued with a new one, I presume—'

'You presume correctly.'

'Your bandit's cloak you will find in the bottom drawer of your tallboy. It was put there tonight. I believed that perhaps to purchase another one would not satisfy you, and indeed that to find one similar might not be possible.'

'It will mean more to me now that it has been through certain—adventures,' said Stafford Nye. He added, 'It has served its purpose.'

The car purred through the night.

The Countess Zerkowski said:

'Yes. It has served its purpose since I am here—alive...'

Sir Stafford Nye said nothing. He was assuming, rightly or not, that she wanted him to ask questions, to press her, to know more of what she had been doing, of what fate she had escaped. She wanted him to display curiosity, but Sir Stafford Nye was not going to display curiosity. He rather enjoyed not doing so. He heard her laugh very gently. Yet he fancied, rather surprisingly, that it was a pleased laugh, a laugh of satisfaction, not of stalemate.

'Did you enjoy your evening?' she said.

‘A good party, I think, but Milly Jean always gives good parties.’

‘You know her well then?’

‘I knew her when she was a girl in New York before she married. A pocket Venus.’

She looked at him in faint surprise.

‘Is that your term for her?’

‘Actually, no. It was said to me by an elderly relative of mine.’

‘Yes, it isn’t a description that one hears given often of a woman nowadays. It fits her, I think, very well. Only—’

‘Only what?’

‘Venus is seductive, is she not? Is she also ambitious?’

‘You think Milly Jean Cortman is ambitious?’

‘Oh yes. That above all.’

‘And you think to be the wife of the Ambassador to St James’s is insufficient to satisfy ambition?’

‘Oh no,’ said the Countess. ‘That is only the beginning.’

He did not answer. He was looking out through the car window. He began to speak, then stopped himself. He noted her quick glance at him, but she too was silent. It was not till they were going over a bridge with the Thames below them that he said:

‘So you are not giving me a lift home and you are not going back to the St James’s Tower. We are crossing the Thames. We met there once before, crossing a bridge. Where are you taking me?’

‘Do you mind?’

‘I think I do.’

‘Yes, I can see you might.’

‘Well of course you are quite in the mode. Hi-jacking is the fashion nowadays, isn’t it? You have hi-jacked me. Why?’

‘Because, like once before, I have need of you.’ She added, ‘And others have need of you.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And that does not please you.’

‘It would please me better to be asked.’

‘If I had asked, would you have come?’

‘Perhaps yes, perhaps no.’

‘I am sorry.’

‘I wonder.’

They drove on through the night in silence. It was not a drive through lonely country, they were on a main road. Now and then the lights picked up a name or a signpost so that Stafford Nye saw quite clearly where their route lay. Through Surrey and through the first residential portions of Sussex. Occasionally he thought they took a detour or a side road which was not the most direct route, but even of this he could not be sure. He almost asked his companion whether this was being done because they might possibly have been followed from London. But he had determined rather firmly on his policy of silence. It was for her to speak, for her to give information. He found her, even with the additional information he had been able to get, an enigmatic character.

They were driving to the country after a dinner party in London. They were, he was pretty sure, in one of the more expensive types of hire car. This was something planned beforehand. Reasonable, nothing doubtful or unexpected

about it. Soon, he imagined, he would find out where it was they were going. Unless, that is, they were going to drive as far as the coast. That also was possible, he thought. Haslemere, he saw on a signpost. Now they were skirting Godalming. All very plain and above board. The rich countryside of moneyed suburbia. Agreeable woods, handsome residences. They took a few side turns and then as the car finally slowed, they seemed to be arriving at their destination. Gates. A small white lodge by the gates. Up a drive, well-kept rhododendrons on either side of it. They turned round a bend and drew up before a house. 'Stockbroker Tudor,' murmured Sir Stafford Nye, under his breath. His companion turned her head inquiringly.

'Just a comment,' said Stafford Nye. 'Pay no attention. I take it we are now arriving at the destination of your choice?'

'And you don't admire the look of it very much.'

'The grounds seem well-kept up,' said Sir Stafford, following the beam of the headlights as the car rounded the bend. 'Takes money to keep these places up and in good order. I should say this was a comfortable house to live in.'

'Comfortable but not beautiful. The man who lives in it prefers comfort to beauty, I should say.'

'Perhaps wisely,' said Sir Stafford. 'And yet in some ways he is very appreciative of beauty, of some kinds of beauty.'

They drew up before the well-lighted porch. Sir Stafford got out and tendered an arm to help his companion. The chauffeur had mounted the steps and pressed the bell. He looked inquiringly at the woman as she ascended the steps.

'You won't be requiring me again tonight, m'lady?'

'No. That's all for now. We'll telephone down in the morning.'

'Good night. Good night, sir.'

There were footsteps inside and the door was flung open. Sir Stafford had expected some kind of butler, but instead there was a tall grenadier of a parlour-maid. Grey-haired, tight-lipped, eminently reliable and competent, he thought. An invaluable asset and hard to find nowadays. Trustworthy, capable of being fierce.

‘I am afraid we are a little late,’ said Renata.

‘The master is in the library. He asked that you and the gentleman should come to him there when you arrived.’

Chapter 9

The House Near Godalming

She led the way up the broad staircase and the two of them followed her. Yes, thought Stafford Nye, a very comfortable house. Jacobean paper, a most unsightly carved oak staircase but pleasantly shallow treads. Pictures nicely chosen but of no particular artistic interest. A rich man's house, he thought. A man, not of bad taste, a man of conventional tastes. Good thick pile carpet of an agreeable plum-coloured texture.

On the first floor, the grenadier-like parlour-maid went to the first door along it. She opened it and stood back to let them go in but she made no announcement of names. The Countess went in first and Sir Stafford Nye followed her. He heard the door shut quietly behind him.

There were four people in the room. Sitting behind a large desk which was well covered with papers, documents, an open map or two and presumably other papers which were in the course of discussion, was a large, fat man with a very yellow face. It was a face Sir Stafford Nye had seen before, though he could not for the moment attach the proper name to it. It was a man whom he had met only in a casual fashion, and yet the occasion had been an important one. He should know, yes, definitely he should know. But why—why wouldn't the name come?

With a slight struggle, the figure sitting at the desk rose to his feet. He took the Countess Renata's outstretched hand.

'You've arrived,' he said, 'splendid.'

'Yes. Let me introduce you, though I think you already know him. Sir Stafford Nye, Mr Robinson.'

Of course. In Sir Stafford Nye's brain something clicked like a camera. That fitted in, too, with another name. Pikeaway. To say that he knew all about Mr Robinson was not true. He knew about Mr Robinson all that Mr

Robinson permitted to be known. His name, as far as anyone knew, was Robinson, though it might have been any name of foreign origin. No one had ever suggested anything of that kind. Recognition came also of his personal appearance. The high forehead, the melancholy dark eyes, the large generous mouth, and the impressive white teeth—false teeth, presumably, but at any rate teeth of which it might have been said, like in Red Riding Hood, ‘the better to eat you with, child!’

He knew, too, what Mr Robinson stood for. Just one simple word described it. Mr Robinson represented Money with a capital M. Money in its every aspect. International money, world-wide money, private home finances, banking, money not in the way that the average person looked at it. You never thought of him as a very rich man. Undoubtedly he was a very rich man but that wasn’t the important thing. He was one of the arrangers of money, the great clan of bankers. His personal tastes might even have been simple, but Sir Stafford Nye doubted if they were. A reasonable standard of comfort, even luxury, would be Mr Robinson’s way of life. But not more than that. So behind all this mysterious business there was the power of money.

‘I heard of you just a day or two ago,’ said Mr Robinson, as he shook hands, ‘from our friend Pikeaway, you know.’

That fitted in, thought Stafford Nye, because now he remembered that on the solitary occasion before that he had met Mr Robinson, Colonel Pikeaway had been present. Horsham, he remembered, had spoken of Mr Robinson. So now there was Mary Ann (or the Countess Zerkowski?) and Colonel Pikeaway sitting in his own smoke-filled room with his eyes half closed either going to sleep or just waking up, and there was Mr Robinson with his large, yellow face, and so there was money at stake somewhere, and his glance shifted to the three other people in the room because he wanted to see if he knew who they were and what they represented, or if he could guess.

In two cases at least he didn’t need to guess. The man who sat in the tall porter’s chair by the fireplace, an elderly figure framed by the chair as a picture frame might have framed him, was a face that had been well known all over England. Indeed, it still was well known, although it was very

seldom seen nowadays. A sick man, an invalid, a man who made very brief appearances, and then it was said, at physical cost to himself in pain and difficulty. Lord Altamount. A thin emaciated face, outstanding nose, grey hair which receded just a little from the forehead, and then flowed back in a thick grey mane; somewhat prominent ears that cartoonists had used in their time, and a deep piercing glance that not so much observed as probed. Probed deeply into what it was looking at. At the moment it was looking at Sir Stafford Nye. He stretched out a hand as Stafford Nye went towards him.

‘I don’t get up,’ said Lord Altamount. His voice was faint, an old man’s voice, a far-away voice. ‘My back doesn’t allow me. Just come back from Malaya, haven’t you, Stafford Nye?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it worth your going? I expect you think it wasn’t. You’re probably right, too. Still, we have to have these excrescences in life, these ornamental trimmings to adorn the better kind of diplomatic lies. I’m glad you could come here or were brought here tonight. Mary Ann’s doing, I suppose?’

So that’s what he calls her and thinks of her as, thought Stafford Nye to himself. It was what Horsham had called her. She was in with them then, without a doubt. As for Altamount, he stood for—what did he stand for nowadays? Stafford Nye thought to himself. He stands for England. He still stands for England until he’s buried in Westminster Abbey or a country mausoleum, whatever he chooses. He has been England, and he knows England, and I should say he knows the value of every politician and government official in England pretty well, even if he’s never spoken to them.

Lord Altamount said:

‘This is our colleague, Sir James Kleek.’

Stafford Nye didn’t know Kleek. He didn’t think he’d even heard of him. A restless, fidgety type. Sharp, suspicious glances that never rested anywhere

for long. He had the contained eagerness of a sporting dog awaiting the word of command. Ready to start off at a glance from his master's eye.

But who was his master? Altamount or Robinson?

Stafford's eye went round to the fourth man. He had risen to his feet from the chair where he had been sitting close to the door. Bushy moustache, raised eyebrows, watchful, withdrawn, managing in some way to remain familiar yet almost unrecognizable.

'So it's you,' said Sir Stafford Nye, 'how are you, Horsham?'

'Very pleased to see you here, Sir Stafford.'

Quite a representative gathering, Stafford Nye thought, with a swift glance round.

They had set a chair for Renata not far from the fire and Lord Altamount. She had stretched out a hand—her left hand, he noticed—and he had taken it between his two hands, holding it for a minute, then dropping it. He said:

'You took risks, child, you take too many risks.'

Looking at him, she said, 'It was you who taught me that, and it's the only way of life.'

Lord Altamount turned his head towards Sir Stafford Nye.

'It wasn't I who taught you to choose your man. You've got a natural genius for that.' Looking at Stafford Nye, he said, 'I know your great-aunt, or your great-great-aunt, is she?'

'Great-Aunt Matilda,' said Stafford Nye immediately.

'Yes. That's the one. One of the Victorian tours-de-force of the 'nineties. She must be nearly ninety herself now.'

He went on:

‘I don’t see her very often. Once or twice a year perhaps. But it strikes me every time—that sheer vitality of hers that outlives her bodily strength. They have the secret of that, those indomitable Victorians and some of the Edwardians as well.’

Sir James Kleek said, ‘Let me get you a drink, Nye? What will you have?’

‘Gin and tonic, if I may.’

The Countess refused with a small shake of the head.

James Kleek brought Nye his drink and set it on the table near Mr Robinson. Stafford Nye was not going to speak first. The dark eyes behind the desk lost their melancholy for a moment. They had quite suddenly a twinkle in them.

‘Any questions?’ he said.

‘Too many,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to have explanations first, questions later?’

‘Is that what you’d like?’

‘It might simplify matters.’

‘Well, we start with a few plain statements of facts. You may or you may not have been asked to come here. If not, that fact may rankle slightly.’

‘He prefers to be asked always,’ said the Countess. ‘He said as much to me.’

‘Naturally,’ said Mr Robinson.

‘I was hi-jacked,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘Very fashionable, I know. One of our more modern methods.’

He kept his tone one of light amusement.

‘Which invites, surely, a question from you,’ said Mr Robinson.

‘Just one small word of three letters. Why?’

‘Quite so. Why? I admire your economy of speech. This is a private committee—a committee of inquiry. An inquiry of world-wide significance.’

‘Sounds interesting,’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

‘It is more than interesting. It is poignant and immediate. Four different ways of life are represented in this room tonight,’ said Lord Altamount. ‘We represent different branches. I have retired from active participation in the affairs of this country, but I am still a consulting authority. I have been consulted and asked to preside over this particular inquiry as to what is going on in the world in this particular year of our Lord, because something is going on. James, here, has his own special task. He is my right-hand man. He is also our spokesman. Explain the general set-out, if you will, Jamie, to Sir Stafford here.’

It seemed to Stafford Nye that the gun dog quivered. At last! At last I can speak and get on with it! He leaned forward a little in his chair.

‘If things happen in the world, you have to look for a cause for them. The outward signs are always easy to see but they’re not, or so the Chairman—’ he bowed to Lord Altamount—‘and Mr Robinson and Mr Horsham believe, important. It’s always been the same way. You take a natural force, a great fall of water that will give you turbine power. You take the discovery of uranium from pitchblende, and that will give you in due course nuclear power that had not been dreamt of or known. When you found coal and minerals, they gave you transport, power, energy. There are forces at work always that give you certain things. But behind each of them there is someone who controls it. You’ve got to find who’s controlling the powers that are slowly gaining ascendancy in practically every country in Europe, further afield still in parts of Asia. Less, possibly, in Africa, but again in the American continents both north and south. You’ve got to get behind the things that are happening and find out the motive force that’s making them happen. One thing that makes things happen is money.’

He nodded towards Mr Robinson.

‘Mr Robinson, there, knows as much about money as anybody in the world, I suppose.’

‘It’s quite simple,’ said Mr Robinson. ‘There are big movements afoot. There has to be money behind them. We’ve got to find out where that money’s coming from. Who’s operating with it? Where do they get it from? Where are they sending it to? Why? It’s quite true what James says: I know a lot about money! As much as any man alive knows today. Then there are what you might call trends. It’s a word we use a good deal nowadays! Trends or tendencies—there are innumerable words one uses. They mean not quite the same thing, but they’re in relationship with each other. A tendency, shall we say, to rebellion shows up. Look back through history. You’ll find it coming again and again, repeating itself like a periodic table, repeating a pattern. A desire for rebellion, the means of rebellion, the form the rebellion takes. It’s not a thing particular to any particular country. If it arises in one country, it will arise in other countries in less or more degrees. That’s what you mean, sir, isn’t it?’ He half turned towards Lord Altamount. ‘That’s the way you more or less put it to me.’

‘Yes, you’re expressing things very well, James.’

‘It’s a pattern, a pattern that arises and seems inevitable. You can recognize it where you find it. There was a period when a yearning towards crusades swept countries. All over Europe people embarked in ships, they went off to deliver the Holy Land. All quite clear, a perfectly good pattern of determined behaviour. But why did they go? That’s the interest of history, you know. Seeing why these desires and patterns arise. It’s not always a materialistic answer either. All sorts of things can cause rebellion, a desire for freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of religious worship, again a series of closely related patterns. It led people to embrace emigration to other countries, to formation of new religions very often as full of tyranny as the forms of religion they had left behind. But in all this, if you look hard enough, if you make enough investigations, you can see what started the onset of these and many other—I’ll use the same word—patterns. In some ways it’s like a virus disease. The virus can be carried—round the world, across seas, up mountains. It can go and infect. It goes apparently without being set in motion. But one can’t be sure, even now, that that was always

really true. There could have been causes. Causes that made things happen. One can go a few steps further. There are people. One person—ten persons—a few hundred persons who are capable of being and setting in motion a cause. So it is not the end process that one has to look at. It is the first people who set the cause in motion. You have your crusaders, you have your religious enthusiasts, you have your desires for liberty, you have all the other patterns but you've got to go further back still. Further back to a hinterland. Visions, dreams. The prophet Joel knew it when he wrote "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." And of those two, which are the more powerful? Dreams are not destructive. But visions can open new worlds to you—and visions can also destroy the worlds that already exist...'

James Kleek turned suddenly towards Lord Altamount. 'I don't know if it connects up, sir,' he said, 'but you told me a story once of somebody in the Embassy at Berlin. A woman.'

'Oh that? Yes, I found it interesting at the time. Yes, it has a bearing on what we are talking about now. One of the Embassy wives, clever, intelligent woman, well educated. She was very anxious to go personally and hear the Führer speak. I am talking, of course, of a time immediately preceding the 1939 war. She was curious to know what oratory could do. Why was everyone so impressed? And so she went. She came back and said, "It's extraordinary. I wouldn't have believed it. Of course I don't understand German very well but I was carried away, too. And I see now why everyone is. I mean, his ideas were wonderful...They inflamed you. The things he said. I mean, you just felt there was no other way of thinking, that a whole new world would happen if only one followed him. Oh, I can't explain properly. I'm going to write down as much as I can remember, and then if I bring it to you to see, you'll see better than my just trying to tell you the effect it had."

'I told her that was a very good idea. She came to me the next day and she said, "I don't know if you'll believe this. I started to write down the things I'd heard, the things Hitler had said. What they'd meant—but—it was frightening—there wasn't anything to write down at all, I didn't seem able to remember a single stimulating or exciting sentence. I have some of the

words, but it doesn't seem to mean the same things as when I wrote them down. They are just—oh, they are just meaningless. I don't understand.'

'That shows you one of the great dangers one doesn't always remember, but it exists. There are people capable of communicating to others a wild enthusiasm, a kind of vision of life and of happening. They can do that though it is not really by what they say, it is not the words you hear, it is not even the idea described. It's something else. It's the magnetic power that a very few men have of starting something, of producing and creating a vision. By their personal magnetism perhaps, a tone of voice, perhaps some emanation that comes forth straight from the flesh. I don't know, but it exists.

'Such people have power. The great religious teachers had this power, and so has an evil spirit power also. Belief can be created in a certain movement, in certain things to be done, things that will result in a new heaven and a new earth, and people will believe it and work for it and fight for it and even die for it.'

He lowered his voice as he said: 'Jan Smuts puts it in a phrase. He said Leadership, besides being a great creative force, can be diabolical.'

Stafford Nye moved in his chair.

'I understand what you mean. It is interesting what you say. I can see perhaps that it might be true.'

'But you think it's exaggerated, of course.'

'I don't know that I do,' said Stafford Nye. 'Things that sound exaggerated are very often not exaggerated at all. They are only things that you haven't heard said before or thought about before. And therefore they come to you as so unfamiliar that you can hardly do anything about them except accept them. By the way, may I ask a simple question? What does one do about them?'

'If you come across the suspicion that this sort of thing is going on, you must find out about them,' said Lord Altamount. 'You've got to go like

Kipling's mongoose: Go and find out. Find out where the money comes from and where the ideas are coming from, and where, if I may say so, the machinery comes from. Who is directing the machinery? There's a chief of staff, you know, as well as a commander-in-chief. That's what we're trying to do. We'd like you to come and help us.'

It was one of the rare occasions in his life when Sir Stafford Nye was taken aback. Whatever he may have felt on some former occasions, he had always managed to conceal the fact. But this time it was different. He looked from one to the other of the men in the room. At Mr Robinson, impassively yellow-faced with his mouthful of teeth displayed; to Sir James Kleek, a somewhat brash talker, Sir Stafford Nye had considered him, but nevertheless he had obviously his uses; Master's dog, he called him in his own mind. He looked at Lord Altamount, the hood of the porter's chair framed round his head. The lighting was not strong in the room. It gave him the look of a saint in a niche in a cathedral somewhere. Ascetic. Fourteenth-century. A great man. Yes, Altamount had been one of the great men of the past. Stafford Nye had no doubt of that, but he was now a very old man. Hence, he supposed, the necessity for Sir James Kleek, and Lord Altamount's reliance on him. He looked past them to the enigmatic, cool creature who had brought him here, the Countess Renata Zerkowski alias Mary Ann, alias Daphne Theodofanous. Her face told him nothing. She was not even looking at him. His eyes came round last to Mr Henry Horsham of Security.

With faint surprise he observed that Henry Horsham was grinning at him.

'But look here,' said Stafford Nye, dropping all formal language, and speaking rather like the schoolboy of eighteen he had once been. 'Where on earth do I come in? What do I know? Quite frankly, I'm not distinguished in any way in my own profession, you know. They don't think very much of me at the FO. Never have.'

'We know that,' said Lord Altamount.

It was Sir James Kleek's turn to grin and he did so.

‘All the better perhaps,’ he remarked, and added apologetically as Lord Altamount frowned at him, ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘This is a committee of investigation,’ said Mr Robinson. ‘It is not a question of what you have done in the past, of what other people’s opinion of you may be. What we are doing is to recruit a committee to investigate. There are not very many of us at the moment forming this committee. We ask you to join it because we think that you have certain qualities which may help in an investigation.’

Stafford Nye turned his head towards the Security man. ‘What about it, Horsham?’ he said. ‘I can’t believe you’d agree with that?’

‘Why not?’ said Henry Horsham.

‘Indeed? What are my “qualities”, as you call them? I can’t, quite frankly, believe in them myself.’

‘You’re not a hero-worshipper,’ said Horsham. ‘That’s why. You’re the kind who sees through humbug. You don’t take anyone at their own or the world’s valuation. You take them at your own valuation.’

Ce n’est pas un garçon sérieux. The words floated through Sir Stafford Nye’s mind. A curious reason for which to be chosen for a difficult and exacting job.

‘I’ve got to warn you,’ he said, ‘that my principal fault, and one that’s been frequently noticed about me and which has cost me several good jobs is, I think, fairly well known. I’m not, I should say, a sufficiently serious sort of chap for an important job like this.’

‘Believe it or not,’ said Mr Horsham, ‘that’s one of the reasons why they want you. I’m right, my lord, aren’t I?’ He looked towards Lord Altamount.

‘Public service!’ said Lord Altamount. ‘Let me tell you that very often one of the most serious disadvantages in public life is when people in a public position take themselves too seriously. We feel that you won’t. Anyway,’ he said, ‘Mary Ann thinks so.’

Sir Stafford Nye turned his head. So here she was, no longer a countess. She had become Mary Ann again.

‘You don’t mind my asking,’ he said, ‘but who are you really? I mean, are you a real countess.’

‘Absolutely. Geboren, as the Germans say. My father was a man of pedigree, a good sportsman, a splendid shot, and had a very romantic but somewhat dilapidated castle in Bavaria. It’s still there, the castle. As far as that goes, I have connections with that large portion of the European world which is still heavily snobbish as far as birth is concerned. A poor and shabby countess sits down first at the table whilst a rich American with a fabulous fortune in dollars in the bank is kept waiting.’

‘What about Daphne Theodofanous? Where does she come in?’

‘A useful name for a passport. My mother was Greek.’

‘And Mary Ann?’

It was almost the first smile Stafford Nye had seen on her face. Her eyes went to Lord Altamount and from him to Mr Robinson.

‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘because I’m a kind of maid-of-all-work, going places, looking for things, taking things from one country to another, sweeping under the mat, do anything, go anywhere, clear up the mess.’ She looked towards Lord Altamount again. ‘Am I right, Uncle Ned?’

‘Quite right, my dear. Mary Ann you are and always will be to us.’

‘Were you taking something on that plane? I mean taking something important from one country to another?’

‘Yes. It was known I was carrying it. If you hadn’t come to my rescue, if you hadn’t drunk possibly poisoned beer and handed over your bandit cloak of bright colours as a disguise, well, accidents happen sometimes. I shouldn’t have got here.’

‘What were you carrying—or mustn’t I ask? Are there things I shall never know?’

‘There are a lot of things you will never know. There are a lot of things you won’t be allowed to ask. I think that question of yours I shall answer. A bare answer of fact. If I am allowed to do so.’

Again she looked at Lord Altamount.

‘I trust your judgment,’ said Lord Altamount. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Give him the dope,’ said the irreverent James Kleek.

Mr Horsham said, ‘I suppose you’ve got to know. I wouldn’t tell you, but then I’m Security. Go ahead, Mary Ann.’

‘One sentence. I was bringing a birth certificate. That’s all. I don’t tell you any more and it won’t be any use your asking any more questions.’

Stafford Nye looked round the assembly.

‘All right. I’ll join. I’m flattered at your asking me. Where do we go from here?’

‘You and I,’ said Renata, ‘leave here tomorrow. We go to the Continent. You may have read, or know, that there’s a Musical Festival taking place in Bavaria. It is something quite new which has only come into being in the last two years. It has a rather formidable German name meaning “The Company of Youthful Singers” and is supported by the Governments of several different countries. It is in opposition to the traditional festivals and productions of Bayreuth. Much of the music given is modern—new young composers are given the chance of their compositions being heard. Whilst thought of highly by some, it is utterly repudiated and held in contempt by others.’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Stafford, ‘I have read about it. Are we going to attend it?’

‘We have seats booked for two of the performances.’

‘Has this festival any special significance in our investigation?’

‘No,’ said Renata. ‘It is more in the nature of what you might call an exit and entry convenience. We go there for an ostensible and true reason, and we leave it for our next step in due course.’

He looked round. ‘Instructions? Do I get any marching orders? Am I to be briefed?’

‘Not in your meaning of those terms. You are going on a voyage of exploration. You will learn things as you go along. You will go as yourself, knowing only what you know at present. You go as a lover of music, as a slightly disappointed diplomat who had perhaps hoped for some post in his own country which he has not been given. Otherwise, you will know nothing. It is safer so.’

‘But that is the sum of activities at present? Germany, Bavaria, Austria, the Tyrol—that part of the world?’

‘It is one of the centres of interest.’

‘It is not the only one?’

‘Indeed, not even the principal one. There are other spots on the globe, all of varying importance and interest. How much importance each one holds is what we have to find out.’

‘And I don’t know, or am not to be told, anything about these other centres?’

‘Only in cursory fashion. One of them, we think the most important one, has its headquarters in South America, there are two with headquarters in the United States of America, one in California, the other in Baltimore. There is one in Sweden, there is one in Italy. Things have become very active in the latter in the last six months. Portugal and Spain also have smaller centres. Paris, of course. There are further interesting spots just “coming into production”, you might say. As yet not fully developed.’

‘You mean Malaya, or Vietnam?’

‘No. No, all that lies rather in the past. It was a good rallying cry for violence and student indignation and for many other things.

‘What is being promoted, you must understand, is the growing organization of youth everywhere against their mode of government; against their parental customs, against very often the religions in which they have been brought up. There is the insidious cult of permissiveness, there is the increasing cult of violence. Violence not as a means of gaining money, but violence for the love of violence. That particularly is stressed, and the reasons for it are to the people concerned one of the most important things and of the utmost significance.’

‘Permissiveness, is that important?’

‘It is a way of life, no more. It lends itself to certain abuses but not unduly.’

‘What about drugs?’

‘The cult of drugs has been deliberately advanced and fomented. Vast sums of money have been made that way, but it is not, or so we think, entirely activated for the money motive.’

All of them looked at Mr Robinson, who slowly shook his head.

‘No,’ he said, ‘it looks that way. There are people who are being apprehended and brought to justice. Pushers of drugs will be followed up. But there is more than just the drug racket behind all this. The drug racket is a means, and an evil means, of making money. But there is more to it than that.’

‘But who—’ Stafford Nye stopped.

‘Who and what and why and where? The four W’s. That is your mission, Sir Stafford,’ said Mr Robinson. ‘That’s what you’ve got to find out. You and Mary Ann. It won’t be easy, and one of the hardest things in the world, remember, is to keep one’s secrets.’

Stafford Nye looked with interest at the fat yellow face of Mr Robinson. Perhaps the secret of Mr Robinson's domination in the financial world was just that. His secret was that he kept his secret. Mr Robinson's mouth showed its smile again. The large teeth gleamed.

'If you know a thing,' he said, 'it is always a great temptation to show that you know it; to talk about it, in other words. It is not that you want to give information, it is not that you have been offered payment to give information. It is that you want to show how important you are. Yes, it's just as simple as that. In fact,' said Mr Robinson, and he half closed his eyes, 'everything in this world is so very, very simple. That's what people don't understand.'

The Countess got to her feet and Stafford Nye followed her example.

'I hope you will sleep well and be comfortable,' said Mr Robinson. 'This house is, I think, moderately comfortable.'

Stafford Nye murmured that he was quite sure of that, and on that point he was shortly to be proved to have been quite right. He laid his head on the pillow and went to sleep immediately.

Book 2

Journey To Siegfried

Chapter 10

The Woman In The Schloss

I

They came out of the Festival Youth Theatre to the refreshing night air. Below them in a sweep of the ground, was a lighted restaurant. On the side of the hill was another, smaller one. The restaurants varied slightly in price though neither of them was inexpensive. Renata was in evening dress of black velvet, Sir Stafford Nye was in white tie and full evening dress.

‘A very distinguished audience,’ murmured Stafford Nye to his companion. ‘Plenty of money there. A young audience on the whole. You wouldn’t think they could afford it.’

‘Oh! that can be seen to—it is seen to.’

‘A subsidy for the élite of youth? That kind of thing?’ ‘Yes.’

They walked towards the restaurant on the high side of the hill.

‘They give you an hour for the meal. Is that right?’

‘Technically an hour. Actually an hour and a quarter.’

‘That audience,’ said Sir Stafford Nye, ‘most of them, nearly all of them, I should say, are real lovers of music.’

‘Most of them, yes. It’s important, you know.’

‘What do you mean—important?’

‘That the enthusiasm should be genuine. At both ends of the scale,’ she added.

‘What did you mean, exactly, by that?’

‘Those who practise and organize violence must love violence, must want it, must yearn for it. The seal of ecstasy in every movement, of slashing, hurting, destroying. And the same thing with the music. The ears must appreciate every moment of the harmonies and beauties. There can be no pretending in this game.’

‘Can you double the rôles—do you mean you can combine violence and a love of music or a love of art?’

‘It is not always easy, I think, but yes. There are many who can. It is safer really, if they don’t have to combine rôles.’

‘It’s better to keep it simple, as our fat friend Mr Robinson would say? Let the lovers of music love music, let the violent practitioners love violence. Is that what you mean?’

‘I think so.’

‘I am enjoying this very much. The two days that we have stayed here, the two nights of music that we have enjoyed. I have not enjoyed all the music because I am not perhaps sufficiently modern in my taste. I find the clothes very interesting.’

‘Are you talking of the stage production?’

‘No, no, I was talking of the audience, really. You and I, the squares, the old-fashioned. You, Countess, in your society gown, I in my white tie and tails. Not a comfortable get-up, it never has been. And then the others, the silks and the velvets, the ruffled shirts of the men, real lace, I noticed, several times—and the plush and the hair and the luxury of avant garde, the luxury of the eighteen-hundreds or you might almost say of the Elizabethan age or of Van Dyck pictures.’

‘Yes, you are right.’

‘I’m no nearer, though, to what it all means. I haven’t learnt anything. I haven’t found out anything.’

‘You mustn’t be impatient. This is a rich show, supported, asked for, demanded perhaps by youth and provided by—’

‘By whom?’

‘We don’t know yet. We shall know.’

‘I’m so glad you are sure of it.’

They went into the restaurant and sat down. The food was good though not in any way ornate or luxurious. Once or twice they were spoken to by an acquaintance or a friend. Two people who recognized Sir Stafford Nye expressed pleasure and surprise at seeing him. Renata had a bigger circle of acquaintances since she knew more foreigners—well-dressed women, a man or two, mostly German or Austrian, Stafford Nye thought, one or two Americans. Just a few desultory words. Where people had come from or were going to, criticism or appreciation of the musical fare. Nobody wasted much time since the interval for eating had not been very long.

They returned to their seats for the two final musical offerings. A Symphonic Poem, ‘Disintegration in Joy’, by a new young composer, Solukonov, and then the solemn grandeur of the March of the Meistersingers.

They came out again into the night. The car which was at their disposal every day was waiting there to take them back to the small but exclusive hotel in the village street. Stafford Nye said good-night to Renata. She spoke to him in a lowered voice.

‘Four a.m.,’ she said. ‘Be ready.’

She went straight into her room and shut the door and he went to his.

The faint scrape of fingers on his door came precisely at three minutes to four the next morning. He opened the door and stood ready.

‘The car is waiting,’ she said. ‘Come.’

They lunched at a small mountain inn. The weather was good, the mountains beautiful. Occasionally Stafford Nye wondered what on earth he was doing here. He understood less and less of his travelling companion. She spoke little. He found himself watching her profile. Where was she taking him? What was her real reason? At last, as the sun was almost setting, he said:

‘Where are we going? Can I ask?’

‘You can ask, yes.’

‘But you do not reply?’

‘I could reply. I could tell you things, but would they mean anything? It seems to me that if you come to where we are going without my preparing you with explanations (which cannot in the nature of things mean anything), your first impressions will have more force and significance.’

He looked at her again thoughtfully. She was wearing a tweed coat trimmed with fur, smart travelling clothes, foreign in make and cut.

‘Mary Ann,’ he said thoughtfully.

There was a faint question in it.

‘No,’ she said, ‘not at the moment.’

‘Ah. You are still the Countess Zerkowski.’

‘At the moment I am still the Countess Zerkowski.’

‘Are you in your own part of the world?’

‘More or less. I grew up as a child in this part of the world. For a good portion of each year we used to come here in the autumn to a Schloss not very many miles from here.’

He smiled and said thoughtfully, ‘What a nice word it is. A Schloss. So solid-sounding.’

‘Schlösser are not standing very solidly nowadays. They are mostly disintegrated.’

‘This is Hitler’s country, isn’t it? We’re not far, are we, from Berchtesgaden?’

‘It lies over there to the north-east.’

‘Did your relations, your friends—did they accept Hitler, believe in him? Perhaps I ought not to ask things like that.’

‘They disliked him and all he stood for. But they said “Heil Hitler”. They acquiesced in what had happened to their country. What else could they do? What else could anybody do at that date?’

‘We are going towards the Dolomites, are we not?’

‘Does it matter where we are, or which way we are going?’

‘Well, this is a voyage of exploration, is it not?’

‘Yes, but the exploration is not geographical. We are going to see a personality.’

‘You make me feel—’ Stafford Nye looked up at the landscape of swelling mountains reaching up to the sky—‘as though we were going to visit the famous Old Man of the Mountain.’

‘The Master of the Assassins, you mean, who kept his followers under drugs so that they died for him wholeheartedly, so that they killed, knowing that they themselves would also be killed, but believing, too, that that would transfer them immediately to the Moslem Paradise—beautiful women, hashish and erotic dreams—perfect and unending happiness.’

She paused a minute and then said:

‘Spell-binders! I suppose they’ve always been there throughout the ages. People who make you believe in them so that you are ready to die for them. Not only Assassins. The Christians died also.’

‘The holy Martyrs? Lord Altamount?’

‘Why do you say Lord Altamount?’

‘I saw him that way—suddenly—that evening. Carved in stone—in a thirteenth-century cathedral, perhaps.’

‘One of us may have to die. Perhaps more.’

She stopped what he was about to say.

‘There is another thing I think of sometimes. A verse in the New Testament—Luke, I think. Christ at the Last Supper saying to his followers: “You are my companions and my friends, yet one of you is a devil.” So in all probability one of us is a devil.’

‘You think it possible?’

‘Almost certain. Someone we trust and know, but who goes to sleep at night, not dreaming of martyrdom but of thirty pieces of silver, and who wakes with the feel of them in the palm of his hand.’

‘The love of money?’

‘Ambition covers it better. How does one recognize a devil? How would one know? A devil would stand out in a crowd, would be exciting—would advertise himself—would exercise leadership.’

She was silent a moment and then said in a thoughtful voice:

‘I had a friend once in the Diplomatic Service who told me how she had said to a German woman how moved she herself had been at the performance of the Passion Play at Oberammergau. But the German woman said scornfully: “You do not understand. We Germans have no need of a Jesus Christ! We have our Adolf Hitler here with us. He is greater than any Jesus that ever lived.” She was quite a nice ordinary woman. But that is how she felt. Masses of people felt it. Hitler was a spell-binder. He spoke and they listened—and accepted the sadism, the gas chambers, the tortures of the Gestapo.’

She shrugged her shoulders and then said in her normal voice, 'All the same, it's odd that you should have said what you did just now.'

'What was that?'

'About the Old Man of the Mountain. The head of the Assassins.'

'Are you telling me there is an Old Man of the Mountain here?'

'No. Not an Old Man of the Mountain, but there might be an Old Woman of the Mountain.'

'An Old Woman of the Mountain. What's she like?'

'You'll see this evening.'

'What are we doing this evening?'

'Going into society,' said Renata.

'It seems a long time since you've been Mary Ann.'

'You'll have to wait till we're doing some air travel again.'

'I suppose it's very bad for one's morale,' Stafford Nye said thoughtfully, 'living high up in the world.'

'Are you talking socially?'

'No. Geographically. If you live in a castle on a mountain peak overlooking the world below you, well, it makes you despise the ordinary folk, doesn't it? You're the top one, you're the grand one. That's what Hitler felt in Berchtesgaden, that's what many people feel perhaps who climb mountains and look down on their fellow creatures in valleys below.'

'You must be careful tonight,' Renata warned him. 'It's going to be ticklish.'

'Any instructions?'

‘You’re a disgruntled man. You’re one that’s against the Establishment, against the conventional world. You’re a rebel, but a secret rebel. Can you do it?’

‘I can try.’

The scenery had grown wilder. The big car twisted and turned up the roads, passing through mountain villages, sometimes looking down on a bewilderingly distant view where lights shone on a river, where the steeples of churches showed in the distance.

‘Where are we going, Mary Ann?’

‘To an Eagle’s nest.’

The road took a final turn. It wound through a forest. Stafford Nye thought he caught glimpses now and again of deer or of animals of some kind. Occasionally, too, there were leather-jacketed men with guns. Keepers, he thought. And then they came finally to a view of an enormous Schloss standing on a crag. Some of it, he thought, was partially ruined, though most of it had been restored and rebuilt. It was both massive and magnificent but there was nothing new about it or in the message it held. It was representative of past power, power held through bygone ages.

‘This was originally the Grand Duchy of Liechtenstolz. The Schloss was built by the Grand Duke Ludwig in 1790,’ said Renata.

‘Who lives there now? The present Grand Duke?’

‘No. They’re all gone and done with. Swept away.’

‘And who lives here now then?’

‘Someone who has present-day power,’ said Renata.

‘Money?’

‘Yes. Very much so.’

‘Shall we meet Mr Robinson, flown on ahead by air to greet us?’

‘The last person you’ll meet here will be Mr Robinson, I can assure you.’

‘A pity,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘I like Mr Robinson. He’s quite something, isn’t he? Who is he really—what nationality is he?’

‘I don’t think anybody has ever known. Everyone tells one something different. Some people say he’s a Turk, some that he’s an Armenian, some that he’s Dutch, some that he’s just plain English. Some say that his mother was a Circassian slave, a Russian Grand-Duchess, an Indian Begum and so on. Nobody knows. One person told me that his mother was a Miss McLellan from Scotland. I think that’s as likely as anything.’

They had drawn up beneath a large portico. Two men-servants in livery came down the steps. Their bows were ostentatious as they welcomed the guests. The luggage was removed; they had a good deal of luggage with them. Stafford Nye had wondered to begin with why he had been told to bring so much, but he was beginning to understand now that from time to time there was need for it. There would, he thought, be need for it this evening. A few questioning remarks and his companion told him that this was so.

They met before dinner, summoned by the sound of a great resounding gong. As he paused in the hall, he waited for her to join him coming down the stairs. She was in full elaborate evening dress tonight, wearing a dark red velvet gown, rubies round her neck and a ruby tiara on her head. A manservant stepped forward and conducted them. Flinging open the door, he announced:

‘The Gräfin Zerkowski, Sir Stafford Nye.’

‘Here we come, and I hope we look the part,’ said Sir Stafford Nye to himself.

He looked down in a satisfied manner at the sapphire and diamond studs in the front of his shirt. A moment later he had drawn his breath in an astonished gasp. Whatever he had expected to see it had not been this. It

was an enormous room, rococo in style, chairs and sofas and hangings of the finest brocades and velvets. On the walls there were pictures that he could not recognize all at once, but where he noted almost immediately—for he was fond of pictures—what was certainly a Cézanne, a Matisse, possibly a Renoir. Pictures of inestimable value.

Sitting on a vast chair, throne-like in its suggestion, was an enormous woman. A whale of a woman, Stafford Nye thought, there really was no other word to describe her. A great, big, cheesy-looking woman, wallowing in fat. Double, treble, almost quadruple chins. She wore a dress of stiff orange satin. On her head was an elaborate crown-like tiara of precious stones. Her hands, which rested on the brocaded arms of her seat, were also enormous. Great, big, fat hands with great, big, fat, shapeless fingers. On each finger, he noticed, was a solitaire ring. And in each ring, he thought, was a genuine solitaire stone. A ruby, an emerald, a sapphire, a diamond, a pale green stone which he did not know, a chrysoprase, perhaps, a yellow stone which, if not a topaz, was a yellow diamond. She was horrible, he thought. She wallowed in her fat. A great, white, creased, slobbering mass of fat was her face. And set in it, rather like currants in a vast currant bun, were two small black eyes. Very shrewd eyes, looking on the world, appraising it, appraising him, not appraising Renata, he thought. Renata she knew. Renata was here by command, by appointment. However you liked to put it. Renata had been told to bring him here. He wondered why. He couldn't really think why, but he was quite sure of it. It was at him she was looking. She was appraising him, summing him up. Was he what she wanted? Was he, yes, he'd rather put it this way, was he what the customer had ordered?

I'll have to make quite sure that I know what it is she does want, he thought. I'll have to do my best, otherwise...Otherwise he could quite imagine that she might raise a fat ringed hand and say to one of the tall, muscular footmen: 'Take him and throw him over the battlements.' It's ridiculous, thought Stafford Nye. Such things can't happen nowadays. Where am I? What kind of a parade, a masquerade or a theatrical performance am I taking part in?

'You have come very punctual to time, child.'

It was a hoarse, asthmatic voice which had once had an undertone, he thought, of strength, possibly even of beauty. That was over now. Renata came forward, made a slight curtsy. She picked up the fat hand and dropped a courtesy kiss upon it.

‘Let me present to you Sir Stafford Nye. The Gräfin Charlotte von Waldsausen.’

The fat hand was extended towards him. He bent over it in the foreign style. Then she said something that surprised him.

‘I know your great-aunt,’ she said.

He looked astounded, and he saw immediately that she was amused by that, but he saw too, that she had expected him to be surprised by it. She laughed, a rather queer, grating laugh. Not attractive.

‘Shall we say, I used to know her. It is many, many years since I have seen her. We were in Switzerland together, at Lausanne, as girls. Matilda. Lady Matilda Baldwen-White.’

‘What a wonderful piece of news to take home with me,’ said Stafford Nye.

‘She is older than I am. She is in good health?’

‘For her age, in very good health. She lives in the country quietly. She has arthritis, rheumatism.’

‘Ah yes, all the ills of old age. She should have injections of procaine. That is what the doctors do here in this altitude. It is very satisfactory. Does she know that you are visiting me?’

‘I imagine that she has not the least idea of it,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘She knew only that I was going to this festival of modern music.’

‘Which you enjoyed, I hope?’

‘Oh, enormously. It is a fine Festival Opera Hall, is it not?’

‘One of the finest. Pah! It makes the old Bayreuth Festival Hall look like a comprehensive school! Do you know what it cost to build, that Opera House?’

She mentioned a sum in millions of marks. It quite took Stafford Nye’s breath away, but he was under no necessity to conceal that. She was pleased with the effect it made upon him.

‘With money,’ she said, ‘if one knows, if one has the ability, if one has the discrimination, what is there that money cannot do? It can give one the best.’

She said the last two words with a rich enjoyment, a kind of smacking of the lips which he found both unpleasant and at the same time slightly sinister.

‘I see that here,’ he said, as he looked round the walls.

‘You are fond of art? Yes, I see you are. There, on the east wall is the finest Cézanne in the world today. Some say that the—ah, I forget the name of it at the moment, the one in the Metropolitan in New York—is finer. That is not true. The best Matisse, the best Cézanne, the best of all that great school of art are here. Here in my mountain eyrie.’

‘It is wonderful,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘Quite wonderful.’

Drinks were being handed round. The Old Woman of the Mountain, Sir Stafford Nye noticed, did not drink anything. It was possible, he thought, that she feared to take any risks over her blood pressure with that vast weight.

‘And where did you meet this child?’ asked the mountainous Dragon.

Was it a trap? He did not know, but he made his decision.

‘At the American Embassy, in London.’

‘Ah yes, so I heard. And how is—ah, I forget her name now—ah yes, Milly Jean, our southern heiress? Attractive, did you think?’

‘Most charming. She has a great success in London.’

‘And poor dull Sam Cortman, the United States Ambassador?’

‘A very sound man, I’m sure,’ said Stafford Nye politely.

She chuckled.

‘Aha, you’re tactful, are you not? Ah well, he does well enough. He does what he is told as a good politician should. And it is enjoyable to be Ambassador in London. She could do that for him, Milly Jean. Ah, she could get him an Embassy anywhere in the world, with that well-stuffed purse of hers. Her father owns half the oil in Texas, he owns land, goldfields, everything. A coarse, singularly ugly man—But what does she look like? A gentle little aristocrat. Not blatant, not rich. That is very clever of her, is it not?’

‘Sometimes it presents no difficulties,’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

‘And you? You are not rich?’

‘I wish I was.’

‘The Foreign Office nowadays, it is not, shall we say, very rewarding?’

‘Oh well, I would not put it like that...After all, one goes places, one meets amusing people, one sees the world, one sees something of what goes on.’

‘Something, yes. But not everything.’

‘That would be very difficult.’

‘Have you ever wished to see what—how shall I put it—what goes on behind the scenes in life?’

‘One has an idea sometimes.’ He made his voice non-committal.

‘I have heard it said that that is true of you, that you have sometimes ideas about things. Not perhaps the conventional ideas?’

‘There have been times when I’ve been made to feel the bad boy of the family,’ said Stafford Nye and laughed.

Old Charlotte chuckled.

‘You don’t mind admitting things now and again, do you?’

‘Why pretend? People always know what you’re concealing.’

She looked at him.

‘What do you want out of life, young man?’

He shrugged his shoulders. Here again, he had to play things by ear.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Come now, come now, am I to believe that?’

‘Yes, you can believe it. I am not ambitious. Do I look ambitious?’

‘No, I will admit that.’

‘I ask only to be amused, to live comfortably, to eat, to drink in moderation, to have friends who amuse me.’

The old woman leant forward. Her eyes snapped open and shut three or four times. Then she spoke in a rather different voice. It was like a whistling note.

‘Can you hate? Are you capable of hating?’

‘To hate is a waste of time.’

‘I see. I see. There are no lines of discontent in your face. That is true enough. All the same, I think you are ready to take a certain path which will lead you to a certain place, and you will go along it smiling, as though you did not care, but all the same, in the end, if you find the right advisers, the

right helpers, you might attain what you want, if you are capable of wanting.'

'As to that,' said Stafford Nye, 'who isn't?' He shook his head at her very gently. 'You see too much,' he said. 'Much too much.'

Footmen threw open a door.

'Dinner is served.'

The proceedings were properly formal. They had indeed almost a royal tinge about them. The big doors at the far end of the room were flung open, showing through to a brightly lighted ceremonial dining-room, with a painted ceiling and three enormous chandeliers. Two middle-aged women approached the Gräfin, one on either side. They wore evening dress, their grey hair was carefully piled on their heads, each wore a diamond brooch. To Sir Stafford Nye, all the same, they brought a faint flavour of wardresses. They were, he thought, not so much security guards as perhaps high-class nursing attendants in charge of the health, the toilet and other intimate details of the Gräfin Charlotte's existence. After respectful bows, each one of them slipped an arm below the shoulder and elbow of the sitting woman. With the ease of long practice aided by the effort which was obviously as much as she could make, they raised her to her feet in a dignified fashion.

'We will go in to dinner now,' said Charlotte.

With her two female attendants, she led the way. On her feet she looked even more a mass of wobbling jelly, yet she was still formidable. You could not dispose of her in your mind as just a fat old woman. She was somebody, knew she was somebody, intended to be somebody. Behind the three of them he and Renata followed.

As they entered through the portals of the dining-room, he felt it was almost more a banquet hall than a dining-room. There was a bodyguard here. Tall, fair-haired, handsome young men. They wore some kind of uniform. As Charlotte entered there was a clash as one and all drew their swords. They cross them overhead to make a passageway, and Charlotte, steadying

herself, passed along that passageway, released by her attendants and making her progress solo to a vast carved chair with gold fittings and upholstered in golden brocade at the head of the long table. It was rather like a wedding procession, Stafford Nye thought. A naval or military one. In this case surely, military, strictly military—but lacking a bridegroom.

They were all young men of super physique. None of them, he thought, was older than thirty. They had good looks, their health was evident. They did not smile, they were entirely serious, they were—he thought of a word for it—yes, dedicated. Perhaps not so much a military procession as a religious one. The servitors appeared, old-fashioned servitors belonging, he thought, to the Schloss's past, to a time before the 1939 war. It was like a super production of a period historic play. And queening over it, sitting in the chair or the throne or whatever you liked to call it, at the head of the table, was not a queen or an empress but an old woman noticeable mainly for her avoirdupois weight and her extraordinary and intense ugliness. Who was she? What was she doing here? Why?

Why all this masquerade, why this bodyguard, a security bodyguard perhaps? Other diners came to the table. They bowed to the monstrosity on the presiding throne and took their places. They wore ordinary evening dress. No introductions were made.

Stafford Nye, after long years of sizing up people, assessed them. Different types. A great many different types. Lawyers, he was certain. Several lawyers. Possibly accountants or financiers; one or two army officers in plain clothes. They were of the Household, he thought, but they were also in the old-fashioned feudal sense of the term those who 'sat below the salt'.

Food came. A vast boar's head pickled in aspic, venison, a cool refreshing lemon sorbet, a magnificent edifice of pastry—a super millefeuille that seemed of unbelievable confectionary richness.

The vast woman ate, ate greedily, hungrily, enjoying her food. From outside came a new sound. The sound of the powerful engine of a super sports car. It passed the windows in a white flash. There came a cry inside the room from the bodyguard. A great cry of 'Heil! Heil! Heil Franz!'

The bodyguard of young men moved with the ease of a military manoeuvre known by heart. Everyone had risen to their feet. Only the old woman sat without moving, her head lifted high, on her dais. And, so Stafford Nye thought, a new excitement now permeated the room.

The other guests, or the other members of the household, whatever they were, disappeared in a way that somehow reminded Stafford of lizards disappearing into the cracks of a wall. The golden-haired boys formed a new figure, their swords flew out, they saluted their patroness, she bowed her head in acknowledgment, their swords were sheathed and they turned, permission given, to march out through the door of the room. Her eyes followed them, then went first to Renata, and then to Stafford Nye.

‘What do you think of them?’ she said. ‘My boys, my youth corps, my children. Yes, my children. Have you a word that can describe them?’

‘I think so,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘Magnificent.’ He spoke to her as to Royalty. ‘Magnificent, ma’am.’

‘Ah!’ She bowed her head. She smiled, the wrinkles multiplying all over her face. It made her look exactly like a crocodile.

A terrible woman, he thought, a terrible woman, impossible, dramatic. Was any of this happening? He couldn’t believe it was. What could this be but yet another festival hall in which a production was being given.

The doors clashed open again. The yellow-haired band of the young supermen marched as before through it. This time they did not wield swords, instead they sang. Sang with unusual beauty of tone and voice.

After a good many years of pop music Stafford Nye felt an incredulous pleasure. Trained voices, these. Not raucous shouting. Trained by masters of the singing art. Not allowed to strain their vocal cords, to be off key. They might be the new Heroes of a New World, but what they sang was not new music. It was music he had heard before. An arrangement of the Preislied, there must be a concealed orchestra somewhere, he thought, in a gallery round the top of the room. It was an arrangement or adaptation of various

Wagnerian themes. It passed from the Preislied to the distant echoes of the Rhine music.

The Elite Corps made once more a double lane where somebody was expected to make an entrance. It was not the old Empress this time. She sat on her dais awaiting whoever was coming.

And at last he came. The music changed as he came. It gave out that motif which by now Stafford Nye had got by heart. The melody of the Young Siegfried. Siegfried's horn call, rising up in its youth and its triumph, its mastery of a new world which the young Siegfried came to conquer.

Through the doorway, marching up between the lines of what were clearly his followers, came one of the handsomest young men Stafford Nye had ever seen. Golden-haired, blue-eyed, perfectly proportioned, conjured up as it were by the wave of a magician's wand, he came forth out of the world of myth. Myth, heroes, resurrection, rebirth, it was all there. His beauty, his strength, his incredible assurance and arrogance.

He strode through the double lines of his bodyguard, until he stood before the hideous mountain of womanhood that sat there on her throne; he knelt on one knee, raised her hand to his lips, and then rising to his feet, he threw up one arm in salutation and uttered the cry that Stafford Nye had heard from the others. 'Heil!' His German was not very clear, but Stafford Nye thought he distinguished the syllables 'Heil to the great mother!'

Then the handsome young hero looked from one side to the other. There was some faint recognition, though an uninterested one, of Renata, but when his gaze turned to Stafford Nye, there was definite interest and appraisal. Caution, thought Stafford Nye. Caution! He must play his part right now. Play the part that was expected of him. Only—what the hell was that part? What was he doing here? What were he or the girl supposed to be doing here? Why had they come?

The hero spoke.

'So,' he said, 'we have guests!' And he added, smiling with the arrogance of a young man who knows that he is vastly superior to any other person in

the world. 'Welcome, guests, welcome to you both.'

Somewhere in the depths of the Schloss a great bell began tolling. It had no funereal sound about it, but it had a disciplinary air. The feeling of a monastery summoned to some holy office.

'We must sleep now,' said old Charlotte. 'Sleep. We will meet again tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock.'

She looked towards Renata and Sir Stafford Nye.

'You will be shown to your rooms. I hope you will sleep well.'

It was the Royal dismissal.

Stafford Nye saw Renata's arm fly up in the Fascist salute, but it was addressed not to Charlotte, but to the golden-haired boy. He thought she said: 'Heil Franz Joseph.' He copied her gesture and he, too, said 'Heil!'

Charlotte spoke to them.

'Would it please you tomorrow morning to start the day with a ride through the forest?'

'I should like it of all things,' said Stafford Nye.

'And you, child?'

'Yes, I too.'

'Very good then. It shall be arranged. Good night to you both. I am glad to welcome you here. Franz Joseph—give me your arm. We will go into the Chinese Boudoir. We have much to discuss, and you will have to leave in good time tomorrow morning.'

The menservants escorted Renata and Stafford Nye to their apartments. Nye hesitated for a moment on the threshold. Would it be possible for them to have a word or two now? He decided against it. As long as the castle walls

surrounded them it was well to be careful. One never knew—each room might be wired with microphones.

Sooner or later, though, he had to ask questions. Certain things aroused a new and sinister apprehension in his mind. He was being persuaded, inveigled into something. But what? And whose doing was it?

The bedrooms were handsome, yet oppressive. The rich hangings of satin and velvets, some of them antique, gave out a faint perfume of decay, tempered by spices. He wondered how often Renata had stayed here before.

Chapter 11

The Young And The Lovely

After breakfasting on the following morning in a small breakfast-room downstairs, he found Renata waiting for him. The horses were at the door.

Both of them had brought riding clothes with them. Everything they could possibly require seemed to have been intelligently anticipated.

They mounted and rode away down the castle drive. Renata spoke with the groom at some length.

‘He asked if we would like him to accompany us but I said no. I know the tracks round here fairly well.’

‘I see. You have been here before?’

‘Not very often of late years. Early in my life I knew this place very well.’

He gave her a sharp look. She did not return it. As she rode beside him, he watched her profile—the thin, aquiline nose, the head carried so proudly on the slender neck. She rode a horse well, he saw that.

All the same, there was a sense of ill ease in his mind this morning. He wasn’t sure why...

His mind went back to the Airport Lounge. The woman who had come to stand beside him. The glass of Pilsner on the table...Nothing in it that there shouldn’t have been—neither then, nor later. A risk he had accepted. Why, when all that was long over, should it rouse uneasiness in him now?

They had a brief canter following a ride through the trees. A beautiful property, beautiful woods. In the distance he saw horned animals. A paradise for a sportsman, a paradise for the old way of living, a paradise that contained—what? A serpent? As it was in the beginning—with Paradise

went a serpent. He drew rein and the horses fell to a walk. He and Renata were alone—no microphones, no listening walls—The time had come for his questions.

‘Who is she?’ he said urgently. ‘What is she?’

‘It’s easy to answer. So easy that it’s hardly believable.’

‘Well?’ he said.

‘She’s oil. Copper. Goldmines in South Africa. Armaments in Sweden. Uranium deposits in the north. Nuclear development, vast stretches of cobalt. She’s all those things.’

‘And yet, I hadn’t heard about her, I didn’t know her name, I didn’t know—’

‘She has not wanted people to know.’

‘Can one keep such things quiet?’

‘Easily, if you have enough copper and oil and nuclear deposits and armaments and all the rest of it. Money can advertise, or money can keep secrets, can hush things up.’

‘But who actually is she?’

‘Her grandfather was American. He was mainly railways, I think. Possibly Chicago hogs in those times. It’s like going back into history, finding out. He married a German woman. You’ve heard of her, I expect. Big Belinda, they used to christen her. Armaments, shipping, the whole industrial wealth of Europe. She was her father’s heiress.’

‘Between those two, unbelievable wealth,’ said Sir Stafford Nye. ‘And so—power. Is that what you’re telling me?’

‘Yes. She didn’t just inherit things, you know. She made money as well. She’d inherited brains, she was a big financier in her own right. Everything she touched multiplied itself. Turned to incredible sums of money, and she invested them. Taking advice, taking other people’s judgment, but in the

end always using her own. And always prospering. Always adding to her wealth so that it was too fabulous to be believed. Money creates money.'

'Yes, I can understand that. Wealth has to increase if there's a superfluity of it. But—what did she want? What has she got?'

'You said it just now. Power.'

'And she lives here? Or does she—?'

'She visits America and Sweden. Oh yes, she visits places, but not often. This is where she prefers to be, in the centre of a web like a vast spider controlling all the threads. The threads of finance. Other threads too.'

'When you say, other threads—'

'The arts. Music, pictures, writers. Human beings—young human beings.'

'Yes. One might know that. Those pictures, a wonderful collection.'

'There are galleries of them upstairs in the Schloss. There are Rembrandts and Giotto's and Raphaels and there are cases of jewels—some of the most wonderful jewels in the world.'

'All belonging to one ugly, gross old woman. Is she satisfied?'

'Not yet, but well on the way to being.'

'Where is she going, what does she want?'

'She loves youth. That is her mode of power. To control youth. The world is full of rebellious youth at this moment. That's been helped on. Modern philosophy, modern thought, writers and others whom she finances and controls.'

'But how can—?' He stopped.

'I can't tell you because I don't know. It's an enormous ramification. She's behind it in one sense, supports rather curious charities, earnest

philanthropists and idealists, raises innumerable grants for students and artists and writers.'

'And yet you say it's not—'

'No, it's not yet complete. It's a great upheaval that's being planned. It's believed in, it's the new heaven and the new earth. That's what's been promised by leaders for thousands of years. Promised by religions, promised by those who support Messiahs, promised by those who come back to teach the law, like the Buddha. Promised by politicians. The crude heaven of an easy attainment such as the Assassins believed in, and the Old Man of the Assassins promised his followers and, from their point of view, gave to them.'

'Is she behind drugs as well?'

'Yes. Without conviction, of course. Only a means of having people bent to her will. It's one way, too, of destroying people. The weak ones. The ones she thinks are no good, although they had once shown promise. She'd never take drugs herself—she's strong. But drugs destroy weak people more easily and naturally than anything else.'

'And force? What about force? You can't do everything by propaganda.'

'No, of course not. Propaganda is the first stage and behind it there are vast armaments piling up. Arms that go to deprived countries and then on elsewhere. Tanks and guns and nuclear weapons that go to Africa and the South Seas and South America. In South America there's a lot building up. Forces of young men and women drilling and training. Enormous arms dumps—means of chemical warfare—'

'It's a nightmare! How do you know all this, Renata?'

'Partly because I've been told it; from information received, partly because I have been instrumental in proving some of it.'

'But you. You and she?'

‘There’s always something idiotic behind all great and vast projects.’ She laughed suddenly. ‘Once, you see, she was in love with my grandfather. A foolish story. He lived in this part of the world. He had a castle a mile or two from here.’

‘Was he a man of genius?’

‘Not at all. He was just a very good sportsman. Handsome, dissolute and attractive to women. And so, because of that, she is in a sense my protectress. And I am one of her converts or slaves! I work for her. I find people for her. I carry out her commands in different parts of the world.’

‘Do you?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I wondered,’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

He did wonder. He looked at Renata and he thought again of the airport. He was working for Renata, he was working with Renata. She had brought him to this Schloss. Who had told her to bring him here? Big, gross Charlotte in the middle of her spider’s web? He had had a reputation, a reputation of being unsound in certain diplomatic quarters. He could be useful to these people perhaps, but useful in a small and rather humiliating way. And he thought suddenly, in a kind of fog of question marks: Renata??? I took a risk with her at Frankfurt airport. But I was right. It came off. Nothing happened to me. But all the same, he thought, who is she? What is she? I don’t know. I can’t be sure. One can’t in the world today be sure of anyone. Anyone at all. She was told perhaps to get me. To get me into the hollow of her hand, so that business at Frankfurt might have been cleverly thought out. It fitted in with my sense of risk, and it would make me sure of her. It would make me trust her.

‘Let’s canter again,’ she said. ‘We’ve walked the horses too long.’

‘I haven’t asked you what you are in all this?’

‘I take orders.’

‘From whom?’

‘There’s an opposition. There’s always an opposition. There are people who have a suspicion of what’s going on, of how the world is going to be made to change, of how with money, wealth, armaments, idealism, great trumpeting words of power that’s going to happen. There are people who say it shall not happen.’

‘And you are with them?’

‘I say so.’

‘What do you mean by that, Renata?’

She said, ‘I say so.’

He said: ‘That young man last night—’

‘Franz Joseph?’

‘Is that his name?’

‘It is the name he is known by.’

‘But he has another name, hasn’t he?’

‘Do you think so?’

‘He is, isn’t he, the young Siegfried?’

‘You saw him like that? You realized that’s what he was, what he stands for?’

‘I think so. Youth. Heroic youth. Aryan youth, it has to be Aryan youth in this part of the world. There is still that point of view. A super race, the supermen. They must be of Aryan descent.’

‘Oh yes, it’s lasted on from the time of Hitler. It doesn’t always come out into the open much and, in other places all over the world, it isn’t stressed

so much. South America, as I say, is one of the strongholds. And Peru and South Africa also.'

'What does the young Siegfried do? What does he do besides look handsome and kiss the hand of his protectress?'

'Oh, he's quite an orator. He speaks and his following would follow him to death.'

'Is that true?'

'He believes it.'

'And you?'

'I think I might believe it.' She added: 'Oratory is very frightening, you know. What a voice can do, what words can do, and not particularly convincing words at that. The way they are said. His voice rings like a bell, and women cry and scream and faint away when he addresses them—you'll see that for yourself.'

'You saw Charlotte's Bodyguard last night all dressed up—people do love dressing up nowadays. You'll see them all over the world in their own chosen get-up, different in different places, some with their long hair and their beards, and girls in their streaming white nightgowns, talking of peace and beauty, and the wonderful world that is the world of the young which is to be theirs when they've destroyed enough of the old world. The original Country of the Young was west of the Irish Sea, wasn't it? A very simple place, a different Country of the Young from what we're planning now—It was silver sands, and sunshine and singing in the waves...

'But now we want Anarchy, and breaking down and destroying. Only Anarchy can benefit those who march behind it. It's frightening, it's also wonderful—because of its violence, because it's bought with pain and suffering—'

'So that is how you see the world today?'

‘Sometimes.’

‘And what am I to do next?’

‘Come with your guide. I’m your guide. Like Virgil with Dante, I’ll take you down into hell, I’ll show you the sadistic films partly copied from the old SS, show you cruelty and pain and violence worshipped. And I’ll show you the great dreams of paradise in peace and beauty. You won’t know which is which and what is what. But you’ll have to make up your mind.’

‘Do I trust you, Renata?’

‘That will be your choice. You can run away from me if you like, or you can stay with me and see the new world. The new world that’s in the making.’

‘Pasteboard,’ said Sir Stafford Nye violently.

She looked at him inquiringly.

‘Like Alice in Wonderland. The cards, the pasteboard cards all rising up in the air. Flying about. Kings and Queens and Knaves. All sorts of things.’

‘You mean—what do you mean exactly?’

‘I mean it isn’t real. It’s make-believe. The whole damn thing is make-believe.’

‘In one sense, yes.’

‘All dressed up playing parts, putting on a show. I’m getting nearer, aren’t I, to the meaning of things?’

‘In a way, yes, and in a way, no—’

‘There’s one thing I’d like to ask you because it puzzles me. Big Charlotte ordered you to bring me to see her—why? What did she know about me? What use did she think she could make of me?’

‘I don’t quite know—possibly a kind of Eminence Grise—working behind a façade. That would suit you rather well.’

‘But she knows nothing whatever about me!’

‘Oh, that!’ Suddenly Renata went into peals of laughter. ‘It’s so ridiculous, really—the same old nonsense all over again.’

‘I don’t understand you, Renata.’

‘No—because it’s so simple. Mr Robinson would understand.’

‘Would you kindly explain what you are talking about?’

‘It’s the same old business—“It’s not what you are. It’s who you know”. Your Great-Aunt Matilda and Big Charlotte were at school together—’

‘You actually mean—’

‘Girls together.’

He stared at her. Then he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

Chapter 12

Court Jester

They left the Schloss at midday, saying goodbye to their hostess. Then they had driven down the winding road, leaving the Schloss high above them and they had come at last, after many hours of driving, to a stronghold in the Dolomites—an amphitheatre in the mountains where meetings, concerts and reunions of the various Youth Groups were held.

Renata had brought him there, his guide, and from his seat on the bare rock he had watched what went on and had listened. He understood a little more what she had been talking about earlier that day. This great mass gathering, animated as all mass gatherings can be whether they are called by an evangelistic religious leader in Madison Square, New York, or in the shadow of a Welsh church or in a football crowd or in the super demonstrations which marched to attack embassies and police and universities and all the rest of it.

She had brought him there to show him the meaning of that one phrase: 'The Young Siegfried'.

Franz Joseph, if that was really his name, had addressed the crowd. His voice, rising, falling, with its curious exciting quality, its emotional appeal, had held sway over that groaning, almost moaning crowd of young women and young men. Every word that he had uttered had seemed pregnant with meaning, had held incredible appeal. The crowd had responded like an orchestra. His voice had been the baton of the conductor. And yet, what had the boy said? What had been the young Siegfried's message? There were no words that he could remember when it came to an end, but he knew that he had been moved, promised things, roused to enthusiasm. And now it was over. The crowd had surged round the rocky platform, calling, crying out. Some of the girls had been screaming with enthusiasm. Some of them had fainted. What a world it was nowadays, he thought. Everything used the whole time to arouse emotion. Discipline? Restraint? None of those things counted for anything any more. Nothing mattered but to feel.

What sort of a world, thought Stafford Nye, could that make?

His guide had touched him on the arm and they had disentangled themselves from the crowd. They had found their car and the driver had taken them by roads with which he was evidently well acquainted, to a town and an inn on a mountain side where rooms had been reserved for them.

They walked out of the inn presently and up the side of a mountain by a well-trodden path until they came to a seat. They sat there for some moments in silence. It was then that Stafford Nye had said again, 'Pasteboard.'

For some five minutes or so they sat looking down the valley, then Renata said, 'Well?'

'What are you asking me?'

'What you think so far of what I have shown you?'

'I'm not convinced,' said Stafford Nye.

She gave a sigh, a deep, unexpected sigh.

'That's what I hoped you would say.'

'It's none of it true, is it? It's a gigantic show. A show put on by a producer—a complete group of producers, perhaps.

'That monstrous woman pays the producer, hires the producer. We've not seen the producer. What we've seen today is the star performer.'

'What do you think of him?'

'He's not real either,' said Stafford Nye. 'He's just an actor. A first-class actor, superbly produced.'

A sound surprised him. It was Renata laughing. She got up from her seat. She looked suddenly excited, happy, and at the same time faintly ironical.

‘I knew it,’ she said. ‘I knew you’d see. I knew you’d have your feet on the ground. You’ve always known, haven’t you, about everything you’ve met in life? You’ve known humbug, you’ve known everything and everyone for what they really are.’

‘No need to go to Stratford and see Shakespearean plays to know what part you are cast for—The Kings and the great men have to have a Jester—The King’s Jester who tells the King the truth, and talks common sense, and makes fun of all the things that are taking in other people.’

‘So that’s what I am, is it? A Court Jester?’

‘Can’t you feel it yourself? That’s what we want—That’s what we need. “Pasteboard,” you said. “Cardboard”. A vast, well-produced, splendid show! And how right you are. But people are taken in. They think something’s wonderful, or they think something’s devilish, or they think it’s something terribly important. Of course it isn’t—only—only one’s got to find out just how to show people—that the whole thing, all of it, is just silly. Just damn silly. That’s what you and I are going to do.’

‘Is it your idea that in the end we debunk all this?’

‘It seems wildly unlikely, I agree. But you know once people are shown that something isn’t real, that it’s just one enormous leg-pull, well—’

‘Are you proposing to preach a gospel of common sense?’

‘Of course not,’ said Renata. ‘Nobody’d listen to that, would they?’

‘Not just at present.’

‘No. We’ll have to give them evidence—facts—truth—’

‘Have we got such things?’

‘Yes. What I brought back with me via Frankfurt—what you helped to bring safely into England—’

‘I don’t understand—’

‘Not yet—You will know later. For now we’ve got a part to play. We’re ready and willing, fairly panting to be indoctrinated. We worship youth. We’re followers and believers in the young Siegfried.’

‘You can put that over, no doubt. I’m not so sure about myself. I’ve never been very successful as a worshipper of anything. The King’s Jester isn’t. He’s the great debunker. Nobody’s going to appreciate that very much just now, are they?’

‘Of course they’re not. No. You don’t let that side of yourself show. Except, of course, when talking about your masters and betters, politicians and diplomats, Foreign Office, the Establishment, all the other things. Then you can be embittered, malicious, witty, slightly cruel.’

‘I still don’t see my rôle in the world crusade.’

‘That’s a very ancient one, the one that everybody understands and appreciates. Something in it for you. That’s your line. You haven’t been appreciated in the past, but the young Siegfried and all he stands for will hold out the hope of reward to you. Because you give him all the inside dope he wants about your own country, he will promise you places of power in that country in the good times to come.’

‘You insinuate that this is a world movement. Is that true?’

‘Of course it is. Rather like one of those hurricanes, you know, that have names. Flora or Little Annie. They come up out of the south or the north or the east or the west, but they come up from nowhere and destroy everything. That’s what everyone wants. In Europe and Asia and America. Perhaps Africa, though there won’t be so much enthusiasm there. They’re fairly new to power and graft and things. Oh yes, it’s a world movement all right. Run by youth and all the intense vitality of youth. They haven’t got knowledge and they haven’t got experience, but they’ve got vision and vitality, and they’re backed by money. Rivers and rivers of money pouring in. There’s been too much materialism, so we’ve asked for something else, and we’ve got it. But as it’s based on hate, it can’t get anywhere. It can’t move off the ground. Don’t you remember in 1919 everyone going about with a rapt face saying Communism was the answer to everything. That

Marxist doctrine would produce a new heaven brought down to a new earth. So many noble ideas flowing about. But then, you see, whom have you got to work out the ideas with? After all, only the same human beings you've always had. You can create a third world now, or so everyone thinks, but the third world will have the same people in it as the first world or the second world or whatever names you like to call things. And when you have the same human beings running things, they'll run them the same way. You've only got to look at history.'

'Does anybody care to look at history nowadays?'

'No. They'd much rather look forward to an unforeseeable future. Science was once going to be the answer to everything. Freudian beliefs and unrepressed sex would be the next answer to human misery. There'd be no more people with mental troubles. If anyone had said that mental homes would be even fuller as the result of shutting out repressions nobody would have believed him.'

Stafford Nye interrupted her:

'I want to know something,' said Sir Stafford Nye.

'What is it?'

'Where are we going next?'

'South America. Possibly Pakistan or India on the way. And we must certainly go to the USA. There's a lot going on there that's very interesting indeed. Especially in California—'

'Universities?' Sir Stafford sighed. 'One gets very tired of universities. They repeat themselves so much.'

They sat silent for some minutes. The light was failing, but a mountain peak showed softly red.

Stafford Nye said in a nostalgic tone:

‘If we had some more music now—this moment—do you know what I’d order?’

‘More Wagner? Or have you torn yourself free from Wagner?’

‘No—you’re quite right—more Wagner. I’d have Hans Sachs sitting under his elder tree, saying of the world: “Mad, mad, all mad”—’

‘Yes—that expresses it. It’s lovely music, too. But we’re not mad. We’re sane.’

‘Eminently sane,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘That is going to be the difficulty. There’s one more thing I want to know.’

‘Well?’

‘Perhaps you won’t tell me. But I’ve got to know. Is there going to be any fun to be got out of this mad business that we’re attempting?’

‘Of course there is. Why not?’

‘Mad, mad, all mad—but we’ll enjoy it all very much. Will our lives be long, Mary Ann?’

‘Probably not,’ said Renata.

‘That’s the spirit. I’m with you, my comrade, and my guide. Shall we get a better world as a result of our efforts?’

‘I shouldn’t think so, but it might be a kinder one. It’s full of beliefs without kindness at present.’

‘Good enough,’ said Stafford Nye. ‘Onward!’

Book 3

At Home And Abroad

Chapter 13

Conference In Paris

In a room in Paris five men were sitting. It was a room that had seen historic meetings before. Quite a number of them. This meeting was in many ways a meeting of a different kind yet it promised to be no less historic.

Monsieur Grosjean was presiding. He was a worried man doing his best to slide over things with facility and a charm of manner that had often helped him in the past. He did not feel it was helping him so much today. Signor Vitelli had arrived from Italy by air an hour before. His gestures were feverish, his manner unbalanced.

‘It is beyond anything,’ he was saying, ‘it is beyond anything one could have imagined.’

‘These students,’ said Monsieur Grosjean, ‘do we not all suffer?’

‘This is more than students. It is beyond students. What can one compare this to? A swarm of bees. A disaster of nature intensified. Intensified beyond anything one could have imagined. They march. They have machine-guns. Somewhere they have acquired planes. They propose to take over the whole of North Italy. But it is madness, that! They are children—nothing more. And yet they have bombs, explosives. In the city of Milan alone they outnumber the police. What can we do, I ask you? The military? The army too—it is in revolt. They say they are with les jeunes. They say there is no hope for the world except in anarchy. They talk of something they call the Third World, but this cannot just happen.’

Monsieur Grosjean sighed. ‘It is very popular among the young,’ he said, ‘the anarchy. A belief in anarchy. We know that from the days of Algeria, from all the troubles from which our country and our colonial empire has suffered. And what can we do? The military? In the end they back the students.’

‘The students, ah, the students,’ said Monsieur Poissonier.

He was a member of the French government to whom the word ‘student’ was anathema. If he had been asked he would have admitted to a preference for Asian ‘flu or even an outbreak of bubonic plague. Either was preferable in his mind to the activities of students. A world with no students in it! That was what Monsieur Poissonier sometimes dreamt about. They were good dreams, those. They did not occur often enough.

‘As for magistrates,’ said Monsieur Grosjean, ‘what has happened to our judicial authorities? The police—yes, they are loyal still, but the judiciary, they will not impose sentences, not on young men who are brought before them, young men who have destroyed property, government property, private property—every kind of property. And why not, one would like to know? I have been making inquiries lately. The Préfecture have suggested certain things to me. An increase is needed, they say, in the standard of living among judiciary authorities, especially in the provincial areas.’

‘Come, come,’ said Monsieur Poissonier, ‘you must be careful what you suggest.’

‘Ma foi, why should I be careful? Things need bringing into the open. We have had frauds before, gigantic frauds and there is money now circulating around. Money, and we do not know where it comes from, but the Préfecture have said to me—and I believe it—that they begin to get an idea of where it is going. Do we contemplate, can we contemplate a corrupt state subsidized from some outside source?’

‘In Italy too,’ said Signor Vitelli, ‘in Italy, ah, I could tell you things. Yes, I could tell you of what we suspect. But who, who is corrupting our world? A group of industrialists, a group of tycoons? How could such a thing be so.’

‘This business has got to stop,’ said Monsieur Grosjean. ‘Action must be taken. Military action. Action from the Air Force. These anarchists, these marauders, they come from every class. It must be put down.’

‘Control by tear gas has been fairly successful,’ said Poissonier dubiously.

‘Tear gas is not enough,’ said Monsieur Grosjean. ‘The same result could be got by setting students to peel bunches of onions. Tears would flow from their eyes. It needs more than that.’

Monsieur Poissonier said in a shocked voice:

‘You are not suggesting the use of nuclear weapons?’

‘Nuclear weapons? Quelle blague! What can we do with nuclear weapons. What would become of the soil of France, of the air of France if we use nuclear weapons? We can destroy Russia, we know that. We also know that Russia can destroy us.’

‘You’re not suggesting that groups of marching and demonstrating students could destroy our authoritarian forces?’

‘That is exactly what I am suggesting. I have had a warning of such things. Of stock-piling of arms, and various forms of chemical warfare and of other things. I have had reports from some of our eminent scientists. Secrets are known. Stores—held in secret—weapons of warfare have been stolen. What is to happen next, I ask you. What is to happen next?’

The question was answered unexpectedly and with more rapidity than Monsieur Grosjean could possibly have calculated. The door opened and his principal secretary approached his master, his face showing urgent concern. Monsieur Grosjean looked at him with displeasure.

‘Did I not say I wanted no interruptions?’

‘Yes indeed, Monsieur le Président, but this is somewhat unusual—’ He bent towards his master’s ear. ‘The Marshal is here. He demands entrance.’

‘The Marshal? You mean—’

The secretary nodded his head vigorously several times to show that he did mean. Monsieur Poissonier looked at his colleague in perplexity.

‘He demands admission. He will not take refusal.’

The two other men in the room looked first at Grosjean and then at the agitated Italian.

‘Would it not be better,’ said Monsieur Coin, the Minister for Home Affairs, ‘if—’

He paused at the ‘if ’ as the door was once more flung open and a man strode in. A very well-known man. A man whose word had been not only law, but above law in the country of France for many past years. To see him at this moment was an unwelcome surprise for those sitting there.

‘Ah, I welcome you, dear colleagues,’ said the Marshal. ‘I come to help you. Our country is in danger. Action must be taken, immediate action! I come to put myself at your service. I take over all responsibility for acting in this crisis. There may be danger. I know there is, but honour is above danger. The salvation of France is above danger. They march this way now. A vast herd of students, of criminals who have been released from jails, some of them who have committed the crime of homicide. Men who have committed incendiarism. They shout names. They sing songs. They call on the names of their teachers, of their philosophers, of those who have led them on this path of insurrection. Those who will bring about the doom of France unless something is done. You sit here, you talk, you deplore things. More than that must be done. I have sent for two regiments. I have alerted the air force, special coded wires have gone out to our neighbouring ally, to my friends in Germany, for she is our ally now in this crisis!’

‘Riot must be put down. Rebellion! Insurrection! The danger to men, women and children, to property. I go forth now to quell the insurrection, to speak to them as their father, their leader. These students, these criminals even, they are my children. They are the youth of France. I go to speak to them of that. They shall listen to me, governments will be revised, their studies can be resumed under their own auspices. Their grants have been insufficient, their lives have been deprived of beauty, of leadership. I come to promise all this. I speak in my own name. I shall speak also in your name, the name of the Government, you have done your best, you have acted as well as you know how. But it needs higher leadership. It needs my leadership. I go now. I have lists of further coded wires to be sent. Such nuclear deterrents as can be used in unfrequented spots can be put into

action in such a modified form that though they may bring terror to the mob, we ourselves shall know that there is no real danger in them. I have thought out everything. My plan will go. Come, my loyal friends, accompany me.'

'Marshal, we cannot allow—you cannot imperil yourself. We must...'

'I listen to nothing you say. I embrace my doom, my destiny.'

The Marshal strode to the door.

'My staff is outside. My chosen bodyguard. I go now to speak to these young rebels, this young flower of beauty and terror, to tell them where their duty lies.'

He disappeared through the door with the grandeur of a leading actor playing his favourite part.

'Bon Dieu, he means it!' said Monsieur Poissonier.

'He will risk his life,' said Signor Vitelli. 'Who knows? It is brave, he is a brave man. It is gallant, yes, but what will happen to him? In the mood les jeunes are in now, they might kill him.'

A pleasurable sigh fell from Monsieur Poissonier's lips. It might be true, he thought. Yes, it might be true.

'It is possible,' he said. 'Yes, they might kill him.'

'One cannot wish that, of course,' said Monsieur Grosjean carefully.

Monsieur Grosjean did wish it. He hoped for it, though a natural pessimism led him to have the second thought that things seldom fell out in the way you wanted them to. Indeed, a much more awful prospect confronted him. It was quite possible, it was within the traditions of the Marshal's past, that somehow or other he might induce a large pack of exhilarated and bloodthirsty students to listen to what he said, trust in his promises, and insist on restoring him to the power that he had once held. It was the sort of thing that had happened once or twice in the career of the Marshal. His

personal magnetism was such that politicians had before now met their defeat when they least expected it.

‘We must restrain him,’ he cried.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Signor Vitelli, ‘he cannot be lost to the world.’

‘One fears,’ said Monsieur Poissonier. ‘He has too many friends in Germany, too many contacts, and you know they move very quickly in military matters in Germany. They might leap at the opportunity.’

‘Bon Dieu, Bon Dieu,’ said Monsieur Grosjean, wiping his brow. ‘What shall we do? What can we do? What is that noise? I hear rifles, do I not?’

‘No, no,’ said Monsieur Poissonier consolingly. ‘It is the canteen coffee trays you hear.’

‘There is a quotation I could use,’ said Monsieur Grosjean, who was a great lover of the drama, ‘if I could only remember it. A quotation from Shakespeare. “Will nobody rid me of this—”’

“‘turbulent priest,’” said Monsieur Poissonier. ‘From the play, Becket.’

‘A madman like the Marshal is worse than a priest. A priest should at least be harmless, though indeed even His Holiness the Pope received a delegation of students only yesterday. He blessed them. He called them his children.’

‘A Christian gesture, though,’ said Monsieur Coin dubiously.

‘One can go too far even with Christian gestures,’ said Monsieur Grosjean.

Chapter 14

Conference In London

In the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street, Mr Cedric Lazenby, the Prime Minister, sat at the head of the table and looked at his assembled Cabinet without any noticeable pleasure. The expression on his face was definitely gloomy, which in a way afforded him a certain relief. He was beginning to think that it was only in the privacy of his Cabinet Meetings that he could relax his face into an unhappy expression, and could abandon that look which he presented usually to the world, of a wise and contented optimism which had served him so well in the various crises of political life.

He looked round at Gordon Chetwynd, who was frowning, at Sir George Packham who was obviously worrying, thinking, and wondering as usual, at the military imperturbability of Colonel Munro, at Air Marshal Kenwood, a tight-lipped man who did not trouble to conceal his profound distrust of politicians. There was also Admiral Blunt, a large formidable man, who tapped his fingers on the table and bided his time until his moment should come.

‘It is not too good,’ the Air Marshal was saying. ‘One has to admit it. Four of our planes hi-jacked within the last week. Flew ’em to Milan. Turned the passengers out, and flew them on somewhere else. Actually Africa. Had pilots waiting there. Black men.’

‘Black Power,’ said Colonel Munro thoughtfully.

‘Or Red Power?’ suggested Lazenby. ‘I feel, you know, that all our difficulties might stem from Russian indoctrination. If one could get into touch with the Russians—I really think a personal visit at top level—’

‘You stick where you are, Prime Minister,’ said Admiral Blunt. ‘Don’t you start arseing around with the Russkies again. All they want at present is to keep out of all this mess. They haven’t had as much trouble there with their

students as most of us have. All they mind about is keeping an eye on the Chinese to see what they'll be up to next.'

'I do think that personal influence—'

'You stay here and look after your own country,' said Admiral Blunt. True to his name, and as was his wont, he said it bluntly.

'Hadn't we better hear—have a proper report of what's actually been happening?' Gordon Chetwynd looked towards Colonel Munro.

'Want facts? Quite right. They're all pretty unpalatable. I presume you want, not particulars of what's been happening here so much, as the general world situation?'

'Quite so.'

'Well, in France the Marshal's in hospital still. Two bullets in his arm. Hell's going on in political circles. Large tracts of the country are held by what they call the Youth Power troops.'

'You mean they've got arms?' said Gordon Chetwynd in a horrified voice.

'They've got a hell of a lot,' said the Colonel. 'I don't know really where they've got them from. There are certain ideas as to that. A large consignment was sent from Sweden to West Africa.'

'What's that got to do with it?' said Mr Lazenby. 'Who cares? Let them have all the arms they want in West Africa. They can go on shooting each other.'

'Well, there's something a little curious about it as far as our Intelligence reports go. Here is a list of the armaments that were sent to West Africa. The interesting thing is they were sent there, but they were sent out again. They were accepted, delivery was acknowledged, payment may or may not have been made, but they were sent out of the country again before five days had passed. They were sent out, re-routed elsewhere.'

'But what's the idea of that?'

‘The idea seems to be,’ said Munro, ‘that they were never really intended for West Africa. Payments were made and they were sent on somewhere else. It seems possible that they went on from Africa to the Near East. To the Persian Gulf, to Greece and to Turkey. Also, a consignment of planes was sent to Egypt. From Egypt they were sent to India, from India they were sent to Russia.’

‘I thought they were sent from Russia.’

‘—And from Russia they went to Prague. The whole thing’s mad.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Sir George, ‘one wonders—’

‘Somewhere there seems to be some central organization which is directing the supplies of various things. Planes, armaments, bombs, both explosive and those that are used in germ warfare. All these consignments are moving in unexpected directions. They are delivered by various cross-country routes to trouble-spots, and used by leaders and regiments—if you like to call them that—of the Youth Power. They mostly go to the leaders of young guerrilla movements, professed anarchists who preach anarchy, and accept—though one doubts if they ever pay for—some of the latest most up-to-date models.’

‘Do you mean to say we’re facing something like war on a world scale?’ Cedric Lazenby was shocked.

The mild man with the Asiatic face who sat lower down at the table, and had not yet spoken, lifted up his face with the Mongolian smile, and said:

‘That is what one is now forced to believe. Our observations tell us—’

Lazenby interrupted.

‘You’ll have to stop observing. UNO will have to take arms itself and put all this down.’

The quiet face remained unmoved.

‘That would be against our principles,’ he said.

Colonel Munro raised his voice and went on with his summing up.

‘There’s fighting in some parts of every country. South-East Asia claimed Independence long ago and there are four, five different divisions of power in South America, Cuba, Peru, Guatemala and so on. As for the United States, you know Washington was practically burned out—the West is overrun with Youth Power Armed Forces—Chicago is under Martial Law. You know about Sam Cortman? Shot last night on the steps of the American Embassy here.’

‘He was to attend here today,’ said Lazenby. ‘He was going to have given us his views of the situation.’

‘I don’t suppose that would have helped much,’ said Colonel Munro. ‘Quite a nice chap—but hardly a live wire.’

‘But who’s behind all this?’ Lazenby’s voice rose fretfully.

‘It could be the Russians, of course—’ He looked hopeful. He still envisaged himself flying to Moscow.

Colonel Munro shook his head. ‘Doubt it,’ he said.

‘A personal appeal,’ said Lazenby. His face brightened with hope. ‘An entirely new sphere of influence. The Chinese...?’

‘Nor the Chinese,’ said Colonel Munro. ‘But you know there’s been a big revival in Neo-Fascism in Germany.’

‘You don’t really think the Germans could possibly...’

‘I don’t think they’re behind all this necessarily, but when you say possibly—yes, I think possibly they easily could. They’ve done it before, you know. Prepared things years before, planned them, everything ready, waiting for the word GO. Good planners, very good planners. Staff work excellent. I admire them, you know. Can’t help it.’

‘But Germany seemed to be so peaceful and well run.’

‘Yes, of course it is up to a point. But do you realize, South America is practically alive with Germans, with young Neo-Fascists, and they’ve got a big Youth Federation there. Call themselves the Super-Aryans, or something of that kind. You know, a bit of the old stuff still, swastikas and salutes, and someone who’s running it, called the Young Wotan or the Young Siegfried or something like that. Lot of Aryan nonsense.’

There was a knock on the door and the secretary entered.

‘Professor Eckstein is here, sir.’

‘We’d better have him in,’ said Cedric Lazenby. ‘After all, if anyone can tell us what our latest research weapons are, he’s the man. We may have something up our sleeve that can soon put an end to all this nonsense.’ Besides being a professional traveller to foreign parts in the rôle of peacemaker, Mr Lazenby had an incurable fund of optimism seldom justified by results.

‘We could do with a good secret weapon,’ said the Air Marshal hopefully.

Professor Eckstein, considered by many to be Britain’s top scientist, when you first looked at him seemed supremely unimportant. He was a small man with old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers and an asthmatic cough. He had the manner of one anxious to apologize for his existence. He made noises like ‘ah’, ‘hrrumph’, ‘mrrh’, blew his nose, coughed asthmatically again and shook hands in a shy manner, as he was introduced to those present. A good many of them he already knew and these he greeted with nervous nods of the head. He sat down on the chair indicated and looked round him vaguely. He raised a hand to his mouth and began to bite his nails.

‘The heads of the Services are here,’ said Sir George Packham. ‘We are very anxious to have your opinion as to what can be done.’

‘Oh,’ said Professor Eckstein, ‘done? Yes, yes, done?’

There was a silence.

‘The world is fast passing into a state of anarchy,’ said Sir George.

‘Seems so, doesn’t it? At least, from what I read in the paper. Not that I trust to that. Really, the things journalists think up. Never any accuracy in their statements.’

‘I understand you’ve made some most important discoveries lately, Professor,’ said Cedric Lazenby encouragingly.

‘Ah yes, so we have. So we have.’ Professor Eckstein cheered up a little. ‘Got a lot of very nasty chemical warfare fixed up. If we ever wanted it. Germ warfare, you know, biological stuff, gas laid on through normal gas outlets, air pollution and poisoning of water supplies. Yes, if you wanted it, I suppose we could kill half the population of England given about three days to do it in.’ He rubbed his hands. ‘That what you want?’

‘No, no indeed. Oh dear, of course not.’ Mr Lazenby looked horrified.

‘Well, that’s what I mean, you know. It’s not a question of not having enough lethal weapons. We’ve got too much. Everything we’ve got is too lethal. The difficulty would be in keeping anybody alive, even ourselves. Eh? All the people at the top, you know. Well–us, for instance.’ He gave a wheezy, happy little chuckle.

‘But that isn’t what we want,’ Mr Lazenby insisted.

‘It’s not a question of what you want, it’s a question of what we’ve got. Everything we’ve got is terrifically lethal. If you want everybody under thirty wiped off the map, I expect you could do it. Mind you, you’d have to take a lot of the older ones as well. It’s difficult to segregate one lot from the other, you know. Personally, I should be against that. We’ve got some very good young Research fellows. Bloody-minded, but clever.’

‘What’s gone wrong with the world?’ asked Kenwood suddenly.

‘That’s the point,’ said Professor Eckstein. ‘We don’t know. We don’t know up at our place in spite of all we do know about this, that and the other. We know a bit more about the moon nowadays, we know a lot about biology, we can transplant hearts and livers; brains, too, soon, I expect, though I don’t know how that’ll work out. But we don’t know who is doing this.’

Somebody is, you know. It's a sort of high-powered background stuff. Oh yes, we've got it cropping up in different ways. You know, crime rings, drug rings, all that sort of thing. A high-powered lot, directed by a few good, shrewd brains behind the scenes. We've had it going on in this country or that country, occasionally on a European scale. But it's going a bit further now, other side of the globe—Southern Hemisphere. Down to the Antarctic Circle before we've finished, I expect.' He appeared to be pleased with his diagnosis.

'People of ill-will—'

'Well, you could put it like that. Ill-will for ill-will's sake or ill-will for the sake of money or power. Difficult, you know, to get at the point of it all. The poor dogs-bodies themselves don't know. They want violence and they like violence. They don't like the world, they don't like our materialistic attitude. They don't like a lot of our nasty ways of making money, they don't like a lot of the fiddles we do. They don't like seeing poverty. They want a better world. Well, you could make a better world, perhaps, if you thought about it long enough. But the trouble is, if you insist on taking away something first, you've got to put something back in its place. Nature won't have a vacuum—an old saying, but true. Dash it all, it's like a heart transplant. You take one heart away but you've got to put another one there. One that works. And you've got to arrange about the heart you're going to put there before you take away the faulty heart that somebody's got at present. Matter of fact, I think a lot of those things are better left alone altogether, but nobody would listen to me, I suppose. And anyway it's not my subject.'

'A gas?' suggested Colonel Munro.

Professor Eckstein brightened.

'Oh, we've got all sorts of gases in stock. Mind you, some of them are reasonably harmless. Mild deterrents, shall we say. We've got all those.' He beamed like a complacent hardware dealer.

'Nuclear weapons?' suggested Mr Lazenby.

‘Don’t you monkey with that! You don’t want a radio-active England, do you, or a radio-active continent, for that matter?’

‘So you can’t help us,’ said Colonel Munro.

‘Not until somebody’s found out a bit more about all this,’ said Professor Eckstein. ‘Well, I’m sorry. But I must impress upon you that most of the things we’re working on nowadays are dangerous.’ He stressed the word. ‘Really dangerous.’

He looked at them anxiously, as a nervous uncle might look at a group of children left with a box of matches to play with, and who might quite easily set the house on fire.

‘Well, thank you, Professor Eckstein,’ said Mr Lazenby. He did not sound particularly thankful.

The Professor gathering correctly that he was released, smiled all round and trotted out of the room.

Mr Lazenby hardly waited for the door to close before venting his feelings.

‘All alike, these scientists,’ he said bitterly. ‘Never any practical good. Never come up with anything sensible. All they can do is split the atom—and then tell us not to mess about with it!’

‘Just as well if we never had,’ said Admiral Blunt, again bluntly. ‘What we want is something homely and domestic like a kind of selective weedkiller which would—’ He paused abruptly. ‘Now what the devil—?’

‘Yes, Admiral?’ said the Prime Minister politely.

‘Nothing—just reminded me of something. Can’t remember what—’

The Prime Minister sighed.

‘Any more scientific experts waiting on the mat?’ asked Gordon Chetwynd, glancing hopefully at his wristwatch.

‘Old Pikeaway is here, I believe,’ said Lazenby. ‘Got a picture—or a drawing—or a map or something or other he wants us to look at—’

‘What’s it all about?’

‘I don’t know. It seems to be all bubbles,’ said Mr Lazenby vaguely.

‘Bubbles? Why bubbles?’

‘I’ve no idea. Well,’ he sighed, ‘we’d better have a look at it.’

‘Horsham’s here, too—’

‘He may have something new to tell us,’ said Chetwynd.

Colonel Pikeaway stumped in. He was supporting a rolled-up burden which with Horsham’s aid was unrolled and which with some difficulty was propped up so that those sitting round the table could look at it.

‘Not exactly drawn to scale yet, but it gives you a rough idea,’ said Colonel Pikeaway.

‘What does it mean, if anything?’

‘Bubbles?’ murmured Sir George. An idea came to him. ‘Is it a gas? A new gas?’

‘You’d better deliver the lecture, Horsham,’ said Pikeaway. ‘You know the general idea.’

‘I only know what I’ve been told. It’s a rough diagram of an association of world control.’

‘By whom?’

‘By groups who own or control the sources of power—the raw materials of power.’

‘And the letters of the alphabet?’

‘Stand for a person or a code name for a special group. They are intersecting circles that by now cover the globe.

‘That circle marked “A” stands for armaments. Someone, or some group is in control of armaments. All types of armaments. Explosives, guns, rifles. All over the world armaments are being produced according to plan, dispatched ostensibly to under-developed nations, backward nations, nations at war. But they don’t remain where they are sent. They are re-routed almost immediately elsewhere. To guerrilla warfare in the South American Continent—to rioting and fighting in the USA—to Depots of Black Power—to various countries in Europe.

image

““D” represents drugs—a network of suppliers run them from various depots and stockpiles. All kinds of drugs, from the more harmless varieties up to the true killers. The headquarters seem likely to be situated in the Levant, and to pass out through Turkey, Pakistan, India and Central Asia.’

‘They make money out of it?’

‘Enormous sums of money. But it’s more than just an association of Pushers. It has a more sinister side to it. It’s being used to finish off the weaklings amongst the young, shall we say, to make them complete slaves. Slaves so that they cannot live and exist or do jobs for their employers without a supply of drugs.’

Kenwood whistled.

‘That’s a bad show, isn’t it? Don’t you know at all who those Drug Pushers are?’

‘Some of them, yes. But only the lesser fry. Not the real controllers. Drug headquarters are, so far as we can judge, in Central Asia and the Levant. They get delivered from there in the tyres of cars, in cement, in concrete, in all kinds of machinery and industrial goods. They’re delivered all over the world and passed on as ordinary trade goods to where they are meant to go.

““F” stands for finance. Money! A money spider’s web in the centre of it all. You’ll have to go to Mr Robinson to tell you about money. According to a memo here, money is coming very largely from America and there’s also a headquarters in Bavaria. There’s a vast reserve in South Africa, based on gold and diamonds. Most of the money is going to South America. One of the principal controllers, if I may so put it, of money, is a very powerful and talented woman. She’s old now: must be near to death. But she is still strong and active. Her name was Charlotte Krapp. Her father owned the vast Krapp yards in Germany. She was a financial genius herself and operated in Wall Street. She accumulated fortune after fortune by investments in all parts of the world. She owns transport, she owns machinery, she owns industrial concerns. All these things. She lives in a vast castle in Bavaria—from there she directs a flow of money to different parts of the globe.

““S” represents science—the new knowledge of chemical and biological warfare—Various young scientists have defected—There is a nucleus of them in the US, we believe, vowed and dedicated to the cause of anarchy.’

‘Fighting for anarchy? A contradiction in terms. Can there be such a thing?’

‘You believe in anarchy if you are young. You want a new world, and to begin with you must pull down the old one—just as you pull down a house before you build a new one to replace it. But if you don’t know where you are going, if you don’t know where you are being lured to go, or even pushed to go, what will the new world be like, and where will the believers be when they get it? Some of them slaves, some of them blinded by hate, some by violence and sadism, both preached and practised. Some of them—and God help those—still idealistic, still believing as people did in France at the time of the French Revolution that that revolution would bring prosperity, peace, happiness, contentment to its people.’

‘And what are we doing about all this? What are we proposing to do about it?’ It was Admiral Blunt who spoke.

‘What are we doing about it? All that we can. I assure you, all you who are here, we are doing all that we can. We have people working for us in every

country. We have agents, inquirers, those who gather information, and bring it back here—'

THE RING

F Big Charlotte — Bavaria

A Eric Olafsson — Sweden, Industrialist, Armaments

D Said to go by the name of Demetrios — Smyrna, Drugs

S Dr Sarolensky — Colorado, USA, Physicist-Chemist. Suspicion only

J — A woman. Goes by Code name of Juanita. Said to be dangerous. No knowledge of her real name.

'Which is very necessary,' said Colonel Pikeaway. 'First we've got to know—know who's who, who's with us and who's against us. And after that we've got to see what, if anything, can be done.'

'Our name for this diagram is The Ring. Here's a list of what we know about the Ring leaders. Those with a query mean that we know only the name they go by—or alternatively we only suspect that they are the ones we want.'

Chapter 15

Aunt Matilda Takes A Cure

I

‘A cure of some kind, I thought?’ Lady Matilda hazarded.

‘A cure?’ said Dr Donaldson. He looked faintly puzzled for a moment, losing his air of medical omniscience, which, of course, so Lady Matilda reflected, was one of the slight disadvantages attached to having a younger doctor attending one rather than the older specimen to whom one has been accustomed for several years.

‘That’s what we used to call them,’ Lady Matilda explained. ‘In my young days, you know, you went for the Cure. Marienbad, Carlsbad, Baden-Baden, all the rest of it. Just the other day I read about this new place in the paper. Quite new and up to date. Said to be all new ideas and things like that. Not that I’m really sold on new ideas, but I wouldn’t really be afraid of them. I mean, they would probably be all the same things all over again. Water tasting of bad eggs and the latest sort of diet and walking to take the Cure, or the Waters, or whatever they call them now, at a rather inconvenient hour in the morning. And I expect they give you massage or something. It used to be seaweed. But this place is somewhere in the mountains. Bavaria or Austria or somewhere like that. So I don’t suppose it would be seaweed. Shaggy moss, perhaps—sounds like a dog. And perhaps quite a nice mineral water as well as the eggy sulphury one, I mean. Superb buildings, I understand. The only thing one is nervous about nowadays is that they never seem to put banisters in any up-to-date modern buildings. Flights of marble steps and all that, but nothing to hang on to.’

‘I think I know the place you mean,’ said Dr Donaldson. ‘It’s been publicized a good deal, in the press.’

‘Well, you know what one is at my age,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘One likes trying new things. Really, I think it is just to amuse one. It doesn’t really

make one feel one's health would be any better. Still, you don't think it would be a bad idea, do you, Dr Donaldson?'

Dr Donaldson looked at her. He was not so young as Lady Matilda labelled him in her mind. He was just approaching forty and he was a tactful and kindly man and willing to indulge his elderly patients as far as he considered it desirable, without any actual danger of their attempting something obviously unsuitable.

'I'm sure it wouldn't do you any harm at all,' he said. 'Might be quite a good idea. Of course travel's a bit tiring though one flies to places very quickly and easily nowadays.'

'Quickly, yes. Easily, no,' said Lady Matilda. 'Ramps and moving staircases and in and out of buses from the airport to the plane, and the plane to another airport and from the airport to another bus. All that, you know. But I understand one can have wheelchairs in the airports.'

'Of course you can. Excellent idea. If you promise to do that and not think you can walk everywhere...'

'I know, I know,' said his patient, interrupting him. 'You do understand. You're really a very understanding man. One has one's pride, you know, and while you can still hobble around with a stick or a little support, you don't really want to look absolutely a creak or bedridden or something. It'd be easier if I was a man,' she mused. 'I mean, one could tie up one's leg with one of those enormous bandages and padded things as though one had the gout. I mean, gout is all right for the male sex. Nobody thinks anything the worse of them. Some of their older friends think they've been tucking in to the port too much because that used to be the old idea, though I believe that is not really true at all. Port wine does not give you gout. Yes, a wheelchair, and I could fly to Munich or somewhere like that. One could arrange for a car or something at the other end.'

'You will take Miss Leatheran with you, of course.'

'Amy? Oh, of course. I couldn't do without her. Anyway, you think no harm would be done?'

‘I think it might do you a world of good.’

‘You really are a nice man.’

Lady Matilda gave him the twinkle from her eyes with which now he was becoming familiar.

‘You think it’ll amuse me and cheer me up to go somewhere new and see some new faces, and of course you’re quite right. But I like to think that I’m taking a Cure, though really there’s nothing for me to be cured of. Not really, is there? I mean, except old age. Unfortunately old age doesn’t get cured, it only gets more so, doesn’t it?’

‘The point is really, will you enjoy yourself? Well, I think you will. When you get tired, by the way, when doing anything, stop doing it.’

‘I shall still drink glasses of water if the water tastes of rotten eggs. Not because I like them or because frankly I think they do me any good. But it has a sort of mortifying feeling. It’s like old women in our village always used to be. They always wanted a nice, strong medicine either coloured black or purple or deep pink, heavily flavoured with peppermint. They thought that did much more good than a nice little pill or a bottle that only appeared to be full of ordinary water without any exotic colouring.’

‘You know too much about human nature,’ said Dr Donaldson.

‘You’re very nice to me,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘I appreciate it. Amy!’

‘Yes, Lady Matilda?’

‘Get me an atlas, will you. I’ve lost track of Bavaria and the countries round it.’

‘Let me see now. An atlas. There’ll be one in the library, I suppose. There must be some old atlases about, dating back to about 1920 or thereabouts, I suppose.’

‘I wondered if we had anything a little more modern.’

‘Atlas,’ said Amy, deep in reflection.

‘If not, you can buy one and bring it along tomorrow morning. It’s going to be very difficult because all the names are different, the countries are different, and I shan’t know where I am. But you’ll have to help me with that. Find a big magnifying glass, will you? I have an idea I was reading in bed with one the other day and it probably slipped down between the bed and the wall.’

Her requirements took a little time to satisfy but the atlas, the magnifying glass and an older atlas by which to check, were finally produced and Amy, nice woman that she was, Lady Matilda thought, was extremely helpful.

‘Yes, here it is. It still seems to be called Monbrügge or something like that. It’s either in the Tyrol or Bavaria. Everything seems to have changed places and got different names—’

II

Lady Matilda looked around her bedroom in the Gasthaus. It was well appointed. It was very expensive. It combined comfort with an appearance of such austerity as might lead the inhabitant to identify herself with an ascetic course of exercises, diet and possibly painful courses of massage. Its furnishings, she thought, were interesting. They provided for all tastes. There was a large framed Gothic script on the wall. Lady Matilda’s German was not as good as it had been in her girlhood, but it dealt, she thought, with the golden and enchanting idea of a return to youth. Not only did youth hold the future in its hands but the old were being nicely indoctrinated to feel that they themselves might know such a second golden flowering.

Here there were gentle aids so as to enable one to pursue the doctrine of any of the many paths in life which attracted different classes of people. (Always presuming that they had enough money to pay for it.) Beside the bed was a Gideon Bible such as Lady Matilda when travelling in the United States had often found by her bedside. She picked it up approvingly, opened it at random and dropped a finger on one particular verse. She read it, nodding her head contentedly and made a brief note of it on a note pad that

was lying on her bed table. She had often done that in the course of her life—it was her way of obtaining divine guidance at short notice.

I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken.

She made further researches of the room. Handily placed but not too apparent was an Almanach de Gotha, modestly situated on a lower shelf on the bedside table. A most invaluable book for those who wished to familiarize themselves with the higher strata of society reaching back for several hundred years and which were still being observed and noted and checked by those of aristocratic lineage or interested in the same. It will come in handy, she thought, I can read up a good deal on that.

Near the desk, by the stove of period porcelain, were paperback editions of certain preachings and tenets by the modern prophets of the world. Those who were now or had recently been crying in the wilderness were here to be studied and approved by young followers with haloes of hair, strange raiment, and earnest hearts. Marcuse, Guevara, Lévi-Strauss, Fanon.

In case she was going to hold any conversations with golden youth she had better read up a little on that also.

At that moment there was a timid tap on the door. It opened slightly and the face of the faithful Amy came round the corner. Amy, Lady Matilda thought suddenly, would look exactly like a sheep when she was ten years older. A nice, faithful, kindly sheep. At the moment, Lady Matilda was glad to think, she looked still like a very agreeable plump lamb with nice curls of hair, thoughtful and kindly eyes, and able to give kindly baa's rather than to bleat.

‘I do hope you slept well.’

‘Yes, my dear, I did, excellently. Have you got that thing?’

Amy always knew what she meant. She handed it to her employer.

‘Ah, my diet sheet. I see.’ Lady Matilda perused it, then said, ‘How incredibly unattractive! What’s this water like one’s supposed to drink?’

‘It doesn’t taste very nice.’

‘No, I don’t suppose it would. Come back in half an hour. I’ve got a letter I want you to post.’

Moving aside her breakfast tray, she moved over to the desk. She thought for a few minutes and then wrote her letter. ‘It ought to do the trick,’ she murmured.

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Matilda, what did you say?’

‘I was writing to the old friend I mentioned to you.’

‘The one you said you haven’t seen for about fifty or sixty years?’

Lady Matilda nodded.

‘I do hope—’ Amy was apologetic. ‘I mean—I—it’s such a long time. People have short memories nowadays. I do hope that she’ll remember all about you and everything.’

‘Of course she will,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘The people you don’t forget are the people you knew when you were about ten to twenty. They stick in your mind for ever. You remember what hats they wore, and the way they laughed, and you remember their faults and their good qualities and everything about them. Now anyone I met twenty years ago, shall we say, I simply can’t remember who they are. Not if they’re mentioned to me, and not if I saw them even. Oh yes, she’ll remember about me. And all about Lausanne. You get that letter posted. I’ve got to do a little homework.’

She picked up the Almanach de Gotha and returned to bed, where she made a serious study of such items as might come in useful. Some family relationships and various other kinships of the useful kind. Who had married whom, who had lived where, what misfortunes had overtaken others. Not that the person whom she had in mind was herself likely to be

found in the Almanach de Gotha. But she lived in a part of the world, had come there deliberately to live in a Schloss belonging to originally noble ancestors, and she had absorbed the local respect and adulation for those above all of good breeding. To good birth, even impaired with poverty, she herself, as Lady Matilda well knew, had no claim whatever. She had had to make do with money. Oceans of money. Incredible amounts of money.

Lady Matilda Cleckheaton had no doubt at all that she herself, the daughter of an eighth Duke, would be bidden to some kind of festivity. Coffee, perhaps, and delicious creamy cakes.

III

Lady Matilda Cleckheaton made her entrance into one of the grand reception rooms of the Schloss. It had been a fifteen-mile drive. She had dressed herself with some care, though somewhat to the disapproval of Amy. Amy seldom offered advice, but she was so anxious for her principal to succeed in whatever she was undertaking that she had ventured this time on a moderate remonstrance.

‘You don’t think your red dress is really a little worn, if you know what I mean. I mean just beneath the arms, and, well, there are two or three very shiny patches—’

‘I know, my dear, I know. It is a shabby dress but it is nevertheless a Patou model. It is old but it was enormously expensive. I am not trying to look rich or extravagant. I am an impoverished member of an aristocratic family. Anyone of under fifty, no doubt, would despise me. But my hostess is living and has lived for some years in a part of the world where the rich will be kept waiting for their meal while the hostess will be willing to wait for a shabby, elderly woman of impeccable descent. Family traditions are things that one does not lose easily. One absorbs them, even, when one goes to a new neighbourhood. In my trunk, by the way, you will find a feather boa.’

‘Are you going to put on a feather boa?’

‘Yes, I am. An ostrich feather one.’

‘Oh dear, that must be years old.’

‘It is, but I’ve kept it very carefully. You’ll see, Charlotte will recognize what it is. She will think one of the best families in England was reduced to wearing her old clothes that she had kept carefully for years. And I’ll wear my sealskin coat, too. That’s a little worn, but such a magnificent coat in its time.’

Thus arrayed, she set forth. Amy went with her as a well-dressed though only quietly smart attendant.

Matilda Cleckheaton had been prepared for what she saw. A whale, as Stafford had told her. A wallowing whale, a hideous old woman sitting in a room surrounded with pictures worth a fortune. Rising with some difficulty from a throne-like chair which could have figured on a stage representing the palace of some magnificent prince from any age from the Middle Ages down.

‘Matilda!’

‘Charlotte!’

‘Ah! After all these years. How strange it seems!’

They exchanged words of greeting and pleasure, talking partly in German and partly in English. Lady Matilda’s German was slightly faulty. Charlotte spoke excellent German, excellent English though with a strong guttural accent, and occasionally English with an American accent. She was really, Lady Matilda thought, quite splendidly hideous. For a moment she felt a fondness almost dating back to the past although, she reflected the next moment, Charlotte had been a most detestable girl. Nobody had really liked her and she herself had certainly not done so. But there is a great bond, say what we will, in the memories of old schooldays. Whether Charlotte had liked her or not she did not know. But Charlotte, she remembered, had certainly—what used to be called in those days—sucked up to her. She had had visions, possibly, of staying in a ducal castle in England. Lady Matilda’s father, though of most praiseworthy lineage, had been one of the most impecunious of English dukes. His estate had only been held together

by the rich wife he had married whom he had treated with the utmost courtesy, and who had enjoyed bullying him whenever able to do so. Lady Matilda had been fortunate enough to be his daughter by a second marriage. Her own mother had been extremely agreeable and also a very successful actress, able to play the part of looking a duchess far more than any real duchess could do.

They exchanged reminiscences of past days, the tortures they had inflicted on some of their instructors, the fortunate and unfortunate marriages that had occurred to some of their schoolmates. Matilda made a few mentions of certain alliances and families culled from the pages of the Almanach de Gotha—‘but of course that must have been a terrible marriage for Elsa. One of the Bourbons de Parme, was it not? Yes, yes, well, one knows what that leads to. Most unfortunate.’

Coffee was brought, delicious coffee, plates of millefeuille pastry and delicious cream cakes.

‘I should not touch any of this,’ cried Lady Matilda. ‘No indeed! My doctor, he is most severe. He said that I must adhere strictly to the Cure while I was here. But after all this is a day of holiday, is it not? Of renewal of youth. That is what interests me so much. My great-nephew who visited you not long ago—I forget who brought him here, the Countess—ah, it began with a Z, I cannot remember her name.’

‘The Countess Renata Zerkowski—’

‘Ah, that was the name, yes. A very charming young woman, I believe. And she brought him to visit you. It was most kind of her. He was so impressed. Impressed, too, with all your beautiful possessions. Your way of living, and indeed, the wonderful things which he had heard about you. How you have a whole movement of—oh, I do not know how to give the proper term. A Galaxy of Youth. Golden, beautiful youth. They flock round you. They worship you. What a wonderful life you must live. Not that I could support such a life. I have to live very quietly. Rheumatoid arthritis. And also the financial difficulties. Difficulty in keeping up the family house. Ah well, you know what it is for us in England—our taxation troubles.’

‘I remember that nephew of yours, yes. He was agreeable, a very agreeable man. The Diplomatic Service, I understand?’

‘Ah yes. But it is—well, you know, I cannot feel that his talents are being properly recognized. He does not say much. He does not complain, but he feels that he is—well, he feels that he has not been appreciated as he should. The powers that be, those who hold office at present, what are they?’

‘Canaille!’ said Big Charlotte.

‘Intellectuals with no savoir faire in life. Fifty years ago it would have been different,’ said Lady Matilda, ‘but nowadays his promotion has been not advanced as it should. I will even tell you, in confidence, of course, that he has been distrusted. They suspect him, you know, of being in with—what shall I call it?—rebellious, revolutionary tendencies. And yet one must realize what the future could hold for a man who could embrace more advanced views.’

‘You mean he is not, then, how do you say it in England, in sympathy with the Establishment, as they call it?’

‘Hush, hush, we must not say these things. At least I must not,’ said Lady Matilda.

‘You interest me,’ said Charlotte.

Matilda Cleckheaton sighed.

‘Put it down, if you like, to the fondness of an elderly relative. Staffy has always been a favourite of mine. He has charm and wit. I think also he has ideas. He envisages the future, a future that should differ a good deal from what we have at present. Our country, alas, is politically in a very bad state. Stafford seems to be very much impressed by things you said to him or showed to him. You’ve done so much for music, I understand. What we need I cannot but feel is the ideal of the super race.’

‘There should and could be a super race. Adolf Hitler had the right idea,’ said Charlotte. ‘A man of no importance in himself, but he had artistic

elements in his character. And undoubtedly he had the power of leadership.'

'Ah yes. Leadership, that is what we need.'

'You had the wrong allies in the last war, my dear. If England and Germany now had arrayed themselves side by side, if they had had the same ideals, of youth, strength, two Aryan nations with the right ideals. Think where your country and mine might have arrived today? Yet perhaps even that is too narrow a view to take. In some ways the communists and the others have taught us a lesson. Workers of the world unite? But that is to set one's sights too low. Workers are only our material. It is "Leaders of the world unite!" Young men with the gift of leadership, of good blood. And we must start, not with the middle-aged men set in their ways, repeating themselves like a gramophone record that has stuck. We must seek among the student population, the young men with brave hearts, with great ideas, willing to march, willing to be killed but willing also to kill. To kill without any compunction—because it is certain that without aggressiveness, without violence, without attack—there can be no victory. I must show you something—'

With somewhat of a struggle she succeeded in rising to her feet. Lady Matilda followed suit, underlining a little her difficulty, which was not quite as much as she was making out.

'It was in May 1940,' said Charlotte, 'when Hitler Youth went on to its second stage. When Himmler obtained from Hitler a charter. The charter of the famous SS. It was formed for the destruction of the eastern peoples, the slaves, the appointed slaves of the world. It would make room for the German master race. The SS executive instrument came into being.' Her voice dropped a little. It held for a moment a kind of religious awe.

Lady Matilda nearly crossed herself by mistake.

'The Order of the Death's Head,' said Big Charlotte.

She walked slowly and painfully down the room and pointed to where on the wall hung, framed in gilt and surmounted with a skull, the Order of the Death's Head.

‘See, it is my most cherished possession. It hangs here on my wall. My golden youth band, when they come here, salute it. And in our archives in the castle here are folios of its chronicles. Some of them are only reading for strong stomachs, but one must learn to accept these things. The deaths in gas chambers, the torture cells, the trials at Nuremberg speak venomously of all those things. But it was a great tradition. Strength through pain. They were trained young, the boys, so that they should not falter or turn back or suffer from any kind of softness. Even Lenin, preaching his Marxist doctrine, declared “Away with softness!” It was one of his first rules for creating a perfect State. But we were too narrow. We wished to confine our great dream only to the German master race. But there are other races. They too can attain master-hood through suffering and violence and through the considered practice of anarchy. We must pull down, pull down all the soft institutions. Pull down the more humiliating forms of religion. There is a religion of strength, the old religion of the Viking people. And we have a leader, young as yet, gaining in power every day. What did some great man say? Give me the tools and I will do the job. Something like that. Our leader has already the tools. He will have more tools. He will have the planes, the bombs, the means of chemical warfare. He will have the men to fight. He will have the transport. He will have shipping and oil. He will have what one might call the Aladdin’s creation of genie. You rub the lamp and the genie appears. It is all in your hands. The means of production, the means of wealth and our young leader, a leader by birth as well as by character. He has all this.’

She wheezed and coughed.

‘Let me help you.’

Lady Matilda supported her back to her seat. Charlotte gasped a little as she sat down.

‘It’s sad to be old, but I shall last long enough. Long enough to see the triumph of a new world, a new creation. That is what you want for your nephew. I will see to it. Power in his own country, that is what he wants, is it not? You would be ready to encourage the spearhead there?’

‘I had influence once. But now—’ Lady Matilda shook her head sadly. ‘All that is gone.’

‘It will come again, dear,’ said her friend. ‘You were right to come to me. I have a certain influence.’

‘It is a great cause,’ said Lady Matilda. She sighed and murmured, ‘The Young Siegfried.’

IV

‘I hope you enjoyed meeting your old friend,’ said Amy as they drove back to the Gasthaus.

‘If you could have heard all the nonsense I talked, you wouldn’t believe it,’ said Lady Matilda Cleckheaton.

Chapter 16

Pikeaway Talks

‘The news from France is very bad,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, brushing a cloud of cigar ash off his coat. ‘I heard Winston Churchill say that in the last war. There was a man who could speak in plain words and no more than needed. It was very impressive. It told us what we needed to know. Well, it’s a long time since then, but I say it again today. The news from France is very bad.’

He coughed, wheezed and brushed a little more ash off himself.

‘The news from Italy is very bad,’ he said. ‘The news from Russia, I imagine, could be very bad if they let much out about it. They’ve got trouble there too. Marching bands of students in the street, shop windows smashed, Embassies attacked. News from Egypt is very bad. News from Jerusalem is very bad. News from Syria is very bad. That’s all more or less normal, so we needn’t worry too much. News from Argentina is what I’d call peculiar. Very peculiar indeed. Argentine, Brazil, Cuba, they’ve all got together. Call themselves the Golden Youth Federated States, or something like that. It’s got an army, too. Properly drilled, properly armed, properly commanded. They’ve got planes, they’ve got bombs, they’ve got God-knows-what. And most of them seem to know what to do with them, which makes it worse. There’s a singing crowd as well, apparently. Pop songs, old local folk songs, and bygone battle hymns. They go along rather like the Salvation Army used to do—no blasphemy intended—I’m not crabbing the Salvation Army. Jolly good work they did always. And the girls—pretty as Punch in their bonnets.’

He went on:

‘I’ve heard that something’s going on in that line in the civilized countries, starting with us. Some of us can be called civilized still, I suppose? One of our politicians the other day, I remember, said we were a splendid nation, chiefly because we were permissive, we had demonstrations, we smashed

things, we beat up anyone if we hadn't anything better to do, we got rid of our high spirits by showing violence, and our moral purity by taking most of our clothes off. I don't know what he thought he was talking about—politicians seldom do—but they can make it sound all right. That's why they are politicians.'

He paused and looked across at the man he was talking to.

'Distressing—sadly distressing,' said Sir George Packham. 'One can hardly believe—one worries—if one could only—Is that all the news you've got?' he asked plaintively.

'Isn't it enough? You're hard to satisfy. World anarchy well on its way—that's what we've got. A bit wobbly still—not fully established yet, but very near to it—very near indeed.'

'But action can surely be taken against all this?'

'Not so easy as you think. Tear gas puts a stop to rioting for a while and gives the police a break. And naturally we've got plenty of germ warfare and nuclear bombs and all the other pretty bags of tricks—What do you think would happen if we started using those? Mass massacre of all the marching girls and boys, and the housewife's shopping circle, and the old age pensioners at home, and a good quota of our pompous politicians as they tell us we've never had it so good, and in addition you and me—Ha, ha!

'And anyway,' added Colonel Pikeaway, 'if it's only news you're after, I understand you've got some hot news of your own arriving today. Top secret from Germany, Herr Heinrich Spiess himself.'

'How on earth did you hear that? It's supposed to be strictly—'

'We know everything here,' said Colonel Pikeaway, using his pet phrase—that's what we're for.

'Bringing some tame doctor, too, I understand—' he added.

'Yes, a Dr Reichardt, a top scientist, I presume—'

‘No. Medical doctor—Loony-bins—’

‘Oh dear—a psychologist?’

‘Probably. The ones that run loony-bins are mostly that. With any luck he’ll have been brought over so that he can examine the heads of some of our young firebrands. Stuffed full they are of German philosophy, Black Power philosophy, dead French writers’ philosophy, and so on and so forth. Possibly they’ll let him examine some of the heads of our legal lights who preside over our judicial courts here saying we must be very careful not to do anything to damage a young man’s ego because he might have to earn his living. We’d be a lot safer if they sent them all round to get plenty of National Assistance to live on and then they could go back to their rooms, not do any work, and enjoy themselves reading more philosophy. However, I’m out of date. I know that. You needn’t tell me so.’

‘One has to take into account the new modes of thought,’ said Sir George Packham. ‘One feels, I mean one hopes—well, it’s difficult to say—’

‘Must be very worrying for you,’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘Finding things so difficult to say.’

His telephone rang. He listened, then handed it to Sir George.

‘Yes?’ said Sir George. ‘Yes? Oh yes. Yes. I agree. I suppose—No—no—not the Home Office. No. Privately, you mean. Well, I suppose we’d better use—er—’ Sir George looked round him cautiously.

‘This place isn’t bugged,’ said Colonel Pikeaway amiably.

‘Code word Blue Danube,’ said Sir George Packham in a loud, hoarse whisper. ‘Yes, yes. I’ll bring Pikeaway along with me. Oh yes, of course. Yes, yes. Get on to him. Yes, say you particularly want him to come, but to remember our meeting has got to be strictly private.’

‘We can’t take my car then,’ said Pikeaway. ‘It’s too well known.’

‘Henry Horsham’s coming to fetch us in the Volkswagen.’

‘Fine,’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘Interesting, you know, all this.’

‘You don’t think—’ said Sir George and hesitated.

‘I don’t think what?’

‘I mean just really—well, I—mean, if you wouldn’t mind my suggesting—a clothes brush?’

‘Oh, this.’ Colonel Pikeaway hit himself lightly on the shoulder and a cloud of cigar ash flew up and made Sir George choke.

‘Nanny,’ Colonel Pikeaway shouted. He banged a buzzer on his desk.

A middle-aged woman came in with a clothes brush, appearing with the suddenness of a genie summoned by Aladdin’s lamp.

‘Hold your breath, please, Sir George,’ she said. ‘This may be a little pungent.’

She held the door open for him and he retired outside while she brushed Colonel Pikeaway, who coughed and complained:

‘Damned nuisance these people are. Always wanting you to get fixed up like a barber’s dummy.’

‘I should not describe your appearance as quite like that, Colonel Pikeaway. You ought to be used to my cleaning you up nowadays. And you know the Home Secretary suffers from asthma.’

‘Well, that’s his fault. Not taking proper care to have pollution removed from the streets of London.’

‘Come on, Sir George, let’s hear what our German friend has come over to say. Sounds as though it’s a matter of some urgency.’

Chapter 17

Herr Heinrich Spiess

Herr Heinrich Spiess was a worried man. He did not seek to conceal the fact. He acknowledged, indeed, without concealment, that the situation which these five men had come together to discuss was a serious situation. At the same time, he brought with him that sense of reassurance which had been his principal asset in dealing with the recently difficult political life in Germany. He was a solid man, a thoughtful man, a man who could bring common sense to any assemblies he attended. He gave no sense of being a brilliant man, and that in itself was reassuring. Brilliant politicians had been responsible for about two-thirds of the national states of crisis in more countries than one. The other third of trouble had been caused by those politicians who were unable to conceal the fact that although duly elected by democratic governments, they had been unable to conceal their remarkably poor powers of judgment, common sense and, in fact, any noticeable brainy qualities.

‘This is not in any sense an official visit, you understand,’ said the Chancellor.

‘Oh quite, quite.’

‘A certain piece of knowledge has come to me which I thought is essential we should share. It throws a rather interesting light on certain happenings which have puzzled as well as distressed us. This is Dr Reichardt.’

Introductions were made. Dr Reichardt was a large and comfortable-looking man with the habit of saying ‘Ach, so’ from time to time.

‘Dr Reichardt is in charge of a large establishment in the neighbourhood of Karlsruhe. He treats there mental patients. I think I am correct in saying that you treat there between five and six hundred patients, am I not right?’

‘Ach, so,’ said Dr Reichardt.

‘I take it that you have several different forms of mental illness?’

‘Ach, so. I have different forms of mental illness, but nevertheless, I have a special interest in, and treat almost exclusively one particular type of mental trouble.’ He branched off into German and Herr Spiess presently rendered a brief translation in case some of his English colleagues should not understand. This was both necessary and tactful. Two of them did in part, one of them definitely did not, and the two others were truly puzzled.

‘Dr Reichardt has had,’ explained Herr Spiess, ‘the greatest success in his treatment of what as a layman I describe as megalomania. The belief that you are someone other than you are. Ideas of being more important than you are. Ideas that if you have persecution mania—’

‘Ach, no!’ said Dr Reichardt. ‘Persecution mania, no, that I do not treat. There is no persecution mania in my clinic. Not among the group with whom I am specially interested. On the contrary, they hold the delusions that they do because they wish to be happy. And they are happy, and I can keep them happy. But if I cure them, see you, they will not be happy. So I have to find a cure that will restore sanity to them, and yet they will be happy just the same. We call this particular state of mind—’

He uttered a long and ferociously sounding German word of at least eight syllables.

‘For the purposes of our English friends, I shall still use my term of megalomania, though I know,’ continued Herr Spiess, rather quickly, ‘that that is not the term you use nowadays, Dr Reichardt. So, as I say, you have in your clinic six hundred patients.’

‘And at one time, the time to which I am about to refer, I had eight hundred.’

‘Eight hundred!’

‘It was interesting—most interesting.’

‘You have such persons—to start at the beginning—’

‘We have God Almighty,’ explained Dr Reichardt. ‘You comprehend?’

Mr Lazenby looked slightly taken aback.

‘Oh—er—yes—er—yes. Very interesting, I am sure.’

‘There are one or two young men, of course, who think they are Jesus Christ. But that is not so popular as the Almighty. And then there are the others. I had at the time I am about to mention twenty-four Adolf Hitlers. This you must understand was at the time when Hitler was alive. Yes, twenty-four or twenty-five Adolf Hitlers—’ he consulted a small notebook which he took from his pocket—‘I have made some notes here, yes. Fifteen Napoleons. Napoleon, he is always popular, ten Mussolinis, five reincarnations of Julius Caesar, and many other cases, very curious and very interesting. But that I will not weary you with at this moment. Not being specially qualified in the medical sense, it would not be of any interest to you. We will come to the incident that matters.’

Dr Reichardt spoke again at rather shorter length, and Herr Spiess continued to translate.

‘There came to him one day a government official. Highly thought of at that time—this was during the war, mind you—by the ruling government. I will call him for the moment Martin B. You will know who I mean. He brought with him his chief. In fact he brought with him—well, we will not beat about the bush—he brought the Führer himself.’

‘Ach, so,’ said Dr Reichardt.

‘It was a great honour, you understand, that he should come to inspect,’ went on the doctor. ‘He was gracious, mein Führer. He told me that he had heard very good reports of my successes. He said that there had been trouble lately. Cases from the army. There, more than once there had been men believing they were Napoleon, sometimes believing they were some of Napoleon’s Marshals and sometimes, you comprehend, behaving accordingly, giving out military orders and causing therefore military difficulties. I would have been happy to have given him any professional knowledge that might be useful to him, but Martin B. who accompanied

him said that that would not be necessary. Our great Führer, however,' said Dr Reichardt, looking at Herr Spiess slightly uneasily, 'did not want to be bothered with such details. He said that no doubt it would be better if medically qualified men with some experience as neurologists should come and have a consultation. What he wanted was to—ach, well, he wanted to see round, and I soon found what he was really interested to see. It should not have surprised me. Oh no, because you see, it was a symptom that one recognizes. The strain of his life was already beginning to tell on the Führer.'

'I suppose he was beginning to think he was God Almighty himself at that time,' said Colonel Pikeaway unexpectedly, and he chuckled.

Dr Reichardt looked shocked.

'He asked me to let him know certain things. He said that Martin B. had told him that I actually had a large number of patients thinking, not to put too fine a point on it, that they were themselves Adolf Hitler. I explained to him that this was not uncommon, that naturally with the respect, the worship they paid to Hitler, it was only natural that the great wish to be like him should end eventually by them identifying themselves with him. I was a little anxious when I mentioned this but I was delighted to find that he expressed great signs of satisfaction. He took it, I am thankful to say, as a compliment, this passionate wish to find identity with himself. He next asked if he could meet a representative number of these patients with this particular affliction. We had a little consultation. Martin B. seemed doubtful, but he took me aside and assured me that Herr Hitler actually wished to have this experience. What he himself was anxious to ensure was that Herr Hitler did not meet—well, in short, that Herr Hitler was not to be allowed to run any risks. If any of these so-called Hitlers, believing passionately in themselves as such, were inclined to be a little violent or dangerous...I assured him that he need have no worry. I suggested that I should collect a group of the most amiable of our Führers and assemble them for him to meet. Herr B. insisted that the Führer was very anxious to interview and mingle with them without my accompanying him. The patients, he said, would not behave naturally if they saw the chief of the establishment there, and if there was no danger...I assured him again that

there was no danger. I said, however, that I should be glad if Herr B. would wait upon him. There was no difficulty about that. It was arranged. Messages were sent to the Führers to assemble in a room for a very distinguished visitor who was anxious to compare notes with them.

‘Ach, so. Martin B. and the Führer were introduced into the assembly. I retired, closing the door, and chatted with the two ADC’s who had accompanied them. The Führer, I said, was looking in a particularly anxious state. He had no doubt had many troubles of late. This I may say was very shortly before the end of the war when things, quite frankly, were going badly. The Führer himself, they told me, had been greatly distressed of late but was convinced that he could bring the war to a successful close if the ideas which he was continually presenting to his general staff were acted upon, and accepted promptly.’

‘The Führer, I presume,’ said Sir George Packham, ‘was at that time—I mean to say—no doubt he was in a state that—’

‘We need not stress these points,’ said Herr Spiess. ‘He was completely beyond himself. Authority had to be taken for him on several points. But all that you will know well enough from the researches you have made in my country.’

‘One remembers that at the Nuremberg trials—’

‘There’s no need to refer to the Nuremberg trials, I’m sure,’ said Mr Lazenby decisively. ‘All that is far behind us. We look forward to a great future in the Common Market with your Government’s help, with the Government of Monsieur Grosjean and your other European colleagues. The past is the past.’

‘Quite so,’ said Herr Spiess, ‘and it is of the past that we now talk. Martin B. and Herr Hitler remained for a very short time in the assembly room. They came out again after seven minutes. Herr B. expressed himself to Dr Reichardt as very well satisfied with their experience. Their car was waiting and he and Herr Hitler must proceed immediately to where they had another appointment. They left very hurriedly.’

There was a silence.

‘And then?’ asked Colonel Pikeaway. ‘Something happened? Or had already happened?’

‘The behaviour of one of our Hitler patients was unusual,’ said Dr Reichardt. ‘He was a man who had a particularly close resemblance to Herr Hitler, which had given him always a special confidence in his own portrayal. He insisted now more fiercely than ever that he was the Führer, that he must go immediately to Berlin, that he must preside over a Council of the General Staff. In fact, he behaved with no signs of the former slight amelioration which he had shown in his condition. He seemed so unlike himself that I really could not understand this change taking place so suddenly. I was relieved, indeed, when two days later, his relations called to take him home for future private treatment there.’

‘And you let him go,’ said Herr Spiess.

‘Naturally I let him go. They had a responsible doctor with them, he was a voluntary patient, not certified, and therefore he was within his rights. So he left.’

‘I don’t see—’ began Sir George Packham.

‘Herr Spiess has a theory—’

‘It’s not a theory,’ said Spiess. ‘What I am telling you is fact. The Russians concealed it, we’ve concealed it. Plenty of evidence and proof has come in. Hitler, our Führer, remained in the asylum by his own consent that day and a man with the nearest resemblance to the real Hitler departed with Martin B. It was that patient’s body which was subsequently found in the bunker. I will not beat about the bush. We need not go into unnecessary details.’

‘We all have to know the truth,’ said Lazenby.

‘The real Führer was smuggled by a pre-arranged underground route to the Argentine and lived there for some years. He had a son there by a beautiful Aryan girl of good family. Some say she was an English girl. Hitler’s

mental condition worsened, and he died insane, believing himself to be commanding his armies in the field. It was the only plan possibly by which he could ever have escaped from Germany. He accepted it.'

'And you mean that for all these years nothing has leaked out about this, nothing has been known?'

'There have been rumours, there are always rumours. If you remember, one of the Czar's daughters in Russia was said to have escaped the general massacre of her family.'

'But that was—' George Packham stopped. 'False—quite false.'

'It was proved false by one set of people. It was accepted by another set of people, both of whom had known her. That Anastasia was indeed Anastasia, or that Anastasia, Grand Duchess of Russia, was really only a peasant girl. Which story was true? Rumours! The longer they go on, the less people believe them, except for those who have romantic minds, who go on believing them. It has often been rumoured that Hitler was alive, not dead. There is no one who has ever said with certainty that they have examined his dead body. The Russians declared so. They brought no proofs, though.'

'Do you really mean to say—Dr Reichardt, do you support this extraordinary story?'

'Ach,' said Dr Reichardt. 'You ask me, but I have told you my part. It was certainly Martin B. who came to my sanatorium. It was Martin B. who brought with him the Führer. It was Martin B. who treated him as the Führer, who spoke to him with the deference with which one speaks to the Führer. As for me, I lived already with some hundreds of Führers, of Napoleons, of Julius Caesars. You must understand that the Hitlers who lived in my sanatorium, they looked alike, they could have been, nearly all of them could have been, Adolf Hitler. They themselves could never have believed in themselves with the passion, the vehemence with which they knew that they were Hitler, unless they had had a basic resemblance, with make-up, clothing, continual acting, and playing of the part. I had had no personal meeting with Herr Adolf Hitler at any previous time. One saw pictures of him in the papers, one knew roughly what our great genius

looked like, but one knew only the pictures that he wished shown. So he came, he was the Führer, Martin B., the man best to be believed on that subject, said he was the Führer. No, I had no doubts. I obeyed orders. Herr Hitler wished to go alone into a room to meet a selection of his—what shall one say?—his plaster copies. He went in. He came out. An exchange of clothing could have been made, not very different clothing in any case. Was it he himself or one of the self-appointed Hitlers who came out? Rushed out quickly by Martin B. and driven away while the real man could have stayed behind, could have enjoyed playing his part, could have known that in this way and in this way only could he manage to escape from the country which at any moment might surrender. He was already disturbed in mind, mentally affected by rage and anger that the orders he gave, the wild fantastic messages sent to his staff, what they were to do, what they were to say, the impossible things they were to attempt, were not, as of old, immediately obeyed. He could feel already that he was no longer in supreme command. But he had a small faithful two or three and they had a plan for him, to get him out of this country, out of Europe, to a place where he could rally round him in a different continent his Nazi followers, the young ones who believed so passionately in him. The swastika would rise again there. He played his part. No doubt, he enjoyed it. Yes, that would be in keeping with a man whose reason was already tottering. He would show these others that he could play the part of Adolf Hitler better than they did. He laughed to himself occasionally, and my doctors, my nurses, they would look in, they would see some slight change. One patient who seemed unusually mentally disturbed, perhaps. Pah, there was nothing in that. It was always happening. With the Napoleons, with the Julius Caesars, with all of them. Some days, as one would say if one was a layman, they are madder than usual. That is the only way I can put it. So now it is for Herr Spiess to speak.'

'Fantastic!' said the Home Secretary.

'Yes, fantastic,' said Herr Spiess patiently, 'but fantastic things can happen, you know. In history, in real life, no matter how fantastic.'

'And nobody suspected, nobody knew?'

‘It was very well planned. It was well planned, well thought out. The escape route was ready, the exact details of it are not clearly known, but one can make a pretty good recapitulation of them. Some of the people who were concerned, who passed a certain personage on from place to place under different disguises, under different names, some of those people, on our looking back and making inquiries, we find did not live as long as they might have done.’

‘You mean in case they should give the secret away or should talk too much?’

‘The SS saw to that. Rich rewards, praise, promises of high positions in the future and then—death is a much easier answer. And the SS were used to death. They knew the different ways of it, they knew means of disposing of bodies—Oh yes, I will tell you that, this has been inquired into for some time now. The knowledge has come little by little to us, and we have made inquiries, documents have been acquired and the truth has come out. Adolf Hitler certainly reached South America. It is said that a marriage ceremony was performed—that a child was born. The child was branded in the foot with the mark of the swastika. Branded as a baby. I have seen trusted agents whom I can believe. They have seen that branded foot in South America. There that child was brought up, carefully guarded, shielded, prepared—prepared as the Dalai Lama might have been prepared for his great destiny. For that was the idea behind the fanatical young, the idea was greater than the idea that they had started out with. This was not merely a revival of the new Nazis, the new German super race. It was that, yes, but it was many more things besides. It was the young of many other nations, the super race of the young men of nearly every country in Europe, to join together, to join the ranks of anarchy, to destroy the old world, that materialistic world, to usher in a great new band of killing, murdering, violent brothers. Bent first on destruction and then on rising to power. And they had now their leader. A leader with the right blood in his veins and a leader who, though he grew up with no great likeness to his dead father, was—no, is—a golden-haired fair Nordic boy, taking presumably after the looks of his mother. A golden boy. A boy whom the whole world could accept. The Germans and the Austrians first because it was the great article of their faith, of their music, the young Siegfried. So he grew up as the young Siegfried who would command them

all, who would lead them into the promised land. Not the promised land of the Jews, whom they despised, where Moses led his followers. The Jews were dead under the ground, killed or murdered in the gas chambers. This was to be a land of their own, a land gained by their own prowess. The countries of Europe were to be banded together with the countries of South America. There already they had their spearhead, their anarchists, their prophets, their Guevaras, the Castros, the Guerrillas, their followers, a long arduous training in cruelty and torture and violence and death and after it, glorious life. Freedom! As Rulers of the New World State. The appointed conquerors.'

'Absurd nonsense,' said Mr Lazenby. 'Once all this is put a stop to—the whole thing will collapse. This is all quite ridiculous. What can they do?' Cedric Lazenby sounded merely querulous.

Herr Spiess shook his heavy, wise head.

'You may ask. I tell you the answer, which is—they do not know. They don't know where they're going. They don't know what is going to be done with them.'

'You mean they're not the real leaders?'

'They are the young marching Heroes, treading their path to glory, on the stepping-stones of violence, of pain, of hatred. They have now their following not only in South America and Europe. The cult has travelled north. In the United States, there too the young men riot, they march, they follow the banner of the Young Siegfried. They are taught his ways, they are taught to kill, to enjoy pain, they are taught the rules of the Death's Head, the rules of Himmler. They are being trained, you see. They are being secretly indoctrinated. They do not know what they're being trained for. But we do, some of us at least. And you? In this country?'

'Four or five of us, perhaps,' said Colonel Pikeaway.

'In Russia they know, in America they have begun to know. They know that there are the followers of the Young Hero, Siegfried, based on the Norse Legends, and that a young Siegfried is the leader. That that is their new

religion. The religion of the glorious boy, the golden triumph of youth. In him the old Nordic Gods have risen again.

‘But that, of course,’ said Herr Spiess, dropping his voice to a commonplace tone, ‘that of course is not the simple prosaic truth. There are some powerful personalities behind this. Evil men with first-class brains. A first-class financier, a great industrialist, someone who controls mines, oil, stores of uranium, who owns scientists of the top class, and those are the ones, a committee of men, who themselves do not look particularly interesting or extraordinary, but nevertheless have got control. They control the sources of power, and control through certain means of their own the young men who kill and the young men who are slaves. By control of drugs they acquire slaves. Slaves in every country who little by little progress from soft drugs to hard drugs and who are then completely subservient, completely dependent on men whom they do not even know but who secretly own them body and soul. Their craving need for a particular drug makes them slaves, and in due course, these slaves prove to be no good, because of their dependence on drugs, they will only be capable of sitting in apathy dreaming sweet dreams, and so they will be left to die, or even helped to die. They will not inherit that kingdom in which they believe. Strange religions are being deliberately introduced to them. The gods of the old days disguised.’

‘And permissive sex also plays its part, I suppose?’

‘Sex can destroy itself. In old Roman times the men who steeped themselves in vice, who were oversexed, who ran sex to death until they were bored and weary of sex, sometimes fled from it and went out into the desert and became Anchorites like St Simeon Stylites. Sex will exhaust itself. It does its work for the time being, but it cannot rule you as drugs rule you. Drugs and sadism and the love of power and hatred. A desire for pain for its own sake. The pleasures of inflicting it. They are teaching themselves the pleasures of evil. Once the pleasures of evil get a hold on you, you cannot draw back.’

‘My dear Chancellor—I really can’t believe you—I mean, well—I mean if there are these tendencies, they must be put down by adopting strong

measures. I mean, really, one—one can't go on pandering to this sort of thing. One must take a firm stand—a firm stand.'

'Shut up, George.' Mr Lazenby pulled out his pipe, looked at it, put it back in his pocket again. 'The best plan, I think,' he said, his *idée fixe* reasserting itself, 'would be for me to fly to Russia. I understand that—well, that these facts are known to the Russians.'

'They know sufficient,' said Herr Spiess. 'How much they will admit they know—' he shrugged his shoulders—'that is difficult to say. It is never easy to get the Russians to come out in the open. They have their own troubles on the Chinese border. They believe perhaps less in the far advanced stage, into which the movement has got, than we do.'

'I should make mine a special mission, I should.'

'I should stay here if I were you, Cedric.'

Lord Altamount's quiet voice spoke from where he leaned rather wearily back in his chair. 'We need you here, Cedric,' he said. There was gentle authority in his voice. 'You are the head of our Government—you must remain here. We have our trained agents—our own emissaries who are qualified for foreign missions.'

'Agents?' Sir George Packham dubiously demanded. 'What can agents do at this stage? We must have a report from—Ah, Horsham, there you are—I did not notice you before. Tell us—what agents have we got? And what can they possibly do?'

'We've got some very good agents,' said Henry Horsham quietly. 'Agents bring you information. Herr Spiess also has brought you information. Information which his agents have obtained for him. The trouble is—always has been—(you've only got to read about the last war) nobody wishes to believe the news the agents bring.'

'Surely—Intelligence—'

‘Nobody wants to accept that the agents are intelligent! But they are, you know. They are highly trained and their reports, nine times out of ten, are true. What happens then? The High-Ups refuse to believe it, don’t want to believe it, go further and refuse to act upon it in any way.’

‘Really, my dear Horsham—I can’t—’

Horsham turned to the German.

‘Even in your country, sir, didn’t that happen? True reports were brought in, but they weren’t always acted upon. People don’t want to know—if truth is unpalatable.’

‘I have to agree—that can and does happen—not often, of that I assure you—But yes—sometimes—’

Mr Lazenby was fidgeting again with his pipe.

‘Let us not argue about information. It is a question of dealing—of acting upon the information we have got. This is not merely a national crises—it is an international crisis. Decisions must be taken at top level—we must act. Munro, the police must be reinforced by the Army—military measures must be set in motion. Herr Spiess, you have always been a great military nation—rebellions must be put down by armed forces before they get out of hand. You would agree with that policy, I am sure—’

‘The policy, yes. But these insurrections are already what you term “out of hand”. They have tools, rifles, machine-guns, explosives, grenades, bombs, chemical and other gases—’

‘But with our nuclear weapons—a mere threat of nuclear warfare—and—’

‘These are not just disaffected schoolboys. With this Army of Youth there are scientists—young biologists, chemists, physicists. To start—or to engage in nuclear warfare in Europe—’ Herr Spiess shook his head. ‘Already we have had an attempt to poison the water supply at Cologne—Typhoid.’

‘The whole position is incredible—’ Cedric Lazenby looked round him hopefully—‘Chetwynd—Munro—Blunt?’

Admiral Blunt was, somewhat to Lazenby’s surprise, the only one to respond.

‘I don’t know where the Admiralty comes in—not quite our pigeon. I’d advise you, Cedric, if you want to do the best thing for yourself, to take your pipe, and a big supply of tobacco, and get as far out of range of any nuclear warfare you are thinking of starting as you can. Go and camp in the Antarctic, or somewhere where radio-activity will take a long time catching up with you. Professor Eckstein warned us, you know, and he knows what he’s talking about.’

Chapter 18

Pikeaway's Postscript

The meeting broke up at this point. It split into a definite rearrangement.

The German Chancellor with the Prime Minister, Sir George Packham, Gordon Chetwynd and Dr Reichardt departed for lunch at Downing Street.

Admiral Blunt, Colonel Munro, Colonel Pikeaway and Henry Horsham remained to make their comments with more freedom of speech than they would have permitted themselves if the VIP's had remained.

The first remarks made were somewhat disjointed.

'Thank goodness they took George Packham with them,' said Colonel Pikeaway. 'Worry, fidget, wonder, surmise—gets me down sometimes.'

'You ought to have gone with them, Admiral,' said Colonel Munro. 'Can't see Gordon Chetwynd or George Packham being able to stop our Cedric from going off for a top-level consultation with the Russians, the Chinese, the Ethiopians, the Argentinians or anywhere else the fancy takes him.'

'I've got other kites to fly,' said the Admiral gruffly. 'Going to the country to see an old friend of mine.' He looked with some curiosity at Colonel Pikeaway.

'Was the Hitler business really a surprise to you, Pikeaway?'

Colonel Pikeaway shook his head.

'Not really. We've known all about the rumours of our Adolf turning up in South America and keeping the swastika flying for years. Fifty-to-fifty chance of its being true. Whoever the chap was, madman, playacting impostor, or the real thing, he passed in his checks quite soon. Nasty stories about that, too—he wasn't an asset to his supporters.'

‘Whose body was it in the Bunker? is still a good talking point,’ said Blunt. ‘Never been any definite identification. Russians saw to that.’

He got up, nodded to the others and went towards the door.

Munro said thoughtfully, ‘I suppose Dr Reichardt knows the truth—though he played it cagey.’

‘What about the Chancellor?’ said Horsham.

‘Sensible man,’ grunted the Admiral, turning his head back from the doorway. ‘He was getting his country the way he wanted it, when this youth business started playing fun and games with the civilized world –Pity!’ He looked shrewdly at Colonel Munro.

‘What about the Golden-Haired Wonder? Hitler’s son? Know all about him?’

‘No need to worry,’ said Colonel Pikeaway unexpectedly.

The Admiral let go of the door-handle and came back and sat down.

‘All my eye and Betty Martin,’ said Colonel Pikeaway. ‘Hitler never had a son.’

‘You can’t be sure of that.’

‘We are sure—Franz Joseph, the Young Siegfried, the idolized Leader, is a common or garden fraud, a rank impostor. He’s the son of an Argentinian carpenter and a good-looking blonde, a small-part German opera singer—inherited his looks and his singing voice from his mother. He was carefully chosen for the part he was to play, groomed for stardom. In his early youth he was a professional actor—he was branded in the foot with a swastika—a story made up for him full of romantic details. He was treated like a dedicated Dalai Lama.’

‘And you’ve proof of this?’

‘Full documentation,’ Colonel Pikeaway grinned. ‘One of my best agents got it. Affidavits, photostats, signed declaration, including one from the mother, and medical evidence as to the date of the scar, copy of the original birth certificate of Karl Aguileros—and signed evidence of his identity with the so-called Franz Joseph. The whole bag of tricks. My agent got away with it just in time. They were after her—might have got her if she hadn’t had a bit of luck at Frankfurt.’

‘And where are these documents now?’

‘In a safe place. Waiting for the right moment for a spectacular debunking of a first-class impostor—’

‘Do the Government know this?—the Prime Minister?’

‘I never tell all I know to politicians—not until I can’t avoid it, or until I’m quite sure they’ll do the right thing.’

‘You are an old devil, Pikeaway,’ said Colonel Munro.

‘Somebody has to be,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, sadly.

Chapter 19

Sir Stafford Nye Has Visitors

Sir Stafford Nye was entertaining guests. They were guests with whom he had previously been unacquainted except for one of them whom he knew fairly well by sight. They were good-looking young men, serious-minded and intelligent, or so he should judge. Their hair was controlled and stylish, their clothes were well cut though not unduly old-fashioned. Looking at them, Stafford Nye was unable to deny that he liked the look of them. At the same time he wondered what they wanted with him. One of them he knew was the son of an oil king. Another of them, since leaving the university, had interested himself in politics. He had an uncle who owned a chain of restaurants. The third one was a young man with beetle brows who frowned and to whom perpetual suspicion seemed to be second nature.

‘It’s very good of you to let us come and call upon you, Sir Stafford,’ said the one who seemed to be the blond leader of the three.

His voice was very agreeable. His name was Clifford Bent.

‘This is Roderick Ketelly and this is Jim Brewster. We’re all anxious about the future. Shall I put it like that?’

‘I suppose the answer to that is, aren’t we all?’ said Sir Stafford Nye.

‘We don’t like things the way they’re going,’ said Clifford Bent. ‘Rebellion, anarchy, all that. Well, it’s all right as a philosophy. Frankly I think we may say that we all seem to go through a phase of it but one does come out the other side. We want people to be able to pursue academic careers without their being interrupted. We want a good sufficiency of demonstrations but not demonstrations of hooliganism and violence. We want intelligent demonstrations. And what we want, quite frankly, or so I think, is a new political party. Jim Brewster here has been paying serious attention to entirely new ideas and plans concerning trade union matters. They’ve tried

to shout him down and talk him out, but he's gone on talking, haven't you, Jim?

'Muddle-headed old fools, most of them,' said Jim Brewster.

'We want a sensible and serious policy for youth, a more economical method of government. We want different ideas to obtain in education but nothing fantastic or high-falutin'. And we shall want, if we win seats, and if we are able finally to form a government—and I don't see why we shouldn't—to put these ideas into action. There are a lot of people in our movement. We stand for youth, you know, just as well as the violent ones do. We stand for moderation and we mean to have a sensible government, with a reduction in the number of MP's, and we're noting down, looking for the men already in politics no matter what their particular persuasion is, if we think they're men of sense. We've come here to see if we can interest you in our aims. At the moment they are still in a state of flux but we have got as far as knowing the men we want. I may say that we don't want the ones we've got at present and we don't want the ones who might be put in instead. As for the third party, it seems to have died out of the running, though there are one or two good people there who suffer now for being in a minority, but I think they would come over to our way of thinking. We want to interest you. We want, one of these days, perhaps not so far distant as you might think—we want someone who'd understand and put out a proper, successful foreign policy. The rest of the world's in a worse mess than we are now. Washington's razed to the ground, Europe has continual military actions, demonstrations, wrecking of airports. Oh well, I don't need to write you a news letter of the past six months, but our aim is not so much to put the world on its legs again as to put England on its legs again. To have the right men to do it. We want young men, a great many young men and we've got a great many young men who aren't revolutionary, who aren't anarchistic, who will be willing to try and make a country run profitably. And we want some of the older men—I don't mean men of sixty-odd, I mean men of forty or fifty—and we've come to you because, well, we've heard things about you. We know about you and you're the sort of man we want.'

'Do you think you are wise?' said Sir Stafford.

‘Well, we, think we are.’

The second young man laughed slightly.

‘We hope you’ll agree with us there.’

‘I’m not sure that I do. You’re talking in this room very freely.’

‘It’s your sitting-room.’

‘Yes, yes, it’s my flat and it’s my sitting-room. But what you are saying, and in fact what you might be going to say, might be unwise. That means both for you as well as me.’

‘Oh! I think I see what you’re driving at.’

‘You are offering me something. A way of life, a new career and you are suggesting a breaking of certain ties. You are suggesting a form of disloyalty.’

‘We’re not suggesting your becoming a defector to any other country, if that’s what you mean.’

‘No, no, this is not an invitation to Russia or an invitation to China or an invitation to other places mentioned in the past, but I think it is an invitation connected with some foreign interests.’ He went on: ‘I’ve recently come back from abroad. A very interesting journey. I have spent the last three weeks in South America. There is something I would like to tell you. I have been conscious since I returned to England that I have been followed.’

‘Followed? You don’t think you imagined it?’

‘No, I don’t think I’ve imagined it. Those are the sort of things I have learned to notice in the course of my career. I have been in some fairly far distant and—shall we say?—interesting parts of the world. You chose to call upon me to sound me as to a proposition. It might have been safer, though, if we had met elsewhere.’

He got up, opened the door into the bathroom and turned the tap.

‘From the films I used to see some years ago,’ he said, ‘if you wished to disguise your conversation when a room was bugged, you turned on taps. I have no doubt that I am somewhat old-fashioned and that there are better methods of dealing with these things now. But at any rate perhaps we could speak a little more clearly now, though even then I still think we should be careful. South America,’ he went on, ‘is a very interesting part of the world. The Federation of South American countries (Spanish Gold has been one name for it), comprising by now Cuba, the Argentine, Brazil, Peru, one or two others not quite settled and fixed but coming into being. Yes. Very interesting.’

‘And what are your views on the subject,’ the suspicious-looking Jim Brewster asked. ‘What have you got to say about things?’

‘I shall continue to be careful,’ said Sir Stafford. ‘You will have more dependence on me if I do not talk unadvisedly. But I think that can be done quite well after I turn off the bath water.’

‘Turn it off, Jim,’ said Cliff Bent.

Jim grinned suddenly and obeyed.

Stafford Nye opened a drawer at the table and took out a recorder.

‘Not a very practised player yet,’ he said.

He put it to his lips and started a tune. Jim Brewster came back, scowling.

‘What’s this? A bloody concert we’re going to put on?’

‘Shut up,’ said Cliff Bent. ‘You ignoramus, you don’t know anything about music.’

Stafford Nye smiled.

‘You share my pleasure in Wagnerian music, I see,’ he said. ‘I was at the Youth Festival this year and enjoyed the concerts there very much.’

Again he repeated the tune.

‘Not any tune I know,’ said Jim Brewster. ‘It might be the Internationale or the Red Flag or God Save the King or Yankee Doodle or the Star-Spangled Banner. What the devil is it?’

‘It’s a motif from an opera,’ said Ketelly. ‘And shut your mouth. We know all we want to know.’

‘The horn call of a young Hero,’ said Stafford Nye.

He brought his hand up in a quick gesture, the gesture from the past meaning ‘Heil Hitler’. He murmured very gently,

‘The new Siegfried.’

All three rose.

‘You’re quite right,’ said Clifford Bent. ‘We must all, I think, be very careful.’

He shook hands.

‘We are glad to know that you will be with us. One of the things this country will need in its future—its great future, I hope—will be a first-class Foreign Minister.’

They went out of the room. Stafford Nye watched them through the slightly open door go into the lift and descend.

He gave a curious smile, shut the door, glanced up at the clock on the wall and sat down in an easy chair—to wait...

His mind went back to the day, a week ago now, when he and Mary Ann had gone their separate ways from Kennedy Airport. They had stood there, both of them finding it difficult to speak. Stafford Nye had broken the silence first.

‘Do you think we’ll ever meet again? I wonder...’

‘Is there any reason why we shouldn’t?’

‘Every reason, I should think.’

She looked at him, then quickly away again.

‘These partings have to happen. It’s—part of the job.’

‘The job! It’s always the job with you, isn’t it?’

‘It has to be.’

‘You’re a professional. I’m only an amateur. You’re a—’ he broke off. ‘What are you? Who are you? I don’t really know, do I?’ ‘No.’

He looked at her then. He saw sadness, he thought, in her face. Something that was almost pain. ‘So I have to—wonder... You think I ought to trust you, I suppose?’

‘No, not that. That is one of the things that I have learnt, that life has taught me. There is nobody that one can trust. Remember that—always.’

‘So that is your world? A world of distrust, of fear, of danger.’

‘I wish to stay alive. I am alive.’

‘I know.’

‘And I want you to stay alive.’

‘I trusted you—in Frankfurt...’

‘You took a risk.’

‘It was a risk well worth taking. You know that as well as I do.’

‘You mean because—?’

‘Because we have been together. And now—That is my flight being called. Is this companionship of ours which started in an airport, to end here in another airport? You are going where? To do what?’

‘To do what I have to do. To Baltimore, to Washington, to Texas. To do what I have been told to do.’

‘And I? I have been told nothing. I am to go back to London—and do what there?’

‘Wait.’

‘Wait for what?’

‘For the advances that almost certainly will be made to you.’

‘And what am I to do then?’

She smiled at him, with the sudden gay smile that he knew so well.

‘Then you play it by ear. You’ll know how to do it, none better. You’ll like the people who approach you. They’ll be well chosen. It’s important, very important, that we should know who they are.’

‘I must go. Goodbye, Mary Ann.’

‘Auf Wiedersehen.’

In the London flat, the telephone rang. At a singularly apposite moment, Stafford Nye thought, bringing him back from his past memories just at that moment of their farewell. ‘Auf Wiedersehen,’ he murmured, as he rose to his feet, crossed to take the receiver off, ‘let it be so.’

A voice spoke whose wheezy accents were quite unmistakable.

‘Stafford Nye?’

He gave the requisite answer: ‘No smoke without fire.’

‘My doctor says I should give up smoking. Poor fellow,’ said Colonel Pikeaway, ‘he might as well give up hope of that. Any news?’

‘Oh yes. Thirty pieces of silver. Promised, that is to say.’

‘Damned swine!’

‘Yes, yes, keep calm.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I played them a tune. Siegfried’s Horn motif. I was following an elderly aunt’s advice. It went down very well.’

‘Sounds crazy to me!’

‘Do you know a song called Juanita? I must learn that too, in case I need it.’

‘Do you know who Juanita is?’

‘I think so.’

‘H’m, I wonder—heard of in Baltimore last.’

‘What about your Greek girl, Daphne Theodofanous? Where is she now, I wonder?’

‘Sitting in an airport somewhere in Europe waiting for you, probably,’ said Colonel Pikeaway.

‘Most of the European airports seem to be closed down because they’ve been blown up or more or less damaged. High explosive, hi-jackers, high jinks.

‘The boys and girls come out to play

The moon doth shine as bright as day—

Leave your supper and leave your sleep

And shoot your playfellow in the street.’

‘The Children’s Crusade à la mode.’

‘Not that I really know much about it. I only know the one that Richard Coeur de Lion went to. But in a way this whole business is rather like the Children’s Crusade. Starting with idealism, starting with ideas of the Christian world delivering the holy city from pagans, and ending with death, death and again, death. Nearly all the children died. Or were sold into slavery. This will end the same way unless we can find some means of getting them out of it...’

Chapter 20

The Admiral Visits An Old Friend

‘Thought you must all be dead here,’ said Admiral Blunt with a snort.

His remark was addressed not to the kind of butler which he would have liked to see opening this front door, but to the young woman whose surname he could never remember but whose Christian name was Amy.

‘Rung you up at least four times in the last week. Gone abroad, that’s what they said.’

‘We have been abroad. We’ve only just come back.’

‘Matilda oughtn’t to go rampaging about abroad. Not at her time of life. She’ll die of blood pressure or heart failure or something in one of these modern airplanes. Cavorting about, full of explosives put in them by the Arabs or the Israelis or somebody or other. Not safe at all any longer.’

‘Her doctor recommended it to her.’

‘Oh well, we all know what doctors are.’

‘And she has really come back in very good spirits.’

‘Where’s she been, then?’

‘Oh, taking a Cure. In Germany or—I never can quite remember whether it’s Germany or Austria. That new place, you know, the Golden Gasthaus.’

‘Ah yes, I know the place you mean. Costs the earth, doesn’t it?’

‘Well, it’s said to produce very remarkable results.’

‘Probably only a different way of killing you quicker,’ said Admiral Blunt.
‘How did you enjoy it?’

‘Well, not really very much. The scenery was very nice, but—’

An imperious voice sounded from the floor above.

‘Amy. Amy! What are you doing, talking in the hall all this time? Bring Admiral Blunt up here. I’m waiting for him.’

‘Gallivanting about,’ said Admiral Blunt, after he had greeted his old friend. ‘That’s how you’ll kill yourself one of these days. You mark my words—’

‘No, I shan’t. There’s no difficulty at all in travelling nowadays.’

‘Running about all those airports, ramps, stairs, buses.’

‘Not at all. I had a wheelchair.’

‘A year or two ago when I saw you, you said you wouldn’t hear of such a thing. You said you had too much pride to admit you needed one.’

‘Well, I’ve had to give up some of my pride, nowadays, Philip. Come and sit down here and tell me why you wanted to come and see me so much all of a sudden. You’ve neglected me a great deal for the last year.’

‘Well, I’ve not been so well myself. Besides, I’ve been looking into a few things. You know the sort of thing. Where they ask your advice but don’t mean in the least to take it. They can’t leave the Navy alone. Keep on wanting to fiddle about with it, drat them.’

‘You look quite well to me,’ said Lady Matilda.

‘You don’t look so bad yourself, my dear. You’ve got a nice sparkle in your eye.’

‘I’m deafer than when you saw me last. You’ll have to speak up more.’

‘All right. I’ll speak up.’

‘What do you want, gin and tonic or whisky or rum?’

‘You seem ready to dispense strong liquor of any kind. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll have a gin and tonic.’

Amy rose and left the room.

‘And when she brings it,’ said the Admiral, ‘get rid of her again, will you? I want to talk to you. Talk to you particularly is what I mean.’

Refreshment brought, Lady Matilda made a dismissive wave of the hand and Amy departed with the air of one who is pleasing herself, not her employer. She was a tactful young woman.

‘Nice girl,’ said the Admiral, ‘very nice.’

‘Is that why you asked me to get rid of her and see she shut the door? So that she mightn’t overhear you saying something nice about her?’

‘No. I wanted to consult you.’

‘What about? Your health or where to get some new servants or what to grow in the garden?’

‘I want to consult you very seriously. I thought perhaps you might be able to remember something for me.’

‘Dear Philip, how touching that you should think I can remember anything. Every year my memory gets worse. I’ve come to the conclusion one only remembers what’s called the “friends of one’s youth”. Even horrid girls one was at school with one remembers, though one doesn’t want to. That’s where I’ve been now, as a matter of fact.’

‘Where’ve you been now? Visiting schools?’

‘No, no, no, I went to see an old school friend whom I haven’t seen for thirty–forty–fifty–that sort of time.’

‘What was she like?’

‘Enormously fat and even nastier and horridier than I remembered her.’

‘You’ve got very queer tastes, I must say, Matilda.’

‘Well, go on, tell me. Tell me what it is you want me to remember?’

‘I wondered if you remembered another friend of yours. Robert Shoreham.’

‘Robbie Shoreham? Of course I do.’

‘The scientist feller. Top scientist.’

‘Of course. He wasn’t the sort of man one would ever forget. I wonder what put him into your head.’

‘Public need.’

‘Funny you should say that,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘I thought the same myself the other day.’

‘You thought what?’

‘That he was needed. Or someone like him—if there is anyone like him.’

‘There isn’t. Now listen, Matilda. People talk to you a bit. They tell you things. I’ve told you things myself.’

‘I’ve always wondered why, because you can’t believe that I’ll understand them or be able to describe them. And that was even more the case with Robbie than with you.’

‘I don’t tell you naval secrets.’

‘Well, he didn’t tell me scientific secrets. I mean, only in a very general way.’

‘Yes, but he used to talk to you about them, didn’t he?’

‘Well, he liked saying things that would astonish me sometimes.’

‘All right, then, here it comes. I want to know if he ever talked to you, in the days when he could talk properly, poor devil, about something called Project B.’

‘Project B.’ Matilda Cleckheaton considered thoughtfully. ‘Sounds vaguely familiar,’ she said. ‘He used to talk about Project this or that sometimes, or Operation that or this. But you must realize that none of it ever made any kind of sense to me, and he knew it didn’t. But he used to like—oh, how shall I put it?—astonishing me rather, you know. Sort of describing it the way that a conjuror might describe how he takes three rabbits out of a hat without your knowing how he did it. Project B? Yes, that was a good long time ago...He was wildly excited for a bit. I used to say to him sometimes “How’s Project B going on?”’

‘I know, I know, you’ve always been a tactful woman. You can always remember what people were doing or interested in. And even if you don’t know the first thing about it you’d show an interest. I described a new kind of naval gun to you once and you must have been bored stiff. But you listened as brightly as though it was the thing you’d been waiting to hear about all your life.’

‘As you tell me, I’ve been a tactful woman and a good listener, even if I’ve never had much in the way of brains.’

‘Well, I want to hear a little more what Robbie said about Project B.’

‘He said—well, it’s very difficult to remember now. He mentioned it after talking about some operation that they used to do on people’s brains. You know, the people who were terribly melancholic and who were thinking of suicide and who were so worried and neurasthenic that they had awful anxiety complexes. Stuff like that, the sort of thing people used to talk of in connection with Freud. And he said that the side effects were impossible. I mean, the people were quite happy and meek and docile and didn’t worry any more, or want to kill themselves, but they—well I mean they didn’t worry enough and therefore they used to get run over and all sorts of things like that because they weren’t thinking of any danger and didn’t notice it. I’m putting it badly but you do understand what I mean. And anyway, he said, that was going to be the trouble, he thought, with Project B.’

‘Did he describe it at all more closely than that?’

‘He said I’d put it into his head,’ said Matilda Cleckheaton unexpectedly.

‘What? Do you mean to say a scientiest—a top-flight scientist like Robbie actually said to you that you had put something into his scientific brain? You don’t know the first thing about science.’

‘Of course not. But I used to try and put a little common sense into people’s brains. The cleverer they are, the less common sense they have. I mean, really, the people who matter are the people who thought of simple things like perforations on postage stamps, or like somebody Adam, or whatever his name was—No—MacAdam in America who put black stuff on roads so that farmers could get all their crops from farms to the coast and make a better profit. I mean, they do much more good than all the high-powered scientists do. Scientists can only think of things for destroying you. Well, that’s the sort of thing I said to Robbie. Quite nicely, of course, as a kind of joke. He’d been just telling me that some splendid things had been done in the scientific world about germ warfare and experiments with biology and what you can do to unborn babies if you get at them early enough. And also some peculiarly nasty and very unpleasant gases and saying how silly people were to protest against nuclear bombs because they were really a kindness compared to some of the other things that had been invented since then. And so I said it’d be much more to the point if Robbie, or someone clever like Robbie, could think of something really sensible. And he looked at me with that, you know, little twinkle he has in his eye sometimes and said, “Well what would you consider sensible?” And I said, “Well, instead of inventing all these germ warfares and these nasty gases, and all the rest of it, why don’t you just invent something that makes people feel happy?” I said it oughtn’t to be any more difficult to do. I said, “You’ve talked about this operation where, I think you said, they took out a bit of the front of your brain or maybe the back of your brain. But anyway it made a great difference in people’s dispositions. They’d become quite different. They hadn’t worried any more or they hadn’t wanted to commit suicide. But,” I said, “well, if you can change people like that just by taking a little bit of bone or muscle or nerve or tinkering up a gland or taking out a gland or putting in more of a gland,” I said, “if you can make all that difference in

people's dispositions, why can't you invent something that will make people pleasant or just sleepy perhaps? Supposing you had something, not a sleeping draught, but just something that people sat down in a chair and had a nice dream. Twenty-four hours or so and just woke up to be fed now and again." I said it would be a much better idea.'

'And is that what Project B was?'

'Well, of course he never told me what it was exactly. But he was excited with an idea and he said I'd put it into his head, so it must have been something rather pleasant I'd put into his head, mustn't it? I mean, I hadn't suggested any ideas to him of any nastier ways for killing people and I didn't want people even –you know–to cry, like tear gas or anything like that. Perhaps laughing–yes, I believe I mentioned laughing gas. I said well if you have your teeth out, they give you three sniffs of it and you laugh, well, surely, surely you could invent something that's as useful as that but would last a little longer. Because I believe laughing gas only lasts about fifty seconds, doesn't it? I know my brother had some teeth out once. The dentist's chair was very near the window and my brother was laughing so much, when he was unconscious, I mean, that he stretched his leg right out and put it through the dentist's window and all the glass fell in the street, and the dentist was very cross about it.'

'Your stories always have such strange side-kicks,' said the Admiral.
'Anyway, this is what Robbie Shoreham had chosen to get on with, from your advice.'

'Well, I don't know what it was exactly. I mean, I don't think it was sleeping or laughing. At any rate, it was something. It wasn't really Project B. It had another name.'

'What sort of a name?'

'Well, he did mention it once I think, or twice. The name he'd given it. Rather like Benger's Food,' said Aunt Matilda, considering thoughtfully.

'Some soothing agent for the digestion?'

‘I don’t think it had anything to do with the digestion. I rather think it was something you sniffed or something, perhaps it was a gland. You know we talked of so many things that you never quite knew what he was talking about at the moment. Benger’s Food. Ben–Ben–it did begin with Ben. And there was a pleasant word associated with it.’

‘Is that all you can remember about it?’

‘I think so. I mean, this was just a talk we had once and then, quite a long time afterwards, he told me I’d put something into his head for Project Ben something. And after that, occasionally, if I remembered, I’d ask him if he was still working on Project Ben and then sometimes he’d be very exasperated and say no, he’d come up against a snag and he was putting it all aside now because it was in–in–well, I mean the next eight words were pure jargon and I couldn’t remember them and you wouldn’t understand them if I said them to you. But in the end, I think–oh dear, oh dear, this is all about eight or nine years ago–in the end he came one day and he said, “Do you remember Project Ben?” I said, “Of course I remember it. Are you still working on it?” And he said no, he was determined to lay it all aside. I said I was sorry. Sorry if he’d given it up and he said, “Well, it’s not only that I can’t get what I was trying for. I know now that it could be got. I know where I went wrong. I know just what the snag was, I know just how to put that snag right again. I’ve got Lisa working on it with me. Yes, it could work. It’d require experimenting on certain things but it could work.” “Well,” I said to him, “what are you worrying about?” And he said, “Because I don’t know what it would really do to people.” I said something about his being afraid it would kill people or maim them for life or something. “No,” he said, “it’s not like that.” He said, it’s a–oh, of course, now I remember. He called it Project Benvo. Yes. And that’s because it had to do with benevolence.’

‘Benevolence!’ said the Admiral, highly surprised. ‘Benevolence? Do you mean charity?’

‘No, no, no. I think he meant simply that you could make people benevolent. Feel benevolent.’

‘Peace and good will towards men?’

‘Well, he didn’t put it like that.’

‘No, that’s reserved for religious leaders. They preach that to you and if you did what they preach it’d be a very happy world. But Robbie, I gather, was not preaching. He proposed to do something in his laboratory to bring about this result by purely physical means.’

‘That’s the sort of thing. And he said you can never tell when things are beneficial to people or when they’re not. They are in one way, they’re not in another. And he said things about—oh, penicillin and sulphonamides and heart transplants and things like pills for women, though we hadn’t got “The Pill” then. But you know, things that seem all right and they’re wonder-drugs or wonder-gases or wonder-something or other, and then there’s something about them that makes them go wrong as well as right, and then you wish they weren’t there and had never been thought of. Well, that’s the sort of thing that he seemed to be trying to get over to me. It was all rather difficult to understand. I said, “Do you mean you don’t like to take the risk?” and he said, “You’re quite right. I don’t like to take the risk. That’s the trouble because, you see, I don’t know in the least what the risk will be. That’s what happens to us poor devils of scientists. We take the risks and the risks are not in what we’ve discovered, it’s the risks of what the people we’ll have to tell about it will do with what we’ve discovered.” I said, “Now you’re talking about nuclear weapons again and atom bombs,” and he said, “Oh, to Hell with nuclear weapons and atomic bombs. We’ve gone far beyond that.”

““But if you’re going to make people nice-tempered and benevolent,” I said, “what have you got to worry about?” And he said, “You don’t understand, Matilda. You’ll never understand. My fellow scientists in all probability would not understand either. And no politicians would ever understand. And so, you see, it’s too big a risk to be taken. At any rate one would have to think for a long time.”

““But,” I said, “you could bring people out of it again, just like laughing gas, couldn’t you? I mean, you could make people benevolent just for a short time, and then they’d get all right again—or all wrong again—it depends which way you look at it, I should have thought.” And he said, “No. This will be, you see, permanent. Quite permanent because it affects the—” and

then he went into jargon again. You know, long words and numbers. Formulas, or molecular changes—something like that. I expect really it must be something like what they do to cretins. You know, to make them stop being cretins, like giving them thyroid or taking it away from them. I forget which it is. Something like that. Well, I expect there's some nice little gland somewhere and if you take it away or smoke it out, or do something drastic to it—but then, the people are permanently—'

'Permanently benevolent? You're sure that's the right word? Benevolence?'

'Yes, because that's why he nicknamed it Benvo.'

'But what did his colleagues think, I wonder, about his backing out?'

'I don't think he had many who knew. Lisa what's-her-name, the Austrian girl; she'd worked on it with him. And there was one young man called Leadenthal or some name like that, but he died of tuberculosis. And he rather spoke as though the other people who worked with him were merely assistants who didn't know exactly what he was doing or trying for. I see what you're getting at,' said Matilda suddenly. 'I don't think he ever told anybody, really. I mean, I think he destroyed his formulas or notes or whatever they were and gave up the whole idea. And then he had his stroke and got ill, and now, poor dear, he can't speak very well. He's paralysed one side. He can hear fairly well. He listens to music. That's his whole life now.'

'His life's work's ended, you think?'

'He doesn't even see friends. I think it's painful to him to see them. He always makes some excuse.'

'But he's alive,' said Admiral Blunt. 'He's alive still. Got his address?'

'It's in my address book somewhere. He's still in the same place. North Scotland somewhere. But—oh, do understand—he was such a wonderful man once. He isn't now. He's just almost dead. For all intents and purposes.'

'There's always hope,' said Admiral Blunt. 'And belief,' he added. 'Faith.'

‘And benevolence, I suppose,’ said Lady Matilda.

Chapter 21

Project Benvo

Professor John Gottlieb sat in his chair looking very steadfastly at the handsome young woman sitting opposite him. He scratched his ear with a rather monkey-like gesture which was characteristic of him. He looked rather like a monkey anyway. A prognathous jaw, a high mathematical head which make a slight contrast in terms, and a small wizened frame.

‘It’s not every day,’ said Professor Gottlieb, ‘that a young lady brings me a letter from the President of the United States. However,’ he said cheerfully, ‘Presidents don’t always know exactly what they’re doing. What’s this all about? I gather you’re vouched for on the highest authority.’

‘I’ve come to ask you what you know or what you can tell me about something called Project Benvo.’

‘Are you really Countess Renata Zerkowski?’

‘Technically, possibly, I am. I’m more often known as Mary Ann.’

‘Yes, that’s what they wrote me under separate cover. And you want to know about Project Benvo. Well, there was such a thing. Now it’s dead and buried and the man who thought of it also, I expect.’

‘You mean Professor Shoreham.’

‘That’s right. Robert Shoreham. One of the greatest geniuses of our age. Einstein, Niels Bohr and some others. But Robert Shoreham didn’t last as long as he should. A great loss to science—what is it Shakespeare says of Lady Macbeth: “She should have died hereafter.”’

‘He’s not dead,’ said Mary Ann.

‘Oh. Sure of that? Nothing’s been heard of him for a long time.’

‘He’s an invalid. He lives in the north of Scotland. He is paralysed, can’t speak very well, can’t walk very well. He sits most of the time listening to music.’

‘Yes, I can imagine that. Well, I’m glad about that. If he can do that he won’t be too unhappy. Otherwise it’s a pretty fair hell for a brilliant man who isn’t brilliant any more. Who’s, as it were, dead in an invalid chair.’

‘There was such a thing as Project Benvo?’

‘Yes, he was very keen about it.’

‘He talked to you about it?’

‘He talked to some of us about it in the early days. You’re not a scientist yourself, young woman, I suppose?’

‘No, I’m—’

‘You’re just an agent, I suppose. I hope you’re on the right side. We still have to hope for miracles these days, but I don’t think you’ll get anything out of Project Benvo.’

‘Why not? You said he worked on it. It would have been a very great invention, wouldn’t it? Or discovery, or whatever you call these things?’

‘Yes, it would have been one of the greatest discoveries of the age. I don’t know just what went wrong. It’s happened before now. A thing goes along all right but in the last stages somehow, it doesn’t click. Breaks down. Doesn’t do what’s expected of it and you give up in despair. Or else you do what Shoreham did.’

‘What was that?’

‘He destroyed it. Every damn bit of it. He told me so himself. Burnt all the formulas, all the papers concerning it, all the data. Three weeks later he had his stroke. I’m sorry. You see, I can’t help you. I never knew any details about it, nothing but its main idea. I don’t even remember that now, except for one thing. Benvo stood for Benevolence.’

Chapter 22

Juanita

Lord Altamount was dictating.

The voice that had once been ringing and dominant was now reduced to a gentleness that had still an unexpectedly special appeal. It seemed to come gently out of the shadows of the past, but to be emotionally moving in a way that a more dominant tone would not have been.

James Kleek was taking down the words as they came, pausing every now and then when a moment of hesitation came, allowing for it and waiting gently himself.

‘Idealism,’ said Lord Altamount, ‘can arise and indeed usually does so when moved by a natural antagonism to injustice. That is a natural revulsion from crass materialism. The natural idealism of youth is fed more and more by a desire to destroy those two phases of modern life, injustice and crass materialism. That desire to destroy what is evil, sometimes leads to a love of destruction for its own sake. It can lead to a pleasure in violence and in the infliction of pain. All this can be fostered and strengthened from outside by those who are gifted by a natural power of leadership. This original idealism arises in a non-adult stage. It should and could lead on to a desire for a new world. It should lead also towards a love of all human beings, and of goodwill towards them. But those who have once learnt to love violence for its own sake will never become adult. They will be fixed in their own retarded development and will so remain for their lifetime.’

The buzzer went. Lord Altamount gestured and James Kleek lifted it up and listened.

‘Mr Robinson is here.’

‘Ah yes. Bring him in. We can go on with this later.’

James Kleek rose, laying aside his notebook and pencil.

Mr Robinson came in. James Kleek set a chair for him, one sufficiently widely proportioned to receive his form without discomfort. Mr Robinson smiled his thanks and arranged himself by Lord Altamount's side.

'Well,' said Lord Altamount. 'Got anything new for us? Diagrams? Circles? Bubbles?'

He seemed faintly amused.

'Not exactly,' said Mr Robinson imperturbably, 'it's more like plotting the course of a river—'

'River?' said Lord Altamount. 'What sort of a river?'

'A river of money,' said Mr Robinson, in the slightly apologetic voice he was wont to use when referring to his speciality. 'It's really just like a river, money is—coming from somewhere and definitely going to somewhere. Really very interesting—that is, if you are interested in these things—It tells its own story, you see—'

James Kleek looked as though he didn't see, but Altamount said, 'I understand. Go on.'

'It's flowing from Scandinavia—from Bavaria—from the USA—from South-east Asia—fed by lesser tributaries on the way—'

'And going—where?'

'Mainly to South America—meeting the demands of the now securely established Headquarters of Militant Youth—'

'And representing four of the five intertwined Circles you showed us—Armaments, Drugs, Scientific and Chemical Warfare Missiles as well as Finance?'

'Yes—we think we know now fairly accurately who controls these various groups—'

‘What about Circle J–Juanita?’ asked James Kleek.

‘As yet we cannot be sure.’

‘James has certain ideas as to that,’ said Lord Altamount. ‘I hope he may be wrong—yes, I hope so. The initial J is interesting. What does it stand for—Justice? Judgment?’

‘A dedicated killer,’ said James Kleek. ‘The female of the species is more deadly than the male.’

‘There are historical precedents,’ admitted Altamount. ‘Jael setting butter in a lordly dish before Sisera—and afterwards driving the nail through his head. Judith executing Holofernes, and applauded for it by her countrymen. Yes, you may have something there.’

‘So you think you know who Juanita is, do you?’ said Mr Robinson. ‘That’s interesting.’

‘Well, perhaps I’m wrong, sir, but there have been things that made me think—’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Robinson, ‘we have all had to think, haven’t we? Better say who you think it is, James.’

‘The Countess Renata Zerkowski.’

‘What makes you pitch upon her?’

‘The places she’s been, the people she’s been in contact with. There’s been too much coincidence about the way she has been turning up in different places, and all that. She’s been in Bavaria. She’s been visiting Big Charlotte there. What’s more, she took Stafford Nye with her. I think that’s significant—’

‘You think they’re in this together?’ asked Altamount.

‘I wouldn’t like to say that. I don’t know enough about him, but...’ He paused.

‘Yes,’ said Lord Altamount, ‘there have been doubts about him. He was suspected from the beginning.’

‘By Henry Horsham?’

‘Henry Horsham for one, perhaps. Colonel Pikeaway isn’t sure, I imagine. He’s been under observation. Probably knows it too. He’s not a fool.’

‘Another of them,’ said James Kleek savagely. ‘Extraordinary, how we can breed them, how we trust them, tell ’em our secrets, let them know what we’re doing, go on saying: “If there’s one person I’m absolutely sure of it’s—oh, McLean, or Burgess, or Philby, or any of the lot.” And now—Stafford Nye.’

‘Stafford Nye, indoctrinated by Renata alias Juanita,’ said Mr Robinson.

‘There was that curious business at Frankfurt airport,’ said Kleek, ‘and there was the visit to Charlotte. Stafford Nye, I gather, has since been in South America with her. As for she herself—do we know where she is now?’

‘I dare say Mr Robinson does,’ said Lord Altamount. ‘Do you, Mr Robinson?’

‘She’s in the United States. I’ve heard that after staying with friends in Washington or near it, she was in Chicago, then in California and that she went from Austin to visit a top-flight scientist. That’s the last I’ve heard.’

‘What’s she doing there?’

‘One would presume,’ said Mr Robinson, in his calm voice, ‘that she is trying to obtain information.’

‘What information?’

Mr Robinson sighed.

‘That is what one wishes one knew. One presumes that it is the same information that we are anxious to obtain and that she is doing it on our behalf. But one never knows—it may be for the other side.’

He turned to look at Lord Altamount.

‘Tonight, I understand, you are travelling to Scotland. Is that right?’

‘Quite right.’

‘I don’t think he ought to, sir,’ said James Kleek. He turned an anxious face to his employer. ‘You’ve not been so well lately, sir. It’ll be a very tiring journey whichever way you go. Air or train. Can’t you leave it to Munro and Horsham?’

‘At my age it’s a waste of time to take care,’ said Lord Altamount. ‘If I can be useful I would like to die in harness, as the saying goes.’

He smiled at Mr Robinson.

‘You’d better come with us, Robinson.’

Chapter 23

Journey To Scotland

I

The Squadron Leader wondered a little what it was all about. He was accustomed to being left only partly in the picture. That was Security's doing, he supposed. Taking no chances. He'd done this sort of thing before more than once. Flying a plane of people out to an unlikely spot, with unlikely passengers, being careful to ask no questions except such as were of an entirely factual nature. He knew some of his passengers on this flight but not all of them. Lord Altamount he recognized. An ill man, a very sick man, he thought, a man who, he judged, kept himself alive by sheer willpower. The keen hawk-faced man with him was his special guard dog, presumably. Seeing not so much to his safety as to his welfare. A faithful dog who never left his side. He would have with him restoratives, stimulants, all the medical box of tricks. The Squadron Leader wondered why there wasn't a doctor also in attendance. It would have been an extra precaution. Like a death's head, the old man looked. A noble death's head. Something made of marble in a museum. Henry Horsham the Squadron Leader knew quite well. He knew several of the Security lot. And Colonel Munro, looking slightly less fierce than usual, rather more worried. Not very happy on the whole. There was also a large, yellow-faced man. Foreigner, he might be. Asiatic? What was he doing, flying in a plane to the North of Scotland? The Squadron Leader said deferentially to Colonel Munro:

‘Everything laid on, sir? The car is here waiting.’

‘How far exactly is the distance?’

‘Seventeen miles, sir, roughish road but not too bad. There are extra rugs in the car.’

‘You have your orders? Repeat, please, if you will, Squadron Leader Andrews.’

The Squadron Leader repeated and the Colonel nodded satisfaction. As the car finally drove off, the Squadron Leader looked after it, wondering to himself why on earth those particular people were here on this drive over the lonely moor to a venerable old castle where a sick man lived as a recluse without friends or visitors in the general run of things. Horsham knew, he supposed. Horsham must know a lot of strange things. Oh well, Horsham wasn’t likely to tell him anything.

The car was well and carefully driven. It drew up at last over a gravel driveway and came to a stop before the porch. It was a turreted building of heavy stone. Lights hung at either side of the big door. The door itself opened before there was any need to ring a bell or demand admittance.

An old Scottish woman of sixty-odd with a stern, dour face, stood in the doorway. The chauffeur helped the occupants out.

James Kleek and Horsham helped Lord Altamount to alight and supported him up the steps. The old Scottish woman stood aside and dropped a respectful curtsy to him. She said:

‘Good evening, y’r lordship. The master’s waiting for you. He knows you’re arriving, we’ve got rooms prepared and fires for you in all of them.’

Another figure had arrived in the hall now. A tall lean woman between fifty and sixty, a woman who was still handsome. Her black hair was parted in the middle, she had a high forehead, an aquiline nose and a tanned skin.

‘Here’s Miss Neumann to look after you,’ said the Scottish woman.

‘Thank you, Janet,’ said Miss Neumann. ‘Be sure the fires are kept up in the bedrooms.’

‘I will that.’

Lord Altamount shook hands with her.

‘Good evening, Miss Neumann.’

‘Good evening, Lord Altamount. I hope you are not too tired by your journey.’

‘We had a very good flight. This is Colonel Munro, Miss Neumann. This is Mr Robinson, Sir James Kleek and Mr Horsham, of the Security Department.’

‘I remember Mr Horsham from some years ago, I think.’

‘I hadn’t forgotten,’ said Henry Horsham. ‘It was at the Leveson Foundation. You were already, I think, Professor Shoreham’s secretary at that time?’

‘I was first his assistant in the laboratory, and afterwards his secretary. I am still, as far as he needs one, his secretary. He also has to have a hospital nurse living here more or less permanently. There have to be changes from time to time—Miss Ellis who is here now took over from Miss Bude only two days ago. I have suggested that she should stay near at hand to the room in which we ourselves shall be. I thought you would prefer privacy, but that she ought not to be out of call in case she was needed.’

‘Is he in very bad health?’ asked Colonel Munro.

‘He doesn’t actually suffer,’ said Miss Neumann, ‘but you must prepare yourself, if you have not seen him, that is, for a long time. He is only what is left of a man.’

‘Just one moment before you take us to him. His mental processes are not too badly depleted? He can understand what one says to him?’

‘Oh, yes, he can understand perfectly, but as he is semi-paralysed, he is unable to speak with much clarity, though that varies, and is unable to walk without help. His brain, in my opinion, is as good as ever it was. The only difference is that he tires very easily now. Now, would you like some refreshment first?’

‘No,’ said Lord Altamont. ‘No, I don’t want to wait. This is a rather urgent matter on which we have come, so if you will take us to him now—he expects us, I understand?’

‘He expects you, yes,’ said Lisa Neumann.

She led the way up some stairs, along a corridor and opened a room of medium size. It had tapestries on the wall, the heads of stags looked down on them, the place had been a one-time shooting-box. It had been little changed in its furnishing or arrangements. There was a big record-player on one side of the room.

The tall man sat in a chair by the fire. His head trembled a little, so did his left hand. The skin of his face was pulled down one side. Without beating about the bush, one could only describe him one way, as a wreck of a man. A man who had once been tall, sturdy, strong. He had a fine forehead, deep-set eyes, and a rugged, determined-looking chin. The eyes, below the heavy eyebrows, were intelligent. He said something. His voice was not weak, it made fairly clear sounds but not always recognizable ones. The faculty of speech had only partly gone from him, he was still understandable.

Lisa Neumann went to stand by him, watching his lips, so that she could interpret what he said if necessary.

‘Professor Shoreham welcomes you. He is very pleased to see you here, Lord Altamont, Colonel Munro, Sir James Kleek, Mr Robinson and Mr Horsham. He would like me to tell you that his hearing is reasonably good. Anything you say to him he will be able to hear. If there is any difficulty I can assist. What he wants to say to you he will be able to transmit through me. If he gets too tired to articulate, I can lip-read and we also converse in a perfected sign language if there is any difficulty.’

‘I shall try,’ said Colonel Munro, ‘not to waste your time and to tire you as little as possible, Professor Shoreham.’

The man in the chair bent his head in recognition of the words.

‘Some questions I can ask of Miss Neumann.’

Shoreham's hand went out in a faint gesture towards the woman standing by his side. Sounds came from his lips, again not quite recognizable to them, but she translated quickly.

'He says he can depend on me to transcribe anything you wish to say to him or I to you.'

'You have, I think, already received a letter from me,' said Colonel Munro.

'That is so,' said Miss Neumann. 'Professor Shoreham received your letter and knows its contents.'

A hospital nurse opened the door just a crack—but she did not come in. She spoke in a low whisper:

'Is there anything I can get or do, Miss Neumann? For any of the guests or for Professor Shoreham?'

'I don't think there is anything, thank you, Miss Ellis. I should be glad, though, if you could stay in your sitting-room just along the passage, in case we should need anything.'

'Certainly—I quite understand.' She went away, closing the door softly.

'We don't want to lose time,' said Colonel Munro. 'No doubt Professor Shoreham is in tune with current affairs.'

'Entirely so,' said Miss Neumann, 'as far as he is interested.'

'Does he keep in touch with scientific advancements and such things?'

Robert Shoreham's head shook slightly from side to side. He himself answered.

'I have finished with all that.'

'But you know roughly the state the world is in? The success of what is called the Revolution of Youth. The seizing of power by youthful fully-equipped forces.'

Miss Neumann said, 'He is in touch entirely with everything that is going on—in a political sense, that is.'

'The world is now given over to violence, pain, revolutionary tenets, a strange and incredible philosophy of rule by an anarchic minority.'

A faint look of impatience went across the gaunt face.

'He knows all that,' said Mr Robinson, speaking unexpectedly. 'No need to go over a lot of things again. He's a man who knows everything.'

He said:

'Do you remember Admiral Blunt?'

Again the head bowed. Something like a smile showed on the twisted lips.

'Admiral Blunt remembers some scientific work you had done on a certain project—I think project is what you call these things? Project Benvo.'

They saw the alert look which came into the eyes.

'Project Benvo,' said Miss Neumann. 'You are going back quite a long time, Mr Robinson, to recall that.'

'It was your project, wasn't it?' said Mr Robinson.

'Yes, it was his project.' Miss Neumann now spoke more easily for him, as a matter of course.

'We cannot use nuclear weapons, we cannot use explosives or gas or chemistry, but your project, Project Benvo, we could use.'

There was silence and nobody spoke. And then again the queer distorted sounds came from Professor Shoreham's lips.

'He says, of course,' said Miss Neumann, 'Benvo could be used successfully in the circumstances in which we find ourselves—'

The man in the chair had turned to her and was saying something to her.

‘He wants me to explain it to you,’ said Miss Neumann. ‘Project B, later called Project Benvo, was something that he worked upon for many years but which at last he laid aside for reasons of his own.’

‘Because he had failed to make his project materialize?’

‘No, he had not failed,’ said Lisa Neumann. ‘We had not failed. I worked with him on this project. He laid it aside for certain reasons, but he did not fail. He succeeded. He was on the right track, he developed it, he tested it in various laboratory experiments, and it worked.’ She turned to Professor Shoreham again, made a few gestures with her hand, touching her lips, ear, mouth in a strange kind of code signal.

‘I am asking if he wants me to explain just what Benvo does.’

‘We do want you to explain.’

‘And he wants to know how you learnt about it.’

‘We learnt about it,’ said Colonel Munro, ‘through an old friend of yours, Professor Shoreham. Not Admiral Blunt, he could not remember very much, but the other person to whom you had once spoken about it, Lady Matilda Cleckheaton.’

Again Miss Neumann turned to him and watched his lips. She smiled faintly.

‘He says he thought Matilda was dead years ago.’

‘She is very much alive. It is she who wanted us to know about this discovery of Professor Shoreham’s.’

‘Professor Shoreham will tell you the main points of what you want to know, though he has to warn you that this knowledge will be quite useless to you. Papers, formulae, accounts and proofs of this discovery were all destroyed. But since the only way to satisfy your questions is for you to learn the main outline of Project Benvo, I can tell you fairly clearly of what

it consists. You know the uses and purpose of tear gas as used by the police in controlling riot crowds; violent demonstrations and so on. It induces a fit of weeping, painful tears and sinus inflammation.'

'And this is something of the same kind?'

'No, it is not in the least of the same kind but it can have the same purpose. It came into the heads of scientists that one can change not only men's principal reactions and feeling, but also mental characteristics. You can change a man's character. The qualities of an aphrodisiac are well known. They lead to a condition of sexual desire, there are various drugs or gases or glandular operations—any of these things can lead to a change in your mental vigour, increased energy as by alterations to the thyroid gland, and Professor Shoreham wishes to tell you that there is a certain process—he will not tell you now whether it is glandular, or a gas that can be manufactured, but there is something that can change a man in his outlook on life—his reaction to people and to life generally. He may be in a state of homicidal fury, he may be pathologically violent, and yet, by the influence of Project Benvo, he turns into something, or rather someone, quite different. He becomes—there is only one word for it, I believe, which is embodied in its name—he becomes benevolent. He wishes to benefit others. He exudes kindness. He has a horror of causing pain or inflicting violence. Benvo can be released over a big area, it can affect hundreds, thousands of people if manufactured in big enough quantities, and if distributed successfully.'

'How long does it last?' said Colonel Munro. 'Twenty-four hours? Longer?'

'You don't understand,' said Miss Neumann. 'It is permanent.'

'Permanent? You've changed a man's nature, you've altered a component, a physical component, of course, of his being which has produced the effect of a permanent change in his nature. And you cannot go back on that? You cannot put him back to where he was again. It has to be accepted as a permanent change?'

'Yes. It was, perhaps, a discovery more of medical interest at first, but Professor Shoreham had conceived of it as a deterrent to be used in war, in mass risings, riotings, revolutions, anarchy. He didn't think of it as merely

medical. It does not produce happiness in the subject, only a great wish for others to be happy. That is an effect, he says, that everyone feels in their life at one time or another. They have a great wish to make someone, one person or many people—to make them comfortable, happy, in good health, all these things. And since people can and do feel these things, there is, we both believed, a component that controls that desire in their bodies, and if you once put that component in operation it can go on in perpetuity.'

'Wonderful,' said Mr Robinson.

He spoke thoughtfully rather than enthusiastically.

'Wonderful. What a thing to have discovered. What a thing to be able to put into action if—but why?'

The head resting towards the back of the chair turned slowly towards Mr Robinson. Miss Neumann said:

'He says you understand better than the others.'

'But it's the answer,' said James Kleek. 'It's the exact answer! It's wonderful.' His face was enthusiastically excited.

Miss Neumann was shaking her head.

'Project Benvo,' she said, 'is not for sale and not for a gift. It has been relinquished.'

'Are you telling us the answer is no?' said Colonel Munro incredulously.

'Yes. Professor Shoreham says the answer is no. He decided that it was against—' she paused a minute and turned to look at the man in the chair. He made quaint gestures with his head, with one hand, and a few guttural sounds came from his mouth. She waited and then she said, 'He will tell you himself, he was afraid. Afraid of what science has done in its time of triumph. The things it has found out and known, the things it has discovered and given to the world. The wonder drugs that have not always been wonder drugs, the penicillin that has saved lives and the penicillin that has

taken lives, the heart transplants that have brought disillusion and the disappointment of a death not expected. He has lived in the period of nuclear fission; new weapons that have slain. The tragedies of radio-activity; the pollutions that new industrial discoveries have brought about. He has been afraid of what science could do, used indiscriminately.'

'But this is a benefit. A benefit to everyone,' cried Munro.

'So have many things been. Always greeted as great benefits to humanity, as great wonders. And then come the side effects, and worse than that, the fact that they have sometimes brought not benefit but disaster. And so he decided that he would give up. He says'—she read from a paper she held, whilst beside her he nodded agreement from his chair—

“I am satisfied that I have done what I set out to do, that I made my discovery. But I decided not to put it into circulation. It must be destroyed. And so it has been destroyed. And so the answer to you is no. There is no benevolence on tap. There could have been once, but now all the formulae, all the know-how, my notes and my account of the necessary procedure are gone—burnt to ashes—I have destroyed my brain child.”’

II

Robert Shoreham struggled into raucous difficult speech.

'I have destroyed my brain child and nobody in the world knows how I arrived at it. One man helped me but he is dead. He died of tuberculosis a year after we had come to success. You must go away again. I cannot help you.'

'But this knowledge of yours means you could save the world!'

The man in the chair made a curious noise. It was laughter. Laughter of a crippled man.

'Save the world. Save the world! What a phrase! That's what your young people are doing, they think! They're going ahead in violence and hatred to save the world. But they don't know how! They will have to do it

themselves, out of their own hearts, out of their own minds. We can't give them an artificial way of doing it. No. An artificial goodness? An artificial kindness? None of that. It wouldn't be real. It wouldn't mean anything. It would be against Nature.' He said slowly: 'Against God.'

The last two words came out unexpectedly, clearly enunciated.

He looked round at his listeners. It was as though he pleaded with them for understanding, yet at the same time had no real hope of it.

'I had a right to destroy what I had created—'

'I doubt it very much,' said Mr Robinson, 'knowledge is knowledge. What you have given birth to—what you have made come to life, you should not destroy.'

'You have a right to your opinion—but the fact you will have to accept.'

'No,' Mr Robinson brought the word out with force.

Lisa Neumann turned on him angrily.

'What do you mean by "No"?''

Her eyes were flashing. A handsome woman, Mr Robinson thought. A woman who had been in love with Robert Shoreham all her life probably. Had loved him, worked with him, and now lived beside him, ministering to him with her intellect, giving him devotion in its purest form without pity.

'There are things one gets to know in the course of one's lifetime,' said Mr Robinson. 'I don't suppose mine will be a long life. I carry too much weight to begin with.' He sighed as he looked down at his bulk. 'But I do know some things. I'm right, you know, Shoreham. You'll have to admit I'm right, too. You're an honest man. You wouldn't have destroyed your work. You couldn't have brought yourself to do it. You've got it somewhere still, locked away, hidden away, not in this house, probably. I'd guess, and I'm only making a guess, that you've got it somewhere in a safe deposit or a

bank. She knows you've got it there, too. You trust her. She's the only person in the world you do trust.'

Shoreham said, and this time his voice was almost distinct:

'Who are you? Who the devil are you?'

'I'm just a man who knows about money,' said Mr Robinson, 'and the things that branch off from money, you know. People and their idiosyncrasies and their practices in life. If you liked to, you could lay your hand on the work that you've put away. I'm not saying that you could do the same work now, but I think it's all there somewhere. You've told us your views, and I wouldn't say they were all wrong,' said Mr Robinson.

'Possibly you're right. Benefits to humanity are tricky things to deal with. Poor old Beveridge, freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom from whatever it was, he thought he was making a heaven on earth by saying that and planning for it and getting it done. But it hasn't made heaven on earth and I don't suppose your benvo or whatever you call it (sounds like a patent food) will bring heaven on earth either. Benevolence has its dangers just like everything else. What it will do is save a lot of suffering, pain, anarchy, violence, slavery to drugs. Yes, it'll save quite a lot of bad things from happening, and it might save something that was important. It might—just might—make a difference to people. Young people. This Benvoleo of yours—now I've made it sound like a patent cleaner—is going to make people benevolent and I'll admit perhaps that it's going to make them condescending, smug and pleased with themselves, but there's just a chance, too, that if you change people's natures by force and they have to go on using that particular kind of nature until they die, one or two of them—not many—might discover that they had a natural vocation, in humility, not pride, for what they were being forced to do. Really change themselves, I mean, before they died. Not be able to get out of a new habit they'd learnt.'

Colonel Munro said, 'I don't understand what the hell you're all talking about.'

Miss Neumann said, 'He's talking nonsense. You have to take Professor Shoreham's answer. He will do what he likes with his own discoveries. You

can't coerce him.'

'No,' said Lord Altamount. 'We're not going to coerce you or torture you, Robert, or force you to reveal your hiding-places. You'll do what you think right. That's agreed.'

'Edward?' said Robert Shoreham. His speech failed him slightly again, his hands moved in gesture, and Miss Neumann translated quickly.

'Edward? He says you are Edward Altamount?'

Shoreham spoke again and she took the words from him.

'He asks you, Lord Altamount, if you are definitely, with your whole heart and mind, asking him to put Project Benvo in your jurisdiction. He says—' she paused, watching, listening—'he says you are the only man in public life that he ever trusted. If it is your wish—'

James Kleek was suddenly on his feet. Anxious, quick to move like lightning, he stood by Lord Altamount's chair.

'Let me help you up, sir. You're ill. You're not well. Please stand back a little, Miss Neumann. I—I must get to him. I—I have his remedies here. I know what to do—'

His hand went into his pocket and came out again with a hypodermic syringe.

'Unless he gets this at once it'll be too late—' He had caught up Lord Altamount's arm, rolling up his sleeve, pinching the flesh between his fingers, he held the hypodermic ready.

But someone else moved. Horsham was across the room, pushing Colonel Munro aside: his hand closed over James Kleek's as he wrenched the hypodermic away. Kleek struggled but Horsham was too strong for him. And Munro was now there, too.

'So it's been you, James Kleek,' he said. 'You who've been the traitor, a faithful disciple who wasn't a faithful disciple.'

Miss Neumann had gone to the door—had flung it open and was calling.

‘Nurse! Come quickly. Come.’

The nurse appeared. She gave one quick glance to Professor Shoreham, but he waved her away and pointed across the room to where Horsham and Munro still held a struggling Kleek. Her hand went into the pocket of her uniform.

Shoreham stammered out, ‘It’s Altamount. A heart attack.’

‘Heart attack, my foot,’ roared Munro. ‘It’s attempted murder.’ He stopped.

‘Hold the chap,’ he said to Horsham, and leapt across the room.

‘Mrs Cortman? Since when have you entered the nursing profession? We’d rather lost sight of you since you gave us the slip in Baltimore.’

Milly Jean was still wrestling with her pocket. Now her hand came out with the small automatic in it. She glanced towards Shoreham but Munro blocked her, and Lisa Neumann was standing in front of Shoreham’s chair.

James Kleek yelled, ‘Get Altamount, Juanita—quick—get Altamount.’

Her arm flashed up and she fired.

James Kleek said,

‘Damned good shot!’

Lord Altamount had had a classical education. He murmured faintly, looking at James Kleek,

‘Jamie? Et tu Brute?’ and collapsed against the back of his chair.

III

Dr McCulloch looked round him, a little uncertain of what he was going to do or say next. The evening had been a somewhat unusual experience for

him.

Lisa Neumann came to him and set a glass by his side.

‘A hot toddy,’ she said.

‘I always knew you were a woman in a thousand, Lisa.’ He sipped appreciatively.

‘I must say I’d like to know what all this has been about—but I gather it’s the sort of thing that’s so hush-hush that nobody’s going to tell me anything.’

‘The Professor—he’s all right, isn’t he?’

‘The Professor?’ He looked at her anxious face, kindly. ‘He’s fine. If you ask me, it’s done him a world of good.’

‘I thought perhaps the shock—’

‘I’m quite all right,’ said Shoreham. ‘Shock treatment is what I needed. I feel—how shall I put it—alive again.’ He looked surprised.

McCulloch said to Lisa, ‘Notice how much stronger his voice is? It’s apathy really that’s the enemy in these cases—what he wants is to work again—the stimulation of some brain work. Music is all very well—it’s kept him soothed and able to enjoy life in a mild way. But he’s really a man of great intellectual power—and he misses the mental activity that was the essence of life to him. Get him started on it again if you can.’

He nodded encouragingly at her as she looked doubtfully at him.

‘I think, Dr McCulloch,’ said Colonel Munro, ‘that we owe you a few explanations of what happened this evening, even though, as you surmise, the powers-that-be will demand a hush-hush policy. Lord Altamount’s death—’ He hesitated.

‘The bullet didn’t actually kill him,’ said the doctor, ‘death was due to shock. That hypodermic would have done the trick—strychnine. The young man—’

‘I only just got it away from him in time,’ said Horsham.

‘Been the fly in the ointment all along?’ asked the doctor.

‘Yes—regarded with trust and affection for over seven years. The son of one of Lord Altamount’s oldest friends—’

‘It happens. And the lady—in it together, do I understand?’

‘Yes. She got the post here by false credentials. She is also wanted by the police for murder.’

‘Murder?’

‘Yes. Murder of her husband, Sam Cortman, the American Ambassador. She shot him on the steps of the Embassy—and told a fine tale of young men, masked, attacking him.’

‘Why did she have it in for him? Political or personal?’

‘He found out about some of her activities, we think.’

‘I’d say he suspected infidelity,’ said Horsham. ‘instead he discovered a hornets’ nest of espionage and conspiracy, and his wife running the show. He didn’t know quite how to deal with it. Nice chap, but slow-thinking—and she had the sense to act quickly. Wonderful how she registered grief at the Memorial Service.’

‘Memorial—’ said Professor Shoreham.

Everyone, slightly startled, turned round to look at him.

‘Difficult word to say, memorial—but I mean it. Lisa, you and I are going to have to start work again.’

‘But, Robert—’

‘I’m alive again. Ask the doctor if I ought to take things easy.’

Lisa turned her eyes inquiringly on McCulloch.

‘If you do, you’ll shorten your life and sink back into apathy—’

‘There you are,’ said Shoreham. ‘Fash-fashion—medical fashion today. Make everyone, even if they’re—at-death’s door—go on working—’

Dr McCulloch laughed and got up.

‘Not far wrong. I’ll send you some pills along to help.’

‘I shan’t take them.’

‘You’ll do.’

At the door the doctor paused. ‘Just want to know—how did you get the police along so quickly?’

‘Squadron Leader Andrews,’ said Munro, ‘had it all in hand. Arrived on the dot. We knew the woman was around somewhere, but had no idea she was in the house already.’

‘Well—I’ll be off. Is all you’ve told me true? Feel I shall wake up any minute, having dropped off to sleep half way through the latest thriller. Spies, murders, traitors, espionage, scientists—’

He went out.

There was a silence.

Professor Shoreham said slowly and carefully:

‘Back to work—’

Lisa said as women have always said:

‘You must be careful, Robert—’

‘Not—not careful. Time might be short.’

He said again:

‘Memorial—’

‘What do you mean? You said it before.’

‘Memorial? Yes. To Edward. His Memorial! Always used to think he had the face of a martyr.’

Shoreham seemed lost in thought.

‘I’d like to get hold of Gottlieb. May be dead. Good man to work with. With him and with you, Lisa—get the stuff out of the bank—’

‘Professor Gottlieb is alive—in the Baker Foundation, Austin, Texas,’ said Mr Robinson.

‘What are you talking of doing?’ said Lisa.

‘Benvo, of course! Memorial to Edward Altamount. He died for it, didn’t he? Nobody should die in vain.’

Epilogue

Sir Stafford Nye wrote out a telegraph message for the third time.

ZP 354XB 91 DEP S.Y.

HAVE ARRANGED FOR MARRIAGE CEREMONY TO BE
PERFORMED ON THURSDAY OF NEXT WEEK AT ST
CHRISTOPHERS IN THE VALE LOWER STAUNTON 2.30 PM STOP
ORDINARY CHURCH OF ENGLAND SERVICE IF R.C. OR GREEK
ORTHODOX DESIRED PLEASE WIRE INSTRUCTIONS STOP
WHERE ARE YOU AND WHAT NAME DO YOU WISH TO USE FOR
MARRIAGE CEREMONY STOP NAUGHTY NIECE OF MINE FIVE
YEARS OLD AND HIGHLY DISOBEDIENT WISHES TO ATTEND AS
BRIDESMAID RATHER SWEET REALLY NAME OF SYBIL STOP
LOCAL HONEYMOON AS I THINK WE HAVE TRAVELLED
ENOUGH LATELY STOP SIGNED PASSENGER TO FRANKFURT.

TO STAFFORD NYE BXY42698

ACCEPT SYBIL AS BRIDESMAID SUGGEST GREAT AUNT
MATILDA AS MATRON OF HONOUR STOP ALSO ACCEPT
PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE THOUGH NOT OFFICIALLY MADE
STOP C OF E QUITE SATISFACTORY ALSO HONEYMOON
ARRANGEMENTS STOP INSIST PANDA SHOULD ALSO BE
PRESENT STOP NO GOOD SAYING WHERE I AM AS I SHANT BE
WHEN THIS REACHES YOU STOP SIGNED MARY ANN

‘Do I look all right?’ asked Stafford Nye nervously, twisting his head to look in the glass.

He was having a dress rehearsal of his wedding clothes.

‘No worse than any other bridegroom,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘They’re always nervous. Not like brides who are usually quite blatantly exultant.’

‘Suppose she doesn’t come?’

‘She’ll come.’

‘I feel—I feel—rather queer inside.’

‘That’s because you would have a second helping of pâté de foie gras. You’ve just got bridegroom’s nerves. Don’t fuss so much, Staffy. You’ll be all right on the night—I mean you’ll be all right when you get to the church—’

‘That reminds me—’

‘You haven’t forgotten to buy the ring?’

‘No, no, it’s just I forgot to tell you that I’ve got a present for you, Aunt Matilda.’

‘That’s very nice of you, dear boy.’

‘You said the organist had gone—’

‘Yes, thank goodness.’

‘I’ve brought you a new organist.’

‘Really, Staffy, what an extraordinary idea! Where did you get him?’

‘Bavaria—he sings like an angel—’

‘We don’t need him to sing. He’ll have to play the organ.’

‘He can do that too—he’s a very talented musician.’

‘Why does he want to leave Bavaria and come to England?’

‘His mother died.’

‘Oh dear, that’s what happened to our organist. Organists’ mothers seem to be very delicate. Will he require mothering? I’m not very good at it.’

‘I dare say some grandmothering or great-grandmothering would do.’

The door was suddenly flung open and an angelic-looking child in pink pyjamas, powdered with rosebuds, made a dramatic entrance—and said in dulcet tones as of one expecting a rapturous welcome—

‘It’s me.’

‘Sybil, why aren’t you in bed?’

‘Things aren’t very pleasant in the nursery—’

‘That means you’ve been a naughty girl, and Nannie isn’t pleased with you. What did you do?’

Sybil looked at the ceiling and began to giggle.

‘It was a caterpillar—a furry one. I put it on her and it went down here.’

Sybil’s finger indicated a spot in the middle of her chest which in dressmaking parlance is referred to as ‘the cleavage’.

‘I don’t wonder Nannie was cross—ugh,’ said Lady Matilda.

Nannie entered at this moment, said that Miss Sybil was over-excited, wouldn’t say her prayers, and wouldn’t go to bed.

Sybil crept to Lady Matilda’s side.

‘I want to say my prayers with you, Tilda—’

‘Very well—but then you go straight to bed.’

‘Oh yes, Tilda.’

Sybil dropped on her knees, clasped her hands, and uttered various peculiar noises which seemed to be a necessary preliminary to approaching the Almighty in prayer. She sighed, groaned, grunted, gave a final catarrhal snort, and launched herself:

‘Please God bless Daddy and Mummy in Singapore, and Aunt Tilda, and Uncle Staffy, and Amy and Cook and Ellen, and Thomas, and all the dogs, and my Pony Grizzle, and Margaret and Diana my best friends, and Joan, the last of my friends, and make me a good girl for Jesus’ sake, Amen. And please God make Nannie nice.’

Sybil rose to her feet, exchanged glances with Nannie with the assurance of having won a victory, said goodnight and disappeared.

‘Someone must have told her about Benvo,’ said Lady Matilda. ‘By the way, Staffy, who’s going to be your best man?’

‘Forgot all about it—Have I got to have one?’

‘It’s usual.’

Sir Stafford Nye picked up a small furry animal.

‘Panda shall be my best man—please Sybil—please Mary Ann—And why not? Panda’s been in it from the beginning—ever since Frankfurt...’

The Witness For The Prosecution And Other Stories (1948)

By Agatha Christie

One

THE WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

“The Witness for the Prosecution” was first published in the USA as “Traitor Hands” in Flynn’s Weekly, 31 January 1925.

Mr. Mayherne adjusted his pince-nez and cleared his throat with a little dry-as-dust cough that was wholly typical of him. Then he looked again at the man opposite him, the man charged with wilful murder.

Mr. Mayherne was a small man precise in manner, neatly, not to say foppishly dressed, with a pair of very shrewd and piercing grey eyes. By no means a fool. Indeed, as a solicitor, Mr. Mayherne’s reputation stood very high. His voice, when he spoke to his client, was dry but not unsympathetic.

“I must impress upon you again that you are in very grave danger, and that the utmost frankness is necessary.”

Leonard Vole, who had been staring in a dazed fashion at the blank wall in front of him, transferred his glance to the solicitor.

“I know,” he said hopelessly. “You keep telling me so. But I can’t seem to realize yet that I’m charged with murder—murder. And such a dastardly crime too.”

Mr. Mayherne was practical, not emotional. He coughed again, took off his pince-nez, polished them carefully, and replaced them on his nose. Then he said:

“Yes, yes, yes. Now, my dear Mr. Vole, we’re going to make a determined effort to get you off—and we shall succeed—we shall succeed. But I must have all the facts. I must know just how damaging the case against you is likely to be. Then we can fix upon the best line of defence.”

Still the young man looked at him in the same dazed, hopeless fashion. To Mr. Mayherne the case had seemed black enough, and the guilt of the prisoner assured. Now, for the first time, he felt a doubt.

“You think I’m guilty,” said Leonard Vole, in a low voice. “But, by God, I swear I’m not! It looks pretty black against me, I know that. I’m like a man caught in a net—the meshes of it all round me, entangling me whichever way I turn. But I didn’t do it, Mr. Mayherne, I didn’t do it!”

In such a position a man was bound to protest his innocence. Mr. Mayherne knew that. Yet, in spite of himself, he was impressed. It might be, after all, that Leonard Vole was innocent.

“You are right, Mr. Vole,” he said gravely. “The case does look very black against you. Nevertheless, I accept your assurance. Now, let us get to facts. I want you to tell me in your own words exactly how you came to make the acquaintance of Miss Emily French.”

“It was one day in Oxford Street. I saw an elderly lady crossing the road. She was carrying a lot of parcels. In the middle of the street she dropped them, tried to recover them, found a bus was almost on top of her and just managed to reach the kerb safely, dazed and bewildered by people having shouted at her. I recovered the parcels, wiped the mud off them as best I could, retied the string of one, and returned them to her.”

“There was no question of your having saved her life?”

“Oh! dear me, no. All I did was to perform a common act of courtesy. She was extremely grateful, thanked me warmly, and said something about my manners not being those of most of the younger generation—I can’t remember the exact words. Then I lifted my hat and went on. I never expected to see her again. But life is full of coincidences. That very evening I came across her at a party at a friend’s house. She recognized me at once and asked that I should be introduced to her. I then found out that she was a Miss Emily French and that she lived at Cricklewood. I talked to her for some time. She was, I imagine, an old lady who took sudden violent fancies to people. She took one to me on the strength of a perfectly simple action which anyone might have performed. On leaving, she shook me warmly by

the hand, and asked me to come and see her. I replied, of course, that I should be very pleased to do so, and she then urged me to name a day. I did not want particularly to go, but it would have seemed churlish to refuse, so I fixed on the following Saturday. After she had gone, I learned something about her from my friends. That she was rich, eccentric, lived alone with one maid and owned no less than eight cats.”

“I see,” said Mr. Mayherne. “The question of her being well off came up as early as that?”

“If you mean that I inquired—” began Leonard Vole hotly, but Mr. Mayherne stilled him with a gesture.

“I have to look at the case as it will be presented by the other side. An ordinary observer would not have supposed Miss French to be a lady of means. She lived poorly, almost humbly. Unless you had been told the contrary, you would in all probability have considered her to be in poor circumstances—at any rate to begin with. Who was it exactly who told you that she was well off?”

“My friend, George Harvey, at whose house the party took place.”

“Is he likely to remember having done so?”

“I really don’t know. Of course it is some time ago now.”

“Quite so, Mr. Vole. You see, the first aim of the prosecution will be to establish that you were in low water financially—that is true, is it not?”

Leonard Vole flushed.

“Yes,” he said, in a low voice. “I’d been having a run of infernal bad luck just then.”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Mayherne again. “That being, as I say, in low water financially, you met this rich old lady and cultivated her acquaintance assiduously. Now if we are in a position to say that you had no idea she was well off, and that you visited her out of pure kindness of heart—”

“Which is the case.”

“I dare say. I am not disputing the point. I am looking at it from the outside point of view. A great deal depends on the memory of Mr. Harvey. Is he likely to remember that conversation or is he not? Could he be confused by counsel into believing that it took place later?”

Leonard Vole reflected for some minutes. Then he said steadily enough, but with a rather paler face:

“I do not think that that line would be successful, Mr. Mayherne. Several of those present heard his remark, and one or two of them chaffed me about my conquest of a rich old lady.”

The solicitor endeavoured to hide his disappointment with a wave of the hand.

“Unfortunately,” he said. “But I congratulate you upon your plain speaking, Mr. Vole. It is to you I look to guide me. Your judgement is quite right. To persist in the line I spoke of would have been disastrous. We must leave that point. You made the acquaintance of Miss French, you called upon her, the acquaintanceship progressed. We want a clear reason for all this. Why did you, a young man of thirty-three, good-looking, fond of sport, popular with your friends, devote so much time to an elderly woman with whom you could hardly have anything in common?”

Leonard Vole flung out his hands in a nervous gesture.

“I can’t tell you—I really can’t tell you. After the first visit, she pressed me to come again, spoke of being lonely and unhappy. She made it difficult for me to refuse. She showed so plainly her fondness and affection for me that I was placed in an awkward position. You see, Mr. Mayherne, I’ve got a weak nature—I drift—I’m one of those people who can’t say “No.” And believe me or not, as you like, after the third or fourth visit I paid her I found myself getting genuinely fond of the old thing. My mother died when I was young, an aunt brought me up, and she too died before I was fifteen. If I told you that I genuinely enjoyed being mothered and pampered, I dare say you’d only laugh.”

Mr. Mayherne did not laugh. Instead he took off his pince-nez again and polished them, always a sign with him that he was thinking deeply.

“I accept your explanation, Mr. Vole,” he said at last. “I believe it to be psychologically probable. Whether a jury would take that view of it is another matter. Please continue your narrative. When was it that Miss French first asked you to look into her business affairs?”

“After my third or fourth visit to her. She understood very little of money matters, and was worried about some investments.”

Mr. Mayherne looked up sharply.

“Be careful, Mr. Vole. The maid, Janet Mackenzie, declares that her mistress was a good woman of business and transacted all her own affairs, and this is borne out by the testimony of her bankers.”

“I can’t help that,” said Vole earnestly. “That’s what she said to me.”

Mr. Mayherne looked at him for a moment or two in silence. Though he had no intention of saying so, his belief in Leonard Vole’s innocence was at that moment strengthened. He knew something of the mentality of elderly ladies. He saw Miss French, infatuated with the good-looking young man, hunting about for pretexts that should bring him to the house. What more likely than that she should plead ignorance of business, and beg him to help her with her money affairs? She was enough of a woman of the world to realize that any man is slightly flattered by such an admission of his superiority. Leonard Vole had been flattered. Perhaps, too, she had not been averse to letting this young man know that she was wealthy. Emily French had been a strong-willed old woman, willing to pay her price for what she wanted. All this passed rapidly through Mr. Mayherne’s mind, but he gave no indication of it, and asked instead a further question.

“And you did handle her affairs for her at her request?”

“I did.”

“Mr. Vole,” said the solicitor, “I am going to ask you a very serious question, and one to which it is vital I should have a truthful answer. You were in low water financially. You had the handling of an old lady’s affairs—an old lady who, according to her own statement, knew little or nothing of business. Did you at any time, or in any manner, convert to your own use the securities which you handled? Did you engage in any transaction for your own pecuniary advantage which will not bear the light of day?” He quelled the other’s response. “Wait a minute before you answer. There are two courses open to us. Either we can make a feature of your probity and honesty in conducting her affairs whilst pointing out how unlikely it is that you would commit murder to obtain money which you might have obtained by such infinitely easier means. If, on the other hand, there is anything in your dealings which the prosecution will get hold of—if, to put it baldly, it can be proved that you swindled the old lady in any way, we must take the line that you had no motive for the murder, since she was already a profitable source of income to you. You perceive the distinction. Now, I beg of you, take your time before you reply.”

But Leonard Vole took no time at all.

“My dealings with Miss French’s affairs are all perfectly fair and aboveboard. I acted for her interests to the very best of my ability, as anyone will find who looks into the matter.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Mayherne. “You relieve my mind very much. I pay you the compliment of believing that you are far too clever to lie to me over such an important matter.”

“Surely,” said Vole eagerly, “the strongest point in my favour is the lack of motive. Granted that I cultivated the acquaintanceship of a rich old lady in the hope of getting money out of her—that, I gather, is the substance of what you have been saying—surely her death frustrates all my hopes?”

The solicitor looked at him steadily. Then, very deliberately, he repeated his unconscious trick with his pince-nez. It was not until they were firmly replaced on his nose that he spoke.

“Are you not aware, Mr. Vole, Miss French left a will under which you are the principal beneficiary?”

“What?” The prisoner sprang to his feet. His dismay was obvious and unforced. “My God! What are you saying? She left her money to me?”

Mr. Mayherne nodded slowly. Vole sank down again, his head in his hands.

“You pretend you know nothing of this will?”

“Pretend? There’s no pretence about it. I knew nothing about it.”

“What would you say if I told you that the maid, Janet Mackenzie, swears that you did know? That her mistress told her distinctly that she had consulted you in the matter, and told you of her intentions?”

“Say? That she’s lying! No, I go too fast. Janet is an elderly woman. She was a faithful watchdog to her mistress, and she didn’t like me. She was jealous and suspicious. I should say that Miss French confided her intentions to Janet, and that Janet either mistook something she said, or else was convinced in her own mind that I had persuaded the old lady into doing it. I dare say that she believes herself now that Miss French actually told her so.”

“You don’t think she dislikes you enough to lie deliberately about the matter?”

Leonard Vole looked shocked and startled.

“No, indeed! Why should she?”

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Mayherne thoughtfully. “But she’s very bitter against you.”

The wretched young man groaned again.

“I’m beginning to see,” he muttered. “It’s frightful. I made up to her, that’s what they’ll say, I got her to make a will leaving her money to me, and then

I go there that night, and there's nobody in the house—they find her the next day—oh! my God, it's awful!"

"You are wrong about there being nobody in the house," said Mr. Mayherne. "Janet, as you remember, was to go out for the evening. She went, but about half past nine she returned to fetch the pattern of a blouse sleeve which she had promised to a friend. She let herself in by the back door, went upstairs and fetched it, and went out again. She heard voices in the sitting room, though she could not distinguish what they said, but she will swear that one of them was Miss French's and one was a man's."

"At half past nine," said Leonard Vole. "At half past nine . . ." He sprang to his feet. "But then I'm saved—saved—"

"What do you mean, saved?" cried Mr. Mayherne, astonished.

"By half past nine I was at home again! My wife can prove that. I left Miss French about five minutes to nine. I arrived home about twenty past nine. My wife was there waiting for me. Oh! thank God—thank God! And bless Janet Mackenzie's sleeve pattern."

In his exuberance, he hardly noticed that the grave expression of the solicitor's face had not altered. But the latter's words brought him down to earth with a bump.

"Who, then, in your opinion, murdered Miss French?"

"Why, a burglar, of course, as was thought at first. The window was forced, you remember. She was killed with a heavy blow from a crowbar, and the crowbar was found lying on the floor beside the body. And several articles were missing. But for Janet's absurd suspicions and dislike of me, the police would never have swerved from the right track."

"That will hardly do, Mr. Vole," said the solicitor. "The things that were missing were mere trifles of no value, taken as a blind. And the marks on the window were not all conclusive. Besides, think for yourself. You say you were no longer in the house by half past nine. Who, then, was the man

Janet heard talking to Miss French in the sitting room? She would hardly be having an amicable conversation with a burglar?"

"No," said Vole. "No—" He looked puzzled and discouraged. "But anyway," he added with reviving spirit, "it lets me out. I've got an alibi. You must see Romaine—my wife—at once."

"Certainly," acquiesced the lawyer. "I should already have seen Mrs. Vole but for her being absent when you were arrested. I wired to Scotland at once, and I understand that she arrives back tonight. I am going to call upon her immediately I leave here."

Vole nodded, a great expression of satisfaction settling down over his face.

"Yes, Romaine will tell you. My God! It's a lucky chance that."

"Excuse me, Mr. Vole, but you are very fond of your wife?"

"Of course."

"And she of you?"

"Romaine is devoted to me. She'd do anything in the world for me."

He spoke enthusiastically, but the solicitor's heart sank a little lower. The testimony of a devoted wife—would it gain credence?

"Was there anyone else who saw you return at nine twenty? A maid, for instance?"

"We have no maid."

"Did you meet anyone in the street on the way back?"

"Nobody I knew. I rode part of the way in a bus. The conductor might remember."

Mr. Mayherne shook his head doubtfully.

“There is no one, then, who can confirm your wife’s testimony?”

“No. But it isn’t necessary, surely?”

“I dare say not. I dare say not,” said Mr. Mayherne hastily. “Now there’s just one thing more. Did Miss French know that you were a married man?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Yet you never took your wife to see her. Why was that?”

For the first time, Leonard Vole’s answer came halting and uncertain.

“Well—I don’t know.”

“Are you aware that Janet Mackenzie says her mistress believed you to be single, and contemplated marrying you in the future?”

Vole laughed.

“Absurd! There was forty years difference in age between us.”

“It has been done,” said the solicitor drily. “The fact remains. Your wife never met Miss French?”

“No—” Again the constraint.

“You will permit me to say,” said the lawyer, “that I hardly understand your attitude in the matter.”

Vole flushed, hesitated, and then spoke.

“I’ll make a clean breast of it. I was hard up, as you know. I hoped that Miss French might lend me some money. She was fond of me, but she wasn’t at all interested in the struggles of a young couple. Early on, I found that she had taken it for granted that my wife and I didn’t get on—were living apart. Mr. Mayherne—I wanted the money—for Romaine’s sake. I said nothing, and allowed the old lady to think what she chose. She spoke

of my being an adopted son for her. There was never any question of marriage—that must be just Janet’s imagination.”

“And that is all?”

“Yes—that is all.”

Was there just a shade of hesitation in the words? The lawyer fancied so. He rose and held out his hand.

“Goodbye, Mr. Vole.” He looked into the haggard young face and spoke with an unusual impulse. “I believe in your innocence in spite of the multitude of facts arrayed against you. I hope to prove it and vindicate you completely.”

Vole smiled back at him.

“You’ll find the alibi is all right,” he said cheerfully.

Again he hardly noticed that the other did not respond.

“The whole thing hinges a good deal on the testimony of Janet Mackenzie,” said Mr. Mayherne. “She hates you. That much is clear.”

“She can hardly hate me,” protested the young man.

The solicitor shook his head as he went out.

“Now for Mrs. Vole,” he said to himself.

He was seriously disturbed by the way the thing was shaping.

The Voles lived in a small shabby house near Paddington Green. It was to this house that Mr. Mayherne went.

In answer to his ring, a big slatternly woman, obviously a charwoman, answered the door.

“Mrs. Vole? Has she returned yet?”

“Got back an hour ago. But I dunno if you can see her.”

“If you will take my card to her,” said Mr. Mayherne quietly, “I am quite sure that she will do so.”

The woman looked at him doubtfully, wiped her hand on her apron and took the card. Then she closed the door in his face and left him on the step outside.

In a few minutes, however, she returned with a slightly altered manner.

“Come inside, please.”

She ushered him into a tiny drawing room. Mr. Mayherne, examining a drawing on the wall, stared up suddenly to face a tall pale woman who had entered so quietly that he had not heard her.

“Mr. Mayherne? You are my husband’s solicitor, are you not? You have come from him? Will you please sit down?”

Until she spoke he had not realized that she was not English. Now, observing her more closely, he noticed the high cheekbones, the dense blue-black of the hair, and an occasional very slight movement of the hands that was distinctly foreign. A strange woman, very quiet. So quiet as to make one uneasy. From the very first Mr. Mayherne was conscious that he was up against something that he did not understand.

“Now, my dear Mrs. Vole,” he began, “you must not give way—”

He stopped. It was so very obvious that Romaine Vole had not the slightest intention of giving way. She was perfectly calm and composed.

“Will you please tell me all about it?” she said. “I must know everything. Do not think to spare me. I want to know the worst.” She hesitated, then repeated in a lower tone, with a curious emphasis which the lawyer did not understand: “I want to know the worst.”

Mr. Mayherne went over his interview with Leonard Vole. She listened attentively, nodding her head now and then.

“I see,” she said, when he had finished. “He wants me to say that he came in at twenty minutes past nine that night?”

“He did come in at that time?” said Mr. Mayherne sharply.

“That is not the point,” she said coldly. “Will my saying so acquit him? Will they believe me?”

Mr. Mayherne was taken aback. She had gone so quickly to the core of the matter.

“That is what I want to know,” she said. “Will it be enough? Is there anyone else who can support my evidence?”

There was a suppressed eagerness in her manner that made him vaguely uneasy.

“So far there is no one else,” he said reluctantly.

“I see,” said Romaine Vole.

She sat for a minute or two perfectly still. A little smile played over her lips.

The lawyer’s feeling of alarm grew stronger and stronger.

“Mrs. Vole—” he began. “I know what you must feel—”

“Do you?” she said. “I wonder.”

“In the circumstances—”

“In the circumstances—I intend to play a lone hand.”

He looked at her in dismay.

“But, my dear Mrs. Vole—you are overwrought. Being so devoted to your husband—”

“I beg your pardon?”

The sharpness of her voice made him start. He repeated in a hesitating manner:

“Being so devoted to your husband—”

Romaine Vole nodded slowly, the same strange smile on her lips.

“Did he tell you that I was devoted to him?” she asked softly. “Ah! yes, I can see he did. How stupid men are! Stupid—stupid—stupid—”

She rose suddenly to her feet. All the intense emotion that the lawyer had been conscious of in the atmosphere was now concentrated in her tone.

“I hate him, I tell you! I hate him. I hate him, I hate him! I would like to see him hanged by the neck till he is dead.”

The lawyer recoiled before her and the smouldering passion in her eyes.

She advanced a step nearer, and continued vehemently:

“Perhaps I shall see it. Supposing I tell you that he did not come in that night at twenty past nine, but at twenty past ten? You say that he tells you he knew nothing about the money coming to him. Supposing I tell you he knew all about it, and counted on it, and committed murder to get it? Supposing I tell you that he admitted to me that night when he came in what he had done? That there was blood on his coat? What then? Supposing that I stand up in court and say all these things?”

Her eyes seemed to challenge him. With an effort, he concealed his growing dismay, and endeavoured to speak in a rational tone.

“You cannot be asked to give evidence against your own husband—”

“He is not my husband!”

The words came out so quickly that he fancied he had misunderstood her.

“I beg your pardon? I—”

“He is not my husband.”

The silence was so intense that you could have heard a pin drop.

“I was an actress in Vienna. My husband is alive but in a madhouse. So we could not marry. I am glad now.”

She nodded defiantly.

“I should like you to tell me one thing,” said Mr. Mayherne. He contrived to appear as cool and unemotional as ever. “Why are you so bitter against Leonard Vole?”

She shook her head, smiling a little.

“Yes, you would like to know. But I shall not tell you. I will keep my secret. . . .”

Mr. Mayherne gave his dry little cough and rose.

“There seems no point in prolonging this interview,” he remarked. “You will hear from me again after I have communicated with my client.”

She came closer to him, looking into his eyes with her own wonderful dark ones.

“Tell me,” she said, “did you believe—honestly—that he was innocent when you came here today?”

“I did,” said Mr. Mayherne.

“You poor little man,” she laughed.

“And I believe so still,” finished the lawyer. “Good evening, madam.”

He went out of the room, taking with him the memory of her startled face.

“This is going to be the devil of a business,” said Mr. Mayherne to himself as he strode along the street.

Extraordinary, the whole thing. An extraordinary woman. A very dangerous woman. Women were the devil when they got their knife into you.

What was to be done? That wretched young man hadn't a leg to stand upon. Of course, possibly he did commit the crime. . . .

"No," said Mr. Mayherne to himself. "No—there's almost too much evidence against him. I don't believe this woman. She was trumping up the whole story. But she'll never bring it into court."

He wished he felt more conviction on the point.

The police court proceedings were brief and dramatic. The principal witnesses for the prosecution were Janet Mackenzie, maid to the dead woman, and Romaine Heilger, Austrian subject, the mistress of the prisoner.

Mr. Mayherne sat in the court and listened to the damning story that the latter told. It was on the lines she had indicated to him in their interview.

The prisoner reserved his defence and was committed for trial.

Mr. Mayherne was at his wits' end. The case against Leonard Vole was black beyond words. Even the famous KC who was engaged for the defence held out little hope.

"If we can shake that Austrian woman's testimony, we might do something," he said dubiously. "But it's a bad business."

Mr. Mayherne had concentrated his energies on one single point. Assuming Leonard Vole to be speaking the truth, and to have left the murdered woman's house at nine o'clock, who was the man whom Janet heard talking to Miss French at half past nine?

The only ray of light was in the shape of a scapegrace nephew who had in bygone days cajoled and threatened his aunt out of various sums of money. Janet Mackenzie, the solicitor learned, had always been attached to this young man, and had never ceased urging his claims upon her mistress. It certainly seemed possible that it was this nephew who had been with Miss

French after Leonard Vole left, especially as he was not to be found in any of his old haunts.

In all other directions, the lawyer's researches had been negative in their result. No one had seen Leonard Vole entering his own house or leaving that of Miss French. No one had seen any other man enter or leave the house in Cricklewood. All inquiries drew a blank.

It was the eve of the trial when Mr. Mayherne received the letter which was to lead his thoughts in an entirely new direction.

It came by the six o'clock post. An illiterate scrawl, written on common paper and enclosed in a dirty envelope with the stamp stuck on crookedly.

Mr. Mayherne read it through once or twice before he grasped its meaning.

Dear Mister

Youre the lawyer chap wot acks for the young feller. if you want that painted foreign hussy showd up for wot she is an her pack of lies you come to 16 Shaw's Rents Stepney tonight. It ul cawst you 2 hundred quid Arsk for Missis Mogson.

The solicitor read and reread this strange epistle. It might, of course, be a hoax, but when he thought it over, he became increasingly convinced that it was genuine, and also convinced that it was the one hope for the prisoner. The evidence of Romaine Heilger damned him completely, and the line the defence meant to pursue, the line that the evidence of a woman who had admittedly lived an immoral life was not to be trusted, was at best a weak one.

Mr. Mayherne's mind was made up. It was his duty to save his client at all costs. He must go to Shaw's Rents.

He had some difficulty in finding the place, a ramshackle building in an evil-smelling slum, but at last he did so, and on inquiry for Mrs. Mogson

was sent up to a room on the third floor. On this door he knocked and, getting no answer, knocked again.

At this second knock, he heard a shuffling sound inside, and presently the door was opened cautiously half an inch and a bent figure peered out.

Suddenly the woman, for it was a woman, gave a chuckle and opened the door wider.

“So it’s you, dearie,” she said, in a wheezy voice. “Nobody with you, is there? No playing tricks? That’s right. You can come in—you can come in.”

With some reluctance the lawyer stepped across the threshold into the small dirty room, with its flickering gas jet. There was an untidy unmade bed in a corner, a plain deal table and two rickety chairs. For the first time Mr. Mayherne had a full view of the tenant of this unsavoury apartment. She was a woman of middle age, bent in figure, with a mass of untidy grey hair and a scarf wound tightly round her face. She saw him looking at this and laughed again, the same curious toneless chuckle.

“Wondering why I hide my beauty, dear? He, he, he. Afraid it may tempt you, eh? But you shall see—you shall see.”

She drew aside the scarf and the lawyer recoiled involuntarily before the almost formless blur of scarlet. She replaced the scarf again.

“So you’re not wanting to kiss me, dearie? He, he, I don’t wonder. And yet I was a pretty girl once—not so long ago as you’d think, either. Vitriol, dearie, vitriol—that’s what did that. Ah! but I’ll be even with ’em—”

She burst into a hideous torrent of profanity which Mr. Mayherne tried vainly to quell. She fell silent at last, her hands clenching and unclenching themselves nervously.

“Enough of that,” said the lawyer sternly. “I’ve come here because I have reason to believe you can give me information which will clear my client, Leonard Vole. Is that the case?”

Her eye leered at him cunningly.

“What about the money, dearie?” she wheezed. “Two hundred quid, you remember.”

“It is your duty to give evidence, and you can be called upon to do so.”

“That won’t do, dearie. I’m an old woman, and I know nothing. But you give me two hundred quid, and perhaps I can give you a hint or two. See?”

“What kind of hint?”

“What should you say to a letter? A letter from her. Never mind now how I got hold of it. That’s my business. It’ll do the trick. But I want my two hundred quid.”

Mr. Mayherne looked at her coldly, and made up his mind.

“I’ll give you ten pounds, nothing more. And only that if this letter is what you say it is.”

“Ten pounds?” She screamed and raved at him.

“Twenty,” said Mr. Mayherne, “and that’s my last word.”

He rose as if to go. Then, watching her closely, he drew out a pocketbook, and counted out twenty one-pound notes.

“You see,” he said. “That is all I have with me. You can take it or leave it.”

But already he knew that the sight of the money was too much for her. She cursed and raved impotently, but at last she gave in. Going over to the bed, she drew something out from beneath the tattered mattress.

“Here you are, damn you!” she snarled. “It’s the top one you want.”

It was a bundle of letters that she threw to him, and Mr. Mayherne untied them and scanned them in his usual cool, methodical manner. The woman, watching him eagerly, could gain no clue from his impassive face.

He read each letter through, then returned again to the top one and read it a second time. Then he tied the whole bundle up again carefully.

They were love letters, written by Romaine Heilger, and the man they were written to was not Leonard Vole. The top letter was dated the day of the latter's arrest.

"I spoke true, dearie, didn't I?" whined the woman. "It'll do for her, that letter?"

Mr. Mayherne put the letters in his pocket, then he asked a question.

"How did you get hold of this correspondence?"

"That's telling," she said with a leer. "But I know something more. I heard in court what that hussy said. Find out where she was at twenty past ten, the time she says she was at home. Ask at the Lion Road Cinema. They'll remember—a fine upstanding girl like that—curse her!"

"Who is the man?" asked Mr. Mayherne. "There's only a Christian name here."

The other's voice grew thick and hoarse, her hands clenched and unclenched. Finally she lifted one to her face.

"He's the man that did this to me. Many years ago now. She took him away from me—a chit of a girl she was then. And when I went after him—and went for him too—he threw the cursed stuff at me! And she laughed—damn her! I've had it in for her for years. Followed her, I have, spied upon her. And now I've got her! She'll suffer for this, won't she, Mr. Lawyer? She'll suffer?"

"She will probably be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for perjury," said Mr. Mayherne quietly.

"Shut away—that's what I want. You're going, are you? Where's my money? Where's that good money?"

Without a word, Mr. Mayherne put down the notes on the table. Then, drawing a deep breath, he turned and left the squalid room. Looking back, he saw the old woman crooning over the money.

He wasted no time. He found the cinema in Lion Road easily enough, and, shown a photograph of Romaine Heilger, the commissionaire recognized her at once. She had arrived at the cinema with a man some time after ten o'clock on the evening in question. He had not noticed her escort particularly, but he remembered the lady who had spoken to him about the picture that was showing. They stayed until the end, about an hour later.

Mr. Mayherne was satisfied. Romaine Heilger's evidence was a tissue of lies from beginning to end. She had evolved it out of her passionate hatred. The lawyer wondered whether he would ever know what lay behind that hatred. What had Leonard Vole done to her? He had seemed dumbfounded when the solicitor had reported her attitude to him. He had declared earnestly that such a thing was incredible—yet it had seemed to Mr. Mayherne that after the first astonishment his protests had lacked sincerity.

He did know. Mr. Mayherne was convinced of it. He knew, but had no intention of revealing the fact. The secret between those two remained a secret. Mr. Mayherne wondered if some day he should come to learn what it was.

The solicitor glanced at his watch. It was late, but time was everything. He hailed a taxi and gave an address.

“Sir Charles must know of this at once,” he murmured to himself as he got in. The trial of Leonard Vole for the murder of Emily French aroused widespread interest. In the first place the prisoner was young and good-looking, then he was accused of a particularly dastardly crime, and there was the further interest of Romaine Heilger, the principal witness for the prosecution. There had been pictures of her in many papers, and several fictitious stories as to her origin and history.

The proceedings opened quietly enough. Various technical evidence came first. Then Janet Mackenzie was called. She told substantially the same story as before. In cross-examination counsel for the defence succeeded in

getting her to contradict herself once or twice over her account of Vole's association with Miss French, he emphasized the fact that though she had heard a man's voice in the sitting room that night, there was nothing to show that it was Vole who was there, and he managed to drive home a feeling that jealousy and dislike of the prisoner were at the bottom of a good deal of her evidence.

Then the next witness was called.

"Your name is Romaine Heilger?"

"Yes."

"You are an Austrian subject?"

"Yes."

"For the last three years you have lived with the prisoner and passed yourself off as his wife?"

Just for a moment Romaine Heilger's eye met those of the man in the dock. Her expression held something curious and unfathomable.

"Yes."

The questions went on. Word by word the damning facts came out. On the night in question the prisoner had taken out a crowbar with him. He had returned at twenty minutes past ten, and had confessed to having killed the old lady. His cuffs had been stained with blood, and he had burned them in the kitchen stove. He had terrorized her into silence by means of threats.

As the story proceeded, the feeling of the court which had, to begin with, been slightly favourable to the prisoner, now set dead against him. He himself sat with downcast head and moody air, as though he knew he were doomed.

Yet it might have been noted that her own counsel sought to restrain Romaine's animosity. He would have preferred her to be a more unbiased witness.

Formidable and ponderous, counsel for the defence arose.

He put it to her that her story was a malicious fabrication from start to finish, that she had not even been in her own house at the time in question, that she was in love with another man and was deliberately seeking to send Vole to his death for a crime he did not commit.

Romaine denied these allegations with superb insolence.

Then came the surprising denouement, the production of the letter. It was read aloud in court in the midst of a breathless stillness.

Max, beloved, the Fates have delivered him into our hands! He has been arrested for murder—but, yes, the murder of an old lady! Leonard who would not hurt a fly! At last I shall have my revenge. The poor chicken! I shall say that he came in that night with blood upon him—that he confessed to me. I shall hang him, Max—and when he hangs he will know and realize that it was Romaine who sent him to his death. And then—happiness, Beloved! Happiness at last!

There were experts present ready to swear that the handwriting was that of Romaine Heilger, but they were not needed. Confronted with the letter, Romaine broke down utterly and confessed everything. Leonard Vole had returned to the house at the time he said, twenty past nine. She had invented the whole story to ruin him.

With the collapse of Romaine Heilger, the case for the Crown collapsed also. Sir Charles called his few witnesses, the prisoner himself went into the box and told his story in a manly straightforward manner, unshaken by cross-examination.

The prosecution endeavoured to rally, but without great success. The judge's summing up was not wholly favourable to the prisoner, but a reaction had set in and the jury needed little time to consider their verdict.

“We find the prisoner not guilty.”

Leonard Vole was free!

Little Mr. Mayherne hurried from his seat. He must congratulate his client.

He found himself polishing his pince-nez vigorously, and checked himself. His wife had told him only the night before that he was getting a habit of it. Curious things habits. People themselves never knew they had them.

An interesting case—a very interesting case. That woman, now, Romaine Heilger.

The case was dominated for him still by the exotic figure of Romaine Heilger. She had seemed a pale quiet woman in the house at Paddington, but in court she had flamed out against the sober background. She had flaunted herself like a tropical flower.

If he closed his eyes he could see her now, tall and vehement, her exquisite body bent forward a little, her right hand clenching and unclenching itself unconsciously all the time. Curious things, habits. That gesture of hers with the hand was her habit, he supposed. Yet he had seen someone else do it quite lately. Who was it now? Quite lately—

He drew in his breath with a gasp as it came back to him. The woman in Shaw's Rents. . . .

He stood still, his head whirling. It was impossible—impossible—Yet, Romaine Heilger was an actress.

The KC came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Congratulated our man yet? He's had a narrow shave, you know. Come along and see him.”

But the little lawyer shook off the other's hand.

He wanted one thing only—to see Romaine Heilger face to face.

He did not see her until some time later, and the place of their meeting is not relevant.

“So you guessed,” she said, when he had told her all that was in his mind. “The face? Oh! that was easy enough, and the light of that gas jet was too bad for you to see the makeup.”

“But why—why—”

“Why did I play a lone hand?” She smiled a little, remembering the last time she had used the words.

“Such an elaborate comedy!”

“My friend—I had to save him. The evidence of a woman devoted to him would not have been enough—you hinted as much yourself. But I know something of the psychology of crowds. Let my evidence be wrung from me, as an admission, damning me in the eyes of the law, and a reaction in favour of the prisoner would immediately set in.”

“And the bundle of letters?”

“One alone, the vital one, might have seemed like a—what do you call it?—put-up job.”

“Then the man called Max?”

“Never existed, my friend.”

“I still think,” said little Mr. Mayherne, in an aggrieved manner, “that we could have got him off by the—er—normal procedure.”

“I dared not risk it. You see, you thought he was innocent—”

“And you knew it? I see,” said little Mr. Mayherne.

“My dear Mr. Mayherne,” said Romaine, “you do not see at all. I knew—he was guilty!”

Two

THE RED SIGNAL

“The Red Signal” was first published in Grand Magazine, June 1924.

No, but how too thrilling,” said pretty Mrs. Eversleigh, opening her lovely, but slightly vacant eyes very wide. “They always say women have a sixth sense; do you think it’s true, Sir Alington?”

The famous alienist smiled sardonically. He had an unbounded contempt for the foolish pretty type, such as his fellow guest. Alington West was the supreme authority on mental disease, and he was fully alive to his own position and importance. A slightly pompous man of full figure.

“A great deal of nonsense is talked, I know that, Mrs. Eversleigh. What does the term mean—a sixth sense?”

“You scientific men are always so severe. And it really is extraordinary the way one seems to positively know things sometimes—just know them, feel them, I mean—quite uncanny—it really is. Claire knows what I mean, don’t you, Claire?”

She appealed to her hostess with a slight pout, and a tilted shoulder.

Claire Trent did not reply at once. It was a small dinner party, she and her husband, Violet Eversleigh, Sir Alington West, and his nephew, Dermot West, who was an old friend of Jack Trent’s. Jack Trent himself, a somewhat heavy florid man, with a good-humoured smile, and a pleasant lazy laugh, took up the thread.

“Bunkum, Violet! Your best friend is killed in a railway accident. Straight away you remember that you dreamt of a black cat last Tuesday—marvelous, you felt all along that something was going to happen!”

“Oh, no, Jack, you’re mixing up premonitions with intuition now. Come, now, Sir Alington, you must admit that premonitions are real?”

“To a certain extent, perhaps,” admitted the physician cautiously. “But coincidence accounts for a good deal, and then there is the invariable tendency to make the most of a story afterwards—you’ve always got to take that into account.”

“I don’t think there is any such thing as premonition,” said Claire Trent, rather abruptly. “Or intuition, or a sixth sense, or any of the things we talk about so glibly. We go through life like a train rushing through the darkness to an unknown destination.”

“That’s hardly a good simile, Mrs. Trent,” said Dermot West, lifting his head for the first time and taking part in the discussion. There was a curious glitter in the clear grey eyes that shone out rather oddly from the deeply tanned face. “You’ve forgotten the signals, you see.”

“The signals?”

“Yes, green if its all right, and red—for danger!”

“Red—for danger—how thrilling!” breathed Violet Eversleigh.

Dermot turned from her rather impatiently.

“That’s just a way of describing it, of course. Danger ahead! The red signal! Look out!”

Trent stared at him curiously.

“You speak as though it were an actual experience, Dermot, old boy.”

“So it is—has been, I mean.”

“Give us the yarn.”

“I can give you one instance. Out in Mesopotamia—just after the Armistice, I came into my tent one evening with the feeling strong upon me. Danger!

Look out! Hadn't the ghost of a notion what it was all about. I made a round of the camp, fussed unnecessarily, took all precautions against an attack by hostile Arabs. Then I went back to my tent. As soon as I got inside, the feeling popped up again stronger than ever. Danger! In the end, I took a blanket outside, rolled myself up in it and slept there."

"Well?"

"The next morning, when I went inside the tent, first thing I saw was a great knife arrangement—about half a yard long—struck down through my bunk, just where I would have lain. I soon found out about it—one of the Arab servants. His son had been shot as a spy. What have you got to say to that, Uncle Alington, as an example of what I call the red signal?"

The specialist smiled noncommittally.

"A very interesting story, my dear Dermot."

"But not one that you would accept unreservedly?"

"Yes, yes, I have no doubt that you had the premonition of danger, just as you state. But it is the origin of the premonition I dispute. According to you, it came from without, impressed by some outside source upon your mentality. But nowadays we find that nearly everything comes from within—from our subconscious self."

"Good old subconscious," cried Jack Trent. "It's the jack-of-all-trades nowadays."

Sir Alington continued without heeding the interruption.

"I suggest that by some glance or look this Arab had betrayed himself. Your conscious self did not notice or remember, but with your subconscious self it was otherwise. The subconscious never forgets. We believe, too, that it can reason and deduce quite independently of the higher or conscious will. Your subconscious self, then, believed that an attempt might be made to assassinate you, and succeeded in forcing its fear upon your conscious realization."

“That sounds very convincing, I admit,” said Dermot smiling.

“But not nearly so exciting,” pouted Mrs. Eversleigh.

“It is also possible that you may have been subconsciously aware of the hate felt by the man towards you. What in the old days used to be called telepathy certainly exists, though the conditions governing it are very little understood.”

“Have there been any other instances?” asked Claire of Dermot.

“Oh! yes, but nothing very pictorial—and I suppose they could all be explained under the heading of coincidence. I refused an invitation to a country house once, for no other reason than the hoisting of the ‘red signal.’ The place was burnt out during the week. By the way, Uncle Alington, where does the subconscious come in there?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t,” said Alington, smiling.

“But you’ve got an equally good explanation. Come, now. No need to be tactful with near relatives.”

“Well, then, nephew, I venture to suggest that you refused the invitation for the ordinary reason that you didn’t much want to go, and that after the fire, you suggested to yourself that you had had a warning of danger, which explanation you now believe implicitly.”

“It’s hopeless,” laughed Dermot. “It’s heads you win, tails I lose.”

“Never mind, Mr. West,” cried Violet Eversleigh. “I believe in your Red Signal implicitly. Is the time in Mesopotamia the last time you had it?”

“Yes—until—”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.”

Dermot sat silent. The words which had nearly left his lips were: "Yes, until tonight." They had come quite unbidden to his lips, voicing a thought which had as yet not been consciously realized, but he was aware at once that they were true. The Red Signal was looming up out of the darkness. Danger! Danger at hand!

But why? What conceivable danger could there be here? Here in the house of his friends? At least—well, yes, there was that kind of danger. He looked at Claire Trent—her whiteness, her slenderness, the exquisite droop of her golden head. But that danger had been there for some time—it was never likely to get acute. For Jack Trent was his best friend, and more than his best friend, the man who had saved his life in Flanders and had been recommended for the VC for doing so. A good fellow, Jack, one of the best. Damned bad luck that he should have fallen in love with Jack's wife. He'd get over it some day, he supposed. A thing couldn't go on hurting like this forever. One could starve it out—that was it, starve it out. It was not as though she would ever guess—and if she did guess, there was no danger of her caring. A statue, a beautiful statue, a thing of gold and ivory and pale pink coral . . . a toy for a king, not a real woman. . . .

Claire . . . the very thought of her name, uttered silently, hurt him . . . He must get over it. He'd cared for women before . . . "But not like this!" said something. "Not like this." Well, there it was. No danger there—heartache, yes, but not danger. Not the danger of the Red Signal. That was for something else.

He looked round the table and it struck him for the first time that it was rather an unusual little gathering. His uncle, for instance, seldom dined out in this small, informal way. It was not as though the Trents were old friends; until this evening Dermot had not been aware that he knew them at all.

To be sure, there was an excuse. A rather notorious medium was coming after dinner to give a seance. Sir Alington professed to be mildly interested in spiritualism. Yes, that was an excuse, certainly.

The word forced itself on his notice. An excuse. Was the seance just an excuse to make the specialist's presence at dinner natural? If so, what was the real object of his being here? A host of details came rushing into

Dermot's mind, trifles unnoticed at the time, or, as his uncle would have said, unnoticed by the conscious mind.

The great physician had looked oddly, very oddly, at Claire more than once. He seemed to be watching her. She was uneasy under his scrutiny. She made little twitching motions with her hands. She was nervous, horribly nervous, and was it, could it be, frightened? Why was she frightened?

With a jerk, he came back to the conversation round the table. Mrs. Eversleigh had got the great man talking upon his own subject.

"My dear lady," he was saying, "what is madness? I can assure you that the more we study the subject, the more difficult we find it to pronounce. We all practise a certain amount of self-deception, and when we carry it so far as to believe we are the Czar of Russia, we are shut up or restrained. But there is a long road before we reach that point. At what particular spot on it shall we erect a post and say, 'On this side sanity, on the other madness?' It can't be done, you know. And I will tell you this, if the man suffering from a delusion happened to hold his tongue about it, in all probability we should never be able to distinguish him from a normal individual. The extraordinary sanity of the insane is a most interesting subject."

Sir Alington sipped his wine with appreciation, and beamed upon the company.

"I've always heard they are very cunning," remarked Mrs. Eversleigh. "Loonies, I mean."

"Remarkably so. And suppression of one's particular delusion has a disastrous effect very often. All suppressions are dangerous, as psychoanalysis has taught us. The man who has a harmless eccentricity, and can indulge it as such, seldom goes over the border line. But the man"—he paused—"or woman who is to all appearance perfectly normal may be in reality a poignant source of danger to the community."

His gaze travelled gently down the table to Claire, and then back again. He sipped his wine once more.

A horrible fear shook Dermot. Was that what he meant? Was that what he was driving at? Impossible, but—

“And all from suppressing oneself,” sighed Mrs. Eversleigh. “I quite see that one should be very careful always to—to express one’s personality. The dangers of the other are frightful.”

“My dear Mrs. Eversleigh,” expostulated the physician. “You have quite misunderstood me. The cause of the mischief is in the physical matter of the brain—sometimes arising from some outward agency such as a blow; sometimes, alas, congenital.”

“Heredity is so sad,” sighed the lady vaguely. “Consumption and all that.”

“Tuberculosis is not hereditary,” said Sir Alington drily.

“Isn’t it? I always thought it was. But madness is! How dreadful. What else?”

“Gout,” said Sir Alington, smiling. “And colour blindness—the latter is rather interesting. It is transmitted direct to males, but is latent in females. So, while there are many colour-blind men, for a woman to be colour-blind, it must have been latent in her mother as well as present in her father—rather an unusual state of things to occur. That is what is called sex-limited heredity.”

“How interesting. But madness is not like that, is it?”

“Madness can be handed down to men or women equally,” said the physician gravely.

Claire rose suddenly, pushing back her chair so abruptly that it overturned and fell to the ground. She was very pale and the nervous motions of her fingers were very apparent.

“You—you will not be long, will you?” she begged. “Mrs. Thompson will be here in a few minutes now.”

“One glass of port, and I will be with you, for one,” declared Sir Alington. “To see this wonderful Mrs. Thompson’s performance is what I have come for, is it not? Ha, ha! Not that I needed any inducement.” He bowed.

Claire gave a faint smile of acknowledgment and passed out of the room, her hand on Mrs. Eversleigh’s shoulder.

“Afraid I’ve been talking shop,” remarked the physician as he resumed his seat. “Forgive me, my dear fellow.”

“Not at all,” said Trent perfunctorily.

He looked strained and worried. For the first time Dermot felt an outsider in the company of his friend. Between these two was a secret that even an old friend might not share. And yet the whole thing was fantastic and incredible. What had he to go upon? Nothing but a couple of glances and a woman’s nervousness.

They lingered over their wine but a very short time, and arrived up in the drawing room just as Mrs. Thompson was announced.

The medium was a plump middle-aged woman, atrociously dressed in magenta velvet, with a loud rather common voice.

“Hope I’m not late, Mrs. Trent,” she said cheerily. “You did say nine o’clock, didn’t you?”

“You are quite punctual, Mrs. Thompson,” said Claire in her sweet, slight husky voice. “This is our little circle.”

No further introductions were made, as was evidently the custom. The medium swept them all with a shrewd, penetrating eye.

“I hope we shall get some good results,” she remarked briskly. “I can’t tell you how I hate it when I go out and I can’t give satisfaction, so to speak. It just makes me mad. But I think Shiromako (my Japanese control, you know) will be able to get through all right tonight. I’m feeling ever so fit, and I refused the welsh rabbit, fond of toasted cheese though I am.”

Dermot listened, half amused, half disgusted. How prosaic the whole thing was! And yet, was he not judging foolishly? Everything, after all, was natural—the powers claimed by mediums were natural powers, as yet imperfectly understood. A great surgeon might be wary of indigestion on the eve of a delicate operation. Why not Mrs. Thompson?

Chairs were arranged in a circle, lights so that they could conveniently be raised or lowered. Dermot noticed that there was no question of tests, or of Sir Alington satisfying himself as to the conditions of the seance. No, this business of Mrs. Thompson was only a blind. Sir Alington was here for quite another purpose. Claire's mother, Dermot remembered, had died abroad. There had been some mystery about her . . . Hereditary. . . .

With a jerk he forced his mind back to the surroundings of the moment.

Everyone took their places, and the lights were turned out, all but a small red-shaded one on a far table.

For a while nothing was heard but the low even breathing of the medium. Gradually it grew more and more stertorous. Then, with a suddenness that made Dermot jump, a loud rap came from the far end of the room. It was repeated from the other side. Then a perfect crescendo of raps was heard. They died away, and a sudden high peal of mocking laughter rang through the room. Then silence, broken by a voice utterly unlike that of Mrs. Thompson, a high-pitched quaintly inflected voice.

"I am here, gentlemen," it said. "Yess, I am here. You wish to ask me things?"

"Who are you? Shiromako?"

"Yess. I Shiromako. I pass over long time ago. I work. I very happy."

Further details of Shiromako's life followed. It was all very flat and uninteresting, and Dermot had heard it often before. Everyone was happy, very happy. Messages were given from vaguely described relatives, the description being so loosely worded as to fit almost any contingency. An elderly lady, the mother of someone present, held the floor for some time,

imparting copy book maxims with an air of refreshing novelty hardly borne out by her subject matter.

“Someone else want to get through now,” announced Shiromako. “Got a very important message for one of the gentlemen.”

There was a pause, and then a new voice spoke, prefacing its remark with an evil demoniacal chuckle.

“Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha! Better not go home. Better not go home. Take my advice.”

“Who are you speaking to?” asked Trent.

“One of you three. I shouldn’t go home if I were him. Danger! Blood! Not very much blood—quite enough. No, don’t go home.” The voice grew fainter. “Don’t go home!”

It died away completely. Dermot felt his blood tingling. He was convinced that the warning was meant for him. Somehow or other, there was danger abroad tonight.

There was a sigh from the medium, and then a groan. She was coming round. The lights were turned on, and presently she sat upright, her eyes blinking a little.

“Go off well, my dear? I hope so.”

“Very good indeed, thank you, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Shiromako, I suppose?”

“Yes, and others.”

Mrs. Thompson yawned.

“I’m dead beat. Absolutely down and out. Does fairly take it out of you. Well, I’m glad it was a success. I was a bit afraid it mightn’t be—afraid

something disagreeable might happen. There's a queer feel about this room tonight."

She glanced over each ample shoulder in turn, and then shrugged them uncomfortably.

"I don't like it," she said. "Any sudden deaths among any of you people lately?"

"What do you mean—among us?"

"Near relatives—dear friends? No? Well, if I wanted to be melodramatic, I'd say there was death in the air tonight. There, it's only my nonsense. Good-bye, Mrs. Trent. I'm glad you've been satisfied."

Mrs. Thompson in her magenta velvet gown went out.

"I hope you've been interested, Sir Alington," murmured Claire.

"A most interesting evening, my dear lady. Many thanks for the opportunity. Let me wish you good night. You are all going to a dance, are you not?"

"Won't you come with us?"

"No, no. I make it a rule to be in bed by half past eleven. Good night. Good night, Mrs. Eversleigh. Ah! Dermot, I rather want to have a word with you. Can you come with me now? You can rejoin the others at the Grafton Galleries."

"Certainly, uncle. I'll meet you there then, Trent."

Very few words were exchanged between uncle and nephew during the short drive to Harley Street. Sir Alington made a semi-apology for dragging Dermot away, and assured him that he would only detain him a few minutes.

"Shall I keep the car for you, my boy?" he asked, as they alighted.

“Oh, don’t bother, uncle. I’ll pick up a taxi.”

“Very good. I don’t like to keep Charlson up later than I can help. Good night, Charlson. Now where the devil did I put my key?”

The car glided away as Sir Alington stood on the steps vainly searching his pockets.

“Must have left it in my other coat,” he said at length. “Ring the bell, will you? Johnson is still up, I daresay.”

The imperturbable Johnson did indeed open the door within sixty seconds.

“Mislaid my key, Johnson,” explained Sir Alington. “Bring a couple of whiskies and sodas into the library, will you?”

“Very good, Sir Alington.”

The physician strode on into the library and turned on the lights. He motioned to Dermot to close the door behind him after entering.

“I won’t keep you long, Dermot, but there’s just something I want to say to you. Is it my fancy, or have you a certain—tendresse, shall we say, for Mrs. Jack Trent?”

The blood rushed to Dermot’s face.

“Jack Trent is my best friend.”

“Pardon me, but that is hardly answering my question. I daresay that you consider my views on divorce and such matters highly puritanical, but I must remind you that you are my only near relative and that you are my heir.”

“There is no question of a divorce,” said Dermot angrily.

“There certainly is not, for a reason which I understand perhaps better than you do. That particular reason I cannot give you now, but I do wish to warn you. Claire Trent is not for you.”

The young man faced his uncle's gaze steadily.

"I do understand—and permit me to say, perhaps better than you think. I know the reason for your presence at dinner tonight."

"Eh?" The physician was clearly startled. "How did you know that?"

"Call it a guess, sir. I am right, am I not, when I say that you were there in your—professional capacity."

Sir Alington strode up and down.

"You are quite right, Dermot. I could not, of course, have told you so myself, though I am afraid it will soon be common property."

Dermot's heart contracted.

"You mean that you have—made up your mind?"

"Yes, there is insanity in the family—on the mother's side. A sad case—a very sad case."

"I can't believe it, sir."

"I dare say not. To the layman there are few if any signs apparent."

"And to the expert?"

"The evidence is conclusive. In such a case, the patient must be placed under restraint as soon as possible."

"My God!" breathed Dermot. "But you can't shut anyone up for nothing at all."

"My dear Dermot! Cases are only placed under restraint when their being at large would result in danger to the community.

"Very grave danger. In all probability a peculiar form of homicidal mania. It was so in the mother's case."

Dermot turned away with a groan, burying his face in his hands. Claire—white and golden Claire!

“In the circumstances,” continued the physician comfortably, “I felt it incumbent on me to warn you.”

“Claire,” murmured Dermot. “My poor Claire.”

“Yes, indeed, we must all pity her.”

Suddenly Dermot raised his head.

“I don’t believe it.”

“What?”

“I say I don’t believe it. Doctors make mistakes. Everyone knows that. And they’re always keen on their own speciality.”

“My dear Dermot,” cried Sir Alington angrily.

“I tell you I don’t believe it—and anyway, even if it is so, I don’t care. I love Claire. If she will come with me, I shall take her away—far away—out of the reach of meddling physicians. I shall guard her, care for her, shelter her with my love.”

“You will do nothing of the sort. Are you mad?”

Dermot laughed scornfully.

“You would say so, I daresay.”

“Understand me, Dermot.” Sir Alington’s face was red with suppressed passion. “If you do this thing—this shameful thing—it is the end. I shall withdraw the allowance I am now making you, and I shall make a new will leaving all I possess to various hospitals.”

“Do as you please with your damned money,” said Dermot in a low voice. “I shall have the woman I love.”

“A woman who—”

“Say a word against her, and, by God! I’ll kill you!” cried Dermot.

A slight clink of glasses made them both swing round. Unheard by them in the heat of their argument, Johnson had entered with a tray of glasses. His face was the imperturbable one of the good servant, but Dermot wondered how much he had overheard.

“That’ll do, Johnson,” said Sir Alington curtly. “You can go to bed.”

“Thank you, sir. Good night, sir.”

Johnson withdrew.

The two men looked at each other. The momentary interruption had calmed the storm.

“Uncle,” said Dermot. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you as I did. I can quite see that from your point of view you are perfectly right. But I have loved Claire Trent for a long time. The fact that Jack Trent is my best friend has hitherto stood in the way of my ever speaking of love to Claire herself. But in these circumstances that fact no longer counts. The idea that any monetary conditions can deter me is absurd. I think we’ve both said all there is to be said. Good night.”

“Dermot—”

“It is really no good arguing further. Good night, Uncle Alington. I’m sorry, but there it is.”

He went out quickly, shutting the door behind him. The hall was in darkness. He passed through it, opened the front door and emerged into the street, banging the door behind him.

A taxi had just deposited a fare at a house farther along the street and Dermot hailed it, and drove to the Grafton Galleries.

In the door of the ballroom he stood for a minute bewildered, his head spinning. The raucous jazz music, the smiling women—it was as though he had stepped into another world.

Had he dreamt it all? Impossible that that grim conversation with his uncle should have really taken place. There was Claire floating past, like a lily in her white and silver gown that fitted sheathlike to her slenderness. She smiled at him, her face calm and serene. Surely it was all a dream.

The dance had stopped. Presently she was near him, smiling up into his face. As in a dream he asked her to dance. She was in his arms now, the raucous melodies had begun again.

He felt her flag a little.

“Tired? Do you want to stop?”

“If you don’t mind. Can we go somewhere where we can talk? There is something I want to say to you.”

Not a dream. He came back to earth with a bump. Could he ever have thought her face calm and serene? It was haunted with anxiety, with dread. How much did she know?

He found a quiet corner, and they sat down side by side.

“Well,” he said, assuming a lightness he did not feel. “You said you had something you wanted to say to me?”

“Yes.” Her eyes were cast down. She was playing nervously with the tassel of her gown. “It’s difficult—rather.”

“Tell me, Claire.”

“It’s just this. I want you to—to go away for a time.”

He was astonished. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

“You want me to go away? Why?”

“It’s best to be honest, isn’t it? I—I know that you are a—a gentleman and my friend. I want you to go away because I—I have let myself get fond of you.”

“Claire.”

Her words left him dumb—tongue-tied.

“Please do not think that I am conceited enough to fancy that you—that you would ever be likely to fall in love with me. It is only that—I am not very happy—and—oh! I would rather you went away.”

“Claire, don’t you know that I have cared—cared damnably—ever since I met you?”

She lifted startled eyes to his face.

“You cared? You have cared a long time?”

“Since the beginning.”

“Oh!” she cried. “Why didn’t you tell me? Then? When I could have come to you! Why tell me now when it’s too late. No, I’m mad—I don’t know what I’m saying. I could never have come to you.”

“Claire, what did you mean when you said ‘now that it’s too late’? Is it—is it because of my uncle? What he knows? What he thinks?”

She nodded dumbly, the tears running down her face.

“Listen, Claire, you’re not to believe all that. You’re not to think about it. Instead you will come away with me. We’ll go to the South Seas, to islands like green jewels. You will be happy there, and I will look after you—keep you safe for always.”

His arms went round her. He drew her to him, felt her tremble at his touch. Then suddenly she wrenched herself free.

“Oh, no, please. Can’t you see? I couldn’t now. It would be ugly—ugly—ugly. All along I’ve wanted to be good—and now—it would be ugly as well.”

He hesitated, baffled by her words. She looked at him appealingly.

“Please,” she said. “I want to be good. . . .”

Without a word, Dermot got up and left her. For the moment he was touched and racked by her words beyond argument. He went for his hat and coat, running into Trent as he did so.

“Hallo, Dermot, you’re off early.”

“Yes, I’m not in the mood for dancing tonight.”

“It’s a rotten night,” said Trent gloomily. “But you haven’t got my worries.”

Dermot had a sudden panic that Trent might be going to confide in him. Not that—anything but that!

“Well, so long,” he said hurriedly. “I’m off home.”

“Home, eh? What about the warning of the spirits?”

“I’ll risk that. Good night, Jack.”

Dermot’s flat was not far away. He walked there, feeling the need of the cool night air to calm his fevered brain.

He let himself in with his key and switched on the light in the bedroom.

And all at once, for the second time that night, the feeling that he had designated by the title of the Red Signal surged over him. So overpowering was it that for the moment it swept even Claire from his mind.

Danger! He was in danger. At this very moment, in this very room, he was in danger.

He tried in vain to ridicule himself free of the fear. Perhaps his efforts were secretly halfhearted. So far, the Red Signal had given him timely warning which had enabled him to avoid disaster. Smiling a little at his own superstition, he made a careful tour of the flat. It was possible that some malefactor had got in and was lying concealed there. But his search revealed nothing. His man Milson, was away, and the flat was absolutely empty.

He returned to his bedroom and undressed slowly, frowning to himself. The sense of danger was acute as ever. He went to a drawer to get out a handkerchief, and suddenly stood stock-still. There was an unfamiliar lump in the middle of the drawer—something hard.

His quick nervous fingers tore aside the handkerchiefs and took out the object concealed beneath them. It was a revolver.

With the utmost astonishment Dermot examined it keenly. It was of a somewhat unfamiliar pattern, and one shot had been fired from it lately. Beyond that, he could make nothing of it. Someone had placed it in that drawer that very evening. It had not been there when he dressed for dinner—he was sure of that.

He was about to replace it in the drawer, when he was startled by a bell ringing. It rang again and again, sounding unusually loud in the quietness of the empty flat.

Who could it be coming to the front door at this hour? And only one answer came to the question—an answer instinctive and persistent.

“Danger—danger—danger. . . .”

Led by some instinct for which he did not account, Dermot switched off his light, slipped on an overcoat that lay across a chair, and opened the hall door.

Two men stood outside. Beyond them Dermot caught sight of a blue uniform. A policeman!

“Mr. West?” asked the foremost of the two men.

It seemed to Dermot that ages elapsed before he answered. In reality it was only a few seconds before he replied in a very fair imitation of his man’s expressionless voice:

“Mr. West hasn’t come in yet. What do you want with him at this time of night?”

“Hasn’t come in yet, eh? Very well, then, I think we’d better come in and wait for him.”

“No, you don’t.”

“See here, my man, my name is Inspector Verall of Scotland Yard, and I’ve got a warrant for the arrest of your master. You can see it if you like.”

Dermot perused the proffered paper, or pretended to do so, asking in a dazed voice:

“What for? What’s he done?”

“Murder. Sir Alington West of Harley Street.”

His brain in a whirl, Dermot fell back before his redoubtable visitors. He went into the sitting room and switched on the light. The inspector followed him.

“Have a search round,” he directed the other man. Then he turned to Dermot.

“You stay here, my man. No slipping off to warn your master. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Milson, sir.”

“What time do you expect your master in, Milson?”

“I don’t know, sir, he was going to a dance, I believe. At the Grafton Galleries.”

“He left there just under an hour ago. Sure he’s not been back here?”

“I don’t think so, sir. I fancy I should have heard him come in.”

At this moment the second man came in from the adjoining room. In his hand he carried the revolver. He took it across to the inspector in some excitement. An expression of satisfaction flitted across the latter’s face.

“That settles it,” he remarked. “Must have slipped in and out without your hearing him. He’s hooked it by now. I’d better be off. Cawley, you stay here, in case he should come back again, and you keep an eye on this fellow. He may know more about his master than he pretends.”

The inspector bustled off. Dermot endeavoured to get at the details of the affair from Cawley, who was quite ready to be talkative.

“Pretty clear case,” he vouchsafed. “The murder was discovered almost immediately. Johnson, the manservant, had only just gone up to bed when he fancied he heard a shot, and came down again. Found Sir Alington dead, shot through the heart. He rang us up at once and we came along and heard his story.”

“Which made it a pretty clear case?” ventured Dermot.

“Absolutely. This young West came in with his uncle and they were quarrelling when Johnson brought in the drinks. The old boy was threatening to make a new will, and your master was talking about shooting him. Not five minutes later the shot was heard. Oh! yes, clear enough. Silly young fool.”

Clear enough indeed. Dermot’s heart sank as he realized the overwhelming nature of the evidence against him. Danger indeed—horrible danger! And no way out save that of flight. He set his wits to work. Presently he suggested making a cup of tea. Cawley assented readily enough. He had already searched the flat and knew there was no back entrance.

Dermot was permitted to depart to the kitchen. Once there he put the kettle on, and chinked cups and saucers industriously. Then he stole swiftly to the window and lifted the sash. The flat was on the second floor, and outside the window was a small wire lift used by tradesmen which ran up and down on its steel cable.

Like a flash Dermot was outside the window and swinging himself down the wire rope. It cut into his hands, making them bleed, but he went on desperately.

A few minutes later he was emerging cautiously from the back of the block. Turning the corner, he cannoned into a figure standing by the sidewalk. To his utter amazement he recognized Jack Trent. Trent was fully alive to the perils of the situation.

“My God! Dermot! Quick, don’t hang about here.”

Taking him by the arm, he led him down a bystreet then down another. A lonely taxi was sighted and hailed and they jumped in, Trent giving the man his own address.

“Safest place for the moment. There we can decide what to do next to put those fools off the track. I came round here hoping to be able to warn you before the police got here, but I was too late.”

“I didn’t even know that you had heard of it. Jack, you don’t believe—”

“Of course not, old fellow, not for one minute. I know you far too well. All the same, it’s a nasty business for you. They came round asking questions—what time you got to the Grafton Galleries, when you left, etc. Dermot, who could have done the old boy in?”

“I can’t imagine. Whoever did it put the revolver in my drawer, I suppose. Must have been watching us pretty closely.”

“That séance business was damned funny. ‘Don’t go home.’ Meant for poor old West. He did go home, and got shot.”

“It applies to me to,” said Dermot. “I went home and found a planted revolver and a police inspector.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t get me too,” said Trent. “Here we are.”

He paid the taxi, opened the door with his latchkey, and guided Dermot up the dark stairs to his den, which was a small room on the first floor.

He threw open the door and Dermot walked in, whilst Trent switched on the light, and then came to join him.

“Pretty safe here for the time being,” he remarked. “Now we can get our heads together and decide what is best to be done.”

“I’ve made a fool of myself,” said Dermot suddenly. “I ought to have faced it out. I see more clearly now. The whole thing’s a plot. What the devil are you laughing at?”

For Trent was leaning back in his chair, shaking with unrestrained mirth. There was something horrible in the sound—something horrible, too, about the man altogether. There was a curious light in his eyes.

“A damned clever plot,” he gasped out. “Dermot, my boy, you’re done for.”

He drew the telephone towards him.

“What are you going to do?” asked Dermot.

“Ring up Scotland Yard. Tell ’em their bird’s here—safe under lock and key. Yes, I locked the door when I came in and the key’s in my pocket. No good looking at that other door behind me. That leads into Claire’s room, and she always locks it on her side. She’s afraid of me, you know. Been afraid of me a long time. She always knows when I’m thinking about that knife—a long sharp knife. No, you don’t—”

Dermot had been about to make a rush at him, but the other had suddenly produced an ugly-looking revolver.

“That’s the second of them,” chuckled Trent. “I put the first of them in your drawer—after shooting old West with it—What are you looking at over my head? That door? It’s no use, even if Claire was to open it—and she might to you—I’d shoot you before you got there. Not in the heart—not to kill, just wing you, so that you couldn’t get away. I’m a jolly good shot, you know. I saved your life once. More fool I. No, no, I want you hanged—yes, hanged. It isn’t you I want the knife for. It’s Claire—pretty Claire, so white and soft. Old West knew. That’s what he was here for tonight, to see if I was mad or not. He wanted to shut me up—so that I shouldn’t get Claire with the knife. I was very cunning. I took his latchkey and yours too. I slipped away from the dance as soon as I got there. I saw you come out from his house, and I went in. I shot him and came away at once. Then I went to your place and left the revolver. I was at the Grafton Galleries again almost as soon as you were, and I put the latchkey back in your coat pocket when I was saying good night to you. I don’t mind telling you all this. There’s no one else to hear, and when you’re being hanged I’d like you to know I did it . . . God, how it makes me laugh! What are you thinking of? What the devil are you looking at?”

“I’m thinking of some words you quoted just now. You’d have done better, Trent, not to come home.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look behind you!” Trent spun round. In the doorway of the communicating room stood Claire—and Inspector Verall. . . .

Trent was quick. The revolver spoke just once—and found its mark. He fell forward across the table. The inspector sprang to his side, as Dermot stared at Claire in a dream. Thoughts flashed through his brain disjointedly. His uncle—their quarrel—the colossal misunderstanding—the divorce laws of England which would never free Claire from an insane husband—“we must all pity her”—the plot between her and Sir Alington which the cunning of Trent had seen through—her cry to him, “Ugly—ugly—ugly!” Yes, but now—

The inspector straightened up again.

“Dead,” he said vexedly.

“Yes,” Dermot heard himself saying, “he was always a good shot. . . .”

Three

THE FOURTH MAN

“The Fourth Man” was first published in Pearson’s Magazine, December 1925.

Canon Parfitt panted a little. Running for trains was not much of a business for a man of his age. For one thing his figure was not what it was and with the loss of his slender silhouette went an increasing tendency to be short of breath. This tendency the Canon himself always referred to, with dignity, as “My heart, you know!”

He sank into the corner of the first-class carriage with a sigh of relief. The warmth of the heated carriage was most agreeable to him. Outside the snow was falling. Lucky to get a corner seat on a long night journey. Miserable business if you didn’t. There ought to be a sleeper on this train.

The other three corners were already occupied, and noting this fact Canon Parfitt became aware that the man in the far corner was smiling at him in gentle recognition. He was a clean-shaven man with a quizzical face and hair just turning grey on the temples. His profession was so clearly the law that no one could have mistaken him for anything else for a moment. Sir George Durand was, indeed, a very famous lawyer.

“Well, Parfitt,” he remarked genially, “you had a run for it, didn’t you?”

“Very bad for my heart, I’m afraid,” said the Canon. “Quite a coincidence meeting you, Sir George. Are you going far north?”

“Newcastle,” said Sir George laconically. “By the way,” he added, “do you know Dr. Campbell Clark?”

The man sitting on the same side of the carriage as the Canon inclined his head pleasantly.

“We met on the platform,” continued the lawyer. “Another coincidence.”

Canon Parfitt looked at Dr. Campbell Clark with a good deal of interest. It was a name of which he had often heard. Dr. Clark was in the forefront as a physician and mental specialist, and his last book, *The Problem of the Unconscious Mind*, had been the most discussed book of the year.

Canon Parfitt saw a square jaw, very steady blue eyes and reddish hair untouched by grey, but thinning rapidly. And he received also the impression of a very forceful personality.

By a perfectly natural association of ideas the Canon looked across to the seat opposite him, half expecting to receive a glance of recognition there also, but the fourth occupant of the carriage proved to be a total stranger—a foreigner, the Canon fancied. He was a slight dark man, rather insignificant in appearance. Huddled in a big overcoat, he appeared to be fast asleep.

“Canon Parfitt of Bradchester?” inquired Dr. Campbell Clark in a pleasant voice.

The Canon looked flattered. Those “scientific sermons” of his had really made a great hit—especially since the Press had taken them up. Well, that was what the Church needed—good modern up-to-date stuff.

“I have read your book with great interest, Dr. Campbell Clark,” he said. “Though it’s a bit technical here and there for me to follow.”

Durand broke in.

“Are you for talking or sleeping, Canon?” he asked. “I’ll confess at once that I suffer from insomnia and that therefore I’m in favour of the former.”

“Oh! certainly. By all means,” said the Canon. “I seldom sleep on these night journeys, and the book I have with me is a very dull one.”

“We are at any rate a representative gathering,” remarked the doctor with a smile. “The Church, the Law, the Medical Profession.”

“Not much we couldn’t give an opinion on between us, eh?” laughed Durand. “The Church for the spiritual view, myself for the purely worldly and legal view, and you, doctor, with widest field of all, ranging from the purely pathological to the super-psychological! Between us three we should cover any ground pretty completely, I fancy.”

“Not so completely as you imagine, I think,” said Dr. Clark. “There’s another point of view, you know, that you left out, and that’s rather an important one.”

“Meaning?” queried the lawyer.

“The point of view of the Man in the Street.”

“Is that so important? Isn’t the Man in the Street usually wrong?”

“Oh! almost always. But he has the thing that all expert opinion must lack—the personal point of view. In the end, you know, you can’t get away from personal relationships. I’ve found that in my profession. For every patient who comes to me genuinely ill, at least five come who have nothing whatever the matter with them except an inability to live happily with the inmates of the same house. They call it everything—from housemaid’s knee to writer’s cramp, but it’s all the same thing, the raw surface produced by mind rubbing against mind.”

“You have a lot of patients with ‘nerves,’ I suppose,” the Canon remarked disparagingly. His own nerves were excellent.

“Ah! and what do you mean by that?” The other swung round on him, quick as a flash. “Nerves! People use that word and laugh after it, just as you did. ‘Nothing the matter with so and so,’ they say. ‘Just nerves.’ But, good God, man, you’ve got the crux of everything there! You can get at a mere bodily ailment and heal it. But at this day we know very little more about the obscure causes of the hundred and one forms of nervous disease than we did in—well, the reign of Queen Elizabeth!”

“Dear me,” said Canon Parfitt, a little bewildered by this onslaught. “Is that so?”

“Mind you, it’s a sign of grace,” Dr. Campbell Clark went on. “In the old days we considered man a simple animal, body and soul—with stress laid on the former.”

“Body, soul and spirit,” corrected the clergyman mildly.

“Spirit?” The doctor smiled oddly. “What do you parsons mean exactly by spirit? You’ve never been very clear about it, you know. All down the ages you’ve funk’d an exact definition.”

The Canon cleared his throat in preparation for speech, but to his chagrin he was given no opportunity. The doctor went on.

“Are we even sure the word is spirit—might it not be spirits?”

“Spirits?” Sir George Durand questioned, his eyebrows raised quizzically.

“Yes.” Campbell Clark’s gaze transferred itself to him. He leaned forward and tapped the other man lightly on the breast. “Are you so sure,” he said gravely, “that there is only one occupant of this structure—for that is all it is, you know—this desirable residence to be let furnished—for seven, twenty-one, forty-one, seventy-one—whatever it may be!—years? And in the end the tenant moves his things out—little by little—and then goes out of the house altogether—and down comes the house, a mass of ruin and decay. You’re the master of the house—we’ll admit that, but aren’t you ever conscious of the presence of others—soft-footed servants, hardly noticed, except for the work they do—work that you’re not conscious of having done? Or friends—moods that take hold of you and make you, for the time being, a ‘different man’ as the saying goes? You’re the king of the castle, right enough, but be very sure the ‘dirty rascal’ is there too.”

“My dear Clark,” drawled the lawyer. “You make me positively uncomfortable. Is my mind really a battleground of conflicting personalities? Is that Science’s latest?”

It was the doctor’s turn to shrug his shoulders.

“Your body is,” he said drily. “If the body, why not the mind?”

“Very interesting,” said Canon Parfitt. “Ah! Wonderful science—wonderful science.”

And inwardly he thought to himself: “I can get a most interesting sermon out of that idea.”

But Dr. Campbell Clark had leant back in his seat, his momentary excitement spent.

“As a matter of fact,” he remarked in a dry professional manner, “it is a case of dual personality that takes me to Newcastle tonight. Very interesting case. Neurotic subject, of course. But quite genuine.”

“Dual personality,” said Sir George Durand thoughtfully. “It’s not so very rare, I believe. There’s loss of memory as well, isn’t there? I know the matter cropped up in a case in the Probate Court the other day.”

Dr. Clark nodded.

“The classic case, of course,” he said, “was that of Felicie Bault. You may remember hearing of it?”

“Of course,” said Canon Parfitt. “I remember reading about it in the papers—but quite a long time ago—seven years at least.”

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

“That girl became one of the most famous figures in France. Scientists from all over the world came to see her. She had no less than four distinct personalities. They were known as Felicie 1, Felicie 2, Felicie 3, etc.”

“Wasn’t there some suggestion of deliberate trickery?” asked Sir George alertly.

“The personalities of Felicie 3 and Felicie 4 were a little open to doubt,” admitted the doctor. “But the main facts remain. Felicie Bault was a Brittany peasant girl. She was the third of a family of five; the daughter of a drunken father and a mentally defective mother. In one of his drinking bouts the father strangled the mother and was, if I remember rightly, transported

for life. Felicie was then five years of age. Some charitable people interested themselves in the children and Felicie was brought up and educated by an English maiden lady who had a kind of home for destitute children. She could make very little of Felicie, however. She describes the girl as abnormally slow and stupid, only taught to read and write with the greatest difficulty and clumsy with her hands. This lady, Miss Slater, tried to fit the girl for domestic service, and did indeed find her several places when she was of an age to take them. But she never stayed long anywhere owing to her stupidity and also her intense laziness.”

The doctor paused for a minute, and the Canon, recrossing his legs, and arranging his travelling rug more closely round him, was suddenly aware that the man opposite him had moved very slightly. His eyes, which had formerly been shut, were now open, and something in them, something mocking and indefinable, startled the worthy Canon. It was as though the man were listening and gloating secretly over what he heard.

“There is a photograph taken of Felicie Bault at the age of seventeen,” continued the doctor. “It shows her as a loutish peasant girl, heavy of build. There is nothing in that picture to indicate that she was soon to be one of the most famous persons in France.

“Five years later, when she was 22, Felicie Bault had a severe nervous illness, and on recovery the strange phenomena began to manifest themselves. The following are facts attested to by many eminent scientists. The personality called Felicie 1 was undistinguishable from the Felicie Bault of the last twenty-two years. Felicie 1 wrote French badly and haltingly, she spoke no foreign languages and was unable to play the piano. Felicie 2, on the contrary, spoke Italian fluently and German moderately. Her handwriting was quite dissimilar to that of Felicie 1, and she wrote fluent and expressive French. She could discuss politics and art and she was passionately fond of playing the piano. Felicie 3 had many points in common with Felicie 2. She was intelligent and apparently well educated, but in moral character she was a total contrast. She appeared, in fact, an utterly depraved creature—but depraved in a Parisian and not a provincial way. She knew all the Paris argot, and the expressions of the chic demi monde. Her language was filthy and she would rail against religion and so-

called ‘good people’ in the most blasphemous terms. Finally there was Felicie 4—a dreamy, almost half-witted creature, distinctly pious and professedly clairvoyant, but this fourth personality was very unsatisfactory and elusive and has been sometimes thought to be a deliberate trickery on the part of Felicie 3—a kind of joke played by her on a credulous public. I may say that (with the possible exception of Felicie 4) each personality was distinct and separate and had no knowledge of the others. Felicie 2 was undoubtedly the most predominant and would last sometimes for a fortnight at a time, then Felicie 1 would appear abruptly for a day or two. After that, perhaps Felicie 3 or 4, but the two latter seldom remained in command for more than a few hours. Each change was accompanied by severe headache and heavy sleep, and in each case there was complete loss of memory of the other states, the personality in question taking up life where she had left it, unconscious of the passage of time.”

“Remarkable,” murmured the Canon. “Very remarkable. As yet we know next to nothing of the marvels of the universe.”

“We know that there are some very astute impostors in it,” remarked the lawyer drily.

“The case of Felicie Bault was investigated by lawyers as well as by doctors and scientists,” said Dr. Campbell Clark quickly. “Maitre Quimbellier, you remember, made the most thorough investigation and confirmed the views of the scientists. And after all, why should it surprise us so much? We come across the double-yolked egg, do we not? And the twin banana? Why not the double soul—in the single body?”

“The double soul?” protested the Canon.

Dr. Campbell Clark turned his piercing blue eyes on him.

“What else can we call it? That is to say—if the personality is the soul?”

“It is a good thing such a state of affairs is only in the nature of a ‘freak,’ ” remarked Sir George. “If the case were common, it would give rise to pretty complications.”

“The condition is, of course, quite abnormal,” agreed the doctor. “It was a great pity that a longer study could not have been made, but all that was put an end to by Felicie’s unexpected death.”

“There was something queer about that, if I remember rightly,” said the lawyer slowly.

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

“A most unaccountable business. The girl was found one morning dead in bed. She had clearly been strangled. But to everyone’s stupefaction it was presently proved beyond doubt that she had actually strangled herself. The marks on her neck were those of her own fingers. A method of suicide which, though not physically impossible, must have necessitated terrific muscular strength and almost superhuman will power. What had driven the girl to such straits has never been found out. Of course her mental balance must always have been precarious. Still, there it is. The curtain has been rung down forever on the mystery of Felicie Bault.”

It was then that the man in the far corner laughed.

The other three men jumped as though shot. They had totally forgotten the existence of the fourth amongst them. As they stared towards the place where he sat, still huddled in his overcoat, he laughed again.

“You must excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, in perfect English that had, nevertheless, a foreign flavour.

He sat up, displaying a pale face with a small jet-black moustache.

“Yes, you must excuse me,” he said, with a mock bow. “But really! in science, is the last word ever said?”

“You know something of the case we have been discussing?” asked the doctor courteously.

“Of the case? No. But I knew her.”

“Felicie Bault?”

“Yes. And Annette Ravel also. You have not heard of Annette Ravel, I see? And yet the story of the one is the story of the other. Believe me, you know nothing of Felicie Bault if you do not also know the history of Annette Ravel.”

He drew out his watch and looked at it.

“Just half an hour before the next stop. I have time to tell you the story—that is, if you care to hear it?”

“Please tell it to us,” said the doctor quietly.

“Delighted,” said the Canon. “Delighted.”

Sir George Durand merely composed himself in an attitude of keen attention.

“My name, gentlemen,” began their strange travelling companion, “is Raoul Letardeau. You have spoken just now of an English lady, Miss Slater, who interested herself in works of charity. I was born in that Britany fishing village and when my parents were both killed in a railway accident it was Miss Slater who came to the rescue and saved me from the equivalent of your English workhouse. There were some twenty children under her care, girls and boys. Amongst these children were Felicie Bault and Annette Ravel. If I cannot make you understand the personality of Annette, gentlemen, you will understand nothing. She was the child of what you call a ‘fille de joie’ who had died of consumption abandoned by her lover. The mother had been a dancer, and Annette, too, had the desire to dance. When I saw her first she was eleven years old, a little shrimp of a thing with eyes that alternately mocked and promised—a little creature all fire and life. And at once—yes, at once—she made me her slave. It was ‘Raoul, do this for me.’ ‘Raoul, do that for me.’ And me, I obeyed. Already I worshipped her, and she knew it.

“We would go down to the shore together, we three—for Felicie would come with us. And there Annette would pull off her shoes and stockings and dance on the sand. And then when she sank down breathless, she would tell us of what she meant to do and to be.

“ ‘See you, I shall be famous. Yes, exceedingly famous. I will have hundreds and thousands of silk stockings—the finest silk. And I shall live in an exquisite apartment. All my lovers shall be young and handsome as well as being rich. And when I dance all Paris shall come to see me. They will yell and call and shout and go mad over my dancing. And in the winters I shall not dance. I shall go south to the sunlight. There are villas there with orange trees. I shall have one of them. I shall lie in the sun on silk cushions, eating oranges. As for you, Raoul, I will never forget you, however rich and famous I shall be. I will protect you and advance your career. Felicie here shall be my maid—no, her hands are too clumsy. Look at them, how large and coarse they are.’

“Felicie would grow angry at that. And then Annette would go on teasing her.

“ ‘She is so ladylike, Felicie—so elegant, so refined. She is a princess in disguise—ha, ha.’

“ ‘My father and mother were married, which is more than yours were,’ Felicie would growl out spitefully.

“ ‘Yes, and your father killed your mother. A pretty thing, to be a murderer’s daughter.’

“ ‘Your father left your mother to rot,’ Felicie would rejoin.

“ ‘Ah! yes.’ Annette became thoughtful. ‘Pauvre Maman. One must keep strong and well. It is everything to keep strong and well.’

“ ‘I am as strong as a horse,’ Felicie boasted.

“And indeed she was. She had twice the strength of any other girl in the Home. And she was never ill.

“But she was stupid, you comprehend, stupid like a brute beast. I often wondered why she followed Annette round as she did. It was, with her, a kind of fascination. Sometimes, I think, she actually hated Annette, and indeed Annette was not kind to her. She jeered at her slowness and

stupidity, and baited her in front of the others. I have seen Felicie grow quite white with rage. Sometimes I have thought that she would fasten her fingers round Annette's neck and choke the life out of her. She was not nimble-witted enough to reply to Annette's taunts, but she did learn in time to make one retort which never failed. That was a reference to her own health and strength. She had learned (what I had always known) that Annette envied her her strong physique, and she struck instinctively at the weak spot in her enemy's armour.

“One day Annette came to me in great glee.

“ ‘Raoul,’ she said. ‘We shall have fun today with that stupid Felicie. We shall die of laughing.’

“ ‘What are you going to do?’

“ ‘Come behind the little shed, and I will tell you.’

“It seemed that Annette had got hold of some book. Part of it she did not understand, and indeed the whole thing was much over her head. It was an early work on hypnotism.

“ ‘A bright object, they say. The brass knob of my bed, it twirls round. I made Felicie look at it last night. ‘Look at it steadily,’ I said. ‘Do not take your eyes off it.’ And then I twirled it. Raoul, I was frightened. Her eyes looked so queer—so queer. ‘Felicie, you will do what I say always,’ I said. ‘I will do what you say always, Annette,’ she answered. And then—and then—I said: ‘Tomorrow you will bring a tallow candle out into the playground at twelve o’clock and start to eat it. And if anyone asks you, you will say that is it the best galette you ever tasted. Oh! Raoul, think of it!’

“ ‘But she’ll never do such a thing,’ I objected.

“ ‘The book says so. Not that I can quite believe it—but, oh! Raoul, if the book is all true, how we shall amuse ourselves!’

“I, too, thought the idea very funny. We passed word round to the comrades and at twelve o’clock we were all in the playground. Punctual to the minute, out came Felicie with a stump of candle in her hand. Will you believe me, Messieurs, she began solemnly to nibble at it? We were all in hysterics! Every now and then one or other of the children would go up to her and say solemnly: ‘It is good, what you eat there, eh, Felicie?’ And she would answer: ‘But, yes, it is the best galette I ever tasted.’ And then we would shriek with laughter. We laughed at last so loud that the noise seemed to wake up Felicie to a realization of what she was doing. She blinked her eyes in a puzzled way, looked at the candle, then at us. She passed her hand over her forehead.

“ ‘But what is it that I do here?’ she muttered.

“ ‘You are eating a candle,’ we screamed.

“ ‘I made you do it. I made you do it,’ cried Annette, dancing about.

“Felicie stared for a moment. Then she went slowly up to Annette.

“ ‘So it is you—it is you who have made me ridiculous? I seem to remember. Ah! I will kill you for this.’

“She spoke in a very quiet tone, but Annette rushed suddenly away and hid behind me.

“ ‘Save me, Raoul! I am afraid of Felicie. It was only a joke, Felicie. Only a joke.’

“ ‘I do not like these jokes,’ said Felicie. ‘You understand? I hate you. I hate you all.’

“She suddenly burst out crying and rushed away.

“Annette was, I think, scared by the result of her experiment, and did not try to repeat it. But from that day on, her ascendancy over Felicie seemed to grow stronger.

“Felicie, I now believe, always hated her, but nevertheless she could not keep away from her. She used to follow Annette around like a dog.

“Soon after that, Messieurs, employment was found for me, and I only came to the Home for occasional holidays. Annette’s desire to become a dancer was not taken seriously, but she developed a very pretty singing voice as she grew older and Miss Slater consented to her being trained as a singer.

“She was not lazy, Annette. She worked feverishly, without rest. Miss Slater was obliged to prevent her doing too much. She spoke to me once about her.

“ ‘You have always been fond of Annette,’ she said. ‘Persuade her not to work too hard. She has a little cough lately that I do not like.’

“My work took me far afield soon afterwards. I received one or two letters from Annette at first, but then came silence. For five years after that I was abroad.

“Quite by chance, when I returned to Paris, my attention was caught by a poster advertising Annette Ravelli with a picture of the lady. I recognized her at once. That night I went to the theatre in question. Annette sang in French and Italian. On the stage she was wonderful. Afterwards I went to her dressing room. She received me at once.

“ ‘Why, Raoul,’ she cried, stretching out her whitened hands to me. ‘This is splendid. Where have you been all these years?’

“I would have told her, but she did not really want to listen.”

“ ‘You see, I have very nearly arrived!’

“She waved a triumphant hand round the room filled with bouquets.

“ ‘The good Miss Slater must be proud of your success.’

“ ‘That old one? No, indeed. She designed me, you know, for the Conservatoire. Decorous concert singing. But me, I am an artist. It is here,

on the variety stage, that I can express myself.’

“Just then a handsome middle-aged man came in. He was very distinguished. By his manner I soon saw that he was Annette’s protector. He looked sideways at me, and Annette explained.

“ ‘A friend of my infancy. He passes through Paris, sees my picture on a poster et voilà!’

“The man was then very affable and courteous. In my presence he produced a ruby and diamond bracelet and clasped it on Annette’s wrist. As I rose to go, she threw me a glance of triumph and a whisper.

“ ‘I arrive, do I not? You see? All the world is before me.’

“But as I left the room, I heard her cough, a sharp dry cough. I knew what it meant, that cough. It was the legacy of her consumptive mother.

“I saw her next two years later. She had gone for refuge to Miss Slater. Her career had broken down. She was in a state of advanced consumption for which the doctors said nothing could be done.

“Ah! I shall never forget her as I saw her then! She was lying in a kind of shelter in the garden. She was kept outdoors night and day. Her cheeks were hollow and flushed, her eyes bright and feverish and she coughed repeatedly.

“She greeted me with a kind of desperation that startled me.

“ ‘It is good to see you, Raoul. You know what they say—that I may not get well? They say it behind my back, you understand. To me they are soothing and consolatory. But it is not true, Raoul, it is not true! I shall not permit myself to die. Die? With beautiful life stretching in front of me? It is the will to live that matters. All the great doctors say that nowadays. I am not one of the feeble ones who let go. Already I feel myself infinitely better—infininitely better, do you hear?’

“She raised herself on her elbow to drive her words home, then fell back, attacked by a fit of coughing that racked her thin body.

“ ‘The cough—it is nothing,’ she gasped. ‘And haemorrhages do not frighten me. I shall surprise the doctors. It is the will that counts. Remember, Raoul, I am going to live.’

“It was pitiful, you understand, pitiful.

“Just then, Felicie Bault came out with a tray. A glass of hot milk. She gave it to Annette and watched her drink it with an expression that I could not fathom. There was a kind of smug satisfaction in it.

“Annette too caught the look. She flung the glass down angrily, so that it smashed to bits.

“ ‘You see her? That is how she always looks at me. She is glad I am going to die! Yes, she gloats over it. She who is well and strong. Look at her, never a day’s illness, that one! And all for nothing. What good is that great carcass of hers to her? What can she make of it?’

“Felicie stooped and picked up the broken fragments of glass.

“ ‘I do not mind what she says,’ she observed in a singsong voice. ‘What does it matter? I am a respectable girl, I am. As for her. She will be knowing the fires of Purgatory before very long. I am a Christian, I say nothing.’

“ ‘You hate me,’ cried Annette. ‘You have always hated me. Ah! but I can charm you, all the same. I can make you do what I want. See now, if I ask you to, you would go down on your knees before me now on the grass.’

“ ‘You are absurd,’ said Felicie uneasily.

“ ‘But, yes, you will do it. You will. To please me. Down on your knees. I ask it of you, I, Annette. Down on your knees, Felicie.’

“Whether it was the wonderful pleading in the voice, or some deeper motive, Felicie obeyed. She sank slowly to her knees, her arms spread wide,

her face vacant and stupid.

“Annette flung her head back and laughed—peal upon peal of laughter.

“ ‘Look at her, with her stupid face! How ridiculous she looks. You can get up now, Felicie, thank you! It is of no use to scowl at me. I am your mistress. You have to do what I say.’

“She lay back on her pillows exhausted. Felicie picked up the tray and moved slowly away. Once she looked back over her shoulder, and the smouldering resentment in her eyes startled me.

“I was not there when Annette died. But it was terrible, it seems. She clung to life. She fought against death like a madwoman. Again and again she gasped out: ‘I will not die—do you hear me? I will not die. I will live—live —’

“Miss Slater told me all this when I came to see her six months later.

“ ‘My poor Raoul,’ she said kindly. ‘You loved her, did you not?’

“ ‘Always—always. But of what use could I be to her? Let us not talk of it. She is dead—she so brilliant, so full of burning life . . .’

“Miss Slater was a sympathetic woman. She went on to talk of other things. She was very worried about Felicie, so she told me. The girl had had a queer sort of nervous breakdown, and ever since she had been very strange in manner.

“ ‘You know,’ said Miss Slater, after a momentary hesitation, ‘that she is learning the piano?’

“I did not know it, and was very much surprised to hear it. Felicie—learning the piano! I would have declared the girl would not know one note from another.

“ ‘She has talent, they say,’ continued Miss Slater. ‘I can’t understand it. I have always put her down as—well, Raoul, you know yourself, she was always a stupid girl.’

“I nodded.

“ ‘She is so strange in her manner sometimes—I really don’t know what to make of it.’

“A few minutes later I entered the Salle de Lecture. Felicie was playing the piano. She was playing the air that I had heard Annette sing in Paris. You understand, Messieurs, it gave me quite a turn. And then, hearing me, she broke off suddenly and looked round at me, her eyes full of mockery and intelligence. For a moment I thought—Well, I will not tell you what I thought.

“ ‘Tiens!’ she said. ‘So it is you—Monsieur Raoul.’

“I cannot describe the way she said it. To Annette I had never ceased to be Raoul. But Felicie, since we had met as grown-ups, always addressed me as Monsieur Raoul. But the way she said it now was different—as though the Monsieur, slightly stressed, was somehow very amusing.

“ ‘Why, Felicie,’ I stammered. ‘You look quite different today.’

“ ‘Do I?’ she said reflectively. ‘It is odd, that. But do not be so solemn, Raoul—decidedly I shall call you Raoul—did we not play together as children?—Life was made for laughter. Let us talk of the poor Annette—she who is dead and buried. Is she in Purgatory, I wonder, or where?’

“And she hummed a snatch of song—untunefully enough, but the words caught my attention.

“ ‘Felicie,’ I cried. ‘You speak Italian?’

“ ‘Why not, Raoul? I am not as stupid as I pretend to be, perhaps.’ She laughed at my mystification.

“ ‘I don’t understand—’ I began.

“ ‘But I will tell you. I am a very fine actress, though no one suspects it. I can play many parts—and play them very well.’

“She laughed again and ran quickly out of the room before I could stop her.

“I saw her again before I left. She was asleep in an armchair. She was snoring heavily. I stood and watched her, fascinated, yet repelled. Suddenly she woke with a start. Her eyes, dull and lifeless, met mine.

“ ‘Monsieur Raoul,’ she muttered mechanically.

“ ‘Yes, Felicie, I am going now. Will you play to me again before I go?’

“ ‘I? Play? You are laughing at me, Monsieur Raoul.’

“ ‘Don’t you remember playing to me this morning?’

“She shook her head.

“ ‘I play? How can a poor girl like me play?’

“She paused for a minute as though in thought, then beckoned me nearer.

“ ‘Monsieur Raoul, there are strange things going on in this house! They play tricks upon you. They alter the clocks. Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. And it is all her doing.’

“ ‘Whose doing?’ I asked, startled.

“ ‘That Annette’s. That wicked one’s. When she was alive she always tormented me. Now that she is dead, she comes back from the dead to torment me.’

“I stared at Felicie. I could see now that she was in an extremity of terror, her eyes staring from her head.

“ ‘She is bad, that one. She is bad, I tell you. She would take the bread from your mouth, the clothes from your back, the soul from your body. . . .’

“She clutched me suddenly.

“ ‘I am afraid, I tell you—afraid. I hear her voice—not in my ear—no, not in my ear. Here, in my head—’ She tapped her forehead. ‘She will drive me away—drive me away altogether, and then what shall I do, what will become of me?’

“Her voice rose almost to a shriek. She had in her eyes the look of the terrified brute beast at bay. . . .

“Suddenly she smiled, a peasant smile, full of cunning, with something in it that made me shiver.

“ ‘If it should come to it, Monsieur Raoul, I am very strong with my hands—very strong with my hands.’

“I had never noticed her hands particularly before. I looked at them now and shuddered in spite of myself. Squat brutal fingers, and as Felicie had said, terribly strong . . . I cannot explain to you the nausea that swept over me. With hands such as these her father must have strangled her mother. . . .

“That was the last time I ever saw Felicie Bault. Immediately afterwards I went abroad—to South America. I returned from there two years after her death. Something I had read in the newspapers of her life and sudden death. I have heard fuller details tonight—from you—gentlemen! Felicie 3 and Felicie 4—I wonder? She was a good actress, you know!”

The train suddenly slackened speed. The man in the corner sat erect and buttoned his overcoat more closely.

“What is your theory?” asked the lawyer, leaning forward.

“I can hardly believe—” began Canon Parfitt, and stopped.

The doctor said nothing. He was gazing steadily at Raoul Lepardeau.

“The clothes from your back, the soul from your body,” quoted the Frenchman lightly. He stood up. “I say to you, Messieurs, that the history of Felicie Bault is the history of Annette Ravel. You did not know her, gentlemen. I did. She was very fond of life. . . .”

His hand on the door, ready to spring out, he turned suddenly and bending down tapped Canon Parfitt on the chest.

“M. le docteur over there, he said just now, that all this”—his hand smote the Canon’s stomach, and the Canon winced—“was only a residence. Tell me, if you find a burglar in your house what do you do? Shoot him, do you not?”

“No,” cried the Canon. “No, indeed—I mean—not in this country.”

But he spoke the last words to empty air. The carriage door banged.

The clergyman, the lawyer and the doctor were alone. The fourth corner was vacant.

Four

S.O.S.

“S.O.S.” was first published in Grand Magazine, February 1926.

Ah!” said Mr. Dinsmead appreciatively.

He stepped back and surveyed the round table with approval. The firelight gleamed on the coarse white tablecloth, the knives and forks, and the other table appointments.

“Is—is everything ready?” asked Mrs. Dinsmead hesitatingly. She was a little faded woman, with a colourless face, meagre hair scraped back from her forehead, and a perpetually nervous manner.

“Everything’s ready,” said her husband with a kind of ferocious geniality.

He was a big man, with stooping shoulders, and a broad red face. He had little pig’s eyes that twinkled under his bushy brows, and a big jowl devoid of hair.

“Lemonade?” suggested Mrs. Dinsmead, almost in a whisper.

Her husband shook his head.

“Tea. Much better in every way. Look at the weather, streaming and blowing. A nice cup of hot tea is what’s needed for supper on an evening like this.”

He winked facetiously, then fell to surveying the table again.

“A good dish of eggs, cold corned beef, and bread and cheese. That’s my order for supper. So come along and get it ready, Mother. Charlotte’s in the kitchen waiting to give you a hand.”

Mrs. Dinsmead rose, carefully winding up the ball of her knitting.

“She’s grown a very good-looking girl,” she murmured. “Sweetly pretty, I say.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Dinsmead. “The mortal image of her Ma! So go along with you, and don’t let’s waste any more time.”

He strolled about the room humming to himself for a minute or two. Once he approached the window and looked out.

“Wild weather,” he murmured to himself. “Not much likelihood of our having visitors tonight.”

Then he too left the room.

About ten minutes later Mrs. Dinsmead entered bearing a dish of fried eggs. Her two daughters followed, bringing in the rest of the provisions. Mr. Dinsmead and his son Johnnie brought up the rear. The former seated himself at the head of the table.

“And for what we are to receive, etcetera,” he remarked humorously. “And blessings on the man who first thought of tinned foods. What would we do, I should like to know, miles from anywhere, if we hadn’t a tin now and then to fall back upon when the butcher forgets his weekly call?”

He proceeded to carve corned beef dexterously.

“I wonder who ever thought of building a house like this, miles from anywhere,” said his daughter Magdalen pettishly. “We never see a soul.”

“No,” said her father. “Never a soul.”

“I can’t think what made you take it, Father,” said Charlotte.

“Can’t you, my girl? Well, I had my reasons—I had my reasons.”

His eyes sought his wife’s furtively, but she frowned.

“And haunted too,” said Charlotte. “I wouldn’t sleep alone here for anything.”

“Pack of nonsense,” said her father. “Never seen anything, have you? Come now.”

“Not seen anything perhaps, but—”

“But what?”

Charlotte did not reply, but she shivered a little. A great surge of rain came driving against the windowpane, and Mrs. Dinsmead dropped a spoon with a tinkle on the tray.

“Not nervous are you, Mother?” said Mr. Dinsmead. “It’s a wild night, that’s all. Don’t you worry, we’re safe here by our fireside, and not a soul from outside likely to disturb us. Why, it would be a miracle if anyone did. And miracles don’t happen. No,” he added as though to himself, with a kind of peculiar satisfaction. “Miracles don’t happen.”

As the words left his lips there came a sudden knocking at the door. Mr. Dinsmead stayed as though petrified.

“Whatever’s that?” he muttered. His jaw fell.

Mrs. Dinsmead gave a little whimpering cry and pulled her shawl up round her. The colour came into Magdalen’s face and she leant forward and spoke to her father.

“The miracle has happened,” she said. “You’d better go and let whoever it is in.”

Twenty minutes earlier Mortimer Cleveland had stood in the driving rain and mist surveying his car. It was really cursed bad luck. Two punctures within ten minutes of each other, and here he was, stranded miles from anywhere, in the midst of these bare Wiltshire downs with night coming on, and no prospect of shelter. Serve him right for trying to take a shortcut. If

only he had stuck to the main road! Now he was lost on what seemed a mere cart track, and no idea if there were even a village anywhere near.

He looked round him perplexedly, and his eye was caught by a gleam of light on the hillside above him. A second later the mist obscured it once more, but, waiting patiently, he presently got a second glimpse of it. After a moment's cogitation, he left the car and struck up the side of the hill.

Soon he was out of the mist, and he recognized the light as shining from the lighted window of a small cottage. Here, at any rate, was shelter. Mortimer Cleveland quickened his pace, bending his head to meet the furious onslaught of wind and rain which seemed to be trying its best to drive him back.

Cleveland was in his own way something of a celebrity though doubtless the majority of folks would have displayed complete ignorance of his name and achievements. He was an authority on mental science and had written two excellent textbooks on the subconscious. He was also a member of the Psychical Research Society and a student of the occult insofar as it affected his own conclusions and line of research.

He was by nature peculiarly susceptible to atmosphere, and by deliberate training he had increased his own natural gift. When he had at last reached the cottage and rapped at the door, he was conscious of an excitement, a quickening of interest, as though all his faculties had suddenly been sharpened.

The murmur of voices within had been plainly audible to him. Upon his knock there came a sudden silence, then the sound of a chair being pushed back along the floor. In another minute the door was flung open by a boy of about fifteen. Cleveland looked straight over his shoulder upon the scene within.

It reminded him of an interior by some Dutch Master. A round table spread for a meal, a family party sitting round it, one or two flickering candles and the firelight's glow over all. The father, a big man, sat one side of the table, a little grey woman with a frightened face sat opposite him. Facing the door,

looking straight at Cleveland, was a girl. Her startled eyes looked straight into his, her hand with a cup in it was arrested halfway to her lips.

She was, Cleveland saw at once, a beautiful girl of an extremely uncommon type. Her hair, red gold, stood out round her face like a mist, her eyes, very far apart, were a pure grey. She had the mouth and chin of an early Italian Madonna.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Cleveland stepped into the room and explained his predicament. He brought his trite story to a close, and there was another pause harder to understand. At last, as though with an effort, the father rose.

"Come in, sir—Mr. Cleveland, did you say?"

"That is my name," said Mortimer, smiling.

"Ah! yes. Come in, Mr. Cleveland. Not weather for a dog outside, is it? Come in by the fire. Shut the door, can't you, Johnnie? Don't stand there half the night."

Cleveland came forward and sat on a wooden stool by the fire. The boy Johnnie shut the door.

"Dinsmead, that's my name," said the other man. He was all geniality now. "This is the Missus, and these are my two daughters, Charlotte and Magdalen."

For the first time, Cleveland saw the face of the girl who had been sitting with her back to him, and saw that, in a totally different way, she was quite as beautiful as her sister. Very dark, with a face of marble pallor, a delicate aquiline nose, and a grave mouth. It was a kind of frozen beauty, austere and almost forbidding. She acknowledged her father's introduction by bending her head, and she looked at him with an intent gaze that was searching in character. It was as though she were summing him up, weighing him in the balance of her young judgement.

"A drop of something to drink, eh, Mr. Cleveland?"

“Thank you,” said Mortimer. “A cup of tea will meet the case admirably.”

Mr. Dinsmead hesitated a minute, then he picked up the five cups, one after another, from the table and emptied them into a slop bowl.

“This tea’s cold,” he said brusquely. “Make us some more will you, Mother?”

Mrs. Dinsmead got up quickly and hurried off with the teapot. Mortimer had an idea that she was glad to get out of the room.

The fresh tea soon came, and the unexpected guest was plied with viands.

Mr. Dinsmead talked and talked. He was expansive, genial, loquacious. He told the stranger all about himself. He’d lately retired from the building trade—yes, made quite a good thing of it. He and the Missus thought they’d like a bit of country air—never lived in the country before. Wrong time of year to choose, of course, October and November, but they didn’t want to wait. “Life’s uncertain, you know, sir.” So they had taken this cottage. Eight miles from anywhere, and nineteen miles from anything you could call a town. No, they didn’t complain. The girls found it a bit dull, but he and mother enjoyed the quiet.

So he talked on, leaving Mortimer almost hypnotized by the easy flow. Nothing here, surely, but rather commonplace domesticity. And yet, at that first glimpse of the interior, he had diagnosed something else, some tension, some strain, emanating from one of those five people—he didn’t know which. Mere foolishness, his nerves were all awry! They were all startled by his sudden appearance—that was all.

He broached the question of a night’s lodging, and was met with a ready response.

“You’ll have to stop with us, Mr. Cleveland. Nothing else for miles around. We can give you a bedroom, and though my pyjamas may be a bit roomy, why, they’re better than nothing, and your own clothes will be dry by morning.”

“It’s very good of you.”

“Not at all,” said the other genially. “As I said just now, one couldn’t turn away a dog on a night like this. Magdalen, Charlotte, go up and see to the room.”

The two girls left the room. Presently Mortimer heard them moving about overhead.

“I can quite understand that two attractive young ladies like your daughters might find it dull here,” said Cleveland.

“Good-lookers, aren’t they?” said Mr. Dinsmead with fatherly pride. “Not much like their mother or myself. We’re a homely pair, but much attached to each other. I’ll tell you that, Mr. Cleveland. Eh, Maggie, isn’t that so?”

Mrs. Dinsmead smiled primly. She had started knitting again. The needles clicked busily. She was a fast knitter.

Presently the room was announced ready, and Mortimer, expressing thanks once more, declared his intention of turning in.

“Did you put a hot-water bottle in the bed?” demanded Mrs. Dinsmead, suddenly mindful of her house pride.

“Yes, Mother, two.”

“That’s right,” said Dinsmead. “Go up with him, girls, and see that there’s nothing else he wants.”

Magdalen went over to the window and saw that the fastenings were secure. Charlotte cast a final eye over the washstand appointments. Then they both lingered by the door.

“Good night, Mr. Cleveland. You are sure there is everything?”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Magdalen. I am ashamed to have given you both so much trouble. Good night.”

“Good night.”

They went out, shutting the door behind them. Mortimer Cleveland was alone. He undressed slowly and thoughtfully. When he had donned Mr. Dinsmead’s pink pyjamas he gathered up his own wet clothes and put them outside the door as his host had bade him. From downstairs he could hear the rumble of Dinsmead’s voice.

What a talker the man was! Altogether an odd personality—but indeed there was something odd about the whole family, or was it his imagination?

He went slowly back into his room and shut the door. He stood by the bed lost in thought. And then he started—

The mahogany table by the bed was smothered in dust. Written in the dust were three letters, clearly visible, SOS.

Mortimer stared as if he could hardly believe his eyes. It was confirmation of all his vague surmises and forebodings. He was right, then. Something was wrong in this house.

SOS. A call for help. But whose finger had written it in the dust? Magdalen’s or Charlotte’s? They had both stood there, he remembered, for a moment or two, before going out of the room. Whose hand had secretly dropped to the table and traced out those three letters?

The faces of the two girls came up before him. Magdalen’s, dark and aloof, and Charlotte’s, as he had seen it first, wide-eyed, startled, with an unfathomable something in her glance. . . .

He went again to the door and opened it. The boom of Mr. Dinsmead’s voice was no longer to be heard. The house was silent.

He thought to himself.

“I can do nothing tonight. Tomorrow—well. We shall see.”

Cleveland woke early. He went down through the living room, and out into the garden. The morning was fresh and beautiful after the rain. Someone

else was up early, too. At the bottom of the garden, Charlotte was leaning on the fence staring out over the Downs. His pulse quickened a little as he went down to join her. All along he had been secretly convinced that it was Charlotte who had written the message. As he came up to her, she turned and wished him “Good morning.” Her eyes were direct and childlike, with no hint of a secret understanding in them.

“A very good morning,” said Mortimer, smiling. “The weather this morning is a contrast to last night.”

“It is indeed.”

Mortimer broke off a twig from a tree near by. With it he began idly to draw on the smooth, sandy patch at his feet. He traced an S, then an O, then an S, watching the girl narrowly as he did so. But again he could detect no gleam of comprehension.

“Do you know what these letters represent?” he said abruptly.

Charlotte frowned a little. “Aren’t they what boats—liners, send out when they are in distress?” she asked.

Mortimer nodded. “Someone wrote that on the table by my bed last night,” he said quietly. “I thought perhaps you might have done so.”

She looked at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

“I? Oh, no.”

He was wrong then. A sharp pang of disappointment shot through him. He had been so sure—so sure. It was not often that his intuitions led him astray.

“You are quite certain?” he persisted.

“Oh, yes.”

They turned and went slowly together toward the house. Charlotte seemed preoccupied about something. She replied at random to the few observations he made. Suddenly she burst out in a low, hurried voice:

“It—it’s odd your asking about those letters, SOS. I didn’t write them, of course, but—I so easily might have done.”

He stopped and looked at her, and she went on quickly:

“It sounds silly, I know, but I have been so frightened, so dreadfully frightened, and when you came in last night, it seemed like an—an answer to something.”

“What are you frightened of?” he asked quickly.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“I think—it’s the house. Ever since we came here it has been growing and growing. Everyone seems different somehow. Father, Mother, and Magdalen, they all seem different.”

Mortimer did not speak at once, and before he could do so, Charlotte went on again.

“You know this house is supposed to be haunted?”

“What?” All his interest was quickened.

“Yes, a man murdered his wife in it, oh, some years ago now. We only found out about it after we got here. Father says ghosts are all nonsense, but I—don’t know.”

Mortimer was thinking rapidly.

“Tell me,” he said in a businesslike tone, “was this murder committed in the room I had last night?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” said Charlotte.

“I wonder now,” said Mortimer half to himself, “yes, that may be it.”

Charlotte looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“Miss Dinsmead,” said Mortimer, gently, “have you ever had any reason to believe that you are mediumistic?”

She stared at him.

“I think you know that you did write SOS last night,” he said quietly. “Oh! quite unconsciously, of course. A crime stains the atmosphere, so to speak. A sensitive mind such as yours might be acted upon in such a manner. You have been reproducing the sensations and impressions of the victim. Many years ago she may have written SOS on that table, and you unconsciously reproduced her act last night.”

Charlotte’s face brightened.

“I see,” she said. “You think that is the explanation?”

A voice called her from the house, and she went in leaving Mortimer to pace up and down the garden path. Was he satisfied with his own explanation? Did it cover the facts as he knew them? Did it account for the tension he had felt on entering the house last night?

Perhaps, and yet he still had the odd feeling that his sudden appearance had produced something very like consternation, he thought to himself:

“I must not be carried away by the psychic explanation, it might account for Charlotte—but not for the others. My coming has upset them horribly, all except Johnnie. What ever it is that’s the matter, Johnnie is out of it.”

He was quite sure of that, strange that he should be so positive, but there it was.

At that minute, Johnnie himself came out of the cottage and approached the guest.

“Breakfast’s ready,” he said awkwardly. “Will you come in?”

Mortimer noticed that the lad's fingers were much stained. Johnnie felt his glance and laughed ruefully.

"I'm always messing about with chemicals, you know," he said. "It makes Dad awfully wild sometimes. He wants me to go into building, but I want to do chemistry and research work."

Mr. Dinsmead appeared at the window ahead of them, broad, jovial, smiling, and at sight of him all Mortimer's distrust and antagonism reawakened. Mrs. Dinsmead was already seated at the table. She wished him "Good morning" in her colourless voice, and he had again the impression that for some reason or other, she was afraid of him.

Magdalen came in last. She gave him a brief nod and took her seat opposite him.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked abruptly. "Was your bed comfortable?"

She looked at him very earnestly, and when he replied courteously in the affirmative he noticed something very like a flicker of disappointment pass over her face. What had she expected him to say, he wondered?

He turned to his host.

"This lad of yours is interested in chemistry, it seems?" he said pleasantly.

There was a crash. Mrs. Dinsmead had dropped her teacup.

"Now then, Maggie, now then," said her husband.

It seemed to Mortimer that there was admonition, warning, in his voice. He turned to his guest and spoke fluently of the advantages of the building trade, and of not letting young boys get above themselves.

After breakfast, he went out in the garden by himself, and smoked. The time was clearly at hand when he must leave the cottage. A night's shelter was one thing, to prolong it was difficult without an excuse, and what possible excuse could he offer? And yet he was singularly loath to depart.

Turning the thing over and over in his mind, he took a path that led round the other side of the house. His shoes were soled with crepe rubber, and made little or no noise. He was passing the kitchen window, when he heard Dinsmead's words from within, and the words attracted his attention immediately.

"It's a fair lump of money, it is."

Mrs. Dinsmead's voice answered. It was too faint in tone for Mortimer to hear the words, but Dinsmead replied:

"Nigh on £60,000, the lawyer said."

Mortimer had no intention of eavesdropping, but he retraced his steps very thoughtfully. The mention of money seemed to crystallize the situation. Somewhere or other there was a question of £60,000—it made the thing clearer—and uglier.

Magdalen came out of the house, but her father's voice called her almost immediately, and she went in again. Presently Dinsmead himself joined his guest.

"Rare good morning," he said genially. "I hope your car will be none the worse."

"Wants to find out when I'm going," thought Mortimer to himself.

Aloud he thanked Mr. Dinsmead once more for his timely hospitality.

"Not at all, not at all," said the other.

Magdalen and Charlotte came together out of the house, and strolled arm in arm to a rustic seat some little distance away. The dark head and the golden one made a pleasant contrast together, and on an impulse Mortimer said:

"Your daughters are very unlike, Mr. Dinsmead."

The other who was just lighting his pipe gave a sharp jerk of the wrist, and dropped the match.

“Do you think so?” he asked. “Yes, well, I suppose they are.”

Mortimer had a flash of intuition.

“But of course they are not both your daughters,” he said smoothly.

He saw Dinsmead look at him, hesitate for a moment, and then make up his mind.

“That’s very clever of you, sir,” he said. “No, one of them is a foundling, we took her in as a baby and we have brought her up as our own. She herself has not the least idea of the truth, but she’ll have to know soon.” He sighed.

“A question of inheritance?” suggested Mortimer quietly.

The other flashed a suspicious look at him.

Then he seemed to decide that frankness was best; his manner became almost aggressively frank and open.

“It’s odd that you should say that, sir.”

“A case of telepathy, eh?” said Mortimer, and smiled.

“It is like this, sir. We took her in to oblige the mother—for a consideration, as at the time I was just starting in the building trade. A few months ago I noticed an advertisement in the papers, and it seemed to me that the child in question must be our Magdalen. I went to see the lawyers, and there has been a lot of talk one way and another. They were suspicious—naturally, as you might say, but everything is cleared up now. I am taking the girl herself to London next week, she doesn’t know anything about it so far. Her father, it seems, was one of these rich Jewish gentlemen. He only learnt of the child’s existence a few months before his death. He set agents on to try and trace her, and left all his money to her when she should be found.”

Mortimer listened with close attention. He had no reason to doubt Mr. Dinsmead’s story. It explained Magdalen’s dark beauty; explained too,

perhaps, her aloof manner. Nevertheless, though the story itself might be true, something lay behind it undivulged.

But Mortimer had no intention of rousing the other's suspicions. Instead, he must go out of his way to allay them.

"A very interesting story, Mr. Dinsmead," he said. "I congratulate Miss Magdalen. An heiress and a beauty, she has a great time ahead of her."

"She has that," agreed her father warmly, "and she's a rare good girl too, Mr. Cleveland."

There was every evidence of hearty warmth in his manner.

"Well," said Mortimer, "I must be pushing along now, I suppose. I have got to thank you once more, Mr. Dinsmead, for your singularly well-timed hospitality."

Accompanied by his host, he went into the house to bid farewell to Mrs. Dinsmead. She was standing by the window with her back to them, and did not hear them enter. At her husband's jovial: "Here's Mr. Cleveland come to say good-bye," she started nervously and swung round, dropping something which she held in her hand. Mortimer picked it up for her. It was a miniature of Charlotte done in the style of some twenty-five years ago. Mortimer repeated to her the thanks he had already proffered to her husband. He noticed again her look of fear and the furtive glances that she shot at him from beneath her eyelids.

The two girls were not in evidence, but it was not part of Mortimer's policy to seem anxious to see them; also he had his own idea, which was shortly to prove correct.

He had gone about half a mile from the house on his way down to where he had left the car the night before, when the bushes on the side of the path were thrust aside, and Magdalen came out on the track ahead of him.

"I had to see you," she said.

“I expected you,” said Mortimer. “It was you who wrote SOS on the table in my room last night, wasn’t it?”

Magdalen nodded.

“Why?” asked Mortimer gently.

The girl turned aside and began pulling off leaves from a bush.

“I don’t know,” she said, “honestly, I don’t know.”

“Tell me,” said Mortimer.

Magdalen drew a deep breath.

“I am a practical person,” she said, “not the kind of person who imagines things or fancies them. You, I know, believe in ghosts and spirits. I don’t, and when I tell you that there is something very wrong in that house,” she pointed up the hill, “I mean that there is something tangibly wrong; it’s not just an echo of the past. It has been coming on ever since we’ve been there. Every day it grows worse, Father is different, Mother is different, Charlotte is different.”

Mortimer interposed. “Is Johnnie different?” he asked.

Magdalen looked at him, a dawning appreciation in her eyes. “No,” she said, “now I come to think of it. Johnnie is not different. He is the only one who’s—who’s untouched by it all. He was untouched last night at tea.”

“And you?” asked Mortimer.

“I was afraid—horribly afraid, just like a child—without knowing what it was I was afraid of. And father was—queer, there’s no other word for it, queer. He talked about miracles and then I prayed—actually prayed for a miracle, and you knocked on the door.”

She stopped abruptly, staring at him.

“I seem mad to you, I suppose,” she said defiantly.

“No,” said Mortimer, “on the contrary you seem extremely sane. All sane people have a premonition of danger if it is near them.”

“You don’t understand,” said Magdalen. “I was not afraid—for myself.”

“For whom, then?”

But again Magdalen shook her head in a puzzled fashion. “I don’t know.”

She went on:

“I wrote SOS on an impulse. I had an idea—absurd, no doubt, that they would not let me speak to you—the rest of them, I mean. I don’t know what it was I meant to ask you to do. I don’t know now.”

“Never mind,” said Mortimer. “I shall do it.”

“What can you do?”

Mortimer smiled a little.

“I can think.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“Yes,” said Mortimer, “a lot can be done that way, more than you would ever believe. Tell me, was there any chance word or phrase that attracted your attention just before the meal last evening?”

Magdalen frowned. “I don’t think so,” she said. “At least I heard Father say something to Mother about Charlotte being the living image of her, and he laughed in a very queer way, but—there’s nothing odd in that, is there?”

“No,” said Mortimer slowly, “except that Charlotte is not like your mother.”

He remained lost in thought for a minute or two, then looked up to find Magdalen watching him uncertainly.

“Go home, child,” he said, “and don’t worry; leave it in my hands.”

She went obediently up the path towards the cottage. Mortimer strolled on a little further, then threw himself down on the green turf. He closed his eyes, detached himself from conscious thought or effort, and let a series of pictures flit at will across his mind.

Johnnie! He always came back to Johnnie. Johnnie, completely innocent, utterly free from all the network of suspicion and intrigue, but nevertheless the pivot round which everything turned. He remembered the crash of Mrs. Dinsmead's cup on her saucer at breakfast that morning. What had caused her agitation? A chance reference on his part to the lad's fondness for chemicals? At the moment he had not been conscious of Mr. Dinsmead, but he saw him now clearly, as he sat, his teacup poised halfway to his lips.

That took him back to Charlotte, as he had seen her when the door opened last night. She had sat staring at him over the rim of her teacup. And swiftly on that followed another memory. Mr. Dinsmead emptying teacups one after the other, and saying "this tea is cold."

He remembered the steam that went up. Surely the tea had not been so very cold after all?

Something began to stir in his brain. A memory of something read not so very long ago, within a month perhaps. Some account of a whole family poisoned by a lad's carelessness. A packet of arsenic left in the larder had all dripped through on the bread below. He had read it in the paper. Probably Mr. Dinsmead had read it too.

Things began to grow clearer. . . .

Half an hour later, Mortimer Cleveland rose briskly to his feet.

It was evening once more in the cottage. The eggs were poached tonight and there was a tin of brawn. Presently Mrs. Dinsmead came in from the kitchen bearing the big teapot. The family took their places round the table.

"A contrast to last night's weather," said Mrs. Dinsmead, glancing towards the window.

“Yes,” said Mr. Dinsmead, “it’s so still tonight that you could hear a pin drop. Now then, Mother, pour out, will you?”

Mrs. Dinsmead filled the cups and handed them round the table. Then, as she put the teapot down, she gave a sudden little cry and pressed her hand to her heart. Mr. Dinsmead swung round his chair, following the direction of her terrified eyes. Mortimer Cleveland was standing in the doorway.

He came forward. His manner was pleasant and apologetic.

“I’m afraid I startled you,” he said. “I had to come back for something.”

“Back for something,” cried Mr. Dinsmead. His face was purple, his veins swelling. “Back for what, I should like to know?”

“Some tea,” said Mortimer.

With a swift gesture he took something from his pocket, and, taking up one of the teacups from the table, emptied some of its contents into a little test tube he held in his left hand.

“What—what are you doing?” gasped Mr. Dinsmead. His face had gone chalky-white, the purple dying out as if by magic. Mrs. Dinsmead gave a thin, high, frightened cry.

“You read the papers, I think, Mr. Dinsmead? I am sure you do. Sometimes one reads accounts of a whole family being poisoned, some of them recover, some do not. In this case, one would not. The first explanation would be the tinned brawn you were eating, but supposing the doctor to be a suspicious man, not easily taken in by the tinned food theory? There is a packet of arsenic in your larder. On the shelf below it is a packet of tea. There is a convenient hole in the top shelf, what more natural to suppose then that the arsenic found its way into the tea by accident? Your son Johnnie might be blamed for carelessness, nothing more.”

“I—I don’t know what you mean,” gasped Dinsmead.

“I think you do,” Mortimer took up a second teacup and filled a second test tube. He fixed a red label to one and a blue label to the other.

“The red-labelled one,” he said, “contains tea from your daughter Charlotte’s cup, the other from your daughter Magdalen’s. I am prepared to swear that in the first I shall find four or five times the amount of arsenic than in the latter.”

“You are mad,” said Dinsmead.

“Oh! dear me, no. I am nothing of the kind. You told me today, Mr. Dinsmead, that Magdalen is your daughter. Charlotte was the child you adopted, the child who was so like her mother that when I held a miniature of that mother in my hand today I mistook it for one of Charlotte herself. Your own daughter was to inherit the fortune, and since it might be impossible to keep your supposed daughter Charlotte out of sight, and someone who knew the mother might have realized the truth of the resemblance, you decided on, well—a pinch of white arsenic at the bottom of a teacup.”

Mrs. Dinsmead gave a sudden high cackle, rocking herself to and fro in violent hysterics.

“Tea,” she squeaked, “that’s what he said, tea, not lemonade.”

“Hold your tongue, can’t you?” roared her husband wrathfully.

Mortimer saw Charlotte looking at him, wide-eyed, wondering, across the table. Then he felt a hand on his arm, and Magdalen dragged him out of earshot.

“Those,” she pointed at the phials—“Daddy. You won’t—”

Mortimer laid his hand on her shoulder. “My child,” he said, “you don’t believe in the past. I do. I believe in the atmosphere of this house. If he had not come to it, perhaps—I say perhaps—your father might not have conceived the plan he did. I keep these two test tubes to safeguard Charlotte

now and in the future. Apart from that, I shall do nothing, in gratitude, if you will, to that hand that wrote SOS.”

Five

WIRELESS

“Wireless” was first published in the Sunday Chronicle Annual 1925, September 1925.

Above all, avoid worry and excitement,” said Dr. Meynell, in the comfortable fashion affected by doctors.

Mrs. Harter, as is often the case with people hearing these soothing but meaningless words, seemed more doubtful than relieved.

“There is a certain cardiac weakness,” continued the doctor fluently, “but nothing to be alarmed about. I can assure you of that.

“All the same,” he added, “it might be as well to have a lift installed. Eh? What about it?”

Mrs. Harter looked worried.

Dr. Meynell, on the contrary, looked pleased with himself. The reason he liked attending rich patients rather than poor ones was that he could exercise his active imagination in prescribing for their ailments.

“Yes, a lift,” said Dr. Meynell, trying to think of something else even more dashing—and failing. “Then we shall avoid all undue exertion. Daily exercise on the level on a fine day, but avoid walking up hills. And above all,” he added happily, “plenty of distraction for the mind. Don’t dwell on your health.”

To the old lady’s nephew, Charles Ridgeway, the doctor was slightly more explicit.

“Do not misunderstand me,” he said. “Your aunt may live for years, probably will. At the same time shock or overexertion might carry her off

like that!" He snapped his fingers. "She must lead a very quiet life. No exertion. No fatigue. But, of course, she must not be allowed to brood. She must be kept cheerful and the mind well distracted."

"Distracted," said Charles Ridgeway thoughtfully.

Charles was a thoughtful young man. He was also a young man who believed in furthering his own inclinations whenever possible.

That evening he suggested the installation of a wireless set.

Mrs. Harter, already seriously upset at the thought of the lift, was disturbed and unwilling. Charles was fluent and persuasive.

"I do not know that I care for these newfangled things," said Mrs. Harter piteously. "The waves, you know—the electric waves. They might affect me."

Charles in a superior and kindly fashion pointed out the futility of this idea.

Mrs. Harter, whose knowledge of the subject was of the vaguest, but who was tenacious of her own opinion, remained unconvinced.

"All that electricity," she murmured timorously. "You may say what you like, Charles, but some people are affected by electricity. I always have a terrible headache before a thunderstorm. I know that."

She nodded her head triumphantly.

Charles was a patient young man. He was also persistent.

"My dear Aunt Mary," he said, "let me make the thing clear to you."

He was something of an authority on the subject. He delivered now quite a lecture on the theme; warming to his task, he spoke of bright-emitter valves, of dull-emitter valves, of high frequency and low frequency, of amplification and of condensers.

Mrs. Harter, submerged in a sea of words that she did not understand, surrendered.

“Of course, Charles,” she murmured, “if you really think—”

“My dear Aunt Mary,” said Charles enthusiastically. “It is the very thing for you, to keep you from moping and all that.”

The lift prescribed by Dr. Meynell was installed shortly afterwards and was very nearly the death of Mrs. Harter since, like many other old ladies, she had a rooted objection to strange men in the house. She suspected them one and all of having designs on her old silver.

After the lift the wireless set arrived. Mrs. Harter was left to contemplate the, to her, repellent object—a large ungainly-looking box, studded with knobs.

It took all Charles’ enthusiasm to reconcile her to it.

Charles was in his element, he turned knobs, discoursing eloquently the while.

Mrs. Harter sat in her high-backed chair, patient and polite, with a rooted conviction in her own mind that these new fangled notions were neither more nor less than unmitigated nuisances.

“Listen, Aunt Mary, we are on to Berlin, isn’t that splendid? Can you hear the fellow?”

“I can’t hear anything except a good deal of buzzing and clicking,” said Mrs. Harter.

Charles continued to twirl knobs. “Brussels,” he announced with enthusiasm.

“Is it really?” said Mrs. Harter with no more than a trace of interest.

Charles again turned knobs and an unearthly howl echoed forth into the room.

“Now we seem to be on to the Dogs’ Home,” said Mrs. Harter, who was an old lady with a certain amount of spirit.

“Ha, ha!” said Charles, “you will have your joke, won’t you, Aunt Mary? Very good that!”

Mrs. Harter could not help smiling at him. She was very fond of Charles. For some years a niece, Miriam Harter, had lived with her. She had intended to make the girl her heiress, but Miriam had not been a success. She was impatient and obviously bored by her aunt’s society. She was always out, “gadding about” as Mrs. Harter called it. In the end, she had entangled herself with a young man of whom her aunt thoroughly disapproved. Miriam had been returned to her mother with a curt note much as if she had been goods on approval. She had married the young man in question and Mrs. Harter usually sent her a handkerchief case or a table centre at Christmas.

Having found nieces disappointing, Mrs. Harter turned her attention to nephews. Charles, from the first, had been an unqualified success. He was always pleasantly deferential to his aunt, and listened with an appearance of intense interest to the reminiscences of her youth. In this he was a great contrast to Miriam, who had been frankly bored and showed it. Charles was never bored, he was always good-tempered, always gay. He told his aunt many times a day that she was a perfectly marvellous old lady.

Highly satisfied with her new acquisition, Mrs. Harter had written to her lawyer with instructions as to the making of a new will. This was sent to her, duly approved by her and signed.

And now even in the matter of the wireless, Charles was soon proved to have won fresh laurels.

Mrs. Harter, at first antagonistic, became tolerant and finally fascinated. She enjoyed it very much better when Charles went out. The trouble with Charles was that he could not leave the thing alone. Mrs. Harter would be seated in her chair comfortably listening to a symphony concert or a lecture on Lucrezia Borgia or Pond Life, quite happy and at peace with the world. Not so Charles. The harmony would be shattered by discordant shrieks

while he enthusiastically attempted to get foreign stations. But on those evenings when Charles was dining out with friends Mrs. Harter enjoyed the wireless very much indeed. She would turn on two switches, sit in her high-backed chair and enjoy the programme of the evening.

It was about three months after the wireless had been installed that the first eerie happening occurred. Charles was absent at a bridge party.

The programme for that evening was a ballad concert. A well-known soprano was singing “Annie Laurie,” and in the middle of “Annie Laurie” a strange thing happened. There was a sudden break, the music ceased for a moment, the buzzing, clicking noise continued and then that too died away. There was dead silence, and then very faintly a low buzzing sound was heard.

Mrs. Harter got the impression, why she did not know, that the machine was tuned into somewhere very far away, and then clearly and distinctly a voice spoke, a man’s voice with a faint Irish accent.

“Mary—can you hear me, Mary? It is Patrick speaking . . . I am coming for you soon. You will be ready, won’t you, Mary?”

Then, almost immediately, the strains of “Annie Laurie” once more filled the room. Mrs. Harter sat rigid in her chair, her hands clenched on each arm of it. Had she been dreaming? Patrick! Patrick’s voice! Patrick’s voice in this very room, speaking to her. No, it must be a dream, a hallucination perhaps. She must just have dropped off to sleep for a minute or two. A curious thing to have dreamed—that her dead husband’s voice should speak to her over the ether. It frightened her just a little. What were the words he had said?

“I was coming for you soon, Mary. You will be ready, won’t you?”

Was it, could it be a premonition? Cardiac weakness. Her heart. After all, she was getting on in years.

“It’s a warning—that’s what it is,” said Mrs. Harter, rising slowly and painfully from her chair, and added characteristically:

“All that money wasted on putting in a lift!”

She said nothing of her experience to anyone, but for the next day or two she was thoughtful and a little preoccupied.

And then came the second occasion. Again she was alone in the room. The wireless, which had been playing an orchestral selection, died away with the same suddenness as before. Again there was silence, the sense of distance, and finally Patrick’s voice not as it had been in life—but a voice rarefied, far away, with a strange unearthly quality. Patrick speaking to you, Mary, I will be coming for you very soon now. . . .”

Then click, buzz, and the orchestral selection was in full swing again.

Mrs. Harter glanced at the clock. No, she had not been asleep this time. Awake and in full possession of her faculties, she had heard Patrick’s voice speaking. It was no hallucination, she was sure of that. In a confused way she tried to think over all that Charles had explained to her of the theory of ether waves.

Could it be Patrick had really spoken to her? That his actual voice had been wafted through space? There were missing wave lengths or something of that kind. She remembered Charles speaking of “gaps in the scale.” Perhaps the missing waves explained all the so-called psychological phenomena? No, there was nothing inherently impossible in the idea. Patrick had spoken to her. He had availed himself of modern science to prepare her for what must soon be coming.

Mrs. Harter rang the bell for her maid, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was a tall gaunt woman of sixty. Beneath an unbending exterior she concealed a wealth of affection and tenderness for her mistress.

“Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Harter when her faithful retainer had appeared, “you remember what I told you? The top left-hand drawer of my bureau. It is locked, the long key with the white label. Everything is there ready.”

“Ready, ma’am?”

“For my burial,” snorted Mrs. Harter. “You know perfectly well what I mean, Elizabeth. You helped me to put the things there yourself.”

Elizabeth’s face began to work strangely.

“Oh, ma’am,” she wailed, “don’t dwell on such things. I thought you was a sight better.”

“We have all got to go sometime or another,” said Mrs. Harter practically. “I am over my three score years and ten, Elizabeth. There, there, don’t make a fool of yourself. If you must cry, go and cry somewhere else.”

Elizabeth retired, still sniffing.

Mrs. Harter looked after her with a good deal of affection.

“Silly old fool, but faithful,” she said, “very faithful. Let me see, was it a hundred pounds or only fifty I left her? It ought to be a hundred. She has been with me a long time.”

The point worried the old lady and the next day she sat down and wrote to her lawyer asking if he would send her will so that she might look over it. It was that same day that Charles startled her by something he said at lunch.

“By the way, Aunt Mary,” he said, “who is that funny old josser up in the spare room? The picture over the mantelpiece, I mean. The old johnny with the beaver and side whiskers?”

Mrs. Harter looked at him austere.

“That is your Uncle Patrick as a young man,” she said.

“Oh, I say, Aunt Mary, I am awfully sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Mrs. Harter accepted the apology with a dignified bend of the head.

Charles went on rather uncertainly:

“I just wondered. You see—”

He stopped undecidedly and Mrs. Harter said sharply:

“Well? What were you going to say?”

“Nothing,” said Charles hastily. “Nothing that makes sense, I mean.”

For the moment the old lady said nothing more, but later that day, when they were alone together, she returned to the subject.

“I wish you would tell me, Charles, what it was made you ask me about that picture of your uncle.”

Charles looked embarrassed.

“I told you, Aunt Mary. It was nothing but a silly fancy of mine—quite absurd.”

“Charles,” said Mrs. Harter in her most autocratic voice, “I insist upon knowing.”

“Well, my dear aunt, if you will have it, I fancied I saw him—the man in the picture, I mean—looking out of the end window when I was coming up the drive last night. Some effect of the light, I suppose. I wondered who on earth he could be, the face was so—early Victorian, if you know what I mean. And then Elizabeth said there was no one, no visitor or stranger in the house, and later in the evening I happened to drift into the spare room, and there was the picture over the mantelpiece. My man to the life! It is quite easily explained, really, I expect. Subconscious and all that. Must have noticed the picture before without realizing that I had noticed it, and then just fancied the face at the window.”

“The end window?” said Mrs. Harter sharply.

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing,” said Mrs. Harter.

But she was startled all the same. That room had been her husband’s dressing room.

That same evening, Charles again being absent, Mrs. Harter sat listening to the wireless with feverish impatience. If for the third time she heard the mysterious voice, it would prove to her finally and without a shadow of doubt that she was really in communication with some other world.

Although her heart beat faster, she was not surprised when the same break occurred, and after the usual interval of deathly silence the faint faraway Irish voice spoke once more.

“Mary—you are prepared now . . . On Friday I shall come for you . . . Friday at half past nine . . . Do not be afraid—there will be no pain . . . Be ready. . . .”

Then almost cutting short the last word, the music of the orchestra broke out again, clamorous and discordant.

Mrs. Harter sat very still for a minute or two. Her face had gone white and she looked blue and pinched round the lips.

Presently she got up and sat down at her writing desk. In a somewhat shaky hand she wrote the following lines:

Tonight, at 9:15, I have distinctly heard the voice of my dead husband. He told me that he would come for me on Friday night at 9:30. If I should die on that day and at that hour I should like the facts made known so as to prove beyond question the possibility of communicating with the spirit world.

Mary Harter.

Mrs. Harter read over what she had written, enclosed it in an envelope and addressed the envelope. Then she rang the bell which was promptly answered by Elizabeth. Mrs. Harter got up from her desk and gave the note she had just written to the old woman.

“Elizabeth,” she said, “if I should die on Friday night I should like that note given to Dr. Meynell. No,”—as Elizabeth appeared to be about to protest

—“do not argue with me. You have often told me you believe in premonitions. I have a premonition now. There is one thing more. I have left you in my will £50. I should like you to have £100. If I am not able to go to the bank myself before I die Mr. Charles will see to it.”

As before, Mrs. Harter cut short Elizabeth’s tearful protests. In pursuance of her determination, the old lady spoke to her nephew on the subject the following morning.

“Remember, Charles, that if anything should happen to me, Elizabeth is to have an extra £50.”

“You are very gloomy these days, Aunt Mary,” said Charles cheerfully. “What is going to happen to you? According to Dr. Meynell, we shall be celebrating your hundredth birthday in twenty years or so!”

Mrs. Harter smiled affectionately at him but did not answer. After a minute or two she said:

“What are you doing on Friday evening, Charles?”

Charles looked a trifle surprised.

“As a matter of fact, the Ewings asked me to go in and play bridge, but if you would rather I stayed at home—”

“No,” said Mrs. Harter with determination. “Certainly not. I mean it, Charles. On that night of all nights I should much rather be alone.”

Charles looked at her curiously, but Mrs. Harter vouchsafed no further information. She was an old lady of courage and determination. She felt that she must go through with her strange experience singlehanded.

Friday evening found the house very silent. Mrs. Harter sat as usual in her straight-backed chair drawn up to the fireplace. All her preparations were made. That morning she had been to the bank, had drawn out £50 in notes and had handed them over to Elizabeth despite the latter’s tearful protests. She had sorted and arranged all her personal belongings and had labelled

one or two pieces of jewellery with the names of friends or relations. She had also written out a list of instructions for Charles. The Worcester tea service was to go to Cousin Emma. The Sèvres jars to young William, and so on.

Now she looked at the long envelope she held in her hand and drew from it a folded document. This was her will sent to her by Mr. Hopkinson in accordance with her instructions. She had already read it carefully, but now she looked over it once more to refresh her memory. It was a short, concise document. A bequest of £50 to Elizabeth Marshall in consideration of faithful service, two bequests of £500 to a sister and a first cousin, and the remainder to her beloved nephew Charles Ridgeway.

Mrs. Harter nodded her head several times. Charles would be a very rich man when she was dead. Well, he had been a dear good boy to her. Always kind, always affectionate, and with a merry tongue which never failed to please her.

She looked at the clock. Three minutes to the half hour. Well she was ready. And she was calm—quite calm. Although she repeated these last words to herself several times, her heart beat strangely and unevenly. She hardly realized it herself, but she was strung up to a fine point of overwrought nerves.

Half past nine. The wireless was switched on. What would she hear? A familiar voice announcing the weather forecast or that faraway voice belonging to a man who had died twenty-five years before?

But she heard neither. Instead there came a familiar sound, a sound she knew well but which tonight made her feel as though an icy hand were laid on her heart. A fumbling at the door. . . .

It came again. And then a cold blast seemed to sweep though the room. Mrs. Harter had now no doubt what her sensations were. She was afraid . . . She was more than afraid—she was terrified. . . .

And suddenly there came to her the thought: Twenty-five years is a long time. Patrick is a stranger to me now.

Terror! That was what was invading her.

A soft step outside the door—a soft halting footstep. Then the door swung silently open. . . .

Mrs. Harter staggered to her feet, swaying slightly from side to side, her eyes fixed on the doorway, something slipped from her fingers into the grate.

She gave a strangled cry which died in her throat. In the dim light of the doorway stood a familiar figure with chestnut beard and whiskers and an old-fashioned Victorian coat.

Patrick had come for her!

Her heart gave one terrified leap and stood still. She slipped to the ground in a huddled heap.

There Elizabeth found her, an hour later.

Dr. Meynell was called at once and Charles Ridgeway was hastily recalled from his bridge party. But nothing could be done. Mrs. Harter had gone beyond human aid.

It was not until two days later that Elizabeth remembered the note given to her by her mistress. Dr. Meynell read it with great interest and showed it to Charles Ridgeway.

“A very curious coincidence,” he said. “It seems clear that your aunt had been having hallucinations about her dead husband’s voice. She must have strung herself up to such a point that the excitement was fatal and when the time actually came she died of the shock.”

“Autosuggestion?” said Charles.

“Something of the sort. I will let you know the result of the autopsy as soon as possible, though I have no doubt of it myself.” In the circumstances an autopsy was desirable, though purely as a matter of form.

Charles nodded comprehendingly.

On the preceding night, when the household was in bed, he had removed a certain wire which ran from the back of the wireless cabinet to his bedroom on the floor above. Also, since the evening had been a chilly one, he had asked Elizabeth to light a fire in his room, and in that fire he had burned a chestnut beard and whiskers. Some Victorian clothing belonging to his late uncle he replaced in the camphor-scented chest in the attic.

As far as he could see, he was perfectly safe. His plan, the shadowy outline of which had first formed in his brain when Doctor Meynell had told him that his aunt might with due care live for many years, had succeeded admirably. A sudden shock, Dr. Meynell had said. Charles, that affectionate young man, beloved of old ladies, smiled to himself.

When the doctor departed, Charles went about his duties mechanically. Certain funeral arrangements had to be finally settled. Relatives coming from a distance had to have trains looked out for them. In one or two cases they would have to stay the night. Charles went about it all efficiently and methodically, to the accompaniment of an undercurrent of his own thoughts.

A very good stroke of business! That was the burden of them. Nobody, least of all his dead aunt, had known in what perilous straits Charles stood. His activities, carefully concealed from the world, had landed him where the shadow of a prison loomed ahead.

Exposure and ruin had stared him in the face unless he could in a few short months raise a considerable sum of money. Well—that was all right now. Charles smiled to himself. Thanks to—yes, call it a practical joke—nothing criminal about that—he was saved. He was now a very rich man. He had no anxieties on the subject, for Mrs. Harter had never made any secret of her intentions.

Chiming in very appositely with these thoughts, Elizabeth put her head round the door and informed him that Mr. Hopkinson was here and would like to see him.

About time, too, Charles thought. Repressing a tendency to whistle, he composed his face to one of suitable gravity and repaired to the library. There he greeted the precise old gentleman who had been for over a quarter of a century the late Mrs. Harter's legal adviser.

The lawyer seated himself at Charles' invitation and with a dry cough entered upon business matters.

"I did not quite understand your letter to me, Mr. Ridgeway. You seemed to be under the impression that the late Mrs. Harter's will was in our keeping?"

Charles stared at him.

"But surely—I've heard my aunt say as much."

"Oh! quite so, quite so. It was in our keeping."

"Was?"

"That is what I said. Mrs. Harter wrote to us, asking that it might be forwarded to her on Tuesday last."

An uneasy feeling crept over Charles. He felt a far-off premonition of unpleasantness.

"Doubtless it will come to light amongst her papers," continued the lawyer smoothly.

Charles said nothing. He was afraid to trust his tongue. He had already been through Mrs. Harter's papers pretty thoroughly, well enough to be quite certain that no will was amongst them. In a minute or two, when he had regained control of himself, he said so. His voice sounded unreal to himself, and he had a sensation as of cold water trickling down his back.

"Has anyone been through her personal effects?" asked the lawyer.

Charles replied that her own maid, Elizabeth, had done so. At Mr. Hopkinson's suggestion, Elizabeth was sent for. She came promptly, grim

and upright, and answered the questions put to her.

She had been through all her mistress's clothes and personal belongings. She was quite sure that there had been no legal document such as a will amongst them. She knew what the will looked like—her mistress had had it in her hand only the morning of her death.

“You are sure of that?” asked the lawyer sharply.

“Yes, sir. She told me so, and she made me take fifty pounds in notes. The will was in a long blue envelope.”

“Quite right,” said Mr. Hopkinson.

“Now I come to think of it,” continued Elizabeth, “that same blue envelope was lying on this table the morning after—but empty. I laid it on the desk.”

“I remember seeing it there,” said Charles.

He got up and went over to the desk. In a minute or two he turned round with an envelope in his hand which he handed to Mr. Hopkinson. The latter examined it and nodded his head.

“That is the envelope in which I despatched the will on Tuesday last.”

Both men looked hard at Elizabeth.

“Is there anything more, sir?” she inquired respectfully.

“Not at present, thank you.”

Elizabeth went towards the door.

“One minute,” said the lawyer. “Was there a fire in the grate that evening?”

“Yes, sir, there was always a fire.”

“Thank you, that will do.”

Elizabeth went out. Charles leaned forward, resting a shaking hand on the table.

“What do you think? What are you driving at?”

Mr. Hopkinson shook his head.

“We must still hope the will may turn up. If it does not—”

“Well, if it does not?”

“I am afraid there is only one conclusion possible. Your aunt sent for that will in order to destroy it. Not wishing Elizabeth to lose by that, she gave her the amount of her legacy in cash.”

“But why?” cried Charles wildly. “Why?”

Mr. Hopkinson coughed. A dry cough.

“You have had no—er—disagreement with your aunt, Mr. Ridgeway?” he murmured.

Charles gasped.

“No, indeed,” he cried warmly. “We were on the kindest, most affectionate terms, right up to the end.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Hopkinson, not looking at him.

It came to Charles with a shock that the lawyer did not believe him. Who knew what this dry old stick might not have heard? Rumours of Charles’ doings might have come round to him. What more natural than that he should suppose that these same rumours had come to Mrs. Harter, and the aunt and nephew should have had an altercation on the subject?

But it wasn’t so! Charles knew one of the bitterest moments of his career. His lies had been believed. Now that he spoke the truth, belief was withheld. The irony of it!

Of course his aunt had never burnt the will! Of course—

His thoughts came to a sudden check. What was that picture rising before his eyes? An old lady with one hand clasped to her heart . . . something slipping . . . a paper . . . falling on the red-hot embers. . . .

Charles' face grew livid. He heard a hoarse voice—his own—asking:

“If that will's never found—?”

“There is a former will of Mrs. Harter's still extant. Dated September 1920. By it Mrs. Harter leaves everything to her niece, Miriam Harter, now Miriam Robinson.”

What was the old fool saying? Miriam? Miriam with her nondescript husband, and her four whining brats. All his cleverness—for Miriam!

The telephone rang sharply at his elbow. He took up the receiver. It was the doctor's voice, hearty and kindly.

“That you Ridgeway? Thought you'd like to know. The autopsy's just concluded. Cause of death as I surmised. But as a matter of fact the cardiac trouble was much more serious than I suspected when she was alive. With the utmost care, she couldn't have lived longer than two months at the outside. Thought you'd like to know. Might console you more or less.”

“Excuse me,” said Charles, “would you mind saying that again?”

“She couldn't have lived longer than two months,” said the doctor in a slightly louder tone. “All things work out for the best, you know, my dear fellow—”

But Charles had slammed back the receiver on its hook. He was conscious of the lawyer's voice speaking from a long way off.

“Dear me, Mr. Ridgeway, are you ill?”

Damn them all! The smug-faced lawyer. That poisonous old ass Meynell. No hope in front of him—only the shadow of the prison wall. . . .

He felt that Somebody had been playing with him—playing with him like a cat with a mouse. Somebody must be laughing. . . .

Six

THE MYSTERY OF THE BLUE JAR

“The Mystery of the Blue Jar” was first published in Grand Magazine, July 1924.

Jack Hartington surveyed his topped drive ruefully. Standing by the ball, he looked back to the tee, measuring the distance. His face was eloquent of the disgusted contempt which he felt. With a sigh he drew out his iron, executed two vicious swings with it, annihilating in turn a dandelion and a tuft of grass, and then addressed himself firmly to the ball.

It is hard when you are twenty-four years of age, and your one ambition in life is to reduce your handicap at golf, to be forced to give time and attention to the problem of earning your living. Five and a half days out of the seven saw Jack imprisoned in a kind of mahogany tomb in the city. Saturday afternoon and Sunday were religiously devoted to the real business of life, and in an excess of zeal he had taken rooms at the small hotel near Stourton Heath links, and rose daily at the hour of six a.m. to get in an hour's practice before catching the 8:46 to town.

The only disadvantage to the plan was that he seemed constitutionally unable to hit anything at that hour in the morning. A fozzled iron succeeded a muffed drive. His mashie shots ran merrily along the ground, and four putts seemed to be the minimum on any green.

Jack sighed, grasped his iron firmly and repeated to himself the magic words, “Left arm right through, and don't look up.”

He swung back—and then stopped, petrified, as a shrill cry rent the silence of the summer's morning.

“Murder,” it called. “Help! Murder!”

It was a woman's voice, and it died away at the end into a sort of gurgling sigh.

Jack flung down his club and ran in the direction of the sound. It had come from somewhere quite near at hand. This particular part of the course was quite wild country, and there were few houses about. In fact, there was only one near at hand, a small picturesque cottage, which Jack had often noticed for its air of old world daintiness. It was towards this cottage that he ran. It was hidden from him by a heather-covered slope, but he rounded this and in less than a minute was standing with his hand on the small latched gate.

There was a girl standing in the garden, and for a moment Jack jumped to the natural conclusion that it was she who had uttered the cry for help. But he quickly changed his mind.

She had a little basket in her hand, half full of weeds, and had evidently just straightened herself up from weeding a wide border of pansies. Her eyes, Jack noticed, were just like pansies themselves, velvety and soft and dark, and more violet than blue. She was like a pansy altogether, in her straight purple linen gown.

The girl was looking at Jack with an expression midway between annoyance and surprise.

"I beg your pardon," said the young man. "But did you cry out just now?"

"I? No, indeed."

Her surprise was so genuine that Jack felt confused. Her voice was very soft and pretty with slight foreign inflection.

"But you must have heard it," he exclaimed. "It came from somewhere just near here."

She stared at him.

"I heard nothing at all."

Jack in his turn stared at her. It was perfectly incredible that she should not have heard that agonized appeal for help. And yet her calmness was so evident that he could not believe she was lying to him.

“It came from somewhere close at hand,” he insisted.

She was looking at him suspiciously now.

“What did it say?” she asked.

“Murder—help! Murder!”

“Murder—help! Murder,” repeated the girl. “Somebody has played a trick on you, Monsieur. Who could be murdered here?”

Jack looked about him with a confused idea of discovering a dead body upon a garden path. Yet he was still perfectly sure that the cry he had heard was real and not a product of his imagination. He looked up at the cottage windows. Everything seemed perfectly still and peaceful.

“Do you want to search our house?” asked the girl drily.

She was so clearly sceptical that Jack’s confusion grew deeper than ever. He turned away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It must have come from higher up in the woods.”

He raised his cap and retreated. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that the girl had calmly resumed her weeding.

For some time he hunted through the woods, but could find no sign of anything unusual having occurred. Yet he was as positive as ever that he had really heard the cry. In the end, he gave up the search and hurried home to bolt his breakfast and catch the 8:46 by the usual narrow margin of a second or so. His conscience pricked him a little as he sat in the train. Ought he not to have immediately reported what he had heard to the police? That he had not done so was solely owing to the pansy girl’s incredulity. She had clearly suspected him of romancing—possibly the police might do the same. Was he absolutely certain that he had heard the cry?

By now he was not nearly so positive as he had been—the natural result of trying to recapture a lost sensation. Was it some bird's cry in the distance that he had twisted into the semblance of a woman's voice?

But he rejected the suggestion angrily. It was a woman's voice, and he had heard it. He remembered looking at his watch just before the cry had come. As nearly as possible it must have been five and twenty minutes past seven when he had heard the call. That might be a fact useful to the police if—if anything should be discovered.

Going home that evening, he scanned the evening papers anxiously to see if there were any mention of a crime having been committed. But there was nothing, and he hardly knew whether to be relieved or disappointed.

The following morning was wet—so wet that even the most ardent golfer might have his enthusiasm damped. Jack rose at the last possible moment, gulped his breakfast, ran for the train and again eagerly scanned the papers. Still no mention of any gruesome discovery having been made. The evening papers told the same tale.

“Queer,” said Jack to himself, “but there it is. Probably some blinking little boys having a game together up in the woods.”

He was out early the following morning. As he passed the cottage, he noted out of the tail of his eye that the girl was out in the garden again weeding. Evidently a habit of hers. He did a particularly good approach shot, and hoped that she had noticed it. As he teed up on the next tee, he glanced at his watch.

“Just five and twenty past seven,” he murmured. “I wonder—”

The words were frozen on his lips. From behind him came the same cry which had so startled him before. A woman's voice, in dire distress.

“Murder—help! Murder!”

Jack raced back. The pansy girl was standing by the gate. She looked startled, and Jack ran up to her triumphantly, crying out:

“You heard it this time, anyway.”

Her eyes were wide with some emotion he could not fathom but he noticed that she shrank back from him as he approached, and even glanced back at the house, as though she meditated running to it for shelter.

She shook her head, staring at him.

“I heard nothing at all,” she said wonderingly.

It was as though she had struck him a blow between the eyes. Her sincerity was so evident that he could not disbelieve her. Yet he couldn’t have imagined it—he couldn’t—he couldn’t—

He heard her voice speaking gently—almost with sympathy.

“You have had the shellshock, yes?”

In a flash he understood her look of fear, her glance back at the house. She thought that he suffered from delusions. . . .

And then, like a douche of cold water, came the horrible thought, was she right? Did he suffer from delusions? Obsessed by the horror of the thought, he turned and stumbled away without vouchsafing a word. The girl watched him go, sighed, shook her head, and bent down to her weeding again.

Jack endeavoured to reason matters out with himself. “If I hear the damned thing again at twenty-five minutes past seven,” he said to himself, “it’s clear that I’ve got hold of a hallucination of some sort. But I won’t hear it.”

He was nervous all that day, and went to bed early determined to put the matter to the proof the following morning.

As was perhaps natural in such a case, he remained awake half the night, and finally overslept himself. It was twenty past seven by the time he was clear of the hotel and running towards the links. He realized that he would not be able to get to the fatal spot by twenty-five past, but surely, if the voice was a hallucination pure and simple, he would hear it anywhere. He ran on, his eyes fixed on the hands of his watch.

Twenty-five past. From far off came the echo of a woman's voice, calling. The words could not be distinguished, but he was convinced that it was the same cry he had heard before, and that it came from the same spot, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the cottage.

Strangely enough, that fact reassured him. It might, after all, be a hoax. Unlikely as it seemed, the girl herself might be playing a trick on him. He set his shoulders resolutely, and took out a club from his golf bag. He would play the few holes up to the cottage.

The girl was in the garden as usual. She looked up this morning, and when he raised his cap to her, said good morning rather shyly . . . She looked, he thought, lovelier than ever.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Jack called out cheerily, cursing the unavoidable banality of the observation.

"Yes, indeed, it is lovely."

"Good for the garden, I expect?"

The girl smiled a little, disclosing a fascinating dimple.

"Alas, no! For my flowers the rain is needed. See, they are all dried up."

Jack accepted the invitation of her gesture, and came up to the low hedge dividing the garden from the course, looking over it into the garden.

"They seem all right," he remarked awkwardly, conscious as he spoke of the girl's slightly pitying glance running over him.

"The sun is good, is it not?" she said. "For the flowers one can always water them. But the sun gives strength and repairs the health. Monsieur is much better today, I can see."

Her encouraging tone annoyed Jack intensely.

"Curse it all," he said to himself. "I believe she's trying to cure me by suggestion."

“I’m perfectly well,” he said.

“That is good then,” returned the girl quickly and soothingly.

Jack had the irritating feeling that she didn’t believe him.

He played a few more holes and hurried back to breakfast. As he ate it, he was conscious, not for the first time, of the close scrutiny of a man who sat at the table next to him. He was a man of middle age, with a powerful forceful face. He had a small dark beard and very piercing grey eyes, and an ease and assurance of manner which placed him among the higher ranks of the professional classes. His name, Jack knew, was Lavington, and he had heard vague rumours as to his being a well-known medical specialist, but as Jack was not a frequenter of Harley Street, the name had conveyed little or nothing to him.

But this morning he was very conscious of the quiet observation under which he was being kept, and it frightened him a little. Was his secret written plainly in his face for all to see? Did this man, by reason of his professional calling, know that there was something amiss in the hidden grey matter?

Jack shivered at the thought. Was it true? Was he really going mad? Was the whole thing a hallucination, or was it a gigantic hoax?

And suddenly a very simple way of testing the solution occurred to him. He had hitherto been alone on his round. Supposing someone else was with him? Then one out of three things might happen. The voice might be silent. They might both hear it. Or—he only might hear it.

That evening he proceeded to carry his plan into effect. Lavington was the man he wanted with him. They fell into conversation easily enough—the older man might have been waiting for such an opening. It was clear that for some reason or other Jack interested him. The latter was able to come quite easily and naturally to the suggestion that they might play a few holes together before breakfast. The arrangement was made for the following morning.

They started out a little before seven. It was a perfect day, still and cloudless, but not too warm. The doctor was playing well, Jack wretchedly. His whole mind was intent on the forthcoming crisis. He kept glancing surreptitiously at his watch. They reached the seventh tee, between which and the hole the cottage was situated, about twenty past seven.

The girl, as usual, was in the garden as they passed. She did not look up.

Two balls lay on the green, Jack's near the hole, the doctor's some little distance away.

"I've got this for it," said Lavington. "I must go for it, I suppose."

He bent down, judging the line he should take. Jack stood rigid, his eyes glued to his watch. It was exactly twenty-five minutes past seven.

The ball ran swiftly along the grass, stopped on the edge of the hole, hesitated and dropped in.

"Good putt," said Jack. His voice sounded hoarse and unlike himself . . . He shoved his wrist watch farther up his arm with a sigh of overwhelming relief. Nothing had happened. The spell was broken.

"If you don't mind waiting a minute," he said, "I think I'll have a pipe."

They paused a while on the eighth tee. Jack filled and lit the pipe with fingers that trembled a little in spite of himself. An enormous weight seemed to have lifted from his mind.

"Lord, what a good day it is," he remarked, staring at the prospect ahead of him with great contentment. "Go on, Lavington, your swipe."

And then it came. Just at the very instant the doctor was hitting. A woman's voice, high and agonized.

"Murder—Help! Murder!"

The pipe fell from Jack's nerveless hand, as he spun round in the direction of the sound, and then, remembering, gazed breathlessly at his companion.

Lavington was looking down the course, shading his eyes.

“A bit short—just cleared the bunker, though, I think.”

He had heard nothing.

The world seemed to spin round with Jack. He took a step or two, lurching heavily. When he recovered himself, he was lying on the short turf, and Lavington was bending over him.

“There, take it easy now, take it easy.”

“What did I do?”

“You fainted, young man—or gave a very good try at it.”

“My God!” said Jack, and groaned.

“What’s the trouble? Something on your mind?”

“I’ll tell you in one minute, but I’d like to ask you something first.”

The doctor lit his own pipe and settled himself on the bank.

“Ask anything you like,” he said comfortably.

“You’ve been watching me for the last day or two. Why?”

Lavington’s eyes twinkled a little.

“That’s rather an awkward question. A cat can look at a king, you know.”

“Don’t put me off. I’m earnest. Why was it? I’ve a vital reason for asking.”

Lavington’s face grew serious.

“I’ll answer you quite honestly. I recognized in you all the signs of a man labouring under a sense of acute strain, and it intrigued me what that strain could be.”

“I can tell you that easily enough,” said Jack bitterly. “I’m going mad.”

He stopped dramatically, but his statement not seeming to arouse the interest and consternation he expected, he repeated it.

“I tell you I’m going mad.”

“Very curious,” murmured Lavington. “Very curious indeed.”

Jack felt indignant.

“I suppose that’s all it does seem to you. Doctors are so damned callous.”

“Come, come my young friend, you’re talking at random. To begin with, although I have taken my degree, I do not practise medicine. Strictly speaking, I am not a doctor—not a doctor of the body, that is.”

Jack looked at him keenly.

“Or the mind?”

“Yes, in a sense, but more truly I call myself a doctor of the soul.”

“Oh!”

“I perceive the disparagement in your tone, and yet we must use some word to denote the active principle which can be separated and exist independently of its fleshy home, the body. You’ve got to come to terms with the soul, you know, young man, it isn’t just a religious term invented by clergymen. But we’ll call it the mind, or the subconscious self, or any term that suits you better. You took offence at my tone just now, but I can assure you that it really did strike me as very curious that such a well-balanced and perfectly normal young man as yourself should suffer from the delusion that he was going out of his mind.”

“I’m out of my mind all right. Absolutely balmy.”

“You will forgive me for saying so, but I don’t believe it.”

“I suffer from delusions.”

“After dinner?”

“No, in the morning.”

“Can’t be done,” said the doctor, relighting his pipe which had gone out.

“I tell you I hear things that no one else hears.”

“One man in a thousand can see the moons of Jupiter. Because the other nine hundred and ninety nine can’t see them there’s no reason to doubt that the moons of Jupiter exist, and certainly no reason for calling the thousandth man a lunatic.”

“The moons of Jupiter are a proved scientific fact.”

“It’s quite possible that the delusions of today may be the proved scientific facts of tomorrow.”

In spite of himself, Lavington’s matter-of-fact manner was having its effect upon Jack. He felt immeasurably soothed and cheered. The doctor looked at him attentively for a minute or two and then nodded.

“That’s better,” he said. “The trouble with you young fellows is that you’re so cocksure nothing can exist outside your own philosophy that you get the wind up when something occurs to jolt you out of that opinion. Let’s hear your grounds for believing that you’re going mad, and we’ll decide whether or not to lock you up afterwards.”

As faithfully as he could, Jack narrated the whole series of occurrences.

“But what I can’t understand,” he ended, “is why this morning it should come at half past seven—five minutes late.”

Lavington thought for a minute or two. Then—

“What’s the time now by your watch?” he asked.

“Quarter to eight,” replied Jack, consulting it.

“That’s simple enough, then. Mine says twenty to eight. Your watch is five minutes fast. That’s a very interesting and important point—to me. In fact, it’s invaluable.”

“In what way?”

Jack was beginning to get interested.

“Well, the obvious explanation is that on the first morning you did hear some such cry—may have been a joke, may not. On the following mornings, you suggestioned yourself to hear it at exactly the same time.”

“I’m sure I didn’t.”

“Not consciously, of course, but the subconscious plays us some funny tricks, you know. But anyway, that explanation won’t wash. If it was a case of suggestion, you would have heard the cry at twenty-five minutes past seven by your watch, and you could never have heard it when the time, as you thought, was past.”

“Well, then?”

“Well—it’s obvious, isn’t it? This cry for help occupies a perfectly definite place and time in space. The place is the vicinity of that cottage and the time is twenty-five minutes past seven.”

“Yes, but why should I be the one to hear it? I don’t believe in ghosts and all that spook stuff—spirits rapping and all the rest of it. Why should I hear the damned thing?”

“Ah! that we can’t tell at present. It’s a curious thing that many of the best mediums are made out of confirmed sceptics. It isn’t the people who are interested in occult phenomena who get the manifestations. Some people see and hear things that other people don’t—we don’t know why, and nine times out of ten they don’t want to see or hear them, and are convinced that they are suffering from delusions—just as you were. It’s like electricity.

Some substances are good conductors, others are nonconductors, and for a long time we didn't know why, and had to be content just to accept the fact. Nowadays we do know why. Some day, no doubt, we shall know why you hear this thing and I and the girl don't. Everything's governed by natural law, you know—there's no such thing really as the supernatural. Finding out the laws that govern so called psychic phenomena is going to be a tough job—but every little helps.”

“But what am I going to do?” asked Jack.

Lavington chuckled.

“Practical, I see. Well, my young friend, you are going to have a good breakfast and get off to the city without worrying your head further about things you don't understand. I, on the other hand, am going to poke about, and see what I can find out about that cottage back there. That's where the mystery centres, I dare swear.”

Jack rose to his feet.

“Right, sir, I'm on, but, I say—”

“Yes?”

Jack flushed awkwardly.

“I'm sure the girl's all right,” he muttered.

Lavington looked amused.

“You didn't tell me she was a pretty girl! Well, cheer up, I think the mystery started before her time.”

Jack arrived home that evening in a perfect fever of curiosity. He was by now pinning his faith blindly to Lavington. The doctor had accepted the matter so naturally, had been so matter-of-fact and unperturbed by it, that Jack was impressed.

He found his new friend waiting for him in the hall when he came down for dinner, and the doctor suggested that they should dine together at the same table.

“Any news, sir?” asked Jack anxiously.

“I’ve collected the life history of Heather Cottage all right. It was tenanted first by an old gardener and his wife. The old man died, and the old woman went to her daughter. Then a builder got hold of it, and modernized it with great success, selling it to a city gentleman who used it for weekends. About a year ago, he sold it to some people called Turner—Mr. and Mrs. Turner. They seem to have been rather a curious couple from all I can make out. He was an Englishman, his wife was popularly supposed to be partly Russian, and was a very handsome exotic-looking woman. They lived very quietly, seeing no one, and hardly ever going outside the cottage garden. The local rumour goes that they were afraid of something—but I don’t think we ought to rely on that.

“And then suddenly one day they departed, cleared out one morning early, and never came back. The agents here got a letter from Mr. Turner, written from London, instructing him to sell up the place as quickly as possible. The furniture was sold off, and the house itself was sold to a Mr. Mauleverer. He only actually lived in it a fortnight—then he advertised it to be let furnished. The people who have it now are a consumptive French professor and his daughter. They have been there just ten days.”

Jack digested this in silence.

“I don’t see that that gets us any forrader,” he said at last. “Do you?”

“I rather want to know more about the Turners,” said Lavington quietly. “They left very early in the morning, you remember. As far as I can make out, nobody actually saw them go. Mr. Turner has been seen since—but I can’t find anybody who has seen Mrs. Turner.

Jack paled.

“It can’t be—you don’t mean—”

“Don’t excite yourself, young man. The influence of anyone at the point of death—and especially of violent death—upon their surroundings is very strong. Those surroundings might conceivably absorb that influence, transmitting it in turn to a suitably tuned receiver—in this case yourself.”

“But why me?” murmured Jack rebelliously. “Why not someone who could do some good?”

“You are regarding the force as intelligent and purposeful, instead of blind and mechanical. I do not believe myself in earthbound spirits, haunting a spot for one particular purpose. But the thing I have seen, again and again, until I can hardly believe it to be pure coincidence, is a kind of blind groping towards justice—a subterranean moving of blind forces, always working obscurely towards that end. . . .”

He shook himself—as though casting off some obsession that preoccupied him, and turned to Jack with a ready smile.

“Let us banish the subject—for tonight at all events,” he suggested.

Jack agreed readily enough, but did not find it so easy to banish the subject from his own mind.

During the weekend, he made vigorous inquiries of his own, but succeeded in eliciting little more than the doctor had done. He had definitely given up playing golf before breakfast.

The next link in the chain came from an unexpected quarter. On getting back one day, Jack was informed that a young lady was waiting to see him. To his intense surprise it proved to be the girl of the garden—the pansy girl, as he always called her in his own mind. She was very nervous and confused.

“You will forgive me, Monsieur, for coming to seek you like this? But there is something I want to tell you—I—”

She looked round uncertainly.

“Come in here,” said Jack promptly, leading the way into the now deserted “Ladies’ Drawing room” of the hotel, a dreary apartment, with a good deal of red plush about it. “Now, sit down, Miss, Miss—”

“Marchaud, Monsieur, Felise Marchaud.”

“Sit down, Mademoiselle Marchaud, and tell me all about it.”

Felise sat down obediently. She was dressed in dark green today, and the beauty and charm of the proud little face was more evident than ever. Jack’s heart beat faster as he sat down beside her.

“It is like this,” explained Felise. “We have been here but a short time, and from the beginning we hear the house—our so sweet little house—is haunted. No servant will stay in it. That does not matter so much—me, I can do the ménage and cook easily enough.”

“Angel,” thought the infatuated young man. “She’s wonderful.”

But he maintained an outward semblance of businesslike attention.

“This talk of ghosts, I think it is all folly—that is until four days ago. Monsieur, four nights running, I have had the same dream. A lady stands there—she is beautiful, tall and very fair. In her hands she holds a blue china jar. She is distressed—very distressed, and continually she holds out the jar to me, as though imploring me to do something with it—but alas! she cannot speak, and I—I do not know what she asks. That was the dream for the first two nights—but the night before last, there was more of it. She and the blue jar faded away, and suddenly I heard her voice crying out—I know it is her voice, you comprehend—and, oh! Monsieur, the words she says are those you spoke to me that morning. ‘Murder—Help! Murder!’ I awoke in terror. I say to myself—it is a nightmare, the words you heard are an accident. But last night the dream came again. Monsieur, what is it? You too have heard. What shall we do?”

Felise’s face was terrified. Her small hands clasped themselves together, and she gazed appealingly at Jack. The latter affected an unconcern he did not feel.

“That’s all right, Mademoiselle Marchaud. You mustn’t worry. I tell you what I’d like you to do, if you don’t mind, repeat the whole story to a friend of mine who is staying here, a Dr. Lavington.”

Felise signified her willingness to adopt this course, and Jack went off in search of Lavington. He returned with him a few minutes later.

Lavington gave the girl a keen scrutiny as he acknowledged Jack’s hurried introductions. With a few reassuring words, he soon put the girl at her ease, and he, in his turn, listened attentively to her story.

“Very curious,” he said, when she had finished. “You have told your father of this?”

Felise shook her head.

“I have not liked to worry him. He is very ill still”—her eyes filled with tears—“I keep from him anything that might excite or agitate him.”

“I understand,” said Lavington kindly. “And I am glad you came to us, Mademoiselle Marchaud. Hartington here, as you know, had an experience something similar to yours. I think I may say that we are well on the track now. There is nothing else that you can think of?”

Felise gave a quick movement.

“Of course! How stupid I am. It is the point of the whole story. Look, Monsieur, at what I found at the back of one of the cupboards where it had slipped behind the shelf.”

She held out to them a dirty piece of drawing paper on which was executed roughly in watercolours a sketch of a woman. It was a mere daub, but the likeness was probably good enough. It represented a tall fair woman, with something subtly un-English about her face. She was standing by a table on which was standing a blue china jar.

“I only found it this morning,” explained Felise. “Monsieur le docteur, that is the face of the woman I saw in my dream, and that is the identical blue

jar.”

“Extraordinary,” commented Lavington. “The key to the mystery is evidently the blue jar. It looks like a Chinese jar to me, probably an old one. It seems to have a curious raised pattern over it.”

“It is Chinese,” declared Jack. “I have seen an exactly similar one in my uncle’s collection—he is a great collector of Chinese porcelain, you know, and I remember noticing a jar just like this a short time ago.”

“The Chinese jar,” mused Lavington. He remained a minute or two lost in thought, then raised his head suddenly, a curious light shining in his eyes. “Hartington, how long has your uncle had that jar?”

“How long? I really don’t know.”

“Think. Did he buy it lately?”

“I don’t know—yes, I believe he did, now I come to think of it. I’m not very interested in porcelain myself, but I remember his showing me his ‘recent acquisitions,’ and this was one of them.”

“Less than two months ago? The Turners left Heather Cottage just two months ago.”

“Yes, I believe it was.”

“Your uncle attends country sales sometimes?”

“He’s always tooling round to sales.”

“Then there is no inherent improbability in our assuming that he bought this particular piece of porcelain at the sale of the Turners’ things. A curious coincidence—or perhaps what I call the groping of blind justice. Hartington, you must find out from your uncle at once where he bought this jar.”

Jack’s face fell.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. Uncle George is away on the Continent. I don’t even know where to write to him.”

“How long will he be away?”

“Three weeks to a month at least.”

There was a silence. Felise sat looking anxiously from one man to the other.

“Is there nothing that we can do?” she asked timidly.

“Yes, there is one thing,” said Lavington, in a tone of suppressed excitement. “It is unusual, perhaps, but I believe that it will succeed. Hartington, you must get hold of that jar. Bring it down here, and, if Mademoiselle permits, we will spend a night at Heather Cottage, taking the blue jar with us.”

Jack felt his skin creep uncomfortably.

“What do you think will happen?” he asked uneasily.

“I have not the slightest idea—but I honestly believe that the mystery will be solved and the ghost laid. Quite possibly there may be a false bottom to the jar and something is concealed inside it. If no phenomenon occurs, we must use our own ingenuity.”

Felise clasped her hands.

“It is a wonderful idea,” she exclaimed.

Her eyes were alight with enthusiasm. Jack did not feel nearly so enthusiastic—in fact, he was inwardlyfunking it badly, but nothing would have induced him to admit the fact before Felise. The doctor acted as though his suggestion were the most natural one in the world.

“When can you get the jar?” asked Felise, turning to Jack.

“Tomorrow,” said the latter, unwillingly.

He had to go through with it now, but the memory of the frenzied cry for help that had haunted him each morning was something to be ruthlessly thrust down and not thought about more than could be helped.

He went to his uncle's house the following evening, and took away the jar in question. He was more than ever convinced when he saw it again that it was the identical one pictured in the water colour sketch, but carefully as he looked it over he could see no sign that it contained a secret receptacle of any kind.

It was eleven o'clock when he and Lavington arrived at Heather Cottage. Felise was on the lookout for them, and opened the door softly before they had time to knock.

"Come in," she whispered. "My father is asleep upstairs, and we must not wake him. I have made coffee for you in here."

She led the way into the small cosy sitting room. A spirit lamp stood in the grate, and bending over it, she brewed them both some fragrant coffee.

Then Jack unfastened the Chinese jar from its many wrappings. Felise gasped as her eyes fell on it.

"But yes, but yes," she cried eagerly. "That is it—I would know it anywhere."

Meanwhile Lavington was making his own preparations. He removed all the ornaments from a small table and set it in the middle of the room. Round it he placed three chairs. Then, taking the blue jar from Jack, he placed it in the centre of the table.

"Now," he said, "we are ready. Turn off the lights, and let us sit round the table in the darkness."

The others obeyed him. Lavington's voice spoke again out of the darkness.

"Think of nothing—or of everything. Do not force the mind. It is possible that one of us has mediumistic powers. If so, that person will go into a

trance. Remember, there is nothing to fear. Cast out fear from your hearts, and drift—drift—”

His voice died away and there was silence. Minute by minute, the silence seemed to grow more pregnant with possibilities. It was all very well for Lavington to say “Cast out fear.” It was not fear that Jack felt—it was panic. And he was almost certain that Felise felt the same way. Suddenly he heard her voice, low and terrified.

“Something terrible is going to happen. I feel it.”

“Cast out fear,” said Lavington. “Do not fight against the influence.”

The darkness seemed to get darker and the silence more acute. And nearer and nearer came that indefinable sense of menace.

Jack felt himself choking—stifling—the evil thing was very near. . . .

And then the moment of conflict passed. He was drifting, drifting down stream—his lids closed—peace—darkness. . . .

Jack stirred slightly. His head was heavy—heavy as lead. Where was he?

Sunshine . . . birds . . . He lay staring up at the sky.

Then it all came back to him. The sitting. The little room. Felise and the doctor. What had happened?

He sat up, his head throbbing unpleasantly, and looked round him. He was lying in a little copse not far from the cottage. No one else was near him. He took out his watch. To his amazement it registered half past twelve.

Jack struggled to his feet, and ran as fast as he could in the direction of the cottage. They must have been alarmed by his failure to come out of the trance, and carried him out into the open air.

Arrived at the cottage, he knocked loudly on the door. But there was no answer, and no signs of life about it. They must have gone off to get help.

Or else—Jack felt an indefinable fear invade him. What had happened last night?

He made his way back to the hotel as quickly as possible. He was about to make some inquiries at the office, when he was diverted by a colossal punch in the ribs which nearly knocked him off his feet. Turning in some indignation, he beheld a white-haired old gentleman wheezing with mirth.

“Didn’t expect me, my boy. Didn’t expect me, hey?” said this individual.

“Why, Uncle George, I thought you were miles away—in Italy somewhere.”

“Ah! but I wasn’t. Landed at Dover last night. Thought I’d motor up to town and stop here to see you on the way. And what did I find. Out all night, hey? Nice goings on—”

“Uncle George,” Jack checked him firmly. “I’ve got the most extraordinary story to tell you. I daresay you won’t believe it.”

“I daresay I shan’t,” laughed the old man. “But do your best, my boy.”

“But I must have something to eat,” continued Jack. “I’m famished.”

He led the way to the dining room, and over a substantial repast, he narrated the whole story.

“And God knows what’s become of them,” he ended.

His uncle seemed on the verge of apoplexy.

“The jar,” he managed to ejaculate at last. “THE BLUE JAR! What’s become of that?”

Jack stared at him in noncomprehension, but submerged in the torrent of words that followed he began to understand.

It came with a rush: “Ming—unique—gem of my collection—worth ten thousand pounds at least—offer from Hoggenheimer, the American

millionaire—only one of its kind in the world—Confound it, sir, what have you done with my BLUE JAR?”

Jack rushed from the room. He must find Lavington. The young lady at the office eyed him coldly.

“Dr. Lavington left late last night—by motor. He left a note for you.”

Jack tore it open. It was short and to the point.

MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,

Is the day of the supernatural over? Not quite—especially when tricked out in new scientific language. Kindest regards from Felise, invalid father, and myself. We have twelve hours start, which ought to be ample.

Yours ever,

AMBROSE LAVINGTON,

Doctor of the Soul.

Seven

SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE

“Sing a Song of Sixpence” was first published in Holly Leaves (published by Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News), 2 December 1929.

Sir Edward Palliser, K.C., lived at No. 9 Queen Anne’s Close. Queen Anne’s Close is a cul-de-sac. In the very heart of Westminster it manages to have a peaceful old-world atmosphere far removed from the turmoil of the twentieth century. It suited Sir Edward Palliser admirably.

Sir Edward had been one of the most eminent criminal barristers of his day and now that he no longer practised at the Bar he had amused himself by amassing a very fine criminological library. He was also the author of a volume of Reminiscences of Eminent Criminals.

On this particular evening Sir Edward was sitting in front of his library fire sipping some very excellent black coffee, and shaking his head over a volume of Lombroso. Such ingenious theories and so completely out of date.

The door opened almost noiselessly and his well-trained manservant approached over the thick pile carpet, and murmured discreetly:

“A young lady wishes to see you, sir.”

“A young lady?”

Sir Edward was surprised. Here was something quite out of the usual course of events. Then he reflected that it might be his niece, Ethel—but no, in that case Armour would have said so.

He inquired cautiously.

“The lady did not give her name?”

“No, sir, but she said she was quite sure you would wish to see her.”

“Show her in,” said Sir Edward Palliser. He felt pleausurably intrigued.

A tall, dark girl of close on thirty, wearing a black coat and skirt, well cut, and a little black hat, came to Sir Edward with outstretched hand and a look of eager recognition on her face. Armour withdrew, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

“Sir Edward—you do know me, don’t you? I’m Magdalen Vaughan.”

“Why, of course.” He pressed the outstretched hand warmly.

He remembered her perfectly now. That trip home from America on the *Siluric*! This charming child—for she had been little more than a child. He had made love to her, he remembered, in a discreet elderly man-of-the-world fashion. She had been so adorably young—so eager—so full of admiration and hero worship—just made to captivate the heart of a man nearing sixty. The remembrance brought additional warmth into the pressure of his hand.

“This is most delightful of you. Sit down, won’t you.” He arranged an armchair for her, talking easily and evenly, wondering all the time why she had come. When at last he brought the easy flow of small talk to an end, there was a silence.

Her hand closed and unclosed on the arm of the chair, she moistened her lips. Suddenly she spoke—abruptly.

“Sir Edward—I want you to help me.”

He was surprised and murmured mechanically:

“Yes?”

She went on, speaking more intensely:

“You said that if ever I needed help—that if there was anything in the world you could do for me—you would do it.”

Yes, he had said that. It was the sort of thing one did say—particularly at the moment of parting. He could recall the break in his voice—the way he had raised her hand to his lips.

“If there is ever anything I can do—remember, I mean it. . . .”

Yes, one said that sort of thing . . . But very, very rarely did one have to fulfill one’s words! And certainly not after—how many?—nine or ten years. He flashed a quick glance at her—she was still a very good-looking girl, but she had lost what had been to him her charm—that look of dewy untouched youth. It was a more interesting face now, perhaps—a younger man might have thought so—but Sir Edward was far from feeling the tide of warmth and emotion that had been his at the end of that Atlantic voyage.

His face became legal and cautious. He said in a rather brisk way:

“Certainly, my dear young lady. I shall be delighted to do anything in my power—though I doubt if I can be very helpful to anyone in these days.”

If he was preparing his way of retreat she did not notice it. She was of the type that can only see one thing at a time and what she was seeing at this moment was her own need. She took Sir Edward’s willingness to help for granted.

“We are in terrible trouble, Sir Edward.”

“We? You are married?”

“No—I meant my brother and I. Oh! and William and Emily too, for that matter. But I must explain. I have—I had an aunt—Miss Crabtree. You may have read about her in the papers. It was horrible. She was killed—murdered.”

“Ah!” A flash of interest lit up Sir Edward’s face. “About a month ago, wasn’t it?”

The girl nodded.

“Rather less than that—three weeks.”

“Yes, I remember. She was hit on the head in her own house. They didn’t get the fellow who did it.”

Again Magdalen Vaughan nodded.

“They didn’t get the man—I don’t believe they ever will get the man. You see—there mightn’t be any man to get.”

“What?”

“Yes—it’s awful. Nothing’s come out about it in the papers. But that’s what the police think. They know nobody came to the house that night.”

“You mean—?”

“That it’s one of us four. It must be. They don’t know which—and we don’t know which . . . We don’t know. And we sit there every day looking at each other surreptitiously and wondering. Oh! if only it could have been someone from outside—but I don’t see how it can. . . .”

Sir Edward stared at her, his interest arising.

“You mean that the members of the family are under suspicion?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. The police haven’t said so, of course. They’ve been quite polite and nice. But they’ve ransacked the house, they’ve questioned us all, and Martha again and again . . . And because they don’t know which, they’re holding their hand. I’m so frightened—so horribly frightened. . . .”

“My dear child. Come now, surely now, surely you are exaggerating.”

“I’m not. It’s one of us four—it must be.”

“Who are the four to whom you refer?”

Magdalen sat up straight and spoke more composedly.

“There’s myself and Matthew. Aunt Lily was our great aunt. She was my grandmother’s sister. We’ve lived with her ever since we were fourteen (we’re twins, you know). Then there was William Crabtree. He was her nephew—her brother’s child. He lived there too, with his wife Emily.”

“She supported them?”

“More or less. He has a little money of his own, but he’s not strong and has to live at home. He’s a quiet, dreamy sort of man. I’m sure it would have been impossible for him to have—oh!—it’s awful of me to think of it even!”

“I am still very far from understanding the position. Perhaps you would not mind running over the facts—if it does not distress you too much.”

“Oh! no—I want to tell you. And it’s all quite clear in my mind still—horribly clear. We’d had tea, you understand, and we’d all gone off to do things of our own. I to do some dressmaking. Matthew to type an article—he does a little journalism; William to do his stamps. Emily hadn’t been down to tea. She’d taken a headache powder and was lying down. So there we were, all of us, busy and occupied. And when Martha went in to lay supper at half past seven, there Aunt Lily was—dead. Her head—oh! it’s horrible—all crushed in.”

“The weapon was found, I think?”

“Yes. It was a heavy paperweight that always lay on the table by the door. The police tested it for fingerprints, but there were none. It had been wiped clean.”

“And your first surmise?”

“We thought of course it was a burglar. There were two or three drawers of the bureau pulled out, as though a thief had been looking for something. Of course we thought it was a burglar! And then the police came—and they said she had been dead at least an hour, and asked Martha who had been to the house, and Martha said nobody. And all the windows were fastened on

the inside, and there seemed no signs of anything having been tampered with. And then they began to ask us questions. . . .”

She stopped. Her breast heaved. Her eyes, frightened and imploring, sought Sir Edward’s in search of reassurance.

“For instance, who benefited by your aunt’s death?”

“That’s simple. We all benefit equally. She left her money to be divided in equal shares among the four of us.”

“And what was the value of her estate?”

“The lawyer told us it will come to about eighty thousand pounds after the death duties are paid.”

Sir Edward opened his eyes in some slight surprise.

“That is quite a considerable sum. You knew, I suppose, the total of your aunt’s fortune?”

Magdalen shook her head.

“No—it came quite as a surprise to us. Aunt Lily was always terribly careful about money. She kept just the one servant and always talked a lot about economy.”

Sir Edward nodded thoughtfully. Magdalen leaned forward a little in her chair.

“You will help me—you will?”

Her words came to Sir Edward as an unpleasant shock just at the moment when he was becoming interested in her story for its own sake.

“My dear young lady—what can I possibly do? If you want good legal advice, I can give you the name—”

She interrupted him.

“Oh! I don’t want that sort of thing! I want you to help me personally—as a friend.”

“That’s very charming of you, but—”

“I want you to come to our house. I want you to ask questions. I want you to see and judge for yourself.”

“But my dear young—”

“Remember, you promised. Anywhere—any time—you said, if I wanted help. . . .”

Her eyes, pleading yet confident, looked into his. He felt ashamed and strangely touched. That terrific sincerity of hers, that absolute belief in an idle promise, ten years old, as a sacred binding thing. How many men had not said those self-same words—a cliché almost!—and how few of them had ever been called upon to make good.

He said rather weakly: “I’m sure there are many people who could advise you better than I could.”

“I’ve got lots of friends—naturally.” (He was amused by the naïve self-assurance of that.) “But you see, none of them are clever. Not like you. You’re used to questioning people. And with all your experience you must know.”

“Know what?”

“Whether they’re innocent or guilty.”

He smiled rather grimly to himself. He flattered himself that on the whole he usually had known! Though, on many occasions, his private opinion had not been that of the jury.

Magdalen pushed back her hat from her forehead with a nervous gesture, looked round the room, and said:

“How quiet it is here. Don’t you sometimes long for some noise?”

The cul-de-sac! All unwittingly her words, spoken at random, touched him on the raw. A cul-de-sac. Yes, but there was always a way out—the way you had come—the way back into the world . . . Something impetuous and youthful stirred in him. Her simple trust appealed to the best side of his nature—and the condition of her problem appealed to something else—the innate criminologist in him. He wanted to see these people of whom she spoke. He wanted to form his own judgement.

He said: “If you are really convinced I can be of any use . . . Mind, I guarantee nothing.”

He expected her to be overwhelmed with delight, but she took it very calmly.

“I knew you would do it. I’ve always thought of you as a real friend. Will you come back with me now?”

“No. I think if I pay you a visit tomorrow it will be more satisfactory. Will you give me the name and address of Miss Crabtree’s lawyer? I may want to ask him a few questions.”

She wrote it down and handed it to him. Then she got up and said rather shyly:

“I—I’m really most awfully grateful. Good-bye.”

“And your own address?”

“How stupid of me. 18 Palatine Walk, Chelsea.”

It was three o’clock on the following afternoon when Sir Edward Palliser approached 18 Palatine Walk with a sober, measured tread. In the interval he had found out several things. He had paid a visit that morning to Scotland Yard, where the Assistant Commissioner was an old friend of his, and he had also had an interview with the late Miss Crabtree’s lawyer. As a result he had a clearer vision of the circumstances. Miss Crabtree’s arrangements in regard to money had been somewhat peculiar. She never made use of a chequebook. Instead she was in the habit of writing to her

lawyer and asking him to have a certain sum in five-pound notes waiting for her. It was nearly always the same sum. Three hundred pounds four times a year. She came to fetch it herself in a four-wheeler which she regarded as the only safe means of conveyance. At other times she never left the house.

At Scotland Yard Sir Edward learned that the question of finance had been gone into very carefully. Miss Crabtree had been almost due for her next instalment of money. Presumably the previous three hundred had been spent—or almost spent. But this was exactly the point that had not been easy to ascertain. By checking the household expenditure, it was soon evident that Miss Crabtree's expenditure per quarter fell a good deal short of three hundred pounds. On the other hand she was in the habit of sending five-pound notes away to needy friends or relatives. Whether there had been much or little money in the house at the time of her death was a debatable point. None had been found.

It was this particular point which Sir Edward was revolving in his mind as he approached Palatine Walk.

The door of the house (which was a non-basement one) was opened to him by a small elderly woman with an alert gaze. He was shown into a big double room on the left of the small hallway and there Magdalen came to him. More clearly than before, he saw the traces of nervous strain in her face.

"You told me to ask questions, and I have come to do so," said Sir Edward, smiling as he shook hands. "First of all I want to know who last saw your aunt and exactly what time that was?"

"It was after tea—five o'clock. Martha was the last person with her. She had been paying the books that afternoon, and brought Aunt Lily the change and the accounts."

"You trust Martha?"

"Oh, absolutely. She was with Aunt Lily for—oh! thirty years, I suppose. She's honest as the day."

Sir Edward nodded.

“Another question. Why did your cousin, Mrs. Crabtree, take a headache powder?”

“Well, because she had a headache.”

“Naturally, but was there any particular reason why she should have a headache?”

“Well, yes, in a way. There was rather a scene at lunch. Emily is very excitable and highly strung. She and Aunt Lily used to have rows sometimes.”

“And they had one at lunch?”

“Yes. Aunt Lily was rather trying about little things. It all started out of nothing—and then they were at it hammer and tongs—with Emily saying all sorts of things she couldn’t possibly have meant—that she’d leave the house and never come back—that she was grudging every mouthful she ate—oh! all sorts of silly things. And Aunt Lily said the sooner she and her husband packed their boxes and went the better. But it all meant nothing, really.”

“Because Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree couldn’t afford to pack up and go?”

“Oh, not only that. William was fond of Aunt Emily. He really was.”

“It wasn’t a day of quarrels by any chance?”

Magdalen’s colour heightened.

“You mean me? The fuss about my wanting to be a mannequin?”

“Your aunt wouldn’t agree?”

“No.”

“Why did you want to be a mannequin, Miss Magdalen? Does the life strike you as a very attractive one?”

“No, but anything would be better than going on living here.”

“Yes, then. But now you will have a comfortable income, won’t you?”

“Oh! yes, it’s quite different now.”

She made the admission with the utmost simplicity.

He smiled but pursued the subject no further. Instead he said: “And your brother? Did he have a quarrel too?”

“Matthew? Oh, no.”

“Then no one can say he had a motive for wishing his aunt out of the way.”

He was quick to seize on the momentary dismay that showed in her face.

“I forgot,” he said casually. “He owed a good deal of money, didn’t he?”

“Yes; poor old Matthew.”

“Still, that will be all right now.”

“Yes—” She sighed. “It is a relief.”

And still she saw nothing! He changed the subject hastily.

“Your cousins and your brother are at home?”

“Yes; I told them you were coming. They are all so anxious to help. Oh, Sir Edward—I feel, somehow, that you are going to find out that everything is all right—that none of us had anything to do with it—that, after all, it was an outsider.”

“I can’t do miracles. I may be able to find out the truth, but I can’t make the truth be what you want it to be.”

“Can’t you? I feel that you could do anything—anything.”

She left the room. He thought, disturbed, “What did she mean by that? Does she want me to suggest a line of defence? For whom?”

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a man about fifty years of age. He had a naturally powerful frame, but stooped slightly. His clothes were untidy and his hair carelessly brushed. He looked good-natured but vague.

“Sir Edward Palliser? Oh, how do you do. Magdalen sent me along. It’s very good of you, I’m sure, to wish to help us. Though I don’t think anything will ever be really discovered. I mean, they won’t catch the fellow.”

“You think it was a burglar then—someone from outside?”

“Well, it must have been. It couldn’t be one of the family. These fellows are very clever nowadays, they climb like cats and they get in and out as they like.”

“Where were you, Mr. Crabtree, when the tragedy occurred?”

“I was busy with my stamps—in my little sitting room upstairs.”

“You didn’t hear anything?”

“No—but then I never do hear anything when I’m absorbed. Very foolish of me, but there it is.”

“Is the sitting room you refer to over this room?”

“No, it’s at the back.”

Again the door opened. A small fair woman entered. Her hands were twitching nervously. She looked fretful and excited.

“William, why didn’t you wait for me? I said ‘wait.’ ”

“Sorry, my dear, I forgot. Sir Edward Palliser—my wife.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Crabtree? I hope you don’t mind my coming here to ask a few questions. I know how anxious you must all be to have things cleared up.”

“Naturally. But I can’t tell you anything—can I, William? I was asleep—on my bed—I only woke up when Martha screamed.”

Her hands continued to twitch.

“Where is your room, Mrs. Crabtree?”

“It’s over this. But I didn’t hear anything—how could I? I was asleep.”

He could get nothing out of her but that. She knew nothing—she had heard nothing—she had been asleep. She reiterated it with the obstinacy of a frightened woman. Yet Sir Edward knew very well that it might easily be—probably was—the bare truth.

He excused himself at last—said he would like to put a few questions to Martha. William Crabtree volunteered to take him to the kitchen. In the hall, Sir Edward nearly collided with a tall dark young man who was striding towards the front door.

“Mr. Matthew Vaughan?”

“Yes—but look here, I can’t wait. I’ve got an appointment.”

“Matthew!” It was his sister’s voice from the stairs. “Oh! Matthew, you promised—”

“I know, sis. But I can’t. Got to meet a fellow. And, anyway, what’s the good of talking about the damned thing over and over again. We have enough of that with the police. I’m fed up with the whole show.”

The front door banged. Mr. Matthew Vaughan had made his exit.

Sir Edward was introduced into the kitchen. Martha was ironing. She paused, iron in hand. Sir Edward shut the door behind him.

“Miss Vaughan has asked me to help her,” he said. “I hope you won’t object to my asking you a few questions.”

She looked at him, then shook her head.

“None of them did it, sir. I know what you’re thinking, but it isn’t so. As nice a set of ladies and gentlemen as you could wish to see.”

“I’ve no doubt of it. But their niceness isn’t what we call evidence, you know.”

“Perhaps not, sir. The law’s a funny thing. But there is evidence—as you call it, sir. None of them could have done it without my knowing.”

“But surely—”

“I know what I’m talking about sir. There, listen to that—”

“That” was a creaking sound above their heads.

“The stairs, sir. Every time anyone goes up or down, the stairs creak something awful. It doesn’t matter how quiet you go. Mrs. Crabtree, she was lying on her bed, and Mr. Crabtree was fiddling about with them wretched stamps of his, and Miss Magdalen she was up above again working her machine, and if any one of those three had come down the stairs I should have known it. And they didn’t!”

She spoke with a positive assurance which impressed the barrister. He thought: “A good witness. She’d carry weight.”

“You mightn’t have noticed.”

“Yes, I would. I’d have noticed without noticing, so to speak. Like you notice when a door shuts and somebody goes out.”

Sir Edward shifted his ground.

“That is three of them accounted for, but there is a fourth. Was Mr. Matthew Vaughan upstairs also?”

“No, but he was in the little room downstairs. Next door. And he was typewriting. You can hear it plain in here. His machine never stopped for a moment. Not for a moment, sir, I can swear to it. A nasty irritating tap tapping noise it is, too.”

Sir Edward paused a minute.

“It was you who found her, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, it was. Lying there with blood on her poor hair. And no one hearing a sound on account of the tap-tapping of Mr. Matthew’s typewriter.”

“I understand you are positive that no one came into the house?”

“How could they, sir, without my knowing? The bell rings in here. And there’s only the one door.”

He looked at her straight in the face.

“You were attached to Miss Crabtree?”

A warm glow—genuine—unmistakable—came into her face.

“Yes, indeed, I was, sir. But for Miss Crabtree—well, I’m getting on and I don’t mind speaking of it now. I got into trouble, sir, when I was a girl, and Miss Crabtree stood by me—took me back into her service, she did, when it was all over. I’d have died for her—I would indeed.”

Sir Edward knew sincerity when he heard it. Martha was sincere.

“As far as you know, no one came to the door—?”

“No one could have come.”

“I said as far as you know. But if Miss Crabtree had been expecting someone—if she opened the door to that someone herself. . . .”

“Oh!” Martha seemed taken aback.

“That’s possible, I suppose?” Sir Edward urged.

“It’s possible—yes—but it isn’t very likely. I mean. . . .”

She was clearly taken aback. She couldn’t deny and yet she wanted to do so. Why? Because she knew that the truth lay elsewhere. Was that it? The four people in the house—one of them guilty? Did Martha want to shield that guilty party? Had the stairs creaked? Had someone come stealthily down and did Martha know who that someone was?

She herself was honest—Sir Edward was convinced of that.

He pressed his point, watching her.

“Miss Crabtree might have done that, I suppose? The window of that room faces the street. She might have seen whoever it was she was waiting for from the window and gone out into the hall and let him—or her—in. She might even have wished that no one should see the person.”

Martha looked troubled. She said at last reluctantly:

“Yes, you may be right, sir. I never thought of that. That she was expecting a gentleman—yes, it well might be.”

It was though she began to perceive advantages in the idea.

“You were the last person to see her, were you not?”

“Yes, sir. After I’d cleared away the tea. I took the receipted books to her and the change from the money she’d given me.”

“Had she given the money to you in five-pound notes?”

“A five-pound note, sir,” said Martha in a shocked voice. “The book never came up as high as five pounds. I’m very careful.”

“Where did she keep her money?”

“I don’t rightly know, sir. I should say that she carried it about with her—in her black velvet bag. But of course she may have kept it in one of the drawers in her bedroom that were locked. She was very fond of locking up things, though prone to lose her keys.”

Sir Edward nodded.

“You don’t know how much money she had—in five-pound notes, I mean?”

“No, sir, I couldn’t say what the exact amount was.”

“And she said nothing to you that could lead you to believe that she was expecting anybody?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re quite sure? What exactly did she say?”

“Well,” Martha considered, “she said the butcher was nothing more than a rogue and a cheat, and she said I’d had in a quarter of a pound of tea more than I ought, and she said Mrs. Crabtree was full of nonsense for not liking to eat margarine, and she didn’t like one of the sixpences I’d brought her back—one of the new ones with oak leaves on it—she said it was bad, and I had a lot of trouble to convince her. And she said—oh, that the fishmonger had sent haddocks instead of whittings, and had I told him about it, and I said I had—and, really, I think that’s all, sir.”

Martha’s speech had made the deceased lady loom clear to Sir Edward as a detailed description would never have done. He said casually:

“Rather a difficult mistress to please, eh?”

“A bit fussy, but there, poor dear, she didn’t often get out, and staying cooped up she had to have something to amuse herself like. She was pernickety but kindhearted—never a beggar sent away from the door without something. Fussy she may have been, but a real charitable lady.”

“I am glad, Martha, that she leaves one person to regret her.”

The old servant caught her breath.

“You mean—oh, but they were all fond of her—really—underneath. They all had words with her now and again, but it didn’t mean anything.”

Sir Edward lifted his head. There was a creak above.

“That’s Miss Magdalen coming down.”

“How do you know?” he shot at her.

The old woman flushed. “I know her step,” she muttered.

Sir Edward left the kitchen rapidly. Martha had been right. Magdalen had just reached the bottom stair. She looked at him hopefully.

“Not very far on as yet,” said Sir Edward, answering her look, and added, “You don’t happen to know what letters your aunt received on the day of her death?”

“They are all together. The police have been through them, of course.”

She led the way to the big double drawing room, and unlocking a drawer took out a large black velvet bag with an old-fashioned silver clasp.

“This is Aunt’s bag. Everything is in here just as it was on the day of her death. I’ve kept it like that.”

Sir Edward thanked her and proceeded to turn out the contents of the bag on the table. It was, he fancied, a fair specimen of an eccentric elderly lady’s handbag.

There was some odd silver change, two ginger nuts, three newspaper cuttings about Joanna Southcott’s box, a trashy printed poem about the unemployed, an Old Moore’s Almanack, a large piece of camphor, some spectacles and three letters. A spidery one from someone called “Cousin Lucy,” a bill for mending a watch, and an appeal from a charitable institution.

Sir Edward went through everything very carefully, then repacked the bag and handed it to Magdalen with a sigh.

“Thank you, Miss Magdalen. I’m afraid there isn’t much there.”

He rose, observed that from the window you commanded a good view of the front door steps, then took Magdalen’s hand in his.

“You are going?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s—it’s going to be all right?”

“Nobody connected with the law ever commits himself to a rash statement like that,” said Sir Edward solemnly, and made his escape.

He walked along the street lost in thought. The puzzle was there under his hand—and he had not solved it. It needed something—some little thing. Just to point the way.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he started. It was Matthew Vaughan, somewhat out of breath.

“I’ve been chasing you, Sir Edward. I want to apologize. For my rotten manners half an hour ago. But I’ve not got the best temper in the world, I’m afraid. It’s awfully good of you to bother about this business. Please ask me whatever you like. If there’s anything I can do to help—”

Suddenly Sir Edward stiffened. His glance was fixed—not on Matthew—but across the street. Somewhat bewildered, Matthew repeated:

“If there’s anything I can do to help—”

“You have already done it, my dear young man,” said Sir Edward. “By stopping me at this particular spot and so fixing my attention on something I might otherwise have missed.”

He pointed across the street to a small restaurant opposite.

“The Four and Twenty Blackbirds?” asked Matthew in a puzzled voice.

“Exactly.”

“It’s an odd name—but you get quite decent food there, I believe.”

“I shall not take the risk of experimenting,” said Sir Edward. “Being further from my nursery days than you are, my friend, I probably remember my nursery rhymes better. There is a classic that runs thus, if I remember rightly: Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye, Four and twenty blackbirds, baked in a pie—and so on. The rest of it does not concern us.”

He wheeled round sharply.

“Where are you going?” asked Matthew Vaughan.

“Back to your house, my friend.”

They walked there in silence, Matthew Vaughan shooting puzzled glances at his companion. Sir Edward entered, strode to a drawer, lifted out a velvet bag and opened it. He looked at Matthew and the young man reluctantly left the room.

Sir Edward tumbled out the silver change on the table. Then he nodded. His memory had not been at fault.

He got up and rang the bell, slipping something into the palm of his hand as he did so.

Martha answered the bell.

“You told me, Martha, if I remember rightly, that you had a slight altercation with your late mistress over one of the new sixpences.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ah! but the curious thing is, Martha, that among this loose change, there is no new sixpence. There are two sixpences, but they are both old ones.”

She stared at him in a puzzled fashion.

“You see what that means? Someone did come to the house that evening—someone to whom your mistress gave sixpence . . . I think she gave it him in exchange for this. . . .”

With a swift movement, he shot his hand forward, holding out the doggerel verse about unemployment.

One glance at her face was enough.

“The game is up, Martha—you see, I know. You may as well tell me everything.”

She sank down on a chair—the tears raced down her face.

“It’s true—it’s true—the bell didn’t ring properly—I wasn’t sure, and then I thought I’d better go and see. I got to the door just as he struck her down. The roll of five-pound notes was on the table in front of her—it was the sight of them as made him do it—that and thinking she was alone in the house as she’d let him in. I couldn’t scream. I was too paralysed and then he turned—and I saw it was my boy. . . .

“Oh, he’s been a bad one always. I gave him all the money I could. He’s been in gaol twice. He must have come around to see me, and then Miss Crabtree, seeing as I didn’t answer the door, went to answer it herself, and he was taken aback and pulled out one of those unemployment leaflets, and the mistress being kind of charitable, told him to come in and got out a sixpence. And all the time that roll of notes was lying on the table where it had been when I was giving her the change. And the devil got into my Ben and he got behind her and struck her down.”

“And then?” asked Sir Edward.

“Oh, sir, what could I do? My own flesh and blood. His father was a bad one, and Ben takes after him—but he was my own son. I hustled him out, and I went back to the kitchen and I went to lay for supper at the usual time.

Do you think it was very wicked of me, sir? I tried to tell you no lies when you was asking me questions.”

Sir Edward rose.

“My poor woman,” he said with feeling in his voice, “I am very sorry for you. All the same, the law will have to take its course, you know.”

“He’s fled the country, sir. I don’t know where he is.”

“There’s a chance, then, that he may escape the gallows, but don’t build upon it. Will you send Miss Magdalen to me.”

“Oh, Sir Edward. How wonderful of you—how wonderful you are,” said Magdalen when he had finished his brief recital. “You’ve saved us all. How can I ever thank you?”

Sir Edward smiled down at her and patted her hand gently. He was very much the great man. Little Magdalen had been very charming on the Siluric. That bloom of seventeen—wonderful! She had completely lost it now, of course.

“Next time you need a friend—” he said.

“I’ll come straight to you.”

“No, no,” cried Sir Edward in alarm. “That’s just what I don’t want you to do. Go to a younger man.”

He extricated himself with dexterity from the grateful household and hailing a taxi sank into it with a sigh of relief.

Even the charm of a dewy seventeen seemed doubtful.

It could not really compare with a really well-stocked library on criminology.

The taxi turned into Queen Anne’s Close.

His cul-de-sac.

Eight

MR. EASTWOOD'S ADVENTURE

“Mr. Eastwood’s Adventure” was first published as “The Mystery of the Second Cucumber” in The Novel Magazine, August 1924. It also appeared later as “The Mystery of the Spanish Shawl.”

Mr. Eastwood looked at the ceiling. Then he looked down at the floor. From the floor his gaze travelled slowly up the right-hand wall. Then, with a sudden stern effort, he focused his gaze once more upon the typewriter before him.

The virgin white of the sheet of paper was defaced by a title written in capital letters.

“THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER,” so it ran. A pleasing title. Anthony Eastwood felt that anyone reading that title would be at once intrigued and arrested by it. “The Mystery of the Second Cucumber,” they would say. “What can that be about? A cucumber? The second cucumber? I must certainly read that story.” And they would be thrilled and charmed by the consummate ease with which this master of detective fiction had woven an exciting plot round this simple vegetable.

That was all very well. Anthony Eastwood knew as well as anyone what the story ought to be like—the bother was that somehow or other he couldn’t get on with it. The two essentials for a story were a title and a plot—the rest was mere spadework, sometimes the title led to a plot all by itself, as it were, and then all was plain sailing—but in this case the title continued to adorn the top of the page, and not the vestige of a plot was forthcoming.

Again Anthony Eastwood’s gaze sought inspiration from the ceiling, the floor, and the wallpaper, and still nothing materialized.

“I shall call the heroine Sonia,” said Anthony, to urge himself on. “Sonia or possibly Dolores—she shall have a skin of ivory pallor—the kind that’s not due to ill health, and eyes like fathomless pools. The hero shall be called George, or possibly John—something short and British. Then the gardener—I suppose there will have to be a gardener, we’ve got to drag that beastly cucumber in somehow or other—the gardener might be Scottish, and amusingly pessimistic about the early frost.”

This method sometimes worked, but it didn’t seem to be going to this morning. Although Anthony could see Sonia and George and the comic gardener quite clearly, they didn’t show any willingness to be active and do things.

“I could make it a banana, of course,” thought Anthony desperately. “Or a lettuce, or a Brussels sprout—Brussels sprout, now, how about that? Really a cryptogram for Brussels—stolen bearer bonds—sinister Belgian Baron.”

For a moment a gleam of light seemed to show, but it died down again. The Belgian Baron wouldn’t materialize, and Anthony suddenly remembered that early frosts and cucumbers were incompatible, which seemed to put the lid on the amusing remarks of the Scottish gardener.

“Oh! Damn!” said Mr. Eastwood.

He rose and seized the Daily Mail. It was just possible that someone or other had been done to death in such a way as to lend inspiration to a perspiring author. But the news this morning was mainly political and foreign. Mr. Eastwood cast down the paper in disgust.

Next, seizing a novel from the table, he closed his eyes and dabbed his finger down on one of the pages. The word thus indicated by Fate was “sheep.” Immediately, with startling brilliance, a whole story unrolled itself in Mr. Eastwood’s brain. Lovely girl—lover killed in the war, her brain unhinged, tends sheep on the Scottish mountains—mystic meeting with dead lover, final effect of sheep and moonlight like Academy picture with girl lying dead in the snow, and two trails of footsteps. . . .

It was a beautiful story. Anthony came out of its conception with a sigh and a sad shake of the head. He knew only too well the editor in question did not want that kind of story—beautiful though it might be. The kind of story he wanted, and insisted on having (and incidentally paid handsomely for getting), was all about mysterious dark women, stabbed to the heart, a young hero unjustly suspected, and the sudden unravelling of the mystery and fixing of the guilt on the least likely person, by the means of wholly inadequate clues—in fact, “the mystery of the second cucumber.”

“Although,” reflected Anthony, “ten to one, he’ll alter the title and call it something rotten, like ‘Murder Most Foul’ without so much as asking me! Oh, curse that telephone.”

He strode angrily to it, and took down the receiver. Twice already in the last hour he had been summoned to it—once for a wrong number, and once to be roped in for dinner by a skittish society dame whom he hated bitterly, but who had been too pertinacious to defeat.

“Hallo!” he growled into the receiver.

A woman’s voice answered him, a soft caressing voice with a trace of foreign accent.

“Is that you, beloved?” it said softly.

“Well—er—I don’t know,” said Mr. Eastwood cautiously. “Who’s speaking?”

“It is I. Carmen. Listen, beloved. I am pursued—in danger—you must come at once. It is life or death now.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Eastwood politely. “I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong—”

She broke in before he could complete the sentence.

“Madre de Dios! They are coming. If they find out what I am doing, they will kill me. Do not fail me. Come at once. It is death for me if you don’t

come. You know, 320 Kirk Street. The word is cucumber . . . Hush. . . .”

He heard the faint click as she hung up the receiver at the other end.

“Well, I’m damned,” said Mr. Eastwood, very much astonished.

He crossed over to his tobacco jar, and filled his pipe carefully.

“I suppose,” he mused, “that that was some curious effect of my subconscious self. She can’t have said cucumber. The whole thing is very extraordinary. Did she say cucumber, or didn’t she?”

He strolled up and down, irresolutely.

“320 Kirk Street. I wonder what it’s all about? She’ll be expecting the other man to turn up. I wish I could have explained. 320 Kirk Street. The word is cucumber—oh, impossible, absurd—hallucination of a busy brain.”

He glanced malevolently at the typewriter.

“What good are you, I should like to know? I’ve been looking at you all the morning, and a lot of good it’s done me. An author should get his plot from life—from life, do you hear? I’m going out to get one now.”

He clapped a hat on his head, gazed affectionately at his priceless collection of old enamels, and left the flat.

Kirk Street, as most Londoners know, is a long, straggling thoroughfare, chiefly devoted to antique shops, where all kinds of spurious goods are offered at fancy prices. There are also old brass shops, glass shops, decayed secondhand shops and secondhand clothes dealers.

No. 320 was devoted to the sale of old glass. Glassware of all kinds filled it to overflowing. It was necessary for Anthony to move gingerly as he advanced up a centre aisle flanked by wine glasses and with lustres and chandeliers swaying and twinkling over his head. A very old lady was sitting at the back of the shop. She had a budding moustache that many an undergraduate might have envied, and a truculent manner.

She looked at Anthony and said, “Well?” in a forbidding voice.

Anthony was a young man somewhat easily discomposed. He immediately inquired the price of some hock glasses.

“Forty-five shillings for half a dozen.”

“Oh, really,” said Anthony. “Rather nice, aren’t they? How much are these things?”

“Beautiful, they are, old Waterford. Let you have the pair for eighteen guineas.”

Mr. Eastwood felt that he was laying up trouble for himself. In another minute he would be buying something, hypnotized by this fierce old woman’s eye. And yet he could not bring himself to leave the shop.

“What about that?” he asked, and pointed to a chandelier.

“Thirty-five guineas.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Eastwood regretfully. “That’s rather more than I can afford.”

“What do you want?” asked the old lady. “Something for a wedding present?”

“That’s it,” said Anthony, snatching at the explanation. “But they’re very difficult to suit.”

“Ah, well,” said the lady, rising with an air of determination. “A nice piece of old glass comes amiss to nobody. I’ve got a couple of old decanters here—and there’s a nice little liqueur set, just the thing for a bride—”

For the next ten minutes Anthony endured agonies. The lady had him firmly in hand. Every conceivable specimen of the glassmaker’s art was paraded before his eyes. He became desperate.

“Beautiful, beautiful,” he exclaimed in a perfunctory manner, as he put down a large goblet that was being forced on his attention. Then blurted out

hurriedly, “I say, are you on the telephone here?”

“No, we’re not. There’s a call office at the post office just opposite. Now, what do you say, the goblet—or these fine old rummers?”

Not being a woman, Anthony was quite unversed in the gentle art of getting out of a shop without buying anything.

“I’d better have the liqueur set,” he said gloomily.

It seemed the smallest thing. He was terrified of being landed with the chandelier.

With bitterness in his heart he paid for his purchase. And then, as the old lady was wrapping up the parcel, courage suddenly returned to him. After all, she would only think him eccentric, and, anyway, what the devil did it matter what she thought?

“Cucumber,” he said, clearly and firmly.

The old crone paused abruptly in her wrapping operations.

“Eh? What did you say?”

“Nothing,” lied Anthony defiantly.

“Oh! I thought you said cucumber.”

“So I did,” said Anthony defiantly.

“Well,” said the old lady. “Why ever didn’t you say that before? Wasting my time. Through that door there and upstairs. She’s waiting for you.”

As though in a dream, Anthony passed through the door indicated, and climbed some extremely dirty stairs. At the top of them a door stood ajar displaying a tiny sitting room.

Sitting on a chair, her eyes fixed on the door, and an expression of eager expectancy on her face, was a girl.

Such a girl! She really had the ivory pallor that Anthony had so often written about. And her eyes! Such eyes! She was not English, that could be seen at a glance. She had a foreign exotic quality which showed itself even in the costly simplicity of her dress.

Anthony paused in the doorway, somewhat abashed. The moment of explanations seemed to have arrived. But with a cry of delight the girl rose and flew into his arms.

“You have come,” she cried. “You have come. Oh, the saints and the Holy Madonna be praised.”

Anthony, never one to miss opportunities, echoed her fervently. She drew away at last, and looked up in his face with a charming shyness.

“I should never have known you,” she declared. “Indeed I should not.”

“Wouldn’t you?” said Anthony feebly.

“No, even your eyes seem different—and you are ten times handsomer than I ever thought you would be.”

“Am I?”

To himself Anthony was saying, “Keep calm, my boy, keep calm. The situation is developing very nicely, but don’t lose your head.”

“I may kiss you again, yes?”

“Of course you can,” said Anthony heartily. “As often as you like.”

There was a very pleasant interlude.

“I wonder who the devil I am?” thought Anthony. “I hope to goodness the real fellow won’t turn up. What a perfect darling she is.”

Suddenly the girl drew away from him, and a momentary terror showed in her face.

“You were not followed here?”

“Lord, no.”

“Ah, but they are very cunning. You do not know them as well as I do. Boris, he is a fiend.”

“I’ll soon settle Boris for you.”

“You are a lion—yes, but a lion. As for them, they are canaille—all of them. Listen, I have it! They would have killed me had they known. I was afraid—I did not know what to do, and then I thought of you . . . Hush, what was that?”

It was a sound in the shop below. Motioning to him to remain where he was, she tiptoed out on to the stairs. She returned with a white face and staring eyes.

“Madre de Dios! It is the police. They are coming up here. You have a knife? A revolver? Which?”

“My dear girl, you don’t expect me seriously to murder a policeman?”

“Oh, but you are mad—mad! They will take you away and hang you by the neck until you’re dead.”

“They’ll what?” said Mr. Eastwood, with a very unpleasant feeling going up and down his spine.

Steps sounded on the stair.

“Here they come,” whispered the girl. “Deny everything. It is the only hope.”

“That’s easy enough,” admitted Mr. Eastwood, sotto voce.

In another minute two men had entered the room. They were in plain clothes, but they had an official bearing that spoke of long training. The

smaller of the two, a little dark man with quiet grey eyes, was the spokesman.

“I arrest you, Conrad Fleckman,” he said, “for the murder of Anna Rosenberg. Anything you say will be used in evidence against you. Here is my warrant and you will do well to come quietly.”

A half-strangled scream burst from the girl’s lips. Anthony stepped forward with a composed smile.

“You are making a mistake, officer,” he said pleasantly. “My name is Anthony Eastwood.”

The two detectives seemed completely unimpressed by his statement.

“We’ll see about that later,” said one of them, the one who had not spoken before. “In the meantime, you come along with us.”

“Conrad,” wailed the girl. “Conrad, do not let them take you.”

Anthony looked at the detectives.

“You will permit me, I am sure, to say good-bye to this young lady?”

With more decency of feeling than he had expected, the two men moved towards the door. Anthony drew the girl into the corner by the window, and spoke to her in a rapid undertone.

“Listen to me. What I said was true. I am not Conrad Fleckman. When you rang up this morning, they must have given you the wrong number. My name is Anthony Eastwood. I came in answer to your appeal because—well, I came.”

She stared at him incredulously.

“You are not Conrad Fleckman?”

“No.”

“Oh!” she cried, with a deep accent of distress. “And I kissed you!”

“That’s all right,” Mr. Eastwood assured her. “The early Christians made a practice of that sort of thing. Jolly sensible. Now look here, I’ll tool off with these people. I shall soon prove my identity. In the meantime, they won’t worry you, and you can warn this precious Conrad of yours. Afterwards—”

“Yes?”

“Well—just this. My telephone number is North-western 1743—and mind they don’t give you the wrong one.”

She gave him an enchanting glance, half tears, half a smile.

“I shall not forget—indeed, I shall not forget.”

“That’s all right then. Good-bye. I say—”

“Yes?”

“Talking of the early Christians—once more wouldn’t matter, would it?”

She flung her arms round his neck. Her lips just touched his.

“I do like you—yes, I do like you. You will remember that, whatever happens, won’t you?”

Anthony disengaged himself reluctantly and approached his captors.

“I am ready to come with you. You don’t want to detain this young lady, I suppose?”

“No, sir, that will be quite all right,” said the small man civilly.

“Decent fellows, these Scotland Yard men,” thought Anthony to himself, as he followed them down the narrow stairway.

There was no sign of the old woman in the shop, but Anthony caught a heavy breathing from a door at the rear, and guessed that she stood behind

it, cautiously observing events.

Once out in the dinginess of Kirk Street, Anthony drew a long breath, and addressed the smaller of the two men.

“Now then, inspector—you are an inspector, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir. Detective-Inspector Verrall. This is Detective-Sergeant Carter.”

“Well, Inspector Verrall, the time has come to talk sense—and to listen to it too. I’m not Conrad What’s-his-name. My name is Anthony Eastwood, as I told you, and I am a writer by profession. If you will accompany me to my flat, I think that I shall be able to satisfy you of my identity.”

Something in the matter-of-fact way Anthony spoke seemed to impress the detectives. For the first time an expression of doubt passed over Verrall’s face.

Carter, apparently, was harder to convince.

“I daresay,” he sneered. “But you’ll remember the young lady was calling you ‘Conrad’ all right.”

“Ah! that’s another matter. I don’t mind admitting to you both that for—er—reasons of my own, I was passing myself off upon that lady as a person called Conrad. A private matter, you understand.”

“Likely story, isn’t it?” observed Carter. “No, sir, you come along with us. Hail that taxi, Joe.”

A passing taxi was stopped, and the three men got inside. Anthony made a last attempt, addressing himself to Verrall as the more easily convinced of the two.

“Look here, my dear inspector, what harm is it going to do you to come along to my flat and see if I’m speaking the truth? You can keep the taxi if you like—there’s a generous offer! It won’t make five minutes’ difference either way.”

Verrall looked at him searchingly.

“I’ll do it,” he said suddenly. “Strange as it appears, I believe you’re speaking the truth. We don’t want to make fools of ourselves at the station by arresting the wrong man. What’s the address?”

“Forty-eight Brandenburg Mansions.”

Verrall leant out and shouted the address to the taxi driver. All three sat in silence until they arrived at their destination, when Carter sprang out, and Verrall motioned to Anthony to follow him.

“No need for any unpleasantness,” he explained, as he, too, descended. “We’ll go in friendly like, as though Mr. Eastwood was bringing a couple of pals home.”

Anthony felt extremely grateful for the suggestion, and his opinion of the Criminal Investigation Department rose every minute.

In the hallway they were fortunate enough to meet Rogers, the porter. Anthony stopped.

“Ah! Good evening, Rogers,” he remarked casually.

“Good evening, Mr. Eastwood,” replied the porter respectfully.

He was attached to Anthony, who set an example of liberality not always followed by his neighbours.

Anthony paused with his foot on the bottom step of the stairs.

“By the way, Rogers,” he said casually. “How long have I been living here? I was just having a little discussion about it with these friends of mine.”

“Let me see, sir, it must be getting on for close on four years now.”

“Just what I thought.”

Anthony flung a glance of triumph at the two detectives. Carter grunted, but Verrall was smiling broadly.

“Good, but not good enough, sir,” he remarked. “Shall we go up?”

Anthony opened the door of the flat with his latchkey. He was thankful to remember that Seamark, his man, was out. The fewer witnesses of this catastrophe the better.

The typewriter was as he had left it. Carter strode across to the table and read the headline on the paper.

“THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER”

he announced in a gloomy voice.

“A story of mine,” explained Anthony nonchalantly.

“That’s another good point, sir,” said Verrall, nodding his head, his eyes twinkling. “By the way, sir, what was it about? What was the mystery of the second cucumber?”

“Ah, there you have me,” said Anthony. “It’s that second cucumber that’s been at the bottom of all this trouble.”

Carter was looking at him intently. Suddenly he shook his head and tapped his forehead significantly.

“Balmy, poor young fellow,” he murmured in an audible aside.

“Now, gentlemen,” said Mr. Eastwood briskly. “To business. Here are letters addressed to me, my bankbook, communications from editors. What more do you want?”

Verrall examined the papers that Anthony thrust upon him.

“Speaking for myself, sir,” he said respectfully, “I want nothing more. I’m quite convinced. But I can’t take the responsibility of releasing you upon myself. You see, although it seems positive that you have been residing here

as Mr. Eastwood for some years, yet it is possible that Conrad Fleckman and Anthony Eastwood are one and the same person. I must make a thorough search of the flat, take your fingerprints, and telephone to headquarters.”

“That seems a comprehensive programme,” remarked Anthony. “I can assure you that you’re welcome to any guilty secrets of mine you may lay your hands on.”

The inspector grinned. For a detective, he was a singularly human person.

“Will you go into the little end room, sir, with Carter, whilst I’m getting busy?”

“All right,” said Anthony unwillingly. “I suppose it couldn’t be the other way about, could it?”

“Meaning?”

“That you and I and a couple of whiskies and sodas should occupy the end room whilst our friend, the Sergeant, does the heavy searching.”

“If you prefer it, sir?”

“I do prefer it.”

They left Carter investigating the contents of the desk with businesslike dexterity. As they passed out of the room, they heard him take down the telephone and call up Scotland Yard.

“This isn’t so bad,” said Anthony, settling himself with a whisky and soda by his side, having hospitably attended to the wants of Inspector Verrall. “Shall I drink first, just to show you that the whisky isn’t poisoned?”

The inspector smiled.

“Very irregular, all this,” he remarked. “But we know a thing or two in our profession. I realized right from the start that we’d made a mistake. But of

course one had to observe all the usual forms. You can't get away from red tape, can you, sir?"

"I suppose not," said Anthony regretfully. "The sergeant doesn't seem very matey yet, though, does he?"

"Ah, he's a fine man, Detective-Sergeant Carter. You wouldn't find it easy to put anything over on him."

"I've noticed that," said Anthony.

"By the way, inspector," he added, "is there any objection to my hearing something about myself?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Come now, don't you realize that I'm devoured by curiosity? Who was Anna Rosenberg, and why did I murder her?"

"You'll read all about it in the newspapers tomorrow, sir."

"Tomorrow I may be Myself with Yesterday's ten thousand years," quoted Anthony. "I really think you might satisfy my perfectly legitimate curiosity, inspector. Cast aside your official reticence, and tell me all."

"It's quite irregular, sir."

"My dear inspector, when we are becoming such fast friends?"

"Well, sir, Anna Rosenberg was a German-Jewess who lived at Hampstead. With no visible means of livelihood, she grew yearly richer and richer."

"I'm just the opposite," commented Anthony. "I have a visible means of livelihood and I get yearly poorer and poorer. Perhaps I should do better if I lived in Hampstead. I've always heard Hampstead is very bracing."

"At one time," continued Verrall, "she was a secondhand clothes dealer—"

“That explains it,” interrupted Anthony. “I remember selling my uniform after the war—not khaki, the other stuff. The whole flat was full of red trousers and gold lace, spread out to best advantage. A fat man in a check suit arrived in a Rolls-Royce with a factotum complete with bag. He bid one pound ten for the lot. In the end I threw in a hunting coat and some Zeiss glasses to make up the two pounds, at a given signal the factotum opened the bag and shovelled the goods inside, and the fat man tendered me a ten-pound note and asked me for change.”

“About ten years ago,” continued the inspector, “there were several Spanish political refugees in London—amongst them a certain Don Fernando Ferrarez with his young wife and child. They were very poor, and the wife was ill. Anna Rosenberg visited the place where they were lodging and asked if they had anything to sell. Don Fernando was out, and his wife decided to part with a very wonderful Spanish shawl, embroidered in a marvellous manner, which had been one of her husband’s last presents to her before flying from Spain. When Don Fernando returned, he flew into a terrible rage on hearing the shawl had been sold, and tried vainly to recover it. When he at last succeeded in finding the secondhand clothes woman in question, she declared that she had resold the shawl to a woman whose name she did not know. Don Fernando was in despair. Two months later he was stabbed in the street and died as a result of his wounds. From that time onward, Anna Rosenberg seemed suspiciously flush of money. In the ten years that followed, her house was burgled no less than eight times. Four of the attempts were frustrated and nothing was taken, on the other four occasions, an embroidered shawl of some kind was amongst the booty.”

The inspector paused, and then went on in obedience to an urgent gesture from Anthony.

“A week ago, Carmen Ferrarez, the young daughter of Don Fernando, arrived in this country from a convent in France. Her first action was to seek out Anna Rosenberg at Hampstead. There she is reported to have had a violent scene with the old woman, and her words at leaving were overheard by one of the servants.

“ ‘You have it still,’ she cried. ‘All these years you have grown rich on it—but I say to you solemnly that in the end it will bring you bad luck. You

have no moral right to it, and the day will come when you will wish you had never seen the Shawl of the Thousand Flowers.’ ”

“Three days after that, Carmen Ferrarez disappeared mysteriously from the hotel where she was staying. In her room was found a name and address—the name of Conrad Fleckman, and also a note from a man purporting to be an antique dealer asking if she were disposed to part with a certain embroidered shawl which he believed she had in her possession. The address given on the note was a false one.

“It is clear that the shawl is the centre of the whole mystery. Yesterday morning Conrad Fleckman called upon Anna Rosenberg. She was shut up with him for an hour or more, and when he left she was obliged to go to bed, so white and shaken was she by the interview. But she gave orders that if he came to see her again he was always to be admitted. Last night she got up and went out about nine o’clock, and did not return. She was found this morning in the house occupied by Conrad Fleckman, stabbed through the heart. On the floor beside her was—what do you think?”

“The shawl?” breathed Anthony. “The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers.”

“Something far more gruesome than that. Something which explained the whole mysterious business of the shawl and made its hidden value clear . . . Excuse me, I fancy that’s the chief—”

There had indeed been a ring at the bell. Anthony contained his impatience as best he could and waited for the inspector to return. He was pretty well at ease about his own position now. As soon as they took the fingerprints they would realise their mistake.

And then, perhaps, Carmen would ring up. . . .

The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers! What a strange story—just the kind of story to make an appropriate setting for the girl’s exquisite dark beauty.

Carmen Ferrarez. . . .

He jerked himself back from day dreaming. What a time that inspector fellow was. He rose and pulled the door open. The flat was strangely silent. Could they have gone? Surely not without a word to him.

He strode out into the next room. It was empty—so was the sitting room. Strangely empty! It had a bare dishevelled appearance. Good heavens! His enamels—the silver!

He rushed wildly through the flat. It was the same tale everywhere. The place had been denuded. Every single thing of value, and Anthony had a very pretty collector's taste in small things, had been taken.

With a groan Anthony staggered to a chair, his head in his hands. He was aroused by the ringing of the front doorbell. He opened it to confront Rogers.

“You’ll excuse me, sir,” said Rogers. “But the gentlemen fancied you might be wanting something.”

“The gentlemen?”

“Those two friends of yours, sir. I helped them with the packing as best I could. Very fortunately I happened to have them two good cases in the basement.” His eyes dropped to the floor. “I’ve swept up the straw as best I could, sir.”

“You packed the things in here?” groaned Anthony.

“Yes, sir. Was that not your wishes, sir? It was the tall gentleman told me to do, sir, and seeing as you were busy talking to the other gentleman in the little end room, I didn’t like to disturb you.”

“I wasn’t talking to him,” said Anthony. “He was talking to me—curse him.”

Rogers coughed.

“I’m sure I’m very sorry for the necessity, sir,” he murmured.

“Necessity?”

“Of parting with your little treasures, sir.”

“Eh? Oh, yes. Ha, ha!” He gave a mirthless laugh. “They’ve driven off by now, I suppose. Those—those friends of mine, I mean?”

“Oh, yes, sir, some time ago. I put the cases on the taxi and the tall gentleman went upstairs again, and then they both came running down and drove off at once . . . Excuse me, sir, but is anything wrong, sir?”

Rogers might well ask. The hollow groan which Anthony emitted would have aroused surmise anywhere.

“Everything is wrong, thank you, Rogers. But I see clearly that you were not to blame. Leave me, I would commune a while with my telephone.”

Five minutes later saw Anthony pouring his tale into the ears of Inspector Driver, who sat opposite to him, notebook in hand. An unsympathetic man, Inspector Driver, and not (Anthony reflected) nearly so like a real inspector! Distinctly stagey, in fact. Another striking example of the superiority of Art over Nature.

Anthony reached the end of his tale. The inspector shut up his notebook.

“Well?” said Anthony anxiously.

“Clear as paint,” said the inspector. “It’s the Patterson gang. They’ve done a lot of smart work lately. Big fair man, small dark man, and the girl.”

“The girl?”

“Yes, dark and mighty good looking. Acts as a decoy usually.”

“A—a Spanish girl?”

“She might call herself that. She was born in Hampstead.”

“I said it was a bracing place,” murmured Anthony.

“Yes, it’s clear enough,” said the inspector, rising to depart. “She got you on the phone and pitched you a tale—she guessed you’d come along all right. Then she goes along to old Mother Gibson’s who isn’t above accepting a tip for the use of her room for them as finds it awkward to meet in public—lovers, you understand, nothing criminal. You fall for it all right, they get you back here, and while one of them pitches you a tale, the other gets away with the swag. It’s the Pattersons all right—just their touch.”

“And my things?” said Anthony anxiously.

“We’ll do what we can, sir. But the Pattersons are uncommon sharp.”

“They seem to be,” said Anthony bitterly.

The inspector departed, and scarcely had he gone before there came a ring at the door. Anthony opened it. A small boy stood there, holding a package.

“Parcel for you, sir.”

Anthony took it with some surprise. He was not expecting a parcel of any kind. Returning to the sitting room with it, he cut the string.

It was the liqueur set!

“Damn!” said Anthony.

Then he noticed that at the bottom of one of the glasses there was a tiny artificial rose. His mind flew back to the upper room in Kirk Street.

“I do like you—yes, I do like you. You will remember that whatever happens, won’t you?”

That was what she had said. Whatever happens . . . Did she mean—

Anthony took hold of himself sternly.

“This won’t do,” he admonished himself.

His eye fell on the typewriter, and he sat down with a resolute face.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER

His face grew dreamy again. The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers. What was it that was found on the floor beside the dead body? The gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery?

Nothing, of course, since it was only a trumped-up tale to hold his attention, and the teller had used the old Arabian Nights' trick of breaking off at the most interesting point. But couldn't there be a gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery? couldn't there now? If one gave one's mind to it?

Anthony tore the sheet of paper from his typewriter and substituted another. He typed a headline:

THE MYSTERY OF THE SPANISH SHAWL

He surveyed it for a moment or two in silence.

Then he began to type rapidly. . . .

Nine

PHILOMEL COTTAGE

“Philomel Cottage” was first published in Grand Magazine, November 1924.

Good-bye, darling.”

“Good-bye, sweetheart.”

Alix Martin stood leaning over the small rustic gate, watching the retreating figure of her husband as he walked down the road in the direction of the village.

Presently he turned a bend and was lost to sight, but Alix still stayed in the same position, absentmindedly smoothing a lock of the rich brown hair which had blown across her face, her eyes far away and dreamy.

Alix Martin was not beautiful, nor even, strictly speaking, pretty. But her face, the face of a woman no longer in her first youth, was irradiated and softened until her former colleagues of the old office days would hardly have recognized her. Miss Alex King had been a trim businesslike young woman, efficient, slightly brusque in manner, obviously capable and matter-of-fact.

Alix had graduated in a hard school. For fifteen years, from the age of eighteen until she was thirty-three, she had kept herself (and for seven years of the time an invalid mother) by her work as a shorthand typist. It was the struggle for existence which had hardened the soft lines of her girlish face.

True, there had been romance—of a kind—Dick Windyford, a fellow clerk. Very much of a woman at heart, Alix had always known without seeming to know that he cared. Outwardly they had been friends, nothing more. Out of

his slender salary Dick had been hard put to it to provide for the schooling of a younger brother. For the moment he could not think of marriage.

And then suddenly deliverance from daily toil had come to the girl in the most unexpected manner. A distant cousin had died, leaving her money to Alix—a few thousand pounds, enough to bring in a couple of hundred a year. To Alix it was freedom, life, independence. Now she and Dick need wait no longer.

But Dick reacted unexpectedly. He had never directly spoken of his love to Alix; now he seemed less inclined to do so than ever. He avoided her, became morose and gloomy. Alix was quick to realize the truth. She had become a woman of means. Delicacy and pride stood in the way of Dick's asking her to be his wife.

She liked him none the worse for it, and was indeed deliberating as to whether she herself might not take the first step, when for the second time the unexpected descended upon her.

She met Gerald Martin at a friend's house. He fell violently in love with her and within a week they were engaged. Alix, who had always considered herself "not the falling-in-love kind," was swept clean off her feet.

Unwittingly she had found the way to arouse her former lover. Dick Windyford had come to her stammering with rage and anger.

"The man's a perfect stranger to you! You know nothing about him!"

"I know that I love him."

"How can you know—in a week?"

"It doesn't take everyone eleven years to find out that they're in love with a girl," cried Alix angrily.

His face went white.

"I've cared for you ever since I met you. I thought that you cared also."

Alix was truthful.

“I thought so too,” she admitted. “But that was because I didn’t know what love was.”

Then Dick had burst out again. Prayers, entreaties, even threats—threats against the man who had supplanted him. It was amazing to Alix to see the volcano that existed beneath the reserved exterior of the man she had thought she knew so well.

Her thoughts went back to that interview now, on this sunny morning, as she leant on the gate of the cottage. She had been married a month, and she was idyllically happy. Yet, in the momentary absence of the husband who was everything to her, a tinge of anxiety invaded her perfect happiness. And the cause of that anxiety was Dick Windyford.

Three times since her marriage she had dreamed the same dream. The environment differed, but the main facts were always the same. She saw her husband lying dead and Dick Windyford standing over him, and she knew clearly and distinctly that his was the hand which had dealt the fatal blow.

But horrible though that was, there was something more horrible still—horrible, that was, on awakening, for in the dream it seemed perfectly natural and inevitable. She, Alix Martin, was glad that her husband was dead; she stretched out grateful hands to the murderer, sometimes she thanked him. The dream always ended the same way, with herself clasped in Dick Windyford’s arms.

She had said nothing of this dream to her husband, but secretly it had perturbed her more than she liked to admit. Was it a warning—a warning against Dick Windyford?

Alix was roused from her thoughts by the sharp ringing of the telephone bell from within the house. She entered the cottage and picked up the receiver. Suddenly she swayed, and put out a hand against the wall.

“Who did you say was speaking?”

“Why, Alix, what’s the matter with your voice? I wouldn’t have known it. It’s Dick.”

“Oh!” said Alix. “Oh! Where—where are you?”

“At the Traveller’s Arms—that’s the right name, isn’t it? Or don’t you even know of the existence of your village pub? I’m on my holiday—doing a bit of fishing here. Any objection to my looking you two good people up this evening after dinner?”

“No,” said Alix sharply. “You mustn’t come.”

There was a pause, and then Dick’s voice, with a subtle alteration in it, spoke again.

“I beg your pardon,” he said formally. “Of course I won’t bother you—”

Alix broke in hastily. He must think her behaviour too extraordinary. It was extraordinary. Her nerves must be all to pieces.

“I only meant that we were—engaged tonight,” she explained, trying to make her voice sound as natural as possible. “Won’t you—won’t you come to dinner tomorrow night?”

But Dick evidently noticed the lack of cordiality in her tone.

“Thanks very much,” he said, in the same formal voice, “but I may be moving on any time. Depends if a pal of mine turns up or not. Good-bye, Alix.” He paused, and then added hastily, in a different tone: “Best of luck to you, my dear.”

Alix hung up the receiver with a feeling of relief.

“He mustn’t come here,” she repeated to herself. “He mustn’t come here. Oh, what a fool I am! To imagine myself into a state like this. All the same, I’m glad he’s not coming.”

She caught up a rustic rush hat from a table, and passed out into the garden again, pausing to look up at the name carved over the porch: Philomel

Cottage.

“Isn’t it a very fanciful name?” she had said to Gerald once before they were married. He had laughed.

“You little Cockney,” he had said, affectionately. “I don’t believe you have ever heard a nightingale. I’m glad you haven’t. Nightingales should sing only for lovers. We’ll hear them together on a summer’s evening outside our own home.”

And at the remembrance of how they had indeed heard them, Alix, standing in the doorway of her home, blushed happily.

It was Gerald who had found Philomel Cottage. He had come to Alix bursting with excitement. He had found the very spot for them—unique—a gem—the chance of a lifetime. And when Alix had seen it she too was captivated. It was true that the situation was rather lonely—they were two miles from the nearest village—but the cottage itself was so exquisite with its old-world appearance, and its solid comfort of bathrooms, hot-water system, electric light, and telephone, that she fell a victim to its charm immediately. And then a hitch occurred. The owner, a rich man who had made it his whim, declined to let it. He would only sell.

Gerald Martin, though possessed of a good income, was unable to touch his capital. He could raise at most a thousand pounds. The owner was asking three. But Alix, who had set her heart on the place, came to the rescue. Her own capital was easily realized, being in bearer bonds. She would contribute half of it to the purchase of the home. So Philomel Cottage became their very own, and never for a minute had Alix regretted the choice. It was true that servants did not appreciate the rural solitude—indeed, at the moment they had none at all—but Alix, who had been starved of domestic life, thoroughly enjoyed cooking dainty little meals and looking after the house.

The garden, which was magnificently stocked with flowers, was attended by an old man from the village who came twice a week.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Alix was surprised to see the old gardener in question busy over the flower beds. She was surprised because his days for work were Mondays and Fridays, and today was Wednesday.

“Why, George, what are you doing here?” she asked, as she came towards him.

The old man straightened up with a chuckle, touching the brim of an aged cap.

“I thought as how you’d be surprised, ma’am. But ’tis this way. There be a fête over to Squire’s on Friday, and I sez to myself, I sez, neither Mr. Martin nor yet his good lady won’t take it amiss if I comes for once on a Wednesday instead of a Friday.”

“That’s quite all right,” said Alix. “I hope you’ll enjoy yourself at the fête.”

“I reckon to,” said George simply. “It’s a fine thing to be able to eat your fill and know all the time as it’s not you as is paying for it. Squire allus has a proper sit-down tea for ’is tenants. Then I thought too, ma’am, as I might as well see you before you goes away so as to learn your wishes for the borders. You have no idea when you’ll be back, ma’am, I suppose?”

“But I’m not going away.”

George stared.

“Bain’t you going to Lunnon tomorrow?”

“No. What put such an idea into your head?”

George jerked his head over his shoulder.

“Met Maister down to village yesterday. He told me you was both going away to Lunnon tomorrow, and it was uncertain when you’d be back again.”

“Nonsense,” said Alix, laughing. “You must have misunderstood him.”

All the same, she wondered exactly what it could have been that Gerald had said to lead the old man into such a curious mistake. Going to London? She never wanted to go to London again.

“I hate London,” she said suddenly and harshly.

“Ah!” said George placidly. “I must have been mistook somehow, and yet he said it plain enough, it seemed to me. I’m glad you’re stopping on here. I don’t hold with all this gallivanting about, and I don’t think nothing of Lunnon. I’ve never needed to go there. Too many moty cars—that’s the trouble nowadays. Once people have got a moty car, blessed if they can stay still anywheres. Mr. Ames, wot used to have this house—nice peaceful sort of gentleman he was until he bought one of them things. Hadn’t had it a month before he put up this cottage for sale. A tidy lot he’d spent on it too, with taps in all the bedrooms, and the electric light and all. ‘You’ll never see your money back,’ I sez to him. ‘But,’ he sez to me, ‘I’ll get every penny of two thousand pounds for this house.’ And, sure enough, he did.”

“He got three thousand,” said Alix, smiling.

“Two thousand,” repeated George. “The sum he was asking was talked of at the time.”

“It really was three thousand,” said Alix.

“Ladies never understand figures,” said George, unconvinced. “You’ll not tell me that Mr. Ames had the face to stand up to you and say three thousand brazenlike in a loud voice?”

“He didn’t say it to me,” said Alix; “he said it to my husband.”

George stooped again to his flower bed.

“The price was two thousand,” he said obstinately.

Alix did not trouble to argue with him. Moving to one of the farther beds, she began to pick an armful of flowers.

As she moved with her fragrant posy towards the house, Alix noticed a small dark green object peeping from between some leaves in one of the beds. She stooped and picked it up, recognizing it for her husband's pocket diary.

She opened it, scanning the entries with some amusement. Almost from the beginning of their married life she had realized that the impulsive and emotional Gerald had the uncharacteristic virtues of neatness and method. He was extremely fussy about meals being punctual, and always planned his day ahead with the accuracy of a timetable.

Looking through the diary, she was amused to notice the entry on the date of May 14th: "Marry Alix St. Peter's 2:30."

"The big silly," murmured Alix to herself, turning the pages. Suddenly she stopped.

" 'Wednesday, June 18th'—why, that's today."

In the space for that day was written in Gerald's neat, precise hand: "9 p.m." Nothing else. What had Gerald planned to do at 9 p.m.? Alix wondered. She smiled to herself as she realized that had this been a story, like those she had so often read, the diary would doubtless have furnished her with some sensational revelation. It would have had in it for certain the name of another woman. She fluttered the back pages idly. There were dates, appointments, cryptic references to business deals, but only one woman's name—her own.

Yet as she slipped the book into her pocket and went on with her flowers to the house, she was aware of a vague uneasiness. Those words of Dick Windyford's recurred to her almost as though he had been at her elbow repeating them: "The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

It was true. What did she know about him? After all, Gerald was forty. In forty years there must have been women in his life. . . .

Alix shook herself impatiently. She must not give way to these thoughts. She had a far more instant preoccupation to deal with. Should she, or should she not, tell her husband that Dick Windyford had rung her up?

There was the possibility to be considered that Gerald might have already run across him in the village. But in that case he would be sure to mention it to her immediately upon his return, and matters would be taken out of her hands. Otherwise—what? Alix was aware of a distinct desire to say nothing about it.

If she told him, he was sure to suggest asking Dick Windyford to Philomel Cottage. Then she would have to explain that Dick had proposed himself, and that she had made an excuse to prevent his coming. And when he asked her why she had done so, what could she say? Tell him her dream? But he would only laugh—or worse, see that she attached an importance to it which he did not.

In the end, rather shamefacedly, Alix decided to say nothing. It was the first secret she had ever kept from her husband, and the consciousness of it made her feel ill at ease.

When she heard Gerald returning from the village shortly before lunch, she hurried into the kitchen and pretended to be busy with the cooking so as to hide her confusion.

It was evident at once that Gerald had seen nothing of Dick Windyford. Alix felt at once relieved and embarrassed. She was definitely committed now to a policy of concealment.

It was not until after their simple evening meal, when they were sitting in the oak-benched living room with the windows thrown open to let in the sweet night air scented with the perfume of the mauve and white stocks outside, that Alix remembered the pocket diary.

“Here’s something you’ve been watering the flowers with,” she said, and threw it into his lap.

“Dropped it in the border, did I?”

“Yes; I know all your secrets now.”

“Not guilty,” said Gerald, shaking his head.

“What about your assignation at nine o’clock tonight?”

“Oh! that—” he seemed taken aback for a moment, then he smiled as though something afforded him particular amusement. “It’s an assignation with a particularly nice girl, Alix. She’s got brown hair and blue eyes, and she’s very like you.”

“I don’t understand,” said Alix, with mock severity. “You’re evading the point.”

“No, I’m not. As a matter of fact, that’s a reminder that I’m going to develop some negatives tonight, and I want you to help me.”

Gerald Martin was an enthusiastic photographer. He had a somewhat old-fashioned camera, but with an excellent lens, and he developed his own plates in a small cellar which he had had fitted up as a darkroom.

“And it must be done at nine o’clock precisely,” said Alix teasingly.

Gerald looked a little vexed.

“My dear girl,” he said, with a shade of testiness in his manner, “one should always plan a thing for a definite time. Then one gets through one’s work properly.”

Alix sat for a minute or two in silence, watching her husband as he lay in his chair smoking, his dark head flung back and the clear-cut lines of his clean-shaven face showing up against the sombre background. And suddenly, from some unknown source, a wave of panic surged over her, so that she cried out before she could stop herself, “Oh, Gerald, I wish I knew more about you!”

Her husband turned an astonished face upon her.

“But, my dear Alix, you do know all about me. I’ve told you of my boyhood in Northumberland, of my life in South Africa, and these last ten years in Canada which have brought me success.”

“Oh! business!” said Alix scornfully.

Gerald laughed suddenly.

“I know what you mean—love affairs. You women are all the same. Nothing interests you but the personal element.”

Alix felt her throat go dry, as she muttered indistinctly: “Well, but there must have been—love affairs. I mean—if I only knew—”

There was silence again for a minute or two. Gerald Martin was frowning, a look of indecision on his face. When he spoke it was gravely, without a trace of his former bantering manner.

“Do you think it wise, Alix—this—Bluebeard’s chamber business? There have been women in my life; yes, I don’t deny it. You wouldn’t believe me if I denied it. But I can swear to you truthfully that not one of them meant anything to me.”

There was a ring of sincerity in his voice which comforted the listening wife.

“Satisfied, Alix?” he asked, with a smile. Then he looked at her with a shade of curiosity.

“What has turned your mind on to these unpleasant subjects, tonight of all nights?”

Alix got up, and began to walk about restlessly.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve been nervy all day.”

“That’s odd,” said Gerald, in a low voice, as though speaking to himself. “That’s very odd.”

“Why it it odd?”

“Oh, my dear girl, don’t flash out at me so. I only said it was odd, because, as a rule, you’re so sweet and serene.”

Alix forced a smile.

“Everything’s conspired to annoy me today,” she confessed. “Even old George had got some ridiculous idea into his head that we were going away to London. He said you had told him so.”

“Where did you see him?” asked Gerald sharply.

“He came to work today instead of Friday.”

“Damned old fool,” said Gerald angrily.

Alix stared in surprise. Her husband’s face was convulsed with rage. She had never seen him so angry. Seeing her astonishment Gerald made an effort to regain control of himself.

“Well, he is a damned old fool,” he protested.

“What can you have said to make him think that?”

“I? I never said anything. At least—oh, yes, I remember; I made some weak joke about being ‘off to London in the morning,’ and I suppose he took it seriously. Or else he didn’t hear properly. You undeceived him, of course?”

He waited anxiously for her reply.

“Of course, but he’s the sort of old man who if once he gets an idea in his head—well, it isn’t so easy to get it out again.”

Then she told him of George’s insistence on the sum asked for the cottage.

Gerald was silent for a minute or two, then he said slowly:

“Ames was willing to take two thousand in cash and the remaining thousand on mortgage. That’s the origin of that mistake, I fancy.”

“Very likely,” agreed Alix.

Then she looked up at the clock, and pointed to it with a mischievous finger.

“We ought to be getting down to it, Gerald. Five minutes behind schedule.”

A very peculiar smile came over Gerald Martin’s face.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he said quietly; “I shan’t do any photography tonight.”

A woman’s mind is a curious thing. When she went to bed that Wednesday night Alix’s mind was contented and at rest. Her momentarily assailed happiness reasserted itself, triumphant as of yore.

But by the evening of the following day she realized that some subtle forces were at work undermining it. Dick Windyford had not rung up again, nevertheless she felt what she supposed to be his influence at work. Again and again those words of his recurred to her: “The man’s a perfect stranger. You know nothing about him.” And with them came the memory of her husband’s face, photographed clearly on her brain, as he said, “Do you think it wise, Alix, this—Bluebeard’s chamber business?” Why had he said that?

There had been warning in them—a hint of menace. It was as though he had said in effect: “You had better not pry into my life, Alix. You may get a nasty shock if you do.”

By Friday morning Alix had convinced herself that there had been a woman in Gerald’s life—a Bluebeard’s chamber that he had sedulously sought to conceal from her. Her jealousy, slow to awaken, was now rampant.

Was it a woman he had been going to meet that night at 9 p.m.? Was his story of photographs to develop a lie invented upon the spur of the

moment?

Three days ago she would have sworn that she knew her husband through and through. Now it seemed to her that he was a stranger of whom she knew nothing. She remembered his unreasonable anger against old George, so at variance with his usual good-tempered manner. A small thing, perhaps, but it showed her that she did not really know the man who was her husband.

There were several little things required on Friday from the village. In the afternoon Alix suggested that she should go for them whilst Gerald remained in the garden; but somewhat to her surprise he opposed this plan vehemently, and insisted on going himself whilst she remained at home. Alix was forced to give way to him, but his insistence surprised and alarmed her. Why was he so anxious to prevent her going to the village?

Suddenly an explanation suggested itself to her which made the whole thing clear. Was it not possible that, whilst saying nothing to her, Gerald had indeed come across Dick Windyford? Her own jealousy, entirely dormant at the time of their marriage, had only developed afterwards. Might it not be the same with Gerald? Might he not be anxious to prevent her seeing Dick Windyford again? This explanation was so consistent with the facts, and so comforting to Alix's perturbed mind, that she embraced it eagerly.

Yet when teatime had come and passed she was restless and ill at ease. She was struggling with a temptation that had assailed her ever since Gerald's departure. Finally, pacifying her conscience with the assurance that the room did need a thorough tidying, she went upstairs to her husband's dressing room. She took a duster with her to keep up the pretence of housewifery.

"If I were only sure," she repeated to herself. "If I could only be sure."

In vain she told herself that anything compromising would have been destroyed ages ago. Against that she argued that men do sometimes keep the most damning piece of evidence through an exaggerated sentimentality.

In the end Alix succumbed. Her cheeks burning with the shame of her action, she hunted breathlessly through packets of letters and documents, turned out the drawers, even went through the pockets of her husband's clothes. Only two drawers eluded her; the lower drawer of the chest of drawers and the small right-hand drawer of the writing desk were both locked. But Alix was by now lost to all shame. In one of these drawers she was convinced that she would find evidence of this imaginary woman of the past who obsessed her.

She remembered that Gerald had left his keys lying carelessly on the sideboard downstairs. She fetched them and tried them one by one. The third key fitted the writing table drawer. Alix pulled it open eagerly. There was a chequebook and a wallet well stuffed with notes, and at the back of the drawer a packet of letters tied up with a piece of tape.

Her breath coming unevenly, Alix untied the tape. Then a deep burning blush overspread her face, and she dropped the letters back into the drawer, closing and relocking it. For the letters were her own, written to Gerald Martin before she married him.

She turned now to the chest of drawers, more with a wish to feel that she had left nothing undone than from any expectation of finding what she sought.

To her annoyance none of the keys on Gerald's bunch fitted the drawer in question. Not to be defeated, Alix went into the other rooms and brought back a selection of keys with her. To her satisfaction the key of the spare room wardrobe also fitted the chest of drawers. She unlocked the drawer and pulled it open. But there was nothing in it but a roll of newspaper clippings already dirty and discoloured with age.

Alix breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, she glanced at the clippings, curious to know what subject had interested Gerald so much that he had taken the trouble to keep the dusty roll. They were nearly all American papers, dated some seven years ago, and dealing with the trial of the notorious swindler and bigamist, Charles Lemaitre. Lemaitre had been suspected of doing away with his women victims. A skeleton had been

found beneath the floor of one of the houses he had rented, and most of the women he had “married” had never been heard of again.

He had defended himself from the charges with consummate skill, aided by some of the best legal talent in the United States. The Scottish verdict of “Not Proven” might perhaps have stated the case best. In its absence, he was found Not Guilty on the capital charge, though sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the other charges preferred against him.

Alix remembered the excitement caused by the case at the time, and also the sensation aroused by the escape of Lemaitre some three years later. He had never been recaptured. The personality of the man and his extraordinary power over women had been discussed at great length in the English papers at the time, together with an account of his excitability in court, his passionate protestations, and his occasional sudden physical collapses, due to the fact that he had a weak heart, though the ignorant accredited it to his dramatic powers.

There was a picture of him in one of the clippings Alix held, and she studied it with some interest—a long-bearded, scholarly-looking gentleman.

Who was it the face reminded her of? Suddenly, with a shock, she realized that it was Gerald himself. The eyes and brow bore a strong resemblance to his. Perhaps he had kept the cutting for that reason. Her eyes went on to the paragraph beside the picture. Certain dates, it seemed, had been entered in the accused’s pocketbook, and it was contended that these were dates when he had done away with his victims. Then a woman gave evidence and identified the prisoner positively by the fact that he had a mole on his left wrist, just below the palm of the hand.

Alix dropped the papers and swayed as she stood. On his left wrist, just below the palm, her husband had a small scar . . .

The room whirled round her. Afterwards it struck her as strange that she should have leaped at once to such absolute certainty. Gerald Martin was Charles Lemaitre! She knew it, and accepted it in a flash. Disjointed fragments whirled through her brain, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting into place.

The money paid for the house—her money—her money only; the bearer bonds she had entrusted to his keeping. Even her dream appeared in its true significance. Deep down in her, her subconscious self had always feared Gerald Martin and wished to escape from him. And it was to Dick Windyford this self of hers had looked for help. That, too, was why she was able to accept the truth too easily, without doubt or hesitation. She was to have been another of Lemaitre's victims. Very soon, perhaps. . . .

A half cry escaped her as she remembered something. Wednesday, 9 p.m. The cellar, with the flagstones that were so easily raised! Once before he had buried one of his victims in a cellar. It had been all planned for Wednesday night. But to write it down beforehand in that methodical manner—insanity! No, it was logical. Gerald always made a memorandum of his engagements; murder was to him a business proposition like any other.

But what had saved her? What could possibly have saved her? Had he relented at the last minute? No. In a flash the answer came to her—old George.

She understood now her husband's uncontrollable anger. Doubtless he had paved the way by telling everyone he met that they were going to London the next day. Then George had come to work unexpectedly, had mentioned London to her, and she had contradicted the story. Too risky to do away with her that night, with old George repeating that conversation. But what an escape! If she had not happened to mention that trivial matter—Alix shuddered.

And then she stayed motionless as though frozen to stone. She had heard the creak of the gate into the road. Her husband had returned.

For a moment Alix stayed as though petrified, then she crept on tiptoe to the window, looking out from behind the shelter of the curtain.

Yes, it was her husband. He was smiling to himself and humming a little tune. In his hand he held an object which almost made the terrified girl's heart stop beating. It was a brand-new spade.

Alix leaped to a knowledge born of instinct. It was to be tonight . . .

But there was still a chance. Gerald, humming his little tune, went round to the back of the house.

Without hesitating a moment, she ran down the stairs and out of the cottage. But just as she emerged from the door, her husband came round the other side of the house.

“Hallo,” he said, “where are you running off to in such a hurry?”

Alix strove desperately to appear calm and as usual. Her chance was gone for the moment, but if she was careful not to arouse his suspicions, it would come again later. Even now, perhaps. . . .

“I was going to walk to the end of the lane and back,” she said in a voice that sounded weak and uncertain in her own ears.

“Right,” said Gerald. “I’ll come with you.”

“No—please, Gerald. I’m—nervy, headachy—I’d rather go alone.”

He looked at her attentively. She fancied a momentary suspicion gleamed in his eye.

“What’s the matter with you, Alix? You’re pale—trembling.”

“Nothing.” She forced herself to be brusque—smiling. “I’ve got a headache, that’s all. A walk will do me good.”

“Well, it’s no good your saying you don’t want me,” declared Gerald, with his easy laugh. “I’m coming, whether you want me or not.”

She dared not protest further. If he suspected that she knew. . . .

With an effort she managed to regain something of her normal manner. Yet she had an uneasy feeling that he looked at her sideways every now and then, as though not quite satisfied. She felt that his suspicions were not completely allayed.

When they returned to the house he insisted on her lying down, and brought some eau-de-Cologne to bathe her temples. He was, as ever, the devoted husband. Alix felt herself as helpless as though bound hand and foot in a trap.

Not for a minute would he leave her alone. He went with her into the kitchen and helped her to bring in the simple cold dishes she had already prepared. Supper was a meal that choked her, yet she forced herself to eat, and even to appear gay and natural. She knew now that she was fighting for her life. She was alone with this man, miles from help, absolutely at his mercy. Her only chance was so to lull his suspicions that he would leave her alone for a few moments—long enough for her to get to the telephone in the hall and summon assistance. That was her only hope now.

A momentary hope flashed over her as she remembered how he had abandoned his plan before. Suppose she told him that Dick Windyford was coming up to see them that evening?

The words trembled on her lips—then she rejected them hastily. This man would not be baulked a second time. There was a determination, an elation, underneath his calm bearing that sickened her. She would only precipitate the crime. He would murder her there and then, and calmly ring up Dick Windyford with a tale of having been suddenly called away. Oh! if only Dick Windyford were coming to the house this evening! If Dick. . . .

A sudden idea flashed into her mind. She looked sharply sideways at her husband as though she feared that he might read her mind. With the forming of a plan, her courage was reinforced. She became so completely natural in manner that she marvelled at herself.

She made the coffee and took it out to the porch where they often sat on fine evenings.

“By the way,” said Gerald suddenly, “we’ll do those photographs later.”

Alix felt a shiver run through her, but she replied nonchalantly, “Can’t you manage alone? I’m rather tired tonight.”

“It won’t take long.” He smiled to himself. “And I can promise you you won’t be tired afterwards.”

The words seemed to amuse him. Alix shuddered. Now or never was the time to carry out her plan.

She rose to her feet.

“I’m just going to telephone to the butcher,” she announced nonchalantly. “Don’t you bother to move.”

“To the butcher? At this time of night?”

“His shop’s shut, of course, silly. But he’s in his house all right. And tomorrow’s Saturday, and I want him to bring me some veal cutlets early, before someone else grabs them off him. The old dear will do anything for me.”

She passed quickly into the house, closing the door behind her. She heard Gerald say, “Don’t shut the door,” and was quick with her light reply, “It keeps the moths out. I hate moths. Are you afraid I’m going to make love to the butcher, silly?”

Once inside, she snatched down the telephone receiver and gave the number of the Traveller’s Arms. She was put through at once.

“Mr. Windyford? Is he still there? Can I speak to him?”

Then her heart gave a sickening thump. The door was pushed open and her husband came into the hall.

“Do go away, Gerald,” she said pettishly. “I hate anyone listening when I’m telephoning.”

He merely laughed and threw himself into a chair.

“Sure it really is the butcher you’re telephoning to?” he quizzed.

Alix was in despair. Her plan had failed. In a minute Dick Windyford would come to the phone. Should she risk all and cry out an appeal for help?

And then, as she nervously depressed and released the little key in the receiver she was holding, which permits the voice to be heard or not heard at the other end, another plan flashed into her head.

“It will be difficult,” she thought to herself. “It means keeping my head, and thinking of the right words, and not faltering for a moment, but I believe I could do it. I must do it.”

And at that minute she heard Dick Windyford’s voice at the other end of the phone.

Alix drew a deep breath. Then she depressed the key firmly and spoke.

“Mrs. Martin speaking—from Philomel Cottage. Please come (she released the key) tomorrow morning with six nice veal cutlets (she depressed the key again). It’s very important (she released the key). Thank you so much, Mr. Hexworthy: you won’t mind my ringing you up so late. I hope, but those veal cutlets are really a matter of (she depressed the key again) life or death (she released it). Very well—tomorrow morning (she depressed it) as soon as possible.”

She replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to face her husband, breathing hard.

“So that’s how you talk to your butcher, is it?” said Gerald.

“It’s the feminine touch,” said Alix lightly.

She was simmering with excitement. He had suspected nothing. Dick, even if he didn’t understand, would come.

She passed into the sitting room and switched on the electric light. Gerald followed her.

“You seem very full of spirits now?” he said, watching her curiously.

“Yes,” said Alix. “My headache’s gone.”

She sat down in her usual seat and smiled at her husband as he sank into his own chair opposite her. She was saved. It was only five and twenty past eight. Long before nine o’clock Dick would have arrived.

“I didn’t think much of that coffee you gave me,” complained Gerald. “It tasted very bitter.”

“It’s a new kind I was trying. We won’t have it again if you don’t like it, dear.”

Alix took up a piece of needlework and began to stitch. Gerald read a few pages of his book. Then he glanced up at the clock and tossed the book away.

“Half past eight. Time to go down to the cellar and start work.”

The sewing slipped from Alix’s fingers.

“Oh, not yet. Let us wait until nine o’clock.”

“No, my girl—half past eight. That’s the time I fixed. You’ll be able to get to bed all the earlier.”

“But I’d rather wait until nine.”

“You know when I fix a time I always stick to it. Come along, Alix. I’m not going to wait a minute longer.”

Alix looked up at him, and in spite of herself she felt a wave of terror slide over her. The mask had been lifted. Gerald’s hands were twitching, his eyes were shining with excitement, he was continually passing his tongue over his dry lips. He no longer cared to conceal his excitement.

Alix thought, “It’s true—he can’t wait—he’s like a madman.”

He strode over to her, and jerked her on to her feet with a hand on her shoulder.

“Come on, my girl—or I’ll carry you there.”

His tone was gay, but there was an undisguised ferocity behind it that appalled her. With a supreme effort she jerked herself free and clung cowering against the wall. She was powerless. She couldn’t get away—she couldn’t do anything—and he was coming towards her.

“Now, Alix—”

“No—no.”

She screamed, her hands held out impotently to ward him off.

“Gerald—stop—I’ve got something to tell you, something to confess—”

He did stop.

“To confess?” he said curiously.

“Yes, to confess.” She had used the words at random, but she went on desperately, seeking to hold his arrested attention.

A look of contempt swept over his face.

“A former lover, I suppose,” he sneered.

“No,” said Alix. “Something else. You’d call it, I expect—yes, you’d call it a crime.”

And at once she saw that she had struck the right note. Again his attention was arrested, held. Seeing that, her nerve came back to her. She felt mistress of the situation once more.

“You had better sit down again,” she said quietly.

She herself crossed the room to her old chair and sat down. She even stooped and picked up her needlework. But behind her calmness she was thinking and inventing feverishly: for the story she invented must hold his interest until help arrived.

“I told you,” she said slowly, “that I had been a shorthand typist for fifteen years. That was not entirely true. There were two intervals. The first occurred when I was twenty-two. I came across a man, an elderly man with a little property. He fell in love with me and asked me to marry him. I accepted. We were married.” She paused. “I induced him to insure his life in my favour.”

She saw a sudden keen interest spring up in her husband’s face, and went on with renewed assurance:

“During the war I worked for a time in a hospital dispensary. There I had the handling of all kinds of rare drugs and poisons.”

She paused reflectively. He was keenly interested now, not a doubt of it. The murderer is bound to have an interest in murder. She had gambled on that, and succeeded. She stole a glance at the clock. It was five and twenty to nine.

“There is one poison—it is a little white powder. A pinch of it means death. You know something about poisons perhaps?”

She put the question in some trepidation. If he did, she would have to be careful.

“No,” said Gerald: “I know very little about them.”

She drew a breath of relief.

“You have heard of hyoscine, of course? This is a drug that acts much the same way, but is absolutely untraceable. Any doctor would give a certificate of heart failure. I stole a small quantity of this drug and kept it by me.”

She paused, marshalling her forces.

“Go on,” said Gerald.

“No. I’m afraid. I can’t tell you. Another time.”

“Now,” he said impatiently. “I want to hear.”

“We had been married a month. I was very good to my elderly husband, very kind and devoted. He spoke in praise of me to all the neighbours. Everyone knew what a devoted wife I was. I always made his coffee myself every evening. One evening, when we were alone together, I put a pinch of the deadly alkaloid in his cup—”

Alix paused, and carefully rethreaded her needle. She, who had never acted in her life, rivalled the greatest actress in the world at this moment. She was actually living the part of the cold-blooded poisoner.

“It was very peaceful. I sat watching him. Once he gasped a little and asked for air. I opened the window. Then he said he could not move from his chair. Presently he died.”

She stopped, smiling. It was a quarter to nine. Surely they would come soon.

“How much,” said Gerald, “was the insurance money?”

“About two thousand pounds. I speculated with it, and lost it. I went back to my office work. But I never meant to remain there long. Then I met another man. I had stuck to my maiden name at the office. He didn’t know I had been married before. He was a younger man, rather good-looking, and quite well-off. We were married quietly in Sussex. He didn’t want to insure his life, but of course he made a will in my favour. He liked me to make his coffee myself just as my first husband had done.”

Alix smiled reflectively, and added simply, “I make very good coffee.”

Then she went on:

“I had several friends in the village where we were living. They were very sorry for me, with my husband dying suddenly of heart failure one evening after dinner. I didn’t quite like the doctor. I don’t think he suspected me, but he was certainly very surprised at my husband’s sudden death. I don’t quite know why I drifted back to the office again. Habit, I suppose. My second husband left about four thousand pounds. I didn’t speculate with it this time; I invested it. Then, you see—”

But she was interrupted. Gerald Martin, his face suffused with blood, half-choking, was pointing a shaking forefinger at her.

“The coffee—my God! the coffee!”

She stared at him.

“I understand now why it was bitter. You devil! You’ve been up to your tricks again.”

His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was ready to spring upon her.

“You’ve poisoned me.”

Alix had retreated from him to the fireplace. Now, terrified, she opened her lips to deny—and then paused. In another minute he would spring upon her. She summoned all her strength. Her eyes held his steadily, compellingly.

“Yes,” she said. “I poisoned you. Already the poison is working. At the minute you can’t move from your chair—you can’t move—”

If she could keep him there—even a few minutes. . . .

Ah! what was that? Footsteps on the road. The creak of the gate. Then footsteps on the path outside. The outer door opening.

“You can’t move,” she said again.

Then she slipped past him and fled headlong from the room to fall fainting into Dick Windyford’s arms.

“My God! Alix,” he cried.

Then he turned to the man with him, a tall stalwart figure in policeman’s uniform.

“Go and see what’s been happening in that room.”

He laid Alix carefully down on a couch and bent over her.

“My little girl,” he murmured. “My poor little girl. What have they been doing to you?”

Her eyelids fluttered and her lips just murmured his name.

Dick was aroused by the policeman’s touching him on the arm.

“There’s nothing in that room, sir, but a man sitting in a chair. Looks as though he’d had some kind of bad fright, and—”

“Yes?”

“Well, sir, he’s—dead.”

They were startled by hearing Alix’s voice. She spoke as though in some kind of dream, her eyes still closed.

“And presently,” she said, almost as though she were quoting from something, “he died—”

Ten

ACCIDENT

“Accident” was first published as “The Uncrossed Path” in The Sunday Dispatch, 22 September 1929.

. . . And I tell you this—it’s the same woman—not a doubt of it!”

Captain Haydock looked into the eager, vehement face of his friend and sighed. He wished Evans would not be so positive and so jubilant. In the course of a career spent at sea, the old sea captain had learned to leave things that did not concern him well alone. His friend, Evans, late C.I.D. Inspector, had a different philosophy of life. “Acting on information received—” had been his motto in early days, and he had improved upon it to the extent of finding out his own information. Inspector Evans had been a very smart, wide-awake officer, and had justly earned the promotion which had been his. Even now, when he had retired from the force, and had settled down in the country cottage of his dreams, his professional instinct was still active.

“Don’t often forget a face,” he reiterated complacently. “Mrs. Anthony—yes, it’s Mrs. Anthony right enough. When you said Mrs. Merrowdene—I knew her at once.”

Captain Haydock stirred uneasily. The Merrowdenes were his nearest neighbours, barring Evans himself, and this identifying of Mrs. Merrowdene with a former heroine of a cause célèbre distressed him.

“It’s a long time ago,” he said rather weakly.

“Nine years,” said Evans, accurately as ever. “Nine years and three months. You remember the case?”

“In a vague sort of way.”

“Anthony turned out to be an arsenic eater,” said Evans, “so they acquitted her.”

“Well, why shouldn’t they?”

“No reason in the world. Only verdict they could give on the evidence. Absolutely correct.”

“Then that’s all right,” said Haydock. “And I don’t see what we’re bothering about.”

“Who’s bothering?”

“I thought you were.”

“Not at all.”

“The thing’s over and done with,” summed up the captain. “If Mrs. Merrowdene at one time of her life was unfortunate enough to be tried and acquitted for murder—”

“It’s not usually considered unfortunate to be acquitted,” put in Evans.

“You know what I mean,” said Captain Haydock irritably. “If the poor lady has been through that harrowing experience, it’s no business of ours to rake it up, is it?”

Evans did not answer.

“Come now, Evans. The lady was innocent—you’ve just said so.”

“I didn’t say she was innocent. I said she was acquitted.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Not always.”

Captain Haydock, who had commenced to tap his pipe out against the side of his chair, stopped, and sat up with a very alert expression.

“Hallo—allo—allo,” he said. “The wind’s in that quarter, is it? You think she wasn’t innocent?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I just—don’t know. Anthony was in the habit of taking arsenic. His wife got it for him. One day, by mistake, he takes far too much. Was the mistake his or his wife’s? Nobody could tell, and the jury very properly gave her the benefit of the doubt. That’s all quite right and I’m not finding fault with it. All the same—I’d like to know.”

Captain Haydock transferred his attention to his pipe once more.

“Well,” he said comfortably. “It’s none of our business.”

“I’m not so sure. . . .”

“But surely—”

“Listen to me a minute. This man, Merrowdene—in his laboratory this evening, fiddling round with tests—you remember—”

“Yes. He mentioned Marsh’s test for arsenic. Said you would know all about it—it was in your line—and chuckled. He wouldn’t have said that if he’d thought for one moment—”

Evans interrupted him.

“You mean he wouldn’t have said that if he knew. They’ve been married how long—six years you told me? I bet you anything he has no idea his wife is the once notorious Mrs. Anthony.”

“And he will certainly not know it from me,” said Captain Haydock stiffly.

Evans paid no attention, but went on:

“You interrupted me just now. After Marsh’s test, Merrowdene heated a substance in a test tube, the metallic residue he dissolved in water and then precipitated it by adding silver nitrate. That was a test for chlorates. A neat unassuming little test. But I chanced to read these words in a book that stood open on the table:

H₂SO₄ decomposes chlorates with evolution of Cl₂O₂. If heated, violent explosions occur; the mixture ought therefore to be kept cool and only very small quantities used.”

Haydock stared at his friend.

“Well, what about it?”

“Just this. In my profession we’ve got tests too—tests for murder. There’s adding up the facts—weighing them, dissecting the residue when you’ve allowed for prejudice and the general inaccuracy of witnesses. But there’s another test of murder—one that is fairly accurate, but rather—dangerous! A murderer is seldom content with one crime. Give him time, and a lack of suspicion, and he’ll commit another. You catch a man—has he murdered his wife or hasn’t he?—perhaps the case isn’t very black against him. Look into his past—if you find that he’s had several wives—and that they’ve all died shall we say—rather curiously?—then you know! I’m not speaking legally, you understand. I’m speaking of moral certainty. Once you know, you can go ahead looking for evidence.”

“Well?”

“I’m coming to the point. That’s all right if there is a past to look into. But suppose you catch your murderer at his or her first crime? Then that test will be one from which you get no reaction. But suppose the prisoner acquitted—starting life under another name. Will or will not the murderer repeat the crime?”

“That’s a horrible idea!”

“Do you still say it’s none of our business?”

“Yes, I do. You’ve no reason to think that Mrs. Merrowdene is anything but a perfectly innocent woman.”

The ex-inspector was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly:

“I told you that we looked into her past and found nothing. That’s not quite true. There was a stepfather. As a girl of eighteen she had a fancy for some young man—and her stepfather exerted his authority to keep them apart. She and her stepfather went for a walk along a rather dangerous part of the cliff. There was an accident—the stepfather went too near the edge—it gave way, and he went over and was killed.”

“You don’t think—”

“It was an accident. Accident! Anthony’s overdose of arsenic was an accident. She’d never have been tried if it hadn’t transpired that there was another man—he sheered off, by the way. Looked as though he weren’t satisfied even if the jury were. I tell you, Haydock, where that woman is concerned I’m afraid of another—accident!”

The old captain shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s been nine years since that affair. Why should there be another ‘accident,’ as you call it, now?”

“I didn’t say now. I said some day or other. If the necessary motive arose.”

Captain Haydock shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I don’t know how you’re going to guard against that.”

“Neither do I,” said Evans ruefully.

“I should leave well alone,” said Captain Haydock. “No good ever came of butting into other people’s affairs.”

But that advice was not palatable to the ex-inspector. He was a man of patience but determination. Taking leave of his friend, he sauntered down to the village, revolving in his mind the possibilities of some kind of successful action.

Turning into the post office to buy some stamps, he ran into the object of his solicitude, George Merrowdene. The ex-chemistry professor was a small dreamy-looking man, gentle and kindly in manner, and usually completely

absentminded. He recognized the other and greeted him amicably, stooping to recover the letters that the impact had caused him to drop on the ground. Evans stooped also and, more rapid in his movements than the other, secured them first, handing them back to their owner with an apology.

He glanced down at them in doing so, and the address on the topmost suddenly awakened all his suspicions anew. It bore the name of a well-known insurance firm.

Instantly his mind was made up. The guileless George Merrowdene hardly realized how it came about that he and the ex-inspector were strolling down the village together, and still less could he have said how it came about that the conversation should come round to the subject of life insurance.

Evans had no difficulty in attaining his object. Merrowdene of his own accord volunteered the information that he had just insured his life for his wife's benefit, and asked Evans's opinion of the company in question.

"I made some rather unwise investments," he explained. "As a result my income has diminished. If anything were to happen to me, my wife would be left very badly off. This insurance will put things right."

"She didn't object to the idea?" inquired Evans casually. "Some ladies do, you know. Feel it's unlucky—that sort of thing."

"Oh, Margaret is very practical," said Merrowdene, smiling. "Not at all superstitious. In fact, I believe it was her idea originally. She didn't like my being so worried."

Evans had got the information he wanted. He left the other shortly afterwards, and his lips were set in a grim line. The late Mr. Anthony had insured his life in his wife's favour a few weeks before his death.

Accustomed to rely on his instincts, he was perfectly sure in his own mind. But how to act was another matter. He wanted, not to arrest a criminal red-handed, but to prevent a crime being committed, and that was a very different and a very much more difficult thing.

All day he was very thoughtful. There was a Primrose League Fête that afternoon held in the grounds of the local squire, and he went to it, indulging in the penny dip, guessing the weight of a pig, and shying at coconuts all with the same look of abstracted concentration on his face. He even indulged in half a crown's worth of Zara, the Crystal Gazer, smiling a little to himself as he did so, remembering his own activities against fortune-tellers in his official days.

He did not pay very much heed to her singsong droning voice—till the end of a sentence held his attention.

“... And you will very shortly—very shortly indeed—be engaged on a matter of life or death . . . Life or death to one person.”

“Eh—what's that?” he asked abruptly.

“A decision—you have a decision to make. You must be very careful—very, very careful . . . If you were to make a mistake—the smallest mistake —”

“Yes?”

The fortune-teller shivered. Inspector Evans knew it was all nonsense, but he was nevertheless impressed.

“I warn you—you must not make a mistake. If you do, I see the result clearly—a death. . . .”

Odd, damned odd. A death. Fancy her lighting upon that!

“If I make a mistake a death will result? Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“In that case,” said Evans, rising to his feet and handing over half a crown, “I mustn't make a mistake, eh?”

He spoke lightly enough, but as he went out of the tent, his jaw set determinedly. Easy to say—not so easy to be sure of doing. He mustn't

make a slip. A life, a vulnerable human life depended on it.

And there was no one to help him. He looked across at the figure of his friend Haydock in the distance. No help there. “Leave things alone,” was Haydock’s motto. And that wouldn’t do here.

Haydock was talking to a woman. She moved away from him and came towards Evans and the inspector recognized her. It was Mrs. Merrowdene. On an impulse he put himself deliberately in her path.

Mrs. Merrowdene was rather a fine-looking woman. She had a broad serene brow, very beautiful brown eyes, and a placid expression. She had the look of an Italian madonna which she heightened by parting her hair in the middle and looping it over her ears. She had a deep rather sleepy voice.

She smiled up at Evans, a contented welcoming smile.

“I thought it was you, Mrs. Anthony—I mean Mrs. Merrowdene,” he said glibly.

He made the slip deliberately, watching her without seeming to do so. He saw her eyes widen, heard the quick intake of her breath. But her eyes did not falter. She gazed at him steadily and proudly.

“I was looking for my husband,” she said quietly. “Have you seen him anywhere about?”

“He was over in that direction when I last saw him.”

They went side by side in the direction indicated, chatting quietly and pleasantly. The inspector felt his admiration mounting. What a woman! What self-command. What wonderful poise. A remarkable woman—and a very dangerous one. He felt sure—a very dangerous one.

He still felt very uneasy, though he was satisfied with his initial step. He had let her know that he recognized her. That would put her on her guard. She would not dare attempt anything rash. There was the question of Merrowdene. If he could be warned. . . .

They found the little man absently contemplating a china doll which had fallen to his share in the penny dip. His wife suggested going home and he agreed eagerly. Mrs. Merrowdene turned to the inspector:

“Won’t you come back with us and have a quiet cup of tea, Mr. Evans?”

Was there a faint note of challenge in her voice? He thought there was.

“Thank you, Mrs. Merrowdene. I should like to very much.”

They walked there, talking together of pleasant ordinary things. The sun shone, a breeze blew gently, everything around them was pleasant and ordinary.

Their maid was out at the fête, Mrs. Merrowdene explained, when they arrived at the charming old-world cottage. She went into her room to remove her hat, returning to set out tea and boil the kettle on a little silver lamp. From a shelf near the fireplace she took three small bowls and saucers.

“We have some very special Chinese tea,” she explained. “And we always drink it in the Chinese manner—out of bowls, not cups.”

She broke off, peered into a bowl and exchanged it for another with an exclamation of annoyance.

“George—it’s too bad of you. You’ve been taking these bowls again.”

“I’m sorry, dear,” said the professor apologetically. “They’re such a convenient size. The ones I ordered haven’t come.”

“One of these days you’ll poison us all,” said his wife with a half laugh. “Mary finds them in the laboratory and brings them back here, and never troubles to wash them out unless they’ve anything very noticeable in them. Why, you were using one of them for potassium cyanide the other day. Really, George, it’s frightfully dangerous.”

Merrowdene looked a little irritated.

“Mary’s no business to remove things from the laboratory. She’s not to touch anything there.”

“But we often leave our teacups there after tea. How is she to know? Be reasonable, dear.”

The professor went into his laboratory, murmuring to himself, and with a smile Mrs. Merrowdene poured boiling water on the tea and blew out the flame of the little silver lamp.

Evans was puzzled. Yet a glimmering of light penetrated to him. For some reason or other, Mrs. Merrowdene was showing her hand. Was this to be the “accident?” Was she speaking of all this so as deliberately to prepare her alibi beforehand? So that when, one day, the “accident” happened, he would be forced to give evidence in her favour. Stupid of her, if so, because before that—

Suddenly he drew in his breath. She had poured the tea into the three bowls. One she set before him, one before herself, the other she placed on a little table by the fire near the chair her husband usually sat in, and it was as she placed this last one on the table that a little strange smile curved round her lips. It was the smile that did it.

He knew!

A remarkable woman—a dangerous woman. No waiting—no preparation. This afternoon—this very afternoon—with him here as witness. The boldness of it took his breath away.

It was clever—it was damnably clever. He would be able to prove nothing. She counted on his not suspecting—simply because it was “so soon.” A woman of lightning rapidity of thought and action.

He drew a deep breath and leaned forward.

“Mrs. Merrowdene, I’m a man of queer whims. Will you be very kind and indulge me in one of them?”

She looked inquiring but unsuspecting.

He rose, took the bowl from in front of her and crossed to the little table where he substituted it for the other. This other he brought back and placed in front of her.

“I want to see you drink this.”

Her eyes met his. They were steady, unfathomable. The colour slowly drained from her face.

She stretched out her hand, raised the cup. He held his breath. Supposing all along he had made a mistake.

She raised it to her lips—at the last moment, with a shudder, she leant forward and quickly poured it into a pot containing a fern. Then she sat back and gazed at him defiantly.

He drew a long sigh of relief, and sat down again.

“Well?” she said.

Her voice had altered. It was slightly mocking—defiant.

He answered her soberly and quietly:

“You are a very clever woman, Mrs. Merrowdene. I think you understand me. There must be no—repetition. You know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean.”

Her voice was even, devoid of expression. He nodded his head, satisfied. She was a clever woman, and she didn’t want to be hanged.

“To your long life and to that of your husband,” he said significantly, and raised his tea to his lips.

Then his face changed. It contorted horribly . . . he tried to rise—to cry out . . . His body stiffened—his face went purple. He fell back sprawling over his

chair—his limbs convulsed.

Mrs. Merrowdene leaned forward, watching him. A little smile crossed her lips. She spoke to him—very softly and gently.

“You made a mistake, Mr. Evans. You thought I wanted to kill George . . . How stupid of you—how very stupid.”

She sat there a minute longer looking at the dead man, the third man who had threatened to cross her path and separate her from the man she loved.

Her smile broadened. She looked more than ever like a madonna. Then she raised her voice and called:

“George, George! . . . Oh, do come here! I’m afraid there’s been the most dreadful accident . . . Poor Mr. Evans. . . .”

Eleven

THE SECOND GONG

“The Second Gong” was first published in the USA in Ladies’ Home Journal, June 1932, and then in Strand Magazine, July 1932. It was later expanded into “Dead Man’s Mirror” for the book Murder in the Mews (Collins, March 1937).

Joan Ashby came out of her bedroom and stood a moment on the landing outside her door. She was half turning as if to go back into the room when, below her feet as it seemed, a gong boomed out.

Immediately Joan started forward almost at a run. So great was her hurry that at the top of the big staircase she collided with a young man arriving from the opposite direction.

“Hullo, Joan! Why the wild hurry?”

“Sorry, Harry. I didn’t see you.”

“So I gathered,” said Harry Dalehouse dryly. “But as I say, why the wild haste?”

“It was the gong.”

“I know. But it’s only the first gong.”

“No, it’s the second.”

“First.”

“Second.”

Thus arguing they had been descending the stairs. They were now in the hall, where the butler, having replaced the gongstick, was advancing toward

them at a grave and dignified pace.

“It is the second,” persisted Joan. “I know it is. Well, for one thing, look at the time.”

Harry Dalehouse glanced up at the grandfather clock.

“Just twelve minutes past eight,” he remarked. “Joan, I believe you’re right, but I never heard the first one. Digby,” he addressed the butler, “is this the first gong or the second?”

“The first, sir.”

“At twelve minutes past eight? Digby, somebody will get the sack for this.”

A faint smile showed for a minute on the butler’s face.

“Dinner is being served ten minutes later tonight, sir. The master’s orders.”

“Incredible!” cried Harry Dalehouse. “Tut, tut! Upon my word, things are coming to a pretty pass! Wonders will never cease. What ails my revered uncle?”

“The seven o’clock train, sir, was half an hour late, and as—” The butler broke off, as a sound like the crack of a whip was heard.

“What on earth—” said Harry. “Why, that sounded exactly like a shot.”

A dark, handsome man of thirty-five came out of the drawing room on their left.

“What was that?” he asked. “It sounded exactly like a shot.”

“It must have been a car backfiring, sir,” said the butler. “The road runs quite close to the house this side and the upstairs windows are open.”

“Perhaps,” said Joan doubtfully. “But that would be over there.” She waved a hand to the right. “And I thought the noise came from here.” She pointed to the left.

The dark man shook his head.

“I don’t think so. I was in the drawing room. I came out here because I thought the noise came from this direction.” He nodded his head in front of him in the direction of the gong and the front door.

“East, west, and south, eh?” said the irrepressible Harry. “Well, I’ll make it complete, Keene. North for me. I thought it came from behind us. Any solutions offered?”

“Well, there’s always murder,” said Geoffrey Keene, smiling. “I beg your pardon, Miss Ashby.”

“Only a shiver,” said Joan. “It’s nothing. A what-do-you-call-it walking over my grave.”

“A good thought—murder,” said Harry. “But, alas! No groans, no blood. I fear the solution is a poacher after a rabbit.”

“Seems tame, but I suppose that’s it,” agreed the other. “But it sounded so near. However, let’s come into the drawing room.”

“Thank goodness, we’re not late,” said Joan fervently. “I was simply haring it down the stairs thinking that was the second gong.”

All laughing, they went into the big drawing room.

Lytcham Close was one of the most famous old houses in England. Its owner, Hubert Lytcham Roche, was the last of a long line, and his more distant relatives were apt to remark that “Old Hubert, you know, really ought to be certified. Mad as a hatter, poor old bird.”

Allowing for the exaggeration natural to friends and relatives, some truth remained. Hubert Lytcham Roche was certainly eccentric. Though a very fine musician, he was a man of ungovernable temper and had an almost abnormal sense of his own importance. People staying in the house had to respect his prejudices or else they were never asked again.

One such prejudice was his music. If he played to his guests, as he often did in the evening, absolute silence must obtain. A whispered comment, a rustle of a dress, a movement even—and he would turn round scowling fiercely, and good-bye to the unlucky guest's chances of being asked again.

Another point was absolute punctuality for the crowning meal of the day. Breakfast was immaterial—you might come down at noon if you wished. Lunch also—a simple meal of cold meats and stewed fruit. But dinner was a rite, a festival, prepared by a cordon bleu whom he had tempted from a big hotel by the payment of a fabulous salary.

A first gong was sounded at five minutes past eight. At a quarter past eight a second gong was heard, and immediately after the door was flung open, dinner announced to the assembled guests, and a solemn procession wended its way to the dining room. Anyone who had the temerity to be late for the second gong was henceforth excommunicated—and Lytcham Close shut to the unlucky diner forever.

Hence the anxiety of Joan Ashby, and also the astonishment of Harry Dalehouse, at hearing that the sacred function was to be delayed ten minutes on this particular evening. Though not very intimate with his uncle, he had been to Lytcham Close often enough to know what a very unusual occurrence that was.

Geoffrey Keene, who was Lytcham Roche's secretary, was also very much surprised.

"Extraordinary," he commented. "I've never known such a thing to happen. Are you sure?"

"Digby said so."

"He said something about a train," said Joan Ashby. "At least I think so."

"Queer," said Keene thoughtfully. "We shall hear all about it in due course, I suppose. But it's very odd."

Both men were silent for a moment or two, watching the girl. Joan Ashby was a charming creature, blue-eyed and golden-haired, with an impish glance. This was her first visit to Lytcham Close and her invitation was at Harry's prompting.

The door opened and Diana Cleves, the Lytcham Roches' adopted daughter, came into the room.

There was a daredevil grace about Diana, a witchery in her dark eyes and her mocking tongue. Nearly all men fell for Diana and she enjoyed her conquests. A strange creature, with her alluring suggestion of warmth and her complete coldness.

"Beaten the Old Man for once," she remarked. "First time for weeks he hasn't been here first, looking at his watch and tramping up and down like a tiger at feeding time."

The young men had sprung forward. She smiled entrancingly at them both—then turned to Harry. Geoffrey Keene's dark cheek flushed as he dropped back.

He recovered himself, however, a moment later as Mrs. Lytcham Roche came in. She was a tall, dark woman, naturally vague in manner, wearing floating draperies of an indeterminate shade of green. With her was a middle-aged man with a beaklike nose and a determined chin—Gregory Barling. He was a somewhat prominent figure in the financial world and, well-bred on his mother's side, he had for some years been an intimate friend of Hubert Lytcham Roche.

Boom!

The gong resounded imposingly. As it died away, the door was flung open and Digby announced:

"Dinner is served."

Then, well-trained servant though he was, a look of complete astonishment flashed over his impassive face. For the first time in his memory, his master

was not in the room!

That his astonishment was shared by everybody was evident. Mrs. Lytcham Roche gave a little uncertain laugh.

“Most amazing. Really—I don’t know what to do.”

Everybody was taken aback. The whole tradition of Lytcham Close was undermined. What could have happened? Conversation ceased. There was a strained sense of waiting.

At last the door opened once more; a sigh of relief went round only tempered by a slight anxiety as to how to treat the situation. Nothing must be said to emphasize the fact that the host had himself transgressed the stringent rule of the house.

But the newcomer was not Lytcham Roche. Instead of the big, bearded, viking-like figure, there advanced into the long drawing room a very small man, palpably a foreigner, with an egg-shaped head, a flamboyant moustache, and most irreproachable evening clothes.

His eyes twinkling, the newcomer advanced toward Mrs. Lytcham Roche.

“My apologies, madame,” he said. “I am, I fear, a few minutes late.”

“Oh, not at all!” murmured Mrs. Lytcham Roche vaguely. “Not at all, Mr. —” She paused.

“Poirot, madame. Hercule Poirot.”

He heard behind him a very soft “Oh”—a gasp rather than an articulate word—a woman’s ejaculation. Perhaps he was flattered.

“You knew I was coming?” he murmured gently. “N’est-ce pas, madame? Your husband told you.”

“Oh—oh, yes,” said Mrs. Lytcham Roche, her manner unconvincing in the extreme. “I mean, I suppose so. I am so terribly unpractical, M. Poirot. I never remember anything. But fortunately Digby sees to everything.”

“My train, I fear, was late,” said M. Poirot. “An accident on the line in front of us.”

“Oh,” cried Joan, “so that’s why dinner was put off.”

His eye came quickly round to her—a most uncannily discerning eye.

“That is something out of the usual—eh?”

“I really can’t think—” began Mrs. Lytcham Roche, and then stopped. “I mean,” she went on confusedly, “it’s so odd. Hubert never—”

Poirot’s eyes swept rapidly round the group.

“M. Lytcham Roche is not down yet?”

“No, and it’s so extraordinary—” She looked appealingly at Geoffrey Keene.

“Mr. Lytcham Roche is the soul of punctuality,” explained Keene. “He has not been late for dinner for—well, I don’t know that he was ever late before.”

To a stranger the situation must have been ludicrous—the perturbed faces and the general consternation.

“I know,” said Mrs. Lytcham Roche with the air of one solving a problem. “I shall ring for Digby.”

She suited the action to the word.

The butler came promptly.

“Digby,” said Mrs. Lytcham Roche, “your master. Is he—”

As was customary with her, she did not finish her sentence. It was clear that the butler did not expect her to do so. He replied promptly and with understanding.

“Mr. Lytcham Roche came down at five minutes to eight and went into the study, madam.”

“Oh!” She paused. “You don’t think—I mean—he heard the gong?”

“I think he must have—the gong is immediately outside the study door.”

“Yes, of course, of course,” said Mrs. Lytcham Roche more vaguely than ever.

“Shall I inform him, madam, that dinner is ready?”

“Oh, thank you, Digby. Yes, I think—yes, yes, I should.”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Lytcham Roche to her guests as the butler withdrew, “what I would do without Digby!”

A pause followed.

Then Digby reentered the room. His breath was coming a little faster than is considered good form in a butler.

“Excuse me, madam—the study door is locked.”

It was then that M. Hercule Poirot took command of the situation.

“I think,” he said, “that we had better go to the study.”

He led the way and everyone followed. His assumption of authority seemed perfectly natural, he was no longer a rather comic-looking guest. He was a personality and master of the situation.

He led the way out into the hall, past the staircase, past the great clock, past the recess in which stood the gong. Exactly opposite that recess was a closed door.

He tapped on it, first gently, then with increasing violence. But there was no reply. Very nimbly he dropped to his knees and applied his eye to the keyhole. He rose and looked round.

“Messieurs,” he said, “we must break open this door. Immediately!”

As before no one questioned his authority. Geoffrey Keene and Gregory Barling were the two biggest men. They attacked the door under Poirot’s directions. It was no easy matter. The doors of Lytcham Close were solid affairs—no modern jerry-building here. It resisted the attack valiantly, but at last it gave before the united attack of the men and crashed inward.

The house party hesitated in the doorway. They saw what they had subconsciously feared to see. Facing them was the window. On the left, between the door and the window, was a big writing table. Sitting, not at the table, but sideways to it, was a man—a big man—slouched forward in the chair. His back was to them and his face to the window, but his position told the tale. His right hand hung limply down and below it, on the carpet, was a small shining pistol.

Poirot spoke sharply to Gregory Barling.

“Take Mrs. Lytcham Roche away—and the other two ladies.”

The other nodded comprehendingly. He laid a hand on his hostess’s arm. She shivered.

“He has shot himself,” she murmured. “Horrible!” With another shiver she permitted him to lead her away. The two girls followed.

Poirot came forward into the room, the two young men behind him.

He knelt down by the body, motioning them to keep back a little.

He found the bullet hole on the right side of the head. It had passed out the other side and had evidently struck a mirror hanging on the left-hand wall, since this was shattered. On the writing table was a sheet of paper, blank save for the word Sorry scrawled across it in hesitating, shaky writing.

Poirot’s eyes darted back to the door.

“The key is not in the lock,” he said. “I wonder—”

His hand slid into the dead man's pocket.

"Here it is," he said. "At least I think so. Have the goodness to try it, monsieur?"

Geoffrey Keene took it from him and tried it in the lock.

"That's it, all right."

"And the window?"

Harry Dalehouse strode across to it.

"Shut."

"You permit?" Very swiftly, Poirot scrambled to his feet and joined the other at the window. It was a long French window. Poirot opened it, stood a minute scrutinizing the grass just in front of it, then closed it again.

"My friends," he said, "we must telephone for the police. Until they have come and satisfied themselves that it is truly suicide nothing must be touched. Death can only have occurred about a quarter of an hour ago."

"I know," said Harry hoarsely. "We heard the shot."

"Comment? What is that you say?"

Harry explained with the help of Geoffrey Keene. As he finished speaking, Barling reappeared.

Poirot repeated what he had said before, and while Keene went off to telephone, Poirot requested Barling to give him a few minutes' interview.

They went into a small morning room, leaving Digby on guard outside the study door, while Harry went off to find the ladies.

"You were, I understand, an intimate friend of M. Lytcham Roche," began Poirot. "It is for that reason that I address myself to you primarily. In

etiquette, perhaps, I should have spoken first to madame, but at the moment I do not think that is pratique.”

He paused.

“I am, see you, in a delicate situation. I will lay the facts plainly before you. I am, by profession, a private detective.”

The financier smiled a little.

“It is not necessary to tell me that, M. Poirot. Your name is, by now, a household word.”

“Monsieur is too amiable,” said Poirot, bowing. “Let us, then, proceed. I receive, at my London address, a letter from this M. Lytcham Roche. In it he says that he has reason to believe that he is being swindled of large sums of money. For family reasons, so he puts it, he does not wish to call in the police, but he desires that I should come down and look into the matter for him. Well, I agree. I come. Not quite so soon as M. Lytcham Roche wishes—for after all I have other affairs, and M. Lytcham Roche, he is not quite the King of England, though he seems to think he is.”

Barling gave a wry smile.

“He did think of himself that way.”

“Exactly. Oh, you comprehend—his letter showed plainly enough that he was what one calls an eccentric. He was not insane, but he was unbalanced, n’est-ce pas?”

“What he’s just done ought to show that.”

“Oh, monsieur, but suicide is not always the act of the unbalanced. The coroner’s jury, they say so, but that is to spare the feelings of those left behind.”

“Hubert was not a normal individual,” said Barling decisively. “He was given to ungovernable rages, was a monomaniac on the subject of family

pride, and had a bee in his bonnet in more ways than one. But for all that he was a shrewd man.”

“Precisely. He was sufficiently shrewd to discover that he was being robbed.”

“Does a man commit suicide because he’s being robbed?” Barling asked.

“As you say, monsieur. Ridiculous. And that brings me to the need for haste in the matter. For family reasons—that was the phrase he used in his letter. Eh bien, monsieur, you are a man of the world, you know that it is for precisely that—family reasons—that a man does commit suicide.”

“You mean?”

“That it looks—on the face of it—as if ce pauvre monsieur had found out something further—and was unable to face what he had found out. But you perceive, I have a duty. I am already employed—commissioned—I have accepted the task. This ‘family reason,’ the dead man did not want it to get to the police. So I must act quickly. I must learn the truth.”

“And when you have learned it?”

“Then—I must use my discretion. I must do what I can.”

“I see,” said Barling. He smoked for a minute or two in silence, then he said, “All the same I’m afraid I can’t help you. Hubert never confided anything to me. I know nothing.”

“But tell me, monsieur, who, should you say, had a chance of robbing this poor gentleman?”

“Difficult to say. Of course, there’s the agent for the estate. He’s a new man.”

“The agent?”

“Yes. Marshall. Captain Marshall. Very nice fellow, lost an arm in the war. He came here a year ago. But Hubert liked him, I know, and trusted him,

too.”

“If it were Captain Marshall who was playing him false, there would be no family reasons for silence.”

“N-No.”

The hesitation did not escape Poirot.

“Speak, monsieur. Speak plainly, I beg of you.”

“It may be gossip.”

“I implore you, speak.”

“Very well, then, I will. Did you notice a very attractive looking young woman in the drawing room?”

“I noticed two very attractive looking young women.”

“Oh, yes, Miss Ashby. Pretty little thing. Her first visit. Harry Dalehouse got Mrs. Lytcham Roche to ask her. No, I mean a dark girl—Diana Cleves.”

“I noticed her,” said Poirot. “She is one that all men would notice, I think.”

“She’s a little devil,” burst out Barling. “She’s played fast and loose with every man for twenty miles round. Someone will murder her one of these days.”

He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, oblivious of the keen interest with which the other was regarding him.

“And this young lady is—”

“She’s Lytcham Roche’s adopted daughter. A great disappointment when he and his wife had no children. They adopted Diana Cleves—she was some kind of cousin. Hubert was devoted to her, simply worshipped her.”

“Doubtless he would dislike the idea of her marrying?” suggested Poirot.

“Not if she married the right person.”

“And the right person was—you, monsieur?”

Barling started and flushed.

“I never said—”

“Mais, non, mais, non! You said nothing. But it was so, was it not?”

“I fell in love with her—yes. Lytcham Roche was pleased about it. It fitted in with his ideas for her.”

“And mademoiselle herself?”

“I told you—she’s the devil incarnate.”

“I comprehend. She has her own ideas of amusement, is it not so? But Captain Marshall, where does he come in?”

“Well, she’s been seeing a lot of him. People talked. Not that I think there’s anything in it. Another scalp, that’s all.”

Poirot nodded.

“But supposing that there had been something in it—well, then, it might explain why M. Lytcham Roche wanted to proceed cautiously.”

“You do understand, don’t you, that there’s no earthly reason for suspecting Marshall of defalcation.”

“Oh, parfaitement, parfaitement! It might be an affair of a forged cheque with someone in the household involved. This young Mr. Dalehouse, who is he?”

“A nephew.”

“He will inherit, yes?”

“He’s a sister’s son. Of course he might take the name—there’s not a Lytcham Roche left.”

“I see.”

“The place isn’t actually entailed, though it’s always gone from father to son. I’ve always imagined that he’d leave the place to his wife for her lifetime and then perhaps to Diana if he approved of her marriage. You see, her husband could take the name.”

“I comprehend,” said Poirot. “You have been most kind and helpful to me, monsieur. May I ask of you one thing further—to explain to Madame Lytcham Roche all that I have told you, and to beg of her that she accord me a minute?”

Sooner than he had thought likely, the door opened and Mrs. Lytcham Roche entered. She floated to a chair.

“Mr. Barling has explained everything to me,” she said. “We mustn’t have any scandal, of course. Though I do feel really it’s fate, don’t you? I mean with the mirror and everything.”

“Comment—the mirror?”

“The moment I saw it—it seemed a symbol. Of Hubert! A curse, you know. I think old families have a curse very often. Hubert was always very strange. Lately he has been stranger than ever.”

“You will forgive me for asking, madame, but you are not in any way short of money?”

“Money? I never think of money.”

“Do you know what they say, madame? Those who never think of money need a great deal of it.”

He ventured a tiny laugh. She did not respond. Her eyes were far away.

“I thank you, madame,” he said, and the interview came to an end.

Poirot rang, and Digby answered.

“I shall require you to answer a few questions,” said Poirot. “I am a private detective sent for by your master before he died.”

“A detective!” the butler gasped. “Why?”

“You will please answer my questions. As to the shot now—”

He listened to the butler’s account.

“So there were four of you in the hall?”

“Yes, sir; Mr. Dalehouse and Miss Ashby and Mr. Keene came from the drawing room.”

“Where were the others?”

“The others, sir?”

“Yes, Mrs. Lytcham Roche, Miss Cleves and Mr. Barling.”

“Mrs. Lytcham Roche and Mr. Barling came down later, sir.”

“And Miss Cleves?”

“I think Miss Cleves was in the drawing room, sir.”

Poirot asked a few more questions, then dismissed the butler with the command to request Miss Cleves to come to him.

She came immediately, and he studied her attentively in view of Barling’s revelations. She was certainly beautiful in her white satin frock with the rosebud on the shoulder.

He explained the circumstances which had brought him to Lytcham Close, eyeing her very closely, but she showed only what seemed to be genuine astonishment, with no signs of uneasiness. She spoke of Marshall

indifferently with tepid approval. Only at mention of Barling did she approach animation.

“That man’s a crook,” she said sharply. “I told the Old Man so, but he wouldn’t listen—went on putting money into his rotten concerns.”

“Are you sorry, mademoiselle, that your—father is dead?”

She stared at him.

“Of course. I’m modern, you know, M. Poirot. I don’t indulge in sob stuff. But I was fond of the Old Man. Though, of course, it’s best for him.”

“Best for him?”

“Yes. One of these days he would have had to be locked up. It was growing on him—this belief that the last Lytcham Roche of Lytcham Close was omnipotent.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“I see, I see—yes, decided signs of mental trouble. By the way, you permit that I examine your little bag? It is charming—all these silk rosebuds. What was I saying? Oh, yes, did you hear the shot?”

“Oh, yes! But I thought it was a car or a poacher, or something.”

“You were in the drawing room?”

“No. I was out in the garden.”

“I see. Thank you, mademoiselle. Next I would like to see M. Keene, is it not?”

“Geoffrey? I’ll send him along.”

Keene came in, alert and interested.

“Mr. Barling has been telling me of the reason for your being down here. I don’t know that there’s anything I can tell you, but if I can—”

Poirot interrupted him. “I only want to know one thing, Monsieur Keene. What was it that you stooped and picked up just before we got to the study door this evening?”

“I—” Keene half sprang up from his chair, then subsided again. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said lightly.

“Oh, I think you do, monsieur. You were behind me, I know, but a friend of mine he says I have eyes in the back of my head. You picked up something and you put it in the right hand pocket of your dinner jacket.”

There was a pause. Indecision was written plainly on Keene’s handsome face. At last he made up his mind.

“Take your choice, M. Poirot,” he said, and leaning forward he turned his pocket inside out. There was a cigarette holder, a handkerchief, a tiny silk rosebud, and a little gold match box.

A moment’s silence and then Keene said, “As a matter of fact it was this.” He picked up the match box. “I must have dropped it earlier in the evening.”

“I think not,” said Poirot.

“What do you mean?”

“What I say. I, monsieur, am a man of tidiness, of method, of order. A match box on the ground, I should see it and pick it up—a match box of this size, assuredly I should see it! No, monsieur, I think it was something very much smaller—such as this, perhaps.”

He picked up the little silk rosebud.

“From Miss Cleve’s bag, I think?”

There was a moment’s pause, then Keene admitted it with a laugh.

“Yes, that’s so. She—gave it to me last night.”

“I see,” said Poirot, and at the moment the door opened and a tall fair-haired man in a lounge suit strode into the room.

“Keene—what’s all this? Lytcham Roche shot himself? Man, I can’t believe it. It’s incredible.”

“Let me introduce you,” said Keene, “to M. Hercule Poirot.” The other started. “He will tell you all about it.” And he left the room, banging the door.

“M. Poirot—” John Marshall was all eagerness “—I’m most awfully pleased to meet you. It is a bit of luck your being down here. Lytcham Roche never told me you were coming. I’m a most frightful admirer of yours, sir.”

A disarming young man, thought Poirot—not so young, either, for there was grey hair at the temples and lines in the forehead. It was the voice and manner that gave the impression of boyishness.

“The police—”

“They are here now, sir. I came up with them on hearing the news. They don’t seem particularly surprised. Of course, he was mad as a hatter, but even then—”

“Even then you are surprised at his committing suicide?”

“Frankly, yes. I shouldn’t have thought that—well, that Lytcham Roche could have imagined the world getting on without him.”

“He has had money troubles of late, I understand?”

Marshall nodded.

“He speculated. Wildcat schemes of Barling’s.”

Poirot said quietly, "I will be very frank. Had you any reason to suppose that Mr. Lytcham Roche suspected you of tampering with your accounts?"

Marshall stared at Poirot in a kind of ludicrous bewilderment. So ludicrous was it that Poirot was forced to smile.

"I see that you are utterly taken aback, Captain Marshall."

"Yes, indeed. The idea's ridiculous."

"Ah! Another question. He did not suspect you of robbing him of his adopted daughter?"

"Oh, so you know about me and Di?" He laughed in an embarrassed fashion.

"It is so, then?"

Marshall nodded.

"But the old man didn't know anything about it. Di wouldn't have him told. I suppose she was right. He'd have gone up like a—a basketful of rockets. I should have been chucked out of a job, and that would have been that."

"And instead what was your plan?"

"Well, upon my word, sir, I hardly know. I left things to Di. She said she'd fix it. As a matter of fact I was looking out for a job. If I could have got one I would have chucked this up."

"And mademoiselle would have married you? But M. Lytcham Roche might have stopped her allowance. Mademoiselle Diana is, I should say, fond of money."

Marshall looked rather uncomfortable.

"I'd have tried to make it up to her, sir."

Geoffrey Keene came into the room. “The police are just going and would like to see you, M. Poirot.”

“Merci. I will come.”

In the study were a stalwart inspector and the police surgeon.

“Mr. Poirot?” said the inspector. “We’ve heard of you, sir. I’m Inspector Reeves.”

“You are most amiable,” said Poirot, shaking hands. “You do not need my co-operation, no?” He gave a little laugh.

“Not this time, sir. All plain sailing.”

“The case is perfectly straightforward, then?” demanded Poirot.

“Absolutely. Door and window locked, key of door in dead man’s pocket. Manner very strange the past few days. No doubt about it.”

“Everything quite—natural?”

The doctor grunted.

“Must have been sitting at a damned queer angle for the bullet to have hit that mirror. But suicide’s a queer business.”

“You found the bullet?”

“Yes, here.” The doctor held it out. “Near the wall below the mirror. Pistol was Mr. Roche’s own. Kept it in the drawer of the desk always. Something behind it all, I daresay, but what that is we shall never know.”

Poirot nodded.

The body had been carried to a bedroom. The police now took their leave. Poirot stood at the front door looking after them. A sound made him turn. Harry Dalehouse was close behind him.

“Have you, by any chance, a strong flashlight, my friend?” asked Poirot.

“Yes, I’ll get it for you.”

When he returned with it Joan Ashby was with him.

“You may accompany me if you like,” said Poirot graciously.

He stepped out of the front door and turned to the right, stopping before the study window. About six feet of grass separated it from the path. Poirot bent down, playing the flashlight on the grass. He straightened himself and shook his head.

“No,” he said, “not there.”

Then he paused and slowly his figure stiffened. On either side of the grass was a deep flower border. Poirot’s attention was focused on the right hand border, full of Michaelmas daisies and dahlias. His torch was directed on the front of the bed. Distinct on the soft mould were footprints.

“Four of them,” murmured Poirot. “Two going toward the window, two coming from it.”

“A gardener,” suggested Joan.

“But no, mademoiselle, but no. Employ your eyes. These shoes are small, dainty, high-heeled, the shoes of a woman. Mademoiselle Diana mentioned having been out in the garden. Do you know if she went downstairs before you did, mademoiselle?”

Joan shook her head.

“I can’t remember. I was in such a hurry because the gong went, and I thought I’d heard the first one. I do seem to remember that her room door was open as I went past, but I’m not sure. Mrs. Lytcham Roche’s was shut, I know.”

“I see,” said Poirot.

Something in his voice made Harry look up sharply, but Poirot was merely frowning gently to himself.

In the doorway they met Diana Cleves.

“The police have gone,” she said. “It’s all—over.”

She gave a deep sigh.

“May I request one little word with you, mademoiselle?”

She led the way into the morning room, and Poirot followed, shutting the door.

“Well?” She looked a little surprised.

“One little question, mademoiselle. Were you tonight at any time in the flower border outside the study window?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “About seven o’clock and again just before dinner.”

“I do not understand,” he said.

“I can’t see that there is anything to ‘understand,’ as you call it,” she said coldly. “I was picking Michaelmas daisies—for the table. I always do the flowers. That was about seven o’clock.”

“And afterward—later?”

“Oh, that! As a matter of fact I dropped a spot of hair oil on my dress—just on the shoulder here. It was just as I was ready to come down. I didn’t want to change the dress. I remembered I’d seen a late rose in bud in the border. I ran out and picked it and pinned it in. See—” She came close to him and lifted the head of the rose. Poirot saw the minute grease spot. She remained close to him, her shoulder almost brushing his.

“And what time was this?”

“Oh, about ten minutes past eight, I suppose.”

“You did not—try the window?”

“I believe I did. Yes, I thought it would be quicker to go in that way. But it was fastened.”

“I see.” Poirot drew a deep breath. “And the shot,” he said, “where were you when you heard that? Still in the flower border?”

“Oh, no; it was two or three minutes later, just before I came in by the side door.”

“Do you know what this is, mademoiselle?”

On the palm of his hand he held out the tiny silk rosebud. She examined it coolly.

“It looks like a rosebud off my little evening bag. Where did you find it?”

“It was in Mr. Keene’s pocket,” said Poirot dryly. “Did you give it to him, mademoiselle?”

“Did he tell you I gave it to him?”

Poirot smiled.

“When did you give it to him, mademoiselle?”

“Last night.”

“Did he warn you to say that, mademoiselle?”

“What do you mean?” she asked angrily.

But Poirot did not answer. He strode out of the room and into the drawing room. Barling, Keene, and Marshall were there. He went straight up to them.

“Messieurs,” he said brusquely, “will you follow me to the study?”

He passed out into the hall and addressed Joan and Harry.

“You, too, I pray of you. And will somebody request madame to come? I thank you. Ah! And here is the excellent Digby. Digby, a little question, a very important little question. Did Miss Cleves arrange some Michaelmas daisies before dinner?”

The butler looked bewildered.

“Yes, sir, she did.”

“You are sure?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

“Très bien. Now—come, all of you.”

Inside the study he faced them.

“I have asked you to come here for a reason. The case is over, the police have come and gone. They say Mr. Lytcham Roche has shot himself. All is finished.” He paused. “But I, Hercule Poirot, say that it is not finished.”

As startled eyes turned to him the door opened and Mrs. Lytcham Roche floated into the room.

“I was saying, madame, that this case is not finished. It is a matter of the psychology. Mr. Lytcham Roche, he had the manie de grandeur, he was a king. Such a man does not kill himself. No, no, he may go mad, but he does not kill himself. Mr. Lytcham Roche did not kill himself.” He paused. “He was killed.”

“Killed?” Marshall gave a short laugh. “Alone in a room with the door and window locked?”

“All the same,” said Poirot stubbornly, “he was killed.”

“And got up and locked the door or shut the window afterward, I suppose,” said Diana cuttingly.

“I will show you something,” said Poirot, going to the window. He turned the handle of the French windows and then pulled gently.

“See, they are open. Now I close them, but without turning the handle. Now the window is closed but not fastened. Now!”

He gave a short jarring blow and the handle turned, shooting the bolt down into its socket.

“You see?” said Poirot softly. “It is very loose, this mechanism. It could be done from outside quite easily.”

He turned, his manner grim.

“When that shot was fired at twelve minutes past eight, there were four people in the hall. Four people have an alibi. Where were the other three? You, madame? In your room. You, Monsieur Barling. Were you, too, in your room?”

“I was.”

“And you, mademoiselle, were in the garden. So you have admitted.”

“I don’t see—” began Diana.

“Wait.” He turned to Mrs. Lytcham Roche. “Tell me, madame, have you any idea of how your husband left his money?”

“Hubert read me his will. He said I ought to know. He left me three thousand a year chargeable on the estate, and the dower house or the town house, whichever I preferred. Everything else he left to Diana, on condition that if she married her husband must take the name.”

“Ah!”

“But then he made a codicil thing—a few weeks ago, that was.”

“Yes, madame?”

“He still left it all to Diana, but on condition that she married Mr. Barling. If she married anyone else, it was all to go to his nephew, Harry Dalehouse.”

“But the codicil was only made a few weeks ago,” purred Poirot.
“Mademoiselle may not have known of that.” He stepped forward accusingly. “Mademoiselle Diana, you want to marry Captain Marshall, do you not? Or is it Mr. Keene?”

She walked across the room and put her arm through Marshall’s sound one.

“Go on,” she said.

“I will put the case against you, mademoiselle. You loved Captain Marshall. You also loved money. Your adopted father he would never have consented to your marrying Captain Marshall, but if he dies you are fairly sure that you get everything. So you go out, you step over the flower border to the window which is open, you have with you the pistol which you have taken from the writing table drawer. You go up to your victim talking amiably. You fire. You drop the pistol by his hand, having wiped it and then pressed his fingers on it. You go out again, shaking the window till the bolt drops. You come into the house. Is that how it happened? I am asking you, mademoiselle?”

“No,” Diana screamed. “No—no!”

He looked at her, then he smiled.

“No,” he said, “it was not like that. It might have been so—it is plausible—it is possible—but it cannot have been like that for two reasons. The first reason is that you picked Michaelmas daisies at seven o’clock, the second arises from something that mademoiselle here told me.” He turned toward Joan, who stared at him in bewilderment. He nodded encouragement.

“But yes, mademoiselle. You told me that you hurried downstairs because you thought it was the second gong sounding, having already heard the first.”

He shot a rapid glance round the room.

“You do not see what that means?” he cried. “You do not see. Look! Look!” He sprang forward to the chair where the victim had sat. “Did you notice how the body was? Not sitting square to the desk—no, sitting sideways to the desk, facing the window. Is that a natural way to commit suicide? Jamais, jamais! You write your apologia ‘sorry’ on a piece of paper—you open the drawer, you take out the pistol, you hold it to your head and you fire. That is the way of suicide. But now consider murder! The victim sits at his desk, the murderer stands beside him—talking. And talking still—fires. Where does the bullet go then?” He paused. “Straight through the head, through the door if it is open, and so—hits the gong.

“Ah! you begin to see? That was the first gong—heard only by mademoiselle, since her room is above.

“What does our murderer do next? Shuts the door, locks it, puts the key in the dead man’s pocket, then turns the body sideways in the chair, presses the dead man’s fingers on the pistol and then drops it by his side, cracks the mirror on the wall as a final spectacular touch—in short, ‘arranges’ his suicide. Then out through the window, the bolt is shaken home, the murderer steps not on the grass, where footprints must show, but on the flower bed, where they can be smoothed out behind him, leaving no trace. Then back into the house, and at twelve minutes past eight, when he is alone in the drawing room, he fires a service revolver out of the drawing room window and dashes out into the hall. Is that how you did it, Mr. Geoffrey Keene?”

Fascinated, the secretary stared at the accusing figure drawing nearer to him. Then, with a gurgling cry, he fell to the ground.

“I think I am answered,” said Poirot. “Captain Marshall, will you ring up the police?” He bent over the prostrate form. “I fancy he will be still unconscious when they come.”

“Geoffrey Keene,” murmured Diana. “But what motive had he?”

“I fancy that as secretary he had certain opportunities—accounts—cheques. Something awakened Mr. Lytcham Roche’s suspicions. He sent for me.”

“Why for you? Why not for the police?”

“I think, mademoiselle, you can answer that question. Monsieur suspected that there was something between you and that young man. To divert his mind from Captain Marshall, you had flirted shamelessly with Mr. Keene. But yes, you need not deny! Mr. Keene gets wind of my coming and acts promptly. The essence of his scheme is that the crime must seem to take place at 8:12, when he has an alibi. His one danger is the bullet, which must be lying somewhere near the gong and which he has not had time to retrieve. When we are all on our way to the study he picks that up. At such a tense moment he thinks no one will notice. But me, I notice everything! I question him. He reflects a little minute and then he plays the comedy! He insinuates that what he picked up was the silk rosebud, he plays the part of the young man in love shielding the lady he loves. Oh, it was very clever, and if you had not picked Michaelmas daisies—”

“I don’t understand what they have to do with it.”

“You do not? Listen—there were only four footprints in the bed, but when you were picking the flowers you must have made many more than that. So in between your picking the flowers and your coming to get the rosebud someone must have smoothed over the bed. Not a gardener—no gardener works after seven. Then it must be someone guilty—it must be the murderer—the murder was committed before the shot was heard.”

“But why did nobody hear the real shot?” asked Harry.

“A silencer. They will find that and the revolver thrown into the shrubbery.”

“What a risk!”

“Why a risk? Everyone was upstairs dressing for dinner. It was a very good moment. The bullet was the only contretemps, and even that, as he thought, passed off well.”

Poirot picked it up. “He threw it under the mirror when I was examining the window with Mr. Dalehouse.”

“Oh!” Diana wheeled on Marshall. “Marry me, John, and take me away.”

Barling coughed. “My dear Diana, under the terms of my friend’s will—”

“I don’t care,” the girl cried. “We can draw pictures on pavements.”

“There’s no need to do that,” said Harry. “We’ll go halves, Di. I’m not going to bag things because Uncle had a bee in his bonnet.”

Suddenly there was a cry. Mrs. Lytcham Roche had sprung to her feet.

“M. Poirot—the mirror—he—he must have deliberately smashed it.”

“Yes, madame.”

“Oh!” She stared at him. “But it is unlucky to break a mirror.”

“It has proved very unlucky for Mr. Geoffrey Keene,” said Poirot cheerfully.

The Mousetrap And Other Stories (1950)

By Agatha Christie

One

THREE BLIND MICE

It was very cold. The sky was dark and heavy with unshed snow.

A man in a dark overcoat, with his muffler pulled up round his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, came along Culver Street and went up the steps of number 74. He put his finger on the bell and heard it shrilling in the basement below.

Mrs. Casey, her hands busy in the sink, said bitterly, "Drat that bell. Never any peace, there isn't."

Wheezing a little, she toiled up the basement stairs and opened the door.

The man standing silhouetted against the lowering sky outside asked in a whisper, "Mrs. Lyon?"

"Second floor," said Mrs. Casey. "You can go on up. Does she expect you?" The man slowly shook his head. "Oh, well, go on up and knock."

She watched him as he went up the shabbily carpeted stairs. Afterward she said he "gave her a funny feeling." But actually all she thought was that he must have a pretty bad cold only to be able to whisper like that—and no wonder with the weather what it was.

When the man got round the bend of the staircase he began to whistle softly. The tune he whistled was "Three Blind Mice."

Molly Davis stepped back into the road and looked up at the newly painted board by the gate.

MONKSWELL MANOR

GUEST HOUSE

She nodded approval. It looked, it really did look, quite professional. Or, perhaps, one might say almost professional. The T of Guest House staggered uphill a little, and the end of Manor was slightly crowded, but on the whole Giles had made a wonderful job of it. Giles was really very clever. There were so many things that he could do. She was always making fresh discoveries about this husband of hers. He said so little about himself that it was only by degrees that she was finding out what a lot of varied talents he had. An ex-naval man was always a “handy man,” so people said.

Well, Giles would have need of all his talents in their new venture. Nobody could be more raw to the business of running a guest house than she and Giles. But it would be great fun. And it did solve the housing problem.

It had been Molly’s idea. When Aunt Katherine died, and the lawyers wrote to her and informed her that her aunt had left her Monkswell Manor, the natural reaction of the young couple had been to sell it. Giles had asked, “What is it like?” And Molly had replied, “Oh, a big, rambling old house, full of stuffy, old-fashioned Victorian furniture. Rather a nice garden, but terribly overgrown since the war, because there’s been only one old gardener left.”

So they had decided to put the house on the market, and keep just enough furniture to furnish a small cottage or flat for themselves.

But two difficulties arose at once. First, there weren’t any small cottages or flats to be found, and secondly, all the furniture was enormous.

“Well” said Molly, “we’ll just have to sell it all. I suppose it will sell?”

The solicitor assured them that nowadays anything would sell.

“Very probably,” he said, “someone will buy it for a hotel or guesthouse in which case they might like to buy it with the furniture complete.

Fortunately the house is in very good repair. The late Miss Emory had extensive repairs and modernizations done just before the war, and there has been very little deterioration. Oh, yes, it’s in good shape.”

And it was then that Molly had had her idea.

“Giles,” she said, “why shouldn’t we run it as a guesthouse ourselves?”

At first her husband had scoffed at the idea, but Molly had persisted.

“We needn’t take very many people—not at first. It’s an easy house to run—it’s got hot and cold water in the bedrooms and central heating and a gas cooker. And we can have hens and ducks and our own eggs, and vegetables.”

“Who’d do all the work— isn’t it very hard to get servants?”

“Oh, we’d have to do the work. But wherever we lived we’d have to do that. A few extra people wouldn’t really mean much more to do. We’d probably get a woman to come in after a bit when we got properly started. If we had only five people, each paying seven guineas a week—” Molly departed into the realms of somewhat optimistic mental arithmetic.

“And think, Giles,” she ended, “it would be our own house. With our own things. As it is, it seems to me it will be years before we can ever find anywhere to live.”

That, Giles admitted, was true. They had had so little time together since their hasty marriage, that they were both longing to settle down in a home.

So the great experiment was set under way. Advertisements were put in the local paper and in the Times, and various answers came.

And now, today, the first of the guests was to arrive. Giles had gone off early in the car to try and obtain some army wire netting that had been advertised as for sale on the other side of the county. Molly announced the necessity of walking to the village to make some last purchases.

The only thing that was wrong was the weather. For the last two days it had been bitterly cold, and now the snow was beginning to fall. Molly hurried up the drive, thick, feathery flakes falling on her waterproofed shoulders

and bright curly hair. The weather forecasts had been lugubrious in the extreme. Heavy snowfall was to be expected.

She hoped anxiously that all the pipes wouldn't freeze. It would be too bad if everything went wrong just as they started. She glanced at her watch. Past teatime. Would Giles have got back yet? Would he be wondering where she was?

"I had to go to the village again for something I had forgotten," she would say. And he would laugh and say, "More tins?"

Tins were a joke between them. They were always on the lookout for tins of food. The larder was really quite nicely stocked now in case of emergencies.

And, Molly thought with a grimace as she looked up at the sky, it looked as though emergencies were going to present themselves very soon.

The house was empty. Giles was not back yet. Molly went first into the kitchen, then upstairs, going round the newly prepared bedrooms. Mrs. Boyle in the south room with the mahogany and the fourposter. Major Metcalf in the blue room with the oak. Mr. Wren in the east room with the bay window. All the rooms looked very nice—and what a blessing that Aunt Katherine had had such a splendid stock of linen. Molly patted a counterpane into place and went downstairs again. It was nearly dark. The house felt suddenly very quiet and empty. It was a lonely house, two miles from a village, two miles, as Molly put it, from anywhere.

She had often been alone in the house before—but she had never before been so conscious of being alone in it.

The snow beat in a soft flurry against the windowpanes. It made a whispery, uneasy sound. Supposing Giles couldn't get back—supposing the snow was so thick that the car couldn't get through? Supposing she had to stay alone here—stay alone for days, perhaps.

She looked round the kitchen—a big, comfortable kitchen that seemed to call for a big, comfortable cook presiding at the kitchen table, her jaws

moving rhythmically as she ate rock cakes and drank black tea—she should be flanked by a tall, elderly parlormaid on one side and a round, rosy housemaid on the other, with a kitchenmaid at the other end of the table observing her betters with frightened eyes. And instead there was just herself, Molly Davis, playing a role that did not yet seem a very natural role to play. Her whole life, at the moment, seemed unreal—Giles seemed unreal. She was playing a part—just playing a part.

A shadow passed the window, and she jumped—a strange man was coming through the snow. She heard the rattle of the side door. The stranger stood there in the open doorway, shaking off snow, a strange man, walking into the empty house.

And then, suddenly, illusion fled.

“Oh Giles,” she cried, “I’m so glad you’ve come!”

“Hullo, sweetheart! What filthy weather! Lord, I’m frozen.”

He stamped his feet and blew through his hands.

Automatically Molly picked up the coat that he had thrown in a Giles-like manner onto the oak chest. She put it on a hanger, taking out of the stuffed pockets a muffler, a newspaper, a ball of string, and the morning’s correspondence which he had shoved in pell mell. Moving into the kitchen, she laid down the articles on the dresser and put the kettle on the gas.

“Did you get the netting?” she asked. “What ages you’ve been.”

“It wasn’t the right kind. Wouldn’t have been any good for us. I went on to another dump, but that wasn’t any good, either. What have you been doing with yourself? Nobody turned up yet, I suppose?”

“Mrs. Boyle isn’t coming till tomorrow, anyway.”

“Major Metcalf and Mr. Wren ought to be here today.”

“Major Metcalf sent a card to say he wouldn’t be here till tomorrow.”

“Then that leaves us and Mr. Wren for dinner. What do you think he’s like? Correct sort of retired civil servant is my idea.”

“No, I think he’s an artist.”

“In that case,” said Giles, “we’d better get a week’s rent in advance.”

“Oh, no, Giles, they bring luggage. If they don’t pay we hang on to their luggage.”

“And suppose their luggage is stones wrapped up in newspaper? The truth is, Molly, we don’t in the least know what we’re up against in this business. I hope they don’t spot what beginners we are.”

“Mrs. Boyle is sure to,” said Molly. “She’s that kind of woman.”

“How do you know? You haven’t seen her?”

Molly turned away. She spread a newspaper on the table, fetched some cheese, and set to work to grate it.

“What’s this?” inquired her husband.

“It’s going to be Welsh rarebit,” Molly informed him. “Bread crumbs and mashed potatoes and just a teeny weeny bit of cheese to justify its name.”

“Aren’t you a clever cook?” said her admiring husband.

“I wonder. I can do one thing at a time. It’s assembling them that needs so much practice. Breakfast is the worst.”

“Why?”

“Because it all happens at once—eggs and bacon and hot milk and coffee and toast. The milk boils over, or the toast burns, or the bacon frizzles, or the eggs go hard. You have to be as active as a scalded cat watching everything at once.”

“I shall have to creep down unobserved tomorrow morning and watch this scalded-cat impersonation.”

“The kettle’s boiling,” said Molly. “Shall we take the tray into the library and hear the wireless? It’s almost time for the news.”

“As we seem to be going to spend almost the whole of our time in the kitchen, we ought to have a wireless there, too.”

“Yes. How nice kitchens are. I love this kitchen. I think it’s far and away the nicest room in the house. I like the dresser and the plates, and I simply love the lavish feeling that an absolutely enormous kitchen range gives you—though, of course, I’m thankful I haven’t got to cook on it.”

“I suppose a whole year’s fuel ration would go in one day.”

“Almost certainly, I should say. But think of the great joints that were roasted in it—sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton. Colossal copper preserving pans full of homemade strawberry jam with pounds and pounds of sugar going into it. What a lovely, comfortable age the Victorian age was. Look at the furniture upstairs, large and solid and rather ornate—but, oh!—the heavenly comfort of it, with lots of room for the clothes one used to have, and every drawer sliding in and out so easily. Do you remember that smart modern flat we were lent? Everything built in and sliding—only nothing slid—it always stuck. And the doors pushed shut—only they never stayed shut, or if they did shut they wouldn’t open.”

“Yes, that’s the worst of gadgets. If they don’t go right, you’re sunk.”

“Well, come on, let’s hear the news.”

The news consisted mainly of grim warnings about the weather, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickerings in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington.

“Ugh,” said Molly, switching it off. “Nothing but misery. I’m not going to hear appeals for fuel economy all over again. What do they expect you to do, sit and freeze? I don’t think we ought to have tried to start a guesthouse

in the winter. We ought to have waited until the spring.” She added in a different tone of voice, “I wonder what the woman was like who was murdered.”

“Mrs. Lyon?”

“Was that her name? I wonder who wanted to murder her and why.”

“Perhaps she had a fortune under the floorboards.”

“When it says the police are anxious to interview a man ‘seen in the vicinity’ does that mean he’s the murderer?”

“I think it’s usually that. Just a polite way of putting it.”

The shrill note of a bell made them both jump.

“That’s the front door,” said Giles. “Enter—a murderer,” he added facetiously.

“It would be, of course, in a play. Hurry up. It must be Mr. Wren. Now we shall see who’s right about him, you or me.”

Mr. Wren and a flurry of snow came in together with a rush. All that Molly, standing in the library door, could see of the newcomer was his silhouette against the white world outside.

How alike, thought Molly, were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, gray hat, muffler round the neck.

In another moment Giles had shut the front door against the elements, Mr. Wren was unwinding his muffler and casting down his suitcase and flinging off his hat—all, it seemed, at the same time, and also talking. He had a high-pitched, almost querulous voice and stood revealed in the light of the hall as a young man with a shock of light, sunburned hair and pale, restless eyes.

“Too, too frightful,” he was saying. “The English winter at its worst—a reversion to Dickens—Scrooge and Tiny Tim and all that. One had to be so

terribly hearty to stand up to it all. Don't you think so? And I've had a terrible cross-country journey from Wales. Are you Mrs. Davis? But how delightful!" Molly's hand was seized in a quick, bony clasp. "Not at all as I'd imagined you. I'd pictured you, you know, as an Indian army general's widow. Terrifically grim and memsahibish—and Benares whatnot—a real Victorian whatnot. Heavenly, simply heavenly—Have you got any wax flowers? Or birds of paradise? Oh, but I'm simply going to love this place. I was afraid, you know, it would be very Olde Worlde—very, very Manor House—failing the Benares brass, I mean. Instead, it's marvelous—real Victorian bedrock respectability. Tell me, have you got one of those beautiful sideboards—mahogany—purple-plummy mahogany with great carved fruits?"

"As a matter of fact," said Molly, rather breathless under this torrent of words, "we have."

"No! Can I see it? At once. In here?"

His quickness was almost disconcerting. He had turned the handle of the dining-room door, and clicked on the light. Molly followed him in, conscious of Giles's disapproving profile on her left.

Mr. Wren passed his long bony fingers over the rich carving of the massive sideboard with little cries of appreciation. Then he turned a reproachful glance upon his hostess.

"No big mahogany dining table? All these little tables dotted about instead?"

"We thought people would prefer it that way," said Molly.

"Darling, of course you're quite right. I was being carried away by my feeling for period. Of course, if you had the table, you'd have to have the right family round it. Stern, handsome father with a beard—prolific, faded mother, eleven children, a grim governess, and somebody called 'poor Harriet'—the poor relation who acts as general helper and is very, very grateful for being given a good home. Look at that grate—think of the flames leaping up the chimney and blistering poor Harriet's back."

“I’ll take your suitcase upstairs,” said Giles. “East room?”

“Yes,” said Molly.

Mr. Wren skipped out into the hall again as Giles went upstairs.

“Has it got a four-poster with little chintz roses?” he asked.

“No, it hasn’t,” said Giles and disappeared round the bend of the staircase.

“I don’t believe your husband is going to like me,” said Mr. Wren. “What’s he been in? The navy?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. They’re much less tolerant than the army and the air force. How long have you been married? Are you very much in love with him?”

“Perhaps you’d like to come up and see your room.”

“Yes, of course that was impertinent. But I did really want to know. I mean, it’s interesting, don’t you think, to know all about people? What they feel and think, I mean, not just who they are and what they do.”

“I suppose,” said Molly in a demure voice, “you are Mr. Wren?”

The young man stopped short, clutched his hair in both hands and tugged at it.

“But how frightful—I never put first things first. Yes, I’m Christopher Wren—now, don’t laugh. My parents were a romantic couple. They hoped I’d be an architect. So they thought it a splendid idea to christen me Christopher—halfway home, as it were.”

“And are you an architect?” asked Molly, unable to help smiling.

“Yes, I am,” said Mr. Wren triumphantly. “At least I’m nearly one. I’m not fully qualified yet. But it’s really a remarkable example of wishful thinking coming off for once. Mind you, actually the name will be a handicap. I shall

never be the Christopher Wren. However, Chris Wren's Pre-Fab Nests may achieve fame."

Giles came down the stairs again, and Molly said, "I'll show you your room now, Mr. Wren."

When she came down a few minutes later, Giles said, "Well, did he like the pretty oak furniture?"

"He was very anxious to have a four-poster, so I gave him the rose room instead."

Giles grunted and murmured something that ended, ". . . young twerp."

"Now, look here, Giles," Molly assumed a severe demeanor. "This isn't a house party of guests we're entertaining. This is business. Whether you like Christopher Wren or not—"

"I don't," Giles interjected.

"—has nothing whatever to do with it. He's paying seven guineas a week, and that's all that matters."

"If he pays it, yes."

"He's agreed to pay it. We've got his letter."

"Did you transfer that suitcase of his to the rose room?"

"He carried it, of course."

"Very gallant. But it wouldn't have strained you. There's certainly no question of stones wrapped up in newspaper. It's so light that there seems to me there's probably nothing in it."

"Ssh, here he comes," said Molly warningly.

Christopher Wren was conducted to the library which looked, Molly thought, very nice, indeed, with its big chairs and its log fire. Dinner, she

told him, would be in half an hour's time. In reply to a question, she explained that there were no other guests at the moment. In that case, Christopher said, how would it be if he came into the kitchen and helped?

"I can cook you an omelette if you like," he said engagingly.

The subsequent proceedings took place in the kitchen, and Christopher helped with the washing up.

Somehow, Molly felt, it was not quite the right start for a conventional guesthouse—and Giles had not liked it at all. Oh, well, thought Molly, as she fell asleep, tomorrow when the others came it would be different.

The morning came with dark skies and snow. Giles looked grave, and Molly's heart fell. The weather was going to make everything very difficult.

Mrs. Boyle arrived in the local taxi with chains on the wheels, and the driver brought pessimistic reports of the state of the road.

"Drifts afore nightfall," he prophesied.

Mrs. Boyle herself did not lighten the prevailing gloom. She was a large, forbidding-looking woman with a resonant voice and a masterful manner. Her natural aggressiveness had been heightened by a war career of persistent and militant usefulness.

"If I had not believed this was a running concern, I should never have come," she said. "I naturally thought it was a well-established guesthouse, properly run on scientific lines."

"There is no obligation for you to remain if you are not satisfied, Mrs. Boyle," said Giles.

"No, indeed, and I shall not think of doing so."

"Perhaps, Mrs. Boyle," said Giles, "you would like to ring up for a taxi. The roads are not yet blocked. If there has been any misapprehension it would, perhaps, be better if you went elsewhere." He added, "We have had so

many applications for rooms that we shall be able to fill your place quite easily—indeed, in future we are charging a higher rate for our rooms.”

Mrs. Boyle threw him a sharp glance. “I am certainly not going to leave before I have tried what the place is like. Perhaps you would let me have a rather large bath towel, Mrs. Davis. I am not accustomed to drying myself on a pocket handkerchief.”

Giles grinned at Molly behind Mrs. Boyle’s retreating back.

“Darling, you were wonderful,” said Molly. “The way you stood up to her.”

“Bullies soon climb down when they get their own medicine,” said Giles.

“Oh, dear,” said Molly. “I wonder how she’ll get on with Christopher Wren.”

“She won’t,” said Giles.

And, indeed, that very afternoon, Mrs. Boyle remarked to Molly, “That’s a very peculiar young man,” with distinct disfavor in her voice.

The baker arrived looking like an Arctic explorer and delivered the bread with the warning that his next call, due in two days’ time, might not materialize.

“Holdups everywhere,” he announced. “Got plenty of stores in, I hope?”

“Oh, yes,” said Molly. “We’ve got lots of tins. I’d better take extra flour, though.”

She thought vaguely that there was something the Irish made called soda bread. If the worst came to the worst she could probably make that.

The baker had also brought the papers, and she spread them out on the hall table. Foreign affairs had receded in importance. The weather and the murder of Mrs. Lyon occupied the front page.

She was staring at the blurred reproduction of the dead woman's features when Christopher Wren's voice behind her said, "Rather a sordid murder, don't you think? Such a drab-looking woman and such a drab street. One can't feel, can one, that there is any story behind it?"

"I've no doubt," said Mrs. Boyle with a snort, "that the creature got no more than she deserved."

"Oh." Mr. Wren turned to her with engaging eagerness. "So you think it's definitely a sex crime, do you?"

"I suggested nothing of the kind, Mr. Wren."

"But she was strangled, wasn't she? I wonder—" he held out his long white hands—"what it would feel like to strangle anyone."

"Really, Mr. Wren!"

Christopher moved nearer to her, lowering his voice. "Have you considered, Mrs. Boyle, just what it would feel like to be strangled?"

Mrs. Boyle said again, even more indignantly, "Really, Mr. Wren!"

Molly read hurriedly out, " 'The man the police are anxious to interview was wearing a dark overcoat and a light Homburg hat, was of medium height, and wore a woolen scarf.' "

"In fact," said Christopher Wren, "he looked just like everybody else." He laughed.

"Yes," said Molly. "Just like everybody else."

In his room at Scotland Yard, Inspector Parminter said to Detective Sergeant Kane, "I'll see those two workmen now."

"Yes, sir."

"What are they like?"

“Decent class workingmen. Rather slow reactions. Dependable.”

“Right.” Inspector Parminter nodded.

Presently two embarrassed-looking men in their best clothes were shown into his room. Parminter summed them up with a quick eye. He was an adept at setting people at their ease.

“So you think you’ve some information that might be useful to us on the Lyon case,” he said. “Good of you to come along. Sit down. Smoke?”

He waited while they accepted cigarettes and lit up.

“Pretty awful weather outside.”

“It is that, sir.”

“Well, now, then—let’s have it.”

The two men looked at each other, embarrassed now that it came to the difficulties of narration.

“Go ahead, Joe,” said the bigger of the two.

Joe went ahead. “It was like this, see. We ’adn’t got a match.”

“Where was this?”

“Jarman Street—we was working on the road there—gas mains.”

Inspector Parminter nodded. Later he would get down to exact details of time and place. Jarman Street, he knew was in the close vicinity of Culver Street where the tragedy had taken place.

“You hadn’t got a match,” he repeated encouragingly.

“No. Finished my box, I ’ad, and Bill’s lighter wouldn’t work, and so I spoke to a bloke as was passing. ‘Can you give us a match, mister?’ I says.

Didn't think nothing particular, I didn't, not then. He was just passing—like lots of others—I just 'appened to arsk 'im."

Again Parminter nodded.

"Well, he give us a match, 'e did. Didn't say nothing. 'Cruel cold,' Bill said to 'im, and he just answered, whispering-like, 'Yes, it is.' Got a cold on his chest, I thought. He was all wrapped up, anyway. 'Thanks mister,' I says and gives him back his matches, and he moves off quick, so quick that when I sees 'e'd dropped something, it's almost too late to call 'im back. It was a little notebook as he must 'ave pulled out of 'is pocket when he got the matches out. 'Hi, mister,' I calls after 'im, 'you've dropped something.' But he didn't seem to hear—he just quickens up and bolts round the corner, didn't 'e, Bill?"

"That's right," agreed Bill. "Like a scurrying rabbit."

"Into the Harrow Road, that was, and it didn't seem as we'd catch up with him there, not the rate 'e was going, and, anyway, by then it was a bit late—it was only a little book, not a wallet or anything like that—maybe it wasn't important. 'Funny bloke,' I says. 'His hat pulled down over his eyes, and all buttoned up—like a crook on the pictures,' I says to Bill, didn't I, Bill?"

"That's what you said," agreed Bill.

"Funny I should have said that, not that I thought anything at the time. Just in a hurry to get home, that's what I thought, and I didn't blame 'im. Not 'arf cold, it was!"

"Not 'arf," agreed Bill.

"So I says to Bill, 'Let's 'ave a look at this little book and see if it's important.' Well, sir, I took a look. 'Only a couple of addresses,' I says to Bill. Seventy-Four Culver Street and some blinking manor 'ouse."

"Ritzy," said Bill with a snort of disapproval.

Joe continued his tale with a certain gusto now that he had got wound up.

“ ‘Seventy-Four Culver Street,’ I says to Bill. ‘That’s just round the corner from ’ere. When we knock off, we’ll take it round’—and then I sees something written across the top of the page. ‘What’s this?’ I says to Bill. And he takes it and reads it out. ‘ “Three blind mice”—must be off ’is knocker,’ he says—and just at that very moment—yes, it was that very moment, sir, we ’ears some woman yelling, ‘Murder!’ a couple of streets away!”

Joe paused at this artistic climax.

“Didn’t half yell, did she?” he resumed. “ ‘Here,’ I says to Bill, ‘you nip along.’ And by and by he comes back and says there’s a big crowd and the police are there and some woman’s had her throat cut or been strangled and that was the landlady who found her, yelling for the police. ‘Where was it?’ I says to him. ‘In Culver Street,’ he says. ‘What number?’ I asks, and he says he didn’t rightly notice.”

Bill coughed and shuffled his feet with the sheepish air of one who has not done himself justice.

“So I says, ‘We’ll nip around and make sure,’ and when we finds it’s number seventy-four we talk it over, and ‘Maybe,’ Bill says, ‘the address in the notebook’s got nothing to do with it,’ and I says as maybe it has, and, anyway, after we’ve talked it over and heard the police want to interview a man who left the ’ouse about that time, well, we come along ’ere and ask if we can see the gentleman who’s handling the case, and I’m sure I ’ope as we aren’t wasting your time.”

“You acted very properly,” said Parminter approvingly. “You’ve brought the notebook with you? Thank you. Now—”

His questions became brisk and professional. He got places, times, dates—the only thing he did not get was a description of the man who had dropped the notebook. Instead he got the same description as he had already got from a hysterical landlady, the description of a hat pulled down over the eyes, a buttoned-up coat, a muffler swathed round the lower part of a face, a voice that was only a whisper, gloved hands.

When the men had gone he remained staring down at the little book lying open on his table. Presently it would go to the appropriate department to see what evidence, if any, of fingerprints it might reveal. But now his attention was held by the two addresses and by the line of small handwriting along the top of the page.

He turned his head as Sergeant Kane came into the room.

“Come here, Kane. Look at this.”

Kane stood behind him and let out a low whistle as he read out, “ ‘Three Blind Mice!’ Well, I’m dashed!”

“Yes.” Parminter opened a drawer and took out a half sheet of notepaper which he laid beside the notebook on his desk. It had been found pinned carefully to the murdered woman.

On it was written, This is the first. Below was a childish drawing of three mice and a bar of music.

Kane whistled the tune softly. Three Blind Mice, See how they run—

“That’s it, all right. That’s the signature tune.”

“Crazy, isn’t it, sir?”

“Yes.” Parminter frowned. “The identification of the woman is quite certain?”

“Yes, sir. Here’s the report from the fingerprints department. Mrs. Lyon, as she called herself, was really Maureen Gregg. She was released from Holloway two months ago on completion of her sentence.”

Parminter said thoughtfully, “She went to Seventy-Four Culver Street calling herself Maureen Lyon. She occasionally drank a bit and she had been known to bring a man home with her once or twice. She displayed no fear of anything or anyone. There’s no reason to believe she thought herself in any danger. This man rings the bell, asks for her, and is told by the landlady to go up to the second floor. She can’t describe him, says only that

he was of medium height and seemed to have a bad cold and lost his voice. She went back again to the basement and heard nothing of a suspicious nature. She did not hear the man go out. Ten minutes or so later she took tea to her lodger and discovered her strangled.

“This wasn’t a casual murder, Kane. It was carefully planned.” He paused and then added abruptly, “I wonder how many houses there are in England called Monkswell Manor?”

“There might be only one, sir.”

“That would probably be too much luck. But get on with it. There’s no time to lose.”

The sergeant’s eye rested appreciatively on two entries in the notebook—74 Culver Street; Monkswell Manor.

He said, “So you think—”

Parminster said swiftly, “Yes. Don’t you?”

“Could be. Monkswell Manor—now where—Do you know, sir, I could swear I’ve seen that name quite lately.”

“Where?”

“That’s what I’m trying to remember. Wait a minute—Newspaper—Times. Back page. Wait a minute—Hotels and boardinghouses—Half a sec, sir—it’s an old one. I was doing the crossword.”

He hurried out of the room and returned in triumph, “Here you are, sir, look.”

The inspector followed the pointing finger.

“Monkswell Manor, Harpleden, Berks.” He drew the telephone toward him. “Get me the Berkshire County police.”

With the arrival of Major Metcalf, Monkswell Manor settled into its routine as a going concern. Major Metcalf was neither formidable like Mrs. Boyle, nor erratic like Christopher Wren. He was a stolid, middle-aged man of spruce military appearance, who had done most of his service in India. He appeared satisfied with his room and its furniture, and while he and Mrs. Boyle did not actually find mutual friends, he had known cousins of friends of hers—"the Yorkshire branch," out in Poonah. His luggage, however, two heavy pigskin cases, satisfied even Giles's suspicious nature.

Truth to tell, Molly and Giles did not have much time for speculating about their guests. Between them, dinner was cooked, served, eaten, and washed up satisfactorily. Major Metcalf praised the coffee, and Giles and Molly retired to bed, tired but triumphant—to be roused about two in the morning by the persistent ringing of a bell.

"Damn," said Giles. "It's the front door. What on earth—"

"Hurry up," said Molly. "Go and see."

Casting a reproachful glance at her, Giles wrapped his dressing gown round him and descended the stairs. Molly heard the bolts being drawn back and a murmur of voices in the hall. Presently, driven by curiosity, she crept out of bed and went to peep from the top of the stairs. In the hall below, Giles was assisting a bearded stranger out of a snow-covered overcoat. Fragments of conversation floated up to her.

"Brrr." It was an explosive foreign sound. "My fingers are so cold I cannot feel them. And my feet—" A stamping sound was heard.

"Come in here." Giles threw open the library door. "It's warm. You'd better wait here while I get a room ready."

"I am indeed fortunate," said the stranger politely.

Molly peered inquisitively through the banisters. She saw an elderly man with a small black beard and Mephistophelean eyebrows. A man who moved with a young and jaunty step in spite of the gray at his temples.

Giles shut the library door on him and came quickly up the stairs. Molly rose from her crouching position.

“Who is it?” she demanded.

Giles grinned. “Another guest for the guesthouse. Car overturned in a snowdrift. He got himself out and was making his way as best he could—it’s a howling blizzard still, listen to it—along the road when he saw our board. He said it was like an answer to prayer.”

“You think he’s—all right?”

“Darling, this isn’t the sort of night for a housebreaker to be doing his rounds.”

“He’s a foreigner, isn’t he?”

“Yes. His name’s Paravicini. I saw his wallet—I rather think he showed it on purpose—simply crammed with notes. Which room shall we give him?”

“The green room. It’s all tidy and ready. We’ll just have to make up the bed.”

“I suppose I’ll have to lend him pajamas. All his things are in the car. He said he had to climb out through the window.”

Molly fetched sheets, pillowcases, and towels.

As they hurriedly made the bed up, Giles said, “It’s coming down thick. We’re going to be snowed up, Molly, completely cut off. Rather exciting in a way, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said Molly doubtfully. “Do you think I can make soda bread, Giles?”

“Of course you can. You can make anything,” said her loyal husband.

“I’ve never tried to make bread. It’s the sort of thing one takes for granted. It may be new or it may be stale but it’s just something the baker brings.

But if we're snowed up there won't be a baker."

"Nor a butcher, nor a postman. No newspapers. And probably no telephone."

"Just the wireless telling us what to do?"

"At any rate we make our own electric light."

"You must run the engine again tomorrow. And we must keep the central heating well stoked."

"I suppose our next lot of coke won't come in now. We're very low."

"Oh, bother. Giles, I feel we are in for a simply frightful time. Hurry up and get Para—whatever his name is. I'll go back to bed."

Morning brought confirmation of Giles's forebodings. Snow was piled five feet high, drifting up against the doors and windows. Outside it was still snowing. The world was white, silent, and—in some subtle way—menacing.

Mrs. Boyle sat at breakfast. There was no one else in the dining room. At the adjoining table, Major Metcalf's place had been cleared away. Mr. Wren's table was still laid for breakfast. One early riser, presumably, and one late one. Mrs. Boyle herself knew definitely that there was only one proper time for breakfast, nine o'clock.

Mrs. Boyle had finished her excellent omelette and was champing toast between her strong white teeth. She was in a grudging and undecided mood. Monkswell Manor was not at all what she had imagined it would be. She had hoped for bridge, for faded spinsters whom she could impress with her social position and connections, and to whom she could hint at the importance and secrecy of her war service.

The end of the war had left Mrs. Boyle marooned, as it were, on a desert shore. She had always been a busy woman, talking fluently of efficiency

and organization. Her vigor and drive had prevented people asking whether she was, indeed, a good or efficient organizer. War activities had suited her down to the ground. She had bossed people and bullied people and worried heads of departments and, to give her her due, had at no time spared herself. Subservient women had run to and fro, terrified of her slightest frown. And now all that exciting hustling life was over. She was back in private life, and her former private life had vanished. Her house, which had been requisitioned by the army, needed thorough repairing and redecorating before she could return to it, and the difficulties of domestic help made a return to it impracticable in any case. Her friends were largely scattered and dispersed. Presently, no doubt, she would find her niche, but at the moment it was a case of marking time. A hotel or a boardinghouse seemed the answer. And she had chosen to come to Monkswell Manor.

She looked round her disparagingly.

Most dishonest, she said to herself, not to have told me they were only just starting.

She pushed her plate farther away from her. The fact that her breakfast had been excellently cooked and served, with good coffee and homemade marmalade, in a curious way annoyed her still more. It had deprived her of a legitimate cause of complaint. Her bed, too, had been comfortable, with embroidered sheets and a soft pillow. Mrs. Boyle liked comfort, but she also liked to find fault. The latter was, perhaps, the stronger passion of the two.

Rising majestically, Mrs. Boyle left the dining room, passing in the doorway that very extraordinary young man with the red hair. He was wearing this morning a checked tie of virulent green—a woolen tie.

Preposterous, said Mrs. Boyle to herself. Quite preposterous.

The way he looked at her, too, sideways out of those pale eyes of his—she didn't like it. There was something upsetting—unusual—about that faintly mocking glance.

Unbalanced mentally, I shouldn't wonder, said Mrs. Boyle to herself.

She acknowledged his flamboyant bow with a slight inclination of her head and marched into the big drawing room. Comfortable chairs here, particularly the large rose-colored one. She had better make it clear that that was to be her chair. She deposited her knitting on it as a precaution and walked over and laid a hand on the radiators. As she had suspected, they were only warm, not hot. Mrs. Boyle's eye gleamed militantly. She could have something to say about that.

She glanced out of the window. Dreadful weather—quite dreadful. Well, she wouldn't stay here long—not unless more people came and made the place amusing.

Some snow slid off the roof with a soft whooshing sound. Mrs. Boyle jumped. "No," she said out loud. "I shan't stay here long."

Somebody laughed—a faint, high chuckle. She turned her head sharply. Young Wren was standing in the doorway looking at her with that curious expression of his.

"No," he said. "I don't suppose you will."

Major Metcalf was helping Giles to shovel away snow from the back door. He was a good worker, and Giles was quite vociferous in his expressions of gratitude.

"Good exercise," said Major Metcalf. "Must get exercise every day. Got to keep fit, you know."

So the major was an exercise fiend. Giles had feared as much. It went with his demand for breakfast at half past seven.

As though reading Giles's thoughts, the major said, "Very good of your missus to cook me an early breakfast. Nice to get a new-laid egg, too."

Giles had risen himself before seven, owing to the exigencies of hotelkeeping. He and Molly had had boiled eggs and tea and had set to on the sitting rooms. Everything was spick-and-span. Giles could not help

thinking that if he had been a guest in his own establishment, nothing would have dragged him out of bed on a morning such as this until the last possible moment.

The major, however, had been up and breakfasted, and roamed about the house, apparently full of energy seeking an outlet.

Well, thought Giles, there's plenty of snow to shovel.

He threw a sideways glance at his companion. Not an easy man to place, really. Hard-bitten, well over middle age, something queerly watchful about the eyes. A man who was giving nothing away. Giles wondered why he had come to Monkswell Manor. Demobilized, probably, and no job to go to.

Mr. Paravicini came down late. He had coffee and a piece of toast—a frugal Continental breakfast.

He somewhat disconcerted Molly when she brought it to him by rising to his feet, bowing in an exaggerated manner, and exclaiming, “My charming hostess? I am right, am I not?”

Molly admitted rather shortly that he was right. She was in no mood for compliments at this hour.

“And why,” she said, as she piled crockery recklessly in the sink, “everybody has to have their breakfast at a different time—It's a bit hard.”

She slung the plates into the rack and hurried upstairs to deal with the beds. She could expect no assistance from Giles this morning. He had to clear a way to the boiler house and to the henhouse.

Molly did the beds at top speed and admittedly in the most slovenly manner, smoothing sheets and pulling them up as fast as she could.

She was at work on the baths when the telephone rang.

Molly first cursed at being interrupted, then felt a slight feeling of relief that the telephone at least was still in action, as she ran down to answer it.

She arrived in the library a little breathless and lifted the receiver.

“Yes?”

A hearty voice with a slight but pleasant country burr asked, “Is that Monkswell Manor?”

“Monkswell Manor Guest House.”

“Can I speak to Commander David, please?”

“I’m afraid he can’t come to the telephone just now,” said Molly. “This is Mrs. Davis. Who is speaking, please?”

“Superintendent Hogben, Berkshire Police.”

Molly gave a slight gasp. She said, “Oh, yes—er—yes?”

“Mrs. Davis, rather an urgent matter has arisen. I don’t wish to say very much over the telephone, but I have sent Detective Sergeant Trotter out to you, and he should be there any minute now.”

“But he won’t get here. We’re snowed up—completely snowed up. The roads are impassable.”

There was no break in the confidence of the voice at the other end.

“Trotter will get to you, all right,” it said. “And please impress upon your husband, Mrs. Davis, to listen very carefully to what Trotter has to tell you, and to follow his instructions implicitly. That’s all.”

“But, Superintendent Hogben, what—”

But there was a decisive click. Hogben had clearly said all he had to say and rung off. Molly waggled the telephone rest once or twice, then gave up. She turned as the door opened.

“Oh, Giles darling, there you are.”

Giles had snow on his hair and a good deal of coal grime on his face. He looked hot.

“What is it, sweetheart? I’ve filled the coal scuttles and brought in the wood. I’ll do the hens next and then have a look at the boiler. Is that right? What’s the matter, Molly? You looked scared.”

“Giles, it was the police.”

“The police?” Giles sounded incredulous.

“Yes, they’re sending out an inspector or a sergeant or something.”

“But why? What have we done?”

“I don’t know. Do you think it could be that two pounds of butter we had from Ireland?”

Giles was frowning. “I did remember to get the wireless license, didn’t I?”

“Yes, it’s in the desk. Giles, old Mrs. Bidlock gave me five of her coupons for that old tweed coat of mine. I suppose that’s wrong—but I think it’s perfectly fair. I’m a coat less so why shouldn’t I have the coupons? Oh, dear, what else is there we’ve done?”

“I had a near shave with the car the other day. But it was definitely the other fellow’s fault. Definitely.”

“We must have done something,” wailed Molly.

“The trouble is that practically everything one does nowadays is illegal,” said Giles gloomily. “That’s why one has a permanent feeling of guilt. Actually I expect it’s something to do with running this place. Running a guesthouse is probably chockfull of snags we’ve never heard of.”

“I thought drink was the only thing that mattered. We haven’t given anyone anything to drink. Otherwise, why shouldn’t we run our own house any way we please?”

“I know. It sounds all right. But as I say, everything’s more or less forbidden nowadays.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Molly. “I wish we’d never started. We’re going to be snowed up for days, and everybody will be cross and they’ll eat all our reserves of tins—”

“Cheer up, sweetheart,” said Giles. “We’re having a bad break at the moment, but it will pan out all right.”

He kissed the top of her head rather absentmindedly and, releasing her, said in a different voice, “You know, Molly, come to think of it, it must be something pretty serious to send a police sergeant trekking out here in all this.” He waved a hand toward the snow outside. He said, “It must be something really urgent—”

As they stared at each other, the door opened, and Mrs. Boyle came in.

“Ah, here you are, Mr. Davis,” said Mrs. Boyle. “Do you know the central heating in the drawing room is practically stone-cold?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Boyle. We’re rather short of coke and—”

Mrs. Boyle cut in ruthlessly. “I am paying seven guineas a week here—seven guineas. And I do not expect to freeze.”

Giles flushed. He said shortly, “I’ll go and stoke it up.”

He went out of the room, and Mrs. Boyle turned to Molly.

“If you don’t mind my saying so, Mrs. Davis, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners—and his ties—And does he never brush his hair?”

“He’s an extremely brilliant young architect,” said Molly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Christopher Wren is an architect and—”

“My dear young woman,” snapped Mrs. Boyle, “I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. Of course he was an architect. He built St. Paul’s. You young people seem to think that education came in with the Education Act.”

“I meant this Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he’d be an architect. And he is—or nearly—one, so it turned out all right.”

“Humph,” Mrs. Boyle snorted. “It sounds a very fishy story to me. I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know about him?”

“Just as much as I know about you, Mrs. Boyle—which is that both you and he are paying us seven guineas a week. That’s really all that I need to know, isn’t it? And all that concerns me. It doesn’t matter to me whether I like my guests, or whether—” Molly looked very steadily at Mrs. Boyle—“or whether I don’t.”

Mrs. Boyle flushed angrily. “You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this queer foreigner? When did he arrive?”

“In the middle of the night.”

“Indeed. Most peculiar. Not a very conventional hour.”

“To turn away bona fide travelers would be against the law, Mrs. Boyle.” Molly added sweetly. “You may not be aware of that.”

“All I can say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me—”

“Beware, beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and then—”

Mrs. Boyle jumped as though it had been indeed the devil who addressed her. Mr. Paravicini, who had minced quietly in without either of the two

women noticing him, laughed and rubbed his hands together with a kind of elderly satanic glee.

“You startled me,” said Mrs. Boyle. “I did not hear you come in.”

“I come in on tiptoe, so,” said Mr. Paravicini, “nobody ever hears me come and go. That I find very amusing. Sometimes I overhear things. That, too, amuses me.” He added softly, “But I do not forget what I hear.”

Mrs. Boyle said rather feebly, “Indeed? I must get my knitting—I left it in the drawing room.”

She went out hurriedly. Molly stood looking at Mr. Paravicini with a puzzled expression. He approached her with a kind of hop and skip.

“My charming hostess looks upset.” Before she could prevent it, he picked up her hand and kissed it. “What is it, dear lady?”

Molly drew back a step. She was not sure that she liked Mr. Paravicini much. He was leering at her like an elderly satyr.

“Everything is rather difficult this morning,” she said lightly. “Because of the snow.”

“Yes.” Mr. Paravicini turned his head round to look out of the window. “Snow makes everything very difficult, does it not? Or else it makes things very easy.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No,” he said thoughtfully. “There is quite a lot that you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know very much about running a guesthouse.”

Molly’s chin went up belligerently. “I daresay we don’t. But we mean to make a go of it.”

“Bravo, bravo.”

“After all,” Molly’s voice betrayed slight anxiety, “I’m not such a very bad cook—”

“You are, without doubt, an enchanting cook,” said Mr. Paravicini.

What a nuisance foreigners were, thought Molly.

Perhaps Mr. Paravicini read her thoughts. At all events his manner changed. He spoke quietly and quite seriously.

“May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs. Davis? You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these guests of yours?”

“Is that usual?” Molly looked troubled. “I thought people just—just came.”

“It is advisable always to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof.” He leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder in a minatory kind of way. “Take myself, for example. I turn up in the middle of the night. My car, I say, is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all. Perhaps you know nothing, either, of your other guests.”

“Mrs. Boyle—” began Molly, but stopped as that lady herself re-entered the room, knitting in hand.

“The drawing room is too cold. I shall sit in here.” She marched toward the fireplace.

Mr. Paravicini pirouetted swiftly ahead of her. “Allow me to poke the fire for you.”

Molly was struck, as she had been the night before, by the youthful jauntiness of his step. She noticed that he always seemed careful to keep his back to the light, and now, as he knelt, poking the fire, she thought she saw the reason for it. Mr. Paravicini’s face was cleverly but decidedly “made up.”

So the old idiot tried to make himself look younger than he was, did he? Well, he didn’t succeed. He looked all his age and more. Only the youthful

walk was incongruous. Perhaps that, too, had been carefully counterfeited.

She was brought back from speculation to the disagreeable realities by the brisk entrance of Major Metcalf.

“Mrs. Davis. I’m afraid the pipes of the—er—” he lowered his voice modestly, “downstairs cloakroom are frozen.”

“Oh, dear,” groaned Molly. “What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes.”

Mr. Paravicini dropped the poker into the grate with a clatter. Mrs. Boyle stopped knitting. Molly, looking at Major Metcalf, was puzzled by his sudden stiff immobility and by the indescribable expression on his face. It was an expression she could not place. It was as though all emotion had been drained out of it, leaving something carved out of wood behind.

He said in a short, staccato voice, “Police, did you say?”

She was conscious that behind the stiff immobility of his demeanor, some violent emotion was at work. It might have been fear or alertness or excitement—but there was something. This man, she said to herself, could be dangerous.

He said again, and this time his voice was just mildly curious, “What’s that about the police?”

“They rang up,” said Molly. “Just now. To say they’re sending a sergeant out here.” She looked toward the window. “But I shouldn’t think he’ll ever get here,” she said hopefully.

“Why are they sending the police here?” He took a step nearer to her, but before she could reply the door opened, and Giles came in.

“This ruddy coke’s more than half stones,” he said angrily. Then he added sharply, “Is anything the matter?”

Major Metcalf turned to him. “I hear the police are coming out here,” he said. “Why?”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Giles. “No one can ever get through in this. Why, the drifts are five feet deep. The road’s all banked up. Nobody will get here today.”

And at that moment there came distinctly three loud taps on the window.

It startled them all. For a moment or two they did not locate the sound. It came with the emphasis and menace of a ghostly warning. And then, with a cry, Molly pointed to the French window. A man was standing there tapping on the pane, and the mystery of his arrival was explained by the fact that he wore skis.

With an exclamation, Giles crossed the room, fumbled with the catch, and threw open the French window.

“Thank you, sir,” said the new arrival. He had a slightly common, cheerful voice and a well-bronzed face.

“Detective Sergeant Trotter,” he announced himself.

Mrs. Boyle peered at him over her knitting with disfavor.

“You can’t be a sergeant,” she said disapprovingly.

“You’re too young.”

The young man, who was indeed very young, looked affronted at this criticism and said in a slightly annoyed tone, “I’m not quite as young as I look, madam.”

His eye roved over the group and picked out Giles.

“Are you Mr. Davis? Can I get these skis off and stow them somewhere?”

“Of course, come with me.”

Mrs. Boyle said acidly as the door to the hall closed behind them, “I suppose that’s what we pay our police force for, nowadays, to go round enjoying themselves at winter sports.”

Paravicini had come close to Molly. There was quite a hiss in his voice as he said in a quick, low voice, "Why did you send for the police, Mrs. Davis?"

She recoiled a little before the steady malignity of his glance. This was a new Mr. Paravicini. For a moment she felt afraid. She said helplessly, "But I didn't. I didn't."

And then Christopher Wren came excitedly through the door, saying in a high penetrating whisper, "Who's that man in the hall? Where did he come from? So terribly hearty and all over snow."

Mrs. Boyle's voice boomed out over the click of her knitting needles. "You may believe it or not, but that man is a policeman. A policeman—skiing!"

The final disruption of the lower classes had come, so her manner seemed to say.

Major Metcalf murmured to Molly, "Excuse me, Mrs. Davis, but may I use your telephone?"

"Of course, Major Metcalf."

He went over to the instrument, just as Christopher Wren said shrilly, "He's very handsome, don't you think so? I always think policemen are terribly attractive."

"Hullo, hullo—" Major Metcalf was rattling the telephone irritably. He turned to Molly. "Mrs. Davis, this telephone is dead, quite dead."

"It was all right just now. I—"

She was interrupted. Christopher Wren was laughing, a high, shrill, almost hysterical laugh. "So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?"

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Major Metcalf stiffly.

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Boyle.

Christopher was still in fits of laughter. "It's a private joke of my own," he said. "Hsh," he put his finger to his lips, "the sleuth is coming."

Giles came in with Sergeant Trotter. The latter had got rid of his skis and brushed off the snow and was holding in his hand a large notebook and pencil. He brought an atmosphere of unhurried judicial procedure with him.

"Molly," said Giles, "Sergeant Trotter wants a word with us alone."

Molly followed them both out of the room.

"We'll go in the study," Giles said.

They went into the small room at the back of the hall which was dignified by that name. Sergeant Trotter closed the door carefully behind him.

"What have we done, Sergeant?" Molly demanded plaintively.

"Done?" Sergeant Trotter stared at her. Then he smiled broadly. "Oh," he said. "It's nothing of that kind, madam. I'm sorry if there's been a misapprehension of any kind. No, Mrs. Davis, it's something quite different. It's more a matter of police protection, if you understand me."

Not understanding him in the least, they both looked at him inquiringly.

Sergeant Trotter went on fluently, "It relates to the death of Mrs. Lyon, Mrs. Maureen Lyon, who was murdered in London two days ago. You may have read about the case."

"Yes," said Molly.

"The first thing I want to know is if you were acquainted with this Mrs. Lyon?"

"Never heard of her," said Giles, and Molly murmured concurrence.

"Well, that's rather what we expected. But as a matter of fact Lyon wasn't the murdered woman's real name. She had a police record, and her fingerprints were on file, so we were able to identify her without any

difficulty. Her real name was Gregg; Maureen Gregg. Her late husband, John Gregg, was a farmer who resided at Longridge Farm not very far from here. You may have heard of the Longridge Farm case.”

The room was very still. Only one sound broke the stillness, a soft, unexpected plop as snow slithered off the roof and fell to the ground outside. It was a secret, almost sinister sound.

Trotter went on. “Three evacuee children were billeted on the Greggs at Longridge Farm in 1940. One of those children subsequently died as the result of criminal neglect and ill-treatment. The case made quite a sensation, and the Greggs were both sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Gregg escaped on his way to prison, he stole a car and had a crash while trying to evade the police. He was killed outright. Mrs. Gregg served her sentence and was released two months ago.”

“And now she’s been murdered,” said Giles. “Who do they think did it?”

But Sergeant Trotter was not to be hurried. “You remember the case, sir?” he asked.

Giles shook his head. “In 1940 I was a midshipman serving in the Mediterranean.”

“I—I do remember hearing about it, I think,” said Molly rather breathlessly. “But why do you come to us? What have we to do with it?”

“It’s a question of your being in danger, Mrs. Davis!”

“Danger?” Giles spoke incredulously.

“It’s like this, sir. A notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In it were written two addresses. The first was Seventy-Four Culver Street.”

“Where the woman was murdered?” Molly put in.

“Yes, Mrs. Davis. The other address was Monkswell Manor.”

“What?” Molly’s tone was incredulous. “But how extraordinary.”

“Yes. That’s why Superintendent Hogben thought it imperative to find out if you knew of any connection between you, or between this house, and the Longridge Farm case.”

“There’s nothing—absolutely nothing,” said Giles. “It must be some coincidence.”

Sergeant Trotter said gently, “Superintendent Hogben doesn’t think it is a coincidence. He’d have come himself if it had been at all possible. Under the weather conditions, and as I’m an expert skier, he sent me with instructions to get full particulars of everyone in this house, to report back to him by phone, and to take all measures I thought expedient for the safety of the household.”

Giles said sharply, “Safety? Good Lord, man, you don’t think somebody is going to be killed here?”

Trotter said apologetically, “I didn’t want to upset the lady, but yes, that is just what Superintendent Hogben does think.”

“But what earthly reason could there be—”

Giles broke off, and Trotter said, “That’s just what I’m here to find out.”

“But the whole thing’s crazy.”

“Yes, sir, but it’s because it’s crazy that it’s dangerous.”

Molly said, “There’s something more you haven’t told us yet, isn’t there, Sergeant?”

“Yes, madam. At the top of the page in the notebook was written, ‘Three Blind Mice.’ Pinned to the dead woman’s body was a paper with ‘This is the first’ written on it. And below it a drawing of three mice and a bar of music. The music was the tune of the nursery rhyme ‘Three Blind Mice.’ ”

Molly sang softly:

“Three Blind Mice,

See how they run.

They all ran after the farmer's wife!

She—"

She broke off. "Oh, it's horrible—horrible. There were three children, weren't there?"

"Yes, Mrs. Davis. A boy of fifteen, a girl of fourteen, and the boy of twelve who died."

"What happened to the others?"

"The girl was, I believe, adopted by someone. We haven't been able to trace her. The boy would be just on twenty-three now. We've lost track of him. He was said to have always been a bit—queer. He joined up in the army at eighteen. Later he deserted. Since then he's disappeared. The army psychiatrist says definitely that he's not normal."

"You think that it was he who killed Mrs. Lyon?" Giles asked. "And that he's a homicidal maniac and may turn up here for some unknown reason?"

"We think that there must be a connection between someone here and the Longridge Farm business. Once we can establish what that connection is, we will be forearmed. Now you state, sir, that you yourself have no connection with that case. The same goes for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"I—oh, yes—yes."

"Perhaps you will tell me exactly who else there is in the house?"

They gave him the names. Mrs. Boyle. Major Metcalf. Mr. Christopher Wren. Mr. Paravicini. He wrote them down in his notebook.

"Servants?"

"We haven't any servants," said Molly. "And that reminds me, I must go and put the potatoes on."

She left the study abruptly.

Trotter turned to Giles. “What do you know about these people, sir?”

“I—We—” Giles paused. Then he said quietly, “Really, we don’t know anything about them, Sergeant Trotter. Mrs. Boyle wrote from a Bournemouth hotel. Major Metcalf from Leamington. Mr. Wren from a private hotel in South Kensington. Mr. Paravicini just turned up out of the blue—or rather out of the white—his car overturned in a snowdrift near here. Still, I suppose they’ll have identity cards, ration books, that sort of thing?”

“I shall go into all that, of course.”

“In a way it’s lucky that the weather is so awful,” said Giles. “The murderer can’t very well turn up in this, can he?”

“Perhaps he doesn’t need to, Mr. Davis.”

“What do you mean?”

Sergeant Trotter hesitated for a moment and then he said, “You’ve got to consider, sir, that he may be here already.”

Giles stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Gregg was killed two days ago. All your visitors here have arrived since then, Mr. Davis.”

“Yes, but they’d booked beforehand—some time beforehand—except for Paravicini.”

Sergeant Trotter sighed. His voice sounded tired. “These crimes were planned in advance.”

“Crimes? But only one crime has happened yet. Why are you sure that there will be another?”

“That it will happen—no. I hope to prevent that. That it will be attempted, yes.”

“But then—if you’re right,” Giles spoke excitedly, “there’s only one person it could be. There’s only one person who’s the right age. Christopher Wren!”

Sergeant Trotter had joined Molly in the kitchen.

“I’d be glad, Mrs. Davis, if you would come with me to the library. I want to make a general statement to everyone. Mr. Davis has kindly gone to prepare the way—”

“All right—just let me finish these potatoes. Sometimes I wish Sir Walter Raleigh had never discovered the beastly things.”

Sergeant Trotter preserved a disapproving silence. Molly said apologetically, “I can’t really believe it, you see—It’s so fantastic—”

“It isn’t fantastic, Mrs. Davis—It’s just plain facts.”

“You have a description of the man?” Molly asked curiously.

“Medium height, slight build, wore a dark overcoat and a light hat, spoke in a whisper, his face was hidden by a muffler. You see—that might be anybody.” He paused and added, “There are three dark overcoats and light hats hanging up in your hall here, Mrs. Davis.”

“I don’t think any of these people came from London.”

“Didn’t they, Mrs. Davis?” With a swift movement Sergeant Trotter moved to the dresser and picked up a newspaper.

“The Evening Standard of February 19th. Two days ago. Someone brought that paper here, Mrs. Davis.”

“But how extraordinary.” Molly stared, some faint chord of memory stirred. “Where can that paper have come from?”

“You mustn’t take people always at their face value, Mrs. Davis. You don’t really know anything about these people you have admitted to your house.” He added, “I take it you and Mr. Davis are new to the guesthouse business?”

“Yes, we are,” Molly admitted. She felt suddenly young, foolish, and childish.

“You haven’t been married long, perhaps, either?”

“Just a year.” She blushed slightly. “It was all rather sudden.”

“Love at first sight,” said Sergeant Trotter sympathetically.

Molly felt quite unable to snub him. “Yes,” she said, and added in a burst of confidence, “we’d only known each other a fortnight.”

Her thoughts went back over those fourteen days of whirlwind courtship. There hadn’t been any doubts—they had both known. In a worrying, nerve-racked world, they had found the miracle of each other. A little smile came to her lips.

She came back to the present to find Sergeant Trotter eying her indulgently.

“Your husband doesn’t come from these parts, does he?”

“No,” said Molly vaguely. “He comes from Lincolnshire.”

She knew very little of Giles’s childhood and upbringing. His parents were dead, and he always avoided talking about his early days. He had had, she fancied, an unhappy childhood.

“You’re both very young, if I may say so, to run a place of this kind,” said Sergeant Trotter.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m twenty-two and—”

She broke off as the door opened and Giles came in.

“Everything’s all set. I’ve given them a rough outline,” he said. “I hope that’s all right, Sergeant?”

“Saves time,” said Trotter. “Are you ready, Mrs. Davis?”

Four voices spoke at once as Sergeant Trotter entered the library.

Highest and shrillest was that of Christopher Wren declaring that this was too, too thrilling and he wasn’t going to sleep a wink tonight, and please, please could we have all the gory details?

A kind of double-bass accompaniment came from Mrs. Boyle. “Absolute outrage—sheer incompetence—police have no business to let murderers go roaming about the countryside.”

Mr. Paravicini was eloquent chiefly with his hands. His gesticulations were more eloquent than his words, which were drowned by Mrs. Boyle’s double bass. Major Metcalf could be heard in an occasional short staccato bark. He was asking for facts.

Trotter waited a moment or two, then he held up an authoritative hand and, rather surprisingly, there was silence.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, Mr. Davis has given you an outline of why I’m here. I want to know one thing, and one thing only, and I want to know it quick. Which of you has some connection with the Longridge Farm case?”

The silence was unbroken. Four blank faces looked at Sergeant Trotter. The emotions of a few moments back—excitement, indignation, hysteria, inquiry, were wiped away as a sponge wipes out the chalk marks on a slate.

Sergeant Trotter spoke again, more urgently. “Please understand me. One of you, we have reason to believe, is in danger—deadly danger. I have got to know which one of you it is!”

And still no one spoke or moved.

Something like anger came into Trotter's voice. "Very well—I'll ask you one by one. Mr. Paravicini?"

A very faint smile flickered across Mr. Paravicini's face. He raised his hands in a protesting foreign gesture.

"But I am a stranger in these parts, Inspector. I know nothing, but nothing, of these local affairs of bygone years."

Trotter wasted no time. He snapped out, "Mrs. Boyle?"

"Really I don't see why—I mean—why should I have anything to do with such a distressing business?"

"Mr. Wren?"

Christopher said shrilly, "I was a mere child at the time. I don't remember even hearing about it."

"Major Metcalf?"

The Major said abruptly, "Read about it in the papers. I was stationed at Edinburgh at the time."

"That's all you have to say—any of you?"

Silence again.

Trotter gave an exasperated sigh. "If one of you gets murdered," he said, "you'll only have yourself to blame." He turned abruptly and went out of the room.

"My dears," said Christopher. "How melodramatic!" He added, "He's very handsome, isn't he? I do admire the police. So stern and hard-boiled. Quite a thrill, this whole business. 'Three Blind Mice.' How does the tune go?"

He whistled the air softly, and Molly cried out involuntarily, "Don't!"

He whirled round on her and laughed. "But, darling," he said, "it's my signature tune. I've never been taken for a murderer before and I'm getting a tremendous kick out of it!"

"Melodramatic rubbish," said Mrs. Boyle. "I don't believe a word of it."

Christopher's light eyes danced with an impish mischief. "But just wait, Mrs. Boyle," he lowered his voice, "till I creep up behind you and you feel my hands round your throat."

Molly flinched.

Giles said angrily, "You're upsetting my wife, Wren. It's a damned poor joke, anyway."

"It's no joking matter," said Metcalf.

"Oh, but it is," said Christopher. "That's just what it is—a madman's joke. That's what makes it so deliciously macabre."

He looked round at them and laughed again. "If you could just see your faces," he said.

Then he went swiftly out of the room.

Mrs. Boyle recovered first. "A singularly ill-mannered and neurotic young man," she said. "Probably a conscientious objector."

"He tells me he was buried during an air raid for forty-eight hours before being dug out," said Major Metcalf. "That accounts for a good deal, I daresay."

"People have so many excuses for giving way to nerves," said Mrs. Boyle acidly. "I'm sure I went through as much as anybody in the war, and my nerves are all right."

"Perhaps that's just as well for you, Mrs. Boyle," said Metcalf.

"What do you mean?"

Major Metcalf said quietly, “I think you were actually the billeting officer for this district in 1940, Mrs. Boyle.” He looked at Molly who gave a grave nod. “That is so, isn’t it?”

An angry flush appeared on Mrs. Boyle’s face. “What of it?” she demanded.

Metcalf said gravely, “You were responsible for sending three children to Longridge Farm.”

“Really, Major Metcalf, I don’t see how I can be held responsible for what happened. The Farm people seemed very nice and were most anxious to have the children. I don’t see that I was to blame in any way—or that I can be held responsible—” Her voice trailed off.

Giles said sharply, “Why didn’t you tell Sergeant Trotter this?”

“No business of the police,” snapped Mrs. Boyle. “I can look after myself.”

Major Metcalf said quietly, “You’d better watch out.”

Then he, too, left the room.

Molly murmured, “Of course, you were the billeting officer. I remember.”

“Molly, did you know?” Giles stared at her.

“You had the big house on the common, didn’t you?”

“Requisitioned,” said Mrs. Boyle. “And completely ruined,” she added bitterly. “Devastated. Iniquitous.”

Then, very softly, Mr. Paravicini began to laugh. He threw his head back and laughed without restraint.

“You must forgive me,” he gasped. “But, indeed, I find all this most amusing. I enjoy myself—yes, I enjoy myself greatly.”

Sergeant Trotter re-entered the room at that moment. He threw a glance of disapproval at Mr. Paravicini. “I’m glad,” he said acidly, “that everyone

finds this so funny.”

“I apologize, my dear Inspector. I do apologize. I am spoiling the effect of your solemn warning.”

Sergeant Trotter shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve done my best to make the position clear,” he said. “And I’m not an inspector. I’m only a sergeant. I’d like to use the telephone, please, Mrs. Davis.”

“I abase myself,” said Mr. Paravicini. “I creep away.”

Far from creeping, he left the room with that jaunty and youthful step that Molly had noticed before.

“He’s an odd fish,” said Giles.

“Criminal type,” said Trotter. “Wouldn’t trust him a yard.”

“Oh,” said Molly. “You think he—but he’s far too old—Or is he old at all? He uses makeup—quite a lot of it. And his walk is young. Perhaps, he’s made up to look old. Sergeant Trotter, do you think—”

Sergeant Trotter snubbed her severely. “We shan’t get anywhere with unprofitable speculation, Mrs. Davis,” he said. “I must report to Superintendent Hogben.”

He crossed to the telephone.

“But you can’t,” said Molly. “The telephone’s dead.”

“What?” Trotter swung round.

The sharp alarm in his voice impressed them all. “Dead? Since when?”

“Major Metcalf tried it just before you came.”

“But it was all right before that. You got Superintendent Hogben’s message?”

“Yes. I suppose—since ten—the line’s down—with the snow.”

But Trotter’s face remained grave. “I wonder,” he said. “It may have been—cut.”

Molly stared. “You think so?”

“I’m going to make sure.”

He hurried out of the room. Giles hesitated, then went after him.

Molly exclaimed, “Good heavens! Nearly lunchtime, I must get on—or we’ll have nothing to eat.”

As she rushed from the room, Mrs. Boyle muttered, “Incompetent chit! What a place. I shan’t pay seven guineas for this kind of thing.”

Sergeant Trotter bent down, following the wires. He asked Giles, “Is there an extension?”

“Yes, in our bedroom upstairs. Shall I go up and see there?”

“If you please.”

Trotter opened the window and leaned out, brushing snow from the sill. Giles hurried up the stairs.

Mr. Paravicini was in the big drawing room. He went across to the grand piano and opened it. Sitting on the music stool, he picked out a tune softly with one finger.

Three Blind Mice,

See how they run. . . .

Christopher Wren was in his bedroom. He moved about it, whistling briskly. Suddenly the whistle wavered and died. He sat down on the edge of

the bed. He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. He murmured childishly, "I can't go on."

Then his mood changed. He stood up, squared his shoulders. "I've got to go on," he said. "I've got to go through with it."

Giles stood by the telephone in his and Molly's room. He bent down toward the skirting. One of Molly's gloves lay there. He picked it up. A pink bus ticket dropped out of it. Giles stood looking down at it as it fluttered to the ground. Watching it, his face changed. It might have been a different man who walked slowly, as though in a dream, to the door, opened it, and stood a moment peering along the corridor toward the head of the stairs.

Molly finished the potatoes, threw them into the pot, and set the pot on the fire. She glanced into the oven. Everything was all set, going according to plan.

On the kitchen table was the two-day-old copy of the Evening Standard. She frowned as she looked at it. If she could only just remember—

Suddenly her hands went to her eyes. "Oh, no," said Molly. "Oh, no!"

Slowly she took her hands away. She looked round the kitchen like someone looking at a strange place. So warm and comfortable and spacious, with its faint savory smell of cooking.

"Oh, no," she said again under her breath.

She moved slowly, like a sleepwalker, toward the door into the hall. She opened it. The house was silent except for someone whistling.

That tune—

Molly shivered and retreated. She waited a minute or two, glancing once more round the familiar kitchen. Yes, everything was in order and progressing. She went once more toward the kitchen door.

Major Metcalf came quietly down the back stairs. He waited a moment or two in the hall, then he opened the big cupboard under the stairs and peered

in. Everything seemed quiet. Nobody about. As good a time as any to do what he had set out to do—

Mrs. Boyle, in the library, turned the knobs of the radio with some irritation.

Her first attempt had brought her into the middle of a talk on the origin and significance of nursery rhymes. The last thing she wanted to hear. Twirling impatiently, she was informed by a cultured voice: “The psychology of fear must be thoroughly understood. Say you are alone in a room. A door opens softly behind you—”

A door did open.

Mrs. Boyle, with a violent start, turned sharply. “Oh, it’s you,” she said with relief. “Idiotic programs they have on this thing. I can’t find anything worth listening to!”

“I shouldn’t bother to listen, Mrs. Boyle.”

Mrs. Boyle snorted. “What else is there for me to do?” she demanded. “Shut up in a house with a possible murderer—not that I believe that melodramatic story for a moment—”

“Don’t you, Mrs. Boyle?”

“Why—what do you mean—”

The belt of the raincoat was slipped round her neck so quickly that she hardly realized its significance. The knob of the radio amplifier was turned higher. The lecturer on the psychology of fear shouted his learned remarks into the room and drowned what incidental noises there were attendant on Mrs. Boyle’s demise.

But there wasn’t much noise.

The killer was too expert for that.

They were all huddled in the kitchen. On the gas cooker the potatoes bubbled merrily. The savory smell from the oven of steak and kidney pie was stronger than ever.

Four shaken people stared at each other, the fifth, Molly, white and shivering, sipped at the glass of whisky that the sixth, Sergeant Trotter, had forced her to drink.

Sergeant Trotter himself, his face set and angry, looked round at the assembled people. Just five minutes had elapsed since Molly's terrified screams had brought him and the others racing to the library.

"She'd only just been killed when you got to her, Mrs. Davis," he said. "Are you sure you didn't see or hear anybody as you came across the hall?"

"Whistling," said Molly faintly. "But that was earlier. I think—I'm not sure—I think I heard a door shut—softly, somewhere—just as I—as I—went into the library."

"Which door?"

"I don't know."

"Think, Mrs. Davis—try and think—upstairs—downstairs—right, left?"

"I don't know, I tell you," cried Molly. "I'm not even sure I heard anything."

"Can't you stop bullying her?" said Giles angrily. "Can't you see she's all in?"

"I'm investigating a murder, Mr. Davis—I beg your pardon—Commander Davis."

"I don't use my war rank, Sergeant."

"Quite so, sir." Trotter paused, as though he had made some subtle point. "As I say, I'm investigating a murder. Up to now nobody has taken this thing seriously. Mrs. Boyle didn't. She held out on me with information.

You all held out on me. Well, Mrs. Boyle is dead. Unless we get to the bottom of this—and quickly, mind, there may be another death.”

“Another? Nonsense. Why?”

“Because,” said Sergeant Trotter gravely, “there were three little blind mice.”

Giles said incredulously, “A death for each of them? But there would have to be a connection—I mean another connection with the case.”

“Yes, there would have to be that.”

“But why another death here?”

“Because there were only two addresses in the notebook. There was only one possible victim at Seventy-Four Culver Street. She’s dead. But at Monkswell Manor there is a wider field.”

“Nonsense, Trotter. It would be a most unlikely coincidence that there should be two people brought here by chance, both of them with a share in the Longridge Farm case.”

“Given certain circumstances, it wouldn’t be so much of a coincidence. Think it out, Mr. Davis.” He turned toward the others. “I’ve had your accounts of where you all were when Mrs. Boyle was killed. I’ll check them over. You were in your room, Mr. Wren, when you heard Mrs. Davis scream?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Mr. Davis, you were upstairs in your bedroom examining the telephone extension there?”

“Yes,” said Giles.

“Mr. Paravicini was in the drawing room playing tunes on the piano. Nobody heard you, by the way, Mr. Paravicini?”

“I was playing very, very softly, Sergeant, just with one finger.”

“What tune was it?”

“ ‘Three Blind Mice,’ Sergeant.” He smiled. “The same tune that Mr. Wren was whistling upstairs. The tune that’s running through everybody’s head.”

“It’s a horrid tune,” said Molly.

“How about the telephone wire?” asked Metcalf. “Was it deliberately cut?”

“Yes, Major Metcalf. A section had been cut out just outside the dining room window—I had just located the break when Mrs. Davis screamed.”

“But it’s crazy. How can he hope to get away with it?” demanded Christopher shrilly.

The sergeant measured him carefully with his eye.

“Perhaps he doesn’t very much care about that,” he said. “Or again, he may be quite sure he’s too clever for us. Murderers get like that.” He added, “We take a psychology course, you know, in our training. A schizophrenic’s mentality is very interesting.”

“Shall we cut out the long words?” said Giles.

“Certainly, Mr. Davis. Two six-letter words are all that concern us at the moment. One’s ‘murder’ and the other’s ‘danger.’ That’s what we’ve got to concentrate upon. Now, Major Metcalf, let me be quite clear about your movements. You say you were in the cellar— Why?”

“Looking around,” said the major. “I looked in that cupboard place under the stairs and then I noticed a door there and I opened it and saw a flight of steps, so I went down there. Nice cellar you’ve got,” he said to Giles. “Crypt of an old monastery, I should say.”

“We’re not engaged in antiquarian research, Major Metcalf. We’re investigating a murder. Will you listen a moment, Mrs. Davis? I’ll leave the kitchen door open.” He went out; a door shut with a faint creak. “Is that

what you heard, Mrs. Davis?" he asked as he reappeared in the open doorway.

"I—it does sound like it."

"That was the cupboard under the stairs. It could be, you know, that after killing Mrs. Boyle, the murderer, retreating across the hall, heard you coming out of the kitchen, and slipped into the cupboard, pulling the door to after him."

"Then his fingerprints will be on the inside of the cupboard," cried Christopher.

"Mine are there already," said Major Metcalf.

"Quite so," said Sergeant Trotter. "But we've a satisfactory explanation for those, haven't we?" he added smoothly.

"Look here, Sergeant," said Giles, "admittedly you're in charge of this affair. But this is my house, and in a certain degree I feel responsible for the people staying in it. Oughtn't we to take precautionary measures?"

"Such as, Mr. Davis?"

"Well, to be frank, putting under restraint the person who seems pretty clearly indicated as the chief suspect."

He looked straight at Christopher Wren.

Christopher Wren sprang forward, his voice rose, shrill and hysterical. "It's not true! It's not true! You're all against me. Everyone's always against me. You're going to frame me for this. It's persecution—persecution—"

"Steady on, lad," said Major Metcalf.

"It's all right, Chris." Molly came forward. She put her hand on his arm. "Nobody's against you. Tell him it's all right," she said to Sergeant Trotter.

"We don't frame people," said Sergeant Trotter.

“Tell him you’re not going to arrest him.”

“I’m not going to arrest anyone. To do that, I need evidence. There’s no evidence—at present.”

Giles cried out, “I think you’re crazy, Molly. And you, too, Sergeant. There’s only one person who fits the bill, and—”

“Wait, Giles, wait—” Molly broke in. “Oh, do be quiet. Sergeant Trotter, can I—can I speak to you a minute?”

“I’m staying,” said Giles.

“No, Giles, you, too, please.”

Giles’s face grew as dark as thunder. He said, “I don’t know what’s come over you, Molly.”

He followed the others out of the room, banging the door behind him.

“Yes, Mrs. Davis, what is it?”

“Sergeant Trotter, when you told us about the Longridge Farm case, you seemed to think that it must be the eldest boy who is—responsible for all this. But you don’t know that?”

“That’s perfectly true, Mrs. Davis. But the probabilities lie that way—mental instability, desertion from the army, psychiatrist’s report.”

“Oh, I know, and therefore it all seems to point to Christopher. But I don’t believe it is Christopher. There must be other—possibilities. Hadn’t those three children any relations—parents, for instance?”

“Yes. The mother was dead. But the father was serving abroad.”

“Well, what about him? Where is he now?”

“We’ve no information. He obtained his demobilization papers last year.”

“And if the son was mentally unstable, the father may have been, too.”

“That is so.”

“So the murderer may be middle-aged or old. Major Metcalf, remember, was frightfully upset when I told him the police had rung up. He really was.”

Sergeant Trotter said quietly, “Please believe me, Mrs. Davis, I’ve had all the possibilities in mind since the beginning. The boy, Jim—the father—even the sister. It could have been a woman, you know. I haven’t overlooked anything. I may be pretty sure in my own mind—but I don’t know—yet. It’s very hard really to know about anything or anyone—especially in these days. You’d be surprised what we see in the police force. With marriages, especially. Hasty marriages—war marriages. There’s no background, you see. No families or relations to meet. People accept each other’s word. Fellow says he’s a fighter pilot or an army major—the girl believes him implicitly. Sometimes she doesn’t find out for a year or two that he’s an absconding bank clerk with a wife and family, or an army deserter.”

He paused and went on.

“I know quite well what’s in your mind, Mrs. Davis. There’s just one thing I’d like to say to you. The murderer’s enjoying himself. That’s the one thing I’m quite sure of.”

He went toward the door.

Molly stood very straight and still, a red flush burning in her cheeks. After standing rigid for a moment or two, she moved slowly toward the stove, knelt down, and opened the oven door. A savory, familiar smell came toward her. Her heart lightened. It was as though suddenly she had been wafted back into the dear, familiar world of everyday things. Cooking, housework, homemaking, ordinary prosaic living.

So, from time immemorial women had cooked food for their men. The world of danger—of madness, receded. Woman, in her kitchen, was safe—

eternally safe.

The kitchen door opened. She turned her head as Christopher Wren entered. He was a little breathless.

“My dear,” he said. “Such ructions! Somebody’s stolen the sergeant’s skis!”

“The sergeant’s skis? But why should anyone want to do that?”

“I really can’t imagine. I mean, if the sergeant decided to go away and leave us, I should imagine that the murderer would be only too pleased. I mean, it really doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Giles put them in the cupboard under the stairs.”

“Well, they’re not there now. Intriguing, isn’t it?” He laughed gleefully.

“The sergeant’s awfully angry about it. Snapping like a turtle. He’s been pitching into poor Major Metcalf. The old boy sticks to it that he didn’t notice whether they were there or not when he looked into the cupboard just before Mrs. Boyle was murdered. Trotter says he must have noticed. If you ask me,” Christopher lowered his voice and leaned forward, “this business is beginning to get Trotter down.”

“It’s getting us all down,” said Molly.

“Not me. I find it most stimulating. It’s all so delightfully unreal.”

Molly said sharply, “You wouldn’t say that if—if you’d been the one to find her. Mrs. Boyle, I mean. I keep thinking of it—I can’t forget it. Her face—all swollen and purple—”

She shivered. Christopher came across to her. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“I know. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

A dry sob rose in Molly’s throat. “It seemed all right just now—cooking—the kitchen,” she spoke confusedly, incoherently. “And then suddenly—it was all back again—like a nightmare.”

There was a curious expression on Christopher Wren's face as he stood there looking down on her bent head.

"I see," he said. "I see." He moved away. "Well, I'd better clear out and—not interrupt you."

Molly cried, "Don't go!" just as his hand was on the door handle.

He turned round, looking at her questioningly. Then he came slowly back.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Mean what?"

"You definitely don't want to—go?"

"No, I tell you. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid to be alone."

Christopher sat down by the table. Molly bent to the oven, lifted the pie to a higher shelf, shut the oven door, and came and joined him.

"That's very interesting," said Christopher in a level voice.

"What is?"

"That you're not afraid to be—alone with me. You're not, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"Why aren't you afraid, Molly?"

"I don't know—I'm not."

"And yet I'm the only person who—fits the bill. One murderer as per schedule."

"No," said Molly. "There are—other possibilities, I've been talking to Sergeant Trotter about them."

“Did he agree with you?”

“He didn’t disagree,” said Molly slowly.

Certain words sounded over and over again in her head. Especially that last phrase: I know exactly what’s in your mind, Mrs. Davis. But did he? Could he possibly know? He had said, too, that the murderer was enjoying himself. Was that true?

She said to Christopher, “You’re not exactly enjoying yourself, are you? In spite of what you said just now.”

“Good God, no,” said Christopher, staring. “What a very odd thing to say.”

“Oh, I didn’t say it. Sergeant Trotter did. I hate that man! He—he puts things into your head—things that aren’t true—that can’t possibly be true.”

She put her hands to her head, covering her eyes with them. Very gently Christopher took those hands away.

“Look here, Molly,” he said, “what is all this?”

She let him force her gently into a chair by the kitchen table. His manner was no longer hysterical or childish.

“What’s the matter, Molly?” he said.

Molly looked at him—a long appraising glance. She asked irrelevantly, “How long have I known you, Christopher? Two days?”

“Just about. You’re thinking, aren’t you, that though it’s such a short time, we seem to know each other rather well.”

“Yes—it’s odd, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s a kind of sympathy between us. Possibly because we’ve both—been up against it.”

It was not a question. It was a statement. Molly let it pass. She said very quietly, and again it was a statement rather than a question, “Your name isn’t really Christopher Wren, is it.”

“No.”

“Why did you—”

“Choose that? Oh, it seemed rather a pleasant whimsy. They used to jeer at me and call me Christopher Robin at school. Robin—Wren—association of ideas, I suppose.”

“What’s your real name?”

Christopher said quietly, “I don’t think we’ll go into that. It wouldn’t mean anything to you. I’m not an architect. Actually, I’m a deserter from the army.”

Just for a moment swift alarm leaped into Molly’s eyes.

Christopher saw it. “Yes,” he said. “Just like our unknown murderer. I told you I was the only one the specification fitted.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Molly. “I told you I didn’t believe you were the murderer. Go on—tell me about yourself. What made you desert—nerves?”

“Being afraid, you mean? No, curiously enough, I wasn’t afraid—not more than anyone else, that is to say. Actually I got a reputation for being rather cool under fire. No, it was something quite different. It was—my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes—you see, she was killed—in an air raid. Buried. They—they had to dig her out. I don’t know what happened to me when I heard about it—I suppose I went a little mad. I thought, you see, it happened to me. I felt I had to get home quickly and—and dig myself out—I can’t explain—it was all confused.” He lowered his head to his hands and spoke in a muffled voice. “I wandered about a long time, looking for her—or for myself—I don’t know which. And then, when my mind cleared up, I was afraid to go

back—or to report—I knew I could never explain. Since then, I’ve just been—nothing.”

He stared at her, his young face hollow with despair.

“You mustn’t feel like that,” said Molly gently. “You can start again.”

“Can one ever do that?”

“Of course—you’re quite young.”

“Yes, but you see—I’ve come to the end.”

“No,” said Molly. “You haven’t come to the end, you only think you have. I believe everyone has that feeling once, at least, in their lives—that it’s the end, that they can’t go on.”

“You’ve had it, haven’t you, Molly? You must have—to be able to speak like that.”

“Yes.”

“What was yours?”

“Mine was just what happened to a lot of people. I was engaged to a young fighter pilot—and he was killed.”

“Wasn’t there more to it than that?”

“I suppose there was. I’d had a nasty shock when I was younger. I came up against something that was rather cruel and beastly. It predisposed me to think that life was always—horrible. When Jack was killed it just confirmed my belief that the whole of life was cruel and treacherous.”

“I know. And then, I suppose,” said Christopher, watching her, “Giles came along.”

“Yes.” He saw the smile, tender, almost shy, that trembled on her mouth. “Giles came—everything felt right and safe and happy—Giles!”

The smile fled from her lips. Her face was suddenly stricken. She shivered as though with cold.

“What’s the matter, Molly? What’s frightening you? You are frightened, aren’t you?”

She nodded.

“And it’s something to do with Giles? Something he’s said or done?”

“It’s not Giles, really. It’s that horrible man!”

“What horrible man?” Christopher was surprised. “Paravicini?”

“No, no. Sergeant Trotter.”

“Sergeant Trotter?”

“Suggesting things—hinting things—putting horrible thoughts into my mind about Giles—thoughts that I didn’t know were there. Oh, I hate him—I hate him.”

Christopher’s eyebrows rose in slow surprise. “Giles? Giles! Yes, of course, he and I are much of an age. He seems to me much older than I am—but I suppose he isn’t, really. Yes, Giles might fit the bill equally well. But look here, Molly, that’s all nonsense. Giles was down here with you the day that woman was killed in London.”

Molly did not answer.

Christopher looked at her sharply. “Wasn’t he here?”

Molly spoke breathlessly, the words coming out in an incoherent jumble. “He was out all day—in the car—he went over to the other side of the county about some wire netting in a sale there—at least that’s what he said—that’s what I thought—until—until—”

“Until what?”

Slowly Molly's hand reached out and traced the date of the Evening Standard that covered a portion of the kitchen table.

Christopher looked at it and said, "London edition, two days ago."

"It was in Giles's pocket when he came back. He—he must have been in London."

Christopher stared. He stared at the paper and he stared at Molly. He pursed up his lips and began to whistle, then checked himself abruptly. It wouldn't do to whistle that tune just now.

Choosing his words very carefully, and avoiding her eye, he said, "How much do you actually—know about Giles?"

"Don't," cried Molly. "Don't! That's just what that beast Trotter said—or hinted. That women often didn't know anything about the men that they married—especially in wartime. They—they just took the man's own account of himself."

"That's true enough, I suppose."

"Don't you say it, too! I can't bear it. It's just because we're all in such a state, so worked up. We'd—we'd believe any fantastic suggestion—It's not true! I—"

She stopped. The kitchen door had opened.

Giles came in. There was rather a grim look on his face. "Am I interrupting anything?" he asked.

Christopher slipped from the table. "I'm just taking a few cookery lessons," he said.

"Indeed? Well, look here, Wren, tête-à-têtes aren't very healthy things at the present time. You keep out of the kitchen, do you hear?"

"Oh, but surely—"

“You keep away from my wife, Wren. She’s not going to be the next victim.”

“That,” said Christopher, “is just what I’m worrying about.”

If there was significance in the words, Giles did not apparently notice them. He merely turned a rather darker shade of brick red. “I’ll do the worrying,” he said. “I can look after my own wife. Get the hell out of here.”

Molly said in a clear voice, “Please go, Christopher. Yes—really.”

Christopher moved slowly toward the door. “I shan’t go very far,” he said, and the words were addressed to Molly and held a very definite meaning.

“Will you get out of here?”

Christopher gave a high childish giggle. “Aye, aye, Commander,” he said.

The door shut behind him. Giles turned on Molly.

“For God’s sake, Molly, haven’t you got any sense? Shut in here alone with a dangerous homicidal maniac!”

“He isn’t the—” she changed her phrase quickly—“he isn’t dangerous. Anyway, I’m on my guard. I can—look after myself.”

Giles laughed unpleasantly. “So could Mrs. Boyle.”

“Oh, Giles, don’t.”

“Sorry, my dear. But I’m het up. That wretched boy. What you see in him I can’t imagine.”

Molly said slowly, “I’m sorry for him.”

“Sorry for a homicidal lunatic?”

Molly gave him a curious glance. “I could be sorry for a homicidal lunatic,” she said.

“Calling him Christopher, too. Since when have you been on Christian-name terms?”

“Oh Giles, don’t be ridiculous. Everyone always uses Christian names nowadays. You know they do.”

“Even after a couple of days? But perhaps it’s more than that. Perhaps you knew Mr. Christopher Wren, the phony architect, before he came here? Perhaps you suggested to him that he should come here? Perhaps you cooked it all up between you?”

Molly stared at him. “Giles, have you gone out of your mind? What on earth are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting that Christopher Wren is an old friend, that you’re on rather closer terms with him than you’d like me to know.”

“Giles, you must be crazy!”

“I suppose you’ll stick to it that you never saw him until he walked in here. Rather odd that he should come and stay in an out-of-the-way place like this, isn’t it?”

“Is it any odder than that Major Metcalf and—and Mrs. Boyle should?”

“Yes—I think it is. I’ve always read that these murmuring loonies had a peculiar fascination for women. Looks as though it were true. How did you get to know him? How long has this been going on?”

“You’re being absolutely absurd, Giles. I never saw Christopher Wren until he arrived here.”

“You didn’t go up to London to meet him two days ago and fix up to meet here as strangers?”

“You know perfectly well, Giles, I haven’t been up to London for weeks.”

“Haven’t you? That’s interesting.” He fished a fur-lined glove out of his pocket and held it out. “That’s one of the gloves you were wearing day

before yesterday, isn't it? The day I was over at Sailham getting the netting."

"The day you were over at Sailham getting the netting," said Molly, eying him steadily. "Yes, I wore those gloves when I went out."

"You went to the village, you said. If you only went to the village, what is this doing inside that glove?"

Accusingly, he held out a pink bus ticket.

There was a moment's silence.

"You went to London," said Giles.

"All right," said Molly. Her chin shot up. "I went to London."

"To meet this chap Christopher Wren."

"No, not to meet Christopher."

"Then why did you go?"

"Just at the moment, Giles," said Molly, "I'm not going to tell you."

"Meaning you'll give yourself time to think up a good story!"

"I think," said Molly, "that I hate you!"

"I don't hate you," said Giles slowly. "But I almost wish I did. I simply feel that—I don't know you any more—I don't know anything about you."

"I feel the same," said Molly. "You—you're just a stranger. A man who lies to me—"

"When have I ever lied to you?"

Molly laughed. "Do you think I believed that story of yours about the wire netting? You were in London, too, that day."

“I suppose you saw me there,” said Giles. “And you didn’t trust me enough —”

“Trust you? I’ll never trust anyone—ever—again.”

Neither of them had noticed the soft opening of the kitchen door. Mr. Paravicini gave a little cough.

“So embarrassing,” he murmured. “I do hope you young people are not both saying just a little more than you mean. One is so apt to in these lovers’ quarrels.”

“Lovers’ quarrels,” said Giles derisively. “That’s good.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said Mr. Paravicini. “I know just how you feel. I have been through all this myself when I was a younger man. But what I came to say was that the inspector person is simply insisting that we should all come into the drawing room. It appears that he has an idea.” Mr. Paravicini sniggered gently. “The police have a clue—yes, one hears that frequently. But an idea? I very much doubt it. A zealous and painstaking officer, no doubt, our Sergeant Trotter, but not, I think, over endowed with brains.”

“Go on, Giles,” said Molly. “I’ve got the cooking to see to. Sergeant Trotter can do without me.”

“Talking of cooking,” said Mr. Paravicini, skipping nimbly across the kitchen to Molly’s side, “have you ever tried chicken livers served on toast that has been thickly spread with foie gras and a very thin rasher of bacon smeared with French mustard?”

“One doesn’t see much foie gras nowadays,” said Giles, “Come on, Paravicini.”

“Shall I stay and assist you, dear lady?”

“You come along to the drawing room, Paravicini,” said Giles.

Mr. Paravicini laughed softly.

“Your husband is afraid for you. Quite natural. He doesn’t fancy the idea of leaving you alone with me. It is my sadistic tendencies he fears—not my dishonorable ones. I yield to force.” He bowed gracefully and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Molly said uncomfortably, “Oh, Mr. Paravicini, I’m sure—”

Mr. Paravicini shook his head. He said to Giles, “You’re very wise, young man. Take no chances. Can I prove to you—or to the inspector for that matter—that I am not a homicidal maniac? No, I cannot. Negatives are such difficult things to prove.”

He hummed cheerfully.

Molly flinched. “Please Mr. Paravicini—not that horrible tune.”

“ ‘Three Blind Mice’—so it was! The tune has got into my head. Now I come to think of it, it is a gruesome little rhyme. Not a nice little rhyme at all. But children like gruesome things. You may have noticed that? That rhyme is very English—the bucolic, cruel English countryside. ‘She cut off their tails with a carving knife.’ Of course a child would love that—I could tell you things about children—”

“Please don’t,” said Molly faintly, “I think you’re cruel, too.” Her voice rose hysterically. “You laugh and smile—you’re like a cat playing with a mouse—playing—”

She began to laugh.

“Steady, Molly,” said Giles. “Come along, we’ll all go into the drawing room together. Trotter will be getting impatient. Never mind the cooking. Murder is more important than food.”

“I’m not sure that I agree with you,” said Mr. Paravicini as he followed them with little skipping steps. “The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast—that’s what they always say.”

Christopher Wren joined them in the hall and received a scowl from Giles. He looked at Molly with a quick, anxious glance, but Molly, her head held high, walked looking straight ahead of her. They marched almost like a procession to the drawing room door. Mr. Paravicini brought up the rear with his little skipping steps.

Sergeant Trotter and Major Metcalf were standing waiting in the drawing room. The major was looking sulky. Sergeant Trotter was looking flushed and energetic.

“That’s right,” he said, as they entered. “I wanted you all together. I want to make a certain experiment—and for that I shall require your cooperation.”

“Will it take long?” Molly asked. “I’m rather busy in the kitchen. After all, we’ve got to have a meal sometime.”

“Yes,” said Trotter. “I appreciate that, Mrs. Davis. But, if you’ll excuse me, there are more important things than meals! Mrs. Boyle, for instance, won’t need another meal.”

“Really, Sergeant,” said Major Metcalf, “that’s an extraordinarily tactless way of putting things.”

“I’m sorry, Major Metcalf, but I want everyone to cooperate in this.”

“Have you found your skis, Sergeant Trotter?” asked Molly.

The young man reddened. “No, I have not, Mrs. Davis. But I may say I have a very shrewd suspicion who took them. And of why they were taken. I won’t say any more at present.”

“Please don’t,” begged Mr. Paravicini. “I always think explanations should be kept to the very end—that exciting last chapter, you know.”

“This isn’t a game, sir.”

“Isn’t it? Now there I think you’re wrong. I think it is a game—to somebody.”

“The murderer is enjoying himself,” murmured Molly softly.

The others looked at her in astonishment. She flushed.

“I’m only quoting what Sergeant Trotter said to me.”

Sergeant Trotter did not look too pleased. “It’s all very well, Mr. Paravicini, mentioning last chapters and speaking as though this was a mystery thriller,” he said. “This is real. This is happening.”

“So long,” said Christopher Wren, fingering his neck gingerly, “as it doesn’t happen to me.”

“Now, then,” said Major Metcalf. “None of that, young fellow. The sergeant here is going to tell us just what he wants us to do.”

Sergeant Trotter cleared his throat. His voice became official.

“I took certain statements from you all a short time ago,” he said. “Those statements related to your positions at the time when the murder of Mrs. Boyle occurred. Mr. Wren and Mr. Davis were in their separate bedrooms. Mrs. Davis was in the kitchen. Major Metcalf was in the cellar. Mr. Paravicini was here in this room—”

He paused and then went on.

“Those are the statements you made. I have no means of checking those statements. They may be true—they may not. To put it quite clearly—four of those statements are true—but one of them is false. Which one?”

He looked from face to face. Nobody spoke.

“Four of you are speaking the truth—one is lying. I have a plan that may help me to discover the liar. And if I discover that one of you lied to me—then I know who the murderer is.”

Giles said sharply, “Not necessarily. Someone might have lied—for some other reason.”

“I rather doubt that, Mr. Davis.”

“But what’s the idea, man? You’ve just said you’ve no means of checking these statements?”

“No, but supposing everyone was to go through these movements a second time.”

“Bah,” said Major Metcalf disparagingly. “Reconstruction of the crime. Foreign idea.”

“Not a reconstruction of the crime, Major Metcalf. A reconstruction of the movements of apparently innocent persons.”

“And what do you expect to learn from that?”

“You will forgive me if I don’t make that clear just at the moment.”

“You want,” asked Molly, “a repeat performance?”

“More or less, Mrs. Davis.”

There was a silence. It was, somehow, an uneasy silence.

It’s a trap, thought Molly. It’s a trap—but I don’t see how—

You might have thought that there were five guilty people in the room, instead of one guilty and four innocent ones. One and all cast doubtful sideways glances at the assured, smiling young man who proposed this innocent-sounding maneuver.

Christopher burst out shrilly, “But I don’t see—I simply can’t see—what you can possibly hope to find out—just by making people do the same thing they did before. It seems to me just nonsense!”

“Does it, Mr. Wren?”

“Of course,” said Giles slowly, “what you say goes, Sergeant. We’ll co-operate. Are we all to do exactly what we did before?”

“The same actions will be performed, yes.”

A faint ambiguity in the phrase made Major Metcalf look up sharply. Sergeant Trotter went on.

“Mr. Paravicini has told us that he sat at the piano and played a certain tune. Perhaps, Mr. Paravicini, you would kindly show us exactly what you did do?”

“But certainly, my dear Sergeant.”

Mr. Paravicini skipped nimbly across the room to the grand piano and settled himself on the music stool.

“The maestro at the piano will play the signature tune to a murder,” he said with a flourish.

He grinned, and with elaborate mannerisms he picked out with one finger the tune of “Three Blind Mice.”

He’s enjoying himself, thought Molly. He’s enjoying himself.

In the big room the soft, muted notes had an almost eerie effect.

“Thank you, Mr. Paravicini,” said Sergeant Trotter. “That, I take it, is exactly how you played the tune on the—former occasion?”

“Yes, Sergeant, it is. I repeated it three times.”

Sergeant Trotter turned to Molly. “Do you play the piano, Mrs. Davis?”

“Yes, Sergeant Trotter.”

“Could you pick out the tune, as Mr. Paravicini has done, playing it in exactly the same manner?”

“Certainly I could.”

“Then will you go and sit at the piano and be ready to do so when I give the signal?”

Molly looked slightly bewildered. Then she crossed slowly to the piano.

Mr. Paravicini rose from the piano stool with a shrill protest. “But, Sergeant, I understood that we were each to repeat our former roles. I was at the piano here.”

“The same actions will be performed as on the former occasion—but they will not necessarily be performed by the same people.”

“I—don’t see the point of that,” said Giles.

“There is a point, Mr. Davis. It is a means of checking up on the original statements—and I may say of one statement in particular. Now, then, please. I will assign you your various stations. Mrs. Davis will be here—at the piano. Mr. Wren, will you kindly go to the kitchen? Just keep an eye on Mrs. Davis’s dinner. Mr. Paravicini, will you go to Mr. Wren’s bedroom? There you can exercise your musical talents by whistling ‘Three Blind Mice’ just as he did. Major Metcalf, will you go up to Mr. Davis’s bedroom and examine the telephone there? And you, Mr. Davis, will you look into the cupboard in the hall and then go down to the cellar?”

There was a moment’s silence. Then four people moved slowly toward the door. Trotter followed them. He looked over his shoulder.

“Count up to fifty and then begin to play, Mrs. Davis,” he said.

He followed the others out. Before the door closed Molly heard Mr. Paravicini’s voice say shrilly, “I never knew the police were so fond of parlor games.”

“Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty.”

Obediently, the counting finished, Molly began to play. Again the soft cruel little tune crept out into the big, echoing room.

Three Blind Mice

See how they run. . . .

Molly felt her heart beating faster and faster. As Paravicini had said, it was a strangely haunting and gruesome little rhyme. It had that childish incomprehension of pity which is so terrifying if met with in an adult.

Very faintly, from upstairs, she could hear the same tune being whistled in the bedroom above—Paravicini enacting the part of Christopher Wren.

Suddenly, next door, the wireless went on in the library. Sergeant Trotter must have set that going. He himself, then, was playing the part of Mrs. Boyle.

But why? What was the point of it all? Where was the trap? For there was a trap, of that she was certain.

A draft of cold air blew across the back of her neck. She turned her head sharply. Surely the door had opened. Someone had come into the room—No, the room was empty. But suddenly she felt nervous—afraid. If someone should come in. Supposing Mr. Paravicini should skip round the door, should come skipping over to the piano, his long fingers twitching and twisting—

“So you are playing your own funeral march, dear lady, a happy thought—” Nonsense—don’t be stupid—don’t imagine things. Besides, you can hear him whistling over your head, just as he can hear you.

She almost took her fingers off the piano as the idea came to her! Nobody had heard Mr. Paravicini playing. Was that the trap? Was it, perhaps, possible that Mr. Paravicini hadn’t been playing at all? That he had been, not in the drawing room, but in the library. In the library, strangling Mrs. Boyle?

He had been annoyed, very annoyed, when Trotter had arranged for her to play. He had laid stress on the softness with which he had picked out the tune. Of course, he had emphasized the softness in the hopes that it would be too soft to be heard outside the room. Because if anyone heard it this time who hadn't heard it last time—why then, Trotter would have got what he wanted—the person who had lied.

The door of the drawing room opened. Molly, strung up to expect Paravicini, nearly screamed. But it was only Sergeant Trotter who entered, just as she finished the third repetition of the tune.

“Thank you, Mrs. Davis,” he said.

He was looking extremely pleased with himself, and his manner was brisk and confident.

Molly took her hands from the keys. “Have you got what you wanted?” she asked.

“Yes, indeed.” His voice was exultant. “I’ve got exactly what I wanted.”

“Which? Who?”

“Don’t you know, Mrs. Davis? Come, now—it’s not so difficult. By the way, you’ve been, if I may say so, extraordinarily foolish. You’ve left me hunting about for the third victim. As a result, you’ve been in serious danger.”

“Me? I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean that you haven’t been honest with me, Mrs. Davis. You held out on me—just as Mrs. Boyle held out on me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Oh, yes, you do. Why, when I first mentioned the Longridge Farm case, you knew all about it. Oh, yes, you did. You were upset. And it was you who confirmed that Mrs. Boyle was the billeting officer for this part of the country. Both you and she came from these parts. So when I began to

speculate who the third victim was likely to be, I plumped at once for you. You'd shown firsthand knowledge of the Longridge Farm business. We policemen aren't so dumb as we look, you know."

Molly said in a low voice, "You don't understand. I didn't want to remember."

"I can understand that." His voice changed a little. "Your maiden name was Wainwright, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you're just a little older than you pretend to be. In 1940, when this thing happened, you were the schoolteacher at Abbeyvale school."

"No!"

"Oh, yes, you were, Mrs. Davis."

"I wasn't, I tell you."

"The child who died managed to get a letter posted to you. He stole a stamp. The letter begged for help—help from his kind teacher. It's a teacher's business to find out why a child doesn't come to school. You didn't find out. You ignored the poor little devil's letter."

"Stop." Molly's cheeks were flaming. "It's my sister you are talking about. She was the schoolmistress. And she didn't ignore his letter. She was ill—with pneumonia. She never saw the letter until after the child was dead. It upset her dreadfully—dreadfully—she was a terribly sensitive person. But it wasn't her fault. It's because she took it to heart so dreadfully that I've never been able to bear being reminded of it. It's been a nightmare to me, always."

Molly's hands went to her eyes, covering them. When she took them away, Trotter was staring at her.

He said softly, "So it was your sister. Well, after all—" He gave a sudden queer smile. "It doesn't much matter, does it? Your sister—my brother—"

He took something out of his pocket. He was smiling now, happily.

Molly stared at the object he held. "I always thought the police didn't carry revolvers," she said.

"The police don't," said the young man. He went on, "But you see, Mrs. Davis, I'm not a policeman. I'm Jim. I'm Georgie's brother. You thought I was a policeman because I rang up from the call box in the village and said that Sergeant Trotter was on his way. Then I cut the telephone wires outside the house when I got here, so that you shouldn't be able to ring back to the police station."

Molly stared at him. The revolver was pointing at her now.

"Don't move, Mrs. Davis—and don't scream—or I pull the trigger at once."

He was still smiling. It was, Molly realized with horror, a child's smile. And his voice, when he spoke, was becoming a child's voice.

"Yes," he said, "I'm Georgie's brother. Georgie died at Longridge Farm. That nasty woman sent us there, and the farmer's wife was cruel to us, and you wouldn't help us—three little blind mice. I said then I'd kill you all when I grew up. I meant it. I've thought of it ever since." He frowned suddenly. "They bothered me a lot in the army—that doctor kept asking me questions—I had to get away. I was afraid they'd stop me doing what I wanted to do. But I'm grown up now. Grown-ups can do what they like."

Molly pulled herself together. Talk to him, she said to herself. Distract his mind.

"But, Jim, listen," she said. "You'll never get safely away."

His face clouded over. "Somebody's hidden my skis. I can't find them." He laughed. "But I daresay it will be all right. It's your husband's revolver. I took it out of his drawer. I daresay they'll think he shot you. Anyway—I don't much care. It's been such fun—all of it. Pretending! That woman in London, her face when she recognized me. That stupid woman this morning!"

He nodded his head.

Clearly, with eerie effect, came a whistle. Someone whistling the tune of “Three Blind Mice.”

Trotter started, the revolver wavered—a voice shouted, “Down, Mrs. Davis.”

Molly dropped to the floor as Major Metcalf, rising from behind the concealment of the sofa by the door flung himself upon Trotter. The revolver went off—and the bullet lodged in one of the somewhat mediocre oil paintings dear to the heart of the late Miss Emory.

A moment later, all was pandemonium—Giles rushed in, followed by Christopher and Mr. Paravicini.

Major Metcalf, retaining his grasp of Trotter, spoke in short explosive sentences.

“Came in while you were playing—slipped behind the sofa—I’ve been on to him from the beginning—that’s to say, I knew he wasn’t a police officer. I’m a police officer—Inspector Tanner. We arranged with Metcalf I should take his place. Scotland Yard thought it advisable to have someone on the spot. Now, my lad—” He spoke quite gently to the now docile Trotter. “You come with me. No one will hurt you. You’ll be all right. We’ll look after you.”

In a piteous child’s voice the bronzed young man asked, “Georgie won’t be angry with me?”

Metcalf said, “No. Georgie won’t be angry.”

He murmured to Giles as he passed him, “Mad as a hatter, poor devil.”

They went out together. Mr. Paravicini touched Christopher Wren on the arm.

“You, also, my friend,” he said, “come with me.”

Giles and Molly, left alone, looked at each other. In another moment they were in each other's arms.

"Darling," said Giles, "you're sure he didn't hurt you?"

"No, no, I'm quite all right. Giles, I've been so terribly mixed up. I almost thought you—why did you go to London that day?"

"Darling, I wanted to get you an anniversary present, for tomorrow. I didn't want you to know."

"How extraordinary! I went to London to get you a present and I didn't want you to know."

"I was insanely jealous of that neurotic ass. I must have been mad. Forgive me, darling."

The door opened, and Mr. Paravicini skipped in in his goatlike way. He was beaming.

"Interrupting the reconciliation—Such a charming scene—But, alas, I must bid you adieu. A police jeep has managed to get through. I shall persuade them to take me with them." He bent and whispered mysteriously in Molly's ear, "I may have a few embarrassments in the near future—but I am confident I can arrange matters, and if you should receive a case—with a goose, say, a turkey, some tins of foie gras, a ham—some nylon stockings, yes? Well, you understand, it will be with my compliments to a very charming lady. Mr. Davis, my check is on the hall table."

He kissed Molly's hand and skipped to the door.

"Nylons?" murmured Molly, "Foie gras? Who is Mr. Paravicini? Santa Claus?"

"Black-market style, I suspect," said Giles.

Christopher Wren poked a diffident head in. "My dears," he said, "I hope I'm not intruding, but there's a terrible smell of burning from the kitchen. Ought I to do something about it?"

With an anguished cry of “My pie!” Molly fled from the room.

Two

STRANGE JEST

And this,” said Jane Helier, completing her introductions, “is Miss Marple!”

Being an actress, she was able to make her point. It was clearly the climax, the triumphant finale! Her tone was equally compounded of reverent awe and triumph.

The odd part of it was that the object thus proudly proclaimed was merely a gentle, fussy-looking, elderly spinster. In the eyes of the two young people who had just, by Jane’s good offices, made her acquaintance, there showed incredulity and a tinge of dismay. They were nice-looking people; the girl, Charmian Stroud, slim and dark—the man, Edward Rossiter, a fair-haired, amiable young giant.

Charmian said a little breathlessly. “Oh! We’re awfully pleased to meet you.” But there was doubt in her eyes. She flung a quick, questioning glance at Jane Helier.

“Darling,” said Jane, answering the glance, “she’s absolutely marvellous. Leave it all to her. I told you I’d get her here and I have.” She added to Miss Marple, “You’ll fix it for them, I know. It will be easy for you.”

Miss Marple turned her placid, china-blue eyes towards Mr. Rossiter. “Won’t you tell me,” she said, “what all this is about?”

“Jane’s a friend of ours,” Charmian broke in impatiently. “Edward and I are in rather a fix. Jane said if we would come to her party, she’d introduce us to someone who was—who would—who could—”

Edward came to the rescue. “Jane tells us you’re the last word in sleuths, Miss Marple!”

The old lady's eyes twinkled, but she protested modestly. "Oh, no, no! Nothing of the kind. It's just that living in a village as I do, one gets to know so much about human nature. But really you have made me quite curious. Do tell me your problem."

"I'm afraid it's terribly hackneyed—just buried treasure," said Edward.

"Indeed? But that sounds most exciting!"

"I know. Like *Treasure Island*. But our problem lacks the usual romantic touches. No point on a chart indicated by a skull and crossbones, no directions like 'four paces to the left, west by north.' It's horribly prosaic—just where we ought to dig."

"Have you tried at all?"

"I should say we'd dug about two solid square acres! The whole place is ready to be turned into a market garden. We're just discussing whether to grow vegetable marrows or potatoes."

Charmian said rather abruptly, "May we really tell you all about it?"

"But, of course, my dear."

"Then let's find a peaceful spot. Come on, Edward." She led the way out of the overcrowded and smoke-laden room, and they went up the stairs, to a small sitting room on the second floor.

When they were seated, Charmian began abruptly. "Well, here goes! The story starts with Uncle Mathew, uncle—or rather, great-great-uncle—to both of us. He was incredibly ancient. Edward and I were his only relations. He was fond of us and always declared that when he died he would leave his money between us. Well, he died last March and left everything he had to be divided equally between Edward and myself. What I've just said sounds rather callous—I don't mean that it was right that he died—actually we were very fond of him. But he'd been ill for some time.

“The point is that the ‘everything’ he left turned out to be practically nothing at all. And that, frankly, was a bit of a blow to us both, wasn’t it, Edward?”

The amiable Edward agreed. “You see,” he said, “we’d counted on it a bit. I mean, when you know a good bit of money is coming to you, you don’t—well—buckle down and try to make it yourself. I’m in the army—not got anything to speak of outside my pay—and Charmian herself hasn’t got a bean. She works as a stage manager in a repertory theatre—quite interesting, and she enjoys it—but no money in it. We’d counted on getting married, but weren’t worried about the money side of it because we both knew we’d be jolly well-off someday.”

“And now, you see, we’re not!” said Charmian. “What’s more, Ansteys—that’s the family place, and Edward and I both love it—will probably have to be sold. And Edward and I feel we just can’t bear that! But if we don’t find Uncle Mathew’s money, we shall have to sell.”

Edward said, “You know, Charmian, we still haven’t come to the vital point.”

“Well, you talk, then.”

Edward turned to Miss Marple. “It’s like this, you see. As Uncle Mathew grew older, he got more and more suspicious. He didn’t trust anybody.”

“Very wise of him,” said Miss Marple. “The depravity of human nature is unbelievable.”

“Well, you may be right. Anyway, Uncle Mathew thought so. He had a friend who lost his money in a bank, and another friend who was ruined by an absconding solicitor, and he lost some money himself in a fraudulent company. He got so that he used to hold forth at great length that the only safe and sane thing to do was to convert your money into solid bullion and bury it.”

“Ah,” said Miss Marple. “I begin to see.”

“Yes. Friends argued with him, pointed out that he’d get no interest that way, but he held that that didn’t really matter. The bulk of your money, he said, should be ‘kept in a box under the bed or buried in the garden.’ Those were his words.”

Charmian went on. “And when he died, he left hardly anything at all in securities, though he was very rich. So we think that that’s what he must have done.”

Edward explained. “We found that he had sold securities and drawn out large sums of money from time to time, and nobody knows what he did with them. But it seems probable that he lived up to his principles, and that he did buy gold and bury it.”

“He didn’t say anything before he died? Leave any paper? No letter?”

“That’s the maddening part of it. He didn’t. He’d been unconscious for some days, but he rallied before he died. He looked at us both and chuckled—a faint, weak little chuckle. He said, ‘You’ll be all right, my pretty pair of doves.’ And then he tapped his eye—his right eye—and winked at us. And then—he died. Poor old Uncle Mathew.”

“He tapped his eye,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

Edward said eagerly. “Does that convey anything to you? It made me think of an Arsene Lupin story where there was something hidden in a man’s glass eye. But Uncle Mathew didn’t have a glass eye.”

Miss Marple shook her head. “No—I can’t think of anything at the moment.”

Charmian said disappointedly, “Jane told us you’d say at once where to dig!”

Miss Marple smiled. “I’m not quite a conjurer, you know. I didn’t know your uncle, or what sort of man he was, and I don’t know the house or the grounds.”

Charmian said, "If you did know them?"

"Well, it must be quite simple, really, mustn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"Simple!" said Charmian. "You come down to Ansteys and see if it's simple!"

It is possible that she did not mean the invitation to be taken seriously, but Miss Marple said briskly, "Well, really, my dear, that's very kind of you. I've always wanted to have the chance of looking for buried treasure. And," she added, looking at them with a beaming, late-Victorian smile, "with a love interest, too!"

"You see!" said Charmian, gesturing dramatically.

They had just completed a grand tour of Ansteys. They had been round the kitchen garden—heavily trenched. They had been through the little woods, where every important tree had been dug round, and had gazed sadly on the pitted surface of the once smooth lawn. They had been up to the attic, where old trunks and chests had been rifled of their contents. They had been down to the cellars, where flagstones had been heaved unwillingly from their sockets. They had measured and tapped walls, and Miss Marple had been shown every antique piece of furniture that contained or could be suspected of containing a secret drawer.

On a table in the morning room there was a heap of papers—all the papers that the late Mathew Stroud had left. Not one had been destroyed, and Charmian and Edward were wont to return to them again and again, earnestly perusing bills, invitations, and business correspondence in the hope of spotting a hitherto unnoticed clue.

"Can you think of anywhere we haven't looked?" demanded Charmian hopefully.

Miss Marple shook her head. "You seem to have been very thorough, my dear. Perhaps, if I may say so, just a little too thorough. I always think, you know, that one should have a plan. It's like my friend, Mrs. Eldritch, she

had such a nice little maid, polished linoleum beautifully, but she was so thorough that she polished the bathroom floor too much, and as Mrs. Eldritch was stepping out of the bath the cork mat slipped from under her, and she had a very nasty fall and actually broke her leg! Most awkward, because the bathroom door was locked, of course, and the gardener had to get a ladder and come in through the window—terribly distressing to Mrs. Eldritch, who had always been a very modest woman.”

Edward moved restlessly.

Miss Marple said quickly, “Please forgive me. So apt, I know, to fly off at a tangent. But one thing does remind one of another. And sometimes that is helpful. All I was trying to say was that perhaps if we tried to sharpen our wits and think of a likely place—”

Edward said crossly, “You think of one, Miss Marple. Charmian’s brains and mine are now only beautiful blanks!”

“Dear, dear. Of course—most tiring for you. If you don’t mind I’ll just look through all this.” She indicated the papers on the table. “That is, if there’s nothing private—I don’t want to appear to pry.”

“Oh, that’s all right. But I’m afraid you won’t find anything.”

She sat down by the table and methodically worked through the sheaf of documents. As she replaced each one, she sorted them automatically into tidy little heaps. When she had finished she sat staring in front of her for some minutes.

Edward asked, not without a touch of malice, “Well, Miss Marple?”

Miss Marple came to herself with a little start. “I beg your pardon. Most helpful.”

“You’ve found something relevant?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that, but I do believe I know what sort of man your Uncle Mathew was. Rather like my own Uncle Henry, I think. Fond of

rather obvious jokes. A bachelor, evidently—I wonder why—perhaps an early disappointment? Methodical up to a point, but not very fond of being tied up—so few bachelors are!”

Behind Miss Marple’s back, Charmian made a sign to Edward. It said, She’s gaga.

Miss Marple was continuing happily to talk of her deceased Uncle Henry. “Very fond of puns, he was. And to some people, puns are most annoying. A mere play upon words may be very irritating. He was a suspicious man, too. Always was convinced the servants were robbing him. And sometimes, of course, they were, but not always. It grew upon him, poor man. Towards the end he suspected them of tampering with his food, and finally refused to eat anything but boiled eggs! Said nobody could tamper with the inside of a boiled egg. Dear Uncle Henry, he used to be such a merry soul at one time—very fond of his coffee after dinner. He always used to say, ‘This coffee is very Moorish,’ meaning, you know, that he’d like a little more.”

Edward felt that if he heard anymore about Uncle Henry he’d go mad.

“Fond of young people, too,” went on Miss Marple, “but inclined to tease them a little, if you know what I mean. Used to put bags of sweets where a child just couldn’t reach them.”

Casting politeness aside, Charmian said, “I think he sounds horrible!”

“Oh, no, dear, just an old bachelor, you know, and not used to children. And he wasn’t at all stupid, really. He used to keep a good deal of money in the house, and he had a safe put in. Made a great fuss about it—and how very secure it was. As a result of his talking so much, burglars broke in one night and actually cut a hole in the safe with a chemical device.”

“Served him right,” said Edward.

“Oh, but there was nothing in the safe,” said Miss Marple. “You see, he really kept the money somewhere else—behind some volumes of sermons in the library, as a matter of fact. He said people never took a book of that kind out of the shelf!”

Edward interrupted excitedly. "I say, that's an idea. What about the library?"

But Charmian shook a scornful head. "Do you think I hadn't thought of that? I went through all the books Tuesday of last week, when you went off to Portsmouth. Took them all out, shook them. Nothing there."

Edward sighed. Then, rousing himself, he endeavoured to rid himself tactfully of their disappointing guest. "It's been awfully good of you to come down as you have and try to help us. Sorry it's been all a washout. Feel we trespassed a lot on your time. However—I'll get the car out, and you'll be able to catch the three thirty—"

"Oh," said Miss Marple, "but we've got to find the money, haven't we? You mustn't give up, Mr. Rossiter. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.' "

"You mean you're going to—go on trying?"

"Strictly speaking," said Miss Marple, "I haven't begun yet. 'First catch your hare—' as Mrs. Beaton says in her cookery book—a wonderful book but terribly expensive; most of the recipes begin, 'Take a quart of cream and a dozen eggs.' Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes. Well, we have, so to speak, caught our hare—the hare being, of course, your Uncle Mathew, and we've only got to decide now where he would have hidden the money. It ought to be quite simple."

"Simple?" demanded Charmian.

"Oh, yes, dear. I'm sure he would have done the obvious thing. A secret drawer—that's my solution."

Edward said dryly, "You couldn't put bars of gold in a secret drawer."

"No, no, of course not. But there's no reason to believe the money is in gold."

"He always used to say—"

“So did my Uncle Henry about his safe! So I should strongly suspect that that was just a blind. Diamonds—now they could be in a secret drawer quite easily.”

“But we’ve looked in all the secret drawers. We had a cabinet-maker over to examine the furniture.”

“Did you, dear? That was clever of you. I should suggest your uncle’s own desk would be the most likely. Was it the tall escritoire against the wall there?”

“Yes. And I’ll show you.” Charmian went over to it. She took down the flap. Inside were pigeonholes and little drawers. She opened a small door in the centre and touched a spring inside the left-hand drawer. The bottom of the centre recess clicked and slid forward. Charmian drew it out, revealing a shallow well beneath. It was empty.

“Now isn’t that a coincidence?” exclaimed Miss Marple. “Uncle Henry had a desk just like this, only his was burr walnut and this is mahogany.”

“At any rate,” said Charmian, “there’s nothing there, as you can see.”

“I expect,” said Miss Marple, “your cabinetmaker was a young man. He didn’t know everything. People were very artful when they made hiding places in those days. There’s such a thing as a secret inside a secret.”

She extracted a hairpin from her neat bun of grey hair. Straightening it out, she stuck the point into what appeared to be a tiny wormhole in one side of the secret recess. With a little difficulty she pulled out a small drawer. In it was a bundle of faded letters and a folded paper.

Edward and Charmian pounced on the find together. With trembling fingers Edward unfolded the paper. He dropped it with an exclamation of disgust.

“A damned cookery recipe. Baked ham!”

Charmian was untying a ribbon that held the letters together. She drew one out and glanced at it. “Love letters!”

Miss Marple reacted with Victorian gusto. “How interesting! Perhaps the reason your uncle never married.”

Charmian read aloud:

“My ever dear Mathew, I must confess that the time seems long indeed since I received your last letter. I try to occupy myself with the various tasks allotted to me, and often say to myself that I am indeed fortunate to see so much of the globe, though little did I think when I went to America that I should voyage off to these far islands!”

Charmian broke off. “Where is it from? Oh! Hawaii!” She went on:

“Alas, these natives are still far from seeing the light. They are in an unclothed and savage state and spend most of their time swimming and dancing, adorning themselves with garlands of flowers. Mr. Gray has made some converts but it is uphill work, and he and Mrs. Gray get sadly discouraged. I try to do all I can to cheer and encourage him, but I, too, am often sad for a reason you can guess, dear Mathew. Alas, absence is a severe trial for a loving heart. Your renewed vows and protestations of affection cheered me greatly. Now and always you have my faithful and devoted heart, dear Mathew, and I remain—Your true love, Betty Martin.

“PS—I address my letter under cover to our mutual friend, Matilda Graves, as usual. I hope heaven will pardon this little subterfuge.”

Edward whistled. “A female missionary! So that was Uncle Mathew’s romance. I wonder why they never married?”

“She seems to have gone all over the world,” said Charmian, looking through the letters. “Mauritius—all sorts of places. Probably died of yellow fever or something.”

A gentle chuckle made them start. Miss Marple was apparently much amused. “Well, well,” she said. “Fancy that, now!”

She was reading the recipe for baked ham. Seeing their enquiring glances, she read out: “ ‘Baked ham with spinach. Take a nice piece of gammon,

stuff with cloves, and cover with brown sugar. Bake in a slow oven. Serve with a border of pureed spinach.’ What do you think of that, now?”

“I think it sounds filthy,” said Edward.

“No, no, actually it would be very good—but what do you think of the whole thing?”

A sudden ray of light illuminated Edward’s face. “Do you think it’s a code—cryptogram of some kind?” He seized it. “Look here, Charmian, it might be, you know! No reason to put a cooking recipe in a secret drawer otherwise.”

“Exactly,” said Miss Marple. “Very, very significant.”

Charmian said, “I know what it might be—invisible ink! Let’s heat it. Turn on the electric fire.”

Edward did so, but no signs of writing appeared under the treatment.

Miss Marple coughed. “I really think, you know, that you’re making it rather too difficult. The recipe is only an indication, so to speak. It is, I think, the letters that are significant.”

“The letters?”

“Especially,” said Miss Marple, “the signature.”

But Edward hardly heard her. He called excitedly, “Charmian! Come here! She’s right. See—the envelopes are old, right enough, but the letters themselves were written much later.”

“Exactly,” said Miss Marple.

“They’re only fake old. I bet anything old Uncle Mat faked them himself —”

“Precisely,” said Miss Marple.

“The whole thing’s a sell. There never was a female missionary. It must be a code.”

“My dear, dear children—there’s really no need to make it all so difficult. Your uncle was really a very simple man. He had to have his little joke, that was all.”

For the first time they gave her their full attention.

“Just exactly what do you mean, Miss Marple?” asked Charmian.

“I mean, dear, that you’re actually holding the money in your hand this minute.”

Charmian stared down.

“The signature, dear. That gives the whole thing away. The recipe is just an indication. Shorn of all the cloves and brown sugar and the rest of it, what is it actually? Why, gammon and spinach to be sure! Gammon and spinach! Meaning—nonsense! So it’s clear that it’s the letters that are important. And then, if you take into consideration what your uncle did just before he died. He tapped his eye, you said. Well, there you are—that gives you the clue, you see.”

Charmian said, “Are we mad, or are you?”

“Surely, my dear, you must have heard the expression meaning that something is not a true picture, or has it quite died out nowadays? ‘All my eye and Betty Martin.’ ”

Edward gasped, his eyes falling to the letter in his hand. “Betty Martin—”

“Of course, Mr. Rossiter. As you have just said, there isn’t—there wasn’t any such person. The letters were written by your uncle, and I daresay he got a lot of fun out of writing them! As you say, the writing on the envelopes is much older—in fact, the envelope couldn’t belong to the letters, anyway, because the postmark of one you are holding is eighteen fifty-one.”

She paused. She made it very emphatic. "Eighteen fifty-one. And that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Not to me," said Edward.

"Well, of course," said Miss Marple, "I daresay it wouldn't to me if it weren't for my great-nephew Lionel. Such a dear little boy and a passionate stamp collector. Knows all about stamps. It was he who told me about the rare and expensive stamps and that a wonderful new find had come up for auction. And I actually remember his mentioning one stamp—an eighteen fifty-one blue two cent. It realized something like twenty-five thousand dollars, I believe. Fancy! I should imagine that the other stamps are something also rare and expensive. No doubt your uncle bought through dealers and was careful to 'cover his tracks,' as they say in detective stories."

Edward groaned. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

"What's the matter?" demanded Charmian.

"Nothing. It's only the awful thought that, but for Miss Marple, we might have burned these letters in a decent, gentlemanly way!"

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "that's just what these old gentlemen who are fond of their jokes never realize. Uncle Henry, I remember, sent a favourite niece a five pound note for a Christmas present. He put it in a Christmas card, gummed the card together, and wrote on it, 'Love and best wishes. Afraid this is all I can manage this year.' "

"She, poor girl, was annoyed at what she thought was his meanness and threw it all straight into the fire; then, of course, he had to give her another."

Edward's feelings towards Uncle Henry had suffered an abrupt and complete change.

"Miss Marple," he said, "I'm going to get a bottle of champagne. We'll all drink the health of your Uncle Henry."

Three

TAPE MEASURE MURDER

Miss Politt took hold of the knocker and rapped politely on the cottage door. After a discreet interval she knocked again. The parcel under her left arm shifted a little as she did so, and she readjusted it. Inside the parcel was Mrs. Spenlow's new green winter dress, ready for fitting. From Miss Politt's left hand dangled a bag of black silk, containing a tape measure, a pincushion, and a large, practical pair of scissors.

Miss Politt was tall and gaunt, with a sharp nose, pursed lips, and meagre iron-grey hair. She hesitated before using the knocker for the third time. Glancing down the street, she saw a figure rapidly approaching. Miss Hartnell, jolly, weather-beaten, fifty-five, shouted out in her usual loud bass voice, "Good afternoon, Miss Politt!"

The dressmaker answered, "Good afternoon, Miss Hartnell." Her voice was excessively thin and genteel in its accents. She had started life as a lady's maid. "Excuse me," she went on, "but do you happen to know if by any chance Mrs. Spenlow isn't at home?"

"Not the least idea," said Miss Hartnell.

"It's rather awkward, you see. I was to fit on Mrs. Spenlow's new dress this afternoon. Three thirty, she said."

Miss Hartnell consulted her wrist watch. "It's a little past the half hour now."

"Yes. I have knocked three times, but there doesn't seem to be any answer, so I was wondering if perhaps Mrs. Spenlow might have gone out and forgotten. She doesn't forget appointments as a rule, and she wants the dress to wear the day after tomorrow."

Miss Hartnell entered the gate and walked up the path to join Miss Politt outside the door of Laburnum Cottage.

“Why doesn’t Gladys answer the door?” she demanded. “Oh, no, of course, it’s Thursday—Gladys’s day out. I expect Mrs. Spenlow has fallen asleep. I don’t expect you’ve made enough noise with this thing.”

Seizing the knocker, she executed a deafening rat-a-tat-tat, and in addition thumped upon the panels of the door. She also called out in a stentorian voice, “What ho, within there!”

There was no response.

Miss Politt murmured, “Oh, I think Mrs. Spenlow must have forgotten and gone out, I’ll call round some other time.” She began edging away down the path.

“Nonsense,” said Miss Hartnell firmly. “She can’t have gone out. I’d have met her. I’ll just take a look through the windows and see if I can find any signs of life.”

She laughed in her usual hearty manner, to indicate that it was a joke, and applied a perfunctory glance to the nearest windowpane—perfunctory because she knew quite well that the front room was seldom used, Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow preferring the small back sitting room.

Perfunctory as it was, though, it succeeded in its object. Miss Hartnell, it is true, saw no signs of life. On the contrary, she saw, through the window, Mrs. Spenlow lying on the hearthrug—dead.

“Of course,” said Miss Hartnell, telling the story afterwards, “I managed to keep my head. That Politt creature wouldn’t have had the least idea of what to do. ‘Got to keep our heads,’ I said to her. ‘You stay here, and I’ll go for Constable Palk.’ She said something about not wanting to be left, but I paid no attention at all. One has to be firm with that sort of person. I’ve always found they enjoy making a fuss. So I was just going off when, at that very moment, Mr. Spenlow came round the corner of the house.”

Here Miss Hartnell made a significant pause. It enabled her audience to ask breathlessly, “Tell me, how did he look?”

Miss Hartnell would then go on, “Frankly, I suspected something at once! He was far too calm. He didn’t seem surprised in the least. And you may say what you like, it isn’t natural for a man to hear that his wife is dead and display no emotion whatever.”

Everybody agreed with this statement.

The police agreed with it, too. So suspicious did they consider Mr. Spenlow’s detachment, that they lost no time in ascertaining how that gentleman was situated as a result of his wife’s death. When they discovered that Mrs. Spenlow had been the monied partner, and that her money went to her husband under a will made soon after their marriage, they were more suspicious than ever.

Miss Marple, that sweet-faced—and, some said, vinegar-tongued—elderly spinster who lived in the house next to the rectory, was interviewed very early—within half an hour of the discovery of the crime. She was approached by Police Constable Palk, importantly thumbing a notebook. “If you don’t mind, ma’am, I’ve a few questions to ask you.”

Miss Marple said, “In connection with the murder of Mrs. Spenlow?”

Palk was startled. “May I ask, madam, how you got to know of it?”

“The fish,” said Miss Marple.

The reply was perfectly intelligible to Constable Palk. He assumed correctly that the fishmonger’s boy had brought it, together with Miss Marple’s evening meal.

Miss Marple continued gently. “Lying on the floor in the sitting room, strangled—possibly by a very narrow belt. But whatever it was, it was taken away.”

Palk's face was wrathful. "How that young Fred gets to know everything —"

Miss Marple cut him short adroitly. She said, "There's a pin in your tunic."

Constable Palk looked down, startled. He said, "They do say, 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.' "

"I hope that will come true. Now what is it you want me to tell you?"

Constable Palk cleared his throat, looked important, and consulted his notebook. "Statement was made to me by Mr. Arthur Spenlow, husband of the deceased. Mr. Spenlow says that at two thirty, as far as he can say, he was rung up by Miss Marple, and asked if he would come over at a quarter past three as she was anxious to consult him about something. Now, ma'am, is that true?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple.

"You did not ring up Mr. Spenlow at two thirty?"

"Neither at two thirty nor any other time."

"Ah," said Constable Palk, and sucked his moustache with a good deal of satisfaction.

"What else did Mr. Spenlow say?"

"Mr. Spenlow's statement was that he came over here as requested, leaving his own house at ten minutes past three; that on arrival here he was informed by the maidservant that Miss Marple was 'not at 'ome.' "

"That part of it is true," said Miss Marple. "He did come here, but I was at a meeting at the Women's Institute."

"Ah," said Constable Palk again.

Miss Marple exclaimed, "Do tell me, Constable, do you suspect Mr. Spenlow?"

“It’s not for me to say at this stage, but it looks to me as though somebody, naming no names, has been trying to be artful.”

Miss Marple said thoughtfully, “Mr. Spenlow?”

She liked Mr. Spenlow. He was a small, spare man, stiff and conventional in speech, the acme of respectability. It seemed odd that he should have come to live in the country, he had so clearly lived in towns all his life. To Miss Marple he confided the reason. He said, “I have always intended, ever since I was a small boy, to live in the country someday and have a garden of my own. I have always been very much attached to flowers. My wife, you know, kept a flower shop. That’s where I saw her first.”

A dry statement, but it opened up a vista of romance. A younger, prettier Mrs. Spenlow, seen against a background of flowers.

Mr. Spenlow, however, really knew nothing about flowers. He had no idea of seeds, of cuttings, of bedding out, of annuals or perennials. He had only a vision—a vision of a small cottage garden thickly planted with sweet-smelling, brightly coloured blossoms. He had asked, almost pathetically, for instruction, and had noted down Miss Marple’s replies to questions in a little book.

He was a man of quiet method. It was, perhaps, because of this trait, that the police were interested in him when his wife was found murdered. With patience and perseverance they learned a good deal about the late Mrs. Spenlow—and soon all St. Mary Mead knew it, too.

The late Mrs. Spenlow had begun life as a between-maid in a large house. She had left that position to marry the second gardener, and with him had started a flower shop in London. The shop had prospered. Not so the gardener, who before long had sickened and died.

His widow carried on the shop and enlarged it in an ambitious way. She had continued to prosper. Then she had sold the business at a handsome price and embarked upon matrimony for the second time—with Mr. Spenlow, a middle-aged jeweller who had inherited a small and struggling business.

Not long afterwards, they had sold the business and came down to St. Mary Mead.

Mrs. Spenlow was a well-to-do woman. The profits from her florist's establishment she had invested—"under spirit guidance," as she explained to all and sundry. The spirits had advised her with unexpected acumen.

All her investments had prospered, some in quite a sensational fashion. Instead, however, of this increasing her belief in spiritualism, Mrs. Spenlow basely deserted mediums and sittings, and made a brief but wholehearted plunge into an obscure religion with Indian affinities which was based on various forms of deep breathing. When, however, she arrived at St. Mary Mead, she had relapsed into a period of orthodox Church-of-England beliefs. She was a good deal at the vicarage, and attended church services with assiduity. She patronized the village shops, took an interest in the local happenings, and played village bridge.

A humdrum, everyday life. And—suddenly—murder.

Colonel Melchett, the chief constable, had summoned Inspector Slack.

Slack was a positive type of man. When he had made up his mind, he was sure. He was quite sure now. "Husband did it, sir," he said.

"You think so?"

"Quite sure of it. You've only got to look at him. Guilty as hell. Never showed a sign of grief or emotion. He came back to the house knowing she was dead."

"Wouldn't he at least have tried to act the part of the distracted husband?"

"Not him, sir. Too pleased with himself. Some gentlemen can't act. Too stiff."

"Any other woman in his life?" Colonel Melchett asked.

“Haven’t been able to find any trace of one. Of course, he’s the artful kind. He’d cover his tracks. As I see it, he was just fed up with his wife. She’d got the money, and I should say was a trying woman to live with—always taking up with some ‘ism’ or other. He cold-bloodedly decided to do away with her and live comfortably on his own.”

“Yes, that could be the case, I suppose.”

“Depend upon it, that was it. Made his plans careful. Pretended to get a phone call—”

Melchett interrupted him. “No call been traced?”

“No, sir. That means either that he lied, or that the call was put through from a public telephone booth. The only two public phones in the village are at the station and the post office. Post office it certainly wasn’t. Mrs. Blade sees everyone who comes in. Station it might be. Train arrives at two twenty-seven and there’s a bit of a bustle then. But the main thing is he says it was Miss Marple who called him up, and that certainly isn’t true. The call didn’t come from her house, and she herself was away at the Institute.”

“You’re not overlooking the possibility that the husband was deliberately got out of the way—by someone who wanted to murder Mrs. Spenlow?”

“You’re thinking of young Ted Gerard, aren’t you, sir? I’ve been working on him—what we’re up against there is lack of motive. He doesn’t stand to gain anything.”

“He’s an undesirable character, though. Quite a pretty little spot of embezzlement to his credit.”

“I’m not saying he isn’t a wrong ’un. Still, he did go to his boss and own up to that embezzlement. And his employers weren’t wise to it.”

“An Oxford Grouper,” said Melchett.

“Yes, sir. Became a convert and went off to do the straight thing and own up to having pinched money. I’m not saying, mind you, that it mayn’t have

been astuteness. He may have thought he was suspected and decided to gamble on honest repentance.”

“You have a sceptical mind, Slack,” said Colonel Melchett. “By the way, have you talked to Miss Marple at all?”

“What’s she got to do with it, sir?”

“Oh, nothing. But she hears things, you know. Why don’t you go and have a chat with her? She’s a very sharp old lady.”

Slack changed the subject. “One thing I’ve been meaning to ask you, sir. That domestic service job where the deceased started her career—Sir Robert Abercrombie’s place. That’s where that jewel robbery was—emeralds—worth a packet. Never got them. I’ve been looking it up—must have happened when the Spenlow woman was there, though she’d have been quite a girl at the time. Don’t think she was mixed up in it, do you, sir? Spenlow, you know, was one of those little tuppenny-ha’penny jewellers—just the chap for a fence.”

Melchett shook his head. “Don’t think there’s anything in that. She didn’t even know Spenlow at the time. I remember the case. Opinion in police circles was that a son of the house was mixed up in it—Jim Abercrombie—awful young waster. Had a pile of debts, and just after the robbery they were all paid off—some rich woman, so they said, but I don’t know—Old Abercrombie hedged a bit about the case—tried to call the police off.”

“It was just an idea, sir,” said Slack.

Miss Marple received Inspector Slack with gratification, especially when she heard that he had been sent by Colonel Melchett.

“Now, really, that is very kind of Colonel Melchett. I didn’t know he remembered me.”

“He remembers you, all right. Told me that what you didn’t know of what goes on in St. Mary Mead isn’t worth knowing.”

“Too kind of him, but really I don’t know anything at all. About this murder, I mean.”

“You know what the talk about it is.”

“Oh, of course—but it wouldn’t do, would it, to repeat just idle talk?”

Slack said, with an attempt at geniality, “This isn’t an official conversation, you know. It’s in confidence, so to speak.”

“You mean you really want to know what people are saying? Whether there’s any truth in it or not?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Well, of course, there’s been a great deal of talk and speculation. And there are really two distinct camps, if you understand me. To begin with, there are the people who think that the husband did it. A husband or a wife is, in a way, the natural person to suspect, don’t you think so?”

“Maybe,” said the inspector cautiously.

“Such close quarters, you know. Then, so often, the money angle. I hear that it was Mrs. Spenlow who had the money, and therefore Mr. Spenlow does benefit by her death. In this wicked world I’m afraid the most uncharitable assumptions are often justified.”

“He comes into a tidy sum, all right.”

“Just so. It would seem quite plausible, wouldn’t it, for him to strangle her, leave the house by the back, come across the fields to my house, ask for me and pretend he’d had a telephone call from me, then go back and find his wife murdered in his absence—hoping, of course, that the crime would be put down to some tramp or burglar.”

The inspector nodded. “What with the money angle—and if they’d been on bad terms lately—”

But Miss Marple interrupted him. “Oh, but they hadn’t.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“Everyone would have known if they’d quarrelled! The maid, Gladys Brent—she’d have soon spread it round the village.”

The inspector said feebly, “She mightn’t have known—” and received a pitying smile in reply.

Miss Marple went on. “And then there’s the other school of thought. Ted Gerard. A good-looking young man. I’m afraid, you know, that good looks are inclined to influence one more than they should. Our last curate but one—quite a magical effect! All the girls came to church—evening service as well as morning. And many older women became unusually active in parish work—and the slippers and scarfs that were made for him! Quite embarrassing for the poor young man.

“But let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, this young man, Ted Gerard. Of course, there has been talk about him. He’s come down to see her so often. Though Mrs. Spenlow told me herself that he was a member of what I think they call the Oxford Group. A religious movement. They are quite sincere and very earnest, I believe, and Mrs. Spenlow was impressed by it all.”

Miss Marple took a breath and went on. “And I’m sure there was no reason to believe that there was anything more in it than that, but you know what people are. Quite a lot of people are convinced that Mrs. Spenlow was infatuated with the young man, and that she’d lent him quite a lot of money. And it’s perfectly true that he was actually seen at the station that day. In the train—the two twenty-seven down train. But of course it would be quite easy, wouldn’t it, to slip out of the other side of the train and go through the cutting and over the fence and round by the hedge and never come out of the station entrance at all. So that he need not have been seen going to the cottage. And, of course, people do think that what Mrs. Spenlow was wearing was rather peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“A kimono. Not a dress.” Miss Marple blushed. “That sort of thing, you know, is, perhaps, rather suggestive to some people.”

“You think it was suggestive?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so, I think it was perfectly natural.”

“You think it was natural?”

“Under the circumstances, yes.” Miss Marple’s glance was cool and reflective.

Inspector Slack said, “It might give us another motive for the husband. Jealousy.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Spenlow would never be jealous. He’s not the sort of man who notices things. If his wife had gone away and left a note on the pincushion, it would be the first he’d know of anything of that kind.”

Inspector Slack was puzzled by the intent way she was looking at him. He had an idea that all her conversation was intended to hint at something he didn’t understand. She said now, with some emphasis, “Didn’t you find any clues, Inspector—on the spot?”

“People don’t leave fingerprints and cigarette ash nowadays, Miss Marple.”

“But this, I think,” she suggested, “was an old-fashioned crime—”

Slack said sharply, “Now what do you mean by that?”

Miss Marple remarked slowly, “I think, you know, that Constable Palk could help you. He was the first person on the—on the ‘scene of the crime,’ as they say.”

Mr. Spenlow was sitting in a deck chair. He looked bewildered. He said, in his thin, precise voice, “I may, of course, be imagining what occurred. My hearing is not as good as it was. But I distinctly think I heard a small boy call after me, ‘Yah, who’s a Crippen?’ It—it conveyed the impression to me that he was of the opinion that I had—had killed my dear wife.”

Miss Marple, gently snipping off a dead rose head, said, "That was the impression he meant to convey, no doubt."

"But what could possibly have put such an idea into a child's head?"

Miss Marple coughed. "Listening, no doubt, to the opinions of his elders."

"You—you really mean that other people think that, also?"

"Quite half the people in St. Mary Mead."

"But—my dear lady—what can possibly have given rise to such an idea? I was sincerely attached to my wife. She did not, alas, take to living in the country as much as I had hoped she would do, but perfect agreement on every subject is an impossible idea. I assure you I feel her loss very keenly."

"Probably. But if you will excuse my saying so, you don't sound as though you do."

Mr. Spenlow drew his meagre frame up to its full height. "My dear lady, many years ago I read of a certain Chinese philosopher who, when his dearly loved wife was taken from him, continued calmly to beat a gong in the street—a customary Chinese pastime, I presume—exactly as usual. The people of the city were much impressed by his fortitude."

"But," said Miss Marple, "the people of St. Mary Mead react rather differently. Chinese philosophy does not appeal to them."

"But you understand?"

Miss Marple nodded. "My Uncle Henry," she explained, "was a man of unusual self-control. His motto was 'Never display emotion.' He, too, was very fond of flowers."

"I was thinking," said Mr. Spenlow with something like eagerness, "that I might, perhaps, have a pergola on the west side of the cottage. Pink roses and, perhaps, wisteria. And there is a white starry flower, whose name for the moment escapes me—"

In the tone in which she spoke to her grandnephew, aged three, Miss Marple said, "I have a very nice catalogue here, with pictures. Perhaps you would like to look through it—I have to go up to the village."

Leaving Mr. Spenlow sitting happily in the garden with his catalogue, Miss Marple went up to her room, hastily rolled up a dress in a piece of brown paper, and, leaving the house, walked briskly up to the post office. Miss Politt, the dressmaker, lived in the rooms over the post office.

But Miss Marple did not at once go through the door and up the stairs. It was just two thirty, and, a minute late, the Much Benham bus drew up outside the post office door. It was one of the events of the day in St. Mary Mead. The postmistress hurried out with parcels, parcels connected with the shop side of her business, for the post office also dealt in sweets, cheap books, and children's toys.

For some four minutes Miss Marple was alone in the post office.

Not till the postmistress returned to her post did Miss Marple go upstairs and explain to Miss Politt that she wanted her old grey crepe altered and made more fashionable if that were possible. Miss Politt promised to see what she could do.

The chief constable was rather astonished when Miss Marple's name was brought to him. She came in with many apologies. "So sorry—so very sorry to disturb you. You are so busy, I know, but then you have always been so very kind, Colonel Melchett, and I felt I would rather come to you instead of Inspector Slack. For one thing, you know, I should hate Constable Palk to get into any trouble. Strictly speaking, I suppose he shouldn't have touched anything at all."

Colonel Melchett was slightly bewildered. He said, "Palk? That's the St. Mary Mead constable, isn't it? What has he been doing?"

"He picked up a pin, you know. It was in his tunic. And it occurred to me at the time that it was quite probable he had actually picked it up in Mrs. Spenlow's house."

“Quite, quite. But after all, you know, what’s a pin? Matter of fact he did pick the pin up just by Mrs. Spenlow’s body. Came and told Slack about it yesterday—you put him up to that, I gather? Oughtn’t to have touched anything, of course, but as I said, what’s a pin? It was only a common pin. Sort of thing any woman might use.”

“Oh, no, Colonel Melchett, that’s where you’re wrong. To a man’s eye, perhaps, it looked like an ordinary pin, but it wasn’t. It was a special pin, a very thin pin, the kind you buy by the box, the kind used mostly by dressmakers.”

Melchett stared at her, a faint light of comprehension breaking in on him. Miss Marple nodded her head several times, eagerly.

“Yes, of course. It seems to me so obvious. She was in her kimono because she was going to try on her new dress, and she went into the front room, and Miss Politt just said something about measurements and put the tape measure round her neck—and then all she’d have to do was to cross it and pull—quite easy, so I’ve heard. And then, of course, she’d go outside and pull the door to and stand there knocking as though she’d just arrived. But the pin shows she’d already been in the house.”

“And it was Miss Politt who telephoned to Spenlow?”

“Yes. From the post office at two thirty—just when the bus comes and the post office would be empty.”

Colonel Melchett said, “But my dear Miss Marple, why? In heaven’s name, why? You can’t have a murder without a motive.”

“Well, I think, you know, Colonel Melchett, from all I’ve heard, that the crime dates from a long time back. It reminds me, you know, of my two cousins, Antony and Gordon. Whatever Antony did always went right for him, and with poor Gordon it was just the other way about. Race horses went lame, and stocks went down, and property depreciated. As I see it, the two women were in it together.”

“In what?”

“The robbery. Long ago. Very valuable emeralds, so I’ve heard. The lady’s maid and the tweeny. Because one thing hasn’t been explained—how, when the tweeny married the gardener, did they have enough money to set up a flower shop?

“The answer is, it was her share of the—the swag, I think is the right expression. Everything she did turned out well. Money made money. But the other one, the lady’s maid, must have been unlucky. She came down to being just a village dressmaker. Then they met again. Quite all right at first, I expect, until Mr. Ted Gerard came on the scene.

“Mrs. Spenlow, you see, was already suffering from conscience, and was inclined to be emotionally religious. This young man no doubt urged her to ‘face up’ and to ‘come clean’ and I daresay she was strung up to do it. But Miss Politt didn’t see it that way. All she saw was that she might go to prison for a robbery she had committed years ago. So she made up her mind to put a stop to it all. I’m afraid, you know, that she was always rather a wicked woman. I don’t believe she’d have turned a hair if that nice, stupid Mr. Spenlow had been hanged.”

Colonel Melchett said slowly, “We can—er—verify your theory—up to a point. The identity of the Politt woman with the lady’s maid at the Abercrombies’, but—”

Miss Marple reassured him. “It will be all quite easy. She’s the kind of woman who will break down at once when she’s taxed with the truth. And then, you see, I’ve got her tape measure. I—er—abstracted it yesterday when I was trying on. When she misses it and thinks the police have got it—well, she’s quite an ignorant woman and she’ll think it will prove the case against her in some way.”

She smiled at him encouragingly. “You’ll have no trouble, I can assure you.” It was the tone in which his favourite aunt had once assured him that he could not fail to pass his entrance examination into Sandhurst.

And he had passed.

Four

THE CASE OF THE PERFECT MAID

Oh, if you please, madam, could I speak to you a moment?"

It might be thought that this request was in the nature of an absurdity, since Edna, Miss Marple's little maid, was actually speaking to her mistress at the moment.

Recognizing the idiom, however, Miss Marple said promptly, "Certainly, Edna, come in and shut the door. What is it?"

Obediently shutting the door, Edna advanced into the room, pleated the corner of her apron between her fingers, and swallowed once or twice.

"Yes, Edna?" said Miss Marple encouragingly.

"Oh, please, ma'am, it's my cousin, Gladdie."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple, her mind leaping to the worst—and, alas, the most usual conclusion. "Not—not in trouble?"

Edna hastened to reassure her. "Oh, no, ma'am, nothing of that kind. Gladdie's not that kind of girl. It's just that she's upset. You see, she's lost her place."

"Dear me, I am sorry to hear that. She was at Old Hall, wasn't she, with the Miss—Misses—Skinner?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right, ma'am. And Gladdie's very upset about it—very upset indeed."

"Gladys has changed places rather often before, though, hasn't she?"

“Oh, yes, ma’am. She’s always one for a change, Gladdie is. She never seems to get really settled, if you know what I mean. But she’s always been the one to give the notice, you see!”

“And this time it’s the other way round?” asked Miss Marple dryly.

“Yes, ma’am, and it’s upset Gladdie something awful.”

Miss Marple looked slightly surprised. Her recollection of Gladys, who had occasionally come to drink tea in the kitchen on her “days out,” was a stout, giggling girl of unshakably equable temperament.

Edna went on. “You see, ma’am, it’s the way it happened—the way Miss Skinner looked.”

“How,” enquired Miss Marple patiently, “did Miss Skinner look?”

This time Edna got well away with her news bulletin.

“Oh, ma’am, it was ever such a shock to Gladdie. You see, one of Miss Emily’s brooches was missing, and such a hue and cry for it as never was, and of course nobody likes a thing like that to happen; it’s upsetting, ma’am, if you know what I mean. And Gladdie’s helped search everywhere, and there was Miss Lavinia saying she was going to the police about it, and then it turned up again, pushed right to the back of a drawer in the dressing table, and very thankful Gladdie was.

“And the very next day as ever was a plate got broken, and Miss Lavinia she bounced out right away and told Gladdie to take a month’s notice. And what Gladdie feels is it couldn’t have been the plate and that Miss Lavinia was just making an excuse of that, and that it must be because of the brooch and they think as she took it and put it back when the police was mentioned, and Gladdie wouldn’t do such a thing, not never she wouldn’t, and what she feels is as it will get round and tell against her and it’s a very serious thing for a girl, as you know, ma’am.”

Miss Marple nodded. Though having no particular liking for the bouncing, self-opinionated Gladys, she was quite sure of the girl’s intrinsic honesty

and could well imagine that the affair must have upset her.

Edna said wistfully, "I suppose, ma'am, there isn't anything you could do about it? Gladdie's in ever such a taking."

"Tell her not to be silly," said Miss Marple crisply. "If she didn't take the brooch—which I'm sure she didn't—then she has no cause to be upset."

"It'll get about," said Edna dismally.

Miss Marple said, "I—er—am going up that way this afternoon. I'll have a word with the Misses Skinner."

"Oh, thank you, madam," said Edna.

Old Hall was a big Victorian house surrounded by woods and park land. Since it had been proved unlettable and unsaleable as it was, an enterprising speculator had divided it into four flats with a central hot-water system, and the use of "the grounds" to be held in common by the tenants. The experiment had been satisfactory. A rich and eccentric old lady and her maid occupied one flat. The old lady had a passion for birds and entertained a feathered gathering to meals every day. A retired Indian judge and his wife rented a second. A very young couple, recently married, occupied the third, and the fourth had been taken only two months ago by two maiden ladies of the name of Skinner. The four sets of tenants were only on the most distant terms with each other, since none of them had anything in common. The landlord had been heard to say that this was an excellent thing. What he dreaded were friendships followed by estrangements and subsequent complaints to him.

Miss Marple was acquainted with all the tenants, though she knew none of them well. The elder Miss Skinner, Miss Lavinia, was what might be termed the working member of the firm, Miss Emily, the younger, spent most of her time in bed suffering from various complaints which, in the opinion of St. Mary Mead, were largely imaginary. Only Miss Lavinia believed devoutly in her sister's martyrdom and patience under affliction,

and willingly ran errands and trotted up and down to the village for things that “my sister had suddenly fancied.”

It was the view of St. Mary Mead that if Miss Emily suffered half as much as she said she did, she would have sent for Doctor Haydock long ago. But Miss Emily, when this was hinted to her, shut her eyes in a superior way and murmured that her case was not a simple one—the best specialists in London had been baffled by it—and that a wonderful new man had put her on a most revolutionary course of treatment and that she really hoped her health would improve under it. No humdrum GP could possibly understand her case.

“And it’s my opinion,” said the outspoken Miss Hartnell, “that she’s very wise not to send for him. Dear Doctor Haydock, in that breezy manner of his, would tell her that there was nothing the matter with her and to get up and not make a fuss! Do her a lot of good!”

Failing such arbitrary treatment, however, Miss Emily continued to lie on sofas, to surround herself with strange little pill boxes, and to reject nearly everything that had been cooked for her and ask for something else—usually something difficult and inconvenient to get.

The door was opened to Miss Marple by “Gladdie,” looking more depressed than Miss Marple had ever thought possible. In the sitting room (a quarter of the late drawing room, which had been partitioned into a dining room, drawing room, bathroom, and housemaid’s cupboard), Miss Lavinia rose to greet Miss Marple.

Lavinia Skinner was a tall, gaunt, bony female of fifty. She had a gruff voice and an abrupt manner.

“Nice to see you,” she said. “Emily’s lying down—feeling low today, poor dear. Hope she’ll see you, it would cheer her up, but there are times when she doesn’t feel up to seeing anybody. Poor dear, she’s wonderfully patient.”

Miss Marple responded politely. Servants were the main topic of conversation in St. Mary Mead, so it was not difficult to lead the conversation in that direction. Miss Marple said she had heard that that nice girl, Gladys Holmes, was leaving.

Miss Lavinia nodded. "Wednesday week. Broke things, you know. Can't have that."

Miss Marple sighed and said we all had to put up with things nowadays. It was so difficult to get girls to come to the country. Did Miss Skinner really think it was wise to part with Gladys?

"Know it's difficult to get servants," admitted Miss Lavinia. "The Devereuxs haven't got anybody—but then, I don't wonder—always quarrelling, jazz on all night—meals anytime—that girl knows nothing of housekeeping. I pity her husband! Then the Larkins have just lost their maid. Of course, what with the judge's Indian temper and his wanting chota hazri, as he calls it, at six in the morning and Mrs. Larkin always fussing, I don't wonder at that, either. Mrs. Carmichael's Janet is a fixture of course—though in my opinion she's the most disagreeable woman, and absolutely bullies the old lady."

"Then don't you think you might reconsider your decision about Gladys? She really is a nice girl. I know all her family; very honest and superior."

Miss Lavinia shook her head.

"I've got my reasons," she said importantly.

Miss Marple murmured, "You missed a brooch, I understand—"

"Now, who has been talking? I suppose the girl has. Quite frankly, I'm almost certain she took it. And then got frightened and put it back—but, of course, one can't say anything unless one is sure." She changed the subject. "Do come and see Emily, Miss Marple. I'm sure it would do her good."

Miss Marple followed meekly to where Miss Lavinia knocked on a door, was bidden enter, and ushered her guest into the best room in the flat, most

of the light of which was excluded by half-drawn blinds. Miss Emily was lying in bed, apparently enjoying the half gloom and her own indefinite sufferings.

The dim light showed her to be a thin, indecisive-looking creature, with a good deal of greyish-yellow hair untidily wound around her head and erupting into curls, the whole thing looking like a bird's nest of which no self-respecting bird could be proud. There was a smell in the room of Eau de Cologne, stale biscuits, and camphor.

With half-closed eyes and a thin, weak voice, Emily Skinner explained that this was "one of her bad days."

"The worst of ill health is," said Miss Emily in a melancholy tone, "that one knows what a burden one is to everyone around one."

"Lavinia is very good to me. Lavvie dear, I do so hate giving trouble but if my hot-water bottle could only be filled in the way I like it—too full it weighs on me so—on the other hand, if it is not sufficiently filled, it gets cold immediately!"

"I'm sorry, dear. Give it to me. I will empty a little out."

"Perhaps, if you're doing that, it might be refilled. There are no rusks in the house, I suppose—no, no, it doesn't matter. I can do without. Some weak tea and a slice of lemon—no lemons? No, really, I couldn't drink tea without lemon. I think the milk was slightly turned this morning. It has put me against milk in my tea. It doesn't matter. I can do without my tea. Only I do feel so weak. Oysters, they say, are nourishing. I wonder if I could fancy a few? No, no, too much bother to get hold of them so late in the day. I can fast until tomorrow."

Lavinia left the room murmuring something incoherent about bicycling down to the village.

Miss Emily smiled feebly at her guest and remarked that she did hate giving anyone any trouble.

Miss Marple told Edna that evening that she was afraid her embassy had met with no success.

She was rather troubled to find that rumours as to Gladys's dishonesty were already going around the village.

In the post office, Miss Wetherby tackled her. "My dear Jane, they gave her a written reference saying she was willing and sober and respectable, but saying nothing about honesty. That seems to me most significant! I hear there was some trouble about a brooch. I think there must be something in it, you know, because one doesn't let a servant go nowadays unless it's something rather grave. They'll find it most difficult to get anyone else. Girls simply will not go to Old Hall. They're nervous coming home on their days out. You'll see, the Skinners won't find anyone else, and then, perhaps, that dreadful hypochondriac sister will have to get up and do something!"

Great was the chagrin of the village when it was made known that the Misses Skinner had engaged, from an agency, a new maid who, by all accounts, was a perfect paragon.

"A three-years" reference recommending her most warmly, she prefers the country, and actually asks less wages than Gladys. I really feel we have been most fortunate."

"Well, really," said Miss Marple, to whom these details were imparted by Miss Lavinia in the fishmonger's shop. "It does seem too good to be true."

It then became the opinion of St. Mary Mead that the paragon would cry off at the last minute and fail to arrive.

None of these prognostications came true, however, and the village was able to observe the domestic treasure, by name, Mary Higgins, driving through the village in Reed's taxi to Old Hall. It had to be admitted that her appearance was good. A most respectable-looking woman, very neatly dressed.

When Miss Marple next visited Old Hall, on the occasion of recruiting stallholders for the vicarage fete, Mary Higgins opened the door. She was

certainly a most superior-looking maid, at a guess forty years of age, with neat black hair, rosy cheeks, a plump figure discreetly arrayed in black with a white apron and cap—"quite the good, old-fashioned type of servant," as Miss Marple explained afterwards, and with the proper, inaudible respectful voice, so different from the loud but adenoidal accents of Gladys.

Miss Lavinia was looking far less harassed than usual and, although she regretted that she could not take a stall owing to her preoccupation with her sister, she nevertheless tendered a handsome monetary contribution, and promised to produce a consignment of pen-wipers and babies' socks.

Miss Marple commented on her air of well-being.

"I really feel I owe a great deal to Mary, I am so thankful I had the resolution to get rid of that other girl. Mary is really invaluable. Cooks nicely and waits beautifully and keeps our little flat scrupulously clean—mattresses turned over every day. And she is really wonderful with Emily!"

Miss Marple hastily enquired after Emily.

"Oh, poor dear, she has been very much under the weather lately. She can't help it, of course, but it really makes things a little difficult sometimes. Wanting certain things cooked and then, when they come, saying she can't eat now—and then wanting them again half an hour later and everything spoiled and having to be done again. It makes, of course, a lot of work—but fortunately Mary does not seem to mind at all. She's used to waiting on invalids, she says, and understands them. It is such a comfort."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple. "You are fortunate."

"Yes, indeed. I really feel Mary has been sent to us as an answer to prayer."

"She sounds to me," said Miss Marple, "almost too good to be true. I should—well, I should be a little careful if I were you."

Lavinia Skinner failed to perceive the point of this remark. She said, "Oh! I assure you I do all I can to make her comfortable. I don't know what I should do if she left."

“I don’t expect she’ll leave until she’s ready to leave,” said Miss Marple and stared very hard at her hostess.

Miss Lavinia said, “If one has no domestic worries, it takes such a load off one’s mind, doesn’t it? How is your little Edna shaping?”

“She’s doing quite nicely. Not much head, of course. Not like your Mary. Still, I do know all about Edna because she’s a village girl.”

As she went out into the hall she heard the invalid’s voice fretfully raised. “This compress has been allowed to get quite dry—Doctor Allerton particularly said moisture continually renewed. There, there, leave it. I want a cup of tea and a boiled egg—boiled only three minutes and a half, remember, and send Miss Lavinia to me.”

The efficient Mary emerged from the bedroom and, saying to Lavinia, “Miss Emily is asking for you, madam,” proceeded to open the door for Miss Marple, helping her into her coat and handing her her umbrella in the most irreproachable fashion.

Miss Marple took the umbrella, dropped it, tried to pick it up, and dropped her bag, which flew open. Mary politely retrieved various odds and ends—a handkerchief, an engagement book, an old-fashioned leather purse, two shillings, three pennies, and a striped piece of peppermint rock.

Miss Marple received the last with some signs of confusion.

“Oh, dear, that must have been Mrs. Clement’s little boy. He was sucking it, I remember, and he took my bag to play with. He must have put it inside. It’s terribly sticky, isn’t it?”

“Shall I take it, madam?”

“Oh, would you? Thank you so much.”

Mary stooped to retrieve the last item, a small mirror, upon recovering which Miss Marple exclaimed fervently, “How lucky, now, that that isn’t broken.”

She thereupon departed, Mary standing politely by the door holding a piece of striped rock with a completely expressionless face.

For ten days longer St. Mary Mead had to endure hearing of the excellencies of Miss Lavinia's and Miss Emily's treasure.

On the eleventh day, the village awoke to its big thrill.

Mary, the paragon, was missing! Her bed had not been slept in, and the front door was found ajar. She had slipped out quietly during the night.

And not Mary alone was missing! Two brooches and five rings of Miss Lavinia's; three rings, a pendant, a bracelet, and four brooches of Miss Emily's were missing, also!

It was the beginning of a chapter of catastrophe.

Young Mrs. Devereux had lost her diamonds which she kept in an unlocked drawer and also some valuable furs given to her as a wedding present. The judge and his wife also had had jewellery taken and a certain amount of money. Mrs. Carmichael was the greatest sufferer. Not only had she some very valuable jewels but she also kept in the flat a large sum of money which had gone. It had been Janet's evening out, and her mistress was in the habit of walking round the gardens at dusk calling to the birds and scattering crumbs. It seemed clear that Mary, the perfect maid, had had keys to fit all the flats!

There was, it must be confessed, a certain amount of ill-natured pleasure in St. Mary Mead. Miss Lavinia had boasted so much of her marvellous Mary.

"And all the time, my dear, just a common thief!"

Interesting revelations followed. Not only had Mary disappeared into the blue, but the agency who had provided her and vouched for her credentials was alarmed to find that the Mary Higgins who had applied to them and whose references they had taken up had, to all intents and purposes, never existed. It was the name of a bona fide servant who had lived with the bona

fide sister of a dean, but the real Mary Higgins was existing peacefully in a place in Cornwall.

“Damned clever, the whole thing,” Inspector Slack was forced to admit. “And, if you ask me, that woman works with a gang. There was a case of much the same kind in Northumberland a year ago. Stuff was never traced, and they never caught her. However, we’ll do better than that in Much Benham!”

Inspector Slack was always a confident man.

Nevertheless, weeks passed, and Mary Higgins remained triumphantly at large. In vain Inspector Slack redoubled that energy that so belied his name.

Miss Lavinia remained tearful. Miss Emily was so upset, and felt so alarmed by her condition that she actually sent for Doctor Haydock.

The whole of the village was terribly anxious to know what he thought of Miss Emily’s claims to ill health, but naturally could not ask him. Satisfactory data came to hand on the subject, however, through Mr. Meek, the chemist’s assistant, who was walking out with Clara, Mrs. Price-Ridley’s maid. It was then known that Doctor Haydock had prescribed a mixture of asafoetida and valerian which, according to Mr. Meek, was the stock remedy for malingerers in the army!

Soon afterwards it was learned that Miss Emily, not relishing the medical attention she had had, was declaring that in the state of her health she felt it her duty to be near the specialist in London who understood her case. It was, she said, only fair to Lavinia.

The flat was put up for subletting.

It was a few days after that that Miss Marple, rather pink and flustered, called at the police station in Much Benham and asked for Inspector Slack.

Inspector Slack did not like Miss Marple. But he was aware that the Chief Constable, Colonel Melchett, did not share that opinion. Rather grudgingly,

therefore, he received her.

“Good afternoon, Miss Marple, what can I do for you?”

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Marple, “I’m afraid you’re in a hurry.”

“Lots of work on,” said Inspector Slack, “but I can spare a few moments.”

“Oh dear,” said Miss Marple. “I hope I shall be able to put what I say properly. So difficult, you know, to explain oneself, don’t you think? No, perhaps you don’t. But you see, not having been educated in the modern style—just a governess, you know, who taught one the dates of the kings of England and general knowledge—Doctor Brewer—three kinds of diseases of wheat—blight, mildew—now what was the third—was it smut?”

“Do you want to talk about smut?” asked Inspector Slack and then blushed.

“Oh, no, no.” Miss Marple hastily disclaimed any wish to talk about smut. “Just an illustration, you know. And how needles are made, and all that. Discursive, you know, but not teaching one to keep to the point. Which is what I want to do. It’s about Miss Skinner’s maid, Gladys, you know.”

“Mary Higgins,” said Inspector Slack.

“Oh, yes, the second maid. But it’s Gladys Holmes I mean—rather an impertinent girl and far too pleased with herself but really strictly honest, and it’s so important that that should be recognized.”

“No charge against her so far as I know,” said the inspector.

“No, I know there isn’t a charge—but that makes it worse. Because, you see, people go on thinking things. Oh, dear—I knew I should explain things badly. What I really mean is that the important thing is to find Mary Higgins.”

“Certainly,” said Inspector Slack. “Have you any ideas on the subject?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I have,” said Miss Marple. “May I ask you a question? Are fingerprints of no use to you?”

“Ah,” said Inspector Slack, “that’s where she was a bit too artful for us. Did most of her work in rubber gloves or housemaid’s gloves, it seems. And she’d been careful—wiped off everything in her bedroom and on the sink. Couldn’t find a single fingerprint in the place!”

“If you did have fingerprints, would it help?”

“It might, madam. They may be known at the Yard. This isn’t her first job, I’d say!”

Miss Marple nodded brightly. She opened her bag and extracted a small cardboard box. Inside it, wedged in cotton wool, was a small mirror.

“From my handbag,” said Miss Marple. “The maid’s prints are on it. I think they should be satisfactory—she touched an extremely sticky substance a moment previously.”

Inspector Slack stared. “Did you get her fingerprints on purpose?”

“Of course.”

“You suspected her then?”

“Well, you know, it did strike me that she was a little too good to be true. I practically told Miss Lavinia so. But she simply wouldn’t take the hint! I’m afraid, you know, Inspector, that I don’t believe in paragons. Most of us have our faults—and domestic service shows them up very quickly!”

“Well,” said Inspector Slack, recovering his balance, “I’m obliged to you, I’m sure. We’ll send these up to the Yard and see what they have to say.”

He stopped. Miss Marple had put her head a little on one side and was regarding him with a good deal of meaning.

“You wouldn’t consider, I suppose, Inspector, looking a little nearer home?”

“What do you mean, Miss Marple?”

“It’s very difficult to explain, but when you come across a peculiar thing you notice it. Although, often, peculiar things may be the merest trifles. I’ve felt that all along, you know; I mean about Gladys and the brooch. She’s an honest girl; she didn’t take that brooch. Then why did Miss Skinner think she did? Miss Skinner’s not a fool; far from it! Why was she so anxious to let a girl go who was a good servant when servants are hard to get? It was peculiar, you know. So I wondered. I wondered a good deal. And I noticed another peculiar thing! Miss Emily’s a hypochondriac, but she’s the first hypochondriac who hasn’t sent for some doctor or other at once. Hypochondriacs love doctors, Miss Emily didn’t!”

“What are you suggesting, Miss Marple?”

“Well, I’m suggesting, you know, that Miss Lavinia and Miss Emily are peculiar people. Miss Emily spends nearly all her time in a dark room. And if that hair of hers isn’t a wig I—I’ll eat my own back switch! And what I say is this—it’s perfectly possible for a thin, pale, grey-haired, whining woman to be the same as a black-haired, rosy-cheeked, plump woman. And nobody that I can find ever saw Miss Emily and Mary Higgins at one and the same time.

“Plenty of time to get impressions of all the keys, plenty of time to find out all about the other tenants, and then—get rid of the local girl. Miss Emily takes a brisk walk across country one night and arrives at the station as Mary Higgins next day. And then, at the right moment, Mary Higgins disappears, and off goes the hue and cry after her. I’ll tell you where you’ll find her, Inspector. On Miss Emily Skinner’s sofa! Get her fingerprints if you don’t believe me, but you’ll find I’m right! A couple of clever thieves, that’s what the Skinners are—and no doubt in league with a clever post and rails or fence or whatever you call it. But they won’t get away with it this time! I’m not going to have one of our village girls’ character for honesty taken away like that! Gladys Holmes is as honest as the day, and everybody’s going to know it! Good afternoon!”

Miss Marple had stalked out before Inspector Slack had recovered.

“Whew?” he muttered. “I wonder if she’s right?”

He soon found out that Miss Marple was right again.

Colonel Melchett congratulated Slack on his efficiency, and Miss Marple had Gladys come to tea with Edna and spoke to her seriously on settling down in a good situation when she got one.

Five

THE CASE OF THE CARETAKER

Well,” demanded Doctor Haydock of his patient. “And how goes it today?”

Miss Marple smiled at him wanly from pillows.

“I suppose, really, that I’m better,” she admitted, “but I feel so terribly depressed. I can’t help feeling how much better it would have been if I had died. After all, I’m an old woman. Nobody wants me or cares about me.”

Doctor Haydock interrupted with his usual brusqueness. “Yes, yes, typical after-reaction of this type of flu. What you need is something to take you out of yourself. A mental tonic.”

Miss Marple sighed and shook her head.

“And what’s more,” continued Doctor Haydock, “I’ve brought my medicine with me!”

He tossed a long envelope on to the bed.

“Just the thing for you. The kind of puzzle that is right up your street.”

“A puzzle?” Miss Marple looked interested.

“Literary effort of mine,” said the doctor, blushing a little. “Tried to make a regular story of it. ‘He said,’ ‘she said,’ ‘the girl thought,’ etc. Facts of the story are true.”

“But why a puzzle?” asked Miss Marple.

Doctor Haydock grinned. “Because the interpretation is up to you. I want to see if you’re as clever as you always make out.”

With that Parthian shot he departed.

Miss Marple picked up the manuscript and began to read.

“And where is the bride?” asked Miss Harmon genially.

The village was all agog to see the rich and beautiful young wife that Harry Laxton had brought back from abroad. There was a general indulgent feeling that Harry—wicked young scapegrace—had had all the luck. Everyone had always felt indulgent towards Harry. Even the owners of windows that had suffered from his indiscriminate use of a catapult had found their indignation dissipated by young Harry’s abject expression of regret. He had broken windows, robbed orchards, poached rabbits, and later had run into debt, got entangled with the local tobacconist’s daughter—been disentangled and sent off to Africa—and the village as represented by various ageing spinsters had murmured indulgently. “Ah, well! Wild oats! He’ll settle down!”

And now, sure enough, the prodigal had returned—not in affliction, but in triumph. Harry Laxton had “made good” as the saying goes. He had pulled himself together, worked hard, and had finally met and successfully wooed a young Anglo-French girl who was the possessor of a considerable fortune.

Harry might have lived in London, or purchased an estate in some fashionable hunting county, but he preferred to come back to the part of the world that was home to him. And there, in the most romantic way, he purchased the derelict estate in the dower house of which he had passed his childhood.

Kingsdean House had been unoccupied for nearly seventy years. It had gradually fallen into decay and abandon. An elderly caretaker and his wife lived in the one habitable corner of it. It was a vast, unprepossessing grandiose mansion, the gardens overgrown with rank vegetation and the trees hemming it in like some gloomy enchanter’s den.

The dower house was a pleasant, unpretentious house and had been let for a long term of years to Major Laxton, Harry’s father. As a boy, Harry had

roamed over the Kingsdean estate and knew every inch of the tangled woods, and the old house itself had always fascinated him.

Major Laxton had died some years ago, so it might have been thought that Harry would have had no ties to bring him back—nevertheless it was to the home of his boyhood that Harry brought his bride. The ruined old Kingsdean House was pulled down. An army of builders and contractors swooped down upon the place, and in almost a miraculously short space of time—so marvellously does wealth tell—the new house rose white and gleaming among the trees.

Next came a posse of gardeners and after them a procession of furniture vans.

The house was ready. Servants arrived. Lastly, a costly limousine deposited Harry and Mrs. Harry at the front door.

The village rushed to call, and Mrs. Price, who owned the largest house, and who considered herself to lead society in the place, sent out cards of invitation for a party “to meet the bride.”

It was a great event. Several ladies had new frocks for the occasion. Everyone was excited, curious, anxious to see this fabulous creature. They said it was all so like a fairy story!

Miss Harmon, weather-beaten, hearty spinster, threw out her question as she squeezed her way through the crowded drawing room door. Little Miss Brent, a thin, acidulated spinster, fluttered out information.

“Oh, my dear, quite charming. Such pretty manners. And quite young. Really, you know, it makes one feel quite envious to see someone who has everything like that. Good looks and money and breeding—most distinguished, nothing in the least common about her—and dear Harry so devoted!”

“Ah,” said Miss Harmon, “it’s early days yet!”

Miss Brent's thin nose quivered appreciatively. "Oh, my dear, do you really think—"

"We all know what Harry is," said Miss Harmon.

"We know what he was! But I expect now—"

"Ah," said Miss Harmon, "men are always the same. Once a gay deceiver, always a gay deceiver. I know them."

"Dear, dear. Poor young thing." Miss Brent looked much happier. "Yes, I expect she'll have trouble with him. Someone ought really to warn her. I wonder if she's heard anything of the old story?"

"It seems so very unfair," said Miss Brent, "that she should know nothing. So awkward. Especially with only the one chemist's shop in the village."

For the erstwhile tobacconist's daughter was now married to Mr. Edge, the chemist.

"It would be so much nicer," said Miss Brent, "if Mrs. Laxton were to deal with Boots in Much Benham."

"I daresay," said Miss Harmon, "that Harry Laxton will suggest that himself."

And again a significant look passed between them.

"But I certainly think," said Miss Harmon, "that she ought to know."

"Beasts!" said Clarice Vane indignantly to her uncle, Doctor Haydock. "Absolute beasts some people are."

He looked at her curiously.

She was a tall, dark girl, handsome, warmhearted and impulsive. Her big brown eyes were alight now with indignation as she said, "All these cats—saying things—hinting things."

“About Harry Laxton?”

“Yes, about his affair with the tobacconist’s daughter.”

“Oh, that!” The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “A great many young men have affairs of that kind.”

“Of course they do. And it’s all over. So why harp on it? And bring it up years after? It’s like ghouls feasting on dead bodies.”

“I daresay, my dear, it does seem like that to you. But you see, they have very little to talk about down here, and so I’m afraid they do tend to dwell upon past scandals. But I’m curious to know why it upsets you so much?”

Clarice Vane bit her lip and flushed. She said, in a curiously muffled voice. “They—they look so happy. The Laxtons, I mean. They’re young and in love, and it’s all so lovely for them. I hate to think of it being spoiled by whispers and hints and innuendoes and general beastliness.”

“H’m. I see.”

Clarice went on. “He was talking to me just now. He’s so happy and eager and excited and—yes, thrilled—at having got his heart’s desire and rebuilt Kingsdean. He’s like a child about it all. And she—well, I don’t suppose anything has ever gone wrong in her whole life. She’s always had everything. You’ve seen her. What did you think of her?”

The doctor did not answer at once. For other people, Louise Laxton might be an object of envy. A spoiled darling of fortune. To him she had brought only the refrain of a popular song heard many years ago, Poor little rich girl
—

A small, delicate figure, with flaxen hair curled rather stiffly round her face and big, wistful blue eyes.

Louise was drooping a little. The long stream of congratulations had tired her. She was hoping it might soon be time to go. Perhaps, even now, Harry

might say so. She looked at him sideways. So tall and broadshouldered with his eager pleasure in this horrible, dull party.

Poor little rich girl—

“Ooph!” It was a sigh of relief.

Harry turned to look at his wife amusedly. They were driving away from the party.

She said, “Darling, what a frightful party!”

Harry laughed. “Yes, pretty terrible. Never mind, my sweet. It had to be done, you know. All these old pussies knew me when I lived here as a boy. They’d have been terribly disappointed not to have got a look at you close up.”

Louise made a grimace. She said, “Shall we have to see a lot of them?”

“What? Oh, no. They’ll come and make ceremonious calls with card cases, and you’ll return the calls and then you needn’t bother anymore. You can have your own friends down or whatever you like.”

Louise said, after a minute or two, “Isn’t there anyone amusing living down here?”

“Oh, yes. There’s the County, you know. Though you may find them a bit dull, too. Mostly interested in bulbs and dogs and horses. You’ll ride, of course. You’ll enjoy that. There’s a horse over at Eglinton I’d like you to see. A beautiful animal, perfectly trained, no vice in him but plenty of spirit.”

The car slowed down to take the turn into the gates of Kingsdean. Harry wrenched the wheel and swore as a grotesque figure sprang up in the middle of the road and he only just managed to avoid it. It stood there, shaking a fist and shouting after them.

Louise clutched his arm. “Who’s that—that horrible old woman?”

Harry's brow was black. "That's old Murgatroyd. She and her husband were caretakers in the old house. They were there for nearly thirty years."

"Why does she shake her fist at you?"

Harry's face got red. "She—well, she resented the house being pulled down. And she got the sack, of course. Her husband's been dead two years. They say she got a bit queer after he died."

"Is she—she isn't—starving?"

Louise's ideas were vague and somewhat melodramatic. Riches prevented you coming into contact with reality.

Harry was outraged. "Good Lord, Louise, what an idea! I pensioned her off, of course—and handsomely, too! Found her a new cottage and everything."

Louise asked, bewildered, "Then why does she mind?"

Harry was frowning, his brows drawn together. "Oh, how should I know? Crazy! She loved the house."

"But it was a ruin, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was—crumbling to pieces—roof leaking—more or less unsafe. All the same I suppose it meant something to her. She'd been there a long time. Oh, I don't know! The old devil's cracked, I think."

Louise said uneasily, "She—I think she cursed us. Oh, Harry, I wish she hadn't."

It seemed to Louise that her new home was tainted and poisoned by the malevolent figure of one crazy old woman. When she went out in the car, when she rode, when she walked out with the dogs, there was always the same figure waiting. Crouched down on herself, a battered hat over wisps of iron-grey hair, and the slow muttering of imprecations.

Louise came to believe that Harry was right—the old woman was mad. Nevertheless that did not make things easier. Mrs. Murgatroyd never

actually came to the house, nor did she use definite threats, nor offer violence. Her squatting figure remained always just outside the gates. To appeal to the police would have been useless and, in any case, Harry Laxton was averse to that course of action. It would, he said, arouse local sympathy for the old brute. He took the matter more easily than Louise did.

“Don’t worry about it, darling. She’ll get tired of this silly cursing business. Probably she’s only trying it on.”

“She isn’t, Harry. She—she hates us! I can feel it. She—she’s illwishing us.”

“She’s not a witch, darling, although she may look like one! Don’t be morbid about it all.”

Louise was silent. Now that the first excitement of settling in was over, she felt curiously lonely and at a loose end. She had been used to life in London and the Riviera. She had no knowledge of or taste for English country life. She was ignorant of gardening, except for the final act of “doing the flowers.” She did not really care for dogs. She was bored by such neighbours as she met. She enjoyed riding best, sometimes with Harry, sometimes, when he was busy about the estate, by herself. She hacked through the woods and lanes, enjoying the easy paces of the beautiful horse that Harry had bought for her. Yet even Prince Hal, most sensitive of chestnut steeds, was wont to shy and snort as he carried his mistress past the huddled figure of a malevolent old woman.

One day Louise took her courage in both hands. She was out walking. She had passed Mrs. Murgatroyd, pretending not to notice her, but suddenly she swerved back and went right up to her. She said, a little breathlessly, “What is it? What’s the matter? What do you want?”

The old woman blinked at her. She had a cunning, dark gypsy face, with wisps of iron-grey hair, and bleared, suspicious eyes. Louise wondered if she drank.

She spoke in a whining and yet threatening voice. “What do I want, you ask? What, indeed! That which has been took away from me. Who turned

me out of Kingsdean House? I'd lived there, girl and woman, for near on forty years. It was a black deed to turn me out and it's black bad luck it'll bring to you and him!"

Louise said, "You've got a very nice cottage and—"

She broke off. The old woman's arms flew up. She screamed, "What's the good of that to me? It's my own place I want and my own fire as I sat beside all them years. And as for you and him, I'm telling you there will be no happiness for you in your new fine house. It's the black sorrow will be upon you! Sorrow and death and my curse. May your fair face rot."

Louise turned away and broke into a little stumbling run. She thought, I must get away from here! We must sell the house! We must go away.

At the moment, such a solution seemed easy to her. But Harry's utter incomprehension took her back. He exclaimed, "Leave here? Sell the house? Because of a crazy old woman's threats? You must be mad."

"No, I'm not. But she—she frightens me, I know something will happen."

Harry Laxton said grimly, "Leave Mrs. Murgatroyd to me. I'll settle her!"

A friendship had sprung up between Clarice Vane and young Mrs. Laxton. The two girls were much of an age, though dissimilar both in character and in tastes. In Clarice's company, Louise found reassurance. Clarice was so self-reliant, so sure of herself. Louise mentioned the matter of Mrs. Murgatroyd and her threats, but Clarice seemed to regard the matter as more annoying than frightening.

"It's so stupid, that sort of thing," she said. "And really very annoying for you."

"You know, Clarice, I—I feel quite frightened sometimes. My heart gives the most awful jumps."

"Nonsense, you mustn't let a silly thing like that get you down. She'll soon tire of it."

She was silent for a minute or two. Clarice said, "What's the matter?"

Louise paused for a minute, then her answer came with a rush. "I hate this place! I hate being here. The woods and this house, and the awful silence at night, and the queer noise owls make. Oh, and the people and everything."

"The people. What people?"

"The people in the village. Those prying, gossiping old maids."

Clarice said sharply, "What have they been saying?"

"I don't know. Nothing particular. But they've got nasty minds. When you've talked to them you feel you wouldn't trust anybody—not anybody at all."

Clarice said harshly, "Forget them. They've nothing to do but gossip. And most of the muck they talk they just invent."

Louise said, "I wish we'd never come here. But Harry adores it so." Her voice softened.

Clarice thought, How she adores him. She said abruptly, "I must go now."

"I'll send you back in the car. Come again soon."

Clarice nodded. Louise felt comforted by her new friend's visit. Harry was pleased to find her more cheerful and from then on urged her to have Clarice often to the house.

Then one day he said, "Good news for you, darling."

"Oh, what?"

"I've fixed the Murgatroyd. She's got a son in America, you know. Well, I've arranged for her to go out and join him. I'll pay her passage."

"Oh, Harry, how wonderful. I believe I might get to like Kingsdean after all."

“Get to like it? Why, it’s the most wonderful place in the world!”

Louise gave a little shiver. She could not rid herself of her superstitious fear so easily.

If the ladies of St. Mary Mead had hoped for the pleasure of imparting information about her husband’s past to the bride, this pleasure was denied them by Harry Laxton’s own prompt action.

Miss Harmon and Clarice Vane were both in Mr. Edge’s shop, the one buying mothballs and the other a packet of boracic, when Harry Laxton and his wife came in.

After greeting the two ladies, Harry turned to the counter and was just demanding a toothbrush when he stopped in mid-speech and exclaimed heartily, “Well, well, just see who’s here! Bella, I do declare.”

Mrs. Edge, who had hurried out from the back parlour to attend to the congestion of business, beamed back cheerfully at him, showing her big white teeth. She had been a dark, handsome girl and was still a reasonably handsome woman, though she had put on weight, and the lines of her face had coarsened; but her large brown eyes were full of warmth as she answered, “Bella, it is, Mr. Harry, and pleased to see you after all these years.”

Harry turned to his wife. “Bella’s an old flame of mine, Louise,” he said. “Head-over-heels in love with her, wasn’t I, Bella?”

“That’s what you say,” said Mrs. Edge.

Louise laughed. She said, “My husband’s very happy seeing all his old friends again.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Edge, “we haven’t forgotten you, Mr. Harry. Seems like a fairy tale to think of you married and building up a new house instead of that ruined old Kingsdean House.”

“You look very well and blooming,” said Harry, and Mrs. Edge laughed and said there was nothing wrong with her and what about that toothbrush?

Clarice, watching the baffled look on Miss Harmon’s face, said to herself exultantly, Oh, well-done, Harry. You’ve spiked their guns.

Doctor Haydock said abruptly to his niece, “What’s all this nonsense about old Mrs. Murgatroyd hanging about Kingsdean and shaking her fist and cursing the new regime?”

“It isn’t nonsense. It’s quite true. It’s upset Louise a good deal.”

“Tell her she needn’t worry—when the Murgatroyds were caretakers they never stopped grumbling about the place—they only stayed because Murgatroyd drank and couldn’t get another job.”

“I’ll tell her,” said Clarice doubtfully, “but I don’t think she’ll believe you. The old woman fairly screams with rage.”

“Always used to be fond of Harry as a boy. I can’t understand it.”

Clarice said, “Oh, well—they’ll be rid of her soon. Harry’s paying her passage to America.”

Three days later, Louise was thrown from her horse and killed.

Two men in a baker’s van were witnesses of the accident. They saw Louise ride out of the gates, saw the old woman spring up and stand in the road waving her arms and shouting, saw the horse start, swerve, and then bolt madly down the road, flinging Louise Laxton over his head.

One of them stood over the unconscious figure, not knowing what to do, while the other rushed to the house to get help.

Harry Laxton came running out, his face ghastly. They took off a door of the van and carried her on it to the house. She died without regaining consciousness and before the doctor arrived.

(End of Doctor Haydock’s manuscript.)

When Doctor Haydock arrived the following day, he was pleased to note that there was a pink flush in Miss Marple's cheek and decidedly more animation in her manner.

"Well," he said, "what's the verdict?"

"What's the problem, Doctor Haydock?" countered Miss Marple.

"Oh, my dear lady, do I have to tell you that?"

"I suppose," said Miss Marple, "that it's the curious conduct of the caretaker. Why did she behave in that very odd way? People do mind being turned out of their old homes. But it wasn't her home. In fact, she used to complain and grumble while she was there. Yes, it certainly looks very fishy. What became of her, by the way?"

"Did a bunk to Liverpool. The accident scared her. Thought she'd wait there for her boat."

"All very convenient for somebody," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I think the 'Problem of the Caretaker's Conduct' can be solved easily enough. Bribery, was it not?"

"That's your solution?"

"Well, if it wasn't natural for her to behave in that way, she must have been 'putting on an act' as people say, and that means that somebody paid her to do what she did."

"And you know who that somebody was?"

"Oh, I think so. Money again, I'm afraid. And I've always noticed that gentlemen always tend to admire the same type."

"Now I'm out of my depth."

"No, no, it all hangs together. Harry Laxton admired Bella Edge, a dark, vivacious type. Your niece Clarice was the same. But the poor little wife was quite a different type—fair-haired and clinging—not his type at all. So

he must have married her for her money. And murdered her for her money, too!”

“You use the word ‘murder’?”

“Well, he sounds the right type. Attractive to women and quite unscrupulous. I suppose he wanted to keep his wife’s money and marry your niece. He may have been seen talking to Mrs. Edge. But I don’t fancy he was attached to her anymore. Though I daresay he made the poor woman think he was, for ends of his own. He soon had her well under his thumb, I fancy.”

“How exactly did he murder her, do you think?”

Miss Marple stared ahead of her for some minutes with dreamy blue eyes.

“It was very well-timed—with the baker’s van as witness. They could see the old woman and, of course, they’d put down the horse’s fright to that. But I should imagine, myself, that an air gun, or perhaps a catapult. Yes, just as the horse came through the gates. The horse bolted, of course, and Mrs. Laxton was thrown.”

She paused, frowning.

“The fall might have killed her. But he couldn’t be sure of that. And he seems the sort of man who would lay his plans carefully and leave nothing to chance. After all, Mrs. Edge could get him something suitable without her husband knowing. Otherwise, why would Harry bother with her? Yes, I think he had some powerful drug handy, that could be administered before you arrived. After all, if a woman is thrown from her horse and has serious injuries and dies without recovering consciousness, well—a doctor wouldn’t normally be suspicious, would he? He’d put it down to shock or something.”

Doctor Haydock nodded.

“Why did you suspect?” asked Miss Marple.

“It wasn’t any particular cleverness on my part,” said Doctor Haydock. “It was just the trite, well-known fact that a murderer is so pleased with his cleverness that he doesn’t take proper precautions. I was just saying a few consolatory words to the bereaved husband—and feeling damned sorry for the fellow, too—when he flung himself down on the settee to do a bit of playacting and a hypodermic syringe fell out of his pocket.

“He snatched it up and looked so scared that I began to think. Harry Laxton didn’t drug; he was in perfect health; what was he doing with a hypodermic syringe? I did the autopsy with a view to certain possibilities. I found strophanthin. The rest was easy. There was strophanthin in Laxton’s possession, and Bella Edge, questioned by the police, broke down and admitted to having got it for him. And finally old Mrs. Murgatroyd confessed that it was Harry Laxton who had put her up to the cursing stunt.”

“And your niece got over it?”

“Yes, she was attracted by the fellow, but it hadn’t gone far.”

The doctor picked up his manuscript.

“Full marks to you, Miss Marple—and full marks to me for my prescription. You’re looking almost yourself again.”

Six

THE THIRD FLOOR FLAT

“The Third-Floor Flat” was first published in Hutchinson’s Story Magazine, January 1929.

Bother!” said Pat.

With a deepening frown she rummaged wildly in the silken trifle she called an evening bag. Two young men and another girl watched her anxiously. They were all standing outside the closed door of Patricia Garnett’s flat.

“It’s no good,” said Pat. “It’s not there. And now what shall we do?”

“What is life without a latchkey?” murmured Jimmy Faulkener.

He was a short, broad-shouldered young man, with good-tempered blue eyes.

Pat turned on him angrily. “Don’t make jokes, Jimmy. This is serious.”

“Look again, Pat,” said Donovan Bailey. “It must be there somewhere.”

He had a lazy, pleasant voice that matched his lean, dark figure.

“If you ever brought it out,” said the other girl, Mildred Hope.

“Of course I brought it out,” said Pat. “I believe I gave it to one of you two.” She turned on the men accusingly. “I told Donovan to take it for me.”

But she was not to find a scapegoat so easily. Donovan put in a firm disclaimer, and Jimmy backed him up.

“I saw you put it in your bag, myself,” said Jimmy.

“Well, then, one of you dropped it out when you picked up my bag. I’ve dropped it once or twice.”

“Once or twice!” said Donovan. “You’ve dropped it a dozen times at least, besides leaving it behind on every possible occasion.”

“I can’t see why everything on earth doesn’t drop out of it the whole time,” said Jimmy.

“The point is—how are we going to get in?” said Mildred.

She was a sensible girl, who kept to the point, but she was not nearly so attractive as the impulsive and troublesome Pat.

All four of them regarded the closed door blankly.

“Couldn’t the porter help?” suggested Jimmy. “Hasn’t he got a master key or something of that kind?”

Pat shook her head. There were only two keys. One was inside the flat hung up in the kitchen and the other was—or should be—in the maligned bag.

“If only the flat were on the ground floor,” wailed Pat. “We could have broken open a window or something. Donovan, you wouldn’t like to be a cat burglar, would you?”

Donovan declined firmly but politely to be a cat burglar.

“A flat on the fourth floor is a bit of an undertaking,” said Jimmy.

“How about a fire escape?” suggested Donovan.

“There isn’t one.”

“There should be,” said Jimmy. “A building five storeys high ought to have a fire escape.”

“I daresay,” said Pat. “But what should be doesn’t help us. How am I ever to get into my flat?”

“Isn’t there a sort of thingummybob?” said Donovan. “A thing the tradesmen send up chops and brussels sprouts in?”

“The service lift,” said Pat. “Oh yes, but it’s only a sort of wire-basket thing. Oh wait—I know. What about the coal lift?”

“Now that,” said Donovan, “is an idea.”

Mildred made a discouraging suggestion. “It’ll be bolted,” she said. “In Pat’s kitchen, I mean, on the inside.”

But the idea was instantly negatived.

“Don’t you believe it,” said Donovan.

“Not in Pat’s kitchen,” said Jimmy. “Pat never locks and bolts things.”

“I don’t think it’s bolted,” said Pat. “I took the dustbin off this morning, and I’m sure I never bolted it afterwards, and I don’t think I’ve been near it since.”

“Well,” said Donovan, “that fact’s going to be very useful to us tonight, but, all the same, young Pat, let me point out to you that these slack habits are leaving you at the mercy of burglars— non-feline—every night.”

Pat disregarded these admonitions.

“Come on,” she cried, and began racing down the four flights of stairs. The others followed her. Pat led them through a dark recess, apparently full to overflowing of perambulators, and through another door into the well of the flats, and guided them to the right lift. There was, at the moment, a dustbin on it. Donovan lifted it off and stepped gingerly on to the platform in its place. He wrinkled up his nose.

“A little noisome,” he remarked. “But what of that? Do I go alone on this venture or is anyone coming with me?”

“I’ll come, too,” said Jimmy.

He stepped on by Donovan's side.

"I suppose the lift will bear me," he added doubtfully.

"You can't weigh much more than a ton of coal," said Pat, who had never been particularly strong on her weights-and-measures table.

"And, anyway, we shall soon find out," said Donovan cheerfully, as he hauled on the rope.

With a grinding noise they disappeared from sight.

"This thing makes an awful noise," remarked Jimmy, as they passed up through blackness. "What will the people in the other flats think?"

"Ghosts or burglars, I expect," said Donovan. "Hauling this rope is quite heavy work. The porter of Friars Mansions does more work than I ever suspected. I say, Jimmy, old son, are you counting the floors?"

"Oh, Lord! No. I forgot about it."

"Well, I have, which is just as well. That's the third we're passing now. The next is ours."

"And now, I suppose," grumbled Jimmy, "we shall find that Pat did bolt the door after all."

But these fears were unfounded. The wooden door swung back at a touch, and Donovan and Jimmy stepped out into the inky blackness of Pat's kitchen.

"We ought to have a torch for this wild night work," exclaimed Donovan. "If I know Pat, everything's on the floor, and we shall smash endless crockery before I can get to the light switch. Don't move about, Jimmy, till I get the light on."

He felt his way cautiously over the floor, uttering one fervent "Damn!" as a corner of the kitchen table took him unawares in the ribs. He reached the

switch, and in another moment another “Damn!” floated out of the darkness.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jimmy.

“Light won’t come on. Dud bulb, I suppose. Wait a minute. I’ll turn the sitting room light on.”

The sitting room was the door immediately across the passage. Jimmy heard Donovan go out of the door, and presently fresh muffled curses reached him. He himself edged his way cautiously across the kitchen.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. Rooms get bewitched at night, I believe. Everything seems to be in a different place. Chairs and tables where you least expected them. Oh, hell! Here’s another!”

But at this moment Jimmy fortunately connected with the electric light switch and pressed it down. In another minute two young men were looking at each other in silent horror.

This room was not Pat’s sitting room. They were in the wrong flat.

To begin with, the room was about ten times more crowded than Pat’s, which explained Donovan’s pathetic bewilderment at repeatedly cannoning into chairs and tables. There was a large round table in the centre of the room covered with a baize cloth, and there was an aspidistra in the window. It was, in fact, the kind of room whose owner, the young men felt sure, would be difficult to explain to. With silent horror they gazed down at the table, on which lay a little pile of letters.

“Mrs. Ernestine Grant,” breathed Donovan, picking them up and reading the name. “Oh, help! Do you think she’s heard us?”

“It’s a miracle she hasn’t heard you,” said Jimmy. “What with your language and the way you’ve been crashing into the furniture. Come on, for the Lord’s sake, let’s get out of here quickly.”

They hastily switched off the light and retraced their steps on tiptoe to the lift. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief as they regained the fastness of its depths without further incident.

“I do like a woman to be a good, sound sleeper,” he said approvingly. “Mrs. Ernestine Grant has her points.”

“I see it now,” said Donovan; “why we made the mistake in the floor, I mean. Out in that well we started up from the basement.”

He heaved on the rope, and the lift shot up. “We’re right this time.”

“I devoutly trust we are,” said Jimmy as he stepped out into another inky void. “My nerves won’t stand many more shocks of this kind.”

But no further nerve strain was imposed. The first click of the light showed them Pat’s kitchen, and in another minute they were opening the front door and admitting the two girls who were waiting outside.

“You have been a long time,” grumbled Pat. “Mildred and I have been waiting here ages.”

“We’ve had an adventure,” said Donovan. “We might have been hauled off to the police station as dangerous malefactors.”

Pat had passed on into the sitting room, where she switched on the light and dropped her wrap on the sofa. She listened with lively interest to Donovan’s account of his adventures.

“I’m glad she didn’t catch you,” she commented. “I’m sure she’s an old curmudgeon. I got a note from her this morning—wanted to see me some time—something she had to complain about—my piano, I suppose. People who don’t like pianos over their heads shouldn’t come and live in flats. I say, Donovan, you’ve hurt your hand. It’s all over blood. Go and wash it under the tap.”

Donovan looked down at his hand in surprise. He went out of the room obediently and presently his voice called to Jimmy.

“Hullo,” said the other, “what’s up? You haven’t hurt yourself badly, have you?”

“I haven’t hurt myself at all.”

There was something so queer in Donovan’s voice that Jimmy stared at him in surprise. Donovan held out his washed hand and Jimmy saw that there was no mark or cut of any kind on it.

“That’s odd,” he said, frowning. “There was quite a lot of blood. Where did it come from?” And then suddenly he realized what his quicker-witted friend had already seen. “By Jove,” he said. “It must have come from that flat.” He stopped, thinking over the possibilities his words implied. “You’re sure it was—er—blood?” he said. “Not paint?”

Donovan shook his head. “It was blood, all right,” he said, and shivered.

They looked at each other. The same thought was clearly in each of their minds. It was Jimmy who voiced it first.

“I say,” he said awkwardly. “Do you think we ought to—well—go down again—and have—a—look around? See it’s all right, you know?”

“What about the girls?”

“We won’t say anything to them. Pat’s going to put on an apron and make us an omelette. We’ll be back by the time they wonder where we are.”

“Oh, well, come on,” said Donovan. “I suppose we’ve got to go through with it. I daresay there isn’t anything really wrong.”

But his tone lacked conviction. They got into the lift and descended to the floor below. They found their way across the kitchen without much difficulty and once more switched on the sitting room light.

“It must have been in here,” said Donovan, “that—that I got the stuff on me. I never touched anything in the kitchen.”

He looked round him. Jimmy did the same, and they both frowned. Everything looked neat and commonplace and miles removed from any suggestion of violence or gore.

Suddenly Jimmy started violently and caught his companion’s arm.

“Look!”

Donovan followed the pointing finger, and in his turn uttered an exclamation. From beneath the heavy rep curtains there protruded a foot—a woman’s foot in a gaping patent leather shoe.

Jimmy went to the curtains and drew them sharply apart. In the recess of the window a woman’s huddled body lay on the floor, a sticky dark pool beside it. She was dead, there was no doubt of that. Jimmy was attempting to raise her up when Donovan stopped him.

“You’d better not do that. She oughtn’t to be touched till the police come.”

“The police. Oh, of course. I say, Donovan, what a ghastly business. Who do you think she is? Mrs. Ernestine Grant?”

“Looks like it. At any rate, if there’s anyone else in the flat they’re keeping jolly quiet.”

“What do we do next?” asked Jimmy. “Run out and get a policeman or ring up from Pat’s flat?”

“I should think ringing up would be best. Come on, we might as well go out the front door. We can’t spend the whole night going up and down in that evil-smelling lift.”

Jimmy agreed. Just as they were passing through the door he hesitated. “Look here; do you think one of us ought to stay—just to keep an eye on things—till the police come?”

“Yes, I think you’re right. If you’ll stay I’ll run up and telephone.”

He ran quickly up the stairs and rang the bell of the flat above. Pat came to open it, a very pretty Pat with a flushed face and a cooking apron on. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“You? But how—Donovan, what is it? Is anything the matter?”

He took both her hands in his. “It’s all right, Pat—only we’ve made a rather unpleasant discovery in the flat below. A woman—dead.”

“Oh!” She gave a little gasp. “How horrible. Has she had a fit or something?”

“No. It looks—well—it looks rather as though she had been murdered.”

“Oh, Donovan!”

“I know. It’s pretty beastly.”

Her hands were still in his. She had left them there—was even clinging to him. Darling Pat—how he loved her. Did she care at all for him? Sometimes he thought she did. Sometimes he was afraid that Jimmy Faulkener—remembrances of Jimmy waiting patiently below made him start guiltily.

“Pat, dear, we must telephone to the police.”

“Monsieur is right,” said a voice behind him. “And in the meantime, while we are waiting their arrival, perhaps I can be of some slight assistance.”

They had been standing in the doorway of the flat, and now they peered out on the landing. A figure was standing on the stairs a little way above them. It moved down and into their range of vision.

They stood staring at the little man with a very fierce moustache and an egg-shaped head. He wore a resplendent dressing gown and embroidered slippers. He bowed gallantly to Patricia.

“Mademoiselle!” he said. “I am, as perhaps you know, the tenant of the flat above. I like to be up high—in the air—the view over London. I take the flat in the name of Mr. O’Connor. But I am not an Irishman. I have another name. That is why I venture to put myself at your service. Permit me.” With a flourish he pulled out a card and handed it to Pat. She read it.

“M. Hercule Poirot. Oh!” She caught her breath. “The M. Poirot! The great detective? And you will really help?”

“That is my intention, mademoiselle. I nearly offered my help earlier in the evening.”

Pat looked puzzled.

“I heard you discussing how to gain admission to your flat. Me, I am very clever at picking locks. I could, without doubt, have opened your door for you, but I hesitated to suggest it. You would have had the grave suspicions of me.”

Pat laughed.

“Now, monsieur,” said Poirot to Donovan. “Go in, I pray of you, and telephone to the police. I will descend to the flat below.”

Pat came down the stairs with him. They found Jimmy on guard, and Pat explained Poirot’s presence. Jimmy, in his turn, explained to Poirot his and Donovan’s adventures. The detective listened attentively.

“The lift door was unbolted, you say? You emerged into the kitchen, but the light it would not turn on.”

He directed his footsteps to the kitchen as he spoke. His fingers pressed the switch.

“Tiens! Voilà ce qui est curieux!” he said as the light flashed on. “It functions perfectly now. I wonder—” He held up a finger to ensure silence and listened. A faint sound broke the stillness—the sound of an unmistakable snore. “Ah!” said Poirot. “La chambre de domestique.”

He tiptoed across the kitchen into a little pantry, out of which led a door. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was the kind of dog kennel designed by the builders of flats to accommodate a human being. The floor space was almost entirely occupied by the bed. In the bed was a rosy-cheeked girl lying on her back with her mouth wide open, snoring placidly.

Poirot switched off the light and beat a retreat.

“She will not wake,” he said. “We will let her sleep till the police come.”

He went back to the sitting room. Donovan had joined them.

“The police will be here almost immediately, they say,” he said breathlessly. “We are to touch nothing.”

Poirot nodded. “We will not touch,” he said. “We will look, that is all.”

He moved into the room. Mildred had come down with Donovan, and all four young people stood in the doorway and watched him with breathless interest.

“What I can’t understand, sir, is this,” said Donovan. “I never went near the window—how did the blood come on my hand?”

“My young friend, the answer to that stares you in the face. Of what colour is the tablecloth? Red, is it not? and doubtless you did put your hand on the table.”

“Yes, I did. Is that—?” He stopped.

Poirot nodded. He was bending over the table. He indicated with his hand a dark patch on the red.

“It was here that the crime was committed,” he said solemnly. “The body was moved afterwards.”

Then he stood upright and looked slowly round the room. He did not move, he handled nothing, but nevertheless the four watching felt as though every

object in that rather frowsty place gave up its secret to his observant eye.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head as though satisfied. A little sigh escaped him. "I see," he said.

"You see what?" asked Donovan curiously.

"I see," said Poirot, "what you doubtless felt—that the room is overfull of furniture."

Donovan smiled ruefully. "I did go barging about a bit," he confessed. "Of course, everything was in a different place to Pat's room, and I couldn't make it out."

"Not everything," said Poirot.

Donovan looked at him inquiringly.

"I mean," said Poirot apologetically, "that certain things are always fixed. In a block of flats the door, the window, the fireplace—they are in the same place in the rooms which are below each other."

"Isn't that rather splitting hairs?" asked Mildred. She was looking at Poirot with faint disapproval.

"One should always speak with absolute accuracy. That is a little—how do you say?—fad of mine."

There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs, and three men came in. They were a police inspector, a constable, and the divisional surgeon. The inspector recognized Poirot and greeted him in an almost reverential manner. Then he turned to the others.

"I shall want statements from everyone," he began, "but in the first place —"

Poirot interrupted. "A little suggestion. We will go back to the flat upstairs and mademoiselle here shall do what she was planning to do—make us an omelette. Me, I have a passion for the omelettes. Then, M. l'Inspecteur,

when you have finished here, you will mount to us and ask questions at your leisure.”

It was arranged accordingly, and Poirot went up with them.

“M. Poirot,” said Pat, “I think you’re a perfect dear. And you shall have a lovely omelette. I really make omelettes frightfully well.”

“That is good. Once, mademoiselle, I loved a beautiful young English girl, who resembled you greatly—but alas!—she could not cook. So perhaps everything was for the best.”

There was a faint sadness in his voice, and Jimmy Faulkener looked at him curiously.

Once in the flat, however, he exerted himself to please and amuse. The grim tragedy below was almost forgotten.

The omelette had been consumed and duly praised by the time that Inspector Rice’s footsteps were heard. He came in accompanied by the doctor, having left the constable below.

“Well, Monsieur Poirot,” he said. “It all seems clear and aboveboard—not much in your line, though we may find it hard to catch the man. I’d just like to hear how the discovery came to be made.”

Donovan and Jimmy between them recounted the happenings of the evening. The inspector turned reproachfully to Pat.

“You shouldn’t leave your lift door unbolted, miss. You really shouldn’t.”

“I shan’t again,” said Pat, with a shiver. “Somebody might come in and murder me like that poor woman below.”

“Ah, but they didn’t come in that way, though,” said the inspector.

“You will recount to us what you have discovered, yes?” said Poirot.

“I don’t know as I ought to—but seeing it’s you, M. Poirot—”

“Précisément,” said Poirot. “And these young people—they will be discreet.”

“The newspapers will get hold of it, anyway, soon enough,” said the inspector. “There’s no real secret about the matter. Well, the dead woman’s Mrs. Grant, all right. I had the porter up to identify her. Woman of about thirty-five. She was sitting at the table, and she was shot with an automatic pistol of small calibre, probably by someone sitting opposite her at table. She fell forward, and that’s how the bloodstain came on the table.”

“But wouldn’t someone have heard the shot?” asked Mildred.

“The pistol was fitted with a silencer. No, you wouldn’t hear anything. By the way, did you hear the screech the maid let out when we told her her mistress was dead? No. Well, that just shows how unlikely it was that anyone would hear the other.”

“Has the maid no story to tell?” asked Poirot.

“It was her evening out. She’s got her own key. She came in about ten o’clock. Everything was quiet. She thought her mistress had gone to bed.”

“She did not look in the sitting room, then?”

“Yes, she took the letters in there which had come by the evening post, but she saw nothing unusual—any more than Mr. Faulkener and Mr. Bailey did. You see, the murderer had concealed the body rather neatly behind the curtains.”

“But it was a curious thing to do, don’t you think?”

Poirot’s voice was very gentle, yet it held something that made the inspector look up quickly.

“Didn’t want the crime discovered till he’d had time to make his getaway.”

“Perhaps, perhaps—but continue with what you were saying.”

“The maid went out at five o’clock. The doctor here puts the time of death as—roughly—about four to five hours ago. That’s right, isn’t it?”

The doctor, who was a man of few words, contented himself with jerking his head affirmatively.

“It’s a quarter to twelve now. The actual time can, I think, be narrowed down to a fairly definite hour.”

He took out a crumpled sheet of paper.

“We found this in the pocket of the dead woman’s dress. You needn’t be afraid of handling it. There are no fingerprints on it.”

Poirot smoothed out the sheet. Across it some words were printed in small, prim capitals.

I WILL COME TO SEE YOU THIS EVENING AT HALF PAST SEVEN.

J.F.

“A compromising document to leave behind,” commented Poirot, as he handed it back.

“Well, he didn’t know she’d got it in her pocket,” said the inspector. “He probably thought she’d destroyed it. We’ve evidence that he was a careful man, though. The pistol she was shot with we found under the body—and there again no fingerprints. They’d been wiped off very carefully with a silk handkerchief.”

“How do you know,” said Poirot, “that it was a silk handkerchief?”

“Because we found it,” said the inspector triumphantly. “At the last, as he was drawing the curtains, he must have let it fall unnoticed.”

He handed across a big white silk handkerchief—a good-quality handkerchief. It did not need the inspector’s finger to draw Poirot’s

attention to the mark on it in the centre. It was neatly marked and quite legible. Poirot read the name out.

“John Fraser.”

“That’s it,” said the inspector. “John Fraser—J.F. in the note. We know the name of the man we have to look for, and I daresay when we find out a little about the dead woman, and her relations come forward, we shall soon get a line on him.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot. “No, mon cher, somehow I do not think he will be easy to find, your John Fraser. He is a strange man—careful, since he marks his handkerchiefs and wipes the pistol with which he has committed the crime—yet careless since he loses his handkerchief and does not search for a letter that might incriminate him.”

“Flurried, that’s what he was,” said the inspector.

“It is possible,” said Poirot. “Yes, it is possible. And he was not seen entering the building?”

“There are all sorts of people going in and out all the time. These are big blocks. I suppose none of you—” he addressed the four collectively—“saw anyone coming out of the flat?”

Pat shook her head. “We went out earlier—about seven o’clock.”

“I see.” The inspector rose. Poirot accompanied him to the door.

“As a little favour, may I examine the flat below?”

“Why, certainly, M. Poirot. I know what they think of you at headquarters. I’ll leave you a key. I’ve got two. It will be empty. The maid cleared out to some relatives, too scared to stay there alone.”

“I thank you,” said M. Poirot. He went back into the flat, thoughtful.

“You’re not satisfied, M. Poirot?” said Jimmy.

“No,” said Poirot. “I am not satisfied.”

Donovan looked at him curiously. “What is it that—well, worries you?”

Poirot did not answer. He remained silent for a minute or two, frowning, as though in thought, then he made a sudden impatient movement of the shoulders.

“I will say good night to you, mademoiselle. You must be tired. You have had much cooking to do—eh?”

Pat laughed. “Only the omelette. I didn’t do dinner. Donovan and Jimmy came and called for us, and we went out to a little place in Soho.”

“And then without doubt, you went to a theatre?”

“Yes. The Brown Eyes of Caroline.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “It should have been blue eyes—the blue eyes of mademoiselle.”

He made a sentimental gesture, and then once more wished Pat good night, also Mildred, who was staying the night by special request, as Pat admitted frankly that she would get the horrors if left alone on this particular night.

The two young men accompanied Poirot. When the door was shut, and they were preparing to say good-bye to him on the landing, Poirot forestalled them.

“My young friends, you heard me say I was not satisfied? Eh bien, it is true—I am not. I go now to make some little investigations of my own. You would like to accompany me—yes?”

An eager assent greeted this proposal. Poirot led the way to the flat below and inserted the key the inspector had given him in the lock. On entering, he did not, as the others had expected, enter the sitting room. Instead he went straight to the kitchen. In a little recess which served as a scullery a big iron bin was standing. Poirot uncovered this and, doubling himself up, began to rootle in it with the energy of a ferocious terrier.

Both Jimmy and Donovan stared at him in amazement.

Suddenly with a cry of triumph he emerged. In his hand he held aloft a small stoppered bottle.

“Voilà!” he said. “I find what I seek.” He sniffed at it delicately. “Alas! I am enrhumé—I have the cold in the head.”

Donovan took the bottle from him and sniffed in his turn, but could smell nothing. He took out the stopper and held the bottle to his nose before Poirot’s warning cry could stop him.

Immediately he fell like a log. Poirot, by springing forward, partly broke his fall.

“Imbecile!” he cried. “The idea. To remove the stopper in that foolhardy manner! Did he not observe how delicately I handled it? Monsieur—Faulkener—is it not? Will you be so good as to get me a little brandy? I observed a decanter in the sitting room.”

Jimmy hurried off, but by the time he returned, Donovan was sitting up and declaring himself quite all right again. He had to listen to a short lecture from Poirot on the necessity of caution in sniffing at possibly poisonous substances.

“I think I’ll be off home,” said Donovan, rising shakily to his feet. “That is, if I can’t be any more use here. I feel a bit wonky still.”

“Assuredly,” said Poirot. “That is the best thing you can do. M. Faulkener, attend me here a little minute. I will return on the instant.”

He accompanied Donovan to the door and beyond. They remained outside on the landing talking for some minutes. When Poirot at last re-entered the flat he found Jimmy standing in the sitting room gazing round him with puzzled eyes.

“Well, M. Poirot,” he said, “what next?”

“There is nothing next. The case is finished.”

“What?”

“I know everything—now.”

Jimmy stared at him. “That little bottle you found?”

“Exactly. That little bottle.”

Jimmy shook his head. “I can’t make head or tail of it. For some reason or other I can see you are dissatisfied with the evidence against this John Fraser, whoever he may be.”

“Whoever he may be,” repeated Poirot softly. “If he is anyone at all—well, I shall be surprised.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He is a name—that is all—a name carefully marked on a handkerchief!”

“And the letter?”

“Did you notice that it was printed? Now, why? I will tell you. Handwriting might be recognized, and a typewritten letter is more easily traced than you would imagine—but if a real John Fraser wrote that letter those two points would not have appealed to him! No, it was written on purpose, and put in the dead woman’s pocket for us to find. There is no such person as John Fraser.”

Jimmy looked at him inquiringly.

“And so,” went on Poirot, “I went back to the point that first struck me. You heard me say that certain things in a room were always in the same place under given circumstances. I gave three instances. I might have mentioned a fourth—the electric light switch, my friend.”

Jimmy still stared uncomprehendingly. Poirot went on.

“Your friend Donovan did not go near the window—it was by resting his hand on this table that he got it covered in blood! But I asked myself at

once—why did he rest it there? What was he doing groping about this room in darkness? For remember, my friend, the electric light switch is always in the same place—by the door. Why, when he came to this room, did he not at once feel for the light and turn it on? That was the natural, the normal thing to do. According to him, he tried to turn on the light in the kitchen, but failed. Yet when I tried the switch it was in perfect working order. Did he, then, not wish the light to go on just then? If it had gone on you would both have seen at once that you were in the wrong flat. There would have been no reason to come into this room.”

“What are you driving at, M. Poirot? I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I mean—this.”

Poirot held up a Yale door key.

“The key of this flat?”

“No, mon ami, the key of the flat above. Mademoiselle Patricia’s key, which M. Donovan Bailey abstracted from her bag some time during the evening.”

“But why—why?”

“Parbleu! So that he could do what he wanted to do—gain admission to this flat in a perfectly unsuspecting manner. He made sure that the lift door was unbolted earlier in the evening.”

“Where did you get the key?”

Poirot’s smile broadened. “I found it just now—where I looked for it—in M. Donovan’s pocket. See you, that little bottle I pretended to find was a ruse. M. Donovan is taken in. He does what I knew he would do—unstoppers it and sniffs. And in that little bottle is ethyl chloride, a very powerful instant anaesthetic. It gives me just the moment or two of unconsciousness I need. I take from his pocket the two things that I knew would be there. This key was one of them—the other—”

He stopped and then went on.

“I questioned at the time the reason the inspector gave for the body being concealed behind the curtain. To gain time? No, there was more than that. And so I thought of just one thing—the post, my friend. The evening post that comes at half past nine or thereabouts. Say the murderer does not find something he expects to find, but that something may be delivered by post later. Clearly, then, he must come back. But the crime must not be discovered by the maid when she comes in, or the police would take possession of the flat, so he hides the body behind the curtain. And the maid suspects nothing and lays the letters on the table as usual.”

“The letters?”

“Yes, the letters.” Poirot drew something from his pocket. “This is the second article I took from M. Donovan when he was unconscious.” He showed the superscription—a typewritten envelope addressed to Mrs. Ernestine Grant. “But I will ask you one thing first, M. Faulkener, before we look at the contents of this letter. Are you or are you not in love with Mademoiselle Patricia?”

“I care for Pat damnably—but I’ve never thought I had a chance.”

“You thought that she cared for M. Donovan? It may be that she had begun to care for him—but it was only a beginning, my friend. It is for you to make her forget—to stand by her in her trouble.”

“Trouble?” said Jimmy sharply.

“Yes, trouble. We will do all we can to keep her name out of it, but it will be impossible to do so entirely. She was, you see, the motive.”

He ripped open the envelope that he held. An enclosure fell out. The covering letter was brief, and was from a firm of solicitors.

Dear Madam,

The document you enclose is quite in order, and the fact of the marriage having taken place in a foreign country does not invalidate it in any way.

Yours truly, etc.

Poirot spread out the enclosure. It was a certificate of marriage between Donovan Bailey and Ernestine Grant, dated eight years ago.

“Oh, my God!” said Jimmy. “Pat said she’d had a letter from the woman asking to see her, but she never dreamed it was anything important.”

Poirot nodded. “Donovan knew—he went to see his wife this evening before going to the flat above—a strange irony, by the way, that led the unfortunate woman to come to this building where her rival lived—he murdered her in cold blood, and then went on to his evening’s amusement. His wife must have told him that she had sent the marriage certificate to her solicitors and was expecting to hear from them. Doubtless he himself had tried to make her believe that there was a flaw in the marriage.”

“He seemed in quite good spirits, too, all the evening. M. Poirot, you haven’t let him escape?” Jimmy shuddered.

“There is no escape for him,” said Poirot gravely. “You need not fear.”

“It’s Pat I’m thinking about mostly,” said Jimmy. “You don’t think—she really cared.”

“Mon ami, that is your part,” said Poirot gently. “To make her turn to you and forget. I do not think you will find it very difficult!”

Seven

THE ADVENTURE OF JOHNNIE WAVERLY

“The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly” was first published as “The Kidnapping of Johnnie Waverly” in *The Sketch*, 10 October 1923.

You can understand the feelings of a mother,” said Mrs. Waverly for perhaps the sixth time.

She looked appealingly at Poirot. My little friend, always sympathetic to motherhood in distress, gesticulated reassuringly.

“But yes, but yes, I comprehend perfectly. Have faith in Papa Poirot.”

“The police—” began Mr. Waverly.

His wife waved the interruption aside. “I won’t have anything more to do with the police. We trusted to them and look what happened! But I’d heard so much of M. Poirot and the wonderful things he’d done, that I felt he might possibly be able to help us. A mother’s feelings—”

Poirot hastily stemmed the reiteration with an eloquent gesture. Mrs. Waverly’s emotion was obviously genuine, but it assorted strangely with her shrewd, rather hard type of countenance. When I heard later that she was the daughter of a prominent steel manufacturer who had worked his way up in the world from an office boy to his present eminence, I realized that she had inherited many of the paternal qualities.

Mr. Waverly was a big, florid, jovial-looking man. He stood with his legs straddled wide apart and looked the type of the country squire.

“I suppose you know all about this business, M. Poirot?”

The question was almost superfluous. For some days past the papers had been full of the sensational kidnapping of little Johnnie Waverly, the three-year-old son and heir of Marcus Waverly, Esq., of Waverly Court, Surrey, one of the oldest families in England.

“The main facts I know, of course, but recount to me the whole story, monsieur, I beg of you. And in detail if you please.”

“Well, I suppose the beginning of the whole thing was about ten days ago when I got an anonymous letter—beastly things, anyway—that I couldn’t make head or tail of. The writer had the impudence to demand that I should pay him twenty-five thousand pounds—twenty-five thousand pounds, M. Poirot! Failing my agreement, he threatened to kidnap Johnnie. Of course I threw the thing into the wastepaper basket without more ado. Thought it was some silly joke. Five days later I got another letter. ‘Unless you pay, your son will be kidnapped on the twenty-ninth.’ That was on the twenty-seventh. Ada was worried, but I couldn’t bring myself to treat the matter seriously. Damn it all, we’re in England. Nobody goes about kidnapping children and holding them up to ransom.”

“It is not a common practice, certainly,” said Poirot. “Proceed, monsieur.”

“Well, Ada gave me no peace, so—feeling a bit of a fool—I laid the matter before Scotland Yard. They didn’t seem to take the thing very seriously—inclined to my view that it was some silly joke. On the twenty-eighth I got a third letter. ‘You have not paid. Your son will be taken from you at twelve o’clock noon tomorrow, the twenty-ninth. It will cost you fifty thousand pounds to recover him.’ Up I drove to Scotland Yard again. This time they were more impressed. They inclined to the view that the letters were written by a lunatic, and that in all probability an attempt of some kind would be made at the hour stated. They assured me that they would take all due precautions. Inspector McNeil and a sufficient force would come down to Waverly on the morrow and take charge.

“I went home much relieved in mind. Yet we already had the feeling of being in a state of siege. I gave orders that no stranger was to be admitted, and that no one was to leave the house. The evening passed off without any untoward incident, but on the following morning my wife was seriously

unwell. Alarmed by her condition, I sent for Doctor Dakers. Her symptoms appeared to puzzle him. While hesitating to suggest that she had been poisoned, I could see that that was what was in his mind. There was no danger, he assured me, but it would be a day or two before she would be able to get about again. Returning to my own room, I was startled and amazed to find a note pinned to my pillow. It was in the same handwriting as the others and contained just three words: ‘At twelve o’clock.’

“I admit, M. Poirot, that then I saw red! Someone in the house was in this—one of the servants. I had them all up, blackguarded them right and left. They never split on each other; it was Miss Collins, my wife’s companion, who informed me that she had seen Johnnie’s nurse slip down the drive early that morning. I taxed her with it, and she broke down. She had left the child with the nursery maid and stolen out to meet a friend of hers—a man! Pretty goings on! She denied having pinned the note to my pillow—she may have been speaking the truth, I don’t know. I felt I couldn’t take the risk of the child’s own nurse being in the plot. One of the servants was implicated—of that I was sure. Finally I lost my temper and sacked the whole bunch, nurse and all. I gave them an hour to pack their boxes and get out of the house.”

Mr. Waverly’s face was quite two shades redder as he remembered his just wrath.

“Was not that a little injudicious, monsieur?” suggested Poirot. “For all you know, you might have been playing into the enemy’s hands.”

Mr. Waverly stared at him. “I don’t see that. Send the whole lot packing, that was my idea. I wired to London for a fresh lot to be sent down that evening. In the meantime, there’d be only people I could trust in the house: my wife’s secretary, Miss Collins, and Tredwell, the butler, who has been with me since I was a boy.”

“And this Miss Collins, how long has she been with you?”

“Just a year,” said Mrs. Waverly. “She has been invaluable to me as a secretary-companion, and is also a very efficient housekeeper.”

“The nurse?”

“She has been with me six months. She came to me with excellent references. All the same, I never really liked her, although Johnnie was quite devoted to her.”

“Still, I gather she had already left when the catastrophe occurred. Perhaps, Monsieur Waverly, you will be so kind as to continue.”

Mr. Waverly resumed his narrative.

“Inspector McNeil arrived about ten thirty. The servants had all left by then. He declared himself quite satisfied with the internal arrangements. He had various men posted in the park outside, guarding all the approaches to the house, and he assured me that if the whole thing were not a hoax, we should undoubtedly catch my mysterious correspondent.

“I had Johnnie with me, and he and I and the inspector went together into the room we call the council chamber. The inspector locked the door. There is a big grandfather clock there, and as the hands drew near to twelve I don’t mind confessing that I was as nervous as a cat. There was a whirring sound, and the clock began to strike. I clutched at Johnnie. I had a feeling a man might drop from the skies. The last stroke sounded, and as it did so, there was a great commotion outside—shouting and running. The inspector flung up the window, and a constable came running up.

“ ‘We’ve got him sir,’ he panted. ‘He was sneaking up through the bushes. He’s got a whole dope outfit on him.’

“We hurried out on the terrace where two constables were holding a ruffianly-looking fellow in shabby clothes, who was twisting and turning in a vain endeavour to escape. One of the policemen held out an unrolled parcel which they had wrested from their captive. It contained a pad of cotton wool and a bottle of chloroform. It made my blood boil to see it. There was a note, too, addressed to me. I tore it open. It bore the following words: ‘You should have paid up. To ransom your son will now cost you fifty thousand. In spite of all your precautions he has been abducted on the twenty-ninth as I said.’

“I gave a great laugh, the laugh of relief, but as I did so I heard the hum of a motor and a shout. I turned my head. Racing down the drive towards the south lodge at a furious speed was a low, long grey car. It was the man who drove it who shouted, but that was not what gave me a shock of horror. It was the sight of Johnnie’s flaxen curls. The child was in the car beside him.

“The inspector ripped out an oath. ‘The child was here not a minute ago,’ he cried. His eyes swept over us. We were all there: myself, Tredwell, Miss Collins. ‘When did you last see him, Mr. Waverly?’

“I cast my mind back, trying to remember. When the constable had called us, I had run out with the inspector, forgetting all about Johnnie.

“And then there came a sound that startled us, the chiming of a church clock from the village. With an exclamation the inspector pulled out his watch. It was exactly twelve o’clock. With one common accord we ran to the council chamber; the clock there marked the hour as ten minutes past. Someone must have deliberately tampered with it, for I have never known it gain or lose before. It is a perfect timekeeper.”

Mr. Waverly paused. Poirot smiled to himself and straightened a little mat which the anxious father had pushed askew.

“A pleasing little problem, obscure and charming,” murmured Poirot. “I will investigate it for you with pleasure. Truly it was planned à merveille.”

Mrs. Waverly looked at him reproachfully. “But my boy,” she wailed.

Poirot hastily composed his face and looked the picture of earnest sympathy again. “He is safe, madame, he is unharmed. Rest assured, these miscreants will take the greatest care of him. Is he not to them the turkey—no, the goose—that lays the golden eggs?”

“M. Poirot, I’m sure there’s only one thing to be done—pay up. I was all against it at first—but now! A mother’s feelings—”

“But we have interrupted monsieur in his history,” cried Poirot hastily.

“I expect you know the rest pretty well from the papers,” said Mr. Waverly. “Of course, Inspector McNeil got on to the telephone immediately. A description of the car and the man was circulated all round, and it looked at first as though everything was going to turn out all right. A car, answering to the description, with a man and a small boy, had passed through various villages, apparently making for London. At one place they had stopped, and it was noticed that the child was crying and obviously afraid of his companion. When Inspector McNeil announced that the car had been stopped and the man and boy detained, I was almost ill with relief. You know the sequel. The boy was not Johnnie, and the man was an ardent motorist, fond of children, who had picked up a small child playing in the streets of Edenswell, a village about fifteen miles from us, and was kindly giving him a ride. Thanks to the cocksure blundering of the police, all traces have disappeared. Had they not persistently followed the wrong car, they might by now have found the boy.”

“Calm yourself, monsieur. The police are a brave and intelligent force of men. Their mistake was a very natural one. And altogether it was a clever scheme. As to the man they caught in the grounds, I understand that his defence has consisted all along of a persistent denial. He declared that the note and parcel were given to him to deliver at Waverly Court. The man who gave them to him handed him a ten-shilling note and promised him another if it were delivered at exactly ten minutes to twelve. He was to approach the house through the grounds and knock at the side door.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” declared Mrs. Waverly hotly. “It’s all a parcel of lies.”

“En verité, it is a thin story,” said Poirot reflectively. “But so far they have not shaken it. I understand, also, that he made a certain accusation?”

His glance interrogated Mr. Waverly. The latter got rather red again.

“The fellow had the impertinence to pretend that he recognized in Tredwell the man who gave him the parcel. ‘Only the bloke has shaved off his moustache.’ Tredwell, who was born on the estate!”

Poirot smiled a little at the country gentleman's indignation. "Yet you yourself suspect an inmate of the house to have been accessory to the abduction."

"Yes, but not Tredwell."

"And you, madame?" asked Poirot, suddenly turning to her.

"It could not have been Tredwell who gave this tramp the letter and parcel—if anybody ever did, which I don't believe. It was given him at ten o'clock, he says. At ten o'clock Tredwell was with my husband in the smoking room."

"Were you able to see the face of the man in the car, monsieur? Did it resemble that of Tredwell in any way?"

"It was too far away for me to see his face."

"Has Tredwell a brother, do you know?"

"He had several, but they are all dead. The last one was killed in the war."

"I am not yet clear as to the grounds of Waverly Court. The car was heading for the south lodge. Is there another entrance?"

"Yes, what we call the east lodge. It can be seen from the other side of the house."

"It seems to me strange that nobody saw the car entering the grounds."

"There is a right of way through, and access to a small chapel. A good many cars pass through. The man must have stopped the car in a convenient place and run up to the house just as the alarm was given and attention attracted elsewhere."

"Unless he was already inside the house," mused Poirot. "Is there any place where he could have hidden?"

“Well, we certainly didn’t make a thorough search of the house beforehand. There seemed no need. I suppose he might have hidden himself somewhere, but who would have let him in?”

“We shall come to that later. One thing at a time—let us be methodical. There is no special hiding place in the house? Waverly Court is an old place, and there are sometimes ‘priests’ holes,’ as they call them.”

“By gad, there is a priest’s hole. It opens from one of the panels in the hall.”

“Near the council chamber?”

“Just outside the door.”

“Voilà!”

“But nobody knows of its existence except my wife and myself.”

“Tredwell?”

“Well—he might have heard of it.”

“Miss Collins?”

“I have never mentioned it to her.”

Poirot reflected for a minute.

“Well, monsieur, the next thing is for me to come down to Waverly Court. If I arrive this afternoon, will it suit you?”

“Oh, as soon as possible, please, Monsieur Poirot!” cried Mrs. Waverly.

“Read this once more.”

She thrust into his hands the last missive from the enemy which had reached the Waverlys that morning and which had sent her posthaste to Poirot. It gave clever and explicit directions for the paying over of the money, and ended with a threat that the boy’s life would pay for any

treachery. It was clear that a love of money warred with the essential mother love of Mrs. Waverly, and that the latter was at last gaining the day.

Poirot detained Mrs. Waverly for a minute behind her husband.

“Madame, the truth, if you please. Do you share your husband’s faith in the butler, Tredwell?”

“I have nothing against him, Monsieur Poirot, I cannot see how he can have been concerned in this, but—well, I have never liked him—never!”

“One other thing, madame, can you give me the address of the child’s nurse?”

“149 Netherall Road, Hammersmith. You don’t imagine—”

“Never do I imagine. Only—I employ the little grey cells. And sometimes, just sometimes, I have a little idea.”

Poirot came back to me as the door closed.

“So madame has never liked the butler. It is interesting, that, eh, Hastings?”

I refused to be drawn. Poirot has deceived me so often that I now go warily. There is always a catch somewhere.

After completing an elaborate outdoor toilet, we set off for Netherall Road. We were fortunate enough to find Miss Jessie Withers at home. She was a pleasant-faced woman of thirty-five, capable and superior. I could not believe that she could be mixed up in the affair. She was bitterly resentful of the way she had been dismissed, but admitted that she had been in the wrong. She was engaged to be married to a painter and decorator who happened to be in the neighbourhood, and she had run out to meet him. The thing seemed natural enough. I could not quite understand Poirot. All his questions seemed to me quite irrelevant. They were concerned mainly with the daily routine of her life at Waverly Court. I was frankly bored and glad when Poirot took his departure.

“Kidnapping is an easy job, mon ami,” he observed, as he hailed a taxi in the Hammersmith Road and ordered it to drive to Waterloo. “That child could have been abducted with the greatest ease any day for the last three years.”

“I don’t see that that advances us much,” I remarked coldly.

“Au contraire, it advances us enormously, but enormously! If you must wear a tie pin, Hastings, at least let it be in the exact centre of your tie. At present it is at least a sixteenth of an inch too much to the right.”

Waverly Court was a fine old place and had recently been restored with taste and care. Mr. Waverly showed us the council chamber, the terrace, and all the various spots connected with the case. Finally, at Poirot’s request, he pressed a spring in the wall, a panel slid aside, and a short passage led us into the priest’s hole.

“You see,” said Waverly. “There is nothing here.”

The tiny room was bare enough, there was not even the mark of a footstep on the floor. I joined Poirot where he was bending attentively over a mark in the corner.

“What do you make of this, my friend?”

There were four imprints close together.

“A dog,” I cried.

“A very small dog, Hastings.”

“A Pom.”

“Smaller than a Pom.”

“A griffon?” I suggested doubtfully.

“Smaller even than a griffon. A species unknown to the Kennel Club.”

I looked at him. His face was alight with excitement and satisfaction.

“I was right,” he murmured. “I knew I was right. Come, Hastings.”

As we stepped out into the hall and the panel closed behind us, a young lady came out of a door farther down the passage. Mr. Waverly presented her to us.

“Miss Collins.”

Miss Collins was about thirty years of age, brisk and alert in manner. She had fair, rather dull hair, and wore pince-nez.

At Poirot’s request, we passed into a small morning room, and he questioned her closely as to the servants and particularly as to Tredwell. She admitted that she did not like the butler.

“He gives himself airs,” she explained.

They then went into the question of the food eaten by Mrs. Waverly on the night of the 28th. Miss Collins declared that she had partaken of the same dishes upstairs in her sitting room and had felt no ill effects. As she was departing I nudged Poirot.

“The dog,” I whispered.

“Ah, yes, the dog!” He smiled broadly. “Is there a dog kept here by any chance, mademoiselle?”

“There are two retrievers in the kennels outside.”

“No, I mean a small dog, a toy dog.”

“No—nothing of the kind.”

Poirot permitted her to depart. Then, pressing the bell, he remarked to me, “She lies, that Mademoiselle Collins. Possibly I should, also, in her place. Now for the butler.”

Tredwell was a dignified individual. He told his story with perfect aplomb, and it was essentially the same as that of Mr. Waverly. He admitted that he knew the secret of the priest's hole.

When he finally withdrew, pontifical to the last, I met Poirot's quizzical eyes.

"What do you make of it all, Hastings?"

"What do you?" I parried.

"How cautious you become. Never, never will the grey cells function unless you stimulate them. Ah, but I will not tease you! Let us make our deductions together. What points strike us specially as being difficult?"

"There is one thing that strikes me," I said. "Why did the man who kidnapped the child go out by the south lodge instead of by the east lodge where no one would see him?"

"That is a very good point, Hastings, an excellent one. I will match it with another. Why warn the Waverlys beforehand? Why not simply kidnap the child and hold him to ransom?"

"Because they hoped to get the money without being forced to action."

"Surely it was very unlikely that the money would be paid on a mere threat?"

"Also they wanted to focus attention on twelve o'clock, so that when the tramp man was seized, the other could emerge from his hiding place and get away with the child unnoticed."

"That does not alter the fact that they were making a thing difficult that was perfectly easy. If they do not specify a time or date, nothing would be easier than to wait their chance, and carry off the child in a motor one day when he is out with his nurse."

"Ye—es," I admitted doubtfully.

“In fact, there is a deliberate playing of the farce! Now let us approach the question from another side. Everything goes to show that there was an accomplice inside the house. Point number one, the mysterious poisoning of Mrs. Waverly. Point number two, the letter pinned to the pillow. Point number three, the putting on of the clock ten minutes—all inside jobs. And an additional fact that you may not have noticed. There was no dust in the priest’s hole. It had been swept out with a broom.

“Now then, we have four people in the house. We can exclude the nurse, since she could not have swept out the priest’s hole, though she could have attended to the other three points. Four people, Mr. and Mrs. Waverly, Tredwell, the butler, and Miss Collins. We will take Miss Collins first. We have nothing much against her, except that we know very little about her, that she is obviously an intelligent young woman, and that she has only been here a year.”

“She lied about the dog, you said,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes, the dog.” Poirot gave a peculiar smile. “Now let us pass to Tredwell. There are several suspicious facts against him. For one thing, the tramp declares that it was Tredwell who gave him the parcel in the village.”

“But Tredwell can prove an alibi on that point.”

“Even then, he could have poisoned Mrs. Waverly, pinned the note to the pillow, put on the clock, and swept out the priest’s hole. On the other hand, he has been born and bred in the service of the Waverlys. It seems unlikely in the last degree that he should connive at the abduction of the son of the house. It is not in the picture!”

“Well, then?”

“We must proceed logically—however absurd it may seem. We will briefly consider Mrs. Waverly. But she is rich, the money is hers. It is her money which has restored this impoverished estate. There would be no reason for her to kidnap her son and pay over her money to herself. The husband, no, is in a different position. He has a rich wife. It is not the same thing as being rich himself—in fact I have a little idea that the lady is not very fond of

parting with her money, except on a very good pretext. But Mr. Waverly, you can see at once, he is a bon viveur.”

“Impossible,” I spluttered.

“Not at all. Who sends away the servants? Mr. Waverly. He can write the notes, drug his wife, put on the hands of the clock, and establish an excellent alibi for his faithful retainer Tredwell. Tredwell has never liked Mrs. Waverly. He is devoted to his master and is willing to obey his orders implicitly. There were three of them in it. Waverly, Tredwell, and some friend of Waverly. That is the mistake the police made, they made no further inquiries about the man who drove the grey car with the wrong child in it. He was the third man. He picks up a child in a village near by, a boy with flaxen curls. He drives in through the east lodge and passes out through the south lodge just at the right moment, waving his hand and shouting. They cannot see his face or the number of the car, so obviously they cannot see the child’s face, either. Then he lays a false trail to London. In the meantime, Tredwell has done his part in arranging for the parcel and note to be delivered by a rough-looking gentleman. His master can provide an alibi in the unlikely case of the man recognizing him, in spite of the false moustache he wore. As for Mr. Waverly, as soon as the hullabaloo occurs outside, and the inspector rushes out, he quickly hides the child in the priest’s hole, follows him out. Later in the day, when the inspector is gone and Miss Collins is out of the way, it will be easy enough to drive him off to some safe place in his own car.”

“But what about the dog?” I asked. “And Miss Collins lying?”

“That was my little joke. I asked her if there were any toy dogs in the house, and she said no—but doubtless there are some—in the nursery! You see, Mr. Waverly placed some toys in the priest’s hole to keep Johnnie amused and quiet.”

“M. Poirot—” Mr. Waverly entered the room—“have you discovered anything? Have you any clue to where the boy has been taken?”

Poirot handed him a piece of paper. “Here is the address.”

“But this is a blank sheet.”

“Because I am waiting for you to write it down for me.”

“What the—” Mr. Waverly’s face turned purple.

“I know everything, monsieur. I give you twenty-four hours to return the boy. Your ingenuity will be equal to the task of explaining his reappearance. Otherwise, Mrs. Waverly will be informed of the exact sequence of events.”

Mr. Waverly sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. “He is with my old nurse, ten miles away. He is happy and well cared for.”

“I have no doubt of that. If I did not believe you to be a good father at heart, I should not be willing to give you another chance.”

“The scandal—”

“Exactly. Your name is an old and honoured one. Do not jeopardize it again. Good evening, Mr. Waverly. Ah, by the way, one word of advice. Always sweep in the corners!”

Eight

FOUR AND TWENTY BLACKBIRDS

“Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds” was first published in the USA as “Four and Twenty Blackbirds” in Collier’s Magazine, 9 November 1940, then as “Poirot and the Regular Customer” in The Strand, March 1941.

Hercule Poirot was dining with his friend, Henry Bonnington at the Gallant Endeavour in the King’s Road, Chelsea.

Mr. Bonnington was fond of the Gallant Endeavour. He liked the leisurely atmosphere, he liked the food which was “plain” and “English” and “not a lot of made up messes.” He liked to tell people who dined with him there just exactly where Augustus John had been wont to sit and draw their attention to the famous artists’ names in the visitors’ book. Mr. Bonnington was himself the least artistic of men—but he took a certain pride in the artistic activities of others.

Molly, the sympathetic waitress, greeted Mr. Bonnington as an old friend. She prided herself on remembering her customers’ likes and dislikes in the way of food.

“Good evening, sir,” she said, as the two men took their seats at a corner table. “You’re in luck today—turkey stuffed with chestnuts—that’s your favourite, isn’t it? And ever such a nice Stilton we’ve got! Will you have soup first or fish?”

Mr. Bonnington deliberated the point. He said to Poirot warningly as the latter studied the menu:

“None of your French kickshaws now. Good well-cooked English food.”

“My friend,” Hercule Poirot waved his hand, “I ask no better! I put myself in your hands unreservedly.”

“Ah—hruup—er—hm,” replied Mr. Bonnington and gave careful attention to the matter.

These weighty matters, and the question of wine, settled, Mr. Bonnington leaned back with a sigh and unfolded his napkin as Molly sped away.

“Good girl, that,” he said approvingly. “Was quite a beauty once—artists used to paint her. She knows about food, too—and that’s a great deal more important. Women are very unsound on food as a rule. There’s many a woman if she goes out with a fellow she fancies—won’t even notice what she eats. She’ll just order the first thing she sees.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“C’est terrible.”

“Men aren’t like that, thank God!” said Mr. Bonnington complacently.

“Never?” There was a twinkle in Hercule Poirot’s eye.

“Well, perhaps when they’re very young,” conceded Mr. Bonnington.

“Young puppies! Young fellows nowadays are all the same—no guts—no stamina. I’ve no use for the young—and they,” he added with strict impartiality, “have no use for me. Perhaps they’re right! But to hear some of these young fellows talk you’d think no man had a right to be alive after sixty! From the way they go on, you’d wonder more of them didn’t help their elderly relations out of the world.”

“It is possible,” said Hercule Poirot, “that they do.”

“Nice mind you’ve got, Poirot, I must say. All this police work saps your ideals.”

Hercule Poirot smiled.

“Tout de même,” he said. “It would be interesting to make a table of accidental deaths over the age of sixty. I assure you it would raise some curious speculations in your mind.”

“The trouble with you is that you’ve started going to look for crime—instead of waiting for crime to come to you.”

“I apologize,” said Poirot. “I talk what you call ‘the shop.’ Tell me, my friend, of your own affairs. How does the world go with you?”

“Mess!” said Mr. Bonnington. “That’s what’s the matter with the world nowadays. Too much mess. And too much fine language. The fine language helps to conceal the mess. Like a highly-flavoured sauce concealing the fact that the fish underneath it is none of the best! Give me an honest fillet of sole and no messy sauce over it.”

It was given him at that moment by Molly and he grunted approval.

“You know just what I like, my girl,” he said.

“Well, you come here pretty regular, don’t you, sir? I ought to know what you like.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Do people then always like the same things? Do not they like a change sometimes?”

“Not gentlemen, sir. Ladies like variety—gentlemen always like the same thing.”

“What did I tell you?” grunted Bonnington. “Women are fundamentally unsound where food is concerned!”

He looked round the restaurant.

“The world’s a funny place. See that odd-looking old fellow with a beard in the corner? Molly’ll tell you he’s always here Tuesdays and Thursday nights. He has come here for close on ten years now—he’s a kind of

landmark in the place. Yet nobody here knows his name or where he lives or what his business is. It's odd when you come to think of it."

When the waitress brought the portions of turkey he said:

"I see you've still got Old Father Time over there?"

"That's right, sir. Tuesdays and Thursdays, his days are. Not but what he came in here on a Monday last week! It quite upset me! I felt I'd got my dates wrong and that it must be Tuesday without my knowing it! But he came in the next night as well—so the Monday was just a kind of extra, so to speak."

"An interesting deviation from habit," murmured Poirot. "I wonder what the reason was?"

"Well, sir, if you ask me, I think he'd had some kind of upset or worry."

"Why did you think that? His manner?"

"No, sir—not his manner exactly. He was very quiet as he always is. Never says much except good evening when he comes and goes. No, it was his order."

"His order?"

"I daresay you gentlemen will laugh at me," Molly flushed up, "but when a gentleman has been here for ten years, you get to know his likes and dislikes. He never could bear suet pudding or blackberries and I've never known him take thick soup—but on that Monday night he ordered thick tomato soup, beefsteak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart! Seemed as though he just didn't notice what he ordered!"

"Do you know," said Hercule Poirot, "I find that extraordinarily interesting."

Molly looked gratified and departed.

“Well, Poirot,” said Henry Bonnington with a chuckle. “Let’s have a few deductions from you. All in your best manner.”

“I would prefer to hear yours first.”

“Want me to be Watson, eh? Well, old fellow went to a doctor and the doctor changed his diet.”

“To thick tomato soup, steak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart? I cannot imagine any doctor doing that.”

“Don’t believe it, old boy. Doctors will put you on to anything.”

“That is the only solution that occurs to you?”

Henry Bonnington said:

“Well, seriously, I suppose there’s only one explanation possible. Our unknown friend was in the grip of some powerful mental emotion. He was so perturbed by it that he literally did not notice what he was ordering or eating.”

He paused a minute and then said:

“You’ll be telling me next that you know just what was on his mind. You’ll say perhaps that he was making up his mind to commit a murder.”

He laughed at his own suggestion.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh.

He has admitted that at that moment he was seriously worried. He claims that he ought then to have had some inkling of what was likely to occur.

His friends assure him that such an idea is quite fantastic.

It was some three weeks later that Hercule Poirot and Bonnington met again—this time their meeting was in the Tube.

They nodded to each other, swaying about, hanging on to adjacent straps. Then at Piccadilly Circus there was a general exodus and they found seats right at the forward end of the car—a peaceful spot since nobody passed in or out that way.

“That’s better,” said Mr. Bonnington. “Selfish lot, the human race, they won’t pass up the car however much you ask ’em to!”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“What will you?” he said. “Life is too uncertain.”

“That’s it. Here today, gone tomorrow,” said Mr. Bonnington with a kind of gloomy relish. “And talking of that, d’you remember that old boy we noticed at the Gallant Endeavour? I shouldn’t wonder if he’d hopped it to a better world. He’s not been there for a whole week. Molly’s quite upset about it.”

Hercule Poirot sat up. His green eyes flashed.

“Indeed?” he said. “Indeed?”

Bonnington said:

“D’you remember I suggested he’d been to a doctor and been put on a diet? Diet’s nonsense of course—but I shouldn’t wonder if he had consulted a doctor about his health and what the doctor said gave him a bit of a jolt. That would account for him ordering things off the menu without noticing what he was doing. Quite likely the jolt he got hurried him out of the world sooner than he would have gone otherwise. Doctors ought to be careful what they tell a chap.”

“They usually are,” said Hercule Poirot.

“This is my station,” said Mr. Bonnington. “Bye, bye. Don’t suppose we shall ever know now who the old boy was—not even his name. Funny world!”

He hurried out of the carriage.

Hercule Poirot, sitting frowning, looked as though he did not think it was such a funny world.

He went home and gave certain instructions to his faithful valet, George.

Hercule Poirot ran his finger down a list of names. It was a record of deaths within a certain area.

Poirot's finger stopped.

"Henry Gascoigne. Sixty-nine. I might try him first."

Later in the day, Hercule Poirot was sitting in Dr. MacAndrew's surgery just off the King's Road. MacAndrew was a tall red-haired Scotsman with an intelligent face.

"Gascoigne?" he said. "Yes, that's right. Eccentric old bird. Lived alone in one of those derelict old houses that are being cleared away in order to build a block of modern flats. I hadn't attended him before, but I'd seen him about and I knew who he was. It was the dairy people got the wind up first. The milk bottles began to pile up outside. In the end the people next door sent word to the police and they broke the door in and found him. He'd pitched down the stairs and broken his neck. Had on an old dressing gown with a ragged cord—might easily have tripped himself up with it."

"I see," said Hercule Poirot. "It was quite simple—an accident."

"That's right."

"Had he any relations?"

"There's a nephew. Used to come along and see his uncle about once a month. Lorrimer, his name is, George Lorrimer. He's a medico himself. Lives at Wimbledon."

"Was he upset at the old man's death?"

“I don’t know that I’d say he was upset. I mean, he had an affection for the old man, but he didn’t really know him very well.”

“How long had Mr. Gascoigne been dead when you saw him?”

“Ah!” said Dr. MacAndrew. “This is where we get official. Not less than forty-eight hours and not more than seventy-two hours. He was found on the morning of the sixth. Actually, we got closer than that. He’d got a letter in the pocket of his dressing gown—written on the third—posted in Wimbledon that afternoon—would have been delivered somewhere around nine twenty p.m. That puts the time of death at after nine twenty on the evening of the third. That agrees with the contents of the stomach and the processes of digestion. He had had a meal about two hours before death. I examined him on the morning of the sixth and his condition was quite consistent with death having occurred about sixty hours previously—round about ten p.m. on the third.”

“It all seems very consistent. Tell me, when was he last seen alive?”

“He was seen in the King’s Road about seven o’clock that same evening, Thursday the third, and he dined at the Gallant Endeavour restaurant at seven thirty. It seems he always dined there on Thursdays. He was by way of being an artist, you know. An extremely bad one.”

“He had no other relations? Only this nephew?”

“There was a twin brother. The whole story is rather curious. They hadn’t seen each other for years. It seems the other brother, Anthony Gascoigne, married a very rich woman and gave up art—and the brothers quarrelled over it. Hadn’t seen each other since, I believe. But oddly enough, they died on the same day. The elder twin passed away at three o’clock on the afternoon of the third. Once before I’ve known a case of twins dying on the same day—in different parts of the world! Probably just a coincidence—but there it is.”

“Is the other brother’s wife alive?”

“No, she died some years ago.”

“Where did Anthony Gascoigne live?”

“He had a house on Kingston Hill. He was, I believe, from what Dr. Lorrimer tells me, very much of a recluse.”

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

The Scotsman looked at him keenly.

“What exactly have you got in your mind, M. Poirot?” he asked bluntly. “I’ve answered your questions—as was my duty seeing the credentials you brought. But I’m in the dark as to what it’s all about.”

Poirot said slowly:

“A simple case of accidental death, that’s what you said. What I have in mind is equally simple—a simple push.”

Dr. MacAndrew looked startled.

“In other words, murder! Have you any grounds for that belief?”

“No,” said Poirot. “It is a mere supposition.”

“There must be something—” persisted the other.

Poirot did not speak. MacAndrew said:

“If it’s the nephew, Lorrimer, you suspect, I don’t mind telling you here and now that you are barking up the wrong tree. Lorrimer was playing bridge in Wimbledon from eight thirty till midnight. That came out at the inquest.”

Poirot murmured:

“And presumably it was verified. The police are careful.”

The doctor said:

“Perhaps you know something against him?”

“I didn’t know that there was such a person until you mentioned him.”

“Then you suspect somebody else?”

“No, no. It is not that at all. It’s a case of the routine habits of the human animal. That is very important. And the dead M. Gascoigne does not fit in. It is all wrong, you see.”

“I really don’t understand.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“The trouble is, there is too much sauce over the bad fish.”

“My dear sir?”

Hercule Poirot smiled.

“You will be having me locked up as a lunatic soon, Monsieur le Docteur. But I am not really a mental case—just a man who has a liking for order and method and who is worried when he comes across a fact that does not fit in. I must ask you to forgive me for having given you so much trouble.”

He rose and the doctor rose also.

“You know,” said MacAndrew, “honestly I can’t see anything the least bit suspicious about the death of Henry Gascoigne. I say he fell—you say somebody pushed him. It’s all—well—in the air.”

Hercule Poirot sighed.

“Yes,” he said. “It is workmanlike. Somebody has made the good job of it!”

“You still think—”

The little man spread out his hands.

“I’m an obstinate man—a man with a little idea—and nothing to support it! By the way, did Henry Gascoigne have false teeth?”

“No, his own teeth were in excellent preservation. Very creditable indeed at his age.”

“He looked after them well—they were white and well brushed?”

“Yes, I noticed them particularly. Teeth tend to grow a little yellow as one grows older, but they were in good condition.”

“Not discoloured in any way?”

“No. I don’t think he was a smoker if that is what you mean.”

“I did not mean that precisely—it was just a long shot—which probably will not come off! Good-bye, Dr. MacAndrew, and thank you for your kindness.”

He shook the doctor’s hand and departed.

“And now,” he said, “for the long shot.”

At the Gallant Endeavour, he sat down at the same table which he had shared with Bonnington. The girl who served him was not Molly. Molly, the girl told him, was away on a holiday.

It was only just seven and Hercule Poirot found no difficulty in entering into conversation with the girl on the subject of old Mr. Gascoigne.

“Yes,” she said. “He’d been here for years and years. But none of us girls ever knew his name. We saw about the inquest in the paper, and there was a picture of him. ‘There,’ I said to Molly. ‘If that isn’t our ‘Old Father Time’ as we used to call him.’”

“He dined here on the evening of his death, did he not?”

“That’s right, Thursday, the third. He was always here on a Thursday. Tuesdays and Thursdays—punctual as a clock.”

“You don’t remember, I suppose, what he had for dinner?”

“Now let me see, it was mulligatawny soup, that’s right, and beefsteak pudding or was it the mutton?—no pudding, that’s right, and blackberry and apple pie and cheese. And then to think of him going home and falling down those stairs that very same evening. A frayed dressing gown cord they said it was as caused it. Of course, his clothes were always something awful—old-fashioned and put on anyhow, and all tattered, and yet he had a kind of air, all the same, as though he was somebody! Oh, we get all sorts of interesting customers here.”

She moved off.

Hercule Poirot ate his filleted sole. His eyes showed a green light.

“It is odd,” he said to himself, “how the cleverest people slip over details. Bonnington will be interested.”

But the time had not yet come for leisurely discussion with Bonnington.

Armed with introductions from a certain influential quarter, Hercule Poirot found no difficulty at all in dealing with the coroner for the district.

“A curious figure, the deceased man Gascoigne,” he observed. “A lonely, eccentric old fellow. But his decease seems to arouse an unusual amount of attention?”

He looked with some curiosity at his visitor as he spoke.

Hercule Poirot chose his words carefully.

“There are circumstances connected with it, Monsieur, which make investigation desirable.”

“Well, how can I help you?”

“It is, I believe, within your province to order documents produced in your court to be destroyed, or to be impounded—as you think fit. A certain letter was found in the pocket of Henry Gascoigne’s dressing gown, was it not?”

“That is so.”

“A letter from his nephew, Dr. George Lorrimer?”

“Quite correct. The letter was produced at the inquest as helping to fix the time of death.”

“Which was corroborated by the medical evidence?”

“Exactly.”

“Is that letter still available?”

Hercule Poirot waited rather anxiously for the reply.

When he heard that the letter was still available for examination he drew a sigh of relief.

When it was finally produced he studied it with some care. It was written in a slightly cramped handwriting with a stylographic pen.

It ran as follows:

Dear Uncle Henry,

I am sorry to tell you that I have had no success as regards Uncle Anthony. He showed no enthusiasm for a visit from you and would give me no reply to your request that he would let bygones be bygones. He is, of course, extremely ill, and his mind is inclined to wander. I should fancy that the end is very near. He seemed hardly to remember who you were.

I am sorry to have failed you, but I can assure you that I did my best.

Your affectionate nephew,

GEORGE LORRIMER

The letter itself was dated 3rd November. Poirot glanced at the envelope's postmark—4:30 p.m. 3 Nov.

He murmured:

“It is beautifully in order, is it not?”

Kingston Hill was his next objective. After a little trouble, with the exercise of good-humoured pertinacity, he obtained an interview with Amelia Hill, cook-housekeeper to the late Anthony Gascoigne.

Mrs. Hill was inclined to be stiff and suspicious at first, but the charming geniality of this strange-looking foreigner would have had its effect on a stone. Mrs. Amelia Hill began to unbend.

She found herself, as had so many other women before her, pouring out her troubles to a really sympathetic listener.

For fourteen years she had had charge of Mr. Gascoigne's household—not an easy job! No, indeed! Many a woman would have quailed under the burdens she had had to bear! Eccentric the poor gentleman was and no denying it. Remarkably close with his money—a kind of mania with him it was—and he as rich a gentleman as might be! But Mrs. Hill had served him faithfully, and put up with his ways, and naturally she'd expected at any rate a remembrance. But no—nothing at all! Just an old will that left all his money to his wife and if she predeceased him then everything to his brother, Henry. A will made years ago. It didn't seem fair!

Gradually Hercule Poirot detached her from her main theme of unsatisfied cupidity. It was indeed a heartless injustice! Mrs. Hill could not be blamed for feeling hurt and surprised. It was well known that Mr. Gascoigne was tightfisted about money. It had even been said that the dead man had refused his only brother assistance. Mrs. Hill probably knew all about that.

“Was it that that Dr. Lorrimer came to see him about?” asked Mrs. Hill. “I knew it was something about his brother, but I thought it was just that his brother wanted to be reconciled. They'd quarrelled years ago.”

“I understand,” said Poirot, “that Mr. Gascoigne refused absolutely?”

“That’s right enough,” said Mrs. Hill with a nod. “ ‘Henry?’ he says, rather weak like. ‘What’s this about Henry? Haven’t seen him for years and don’t want to. Quarrelsome fellow, Henry.’ Just that.”

The conversation then reverted to Mrs. Hill’s own special grievances, and the unfeeling attitude of the late Mr. Gascoigne’s solicitor.

With some difficulty Hercule Poirot took his leave without breaking off the conversation too abruptly.

And so, just after the dinner hour, he came to Elmcrest, Dorset Road, Wimbledon, the residence of Dr. George Lorrimer.

The doctor was in. Hercule Poirot was shown into the surgery and there presently Dr. George Lorrimer came to him, obviously just risen from the dinner table.

“I’m not a patient, Doctor,” said Hercule Poirot. “And my coming here is, perhaps, somewhat of an impertinence—but I’m an old man and I believe in plain and direct dealing. I do not care for lawyers and their long-winded roundabout methods.”

He had certainly aroused Lorrimer’s interest. The doctor was a clean-shaven man of middle height. His hair was brown but his eyelashes were almost white which gave his eyes a pale, boiled appearance. His manner was brisk and not without humour.

“Lawyers?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Hate the fellows! You rouse my curiosity, my dear sir. Pray sit down.”

Poirot did so and then produced one of his professional cards which he handed to the doctor.

George Lorrimer’s white eyelashes blinked.

Poirot leaned forward confidentially. “A good many of my clients are women,” he said.

“Naturally,” said Dr. George Lorrimer, with a slight twinkle.

“As you say, naturally,” agreed Poirot. “Women distrust the official police. They prefer private investigations. They do not want to have their troubles made public. An elderly woman came to consult me a few days ago. She was unhappy about a husband she’d quarrelled with many years before. This husband of hers was your uncle, the late Mr. Gascoigne.” George Lorrimer’s face went purple.

“My uncle? Nonsense! His wife died many years ago.”

“Not your uncle, Mr. Anthony Gascoigne. Your uncle, Mr. Henry Gascoigne.”

“Uncle Henry? But he wasn’t married!”

“Oh yes, he was,” said Hercule Poirot, lying unblushingly. “Not a doubt of it. The lady even brought along her marriage certificate.”

“It’s a lie!” cried George Lorrimer. His face was now as purple as a plum. “I don’t believe it. You’re an impudent liar.”

“It is too bad, is it not?” said Poirot. “You have committed murder for nothing.”

“Murder?” Lorrimer’s voice quavered. His pale eyes bulged with terror.

“By the way,” said Poirot, “I see you have been eating blackberry tart again. An unwise habit. Blackberries are said to be full of vitamins, but they may be deadly in other ways. On this occasion I rather fancy they have helped to put a rope round a man’s neck—your neck, Dr. Lorrimer.”

“You see, mon ami, where you went wrong was over your fundamental assumption.” Hercule Poirot, beaming placidly across the table at his friend, waved an expository hand. “A man under severe mental stress doesn’t choose that time to do something that he’s never done before. His reflexes just follow the track of least resistance. A man who is upset about

something might conceivably come down to dinner dressed in his pyjamas—but they will be his own pyjamas—not somebody else's.

“A man who dislikes thick soup, suet pudding and blackberries suddenly orders all three one evening. You say, because he is thinking of something else. But I say that a man who has got something on his mind will order automatically the dish he has ordered most often before.

“Eh bien, then, what other explanation could there be? I simply could not think of a reasonable explanation. And I was worried! The incident was all wrong. It did not fit! I have an orderly mind and I like things to fit. Mr. Gascoigne's dinner order worried me.

“Then you told me that the man had disappeared. He had missed a Tuesday and a Thursday the first time for years. I liked that even less. A queer hypothesis sprang up in my mind. If I were right about it the man was dead. I made inquiries. The man was dead. And he was very neatly and tidily dead. In other words the bad fish was covered up with the sauce!

“He had been seen in the King's Road at seven o'clock. He had had dinner here at seven thirty—two hours before he died. It all fitted in—the evidence of the stomach contents, the evidence of the letter. Much too much sauce! You couldn't see the fish at all!

“Devoted nephew wrote the letter, devoted nephew had beautiful alibi for time of death. Death very simple—a fall down the stairs. Simple accident? Simple murder? Everyone says the former.

“Devoted nephew only surviving relative. Devoted nephew will inherit—but is there anything to inherit? Uncle notoriously poor.

“But there is a brother. And brother in his time had married a rich wife. And brother lives in a big rich house on Kingston Hill, so it would seem that rich wife must have left him all her money. You see the sequence—rich wife leaves money to Anthony, Anthony leaves money to Henry, Henry's money goes to George—a complete chain.”

“All very pretty in theory,” said Bonnington. “But what did you do?”

“Once you know—you can usually get hold of what you want. Henry had died two hours after a meal—that is all the inquest really bothered about. But supposing the meal was not dinner, but lunch. Put yourself in George’s place. George wants money—badly. Anthony Gascoigne is dying—but his death is no good to George. His money goes to Henry, and Henry Gascoigne may live for years. So Henry must die too—and the sooner the better—but his death must take place after Anthony’s, and at the same time George must have an alibi. Henry’s habit of dining regularly at a restaurant on two evenings of the week suggest an alibi to George. Being a cautious fellow, he tries his plan out first. He impersonates his uncle on Monday evening at the restaurant in question. It goes without a hitch. Everyone there accepts him as his uncle. He is satisfied. He has only to wait till Uncle Anthony shows definite signs of pegging out. The time comes. He writes a letter to his uncle on the afternoon of the second November but dates it the third. He comes up to town on the afternoon of the third, calls on his uncle, and carries his scheme into action. A sharp shove and down the stairs goes Uncle Henry. George hunts about for the letter he has written, and shoves it in the pocket of his uncle’s dressing gown. At seven thirty he is at the Gallant Endeavour, beard, bushy eyebrows all complete. Undoubtedly Mr. Henry Gascoigne is alive at seven thirty. Then a rapid metamorphosis in a lavatory and back full speed in his car to Wimbledon and an evening of bridge. The perfect alibi.”

Mr. Bonnington looked at him.

“But the postmark on the letter?”

“Oh, that was very simple. The postmark was smudgy. Why? It had been altered with lamp black from second November to third November. You would not notice it unless you were looking for it. And finally there were the blackbirds.”

“Blackbirds?”

“Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie! Or blackberries if you prefer to be literal! George, you comprehend, was after all not quite a good enough actor. Do you remember the fellow who blacked himself all over to play Othello? That is the kind of actor you have got to be in crime. George

looked like his uncle and walked like his uncle and spoke like his uncle and had his uncle's beard and eyebrows, but he forgot to eat like his uncle. He ordered the dishes that he himself liked. Blackberries discolour the teeth—the corpse's teeth were not discoloured, and yet Henry Gascoigne ate blackberries at the Gallant Endeavour that night. But there were no blackberries in the stomach. I asked this morning. And George had been fool enough to keep the beard and the rest of the makeup. Oh! plenty of evidence once you look for it. I called on George and rattled him. That finished it! He had been eating blackberries again, by the way. A greedy fellow—cared a lot about his food. Eh bien, greed will hang him all right unless I am very much mistaken.”

A waitress brought them two portions of blackberry and apple tart.

“Take it away,” said Mr. Bonnington. “One can't be too careful. Bring me a small helping of sago pudding.”

Nine

THE LOVE DETECTIVES

“The Love Detectives” was first published in the USA as “At the Crossroads” in Flynn’s Weekly, 30 Oct 1926, and then as “The Magic of Mr. Quin No. 1: At the Cross Roads” in Storyteller, December 1926.

Little Mr. Satterthwaite looked thoughtfully across at his host. The friendship between these two men was an odd one. The colonel was a simple country gentleman whose passion in life was sport. The few weeks that he spent perforce in London, he spent unwillingly. Mr. Satterthwaite, on the other hand, was a town bird. He was an authority on French cooking, on ladies’ dress, and on all the latest scandals. His passion was observing human nature, and he was an expert in his own special line—that of an onlooker at life.

It would seem, therefore, that he and Colonel Melrose would have little in common, for the colonel had no interest in his neighbours’ affairs and a horror of any kind of emotion. The two men were friends mainly because their fathers before them had been friends. Also they knew the same people and had reactionary views about nouveaux riches.

It was about half past seven. The two men were sitting in the colonel’s comfortable study, and Melrose was describing a run of the previous winter with a keen hunting man’s enthusiasm. Mr. Satterthwaite, whose knowledge of horses consisted chiefly of the time-honoured Sunday morning visit to the stables which still obtains in old-fashioned country houses, listened with his invariable politeness.

The sharp ringing of the telephone interrupted Melrose. He crossed to the table and took up the receiver.

“Hello, yes—Colonel Melrose speaking. What’s that?” His whole demeanour altered—became stiff and official. It was the magistrate speaking now, not the sportsman.

He listened for some moments, then said laconically, “Right, Curtis. I’ll be over at once.” He replaced the receiver and turned to his guest. “Sir James Dwighton has been found in his library—murdered.”

“What?”

Mr. Satterthwaite was startled—thrilled.

“I must go over to Alderway at once. Care to come with me?”

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered that the colonel was chief constable of the country.

“If I shan’t be in the way—” He hesitated.

“Not at all. That was Inspector Curtis telephoning. Good, honest fellow, but no brains. I’d be glad if you would come with me, Satterthwaite. I’ve got an idea this is going to turn out a nasty business.”

“Have they got the fellow who did it?”

“No,” replied Melrose shortly.

Mr. Satterthwaite’s trained ear detected a nuance of reserve behind the curt negative. He began to go over in his mind all that he knew of the Dwightons.

A pompous old fellow, the late Sir James, brusque in his manner. A man that might easily make enemies. Veering on sixty, with grizzled hair and a florid face. Reputed to be tightfisted in the extreme.

His mind went on to Lady Dwighton. Her image floated before him, young, auburn-haired, slender. He remembered various rumours, hints, odd bits of gossip. So that was it—that was why Melrose looked so glum. Then he pulled himself up—his imagination was running away with him.

Five minutes later Mr. Satterthwaite took his place beside his host in the latter's little two-seater, and they drove off together into the night.

The colonel was a taciturn man. They had gone quite a mile and a half before he spoke. Then he jerked out abruptly. "You know 'em, I suppose?"

"The Dwightons? I know all about them, of course." Who was there Mr. Satterthwaite didn't know all about? "I've met him once, I think, and her rather oftener."

"Pretty woman," said Melrose.

"Beautiful!" declared Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Think so?"

"A pure Renaissance type," declared Mr. Satterthwaite, warming up to his theme. "She acted in those theatricals—the charity matinee, you know, last spring. I was very much struck. Nothing modern about her—a pure survival. One can imagine her in the doge's palace, or as Lucrezia Borgia."

The colonel let the car swerve slightly, and Mr. Satterthwaite came to an abrupt stop. He wondered what fatality had brought the name of Lucrezia Borgia to his tongue. Under the circumstances—

"Dwighton was not poisoned, was he?" he asked abruptly.

Melrose looked at him sideways, somewhat curiously. "Why do you ask that, I wonder?" he said.

"Oh, I—I don't know." Mr. Satterthwaite was flustered. "I—It just occurred to me."

"Well, he wasn't," said Melrose gloomily. "If you want to know, he was crashed on the head."

"With a blunt instrument," murmured Mr. Satterthwaite, nodding his head sagely.

“Don’t talk like a damned detective story, Satterthwaite. He was hit on the head with a bronze figure.”

“Oh,” said Satterthwaite, and relapsed into silence.

“Know anything of a chap called Paul Delangua?” asked Melrose after a minute or two.

“Yes. Good-looking young fellow.”

“I daresay women would call him so,” growled the colonel.

“You don’t like him?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I should have thought you would have. He rides very well.”

“Like a foreigner at the horse show. Full of monkey tricks.”

Mr. Satterthwaite suppressed a smile. Poor old Melrose was so very British in his outlook. Agreeably conscious himself of a cosmopolitan point of view, Mr. Satterthwaite was able to deplore the insular attitude toward life.

“Has he been down in this part of the world?” he asked.

“He’s been staying at Alderway with the Dwrightons. The rumour goes that Sir James kicked him out a week ago.”

“Why?”

“Found him making love to his wife, I suppose. What the hell—”

There was a violent swerve, and a jarring impact.

“Most dangerous crossroads in England,” said Melrose. “All the same, the other fellow should have sounded his horn. We’re on the main road. I fancy we’ve damaged him rather more than he has damaged us.”

He sprang out. A figure alighted from the other car and joined him. Fragments of speech reached Satterthwaite.

“Entirely my fault, I’m afraid,” the stranger was saying. “But I do not know this part of the country very well, and there’s absolutely no sign of any kind to show you’re coming onto the main road.”

The colonel, mollified, rejoined suitably. The two men bent together over the stranger’s car, which a chauffeur was already examining. The conversation became highly technical.

“A matter of half an hour, I’m afraid,” said the stranger. “But don’t let me detain you. I’m glad your car escaped injury as well as it did.”

“As a matter of fact—” the colonel was beginning, but he was interrupted.

Mr. Satterthwaite, seething with excitement, hopped out of the car with a birdlike action, and seized the stranger warmly by the hand.

“It is! I thought I recognized the voice,” he declared excitedly. “What an extraordinary thing. What a very extraordinary thing.”

“Eh?” said Colonel Melrose.

“Mr. Harley Quin. Melrose, I’m sure you’ve heard me speak many times of Mr. Quin?”

Colonel Melrose did not seem to remember the fact, but he assisted politely at the scene while Mr. Satterthwaite was chirruping gaily on. “I haven’t seen you—let me see—”

“Since the night at the Bells and Motley,” said the other quietly.

“The Bells and Motley, eh?” said the colonel.

“An inn,” explained Mr. Satterthwaite.

“What an odd name for an inn.”

“Only an old one,” said Mr. Quin. “There was a time, remember, when bells and motley were more common in England than they are nowadays.”

“I suppose so, yes, no doubt you are right,” said Melrose vaguely. He blinked. By a curious effect of light—the headlights of one car and the red taillight of the other—Mr. Quin seemed for a moment to be dressed in motley himself. But it was only the light.

“We can’t leave you here stranded on the road,” continued Mr. Satterthwaite. “You must come along with us. There’s plenty of room for three, isn’t there, Melrose?”

“Oh rather.” But the colonel’s voice was a little doubtful. “The only thing is,” he remarked, “the job we’re on. Eh, Satterthwaite?”

Mr. Satterthwaite stood stock-still. Ideas leaped and flashed over him. He positively shook with excitement.

“No,” he cried. “No, I should have known better! There is no chance where you are concerned, Mr. Quin. It was not an accident that we all met tonight at the crossroads.”

Colonel Melrose stared at his friend in astonishment. Mr. Satterthwaite took him by the arm.

“You remember what I told you—about our friend Derek Capel? The motive for his suicide, which no one could guess? It was Mr. Quin who solved that problem—and there have been others since. He shows you things that are there all the time, but which you haven’t seen. He’s marvellous.”

“My dear Satterthwaite, you are making me blush,” said Mr. Quin, smiling. “As far as I can remember, these discoveries were all made by you, not by me.”

“They were made because you were there,” said Mr. Satterthwaite with intense conviction.

“Well,” said Colonel Melrose, clearing his throat uncomfortably. “We mustn’t waste any more time. Let’s get on.”

He climbed into the driver’s seat. He was not too well pleased at having the stranger foisted upon him through Mr. Satterthwaite’s enthusiasm, but he had no valid objection to offer, and he was anxious to get on to Alderway as fast as possible.

Mr. Satterthwaite urged Mr. Quin in next, and himself took the outside seat. The car was a roomy one and took three without undue squeezing.

“So you are interested in crime, Mr. Quin?” said the colonel, doing his best to be genial.

“No, not exactly in crime.”

“What, then?”

Mr. Quin smiled. “Let us ask Mr. Satterthwaite. He is a very shrewd observer.”

“I think,” said Satterthwaite slowly, “I may be wrong, but I think—that Mr. Quin is interested in—lovers.”

He blushed as he said the last word, which is one no Englishman can pronounce without self-consciousness. Mr. Satterthwaite brought it out apologetically, and with an effect of inverted commas.

“By gad!” said the colonel, startled and silenced.

He reflected inwardly that this seemed to be a very rum friend of Satterthwaite’s. He glanced at him sideways. The fellow looked all right—quite a normal young chap. Rather dark, but not at all foreign-looking.

“And now,” said Satterthwaite importantly, “I must tell you all about the case.”

He talked for some ten minutes. Sitting there in the darkness, rushing through the night, he had an intoxicating feeling of power. What did it

matter if he were only a looker-on at life? He had words at his command, he was master of them, he could string them to a pattern—a strange Renaissance pattern composed of the beauty of Laura Dwighton, with her white arms and red hair—and the shadowy dark figure of Paul Delangua, whom women found handsome.

Set that against the background of Alderway—Alderway that had stood since the days of Henry VII and, some said, before that. Alderway that was English to the core, with its clipped yew and its old beak barn and the fishpond, where monks had kept their carp for Fridays.

In a few deft strokes he had etched in Sir James, a Dwrighton who was a true descendant of the old De Wittons, who long ago had wrung money out of the land and locked it fast in coffers, so that whoever else had fallen on evil days, the masters of Alderway had never become impoverished.

At last Mr. Satterthwaite ceased. He was sure, had been sure all along, of the sympathy of his audience. He waited now the word of praise which was his due. It came.

“You are an artist, Mr. Satterthwaite.”

“I—I do my best.” The little man was suddenly humble.

They had turned in at the lodge gates some minutes ago. Now the car drew up in front of the doorway, and a police constable came hurriedly down the steps to meet them.

“Good evening, sir. Inspector Curtis is in the library.”

“Right.”

Melrose ran up the steps followed by the other two. As the three of them passed across the wide hall, an elderly butler peered from a doorway apprehensively. Melrose nodded to him.

“Evening, Miles. This is a sad business.”

“It is indeed,” the other quavered. “I can hardly believe it, sir; indeed I can’t. To think that anyone should strike down the master.”

“Yes, yes,” said Melrose, cutting him short. “I’ll have a talk with you presently.”

He strode on to the library. There a big, soldierly-looking inspector greeted him with respect.

“Nasty business, sir. I have not disturbed things. No fingerprints on the weapon. Whoever did it knew his business.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at the bowed figure sitting at the big writing table, and looked hurriedly away again. The man had been struck down from behind, a smashing blow that had crashed in the skull. The sight was not a pretty one.

The weapon lay on the floor—a bronze figure about two feet high, the base of it stained and wet. Mr. Satterthwaite bent over it curiously.

“A Venus,” he said softly. “So he was struck down by Venus.”

He found food for poetic meditation in the thought.

“The windows,” said the inspector, “were all closed and bolted on the inside.”

He paused significantly.

“Making an inside job of it,” said the chief constable reluctantly. “Well—well, we’ll see.”

The murdered man was dressed in golf clothes, and a bag of golf clubs had been flung untidily across a big leather couch.

“Just come in from the links,” explained the inspector, following the chief constable’s glance. “At five fifteen, that was. Had tea brought here by the butler. Later he rang for his valet to bring him down a pair of soft slippers. As far as we can tell, the valet was the last person to see him alive.”

Melrose nodded, and turned his attention once more to the writing table.

A good many of the ornaments had been overturned and broken. Prominent among these was a big dark enamel clock, which lay on its side in the very centre of the table.

The inspector cleared his throat.

“That’s what you might call a piece of luck, sir,” he said. “As you see, it’s stopped. At half past six. That gives us the time of the crime. Very convenient.”

The colonel was staring at the clock.

“As you say,” he remarked. “Very convenient.” He paused a minute, and then added, “Too damned convenient! I don’t like it, Inspector.”

He looked around at the other two. His eye sought Mr. Quin’s with a look of appeal in it.

“Damn it all,” he said. “It’s too neat. You know what I mean. Things don’t happen like that.”

“You mean,” murmured Mr. Quin, “that clocks don’t fall like that?”

Melrose stared at him for a moment, then back at the clock, which had that pathetic and innocent look familiar to objects which have been suddenly bereft of their dignity. Very carefully Colonel Melrose replaced it on its legs again. He struck the table a violent blow. The clock rocked, but it did not fall. Melrose repeated the action, and very slowly, with a kind of unwillingness, the clock fell over on its back.

“What time was the crime discovered?” demanded Melrose sharply.

“Just about seven o’clock, sir.”

“Who discovered it?”

“The butler.”

“Fetch him in,” said the chief constable. “I’ll see him now. Where is Lady Dwighton, by the way?”

“Lying down, sir. Her maid says that she’s prostrated and can’t see anyone.”

Melrose nodded, and Inspector Curtis went in search of the butler. Mr. Quin was looking thoughtfully into the fireplace. Mr. Satterthwaite followed his example. He blinked at the smouldering logs for a minute or two, and then something bright lying in the grate caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a little sliver of curved glass.

“You wanted me, sir?”

It was the butler’s voice, still quavering and uncertain. Mr. Satterthwaite slipped the fragment of glass into his waistcoat pocket and turned around.

The old man was standing in the doorway.

“Sit down,” said the chief constable kindly. “You’re shaking all over. It’s been a shock to you, I expect.”

“It has indeed, sir.”

“Well, I shan’t keep you long. Your master came in just after five, I believe?”

“Yes, sir. He ordered tea to be brought to him here. Afterward, when I came to take it away, he asked for Jennings to be sent to him—that’s his valet, sir.”

“What time was that?”

“About ten minutes past six, sir.”

“Yes—well?”

“I sent word to Jennings, sir. And it wasn’t till I came in here to shut the windows and draw the curtains at seven o’clock that I saw—”

Melrose cut him short. “Yes, yes, you needn’t go into all that. You didn’t touch the body, or disturb anything, did you?”

“Oh! No indeed, sir! I went as fast as I could go to the telephone to ring up the police.”

“And then?”

“I told Jane—her ladyship’s maid, sir—to break the news to her ladyship.”

“You haven’t seen your mistress at all this evening?”

Colonel Melrose put the question casually enough, but Mr. Satterthwaite’s keen ears caught anxiety behind the words.

“Not to speak to, sir. Her ladyship has remained in her own apartments since the tragedy.”

“Did you see her before?”

The question came sharply, and everyone in the room noted the hesitation before the butler replied.

“I—I just caught a glimpse of her, sir, descending the staircase.”

“Did she come in here?”

Mr. Satterthwaite held his breath.

“I—I think so, sir.”

“What time was that?”

You might have heard a pin drop. Did the old man know, Mr. Satterthwaite wondered, what hung on his answer?

“It was just upon half past six, sir.”

Colonel Melrose drew a deep breath. "That will do, thank you. Just send Jennings, the valet, to me, will you?"

Jennings answered the summons with promptitude. A narrow-faced man with a catlike tread. Something sly and secretive about him.

A man, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, who would easily murder his master if he could be sure of not being found out.

He listened eagerly to the man's answers to Colonel Melrose's questions. But his story seemed straightforward enough. He had brought his master down some soft hide slippers and removed the brogues.

"What did you do after that, Jennings?"

"I went back to the stewards' room, sir."

"At what time did you leave your master?"

"It must have been just after a quarter past six, sir."

"Where were you at half past six, Jennings?"

"In the stewards' room, sir."

Colonel Melrose dismissed the man with a nod. He looked across at Curtis inquiringly.

"Quite correct, sir, I checked that up. He was in the stewards' room from about six twenty until seven o'clock."

"Then that lets him out," said the chief constable a trifle regretfully.

"Besides, there's no motive."

They looked at each other.

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," said the colonel.

A scared-looking lady's maid appeared.

"If you please, her ladyship has heard that Colonel Melrose is here and she would like to see him."

"Certainly," said Melrose. "I'll come at once. Will you show me the way?"

But a hand pushed the girl aside. A very different figure now stood in the doorway. Laura Dwygton looked like a visitor from another world.

She was dressed in a clinging medieval tea gown of dull blue brocade. Her auburn hair was parted in the middle and brought down over her ears. Conscious of the fact she had a style of her own, Lady Dwygton had never had her hair cut. It was drawn back into a simple knot on the nape of her neck. Her arms were bare.

One of them was outstretched to steady herself against the frame of the doorway, the other hung down by her side, clasping a book. She looks, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, like a Madonna from an early Italian canvas.

She stood there, swaying slightly from side to side. Colonel Melrose sprang toward her.

"I've come to tell you—to tell you—"

Her voice was low and rich. Mr. Satterthwaite was so entranced with the dramatic value of the scene that he had forgotten its reality.

"Please, Lady Dwygton—" Melrose had an arm round her, supporting her. He took her across the hall into a small anteroom, its walls hung with faded silk. Quin and Satterthwaite followed. She sank down on the low settee, her head resting back on a rust-coloured cushion, her eyelids closed. The three men watched her. Suddenly she opened her eyes and sat up. She spoke very quietly.

"I killed him," she said. "That's what I came to tell you. I killed him!"

There was a moment's agonized silence. Mr. Satterthwaite's heart missed a beat.

“Lady Dwighton,” said Melrose. “You’ve had a great shock—you’re unstrung. I don’t think you quite know what you’re saying.”

Would she draw back now—while there was yet time?

“I know perfectly what I’m saying. It was I who shot him.”

Two of the men in the room gasped, the other made no sound. Laura Dwighton leaned still farther forward.

“Don’t you understand? I came down and shot him. I admit it.”

The book she had been holding in her hand clattered to the floor. There was a paper cutter in it, a thing shaped like a dagger with a jewelled hilt. Mr. Satterthwaite picked it up mechanically and placed it on the table. As he did so he thought, That’s a dangerous toy. You could kill a man with that.

“Well—” Laura Dwighton’s voice was impatient. “—what are you going to do about it? Arrest me? Take me away?”

Colonel Melrose found his voice with difficulty.

“What you have told me is very serious, Lady Dwighton. I must ask you to go to your room till I have—er—made arrangements.”

She nodded and rose to her feet. She was quite composed now, grave and cold.

As she turned toward the door, Mr. Quin spoke. “What did you do with the revolver, Lady Dwighton?”

A flicker of uncertainty passed across her face. “I—I dropped it there on the floor. No, I think I threw it out of the window—oh! I can’t remember now. What does it matter? I hardly knew what I was doing. It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“No,” said Mr. Quin. “I hardly think it matters.”

She looked at him in perplexity with a shade of something that might have been alarm. Then she flung back her head and went imperiously out of the room. Mr. Satterthwaite hastened after her. She might, he felt, collapse at any minute. But she was already halfway up the staircase, displaying no sign of her earlier weakness. The scared-looking maid was standing at the foot of the stairway, and Mr. Satterthwaite spoke to her authoritatively.

“Look after your mistress,” he said.

“Yes, sir.” The girl prepared to ascend after the blue-robed figure. “Oh, please, sir, they don’t suspect him, do they?”

“Suspect whom?”

“Jennings, sir. Oh! Indeed, sir, he wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Jennings? No, of course not. Go and look after your mistress.”

“Yes, sir.”

The girl ran quickly up the staircase. Mr. Satterthwaite returned to the room he had just vacated.

Colonel Melrose was saying heavily, “Well, I’m jiggered. There’s more in this than meets the eye. It—it’s like those dashed silly things heroines do in many novels.”

“It’s unreal,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite. “It’s like something on the stage.”

Mr. Quin nodded. “Yes, you admire the drama, do you not? You are a man who appreciates good acting when you see it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked hard at him.

In the silence that followed a far-off sound came to their ears.

“Sounds like a shot,” said Colonel Melrose. “One of the keepers, I daresay. That’s probably what she heard. Perhaps she went down to see. She

wouldn't go close or examine the body. She'd leap at once to the conclusion —”

“Mr. Delangua, sir.” It was the old butler who spoke, standing apologetically in the doorway.

“Eh?” said Melrose. “What’s that?”

“Mr. Delangua is here, sir, and would like to speak to you if he may.”

Colonel Melrose leaned back in his chair. “Show him in,” he said grimly.

A moment later Paul Delangua stood in the doorway. As Colonel Melrose had hinted, there was something un-English about him—the easy grace of his movements, the dark, handsome face, the eyes set a little too near together. There hung about him the air of the Renaissance. He and Laura Dwighton suggested the same atmosphere.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said Delangua. He made a little theatrical bow.

“I don’t know what your business may be, Mr. Delangua,” said Colonel Melrose sharply, “but if it is nothing to do with the matter at hand—”

Delangua interrupted him with a laugh. “On the contrary,” he said, “it has everything to do with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Delangua quietly, “that I have come to give myself up for the murder of Sir James Dwighton.”

“You know what you are saying?” said Melrose gravely.

“Perfectly.”

The young man’s eyes were riveted to the table.

“I don’t understand—”

“Why I give myself up? Call it remorse—call it anything you please. I stabbed him, right enough—you may be quite sure of that.” He nodded toward the table. “You’ve got the weapon there, I see. A very handy little tool. Lady Dwighton unfortunately left it lying around in a book, and I happened to snatch it up.”

“One minute,” said Colonel Melrose. “Am I to understand that you admit stabbing Sir James with this?” He held the dagger aloft.

“Quite right. I stole in through the window, you know. He had his back to me. It was quite easy. I left the same way.”

“Through the window?”

“Through the window, of course.”

“And what time was this?”

Delangua hesitated. “Let me see—I was talking to the keeper fellow—that was at a quarter past six. I heard the church tower chime. It must have been—well, say somewhere about half past.”

A grim smile came to the colonel’s lips.

“Quite right, young man,” he said. “Half past six was the time. Perhaps you’ve heard that already? But this is altogether a most peculiar murder!”

“Why?”

“So many people confess to it,” said Colonel Melrose.

They heard the sharp intake of the other’s breath.

“Who else has confessed to it?” he asked in a voice that he vainly strove to render steady.

“Lady Dwighton.”

Delangua threw back his head and laughed in rather a forced manner. "Lady Dwighton is apt to be hysterical," he said lightly. "I shouldn't pay any attention to what she says if I were you."

"I don't think I shall," said Melrose. "But there's another odd thing about this murder."

"What's that?"

"Well," said Melrose, "Lady Dwighton has confessed to having shot Sir James, and you have confessed to having stabbed him. But luckily for both of you, he wasn't shot or stabbed, you see. His skull was smashed in."

"My God!" cried Delangua. "But a woman couldn't possibly do that—"

He stopped, biting his lip. Melrose nodded with the ghost of a smile.

"Often read of it," he volunteered. "Never seen it happen."

"What?"

"Couple of young idiots each accusing themselves because they thought the other had done it," said Melrose. "Now we've got to begin at the beginning."

"The valet," cried Mr. Satterthwaite. "That girl just now—I wasn't paying any attention at the time." He paused, striving for coherence. "She was afraid of our suspecting him. There must be some motive that he had and which we don't know, but she does."

Colonel Melrose frowned, then he rang the bell. When it was answered, he said, "Please ask Lady Dwighton if she will be good enough to come down again."

They waited in silence until she came. At sight of Delangua she started and stretched out a hand to save herself from falling. Colonel Melrose came quickly to the rescue.

"It's quite all right, Lady Dwighton. Please don't be alarmed."

“I don’t understand. What is Mr. Delangua doing here?”

Delangua came over to her, “Laura—Laura—why did you do it?”

“Do it?”

“I know. It was for me—because you thought that—After all, it was natural, I suppose. But, oh! You angel!”

Colonel Melrose cleared his throat. He was a man who disliked emotion and had a horror of anything approaching a “scene.”

“If you’ll allow me to say so, Lady Dwighton, both you and Mr. Delangua have had a lucky escape. He had just arrived in his turn to ‘confess’ to the murder—oh, it’s quite all right, he didn’t do it! But what we want to know is the truth. No more shillyshallying. The butler says you went into the library at half past six—is that so?”

Laura looked at Delangua. He nodded.

“The truth, Laura,” he said. “That is what we want now.”

She breathed a deep sigh. “I will tell you.”

She sank down on a chair that Mr. Satterthwaite had hurriedly pushed forward.

“I did come down. I opened the library door and I saw—”

She stopped and swallowed. Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward and patted her hand encouragingly.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. You saw?”

“My husband was lying across the writing table. I saw his head—the blood—oh!”

She put her hands to her face. The chief constable leaned forward.

“Excuse me, Lady Dwighton. You thought Mr. Delangua had shot him?”

She nodded. “Forgive me, Paul,” she pleaded. “But you said—you said—”

“That I’d shoot him like a dog,” said Delangua grimly. “I remember. That was the day I discovered he’d been ill-treating you.”

The chief constable kept sternly to the matter in hand.

“Then I am to understand, Lady Dwighton, that you went upstairs again and—er—said nothing. We needn’t go into your reason. You didn’t touch the body or go near the writing table?”

She shuddered.

“No, no. I ran straight out of the room.”

“I see, I see. And what time was this exactly? Do you know?”

“It was just half past six when I got back to my bedroom.”

“Then at—say five and twenty past six, Sir James was already dead.” The chief constable looked at the others. “That clock—it was faked, eh? We suspected that all along. Nothing easier than to move the hands to whatever time you wished, but they made a mistake to lay it down on its side like that. Well, that seems to narrow it down to the butler or the valet, and I can’t believe it’s the butler. Tell me, Lady Dwighton, did this man Jennings have any grudge against your husband?”

Laura lifted her face from her hands. “Not exactly a grudge, but—well, James told me only this morning that he’d dismissed him. He’d found him pilfering.”

“Ah! Now we’re getting at it. Jennings would have been dismissed without a character. A serious matter for him.”

“You said something about a clock,” said Laura Dwighton. “There’s just a chance—if you want to fix the time—James would have been sure to have

his little golf watch on him. Mightn't that have been smashed, too, when he fell forward?"

"It's an idea," said the colonel slowly. "But I'm afraid—Curtis!"

The inspector nodded in quick comprehension and left the room. He returned a minute later. On the palm of his hand was a silver watch marked like a golf ball, the kind that are sold for golfers to carry loose in a pocket with balls.

"Here it is, sir," he said, "but I doubt if it will be any good. They're tough, these watches."

The colonel took it from him and held it to his ear.

"It seems to have stopped, anyway," he observed.

He pressed with his thumb, and the lid of the watch flew open. Inside the glass was cracked across.

"Ah!" he said exultantly.

The hand pointed to exactly a quarter past six.

"A very good glass of port, Colonel Melrose," said Mr. Quin.

It was half past nine, and the three men had just finished a belated dinner at Colonel Melrose's house. Mr. Satterthwaite was particularly jubilant.

"I was quite right," he chuckled. "You can't deny it, Mr. Quin. You turned up tonight to save two absurd young people who were both bent on putting their heads into a noose."

"Did I?" said Mr. Quin. "Surely not. I did nothing at all."

"As it turned out, it was not necessary," agreed Mr. Satterthwaite. "But it might have been. It was touch and go, you know. I shall never forget the

moment when Lady Dwighton said, 'I killed him.' I've never seen anything on the stage half as dramatic."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Mr. Quin.

"Wouldn't have believed such a thing could happen outside a novel," declared the colonel, for perhaps the twentieth time that night.

"Does it?" asked Mr. Quin.

The colonel stared at him, "Damn it, it happened tonight."

"Mind you," interposed Mr. Satterthwaite, leaning back and sipping his port, "Lady Dwighton was magnificent, quite magnificent, but she made one mistake. She shouldn't have leaped to the conclusion that her husband had been shot. In the same way Delangua was a fool to assume that he had been stabbed just because the dagger happened to be lying on the table in front of us. It was a mere coincidence that Lady Dwighton should have brought it down with her."

"Was it?" asked Mr. Quin.

"Now if they'd only confined themselves to saying that they'd killed Sir James, without particularizing how—" went on Mr. Satterthwaite—"what would have been the result?"

"They might have been believed," said Mr. Quin with an odd smile.

"The whole thing was exactly like a novel," said the colonel.

"That's where they got the idea from, I daresay," said Mr. Quin.

"Possibly," agreed Mr. Satterthwaite. "Things one has read do come back to one in the oddest way." He looked across at Mr. Quin. "Of course," he said, "the clock really looked suspicious from the first. One ought never to forget how easy it is to put the hands of a clock or watch forward or back."

Mr. Quin nodded and repeated the words. "Forward," he said, and paused. "Or back."

There was something encouraging in his voice. His bright, dark eyes were fixed on Mr. Satterthwaite.

“The hands of the clock were put forward,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “We know that.”

“Were they?” asked Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him. “Do you mean,” he said slowly, “that it was the watch which was put back? But that doesn’t make sense. It’s impossible.”

“Not impossible,” murmured Mr. Quin.

“Well—absurd. To whose advantage could that be?”

“Only, I suppose, to someone who had an alibi for that time.”

“By gad!” cried the colonel. “That’s the time young Delangua said he was talking to the keeper.”

“He told us that very particularly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

They looked at each other. They had an uneasy feeling as of solid ground failing beneath their feet. Facts went spinning round, turning new and unexpected faces. And in the centre of the kaleidoscope was the dark, smiling face of Mr. Quin.

“But in that case—” began Melrose “—in that case—”

Mr. Satterthwaite, nimble-witted, finished his sentence for him. “It’s all the other way round. A plant just the same—but a plant against the valet. Oh, but it can’t be! It’s impossible. Why each of them accused themselves of the crime.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quin. “Up till then you suspected them, didn’t you?” His voice went on, placid and dreamy. “Just like something out of a book, you said, colonel. They got the idea there. It’s what the innocent hero and heroine do. Of course it made you think them innocent—there was the force

of tradition behind them. Mr. Satterthwaite has been saying all along it was like something on the stage. You were both right. It wasn't real. You've been saying so all along without knowing what you were saying. They'd have told a much better story than that if they'd wanted to be believed."

The two men looked at him helplessly.

"It would be clever," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "It would be diabolically clever. And I've thought of something else. The butler said he went in at seven to shut the windows—so he must have expected them to be open."

"That's the way Delangue came in," said Mr. Quin. "He killed Sir James with one blow, and he and she together did what they had to do—"

He looked at Mr. Satterthwaite, encouraging him to reconstruct the scene. He did so, hesitatingly.

"They smashed the clock and put it on its side. Yes. They altered the watch and smashed it. Then he went out of the window, and she fastened it after him. But there's one thing I don't see. Why bother with the watch at all? Why not simply put back the hands of the clock?"

"The clock was always a little obvious," said Mr. Quin.

"Anyone might have seen through a rather transparent device like that."

"But surely the watch was too far-fetched. Why, it was pure chance that we ever thought of the watch."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Quin. "It was the lady's suggestion, remember."

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him, fascinated.

"And yet, you know," said Mr. Quin dreamily, "the one person who wouldn't be likely to overlook the watch would be the valet. Valets know better than anyone what their masters carry in their pockets. If he altered the clock, the valet would have altered the watch, too. They don't understand human nature, those two. They are not like Mr. Satterthwaite."

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

“I was all wrong,” he murmured humbly. “I thought that you had come to save them.”

“So I did,” said Mr. Quin. “Oh! Not those two—the others. Perhaps you didn’t notice the lady’s maid? She wasn’t wearing blue brocade, or acting a dramatic part. But she’s really a very pretty girl, and I think she loves that man Jennings very much. I think that between you you’ll be able to save her man from getting hanged.”

“We’ve no proof of any kind,” said Colonel Melrose heavily.

Mr. Quin smiled. “Mr. Satterthwaite has.”

“I?” Mr. Satterthwaite was astonished.

Mr. Quin went on. “You’ve got a proof that that watch wasn’t smashed in Sir James’s pocket. You can’t smash a watch like that without opening the case. Just try it and see. Someone took the watch out and opened it, set back the hands, smashed the glass, and then shut it and put it back. They never noticed that a fragment of glass was missing.”

“Oh!” cried Mr. Satterthwaite. His hand flew to his waistcoat pocket. He drew out a fragment of curved glass.

It was his moment.

“With this,” said Mr. Satterthwaite importantly, “I shall save a man from death.”

The Golden Ball And Other Stories (1971)

By Agatha Christie

One

THE LISTERDALE MYSTERY

“The Listerdale Mystery” was first published as “The Benevolent Butler” in Grand Magazine, December 1925.

Mrs. St. Vincent was adding up figures. Once or twice she sighed, and her hand stole to her aching forehead. She had always disliked arithmetic. It was unfortunate that nowadays her life should seem to be composed entirely of one particular kind of sum, the ceaseless adding together of small necessary items of expenditure making a total that never failed to surprise and alarm her.

Surely it couldn't come to that! She went back over the figures. She had made a trifling error in the pence, but otherwise the figures were correct.

Mrs. St. Vincent sighed again. Her headache by now was very bad indeed. She looked up as the door opened and her daughter Barbara came into the room. Barbara St. Vincent was a very pretty girl, she had her mother's delicate features, and the same proud turn of the head, but her eyes were dark instead of blue, and she had a different mouth, a sulky red mouth not without attraction.

“Oh! Mother,” she cried. “Still juggling with those horrid old accounts? Throw them all into the fire.”

“We must know where we are,” said Mrs. St. Vincent uncertainly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“We're always in the same boat,” she said drily. “Damned hard up. Down to the last penny as usual.”

Mrs. St. Vincent sighed.

“I wish—” she began, and then stopped.

“I must find something to do,” said Barbara in hard tones. “And find it quickly. After all, I have taken that shorthand and typing course. So have about one million other girls from all I can see! ‘What experience?’ ‘None, but—’ ‘Oh! thank you, good morning. We’ll let you know.’ But they never do! I must find some other kind of a job—any job.”

“Not yet, dear,” pleaded her mother. “Wait a little longer.”

Barbara went to the window and stood looking out with unseeing eyes that took no note of the dingy line of houses opposite.

“Sometimes,” she said slowly, “I’m sorry Cousin Amy took me with her to Egypt last winter. Oh! I know I had fun—about the only fun I’ve ever had or am likely to have in my life. I did enjoy myself—enjoyed myself thoroughly. But it was very unsettling. I mean—coming back to this.”

She swept a hand round the room. Mrs. St. Vincent followed it with her eyes and winced. The room was typical of cheap furnished lodgings. A dusty aspidistra, showily ornamental furniture, a gaudy wallpaper faded in patches. There were signs that the personality of the tenants had struggled with that of the landlady; one or two pieces of good china, much cracked and mended, so that their saleable value was nil, a piece of embroidery thrown over the back of the sofa, a water colour sketch of a young girl in the fashion of twenty years ago; near enough still to Mrs. St. Vincent not to be mistaken.

“It wouldn’t matter,” continued Barbara, “if we’d never known anything else. But to think of Ansteys—”

She broke off, not trusting herself to speak of that dearly loved home which had belonged to the St. Vincent family for centuries and which was now in the hands of strangers.

“If only father—hadn’t speculated—and borrowed—”

“My dear,” said Mrs. St. Vincent, “your father was never, in any sense of the word, a businessman.”

She said it with a graceful kind of finality, and Barbara came over and gave her an aimless sort of kiss, as she murmured, “Poor old Mums. I won’t say anything.”

Mrs. St. Vincent took up her pen again, and bent over her desk. Barbara went back to the window. Presently the girl said:

“Mother. I heard from—from Jim Masterton this morning. He wants to come over and see me.”

Mrs. St. Vincent laid down her pen and looked up sharply.

“Here?” she exclaimed.

“Well, we can’t ask him to dinner at the Ritz very well,” sneered Barbara.

Her mother looked unhappy. Again she looked round the room with innate distaste.

“You’re right,” said Barbara. “It’s a disgusting place. Genteel poverty! Sounds all right—a white-washed cottage, in the country, shabby chintzes of good design, bowls of roses, crown Derby tea service that you wash up yourself. That’s what it’s like in books. In real life, with a son starting on the bottom rung of office life, it means London. Frowsy landladies, dirty children on the stairs, fellow lodgers who always seem to be half-castes, haddocks for breakfasts that aren’t quite—quite and so on.”

“If only—” began Mrs. St. Vincent. “But, really, I’m beginning to be afraid we can’t afford even this room much longer.”

“That means a bed-sitting room—horror!—for you and me,” said Barbara. “And a cupboard under the tiles for Rupert. And when Jim comes to call, I’ll receive him in that dreadful room downstairs with tabbies all round the walls knitting, and staring at us, and coughing that dreadful kind of gulping cough they have!”

There was a pause.

“Barbara,” said Mrs. St. Vincent at last. “Do you—I mean—would you—?”

She stopped, flushing a little.

“You needn’t be delicate, Mother,” said Barbara. “Nobody is nowadays. Marry Jim, I suppose you mean? I would like a shot if he asked me. But I’m so awfully afraid he won’t.”

“Oh, Barbara, dear.”

“Well, it’s one thing seeing me out there with Cousin Amy, moving (as they say in novelettes) in the best society. He did take a fancy to me. Now he’ll come here and see me in this! And he’s a funny creature, you know, fastidious and old-fashioned. I—I rather like him for that. It reminds me of Ansteys and the village—everything a hundred years behind the times, but so—so—oh! I don’t know—so fragrant. Like lavender!”

She laughed, half-ashamed of her eagerness. Mrs. St. Vincent spoke with a kind of earnest simplicity.

“I should like you to marry Jim Masterton,” she said. “He is—one of us. He is very well off, also, but that I don’t mind about so much.”

“I do,” said Barbara. “I’m sick of being hard up.”

“But, Barbara, it isn’t—”

“Only for that? No. I do really. I—oh! Mother, can’t you see I do?”

Mrs. St. Vincent looked very unhappy.

“I wish he could see you in your proper setting, darling,” she said wistfully.

“Oh, well!” said Barbara. “Why worry? We might as well try and be cheerful about things. Sorry I’ve had such a grouch. Cheer up, darling.”

She bent over her mother, kissed her forehead lightly, and went out. Mrs. St. Vincent, relinquishing all attempts at finance, sat down on the uncomfortable sofa. Her thoughts ran round in circles like squirrels in a cage.

“One may say what one likes, appearances do put a man off. Not later—not if they were really engaged. He’d know then what a sweet, dear girl she is. But it’s so easy for young people to take the tone of their surroundings. Rupert, now, he’s quite different from what he used to be. Not that I want my children to be stuck up. That’s not it a bit. But I should hate it if Rupert got engaged to that dreadful girl in the tobacconist’s. I daresay she may be a very nice girl, really. But she’s not our kind. It’s all so difficult. Poor little Babs. If I could do anything—anything. But where’s the money to come from? We’ve sold everything to give Rupert his start. We really can’t even afford this.”

To distract herself Mrs. St. Vincent picked up the Morning Post, and glanced down the advertisements on the front page. Most of them she knew by heart. People who wanted capital, people who had capital and were anxious to dispose of it on note of hand alone, people who wanted to buy teeth (she always wondered why), people who wanted to sell furs and gowns and who had optimistic ideas on the subject of price.

Suddenly she stiffened to attention. Again and again she read the printed words.

“To gentle people only. Small house in Westminster, exquisitely furnished, offered to those who would really care for it. Rent purely nominal. No agents.”

A very ordinary advertisement. She had read many the same or—well, nearly the same. Nominal rent, that was where the trap lay.

Yet, since she was restless and anxious to escape from her thoughts she put on her hat straight away, and took a convenient bus to the address given in the advertisement.

It proved to be that of a firm of house agents. Not a new bustling firm—a rather decrepit, old-fashioned place. Rather timidly she produced the advertisement, which she had torn out, and asked for particulars.

The white-haired old gentleman who was attending to her stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Perfectly. Yes, perfectly, madam. That house, the house mentioned in the advertisement is No. 7 Cheviot Place. You would like an order?”

“I should like to know the rent first?” said Mrs. St. Vincent.

“Ah! the rent. The exact figure is not settled, but I can assure you that it is purely nominal.”

“Ideas of what is purely nominal can vary,” said Mrs. St. Vincent.

The old gentleman permitted himself to chuckle a little.

“Yes, that’s an old trick—an old trick. But you can take my word for it, it isn’t so in this case. Two or three guineas a week, perhaps, not more.”

Mrs. St. Vincent decided to have the order. Not, of course, that there was any real likelihood of her being able to afford the place. But, after all, she might just see it. There must be some grave disadvantage attaching to it, to be offered at such a price.

But her heart gave a little throb as she looked up at the outside of 7 Cheviot Place. A gem of a house. Queen Anne, and in perfect condition! A butler answered the door, he had grey hair and little side whiskers, and the meditative calm of an archbishop. A kindly archbishop, Mrs. St. Vincent thought.

He accepted the order with a benevolent air.

“Certainly, madam. I will show you over. The house is ready for occupation.”

He went before her, opening doors, announcing rooms.

“The drawing room, the white study, a powder closet through here, madam.”

It was perfect—a dream. The furniture all of the period, each piece with signs of wear, but polished with loving care. The loose rugs were of beautiful dim old colours. In each room were bowls of fresh flowers. The back of the house looked over the Green Park. The whole place radiated an old-world charm.

The tears came into Mrs. St. Vincent’s eyes, and she fought them back with difficulty. So had Ansteys looked—Ansteys. . . .

She wondered whether the butler had noticed her emotion. If so, he was too much the perfectly trained servant to show it. She liked these old servants, one felt safe with them, at ease. They were like friends.

“It is a beautiful house,” she said softly. “Very beautiful. I am glad to have seen it.”

“Is it for yourself alone, madam?”

“For myself and my son and daughter. But I’m afraid—”

She broke off. She wanted it so dreadfully—so dreadfully.

She felt instinctively that the butler understood. He did not look at her, as he said in a detached impersonal way:

“I happen to be aware, madam, that the owner requires above all, suitable tenants. The rent is of no importance to him. He wants the house to be tenanted by someone who will really care for and appreciate it.”

“I should appreciate it,” said Mrs. St. Vincent in a low voice.

She turned to go.

“Thank you for showing me over,” she said courteously.

“Not at all, madam.”

He stood in the doorway, very correct and upright as she walked away down the street. She thought to herself: “He knows. He’s sorry for me. He’s one of the old lot too. He’d like me to have it—not a labour member, or a button manufacturer! We’re dying out, our sort, but we band together.”

In the end she decided not to go back to the agents. What was the good? She could afford the rent—but there were servants to be considered. There would have to be servants in a house like that.

The next morning a letter lay by her plate. It was from the house agents. It offered her the tenancy of 7 Cheviot Place for six months at two guineas a week, and went on: “You have, I presume, taken into consideration the fact that the servants are remaining at the landlord’s expense? It is really a unique offer.”

It was. So startled was she by it, that she read the letter out. A fire of questions followed and she described her visit of yesterday.

“Secretive little Mums!” cried Barbara. “Is it really so lovely?”

Rupert cleared his throat, and began a judicial cross-questioning.

“There’s something behind all this. It’s fishy if you ask me. Decidedly fishy.”

“So’s my egg,” said Barbara wrinkling her nose. “Ugh! Why should there be something behind it? That’s just like you, Rupert, always making mysteries out of nothing. It’s those dreadful detective stories you’re always reading.”

“The rent’s a joke,” said Rupert. “In the city,” he added importantly, “one gets wise to all sorts of queer things. I tell you, there’s something very fishy about this business.”

“Nonsense,” said Barbara. “House belongs to a man with lots of money, he’s fond of it, and he wants it lived in by decent people whilst he’s away. Something of that kind. Money’s probably no object to him.”

“What did you say the address was?” asked Rupert of his mother.

“Seven Cheviot Place.”

“Whew!” He pushed back his chair. “I say, this is exciting. That’s the house Lord Listerdale disappeared from.”

“Are you sure?” asked Mrs. St. Vincent doubtfully.

“Positive. He’s got a lot of other houses all over London, but this is the one he lived in. He walked out of it one evening saying he was going to his club, and nobody ever saw him again. Supposed to have done a bunk to East Africa or somewhere like that, but nobody knows why. Depend upon it, he was murdered in that house. You say there’s a lot of panelling?”

“Ye-es,” said Mrs. St. Vincent faintly: “but—”

Rupert gave her no time. He went on with immense enthusiasm.

“Panelling! There you are. Sure to be a secret recess somewhere. Body’s been stuffed in there and has been there ever since. Perhaps it was embalmed first.”

“Rupert, dear, don’t talk nonsense,” said his mother.

“Don’t be a double-dyed idiot,” said Barbara. “You’ve been taking that peroxide blonde to the pictures too much.”

Rupert rose with dignity—such dignity as his lanky and awkward age allowed, and delivered a final ultimatum.

“You take that house, Mums. I’ll ferret out the mystery. You see if I don’t.”

Rupert departed hurriedly, in fear of being late at the office.

The eyes of the two women met.

“Could we, Mother?” murmured Barbara tremulously. “Oh! if we could.”

“The servants,” said Mrs. St. Vincent pathetically, “would eat, you know. I mean, of course, one would want them to—but that’s the drawback. One can so easily—just do without things—when it’s only oneself.”

She looked piteously at Barbara, and the girl nodded.

“We must think it over,” said the mother.

But in reality her mind was made up. She had seen the sparkle in the girl’s eyes. She thought to herself: “Jim Masterton must see her in proper surroundings. This is a chance—a wonderful chance. I must take it.”

She sat down and wrote to the agents accepting their offer.

“Quentin, where did the lilies come from? I really can’t buy expensive flowers.”

“They were sent up from King’s Cheviot, madam. It has always been the custom here.”

The butler withdrew. Mrs. St. Vincent heaved a sigh of relief. What would she do without Quentin? He made everything so easy. She thought to herself, “It’s too good to last. I shall wake up soon, I know I shall, and find it’s been all a dream. I’m so happy here—two months already, and it’s passed like a flash.”

Life indeed had been astonishingly pleasant. Quentin, the butler, had displayed himself the autocrat of 7 Cheviot Place. “If you will leave everything to me, madam,” he had said respectfully. “You will find it the best way.”

Each week, he brought her the housekeeping books, their totals astonishingly low. There were only two other servants, a cook and a housemaid. They were pleasant in manner, and efficient in their duties, but it was Quentin who ran the house. Game and poultry appeared on the table sometimes, causing Mrs. St. Vincent solicitude. Quentin reassured her. Sent up from Lord Listerdale’s country seat, King’s Cheviot, or from his Yorkshire moor. “It has always been the custom, madam.”

Privately Mrs. St. Vincent doubted whether the absent Lord Listerdale would agree with those words. She was inclined to suspect Quentin of usurping his master's authority. It was clear that he had taken a fancy to them, and that in his eyes nothing was too good for them.

Her curiosity aroused by Rupert's declaration, Mrs. St. Vincent had made a tentative reference to Lord Listerdale when she next interviewed the house agent. The white-haired old gentleman had responded immediately.

Yes, Lord Listerdale was in East Africa, had been there for the last eighteen months.

"Our client is rather an eccentric man," he had said, smiling broadly. "He left London in a most unconventional manner, as you may perhaps remember? Not a word to anyone. The newspapers got hold of it. There were actually inquiries on foot at Scotland Yard. Luckily news was received from Lord Listerdale himself from East Africa. He invested his cousin, Colonel Carfax, with power of attorney. It is the latter who conducts all Lord Listerdale's affairs. Yes, rather eccentric, I fear. He has always been a great traveller in the wilds—it is quite on the cards that he may not return for years to England, though he is getting on in years."

"Surely he is not so very old," said Mrs. St. Vincent, with a sudden memory of a bluff, bearded face, rather like an Elizabethan sailor, which she had once noticed in an illustrated magazine.

"Middle-aged," said the white-haired gentleman. "Fifty-three, according to Debrett."

This conversation Mrs. St. Vincent had retailed to Rupert with the intention of rebuking that young gentleman.

Rupert, however, was undismayed.

"It looks fishier than ever to me," he had declared. "Who's this Colonel Carfax? Probably comes into the title if anything happens to Listerdale. The letter from East Africa was probably forged. In three years, or whatever it

is, this Carfax will presume death, and take the title. Meantime, he's got all the handling of the estate. Very fishy, I call it."

He had condescended graciously to approve the house. In his leisure moments he was inclined to tap the panelling and make elaborate measurements for the possible location of a secret room, but little by little his interest in the mystery of Lord Listerdale abated. He was also less enthusiastic on the subject of the tobacconist's daughter. Atmosphere tells.

To Barbara the house had brought great satisfaction. Jim Masterton had come home, and was a frequent visitor. He and Mrs. St. Vincent got on splendidly together, and he said something to Barbara one day that startled her.

"This house is a wonderful setting for your mother, you know."

"For Mother?"

"Yes. It was made for her! She belongs to it in an extraordinary way. You know there's something queer about this house altogether, something uncanny and haunting."

"Don't get like Rupert," Barbara implored him. "He is convinced that the wicked Colonel Carfax murdered Lord Listerdale and hid his body under the floor."

Masterton laughed.

"I admire Rupert's detective zeal. No, I didn't mean anything of that kind. But there's something in the air, some atmosphere that one doesn't quite understand."

They had been three months in Cheviot Place when Barbara came to her mother with a radiant face.

"Jim and I—we're engaged. Yes—last night. Oh, Mother! It all seems like a fairy tale come true."

"Oh, my dear! I'm so glad—so glad."

Mother and daughter clasped each other close.

“You know Jim’s almost as much in love with you as he is with me,” said Barbara at last, with a mischievous laugh.

Mrs. St. Vincent blushed very prettily.

“He is,” persisted the girl. “You thought this house would make such a beautiful setting for me, and all the time it’s really a setting for you. Rupert and I don’t quite belong here. You do.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, darling.”

“It’s not nonsense. There’s a flavour of enchanted castle about it, with you as an enchanted princess and Quentin as—as—oh! a benevolent magician.”

Mrs. St. Vincent laughed and admitted the last item.

Rupert received the news of his sister’s engagement very calmly.

“I thought there was something of the kind in the wind,” he observed sapiently.

He and his mother were dining alone together; Barbara was out with Jim.

Quentin placed the port in front of him, and withdrew noiselessly.

“That’s a rum old bird,” said Rupert, nodding towards the closed door.

“There’s something odd about him, you know, something—”

“Not fishy?” interrupted Mrs. St. Vincent, with a faint smile.

“Why, Mother, how did you know what I was going to say?” demanded Rupert in all seriousness.

“It’s rather a word of yours, darling. You think everything is fishy. I suppose you have an idea that it was Quentin who did away with Lord Listerdale and put him under the floor?”

“Behind the panelling,” corrected Rupert. “You always get things a little bit wrong, Mother. No, I’ve inquired about that. Quentin was down at King’s Cheviot at the time.”

Mrs. St. Vincent smiled at him, as she rose from table and went up to the drawing room. In some ways Rupert was a long time growing up.

Yet a sudden wonder swept over her for the first time as to Lord Listerdale’s reasons for leaving England so abruptly. There must be something behind it, to account for that sudden decision. She was still thinking the matter over when Quentin came in with the coffee tray, and she spoke out impulsively.

“You have been with Lord Listerdale a long time, haven’t you, Quentin?”

“Yes, madam; since I was a lad of twenty-one. That was in the late Lord’s time. I started as third footman.”

“You must know Lord Listerdale very well. What kind of a man is he?”

The butler turned the tray a little, so that she could help herself to sugar more conveniently, as he replied in even unemotional tones:

“Lord Listerdale was a very selfish gentleman, madam: with no consideration for others.”

He removed the tray and bore it from the room. Mrs. St. Vincent sat with her coffee cup in her hand, and a puzzled frown on her face. Something struck her as odd in the speech apart from the views it expressed. In another minute it flashed home to her.

Quentin had used the word “was” not “is.” But then, he must think—must believe—She pulled herself up. She was as bad as Rupert! But a very definite uneasiness assailed her. Afterwards she dated her first suspicions from that moment.

With Barbara’s happiness and future assured, she had time to think her own thoughts, and against her will, they began to centre round the mystery of Lord Listerdale. What was the real story? Whatever it was Quentin knew

something about it. Those had been odd words of his—“a very selfish gentleman—no consideration for others.” What lay behind them? He had spoken as a judge might speak, detachedly and impartially.

Was Quentin involved in Lord Listerdale’s disappearance? Had he taken an active part in any tragedy there might have been? After all, ridiculous as Rupert’s assumption had seemed at the time, that single letter with its power of attorney coming from East Africa was—well, open to suspicion.

But try as she would, she could not believe any real evil of Quentin. Quentin, she told herself over and over again, was good—she used the word as simply as a child might have done. Quentin was good. But he knew something!

She never spoke with him again of his master. The subject was apparently forgotten. Rupert and Barbara had other things to think of, and there were no further discussions.

It was towards the end of August that her vague surmises crystallized into realities. Rupert had gone for a fortnight’s holiday with a friend who had a motorcycle and trailer. It was some ten days after his departure that Mrs. St. Vincent was startled to see him rush into the room where she sat writing.

“Rupert!” she exclaimed.

“I know, Mother. You didn’t expect to see me for another three days. But something’s happened. Anderson—my pal, you know—didn’t much care where he went, so I suggested having a look in at King’s Cheviot—”

“King’s Cheviot? But why—?”

“You know perfectly well, Mother, that I’ve always scented something fishy about things here. Well, I had a look at the old place—it’s let, you know—nothing there. Not that I actually expected to find anything—I was just nosing round, so to speak.”

Yes, she thought. Rupert was very like a dog at this moment. Hunting in circles for something vague and undefined, led by instinct, busy and happy.

“It was when we were passing through a village about eight or nine miles away that it happened—that I saw him, I mean.”

“Saw whom?”

“Quentin—just going into a little cottage. Something fishy here, I said to myself, and we stopped the bus, and I went back. I rapped on the door and he himself opened it.”

“But I don’t understand. Quentin hasn’t been away—”

“I’m coming to that, Mother. If you’d only listen, and not interrupt. It was Quentin, and it wasn’t Quentin, if you know what I mean.”

Mrs. St. Vincent clearly did not know, so he elucidated matters further.

“It was Quentin all right, but it wasn’t our Quentin. It was the real man.”

“Rupert!”

“You listen. I was taken in myself at first, and said: ‘It is Quentin, isn’t it?’ And the old Johnny said: ‘Quite right, sir, that is my name. What can I do for you?’ And then I saw that it wasn’t our man, though it was precious like him, voice and all. I asked a few questions, and it all came out. The old chap hadn’t an idea of anything fishy being on. He’d been butler to Lord Listerdale all right, and was retired on a pension and given this cottage just about the time that Lord Listerdale was supposed to have gone off to Africa. You see where that leads us. This man’s an impostor—he’s playing the part of Quentin for purposes of his own. My theory is that he came up to town that evening, pretending to be the butler from King’s Cheviot, got an interview with Lord Listerdale, killed him and hid his body behind the panelling. It’s an old house, there’s sure to be a secret recess—”

“Oh, don’t let’s go into all that again,” interrupted Mrs. St. Vincent wildly. “I can’t bear it. Why should he—that’s what I want to know—why? If he did such a thing—which I don’t believe for one minute, mind you—what was the reason for it all?”

“You’re right,” said Rupert. “Motive—that’s important. Now I’ve made inquiries. Lord Listerdale had a lot of house property. In the last two days I’ve discovered that practically every one of these houses of his has been let in the last eighteen months to people like ourselves for a merely nominal rent—and with the proviso that the servants should remain. And in every case Quentin himself—the man calling himself Quentin, I mean—has been there for part of the time as butler. That looks as though there were something—jewels, or papers—secreted in one of Lord Listerdale’s houses, and the gang doesn’t know which. I’m assuming a gang, but of course this fellow Quentin may be in it single-handed. There’s a—”

Mrs. St. Vincent interrupted him with a certain amount of determination:

“Rupert! Do stop talking for one minute. You’re making my head spin. Anyway, what you are saying is nonsense—about gangs and hidden papers.”

“There’s another theory,” admitted Rupert. “This Quentin may be someone that Lord Listerdale has injured. The real butler told me a long story about a man called Samuel Lowe—an under-gardener he was, and about the same height and build as Quentin himself. He’d got a grudge against Listerdale —”

Mrs. St. Vincent started.

“With no consideration for others.” The words came back to her mind in their passionless, measured accents. Inadequate words, but what might they not stand for?

In her absorption she hardly listened to Rupert. He made a rapid explanation of something that she did not take in, and went hurriedly from the room.

Then she woke up. Where had Rupert gone? What was he going to do? She had not caught his last words. Perhaps he was going for the police. In that case. . . .

She rose abruptly and rang the bell. With his usual promptness, Quentin answered it.

“You rang, madam?”

“Yes. Come in, please, and shut the door.”

The butler obeyed, and Mrs. St. Vincent was silent a moment whilst she studied him with earnest eyes.

She thought: “He’s been kind to me—nobody knows how kind. The children wouldn’t understand. This wild story of Rupert’s may be all nonsense—on the other hand, there may—yes, there may—be something in it. Why should one judge? One can’t know. The rights and wrongs of it, I mean . . . And I’d stake my life—yes, I would!—on his being a good man.”

Flushed and tremulous, she spoke.

“Quentin, Mr. Rupert has just got back. He has been down to King’s Cheviot—to a village near there—”

She stopped, noticing the quick start he was not able to conceal.

“He has—seen someone,” she went on in measured accents.

She thought to herself: “There—he’s warned. At any rate, he’s warned.”

After that first quick start, Quentin had resumed his unruffled demeanour, but his eyes were fixed on her face, watchful and keen, with something in them she had not seen there before. They were, for the first time, the eyes of a man and not of a servant.

He hesitated for a minute, then said in a voice which also had subtly changed:

“Why do you tell me this, Mrs. St. Vincent?”

Before she could answer, the door flew open and Rupert strode into the room. With him was a dignified middle-aged man with little side whiskers

and the air of a benevolent archbishop. Quentin!

“Here he is,” said Rupert. “The real Quentin. I had him outside in the taxi. Now, Quentin, look at this man and tell me—is he Samuel Lowe?”

It was for Rupert a triumphant moment. But it was short-lived, almost at once he scented something wrong. For while the real Quentin was looking abashed and highly uncomfortable the second Quentin was smiling, a broad smile of undisguised enjoyment.

He slapped his embarrassed duplicate on the back.

“It’s all right, Quentin. Got to let the cat out of the bag some time, I suppose. You can tell ’em who I am.”

The dignified stranger drew himself up.

“This, sir,” he announced, in a reproachful tone, “is my master, Lord Listerdale, sir.”

The next minute beheld many things. First, the complete collapse of the cocksure Rupert. Before he knew what was happening, his mouth still open from the shock of the discovery, he found himself being gently manoeuvred towards the door, a friendly voice that was, and yet was not, familiar in his ear.

“It’s quite all right, my boy. No bones broken. But I want a word with your mother. Very good work of yours, to ferret me out like this.”

He was outside on the landing gazing at the shut door. The real Quentin was standing by his side, a gentle stream of explanation flowing from his lips. Inside the room Lord Listerdale was confronting Mrs. St. Vincent.

“Let me explain—if I can! I’ve been a selfish devil all my life—the fact came home to me one day. I thought I’d try a little altruism for a change, and being a fantastic kind of fool, I started my career fantastically. I’d sent subscriptions to odd things, but I felt the need of doing something—well, something personal. I’ve been sorry always for the class that can’t beg, that

must suffer in silence—poor gentlefolk. I have a lot of house property. I conceived the idea of leasing these houses to people who—well, needed and appreciated them. Young couples with their way to make, widows with sons and daughters starting in the world. Quentin has been more than butler to me, he's a friend. With his consent and assistance I borrowed his personality. I've always had a talent for acting. The idea came to me on my way to the club one night, and I went straight off to talk it over with Quentin. When I found they were making a fuss about my disappearance, I arranged that a letter should come from me in East Africa. In it, I gave full instructions to my cousin, Maurice Carfax. And—well, that's the long and short of it."

He broke off rather lamely, with an appealing glance at Mrs. St. Vincent. She stood very straight, and her eyes met his steadily.

"It was a kind plan," she said. "A very unusual one, and one that does you credit. I am—most grateful. But—of course, you understand that we cannot stay?"

"I expected that," he said. "Your pride won't let you accept what you'd probably style 'charity.' "

"Isn't that what it is?" she asked steadily.

"No," he answered. "Because I ask something in exchange."

"Something?"

"Everything." His voice rang out, the voice of one accustomed to dominate.

"When I was twenty-three," he went on, "I married the girl I loved. She died a year later. Since then I have been very lonely. I have wished very much I could find a certain lady—the lady of my dreams. . . ."

"Am I that?" she asked, very low. "I am so old—so faded."

He laughed.

“Old? You are younger than either of your children. Now I am old, if you like.”

But her laugh rang out in turn. A soft ripple of amusement.

“You? You are a boy still. A boy who loves to dress up.”

She held out her hands and he caught them in his.

Two

THE GIRL IN THE TRAIN

“The Girl in the Train” was first published in Grand Magazine, February 1924.

And that’s that!” observed George Rowland ruefully, as he gazed up at the imposing smoke-grimed façade of the building he had just quitted.

It might be said to represent very aptly the power of Money—and Money, in the person of William Rowland, uncle to the aforementioned George, had just spoken its mind very freely. In the course of a brief ten minutes, from being the apple of his uncle’s eye, the heir to his wealth, and a young man with a promising business career in front of him, George had suddenly become one of the vast army of the unemployed.

“And in these clothes they won’t even give me the dole,” reflected Mr. Rowland gloomily, “and as for writing poems and selling them at the door at twopence (or ‘what you care to give, lydy’) I simply haven’t got the brains.”

It was true that George embodied a veritable triumph of the tailor’s art. He was exquisitely and beautifully arrayed. Solomon and the lilies of the field were simply not in it with George. But man cannot live by clothes alone—unless he has had some considerable training in the art—and Mr. Rowland was painfully aware of the fact.

“And all because of that rotten show last night,” he reflected sadly.

The rotten show last night had been a Covent Garden Ball. Mr. Rowland had returned from it at a somewhat late—or rather early—hour—as a matter of fact, he could not strictly say that he remembered returning at all. Rogers, his uncle’s butler, was a helpful fellow, and could doubtless give more details on the matter. A splitting head, a cup of strong tea, and an

arrival at the office at five minutes to twelve instead of half-past nine had precipitated the catastrophe. Mr. Rowland, senior, who for twenty-four years had condoned and paid up as a tactful relative should, had suddenly abandoned these tactics and revealed himself in a totally new light. The inconsequence of George's replies (the young man's head was still opening and shutting like some mediaeval instrument of the Inquisition) had displeased him still further. William Rowland was nothing if not thorough. He cast his nephew adrift upon the world in a few short succinct words, and then settled down to his interrupted survey of some oilfields in Peru.

George Rowland shook the dust of his uncle's office from off his feet, and stepped out into the City of London. George was a practical fellow. A good lunch, he considered, was essential to a review of the situation. He had it. Then he retraced his steps to the family mansion. Rogers opened the door. His well-trained face expressed no surprise at seeing George at this unusual hour.

"Good afternoon, Rogers. Just pack up my things for me, will you? I'm leaving here."

"Yes, sir. Just for a short visit, sir?"

"For good, Rogers. I am going to the colonies this afternoon."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes. That is, if there is a suitable boat. Do you know anything about the boats, Rogers?"

"Which colony were you thinking of visiting, sir?"

"I'm not particular. Any of 'em will do. Let's say Australia. What do you think of the idea, Rogers?"

Rogers coughed discreetly.

"Well, sir, I've certainly heard it said that there's room out there for anyone who really wants to work."

Mr. Rowland gazed at him with interest and admiration.

“Very neatly put, Rogers. Just what I was thinking myself. I shan’t go to Australia—not today, at any rate. Fetch me an A.B.C., will you? We will select something nearer at hand.”

Rogers brought the required volume. George opened it at random and turned the pages with a rapid hand.

“Perth—too far away—Putney Bridge—too near at hand. Ramsgate? I think not. Reigate also leaves me cold. Why—what an extraordinary thing! There’s actually a place called Rowland’s Castle. Ever heard of it, Rogers?”

“I fancy, sir, that you go there from Waterloo.”

“What an extraordinary fellow you are, Rogers. You know everything. Well, well, Rowland’s Castle! I wonder what sort of a place it is.”

“Not much of a place, I should say, sir.”

“All the better; there’ll be less competition. These quiet little country hamlets have a lot of the old feudal spirit knocking about. The last of the original Rowlands ought to meet with instant appreciation. I shouldn’t wonder if they elected me mayor in a week.”

He shut up the A.B.C. with a bang.

“The die is cast. Pack me a small suitcase, will you, Rogers? Also my compliments to the cook, and will she oblige me with the loan of the cat. Dick Whittington, you know. When you set out to become a Lord Mayor, a cat is essential.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but the cat is not available at the present moment.”

“How is that?”

“A family of eight, sir. Arrived this morning.”

“You don’t say so. I thought its name was Peter.”

“So it is, sir. A great surprise to all of us.”

“A case of careless christening and the deceitful sex, eh? Well, well, I shall have to go catless. Pack up those things at once, will you?”

“Very good, sir.”

Rogers hesitated, then advanced a little farther into the room.

“You’ll excuse the liberty, sir, but if I was you, I shouldn’t take too much notice of anything Mr. Rowland said this morning. He was at one of those city dinners last night, and—”

“Say no more,” said George. “I understand.”

“And being inclined to gout—”

“I know, I know. Rather a strenuous evening for you, Rogers, with two of us, eh? But I’ve set my heart on distinguishing myself at Rowland’s Castle—the cradle of my historic race—that would go well in a speech, wouldn’t it? A wire to me there, or a discreet advertisement in the morning papers, will recall me at any time if a fricassée of veal is in preparation. And now—to Waterloo!—as Wellington said on the eve of the historic battle.”

Waterloo Station was not at its brightest and best that afternoon. Mr. Rowland eventually discovered a train that would take him to his destination, but it was an undistinguished train, an unimposing train—a train that nobody seemed anxious to travel by. Mr. Rowland had a first-class carriage to himself, up in the front of the train. A fog was descending in an indeterminate way over the metropolis, now it lifted, now it descended. The platform was deserted, and only the asthmatic breathing of the engine broke the silence.

And then, all of a sudden, things began to happen with bewildering rapidity.

A girl happened first. She wrenched open the door and jumped in, rousing Mr. Rowland from something perilously near a nap, exclaiming as she did so: “Oh! hide me—oh! please hide me.”

George was essentially a man of action—his not to reason why, his but to do and die, etc. There is only one place to hide in a railway carriage—under the seat. In seven seconds the girl was bestowed there, and George's suitcase, negligently standing on end, covered her retreat. None too soon. An infuriated face appeared at the carriage window.

“My niece! You have her here. I want my niece.”

George, a little breathless, was reclining in the corner, deep in the sporting column of the evening paper, one-thirty edition. He laid it aside with the air of a man recalling himself from far away.

“I beg your pardon, sir?” he said politely.

“My niece—what have you done with her?”

Acting on the policy that attack is always better than defence, George leaped into action.

“What the devil do you mean?” he cried, with a very creditable imitation of his own uncle's manner.

The other paused a minute, taken aback by this sudden fierceness. He was a fat man, still panting a little as though he had run some way. His hair was cut en brosse, and he had a moustache of the Hohenzollern persuasion. His accents were decidedly guttural, and the stiffness of his carriage denoted that he was more at home in uniform than out of it. George had the true-born Briton's prejudice against foreigners—and an especial distaste for German-looking foreigners.

“What the devil do you mean, sir?” he repeated angrily.

“She came in here,” said the other. “I saw her. What have you done with her?”

George flung aside the paper and thrust his head and shoulders through the window.

“So that’s it, is it?” he roared. “Blackmail. But you’ve tried it on the wrong person. I read all about you in the Daily Mail this morning. Here, guard, guard!”

Already attracted from afar by the altercation, that functionary came hurrying up.

“Here, guard,” said Mr. Rowland, with that air of authority which the lower classes so adore. “This fellow is annoying me. I’ll give him in charge for attempted blackmail if necessary. Pretends I’ve got his niece hidden in here. There’s a regular gang of these foreigners trying this sort of thing on. It ought to be stopped. Take him away, will you? Here’s my card if you want it.”

The guard looked from one to the other. His mind was soon made up. His training led him to despise foreigners, and to respect and admire well-dressed gentlemen who travelled first class.

He laid his hand on the shoulder of the intruder.

“Here,” he said, “you come out of this.”

At this crisis the stranger’s English failed him, and he plunged into passionate profanity in his native tongue.

“That’s enough of that,” said the guard. “Stand away, will you? She’s due out.”

Flags were waved and whistles were blown. With an unwilling jerk the train drew out of the station.

George remained at his observation post until they were clear of the platform. Then he drew in his head, and picking up the suit-case tossed it into the rack.

“It’s quite all right. You can come out,” he said reassuringly.

The girl crawled out.

“Oh!” she gasped. “How can I thank you?”

“That’s quite all right. It’s been a pleasure, I assure you,” returned George nonchalantly.

He smiled at her reassuringly. There was a slightly puzzled look in her eyes. She seemed to be missing something to which she was accustomed. At that moment, she caught sight of herself in the narrow glass opposite, and gave a heartfelt gasp.

Whether the carriage cleaners do, or do not, sweep under the seats every day is doubtful. Appearances were against their doing so, but it may be that every particle of dirt and smoke finds its way there like a homing bird. George had hardly had time to take in the girl’s appearance, so sudden had been her arrival, and so brief the space of time before she crawled into hiding, but it was certainly a trim and well-dressed young woman who had disappeared under the seat. Now her little red hat was crushed and dented, and her face was disfigured with long streaks of dirt.

“Oh!” said the girl.

She fumbled for her bag. George, with the tact of a true gentleman, looked fixedly out of the window and admired the streets of London south of the Thames.

“How can I thank you?” said the girl again.

Taking this as a hint that conversation might now be resumed, George withdrew his gaze, and made another polite disclaimer, but this time with a good deal of added warmth in his manner.

The girl was absolutely lovely! Never before, George told himself, had he seen such a lovely girl. The emprossment of his manner became even more marked.

“I think it was simply splendid of you,” said the girl with enthusiasm.

“Not at all. Easiest thing in the world. Only too pleased been of use,” mumbled George.

“Splendid,” she reiterated emphatically.

It is undoubtedly pleasant to have the loveliest girl you have even seen gazing into your eyes and telling you how splendid you are. George enjoyed it as much as anyone could.

Then there came a rather difficult silence. It seemed to dawn upon the girl that further explanation might be expected. She flushed a little.

“The awkward part of it is,” she said nervously, “that I’m afraid I can’t explain.”

She looked at him with a piteous air of uncertainty.

“You can’t explain?”

“No.”

“How perfectly splendid!” said Mr. Rowland with enthusiasm.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said, How perfectly splendid. Just like one of those books that keep you up all night. The heroine always says ‘I can’t explain’ in the first chapter. She explains in the last, of course, and there’s never any real reason why she shouldn’t have done so in the beginning—except that it would spoil the story. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to be mixed up in a real mystery—I didn’t know there were such things. I hope it’s got something to do with secret documents of immense importance, and the Balkan express. I dote upon the Balkan express.”

The girl stared at him with wide, suspicious eyes.

“What makes you say the Balkan express?” she asked sharply.

“I hope I haven’t been indiscreet,” George hastened to put in. “Your uncle travelled by it, perhaps.”

“My uncle—” She paused, then began again. “My uncle—”

“Quite so,” said George sympathetically. “I’ve got an uncle myself. Nobody should be held responsible for their uncles. Nature’s little throwbacks—that’s how I look at it.”

The girl began to laugh suddenly. When she spoke George was aware of the slight foreign inflection in her voice. At first he had taken her to be English.

“What a refreshing and unusual person you are, Mr.—”

“Rowland. George to my friends.”

“My name is Elizabeth—”

She stopped abruptly.

“I like the name of Elizabeth,” said George, to cover her momentary confusion. “They don’t call you Bessie, or anything horrible like that, I hope?”

She shook her head.

“Well,” said George, “now that we know each other, we’d better get down to business. If you’ll stand up, Elizabeth, I’ll brush down the back of your coat.”

She stood up obediently, and George was as good as his word.

“Thank you, Mr. Rowland.”

“George. George to my friends, remember. And you can’t come into my nice empty carriage, roll under the seat, induce me to tell lies to your uncle, and then refuse to be friends, can you?”

“Thank you, George.”

“That’s better.”

“Do I look quite all right now?” asked Elizabeth, trying to see over her left shoulder.

“You look—oh! you look—you look all right,” said George, curbing himself sternly.

“It was all so sudden, you see,” explained the girl.

“It must have been.”

“He saw us in the taxi, and then at the station I just bolted in here knowing he was close behind me. Where is this train going to, by the way?”

“Rowland’s Castle,” said George firmly.

The girl looked puzzled.

“Rowland’s Castle?”

“Not at once, of course. Only after a good deal of stopping and slow going. But I confidently expect to be there before midnight. The old South-Western was a very reliable line—slow but sure—and I’m sure the Southern Railway is keeping up the old traditions.”

“I don’t know that I want to go to Rowland’s Castle,” said Elizabeth doubtfully.

“You hurt me. It’s a delightful spot.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“Not exactly. But there are lots of other places you can go to, if you don’t fancy Rowland’s Castle. There’s Woking, and Weybridge, and Wimbledon. The train is sure to stop at one or other of them.”

“I see,” said the girl. “Yes, I can get out there, and perhaps motor back to London. That would be the best plan, I think.”

Even as she spoke, the train began to slow up. Mr. Rowland gazed at her with appealing eyes.

“If I can do anything—”

“No, indeed. You’ve done a lot already.”

There was a pause, then the girl broke out suddenly:

“I—I wish I could explain. I—”

“For heaven’s sake don’t do that! It would spoil everything. But look here, isn’t there anything that I could do? Carry the secret papers to Vienna—or something of that kind? There always are secret papers. Do give me a chance.”

The train had stopped. Elizabeth jumped quickly out on to the platform. She turned and spoke to him through the window.

“Are you in earnest? Would you really do something for us—for me?”

“I’d do anything in the world for you, Elizabeth.”

“Even if I could give you no reasons?”

“Rotten things, reasons!”

“Even if it were—dangerous?”

“The more danger, the better.”

She hesitated a minute then seemed to make up her mind.

“Lean out of the window. Look down the platform as though you weren’t really looking.” Mr. Rowland endeavoured to comply with this somewhat difficult recommendation. “Do you see that man getting in—with a small dark beard—light overcoat? Follow him, see what he does and where he goes.”

“Is that all?” asked Mr. Rowland. “What do I—?”

She interrupted him.

“Further instructions will be sent to you. Watch him—and guard this.” She thrust a small sealed packet into his hand. “Guard it with your life. It’s the key to everything.”

The train went on. Mr. Rowland remained staring out of the window, watching Elizabeth’s tall, graceful figure threading its way down the platform. In his hand he clutched the small sealed packet.

The rest of his journey was both monotonous and uneventful. The train was a slow one. It stopped everywhere. At every station, George’s head shot out of the window, in case his quarry should alight. Occasionally he strolled up and down the platform when the wait promised to be a long one, and reassured himself that the man was still there.

The eventual destination of the train was Portsmouth, and it was there that the black-bearded traveller alighted. He made his way to a small second-class hotel where he booked a room. Mr. Rowland also booked a room.

The rooms were in the same corridor, two doors from each other. The arrangement seemed satisfactory to George. He was a complete novice in the art of shadowing, but was anxious to acquit himself well, and justify Elizabeth’s trust in him.

At dinner George was given a table not far from that of his quarry. The room was not full, and the majority of the diners George put down as commercial travellers, quiet respectable men who ate their food with appetite. Only one man attracted his special notice, a small man with ginger hair and moustache and a suggestion of horsiness in his apparel. He seemed to be interested in George also, and suggested a drink and a game of billiards when the meal had come to a close. But George had just espied the black-bearded man putting on his hat and overcoat, and declined politely. In another minute he was out in the street, gaining fresh insight into the difficult art of shadowing. The chase was a long and a weary one—and in the end it seemed to lead nowhere. After twisting and turning through the

streets of Portsmouth for about four miles, the man returned to the hotel, George hard upon his heels. A faint doubt assailed the latter. Was it possible that the man was aware of his presence? As he debated this point, standing in the hall, the outer door was pushed open, and the little ginger man entered. Evidently he, too, had been out for a stroll.

George was suddenly aware that the beauteous damsel in the office was addressing him.

“Mr. Rowland, isn’t it? Two gentlemen have called to see you. Two foreign gentlemen. They are in the little room at the end of the passage.”

Somewhat astonished, George sought the room in question. Two men who were sitting there, rose to their feet and bowed punctiliously.

“Mr. Rowland? I have no doubt, sir, that you can guess our identity.”

George gazed from one to the other of them. The spokesman was the elder of the two, a grey-haired, pompous gentleman who spoke excellent English. The other was a tall, somewhat pimply young man, with a blond Teutonic cast of countenance which was not rendered more attractive by the fierce scowl which he wore at the present moment.

Somewhat relieved to find that neither of his visitors was the old gentleman he had encountered at Waterloo, George assumed his most debonair manner.

“Pray sit down, gentlemen. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance. How about a drink?”

The elder man held up a protesting hand.

“Thank you, Lord Rowland—not for us. We have but a few brief moments—just time for you to answer a question.”

“It’s very kind of you to elect me to the peerage,” said George. “I’m sorry you won’t have a drink. And what is this momentous question?”

“Lord Rowland, you left London in company with a certain lady. You arrived here alone. Where is the lady?”

George rose to his feet.

“I fail to understand the question,” he said coldly, speaking as much like the hero of a novel as he could. “I have the honour to wish you good evening, gentlemen.”

“But you do understand it. You understand it perfectly,” cried the younger man, breaking out suddenly. “What have you done with Alexa?”

“Be calm, sir,” murmured the other. “I beg of you to be calm.”

“I can assure you,” said George, “that I know no lady of that name. There is some mistake.”

The older man was eyeing him keenly.

“That can hardly be,” he said drily. “I took the liberty of examining the hotel register. You entered yourself as Mr. G. Rowland of Rowland’s Castle.”

George was forced to blush.

“A—a little joke of mine,” he explained feebly.

“A somewhat poor subterfuge. Come, let us not beat about the bush. Where is Her Highness?”

“If you mean Elizabeth—”

With a howl of rage the young man flung himself forward again.

“Insolent pig-dog! To speak of her thus.”

“I am referring,” said the other slowly, “as you very well know, to the Grand Duchess Anastasia Sophia Alexandra Marie Helena Olga Elizabeth of Catonia.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Rowland helplessly.

He tried to recall all that he had ever known of Catonia. It was, as far as he remembered, a small Balkan kingdom, and he seemed to remember something about a revolution having occurred there. He rallied himself with an effort.

“Evidently we mean the same person,” he said cheerfully, “only I call her Elizabeth.”

“You will give me satisfaction for that,” snarled the younger man. “We will fight.”

“Fight?”

“A duel.”

“I never fight duels,” said Mr. Rowland firmly.

“Why not?” demanded the other unpleasantly.

“I’m too afraid of getting hurt.”

“Aha! is that so? Then I will at least pull your nose for you.”

The younger man advanced fiercely. Exactly what happened was difficult to see, but he described a sudden semicircle in the air and fell to the ground with a heavy thud. He picked himself up in a dazed manner. Mr. Rowland was smiling pleasantly.

“As I was saying,” he remarked, “I’m always afraid of getting hurt. That’s why I thought it well to learn jujitsu.”

There was a pause. The two foreigners looked doubtfully at this amiable looking young man, as though they suddenly realized that some dangerous quality lurked behind the pleasant nonchalance of his manner. The younger Teuton was white with passion.

“You will repent this,” he hissed.

The older man retained his dignity.

“That is your last word, Lord Rowland? You refuse to tell us Her Highness’s whereabouts?”

“I am unaware of them myself.”

“You can hardly expect me to believe that.”

“I am afraid you are of an unbelieving nature, sir.”

The other merely shook his head, and murmuring: “This is not the end. You will hear from us again,” the two men took their leave.

George passed his hand over his brow. Events were proceeding at a bewildering rate. He was evidently mixed up in a first-class European scandal.

“It might even mean another war,” said George hopefully, as he hunted round to see what had become of the man with the black beard.

To his great relief, he discovered him sitting in a corner of the commercial room. George sat down in another corner. In about three minutes the black-bearded man got up and went up to bed. George followed and saw him go into his room and close the door. George heaved a sigh of relief.

“I need a night’s rest,” he murmured. “Need it badly.”

Then a dire thought struck him. Supposing the black-bearded man had realized that George was on his trail? Supposing that he should slip away during the night whilst George himself was sleeping the sleep of the just? A few minutes’ reflection suggested to Mr. Rowland a way of dealing with his difficulty. He unravelled one of his socks till he got a good length of neutral-coloured wool, then creeping quietly out of his room, he pasted one end of the wool to the farther side of the stranger’s door with stamp paper, carrying the wool across it and along to his own room. There he hung the end with a small silver bell—a relic of last night’s entertainment. He surveyed these arrangements with a good deal of satisfaction. Should the

black-bearded man attempt to leave his room George would be instantly warned by the ringing of the bell.

This matter disposed of, George lost no time in seeking his couch. The small packet he placed carefully under his pillow. As he did so, he fell into a momentary brown study. His thoughts could have been translated thus:

“Anastasia Sophia Marie Alexandra Olga Elizabeth. Hang it all, I’ve missed out one. I wonder now—”

He was unable to go to sleep immediately, being tantalized with his failure to grasp the situation. What was it all about? What was the connection between the escaping Grand Duchess, the sealed packet and the black-bearded man? What was the Grand Duchess escaping from? Were the foreigners aware that the sealed packet was in his possession? What was it likely to contain?

Pondering these matters, with an irritated sense that he was no nearer the solution, Mr. Rowland fell asleep.

He was awakened by the faint jangle of a bell. Not one of those men who awake to instant action, it took him just a minute and a half to realize the situation. Then he jumped up, thrust on some slippers, and, opening the door with the utmost caution, slipped out into the corridor. A faint moving patch of shadow at the far end of the passage showed him the direction taken by his quarry. Moving as noiselessly as possible, Mr. Rowland followed the trail. He was just in time to see the black-bearded man disappear into a bathroom. That was puzzling, particularly so as there was a bathroom just opposite his own room. Moving up close to the door, which was ajar, George peered through the crack. The man was on his knees by the side of the bath, doing something to the skirting board immediately behind it. He remained there for about five minutes, then he rose to his feet, and George beat a prudent retreat. Safe in the shadow of his own door, he watched the other pass and regain his own room.

“Good,” said George to himself. “The mystery of the bathroom will be investigated tomorrow morning.”

He got into bed and slipped his hand under the pillow to assure himself that the precious packet was still there. In another minute, he was scattering the bedclothes in a panic. The packet was gone!

It was a sadly chastened George who sat consuming eggs and bacon the following morning. He had failed Elizabeth. He had allowed the precious packet she had entrusted to his charge to be taken from him, and the “Mystery of the Bathroom” was miserably inadequate. Yes, undoubtedly George had made a mutt of himself.

After breakfast he strolled upstairs again. A chambermaid was standing in the passage looking perplexed.

“Anything wrong, my dear?” said George kindly.

“It’s the gentleman here, sir. He asked to be called at half-past eight, and I can’t get any answer and the door’s locked.”

“You don’t say so,” said George.

An uneasy feeling rose in his own breast. He hurried into his room. Whatever plans he was forming were instantly brushed aside by a most unexpected sight. There on the dressing table was the little packet which had been stolen from him the night before!

George picked it up and examined it. Yes, it was undoubtedly the same. But the seals had been broken. After a minute’s hesitation, he unwrapped it. If other people had seen its contents there was no reason why he should not see them also. Besides, it was possible that the contents had been abstracted. The unwound paper revealed a small cardboard box, such as jewellers use. George opened it. Inside, nestling on a bed of cotton wool, was a plain gold wedding ring.

He picked it up and examined it. There was no inscription inside—nothing whatever to make it out from any other wedding ring. George dropped his head into his hands with a groan.

“Lunacy,” he murmured. “That’s what it is. Stark staring lunacy. There’s no sense anywhere.”

Suddenly he remembered the chambermaid’s statement, and at the same time he observed that there was a broad parapet outside the window. It was not a feat he would ordinarily have attempted, but he was so aflame with curiosity and anger that he was in the mood to make light of difficulties. He sprang upon the window sill. A few seconds later he was peering in at the window of the room occupied by the black-bearded man. The window was open and the room was empty. A little further along was a fire escape. It was clear how the quarry had taken his departure.

George jumped in through the window. The missing man’s effects were still scattered about. There might be some clue amongst them to shed light on George’s perplexities. He began to hunt about, starting with the contents of a battered kit bag.

It was a sound that arrested his search—a very slight sound, but a sound indubitably in the room. George’s glance leapt to the big wardrobe. He sprang up and wrenched open the door. As he did so, a man jumped out from it and went rolling over the floor locked in George’s embrace. He was no mean antagonist. All George’s special tricks availed very little. They fell apart at length in sheer exhaustion, and for the first time George saw who his adversary was. It was the little man with the ginger moustache.

“Who the devil are you?” demanded George.

For answer the other drew out a card and handed it to him. George read it aloud.

“Detective-Inspector Jarrold, Scotland Yard.”

“That’s right, sir. And you’d do well to tell me all you know about this business.”

“I would, would I?” said George thoughtfully. “Do you know, Inspector, I believe you’re right. Shall we adjourn to a more cheerful spot?”

In a quiet corner of the bar George unfolded his soul. Inspector Jarrold listened sympathetically.

“Very puzzling, as you say, sir,” he remarked when George had finished. “There’s a lot as I can’t make head or tail of myself, but there’s one or two points I can clear up for you. I was here after Mardenberg (your black-bearded friend) and your turning up and watching him the way you did made me suspicious. I couldn’t place you. I slipped into your room last night when you were out of it, and it was I who sneaked the little packet from under your pillow. When I opened it and found it wasn’t what I was after, I took the first opportunity of returning it to your room.”

“That makes things a little clearer certainly,” said George thoughtfully. “I seem to have made rather an ass of myself all through.”

“I wouldn’t say that, sir. You did uncommon well for a beginner. You say you visited the bathroom this morning and took away what was concealed behind the skirting board?”

“Yes. But it’s only a rotten love letter,” said George gloomily. “Dash it all, I didn’t mean to go nosing out the poor fellow’s private life.”

“Would you mind letting me see it, sir?”

George took a folded letter from his pocket and passed it to the inspector. The latter unfolded it.

“As you say, sir. But I rather fancy that if you drew lines from one dotted i to another, you’d get a different result. Why, bless you, sir, this is a plan of the Portsmouth harbour defences.”

“What?”

“Yes. We’ve had our eye on the gentleman for some time. But he was too sharp for us. Got a woman to do most of the dirty work.”

“A woman?” said George, in a faint voice. “What was her name?”

“She goes by a good many, sir. Most usually known as Betty Brighteyes. A remarkably good-looking young woman she is.”

“Betty—Brighteyes,” said George. “Thank you, Inspector.”

“Excuse me, sir, but you’re not looking well.”

“I’m not well. I’m very ill. In fact, I think I’d better take the first train back to town.”

The Inspector looked at his watch.

“That will be a slow train, I’m afraid, sir. Better wait for the express.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said George gloomily. “No train could be slower than the one I came down by yesterday.”

Seated once more in a first-class carriage, George leisurely perused the day’s news. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and stared at the sheet in front of him.

“A romantic wedding took place yesterday in London when Lord Roland Gaigh, second son of the Marquis of Axminster, was married to the Grand Duchess Anastasia of Catonia. The ceremony was kept a profound secret. The Grand Duchess has been living in Paris with her uncle since the upheaval in Catonia. She met Lord Roland when he was secretary to the British Embassy in Catonia and their attachment dates from that time.”

“Well, I’m—”

Mr. Rowland could not think of anything strong enough to express his feelings. He continued to stare into space. The train stopped at a small station and a lady got in. She sat down opposite him.

“Good morning, George,” she said sweetly.

“Good heavens!” cried George. “Elizabeth!”

She smiled at him. She was, if possible, lovelier than ever.

“Look here,” cried George, clutching his head. “For God’s sake tell me. Are you the Grand Duchess Anastasia, or are you Betty Brighteyes?”

She stared at him.

“I’m not either. I’m Elizabeth Gaigh. I can tell you all about it now. And I’ve got to apologize too. You see, Roland (that’s my brother) has always been in love with Alexa—”

“Meaning the Grand Duchess?”

“Yes, that’s what the family call her. Well, as I say, Roland was always in love with her, and she with him. And then the revolution came, and Alexa was in Paris, and they were just going to fix it up when old Stürm, the chancellor, came along and insisted on carrying off Alexa and forcing her to marry Prince Karl, her cousin, a horrid pimply person—”

“I fancy I’ve met him,” said George.

“Whom she simply hates. And old Prince Usric, her uncle, forbade her to see Roland again. So she ran away to England, and I came up to town and met her, and we wired to Roland who was in Scotland. And just at the very last minute, when we were driving to the Registry Office in a taxi, whom should we meet in another taxi face to face, but old Prince Usric. Of course he followed us, and we were at our wits’ end what to do because he’d have made the most fearful scene, and, anyway, he is her guardian. Then I had the brilliant idea of changing places. You can practically see nothing of a girl nowadays but the tip of her nose. I put on Alexa’s red hat and brown wrap coat, and she put on my grey. Then we told the taxi to go to Waterloo, and I skipped out there and hurried into the station. Old Osric followed the red hat all right, without a thought for the other occupant of the taxi sitting huddled up inside, but of course it wouldn’t do for him to see my face. So I just bolted into your carriage and threw myself on your mercy.”

“I’ve got that all right,” said George. “It’s the rest of it.”

“I know. That’s what I’ve got to apologize about. I hope you won’t be awfully cross. You see, you looked so keen on its being a real mystery—

like in books, that I really couldn't resist the temptation. I picked out a rather sinister looking man on the platform and told you to follow him. And then I thrust the parcel on you."

"Containing a wedding ring."

"Yes. Alexa and I bought that, because Roland wasn't due to arrive from Scotland until just before the wedding. And of course I knew that by the time I got to London they wouldn't want it—they would have had to use a curtain ring or something."

"I see," said George. "It's like all these things—so simple when you know! Allow me, Elizabeth."

He stripped off her left glove, and uttered a sigh of relief at the sight of the bare third finger.

"That's all right," he remarked. "That ring won't be wasted after all."

"Oh!" cried Elizabeth, "but I don't know anything about you."

"You know how nice I am," said George. "By the way, it has just occurred to me, you are the Lady Elizabeth Gaigh, of course."

"Oh! George, are you a snob?"

"As a matter of fact, I am, rather. My best dream was one where King George borrowed half a crown from me to see him over the weekend. But I was thinking of my uncle—the one from whom I am estranged. He's a frightful snob. When he knows I'm going to marry you, and that we'll have a title in the family, he'll make me a partner at once!"

"Oh! George, is he very rich?"

"Elizabeth, are you mercenary?"

"Very. I adore spending money. But I was thinking of Father. Five daughters, full of beauty and blue blood. He's just yearning for a rich son-in-law."

“H’m,” said George. “It will be one of those marriages made in Heaven and approved on earth. Shall we live at Rowland’s Castle? They’d be sure to make me Lord Mayor with you for a wife. Oh! Elizabeth, darling, it’s probably contravening the company’s by-laws, but I simply must kiss you!”

Three

THE MANHOOD OF EDWARD ROBINSON

“The Manhood of Edward Robinson” was first published as “The Day of His Dreams” in Grand Magazine, December 1924.

“With a swing of his mighty arms, Bill lifted her right off her feet, crushing her to his breast. With a deep sigh she yielded her lips in such a kiss as he had never dreamed of—”

With a sigh, Mr. Edward Robinson put down *When Love is King* and stared out of the window of the underground train. They were running through Stamford Brook. Edward Robinson was thinking about Bill. Bill was the real hundred per cent he-man-beloved of lady novelists. Edward envied him his muscles, his rugged good looks and his terrific passions. He picked up the book again and read the description of the proud Marchesa Bianca (she who had yielded her lips). So ravishing was her beauty, the intoxication of her was so great, that strong men went down before her like ninepins, faint and helpless with love.

“Of course,” said Edward to himself, “it’s all bosh, this sort of stuff. All bosh, it is. And yet, I wonder—”

His eyes looked wistful. Was there such a thing as a world of romance and adventure somewhere? Were there women whose beauty intoxicated? Was there such a thing as love that devoured one like a flame?

“This is real life, this is,” said Edward. “I’ve got to go on the same just like all the other chaps.”

On the whole, he supposed, he ought to consider himself a lucky young man. He had an excellent berth—a clerkship in a flourishing concern. He had good health, no one dependent upon him, and he was engaged to Maud.

But the mere thought of Maud brought a shadow over his face. Though he would never have admitted it, he was afraid of Maud. He loved her—yes—he still remembered the thrill with which he had admired the back of her white neck rising out of the cheap four and elevenpenny blouse on the first occasion they had met. He had sat behind her at the cinema, and the friend he was with had known her and had introduced them. No doubt about it, Maud was very superior. She was good looking and clever and very ladylike, and she was always right about everything. The kind of girl, everyone said, who would make such an excellent wife.

Edward wondered whether the Marchesa Bianca would have made an excellent wife. Somehow, he doubted it. He couldn't picture the voluptuous Bianca, with her red lips and her swaying form, tamely sewing on buttons, say, for the virile Bill. No, Bianca was Romance, and this was real life. He and Maud would be very happy together. She had so much common sense. . . .

But all the same, he wished that she wasn't quite so—well, sharp in manner. So prone to “jump upon him.”

It was, of course, her prudence and her common sense which made her do so. Maud was very sensible. And, as a rule, Edward was very sensible too, but sometimes—He had wanted to get married this Christmas, for instance. Maud had pointed out how much more prudent it would be to wait a while—a year or two, perhaps. His salary was not large. He had wanted to give her an expensive ring—she had been horror stricken, and had forced him to take it back and exchange it for a cheaper one. Her qualities were all excellent qualities, but sometimes Edward wished that she had more faults and less virtues. It was her virtues that drove him to desperate deeds.

For instance—

A blush of guilt overspread his face. He had got to tell her—and tell her soon. His secret guilt was already making him behave strangely. Tomorrow was the first of three days holiday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. She had suggested that he should come round and spend the day with her people, and in a clumsy foolish manner, a manner that could not fail to arouse her suspicions, he had managed to get out of it—had told

a long, lying story about a pal of his in the country with whom he had promised to spend the day.

And there was no pal in the country. There was only his guilty secret.

Three months ago, Edward Robinson, in company with a few hundred thousand other young men, had gone in for a competition in one of the weekly papers. Twelve girls' names had to be arranged in order of popularity. Edward had had a brilliant idea. His own preference was sure to be wrong—he had noticed that in several similar competitions. He wrote down the twelve names arranged in his own order of merit, then he wrote them down again this time placing one from the top and one from the bottom of the list alternately.

When the result was announced, Edward had got eight right out of the twelve, and was awarded the first prize of £500. This result, which might easily be ascribed to luck, Edward persisted in regarding as the direct outcome of his “system.” He was inordinately proud of himself.

The next thing was, what do do with the £500? He knew very well what Maud would say. Invest it. A nice little nest egg for the future. And, of course, Maud would be quite right, he knew that. But to win money as the result of a competition is an entirely different feeling from anything else in the world.

Had the money been left to him as a legacy, Edward would have invested it religiously in Conversion Loan or Savings Certificates as a matter of course. But money that one has achieved by a mere stroke of the pen, by a lucky and unbelievable chance, comes under the same heading as a child's sixpence—“for your very own—to spend as you like.”

And in a certain rich shop which he passed daily on his way to the office, was the unbelievable dream, a small two-seater car, with a long shining nose, and the price clearly displayed on it—£465.

“If I were rich,” Edward had said to it, day after day. “If I were rich, I'd have you.”

And now he was—if not rich—at least possessed of a lump sum of money sufficient to realize his dream. That car, that shining alluring piece of loveliness, was his if he cared to pay the price.

He had meant to tell Maud about the money. Once he had told her, he would have secured himself against temptation. In face of Maud's horror and disapproval, he would never have the courage to persist in his madness. But, as it chanced, it was Maud herself who clinched the matter. He had taken her to the cinema—and to the best seats in the house. She had pointed out to him, kindly but firmly, the criminal folly of his behaviour—wasting good money—three and sixpence against two and fourpence, when one saw just as well from the latter places.

Edward took her reproaches in sullen silence. Maud felt contentedly that she was making an impression. Edward could not be allowed to continue in these extravagant ways. She loved Edward, but she realized that he was weak—hers the task of being ever at hand to influence him in the way he should go. She observed his wormlike demeanour with satisfaction.

Edward was indeed wormlike. Like worms, he turned. He remained crushed by her words, but it was at that precise minute that he made up his mind to buy the car.

“Damn it,” said Edward to himself. “For once in my life, I'll do what I like. Maud can go hang!”

And the very next morning he had walked into that palace of plate glass, with its lordly inmates in their glory of gleaming enamel and shimmering metal, and with an insouciance that surprised himself, he bought the car. It was the easiest thing in the world, buying a car!

It had been his for four days now. He had gone about, outwardly calm, but inwardly bathed in ecstasy. And to Maud he had as yet breathed no word. For four days, in his luncheon hour, he had received instruction in the handling of the lovely creature. He was an apt pupil.

Tomorrow, Christmas Eve, he was to take her out into the country. He had lied to Maud, and he would lie again if need be. He was enslaved body and

soul by his new possession. It stood to him for Romance, for Adventure, for all the things that he had longed for and had never had. Tomorrow, he and his mistress would take the road together. They would rush through the keen cold air, leaving the throb and fret of London far behind—out into the wide clear spaces. . . .

At this moment, Edward, though he did not know it, was very near to being a poet.

Tomorrow—

He looked down at the book in his hand—When Love is King. He laughed and stuffed it into his pocket. The car, and the red lips of the Marchesa Bianca, and the amazing prowess of Bill seemed all mixed up together.

Tomorrow—

The weather, usually a sorry jade to those who count upon her, was kindly disposed towards Edward. She gave him the day of his dreams, a day of glittering frost, and pale-blue sky, and a primrose-yellow sun.

So, in a mood of high adventure, of daredevil wickedness, Edward drove out of London. There was trouble at Hyde Park Corner, and a sad contretemps at Putney Bridge, there was much protesting of gears, and a frequent jarring of brakes, and much abuse was freely showered upon Edward by the drivers of other vehicles. But for a novice he did not acquit himself so badly, and presently he came out on to one of those fair wide roads that are the joy of the motorist. There was little congestion on this particular road today. Edward drove on and on, drunk with his mastery over this creature of the gleaming sides, speeding through the cold white world with the elation of a god.

It was a delirious day. He stopped for lunch at an old-fashioned inn, and again later for tea. Then reluctantly he turned homewards—back again to London, to Maud, to the inevitable explanation, recriminations. . . .

He shook off the thought with a sigh. Let tomorrow look after itself. He still had today. And what could be more fascinating than this? Rushing through

the darkness with the headlights searching out the way in front. Why, this was the best of all!

He judged that he had no time to stop anywhere for dinner. This driving through the darkness was a ticklish business. It was going to take longer to get back to London than he had thought. It was just eight o'clock when he passed through Hindhead and came out upon the rim of the Devil's Punch Bowl. There was moonlight, and the snow that had fallen two days ago was still unmelted.

He stopped the car and stood staring. What did it matter if he didn't get back to London until midnight? What did it matter if he never got back? He wasn't going to tear himself away from this at once.

He got out of the car, and approached the edge. There was a path winding down temptingly near him. Edward yielded to the spell. For the next half hour he wandered deliriously in a snowbound world. Never had he imagined anything quite like this. And it was his, his very own, given to him by his shining mistress who waited for him faithfully on the road above.

He climbed up again, got into the car and drove off, still a little dizzy from that discovery of sheer beauty which comes to the most prosaic men once in a while.

Then, with a sigh, he came to himself, and thrust his hand into the pocket of the car where he had stuffed an additional muffler earlier in the day.

But the muffler was no longer there. The pocket was empty. No, not completely empty—there was something scratchy and hard—like pebbles.

Edward thrust his hand deep down. In another minute he was staring like a man bereft of his senses. The object that he held in his hand, dangling from his fingers, with the moonlight striking a hundred fires from it, was a diamond necklace.

Edward stared and stared. But there was no doubting possible. A diamond necklace worth probably thousands of pounds (for the stones were large

ones) had been casually reposing in the side-pocket of the car.

But who had put it there? It had certainly not been there when he started from town. Someone must have come along when he was walking about in the snow, and deliberately thrust it in. But why? Why choose his car? Had the owner of the necklace made a mistake? Or was it—could it possibly be a stolen necklace?

And then, as all these thoughts went whirling through his brain, Edward suddenly stiffened and went cold all over. This was not his car.

It was very like it, yes. It was the same brilliant shade of scarlet—red as the Marchesa Bianca's lips—it had the same long and gleaming nose, but by a thousand small signs, Edward realized that it was not his car. Its shining newness was scarred here and there, it bore signs, faint but unmistakable, of wear and tear. In that case. . . .

Edward, without more ado, made haste to turn the car. Turning was not his strong point. With the car in reverse, he invariably lost his head and twisted the wheel the wrong way. Also, he frequently became entangled between the accelerator and the foot brake with disastrous results. In the end, however, he succeeded, and straight away the car began purring up the hill again.

Edward remembered that there had been another car standing some little distance away. He had not noticed it particularly at the time. He had returned from his walk by a different path from that by which he had gone down into the hollow. This second path had brought him out on the road immediately behind, as he had thought, his own car. It must really have been the other one.

In about ten minutes he was once more at the spot where he had halted. But there was now no car at all by the roadside. Whoever had owned this car must now have gone off in Edward's—he also, perhaps, misled by the resemblance.

Edward took out the diamond necklace from his pocket and let it run through his fingers perplexedly.

What to do next? Run on to the nearest police station? Explain the circumstances, hand over the necklace, and give the number of his own car.

By the by, what was the number of his car? Edward thought and thought, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. He felt a cold sinking sensation. He was going to look the most utter fool at the police station. There was an eight in it, that was all that he could remember. Of course, it didn't really matter—at least . . . He looked uncomfortably at the diamonds. Supposing they should think—oh, but they wouldn't—and yet again they might—that he had stolen the car and the diamonds? Because, after all, when one came to think of it, would anyone in their senses thrust a valuable diamond necklace carelessly into the open pocket of a car?

Edward got out and went round to the back of the motor. Its number was XR10061. Beyond the fact that that was certainly not the number of his car, it conveyed nothing to him. Then he set to work systematically to search all the pockets. In the one where he had found the diamonds he made a discovery—a small scrap of paper with some words pencilled on it. By the light of the headlights, Edward read them easily enough.

“Meet me, Greane, corner of Salter's Lane, ten o'clock.”

He remembered the name Greane. He had seen it on a sign-post earlier in the day. In a minute, his mind was made up. He would go to this village, Greane, find Salter's Lane, meet the person who had written the note, and explain the circumstances. That would be much better than looking a fool in the local police station.

He started off almost happily. After all, this was an adventure. This was the sort of thing that didn't happen every day. The diamond necklace made it exciting and mysterious.

He had some little difficulty in finding Greane, and still more difficulty in finding Salter's Lane, but after knocking up two cottages, he succeeded.

Still, it was a few minutes after the appointed hour when he drove cautiously along a narrow road, keeping a sharp look-out on the left-hand side where he had been told Salter's Lane branched off.

He came upon it quite suddenly round a bend, and even as he drew up, a figure came forward out of the darkness.

“At last!” a girl’s voice cried. “What an age you’ve been, Gerald!”

As she spoke, the girl stepped right into the glare of the headlights, and Edward caught his breath. She was the most glorious creature he had ever seen.

She was quite young, with hair black as night, and wonderful scarlet lips. The heavy cloak that she wore swung open, and Edward saw that she was in full evening dress—a kind of flame-coloured sheath, outlining her perfect body. Round her neck was a row of exquisite pearls.

Suddenly the girl started.

“Why,” she cried; “it isn’t Gerald.”

“No,” said Edward hastily. “I must explain.” He took the diamond necklace from his pocket and held it out to her. “My name is Edward—”

He got no further, for the girl clapped her hands and broke in:

“Edward, of course! I am so glad. But that idiot Jimmy told me over the phone that he was sending Gerald along with the car. It’s awfully sporting of you to come. I’ve been dying to meet you. Remember I haven’t seen you since I was six years old. I see you’ve got the necklace all right. Shove it in your pocket again. The village policeman might come along and see it. Brrr, it’s cold as ice waiting here! Let me get in.”

As though in a dream Edward opened the door, and she sprang lightly in beside him. Her furs swept his cheek, and an elusive scent, like that of violets after rain, assailed his nostrils.

He had no plan, no definite thought even. In a minute, without conscious volition, he had yielded himself to the adventure. She had called him Edward—what matter if he were the wrong Edward? She would find him

out soon enough. In the meantime, let the game go on. He let in the clutch and they glided off.

Presently the girl laughed. Her laugh was just as wonderful as the rest of her.

“It’s easy to see you don’t know much about cars. I suppose they don’t have them out there?”

“I wonder where ‘out there’ is?” thought Edward. Aloud he said, “Not much.”

“Better let me drive,” said the girl. “It’s tricky work finding your way round these lanes until we get on the main road again.”

He relinquished his place to her gladly. Presently they were humming through the night at a pace and with a recklessness that secretly appalled Edward. She turned her head towards him.

“I like pace. Do you? You know—you’re not a bit like Gerald. No one would ever take you to be brothers. You’re not a bit like what I imagined, either.”

“I suppose,” said Edward, “that I’m so completely ordinary. Is that it?”

“Not ordinary—different. I can’t make you out. How’s poor old Jimmy? Very fed up, I suppose?”

“Oh, Jimmy’s all right,” said Edward.

“It’s easy enough to say that—but it’s rough luck on him having a sprained ankle. Did he tell you the whole story?”

“Not a word. I’m completely in the dark. I wish you’d enlighten me.”

“Oh, the thing worked like a dream. Jimmy went in at the front door, toggled up in his girl’s clothes. I gave him a minute or two, and then shinned up to the window. Agnes Larella’s maid was there laying out Agnes’s dress and jewels, and all the rest. Then there was a great yell downstairs, and the

squib went off, and everyone shouted fire. The maid dashed out, and I hopped in, helped myself to the necklace, and was out and down in a flash, and out of the place by the back way across the Punch Bowl. I shoved the necklace and the notice where to pick me up in the pocket of the car in passing. Then I joined Louise at the hotel, having shed my snow boots of course. Perfect alibi for me. She'd no idea I'd been out at all."

"And what about Jimmy?"

"Well, you know more about that than I do."

"He didn't tell me anything," said Edward easily.

"Well, in the general rag, he caught his foot in his skirt and managed to sprain it. They had to carry him to the car, and the Larellas' chauffeur drove him home. Just fancy if the chauffeur had happened to put his hand in the pocket!"

Edward laughed with her, but his mind was busy. He understood the position more or less now. The name of Larella was vaguely familiar to him—it was a name that spelt wealth. This girl, and an unknown man called Jimmy, had conspired together to steal the necklace, and had succeeded. Owing to his sprained ankle and the presence of the Larellas' chauffeur Jimmy had not been able to look in the pocket of the car before telephoning to the girl—probably had had no wish to do so. But it was almost certain that the other unknown "Gerald" would do so at any early opportunity. And in it, he would find Edward's muffler!

"Good going," said the girl.

A tram flashed past them, they were on the outskirts of London. They flashed in and out of the traffic. Edward's heart stood in his mouth. She was a wonderful driver, this girl, but she took risks!

Quarter of an hour later they drew up before an imposing house in a frigid square.

“We can shed some of our clothing here,” said the girl, “before we go on to Ritson’s.”

“Ritson’s?” queried Edward. He mentioned the famous night-club almost reverently.

“Yes, didn’t Gerald tell you?”

“He did not,” said Edward grimly. “What about my clothes?”

She frowned.

“Didn’t they tell you anything? We’ll rig you up somehow. We’ve got to carry this through.”

A stately butler opened the door and stood aside to let them enter.

“Mr. Gerald Champneys rang up, your ladyship. He was very anxious to speak to you, but he wouldn’t leave a message.”

“I bet he was anxious to speak to her,” said Edward to himself. “At any rate, I know my full name now. Edward Champneys. But who is she? Your ladyship, they called her. What does she want to steal a necklace for? Bridge debts?”

In the feuilletons which he occasionally read, the beautiful and titled heroine was always driven desperate by bridge debts.

Edward was led away by the stately butler, and delivered over to a smooth-mannered valet. A quarter of an hour later he rejoined his hostess in the hall, exquisitely attired in evening clothes made in Savile Row which fitted him to a nicety.

Heavens! What a night!

They drove in the car to the famous Ritson’s. In common with everyone else Edward had read scandalous paragraphs concerning Ritson’s. Anyone who was anyone turned up at Ritson’s sooner or later. Edward’s only fear was that someone who knew the real Edward Champneys might turn up. He

consoled himself by the reflection that the real man had evidently been out of England for some years.

Sitting at a little table against the wall, they sipped cocktails. Cocktails! To the simple Edward they represented the quintessence of the fast life. The girl, wrapped in a wonderful embroidered shawl, sipped nonchalantly. Suddenly she dropped the shawl from her shoulders and rose.

“Let’s dance.”

Now the one thing that Edward could do to perfection was to dance. When he and Maud took the floor together at the Palais de Danse, lesser lights stood still and watched in admiration.

“I nearly forgot,” said the girl suddenly. “The necklace?”

She held out her hand. Edward, completely bewildered, drew it from his pocket and gave it to her. To his utter amazement, she coolly clasped it round her neck. Then she smiled up at him intoxicatingly.

“Now,” she said softly, “we’ll dance.”

They danced. And in all Ritson’s nothing more perfect could be seen.

Then, as at length they returned to their table, an old gentleman with a would-be rakish air accosted Edward’s companion.

“Ah! Lady Noreen, always dancing! Yes, yes. Is Captain Folliot here tonight?”

“Jimmy’s taken a toss—racked his ankle.”

“You don’t say so? How did that happen?”

“No details as yet.”

She laughed and passed on.

Edward followed, his brain in a whirl. He knew now. Lady Noreen Eliot, the famous Lady Noreen herself, perhaps the most talked of girl in England. Celebrated for her beauty, for her daring—the leader of that set known as the Bright Young People. Her engagement to Captain James Folliot, V.C., of the Household Cavalry, had been recently announced.

But the necklace? He still couldn't understand the necklace. He must risk giving himself away, but know he must.

As they sat down again, he pointed to it.

“Why that, Noreen?” he said. “Tell me why?”

She smiled dreamily, her eyes far away, the spell of the dance still holding her.

“It's difficult for you to understand, I suppose. One gets so tired of the same thing—always the same thing. Treasure hunts were all very well for a while, but one gets used to everything. ‘Burglaries’ were my idea. Fifty pounds entrance fee, and lots to be drawn. This is the third. Jimmy and I drew Agnes Larella. You know the rules? Burglary to be carried out within three days and the loot to be worn for at least an hour in a public place, or you forfeit your stake and a hundred-pound fine. It's rough luck on Jimmy spraining his ankle, but we'll scoop the pool all right.”

“I see,” said Edward, drawing a deep breath. “I see.”

Noreen rose suddenly, pulling her shawl round her.

“Drive me somewhere in the car. Down to the docks. Somewhere horrible and exciting. Wait a minute—” She reached up and unclasped the diamonds from her neck. “You'd better take these again. I don't want to be murdered for them.”

They went out of Ritson's together. The car stood in a small by street, narrow and dark. As they turned the corner towards it, another car drew up to the curb, and a young man sprang out.

“Thank the Lord, Noreen, I’ve got hold of you at last,” he cried. “There’s the devil to pay. That ass Jimmy got off with the wrong car. God knows where those diamonds are at this minute. We’re in the devil of a mess.”

Lady Noreen stared at him.

“What do you mean? We’ve got the diamonds—at least Edward has.”

“Edward?”

“Yes.” She made a slight gesture to indicate the figure by her side.

“It’s I who am in the devil of a mess,” thought Edward. “Ten to one this is brother Gerald.”

The young man stared at him.

“What do you mean?” he said slowly. “Edward’s in Scotland.”

“Oh!” cried the girl. She stared at Edward. “Oh!”

Her colour came and went.

“So you,” she said, in a low voice, “are the real thing?”

It took Edward just one minute to grasp the situation. There was awe in the girl’s eyes—was it, could it be—admiration? Should he explain? Nothing so tame! He would play up to the end.

He bowed ceremoniously.

“I have to thank you, Lady Noreen,” he said, in the best highwayman manner, “for a most delightful evening.”

One quick look he cast at the car from which the other had just alighted. A scarlet car with a shining bonnet. His car!

“And I will wish you good evening.”

One quick spring and he was inside, his foot on the clutch. The car started forward. Gerald stood paralysed, but the girl was quicker. As the car slid past she leapt for it, alighting on the running board.

The car swerved, shot blindly round the corner and pulled up. Noreen, still panting from her spring, laid her hand on Edward's arm.

"You must give it me—oh, you must give it me. I've got to return it to Agnes Larella. Be a sport—we've had a good evening together—we've danced—we've been—pals. Won't you give it to me? To me?"

A woman who intoxicated you with her beauty. There were such women then. . . .

Also, Edward was only too anxious to get rid of the necklace. It was a heaven-sent opportunity for a beau geste.

He took it from his pocket and dropped it into her outstretched hand.

"We've been—pals," he said.

"Ah!" Her eyes smouldered—lit up.

Then surprisingly she bent her head to him. For a moment he held her, her lips against his. . . .

Then she jumped off. The scarlet car sped forward with a great leap.

Romance!

Adventure!

At twelve o'clock on Christmas Day, Edward Robinson strode into the tiny drawing room of a house in Clapham with the customary greeting of "Merry Christmas."

Maud, who was rearranging a piece of holly, greeted him coldly.

"Have a good day in the country with that friend of yours?" she inquired.

“Look here,” said Edward. “That was a lie I told you. I won a competition—£500, and I bought a car with it. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d kick up a row about it. That’s the first thing. I’ve bought the car and there’s nothing more to be said about it. The second thing is this—I’m not going to hang about for years. My prospects are quite good enough and I mean to marry you next month. See?”

“Oh!” said Maud faintly.

Was this—could this be—Edward speaking in this masterful fashion?

“Will you?” said Edward. “Yes or no?”

She gazed at him, fascinated. There was awe and admiration in her eyes, and the sight of that look was intoxicating to Edward. Gone was that patient motherliness which had roused him to exasperation.

So had the Lady Noreen looked at him last night. But the Lady Noreen had receded far away, right into the region of Romance, side by side with the Marchesa Bianca. This was the Real Thing. This was his woman.

“Yes or no?” he repeated, and drew a step nearer.

“Ye—ye-es,” faltered Maud. “But, oh, Edward, what has happened to you? You’re quite different today.”

“Yes,” said Edward. “For twenty-four hours I’ve been a man instead of a worm—and, by God, it pays!”

He caught her in his arms almost as Bill the superman might have done.

“Do you love me, Maud? Tell me, do you love me?”

“Oh, Edward!” breathed Maud. “I adore you. . . .”

Four

JANE IN SEARCH OF A JOB

“Jane in Search of a Job” was first published in Grand Magazine, August 1924.

Jane Cleveland rustled the pages of the Daily Leader and sighed. A deep sigh that came from the innermost recesses of her being. She looked with distaste at the marble-topped table, the poached egg on toast which reposed on it, and the small pot of tea. Not because she was not hungry. That was far from being the case. Jane was extremely hungry. At that moment she felt like consuming a pound and a half of well-cooked beefsteak, with chip potatoes, and possibly French beans. The whole washed down with some more exciting vintage than tea.

But young women whose exchequers are in a parlous condition cannot be choosers. Jane was lucky to be able to order a poached egg and a pot of tea. It seemed unlikely that she would be able to do so tomorrow. That is unless

She turned once more to the advertisement columns of the Daily Leader. To put it plainly, Jane was out of a job, and the position was becoming acute. Already the genteel lady who presided over the shabby boardinghouse was looking askance at this particular young woman.

“And yet,” said Jane to herself, throwing up her chin indignantly, which was a habit of hers, “and yet I’m intelligent and good-looking and well educated. What more does anyone want?”

According to the Daily Leader, they seemed to want shorthand typists of vast experience, managers for business houses with a little capital to invest, ladies to share in the profits of poultry farming (here again a little capital was required), and innumerable cooks, housemaids and parlourmaids—particularly parlourmaids.

“I wouldn’t mind being a parlourmaid,” said Jane to herself. “But there again, no one would take me without experience. I could go somewhere, I dare say, as a Willing Young Girl—but they don’t pay willing young girls anything to speak of.”

She sighed again, propped the paper up in front of her, and attacked the poached egg with all the vigour of healthy youth.

When the last mouthful had been despatched, she turned the paper, and studied the Agony and Personal column whilst she drank her tea. The Agony column was always the last hope.

Had she but possessed a couple of thousand pounds, the thing would have been easy enough. There were at least seven unique opportunities—all yielding not less than three thousand a year. Jane’s lip curled a little.

“If I had two thousand pounds,” she murmured, “it wouldn’t be easy to separate me from it.”

She cast her eyes rapidly down to the bottom of the column and ascended with the ease born of long practice.

There was the lady who gave such wonderful prices for cast-off clothing. “Ladies’ wardrobes inspected at their own dwellings.” There were gentlemen who bought anything—but principally teeth. There were ladies of title going abroad who would dispose of their furs at a ridiculous figure. There was the distressed clergyman and the hard-working widow, and the disabled officer, all needing sums varying from fifty pounds to two thousand. And then suddenly Jane came to an abrupt halt. She put down her teacup and read the advertisement through again.

“There’s a catch in it, of course,” she murmured. “There always is a catch in these sort of things. I shall have to be careful. But still—”

The advertisement which so intrigued Jane Cleveland ran as follows:

If a young lady of twenty-five to thirty years of age, eyes dark blue, very fair hair, black lashes and brows, straight nose, slim figure, height five feet seven inches, good mimic and able to speak French, will call at 7 Endersleigh Street, between 5 and 6 p.m., she will hear of something to her advantage.

“Guileless Gwendolen, or why girls go wrong,” murmured Jane. “I shall certainly have to be careful. But there are too many specifications, really, for that sort of thing. I wonder now . . . Let us overhaul the catalogue.”

She proceeded to do so.

“Twenty-five to thirty—I’m twenty-six. Eyes dark blue, that’s right. Hair very fair—black lashes and brows—all OK. Straight nose? Ye-es—straight enough, anyway. It doesn’t hook or turn up. And I’ve got a slim figure—slim even for nowadays. I’m only five feet six inches—but I could wear high heels. I am a good mimic—nothing wonderful, but I can copy people’s voices, and I speak French like an angel or a Frenchwoman. In fact, I’m absolutely the goods. They ought to tumble over themselves with delight when I turn up. Jane Cleveland, go in and win.”

Resolutely Jane tore out the advertisement and placed it in her handbag. Then she demanded her bill, with a new briskness in her voice.

At ten minutes to five Jane was reconnoitring in the neighbourhood of Endersleigh Street. Endersleigh Street itself is a small street sandwiched between two larger streets in the neighbourhood of Oxford Circus. It is drab, but respectable.

No. 7 seemed in no way different from the neighbouring houses. It was composed like they were of offices. But looking up at it, it dawned upon Jane for the first time that she was not the only blue-eyed, fairhaired, straight-nosed, slim-figured girl of between twenty-five and thirty years of age. London was evidently full of such girls, and forty or fifty of them at least were grouped outside No. 7 Endersleigh Street.

“Competition,” said Jane. “I’d better join the queue quickly.”

She did so, just as three more girls turned the corner of the street. Others followed them. Jane amused herself by taking stock of her immediate neighbours. In each case she managed to find something wrong—fair eyelashes instead of dark, eyes more grey than blue, fair hair that owed its fairness to art and not to Nature, interesting variations in noses, and figures that only an all-embracing charity could have described as slim. Jane's spirits rose.

"I believe I've got as good an all-round chance as anyone," she murmured to herself. "I wonder what it's all about? A beauty chorus, I hope."

The queue was moving slowly but steadily forward. Presently a second stream of girls began, issuing from inside the house. Some of them tossed their heads, some of them smirked.

"Rejected," said Jane, with glee. "I hope to goodness they won't be full up before I get in."

And still the queue of girls moved forwards. There were anxious glances in tiny mirrors, and a frenzied powdering of noses. Lipsticks were brandished freely.

"I wish I had a smarter hat," said Jane to herself sadly.

At last it was her turn. Inside the door of the house was a glass door at one side, with the legend, Messrs. Cuthbertsons, inscribed on it. It was through this glass door that the applicants were passing one by one. Jane's turn came. She drew a deep breath and entered.

Inside was an outer office, obviously intended for clerks. At the end was another glass door. Jane was directed to pass through this, and did so. She found herself in a smaller room. There was a big desk in it, and behind the desk was a keen-eyed man of middle age with a thick rather foreign-looking moustache. His glance swept over Jane, then he pointed to a door on the left.

"Wait in there, please," he said crisply.

Jane obeyed. The apartment she entered was already occupied. Five girls sat there, all very upright and all glaring at each other. It was clear to Jane that she had been included amongst the likely candidates, and her spirits rose. Nevertheless, she was forced to admit that these five girls were equally eligible with herself as far as the terms of the advertisement went.

The time passed. Streams of girls were evidently passing through the inner office. Most of them were dismissed through another door giving on the corridor, but every now and then a recruit arrived to swell the select assembly. At half-past six there were fourteen girls assembled there.

Jane heard a murmur of voices from the inner office, and then the foreign-looking gentleman, whom she had nicknamed in her mind “the Colonel” owing to the military character of his moustache, appeared in the doorway.

“I will see you ladies one at a time, if you please,” he announced. “In the order in which you arrived, please.”

Jane was, of course, the sixth on the list. Twenty minutes elapsed before she was called in. “The Colonel” was standing with his hands behind his back. He put her through a rapid catechism, tested her knowledge of French, and measured her height.

“It is possible, mademoiselle,” he said in French, “that you may suit. I do not know. But it is possible.”

“What is this post, if I may ask?” said Jane bluntly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“That I cannot tell you as yet. If you are chosen—then you shall know.”

“This seems very mysterious,” objected Jane. “I couldn’t possibly take up anything without knowing all about it. Is it connected with the stage, may I ask?”

“The stage? Indeed, no.”

“Oh!” said Jane, rather taken aback.

He was looking at her keenly.

“You have intelligence, yes? And discretion?”

“I’ve quantities of intelligence and discretion,” said Jane calmly. “What about the pay?”

“The pay will amount to two thousand pounds—for a fortnight’s work.”

“Oh!” said Jane faintly.

She was too taken aback by the munificence of the sum named to recover all at once.

The Colonel resumed speaking.

“One other young lady I have already selected. You and she are equally suitable. There may be others I have not yet seen. I will give you instruction as to your further proceedings. You know Harridge’s Hotel?”

Jane gasped. Who in England did not know Harridge’s Hotel? That famous hostelry situated modestly in a bystreet of Mayfair, where notabilities and royalties arrived and departed as a matter of course. Only this morning Jane had read of the arrival of the Grand Duchess Pauline of Ostrova. She had come over to open a big bazaar in aid of Russian refugees, and was, of course, staying at Harridge’s.

“Yes,” said Jane, in answer to the Colonel’s question.

“Very good. Go there. Ask for Count Streptitch. Send up your card—you have a card?”

Jane produced one. The Colonel took it from her and inscribed in the corner a minute P. He handed the card back to her.

“That ensures that the count will see you. He will understand that you come from me. The final decision lies with him—and another. If he considers you suitable, he will explain matters to you, and you can accept or decline his proposal. Is that satisfactory?”

“Perfectly satisfactory,” said Jane.

“So far,” she murmured to herself as she emerged into the street, “I can’t see the catch. And yet, there must be one. There’s no such thing as money for nothing. It must be crime! There’s nothing else left.”

Her spirits rose. In moderation Jane did not object to crime. The papers had been full lately of the exploits of various girl bandits. Jane had seriously thought of becoming one if all else failed.

She entered the exclusive portals of Harridge’s with slight trepidation. More than ever, she wished that she had a new hat.

But she walked bravely up to the bureau and produced her card, and asked for Count Streptitch without a shade of hesitation in her manner. She fancied that the clerk looked at her rather curiously. He took the card, however, and gave it to a small page boy with some low-voiced instructions which Jane did not catch. Presently the page returned, and Jane was invited to accompany him. They went up in the lift and along a corridor to some big double doors where the page knocked. A moment later Jane found herself in a big room, facing a tall thin man with a fair beard, who was holding her card in a languid white hand.

“Miss Jane Cleveland,” he read slowly. “I am Count Streptitch.”

His lips parted suddenly in what was presumably intended to be a smile, disclosing two rows of white even teeth. But no effect of merriment was obtained.

“I understand that you applied in answer to our advertisement,” continued the count. “The good Colonel Kranin sent you on here.”

“He was a colonel,” thought Jane, pleased with her perspicacity, but she merely bowed her head.

“You will pardon me if I ask you a few questions?”

He did not wait for a reply, but proceeded to put Jane through a catechism very similar to that of Colonel Kranin. Her replies seemed to satisfy him. He nodded his head once or twice.

“I will ask you now, mademoiselle, to walk to the door and back again slowly.”

“Perhaps they want me to be a mannequin,” thought Jane, as she complied. “But they wouldn’t pay two thousand pounds to a mannequin. Still, I suppose I’d better not ask questions yet awhile.”

Count Streptitch was frowning. He tapped on the table with his white fingers. Suddenly he rose, and opening the door of an adjoining room, he spoke to someone inside.

He returned to his seat, and a short middle-aged lady came through the door, closing it behind her. She was plump and extremely ugly, but had nevertheless the air of being a person of importance.

“Well, Anna Michaelovna,” said the count. “What do you think of her?”

The lady looked Jane up and down much as though the girl had been a waxwork at a show. She made no pretence of any greeting.

“She might do,” she said at length. “Of actual likeness in the real sense of the word, there is very little. But the figure and the colouring are very good, better than any of the others. What do you think of it, Feodor Alexandrovitch?”

“I agree with you, Anna Michaelovna.”

“Does she speak French?”

“Her French is excellent.”

Jane felt more and more of a dummy. Neither of these strange people appeared to remember that she was a human being.

“But will she be discreet?” asked the lady, frowning heavily at the girl.

“This is the Princess Poporensky,” said Count Streptitch to Jane in French. “She asks whether you can be discreet?”

Jane addressed her reply to the princess.

“Until I have had the position explained to me, I can hardly make promises.”

“It is just what she says there, the little one,” remarked the lady. “I think she is intelligent, Feodor Alexandrovitch—more intelligent than the others. Tell me, little one, have you also courage?”

“I don’t know,” said Jane, puzzled. “I don’t particularly like being hurt, but I can bear it.”

“Ah! that is not what I mean. You do not mind danger, no?”

“Oh!” said Jane. “Danger! That’s all right. I like danger.”

“And you are poor? You would like to earn much money?”

“Try me,” said Jane with something approaching enthusiasm.

Count Streptitch and Princess Poporensky exchanged glances. Then, simultaneously, they nodded.

“Shall I explain matters, Anna Michaelovna?” the former asked.

The princess shook her head.

“Her Highness wishes to do that herself.”

“It is unnecessary—and unwise.”

“Nevertheless those are her commands. I was to bring the girl in as soon as you had done with her.”

Streptitch shrugged his shoulders. Clearly he was not pleased. Equally clearly he had no intention of disobeying the edict. He turned to Jane.

“The Princess Poporensky will present you to Her Highness the Grand Duchess Pauline. Do not be alarmed.”

Jane was not in the least alarmed. She was delighted at the idea of being presented to a real live grand duchess. There was nothing of the Socialist about Jane. For the moment she had even ceased to worry about her hat.

The Princess Poporensky led the way, waddling along with a gait that she managed to invest with a certain dignity in spite of adverse circumstances. They passed through the adjoining room, which was a kind of antechamber, and the princess knocked upon a door in the farther wall. A voice from inside replied and the princess opened the door and passed in, Jane close upon her heels.

“Let me present to you, madame,” said the princess in a solemn voice, “Miss Jane Cleveland.”

A young woman who had been sitting in a big armchair at the other end of the room jumped up and ran forward. She stared fixedly at Jane for a minute or two, and then laughed merrily.

“But this is splendid, Anna,” she replied. “I never imagined we should succeed so well. Come, let us see ourselves side by side.”

Taking Jane’s arm, she drew the girl across the room, pausing before a full-length mirror which hung on the wall.

“You see?” she cried delightedly. “It is a perfect match!”

Already, with her first glance at the Grand Duchess Pauline, Jane had begun to understand. The Grand Duchess was a young woman perhaps a year or two older than Jane. She had the same shade of fair hair, and the same slim figure. She was, perhaps, a shade taller. Now that they stood side by side, the likeness was very apparent. Detail for detail, the colouring was almost exactly the same.

The Grand Duchess clapped her hands. She seemed an extremely cheerful young woman.

“Nothing could be better,” she declared. “You must congratulate Feodor Alexandrovitch for me, Anna. He has indeed done well.”

“As yet, madame,” murmured the princess, in a low voice, “this young woman does not know what is required of her.”

“True,” said the Grand Duchess, becoming somewhat calmer in manner. “I forgot. Well, I will enlighten her. Leave us together, Anna Michaelovna.”

“But, madame—”

“Leave us alone, I say.”

She stamped her foot angrily. With considerable reluctance Anna Michaelovna left the room. The Grand Duchess sat down and motioned to Jane to do the same.

“They are tiresome, these old women,” remarked Pauline. “But one has to have them. Anna Michaelovna is better than most. Now then, Miss—ah, yes, Miss Jane Cleveland. I like the name. I like you too. You are sympathetic. I can tell at once if people are sympathetic.”

“That’s very clever of you, ma’am,” said Jane, speaking for the first time.

“I am clever,” said Pauline calmly. “Come now, I will explain things to you. Not that there is much to explain. You know the history of Ostrova. Practically all of my family are dead—massacred by the Communists. I am, perhaps, the last of my line. I am a woman, I cannot sit upon the throne. You think they would let me be. But no, wherever I go attempts are made to assassinate me. Absurd, is it not? These vodka-soaked brutes never have any sense of proportion.”

“I see,” said Jane, feeling that something was required of her.

“For the most part I live in retirement—where I can take precautions, but now and then I have to take part in public ceremonies. While I am here, for instance, I have to attend several semipublic functions. Also in Paris on my

way back. I have an estate in Hungary, you know. The sport there is magnificent.”

“Is it really?” said Jane.

“Superb. I adore sport. Also—I ought not to tell you this, but I shall because your face is so sympathetic—there are plans being made there—very quietly, you understand. Altogether it is very important that I should not be assassinated during the next two weeks.”

“But surely the police—” began Jane.

“The police? Oh, yes, they are very good, I believe. And we too—we have our spies. It is possible that I shall be forewarned when the attempt is to take place. But then, again, I might not.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I begin to understand,” said Jane slowly. “You want me to take your place?”

“Only on certain occasions,” said the Grand Duchess eagerly. “You must be somewhere at hand, you understand? I may require you twice, three times, four times in the next fortnight. Each time it will be upon the occasion of some public function. Naturally in intimacy of any kind, you could not represent me.”

“Of course not,” agreed Jane.

“You will do very well indeed. It was clever of Feodor Alexandrovitch to think of an advertisement, was it not?”

“Supposing,” said Jane, “that I get assassinated?”

The Grand Duchess shrugged her shoulders.

“There is the risk, of course, but according to our own secret information, they want to kidnap me, not kill me outright. But I will be quite honest—it is always possible that they might throw a bomb.”

“I see,” said Jane.

She tried to imitate the light-hearted manner of Pauline. She wanted very much to come to the question of money, but did not quite see how best to introduce the subject. But Pauline saved her the trouble.

“We will pay you well, of course,” she said carelessly. “I cannot remember now exactly how much Feodor Alexandrovitch suggested. We were speaking in francs or kronen.”

“Colonel Kranin,” said Jane, “said something about two thousand pounds.”

“That was it,” said Pauline, brightening. “I remember now. It is enough, I hope? Or would you rather have three thousand?”

“Well,” said Jane, “if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather have three thousand.”

“You are businesslike, I see,” said the Grand Duchess kindly. “I wish I was. But I have no idea of money at all. What I want I have to have, that is all.”

It seemed to Jane a simple but admirable attitude of mind.

“And of course, as you say, there is danger,” Pauline continued thoughtfully. “Although you do not look to me as though you minded danger. I do not myself. I hope you do not think that it is because I am a coward that I want you to take my place? You see, it is most important for Ostrova that I should marry and have at least two sons. After that, it does not matter what happens to me.”

“I see,” said Jane.

“And you accept?”

“Yes,” said Jane resolutely. “I accept.”

Pauline clapped her hands vehemently several times. Princess Poporensky appeared immediately.

“I have told her all, Anna,” announced the Grand Duchess. “She will do what we want, and she is to have three thousand pounds. Tell Feodor to make a note of it. She is really very like me, is she not? I think she is better looking, though.”

The princess waddled out of the room, and returned with Count Streptitch.

“We have arranged everything, Feodor Alexandrovitch,” the Grand Duchess said.

He bowed.

“Can she play her part, I wonder?” he queried, eyeing Jane doubtfully.

“I’ll show you,” said the girl suddenly. “You permit, ma’am?” she said to the Grand Duchess.

The latter nodded delightedly.

Jane stood up.

“But this is splendid, Anna,” she said. “I never imagined we should succeed so well. Come, let us see ourselves, side by side.”

And, as Pauline had done, she drew the other girl to the glass.

“You see? A perfect match!”

Words, manner and gesture, it was an excellent imitation of Pauline’s greeting. The princess nodded her head, and uttered a grunt of approbation.

“It is good, that,” she declared. “It would deceive most people.”

“You are very clever,” said Pauline appreciatively. “I could not imitate anyone else to save my life.”

Jane believed her. It had already struck her that Pauline was a young woman who was very much herself.

“Anna will arrange details with you,” said the Grand Duchess. “Take her into my bedroom, Anna, and try some of my clothes on her.”

She nodded a gracious farewell, and Jane was convoyed away by the Princess Poporensky.

“This is what Her Highness will wear to open the bazaar,” explained the old lady, holding up a daring creation of white and black. “This is in three days’ time. It may be necessary for you to take her place there. We do not know. We have not yet received information.”

At Anna’s bidding, Jane slipped off her own shabby garments, and tried on the frock. It fitted her perfectly. The other nodded approvingly.

“It is almost perfect—just a shade long on you, because you are an inch or so shorter than Her Highness.”

“That is easily remedied,” said Jane quickly. “The Grand Duchess wears low-heeled shoes, I noticed. If I wear the same kind of shoes, but with high heels, it will adjust things nicely.”

Anna Michaelovna showed her the shoes that the Grand Duchess usually wore with the dress. Lizard skin with a strap across. Jane memorized them, and arranged to get a pair just like them, but with different heels.

“It would be well,” said Anna Michaelovna, “for you to have a dress of distinctive colour and material quite unlike Her Highness’s. Then in case it becomes necessary for you to change places at a moment’s notice, the substitution is less likely to be noticed.”

Jane thought a minute.

“What about a flame-red marocain? And I might, perhaps, have plain glass pince-nez. That alters the appearance very much.”

Both suggestions were approved, and they went into further details.

Jane left the hotel with banknotes for a hundred pounds in her purse, and instructions to purchase the necessary outfit and engage rooms at the Blitz

Hotel as Miss Montresor of New York.

On the second day after this, Count Streptitch called upon her there.

“A transformation indeed,” he said, as he bowed.

Jane made him a mock bow in return. She was enjoying the new clothes and the luxury of her life very much.

“All this is very nice,” she sighed. “But I suppose that your visit means I must get busy and earn my money.”

“That is so. We have received information. It seems possible that an attempt will be made to kidnap Her Highness on the way home from the bazaar. That is to take place, as you know, at Orion House, which is about ten miles out of London. Her Highness will be forced to attend the bazaar in person, as the Countess of Anchester, who is promoting it, knows her personally. But the following is the plan I have concocted.”

Jane listened attentively as he outlined it to her.

She asked a few questions, and finally declared that she understood perfectly the part that she had to play.

The next day dawned bright and clear—a perfect day for one of the great events of the London Season, the bazaar at Orion House, promoted by the Countess of Anchester in aid of Ostrovian refugees in this country.

Having regard to the uncertainty of the English climate, the bazaar itself took place within the spacious rooms of Orion House, which has been for five hundred years in the possession of the Earls of Anchester. Various collections had been loaned, and a charming idea was the gift by a hundred society women of one pearl each taken from their own necklaces, each pearl to be sold by auction on the second day. There were also numerous sideshows and attractions in the grounds.

Jane was there early in the rôle of Miss Montresor. She wore a dress of flame-coloured marocain, and a small red cloche hat. On her feet were

high-heeled lizard-skin shoes.

The arrival of the Grand Duchess Pauline was a great event. She was escorted to the platform and duly presented with a bouquet of roses by a small child. She made a short but charming speech and declared the bazaar open. Count Streptitch and Princess Poporensky were in attendance upon her.

She wore the dress that Jane had seen, white with a bold design of black, and her hat was a small cloche of black with a profusion of white ospreys hanging over the brim and a tiny lace veil coming half-way down the face. Jane smiled to herself.

The Grand Duchess went round the bazaar, visiting every stall, making a few purchases, and being uniformly gracious. Then she prepared to depart.

Jane was prompt to take up her cue. She requested a word with the Princess Poporensky and asked to be presented to the Grand Duchess.

“Ah, yes!” said Pauline, in a clear voice. “Miss Montresor, I remember the name. She is an American journalist, I believe. She has done much for our cause. I should be glad to give her a short interview for her paper. Is there anywhere where we could be undisturbed?”

A small anteroom was immediately placed at the Grand Duchess’s disposal, and Count Streptitch was despatched to bring in Miss Montresor. As soon as he had done so, and withdrawn again, the Princess Poporensky remaining in attendance, a rapid exchange of garments took place.

Three minutes later, the door opened and the Grand Duchess emerged, her bouquet of roses held up to her face.

Bowing graciously, and uttering a few words of farewell to Lady Anchester in French, she passed out and entered her car which was waiting. Princess Poporensky took her place beside her, and the car drove off.

“Well,” said Jane, “that’s that. I wonder how Miss Montresor’s getting on.”

“No one will notice her. She can slip out quietly.”

“That’s true,” said Jane. “I did it nicely, didn’t I?”

“You acted your part with great distinction.”

“Why isn’t the count with us?”

“He was forced to remain. Someone must watch over the safety of Her Highness.”

“I hope nobody’s going to throw bombs,” said Jane apprehensively. “Hi! we’re turning off the main road. Why’s that?”

Gathering speed, the car was shooting down a side road.

Jane jumped up and put her head out of the window, remonstrating with the driver. He only laughed and increased his speed. Jane sank back into her seat again.

“Your spies were right,” she said, with a laugh. “We’re for it all right. I suppose the longer I keep it up, the safer it is for the Grand Duchess. At all events we must give her time to return to London safely.”

At the prospect of danger, Jane’s spirits rose. She had not relished the prospect of a bomb, but this type of adventure appealed to her sporting instincts.

Suddenly, with a grinding of brakes, the car pulled up in its own length. A man jumped on the step. In his hand was a revolver.

“Put your hands up,” he snarled.

The Princess Poporensky’s hands rose swiftly, but Jane merely looked at him disdainfully, and kept her hands on her lap.

“Ask him the meaning of this outrage,” she said in French to her companion.

But before the latter had time to say a word, the man broke in. He poured out a torrent of words in some foreign language.

Not understanding a single thing, Jane merely shrugged her shoulders and said nothing. The chauffeur had got down from his seat and joined the other man.

“Will the illustrious lady be pleased to descend?” he asked, with a grin.

Raising the flowers to her face again, Jane stepped out of the car. The Princess Poporensky followed her.

“Will the illustrious lady come this way?”

Jane took no notice of the man’s mock insolent manner, but of her own accord she walked towards a low-built, rambling house which stood about a hundred yards away from where the car had stopped. The road had been a cul-de-sac ending in the gateway and drive which led to this apparently untenanted building.

The man, still brandishing his pistol, came close behind the two women. As they passed up the steps, he brushed past them and flung open a door on the left. It was an empty room, into which a table and two chairs had evidently been brought.

Jane passed in and sat down. Anna Michaelovna followed her. The man banged the door and turned the key.

Jane walked to the window and looked out.

“I could jump out, of course,” she remarked. “But I shouldn’t get far. No, we’ll just have to stay here for the present and make the best of it. I wonder if they’ll bring us anything to eat?”

About half an hour later her question was answered.

A big bowl of steaming soup was brought in and placed on the table in front of her. Also two pieces of dry bread.

“No luxury for aristocrats evidently,” remarked Jane cheerily as the door was shut and locked again. “Will you start, or shall I?”

The Princess Poporensky waved the mere idea of food aside with horror.

“How could I eat? Who knows what danger my mistress might not be in?”

“She’s all right,” said Jane. “It’s myself I’m worrying about. You know these people won’t be at all pleased when they find they have got hold of the wrong person. In fact, they may be very unpleasant. I shall keep up the haughty Grand Duchess stunt as long as I can, and do a bunk if the opportunity offers.”

The Princess Poporensky offered no reply.

Jane, who was hungry, drank up all the soup. It had a curious taste, but was hot and savoury.

Afterwards she felt rather sleepy. The Princess Poporensky seemed to be weeping quietly. Jane arranged herself on her uncomfortable chair in the least uncomfortable way, and allowed her head to droop.

She slept.

Jane awoke with a start. She had an idea that she had been a very long time asleep. Her head felt heavy and uncomfortable.

And then suddenly she saw something that jerked her faculties wide awake again.

She was wearing the flame-coloured marocain frock.

She sat up and looked around her. Yes, she was still in the room in the empty house. Everything was exactly as it had been when she went to sleep, except for two facts. The first was that the Princess Poporensky was no longer sitting on the other chair. The second was her own inexplicable change of costume.

“I can’t have dreamt it,” said Jane. “Because if I’d dreamt it, I shouldn’t be here.”

She looked across at the window and registered a second significant fact. When she had gone to sleep the sun had been pouring through the window. Now the house threw a sharp shadow on the sunlit drive.

“The house faces west,” she reflected. “It was afternoon when I went to sleep. Therefore it must be tomorrow morning now. Therefore that soup was drugged. Therefore—oh, I don’t know. It all seems mad.”

She got up and went to the door. It was unlocked. She explored the house. It was silent and empty.

Jane put her hand to her aching head and tried to think.

And then she caught sight of a torn newspaper lying by the front door. It had glaring headlines which caught her eye.

“American Girl Bandit in England,” she read. “The Girl in the Red Dress. Sensational Holdup at Orion House Bazaar.”

Jane staggered out into the sunlight. Sitting on the steps she read, her eyes growing bigger and bigger. The facts were short and succinct.

Just after the departure of the Grand Duchess Pauline, three men and a girl in a red dress had produced revolvers and successfully held up the crowd. They had annexed the hundred pearls and made a getaway in a fast racing car. Up to now, they had not been traced.

In the stop press (it was a late evening paper) were a few words to the effect that the “girl bandit in the red dress” had been staying at the Blitz as a Miss Montresor of New York.

“I’m dished,” said Jane. “Absolutely dished. I always knew there was a catch in it.”

And then she started. A strange sound had smote the air. The voice of a man, uttering one word at frequent intervals.

“Damn,” it said. “Damn.” And yet again, “Damn!”

Jane thrilled to the sound. It expressed so exactly her own feelings. She ran down the steps. By the corner of them lay a young man. He was endeavouring to raise his head from the ground. His face struck Jane as one of the nicest faces she had ever seen. It was freckled and slightly quizzical in expression.

“Damn my head,” said the young man. “Damn it. I—”

He broke off and stared at Jane.

“I must be dreaming,” he said faintly.

“That’s what I said,” said Jane. “But we’re not. What’s the matter with your head?”

“Somebody hit me on it. Fortunately it’s a thick one.”

He pulled himself into a sitting position, and made a wry face.

“My brain will begin to function shortly, I expect. I’m still in the same old spot, I see.”

“How did you get here?” asked Jane curiously.

“That’s a long story. By the way, you’re not the Grand Duchess What’s-her-name, are you?”

“I’m not. I’m plain Jane Cleveland.”

“You’re not plain anyway,” said the young man, looking at her with frank admiration.

Jane blushed.

“I ought to get you some water or something, oughtn’t I?” she asked uncertainly.

“I believe it is customary,” agreed the young man. “All the same, I’d rather have whisky if you can find it.”

Jane was unable to find any whisky. The young man took a deep draught of water, and announced himself better.

“Shall I relate my adventures, or will you relate yours?” he asked.

“You first.”

“There’s nothing much to mine. I happened to notice that the Grand Duchess went into that room with low-heeled shoes on and came out with high-heeled ones. It struck me as rather odd. I don’t like things to be odd.

“I followed the car on my motor bicycle, I saw you taken into the house. About ten minutes later a big racing car came tearing up. A girl in red got out and three men. She had low-heeled shoes on, all right. They went into the house. Presently low heels came out dressed in black and white, and went off in the first car, with an old pussy and a tall man with a fair beard. The others went off in the racing car. I thought they’d all gone, and was just trying to get in at that window and rescue you when someone hit me on the head from behind. That’s all. Now for your turn.”

Jane related her adventures.

“And it’s awfully lucky for me that you did follow,” she ended. “Do you see what an awful hole I should have been in otherwise? The Grand Duchess would have had a perfect alibi. She left the bazaar before the holdup began, and arrived in London in her car. Would anybody ever have believed my fantastic improbable story?”

“Not on your life,” said the young man with conviction.

They had been so absorbed in their respective narratives that they had been quite oblivious of their surroundings. They looked up now with a slight start to see a tall sad-faced man leaning against the house. He nodded at them.

“Very interesting,” he commented.

“Who are you?” demanded Jane.

The sad-faced man’s eyes twinkled a little.

“Detective-Inspector Farrell,” he said gently. “I’ve been very interested in hearing your story and this young lady’s. We might have found a little difficulty in believing hers, but for one or two things.”

“For instance?”

“Well, you see, we heard this morning that the real Grand Duchess had eloped with a chauffeur in Paris.”

Jane gasped.

“And then we knew that this American ‘girl bandit’ had come to this country, and we expected a coup of some kind. We’ll have laid hands on them very soon, I can promise you that. Excuse me a minute, will you?”

He ran up the steps into the house.

“Well!” said Jane. She put a lot of force into the expression.

“I think it was awfully clever of you to notice those shoes,” she said suddenly.

“Not at all,” said the young man. “I was brought up in the boot trade. My father’s a sort of boot king. He wanted me to go into the trade—marry and settle down. All that sort of thing. Nobody in particular—just the principle of the thing. But I wanted to be an artist.” He sighed.

“I’m so sorry,” said Jane kindly.

“I’ve been trying for six years. There’s no blinking it. I’m a rotten painter. I’ve a good mind to chuck it and go home like the prodigal son. There’s a good billet waiting for me.”

“A job is the great thing,” agreed Jane wistfully. “Do you think you could get me one trying on boots somewhere?”

“I could give you a better one than that—if you’d take it.”

“Oh, what?”

“Never mind now. I’ll tell you later. You know, until yesterday I never saw a girl I felt I could marry.”

“Yesterday?”

“At the bazaar. And then I saw her—the one and only Her!”

He looked very hard at Jane.

“How beautiful the delphiniums are,” said Jane hurriedly, with very pink cheeks.

“They’re lupins,” said the young man.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Jane.

“Not a bit,” he agreed. And he drew a little nearer.

Five

A FRUITFUL SUNDAY

“A Fruitful Sunday” was first published in the Daily Mail, 11 August 1928.

Well, really, I call this too delightful,” said Miss Dorothy Pratt for the fourth time. “How I wish the old cat could see me now. She and her Janes!”

The “old cat” thus scathingly alluded to was Miss Pratt’s highly estimable employer, Mrs. Mackenzie Jones, who had strong views upon the Christian names suitable for parlourmaids and had repudiated Dorothy in favour of Miss Pratt’s despised second name of Jane.

Miss Pratt’s companion did not reply at once—for the best of reasons. When you have just purchased a Baby Austin, fourth hand, for the sum of twenty pounds, and are taking it out for the second time only, your whole attention is necessarily focused on the difficult task of using both hands and feet as the emergencies of the moment dictate.

“Er—ah!” said Mr. Edward Palgrove and negotiated a crisis with a horrible grinding sound that would have set a true motorist’s teeth on edge.

“Well, you don’t talk to a girl much,” complained Dorothy.

Mr. Palgrove was saved from having to respond as at that moment he was roundly and soundly cursed by the driver of a motor omnibus.

“Well, of all the impudence,” said Miss Pratt, tossing her head.

“I only wish he had this foot brake,” said her swain bitterly.

“Is there anything wrong with it?”

“You can put your foot on it till kingdom comes,” said Mr. Palgrove. “But nothing happens.”

“Oh, well, Ted, you can’t expect everything for twenty pounds. After all, here we are, in a real car, on Sunday afternoon going out of town the same as everybody else.”

More grinding and crashing sounds.

“Ah,” said Ted, flushed with triumph. “That was a better change.”

“You do drive something beautiful,” said Dorothy admiringly.

Emboldened by feminine appreciation, Mr. Palgrove attempted a dash across Hammersmith Broadway, and was severely spoken to by a policeman.

“Well, I never,” said Dorothy, as they proceeded towards Hammersmith Bridge in a chastened fashion. “I don’t know what the police are coming to. You’d think they’d be a bit more civil spoken seeing the way they’ve been shown up lately.”

“Anyway, I didn’t want to go along this road,” said Edward sadly. “I wanted to go down the Great West Road and do a bust.”

“And be caught in a trap as likely as not,” said Dorothy. “That’s what happened to the master the other day. Five pounds and costs.”

“The police aren’t so dusty after all,” said Edward generously. “They pitch into the rich all right. No favour. It makes me mad to think of these swells who can walk into a place and buy a couple of Rolls-Royces without turning a hair. There’s no sense in it. I’m as good as they are.”

“And the jewellery,” said Dorothy, sighing. “Those shops in Bond Street. Diamonds and pearls and I don’t know what! And me with a string of Woolworth pearls.”

She brooded sadly upon the subject. Edward was able once more to give his full attention to his driving. They managed to get through Richmond without mishap. The altercation with the policeman had shaken Edward’s

nerve. He now took the line of least resistance, following blindly behind any car in front whenever a choice of thoroughfares presented itself.

In this way he presently found himself following a shady country lane which many an experienced motorist would have given his soul to find.

“Rather clever turning off the way I did,” said Edward, taking all the credit to himself.

“Sweetly pretty, I call it,” said Miss Pratt. “And I do declare, there’s a man with fruit to sell.”

Sure enough, at a convenient corner, was a small wicker table with baskets of fruit on it, and the legend eat more fruit displayed on a banner.

“How much?” said Edward apprehensively when frenzied pulling of the hand brake had produced the desired result.

“Lovely strawberries,” said the man in charge.

He was an unprepossessing-looking individual with a leer.

“Just the thing for the lady. Ripe fruit, fresh picked. Cherries too. Genuine English. Have a basket of cherries, lady?”

“They do look nice ones,” said Dorothy.

“Lovely, that’s what they are,” said the man hoarsely. “Bring you luck, lady, that basket will.” He at last condescended to reply to Edward. “Two shillings, sir, and dirt cheap. You’d say so if you knew what was inside the basket.”

“They look awfully nice,” said Dorothy.

Edward sighed and paid over two shillings. His mind was obsessed by calculation. Tea later, petrol—this Sunday motoring business wasn’t what you’d call cheap. That was the worst of taking girls out! They always wanted everything they saw.

“Thank you, sir,” said the unprepossessing-looking one. “You’ve got more than your money’s worth in that basket of cherries.”

Edward shoved his foot savagely down and the Baby Austin leaped at the cherry vendor after the manner of an infuriated Alsatian.

“Sorry,” said Edward. “I forgot she was in gear.”

“You ought to be careful, dear,” said Dorothy. “You might have hurt him.”

Edward did not reply. Another half mile brought them to an ideal spot by the banks of a stream. The Austin was left by the side of the road and Edward and Dorothy sat affectionately upon the river bank and munched cherries. A Sunday paper lay unheeded at their feet.

“What’s the news?” said Edward at last, stretching himself flat on his back and tilting his hat to shade his eyes.

Dorothy glanced over the headlines.

“The Woeful Wife. Extraordinary story. Twenty-eight people drowned last week. Reported death of Airman. Startling Jewel Robbery. Ruby Necklace worth fifty thousand pounds missing. Oh, Ted! Fifty thousand pounds. Just fancy!” She went on reading. “The necklace is composed of twenty-one stones set in platinum and was sent by registered post from Paris. On arrival, the packet was found to contain a few pebbles and the jewels were missing.”

“Pinched in the post,” said Edward. “The posts in France are awful, I believe.”

“I’d like to see a necklace like that,” said Dorothy. “All glowing like blood—pigeon’s blood, that’s what they call the colour. I wonder what it would feel like to have a thing like that hanging round your neck.”

“Well, you’re never likely to know, my girl,” said Edward facetiously.

Dorothy tossed her head.

“Why not, I should like to know. It’s amazing the way girls can get on in the world. I might go on the stage.”

“Girls that behave themselves don’t get anywhere,” said Edward discouragingly.

Dorothy opened her mouth to reply, checked herself, and murmured, “Pass me the cherries.”

“I’ve been eating more than you have,” she remarked. “I’ll divide up what’s left and—why, whatever’s this at the bottom of the basket?”

She drew it out as she spoke—a long glittering chain of blood-red stones.

They both stared at it in amazement.

“In the basket, did you say?” said Edward at last.

Dorothy nodded.

“Right at the bottom—under the fruit.”

Again they stared at each other.

“How did it get there, do you think?”

“I can’t imagine. It’s odd, Ted, just after reading that bit in the paper—about the rubies.”

Edward laughed.

“You don’t imagine you’re holding fifty thousand pounds in your hand, do you?”

“I just said it was odd. Rubies set in platinum. Platinum is that sort of dull silvery stuff—like this. Don’t they sparkle and aren’t they a lovely colour? I wonder how many of them there are?” She counted. “I say, Ted, there are twenty-one exactly.”

“No!”

“Yes. The same number as the paper said. Oh, Ted, you don’t think—”

“It could be.” But he spoke irresolutely. “There’s some sort of way you can tell—scratching them on glass.”

“That’s diamonds. But you know, Ted, that was a very odd-looking man—the man with the fruit—a nasty-looking man. And he was funny about it—said we’d got more than our money’s worth in the basket.”

“Yes, but look here, Dorothy, what would he want to hand us over fifty thousand pounds for?”

Miss Pratt shook her head, discouraged.

“It doesn’t seem to make sense,” she admitted. “Unless the police were after him.”

“The police?” Edward paled slightly.

“Yes. It goes on to say in the paper—‘the police have a clue.’ ”

Cold shivers ran down Edward’s spine.

“I don’t like this, Dorothy. Supposing the police get after us.”

Dorothy stared at him with her mouth open.

“But we haven’t done anything, Ted. We found it in the basket.”

“And that’ll sound a silly sort of story to tell! It isn’t likely.”

“It isn’t very,” admitted Dorothy. “Oh, Ted, do you really think it is it? It’s like a fairy story!”

“I don’t think it sounds like a fairy story,” said Edward. “It sounds to me more like the kind of story where the hero goes to Dartmoor unjustly accused for fourteen years.”

But Dorothy was not listening. She had clasped the necklace round her neck and was judging the effect in a small mirror taken from her handbag.

“The same as a duchess might wear,” she murmured ecstatically.

“I won’t believe it,” said Edward violently. “They’re imitation. They must be imitation.”

“Yes, dear,” said Dorothy, still intent on her reflection in the mirror. “Very likely.”

“Anything else would be too much of a—a coincidence.”

“Pigeon’s blood,” murmured Dorothy.

“It’s absurd. That’s what I say. Absurd. Look here, Dorothy, are you listening to what I say, or are you not?”

Dorothy put away the mirror. She turned to him, one hand on the rubies round her neck.

“How do I look?” she asked.

Edward stared at her, his grievance forgotten. He had never seen Dorothy quite like this. There was a triumph about her, a kind of regal beauty that was completely new to him. The belief that she had jewels round her neck worth fifty thousand pounds had made of Dorothy Pratt a new woman. She looked insolently serene, a kind of Cleopatra and Semiramis and Zenobia rolled into one.

“You look—you look—stunning,” said Edward humbly.

Dorothy laughed, and her laugh, too, was entirely different.

“Look here,” said Edward. “We’ve got to do something. We must take them to a police station or something.”

“Nonsense,” said Dorothy. “You said yourself just now that they wouldn’t believe you. You’ll probably be sent to prison for stealing them.”

“But—but what else can we do?”

“Keep them,” said the new Dorothy Pratt.

Edward stared at her.

“Keep them? You’re mad.”

“We found them, didn’t we? Why should we think they’re valuable. We’ll keep them and I shall wear them.”

“And the police will pinch you.”

Dorothy considered this for a minute or two.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll sell them. And you can buy a Rolls Royce, or two Rolls-Royces, and I’ll buy a diamond head-thing and some rings.”

Still Edward stared. Dorothy showed impatience.

“You’ve got your chance now—it’s up to you to take it. We didn’t steal the thing—I wouldn’t hold with that. It’s come to us and it’s probably the only chance we’ll ever have of getting all the things we want. Haven’t you got any spunk at all, Edward Palgrove?”

Edward found his voice.

“Sell it, you say? That wouldn’t be so jolly easy. Any jeweller would want to know where I got the blooming thing.”

“You don’t take it to a jeweller. Don’t you ever read detective stories, Ted? You take it to a ‘fence,’ of course.”

“And how should I know any fences? I’ve been brought up respectable.”

“Men ought to know everything,” said Dorothy. “That’s what they’re for.”

He looked at her. She was serene and unyielding.

“I wouldn’t have believed it of you,” he said weakly.

“I thought you had more spirit.”

There was a pause. Then Dorothy rose to her feet.

“Well,” she said lightly. “We’d best be getting home.”

“Wearing that thing round your neck?”

Dorothy removed the necklace, looked at it reverently and dropped it into her handbag.

“Look here,” said Edward. “You give that to me.”

“No.”

“Yes, you do. I’ve been brought up honest, my girl.”

“Well, you can go on being honest. You need have nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, hand it over,” said Edward recklessly. “I’ll do it. I’ll find a fence. As you say, it’s the only chance we shall ever have. We came by it honest—bought it for two shillings. It’s no more than what gentlemen do in antique shops every day of their life and are proud of it.”

“That’s it!” said Dorothy. “Oh, Edward, you’re splendid!”

She handed over the necklace and he dropped it into his pocket. He felt worked up, exalted, the very devil of a fellow! In this mood he started the Austin. They were both too excited to remember tea. They drove back to London in silence. Once at a crossroads, a policeman stepped towards the car, and Edward’s heart missed a beat. By a miracle, they reached home without mishap.

Edward’s last words to Dorothy were imbued with the adventurous spirit.

“We’ll go through with this. Fifty thousand pounds! It’s worth it!”

He dreamt that night of broad arrows and Dartmoor, and rose early, haggard and unrefreshed. He had to set about finding a fence—and how to do it he had not the remotest idea!

His work at the office was slovenly and brought down upon him two sharp rebukes before lunch.

How did one find a “fence?” Whitechapel, he fancied, was the correct neighbourhood—or was it Stepney?

On his return to the office a call came through for him on the telephone. Dorothy’s voice spoke—tragic and tearful.

“Is that you, Ted? I’m using the telephone, but she may come in any minute, and I’ll have to stop. Ted, you haven’t done anything, have you?”

Edward replied in the negative.

“Well, look here, Ted, you mustn’t. I’ve been lying awake all night. It’s been awful. Thinking of how it says in the Bible you mustn’t steal. I must have been mad yesterday—I really must. You won’t do anything, will you, Ted, dear?”

Did a feeling of relief steal over Mr. Palgrove? Possibly it did—but he wasn’t going to admit any such thing.

“When I say I’m going through with a thing, I go through with it,” he said in a voice such as might belong to a strong superman with eyes of steel.

“Oh, but, Ted, dear, you mustn’t. Oh, Lord, she’s coming. Look here, Ted, she’s going out to dinner tonight. I can slip out and meet you. Don’t do anything till you’ve seen me. Eight o’clock. Wait for me round the corner.” Her voice changed to a seraphic murmur. “Yes, ma’am, I think it was a wrong number. It was Bloomsbury 0234 they wanted.”

As Edward left the office at six o’clock, a huge headline caught his eye.

JEWEL ROBBERY. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Hurriedly he extended a penny. Safely ensconced in the Tube, having dexterously managed to gain a seat, he eagerly perused the printed sheet. He found what he sought easily enough.

A suppressed whistle escaped him.

“Well—I’m—”

And then another adjacent paragraph caught his eye. He read it through and let the paper slip to the floor unheeded.

Precisely at eight o’clock, he was waiting at the rendezvous. A breathless Dorothy, looking pale but pretty, came hurrying along to join him.

“You haven’t done anything, Ted?”

“I haven’t done anything.” He took the ruby chain from his pocket. “You can put it on.”

“But, Ted—”

“The police have got the rubies all right—and the man who pinched them. And now read this!”

He thrust a newspaper paragraph under her nose. Dorothy read:

NEW ADVERTISING STUNT

A clever new advertising dodge is being adopted by the All-English Fivepenny Fair who intend to challenge the famous Woolworths. Baskets of fruit were sold yesterday and will be on sale every Sunday. Out of every fifty baskets, one will contain an imitation necklace in different coloured stones. These necklaces are really wonderful value for the money. Great excitement and merriment was caused by them yesterday and eat more fruit will have a great vogue next Sunday. We congratulate the Fivepenny Fair on their resource and wish them all good luck in their campaign of Buy British Goods.

“Well—” said Dorothy.

And after a pause: “Well!”

“Yes,” said Edward. “I felt the same.”

A passing man thrust a paper into his hand.

“Take one, brother,” he said.

“The price of a virtuous woman is far above rubies.”

“There!” said Edward. “I hope that cheers you up.”

“I don’t know,” said Dorothy doubtfully. “I don’t exactly want to look like a good woman.”

“You don’t,” said Edward. “That’s why the man gave me that paper. With those rubies round your neck you don’t look one little bit like a good woman.”

Dorothy laughed.

“You’re rather a dear, Ted,” she said. “Come on, let’s go to the pictures.”

Six

THE GOLDEN BALL

“The Golden Ball” was first published as “Playing the Innocent” in the Daily Mail, 5 August 1929.

George Dundas stood in the City of London meditating.

All about him toilers and moneymakers surged and flowed like an enveloping tide. But George, beautifully dressed, his trousers exquisitely creased, took no heed of them. He was busy thinking what to do next.

Something had occurred! Between George and his rich uncle (Ephraim Leadbetter of the firm of Leadbetter and Gilling) there had been what is called in a lower walk of life “words.” To be strictly accurate the words had been almost entirely on Mr. Leadbetter’s side. They had flowed from his lips in a steady stream of bitter indignation, and the fact that they consisted almost entirely of repetition did not seem to have worried him. To say a thing once beautifully and then let it alone was not one of Mr. Leadbetter’s mottos.

The theme was a simple one—the criminal folly and wickedness of a young man, who has his way to make, taking a day off in the middle of the week without even asking leave. Mr. Leadbetter, when he had said everything he could think of and several things twice, paused for breath and asked George what he meant by it.

George replied simply that he had felt he wanted a day off. A holiday, in fact.

And what, Mr. Leadbetter wanted to know, were Saturday afternoon and Sunday? To say nothing of Whitsuntide, not long past, and August Bank Holiday to come?

George said he didn't care for Saturday afternoons, Sundays or Bank Holidays. He meant a real day, when it might be possible to find some spot where half London was not assembled already.

Mr. Leadbetter then said that he had done his best by his dead sister's son—nobody could say he hadn't given him a chance. But it was plain that it was no use. And in future George could have five real days with Saturday and Sunday added to do with as he liked.

"The golden ball of opportunity has been thrown up for you, my boy," said Mr. Leadbetter in a last touch of poetical fancy. "And you have failed to grasp it."

George said it seemed to him that that was just what he had done, and Mr. Leadbetter dropped poetry for wrath and told him to get out.

Hence George—meditating. Would his uncle relent or would he not? Had he any secret affection for George, or merely a cold distaste?

It was just at that moment that a voice—a most unlikely voice—said, "Hallo!"

A scarlet touring car with an immense long bonnet had drawn up to the curb beside him. At the wheel was that beautiful and popular society girl, Mary Montresor. (The description is that of the illustrated papers who produced a portrait of her at least four times a month.) She was smiling at George in an accomplished manner.

"I never knew a man could look so like an island," said Mary Montresor. "Would you like to get in?"

"I should love it above all things," said George with no hesitation, and stepped in beside her.

They proceeded slowly because the traffic forbade anything else.

"I'm tired of the city," said Mary Montresor. "I came to see what it was like. I shall go back to London."

Without presuming to correct her geography, George said it was a splendid idea. They proceeded sometimes slowly, sometimes with wild bursts of speed when Mary Montresor saw a chance of cutting in. It seemed to George that she was somewhat optimistic in the latter view, but he reflected that one could only die once. He thought it best, however, to essay no conversation. He preferred his fair driver to keep strictly to the job in hand.

It was she who reopened the conversation, choosing the moment when they were doing a wild sweep round Hyde Park Corner.

“How would you like to marry me?” she inquired casually.

George gave a gasp, but that may have been due to a large bus that seemed to spell certain destruction. He prided himself on his quickness in response.

“I should love it,” he replied easily.

“Well,” said Mary Montresor, vaguely. “Perhaps you may some day.”

They turned into the straight without accident, and at that moment George perceived large new bills at Hyde Park Corner tube station. Sandwiched between GRAVE POLITICAL SITUATION and COLONEL IN DOCK, one said SOCIETY GIRL TO MARRY DUKE and the other DUKE OF EDGEHILL AND MISS MONTRESOR.

“What’s this about the Duke of Edgehill?” demanded George sternly.

“Me and Bingo? We’re engaged.”

“But then—what you said just now—”

“Oh, that,” said Mary Montresor. “You see, I haven’t made up my mind who I shall actually marry.”

“Then why did you get engaged to him?”

“Just to see if I could. Everybody seemed to think it would be frightfully difficult, and it wasn’t a bit!”

“Very rough luck on—er—Bingo,” said George, mastering his embarrassment at calling a real live duke by a nickname.

“Not at all,” said Mary Montresor. “It will be good for Bingo if anything could do him good—which I doubt.”

George made another discovery—again aided by a convenient poster.

“Why, of course, it’s cup day at Ascot. I should have thought that was the one place you were simply bound to be today.”

Mary Montresor sighed.

“I wanted a holiday,” she said plaintively.

“Why, so did I,” said George, delighted. “And as a result my uncle has kicked me out to starve.”

“Then in case we marry,” said Mary, “my twenty thousand a year may come in useful?”

“It will certainly provide us with a few home comforts,” said George.

“Talking of homes,” said Mary, “let’s go in the country and find a home we would like to live in.”

It seemed a simple and charming plan. They negotiated Putney Bridge, reached the Kingston bypass and with a sigh of satisfaction Mary pressed her foot down on the accelerator. They got into the country very quickly. It was half an hour later that with a sudden exclamation Mary shot out a dramatic hand and pointed.

On the brow of a hill in front of them there nestled a house of what house agents describe (but seldom truthfully) as “old-world” charm. Imagine the description of most houses in the country really come true for once, and you get an idea of this house.

Mary drew up outside a white gate.

“We’ll leave the car and go up and look at it. It’s our house!”

“Decidedly, it’s our house,” agreed George. “But just for the moment other people seem to be living in it.”

Mary dismissed the other people with a wave of her hand. They walked up the winding drive together. The house appeared even more desirable at close quarters.

“We’ll go and peep in at all the windows,” said Mary.

George demurred.

“Do you think the other people—?”

“I shan’t consider them. It’s our house—they’re only living in it by a sort of accident. Besides, it’s a lovely day and they’re sure to be out. And if anyone does catch us, I shall say—I shall say—that I thought it was Mrs.—Mrs. Pardonstenger’s house, and that I am so sorry I made a mistake.”

“Well, that ought to be safe enough,” said George reflectively.

They looked in through windows. The house was delightfully furnished. They had just got to the study when footsteps crunched on the gravel behind them and they turned to face a most irreproachable butler.

“Oh!” said Mary. And then putting on her most enchanting smile, she said, “Is Mrs. Pardonstenger in? I was looking to see if she was in the study.”

“Mrs. Pardonstenger is at home, madam,” said the butler. “Will you come this way, please.”

They did the only thing they could. They followed him. George was calculating what the odds against this happening could possibly be. With a name like Pardonstenger he came to the conclusion it was about one in twenty thousand. His companion whispered, “Leave it to me. It will be all right.”

George was only too pleased to leave it to her. The situation, he considered, called for feminine finesse.

They were shown into a drawing room. No sooner had the butler left the room than the door almost immediately reopened and a big florid lady with peroxide hair came in expectantly.

Mary Montresor made a movement towards her, then paused in well-simulated surprise.

“Why!” she exclaimed. “It isn’t Amy! What an extraordinary thing!”

“It is an extraordinary thing,” said a grim voice.

A man had entered behind Mrs. Pardonstenger, an enormous man with a bulldog face and a sinister frown. George thought he had never seen such an unpleasant brute. The man closed the door and stood with his back against it.

“A very extraordinary thing,” he repeated sneeringly. “But I fancy we understand your little game!” He suddenly produced what seemed an outsize in revolvers. “Hands up. Hands up, I say. Frisk ’em, Bella.”

George in reading detective stories had often wondered what it meant to be frisked. Now he knew. Bella (alias Mrs. P.) satisfied herself that neither he nor Mary concealed any lethal weapons on their persons.

“Thought you were mighty clever, didn’t you?” sneered the man. “Coming here like this and playing the innocents. You’ve made a mistake this time—a bad mistake. In fact, I very much doubt whether your friends and relations will ever see you again. Ah! you would, would you?” as George made a movement. “None of your games. I’d shoot you as soon as look at you.”

“Be careful, George,” quavered Mary.

“I shall,” said George with feeling. “Very careful.”

“And now march,” said the man. “Open the door, Bella. Keep your hands above your heads, you two. The lady first—that’s right. I’ll come behind

you both. Across the hall. Upstairs. . . .”

They obeyed. What else could they do? Mary mounted the stairs, her hands held high. George followed. Behind them came the huge ruffian, revolver in hand.

Mary reached the top of the staircase and turned the corner. At the same moment, without the least warning, George lunged out in a fierce backward kick. He caught the man full in the middle and he capsized backwards down the stairs. In a moment George had turned and leaped down after him, kneeling on his chest. With his right hand, he picked up the revolver which had fallen from the other’s hand as he fell.

Bella gave a scream and retreated through a baize door. Mary came running down the stairs, her face as white as paper.

“George, you haven’t killed him?”

The man was lying absolutely still. George bent over him.

“I don’t think I’ve killed him,” he said regretfully. “But he’s certainly taken the count all right.”

“Thank God.” She was breathing rapidly.

“Pretty neat,” said George with permissible self-admiration. “Many a lesson to be learnt from a jolly old mule. Eh, what?”

Mary pulled at his hand.

“Come away,” she cried feverishly. “Come away quick.”

“If we had something to tie this fellow up with,” said George, intent on his own plans. “I suppose you couldn’t find a bit of rope or cord anywhere?”

“No, I couldn’t,” said Mary. “And come away, please—please—I’m so frightened.”

“You needn’t be frightened,” said George with manly arrogance. “I’m here.”

“Darling George, please—for my sake. I don’t want to be mixed up in this. Please let’s go.”

The exquisite way in which she breathed the words “for my sake” shook George’s resolution. He allowed himself to be led forth from the house and hurried down the drive to the waiting car. Mary said faintly: “You drive. I don’t feel I can.” George took command of the wheel.

“But we’ve got to see this thing through,” he said. “Heaven knows what blackguardism that nasty looking fellow is up to. I won’t bring the police into it if you don’t want me to—but I’ll have a try on my own. I ought to be able to get on their track all right.”

“No, George, I don’t want you to.”

“We have a first-class adventure like this, and you want me to back out of it? Not on my life.”

“I’d no idea you were so bloodthirsty,” said Mary tearfully.

“I’m not bloodthirsty. I didn’t begin it. The damned cheek of the fellow—threatening us with an outsize revolver. By the way—why on earth didn’t that revolver go off when I kicked him downstairs?”

He stopped the car and fished the revolver out of the side-pocket of the car where he had placed it. After examining it, he whistled.

“Well, I’m damned! The thing isn’t loaded. If I’d known that—” He paused, wrapped in thought. “Mary, this is a very curious business.”

“I know it is. That’s why I’m begging you to leave it alone.”

“Never,” said George firmly.

Mary uttered a heartrending sigh.

“I see,” she said, “that I shall have to tell you. And the worst of it is that I haven’t the least idea how you’ll take it.”

“What do you mean—tell me?”

“You see, it’s like this.” She paused. “I feel girls should stick together nowadays—they should insist on knowing something about the men they meet.”

“Well?” said George, utterly fogged.

“And the most important thing to a girl is how a man will behave in an emergency—has he got presence of mind—courage—quick wittedness? That’s the kind of thing you can hardly ever know—until it’s too late. An emergency mightn’t arise until you’d been married for years. All you do know about a man is how he dances and if he’s good at getting taxis on a wet night.”

“Both very useful accomplishments,” George pointed out.

“Yes, but one wants to feel a man is a man.”

“The great wide-open spaces where men are men.” George quoted absently.

“Exactly. But we have no wide-open spaces in England. So one has to create a situation artificially. That’s what I did.”

“Do you mean—?”

“I do mean. That house, as it happens, actually is my house. We came to it by design—not by chance. And the man—that man that you nearly killed —”

“Yes?”

“He’s Rube Wallace—the film actor. He does prizefighters, you know. The dearest and gentlest of men. I engaged him. Bella’s his wife. That’s why I was so terrified that you’d killed him. Of course the revolver wasn’t loaded. It’s a stage property. Oh, George, are you very angry?”

“Am I the first person you have—er—tried this test on?”

“Oh, no. There have been—let me see—nine and a half!”

“Who was the half?” inquired George with curiosity.

“Bingo,” replied Mary coldly.

“Did any of them think of kicking like a mule?”

“No—they didn’t. Some tried to bluster and some gave in at once, but they all allowed themselves to be marched upstairs and tied up, and gagged. Then, of course, I managed to work myself loose from my bonds—like in books—and I freed them and we got away—finding the house empty.”

“And nobody thought of the mule trick or anything like it?”

“No.”

“In that case,” said George graciously, “I forgive you.”

“Thank you, George,” said Mary meekly.

“In fact,” said George, “the only question that arises is: Where do we go now? I’m not sure if it’s Lambeth Palace or Doctor’s Commons, wherever that is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The licence. A special licence, I think, is indicated. You’re too fond of getting engaged to one man and then immediately asking another one to marry you.”

“I didn’t ask you to marry me!”

“You did. At Hyde Park Corner. Not a place I should choose for a proposal myself, but everyone has their idiosyncrasies in these matters.”

“I did nothing of the kind. I just asked, as a joke, whether you would care to marry me? It wasn’t intended seriously.”

“If I were to take counsel’s opinion, I am sure that he would say it constituted a genuine proposal. Besides, you know you want to marry me.”

“I don’t.”

“Not after nine-and-a-half failures? Fancy what a feeling of security it will give you to go through life with a man who can extricate you from any dangerous situation.”

Mary appeared to weaken slightly at this telling argument. But she said firmly: “I wouldn’t marry any man unless he went on his knees to me.”

George looked at her. She was adorable. But George had other characteristics of the mule beside its kick. He said with equal firmness:

“To go on one’s knees to any woman is degrading. I will not do it.”

Mary said with enchanting wistfulness: “What a pity.”

They drove back to London. George was stern and silent. Mary’s face was hidden by the brim of her hat. As they passed Hyde Park Corner, she murmured softly:

“Couldn’t you go on your knees to me?”

George said firmly: “No.”

He felt he was being a superman. She admired him for his attitude. But unluckily he suspected her of mulish tendencies herself. He drew up suddenly.

“Excuse me,” he said.

He jumped out of the car, retraced his steps to a fruit barrow they had just passed and returned so quickly that the policeman who was bearing down upon them to ask what they meant by it, had not had time to arrive.

George drove on, lightly tossing an apple into Mary's lap.

"Eat more fruit," he said. "Also symbolical."

"Symbolical?"

"Yes. Originally Eve gave Adam an apple. Nowadays Adam gives Eve one. See?"

"Yes," said Mary rather doubtfully.

"Where shall I drive you?" inquired George formally.

"Home, please."

He drove to Grosvenor Square. His face was absolutely impassive. He jumped out and came round to help her out. She made a last appeal.

"Darling George—couldn't you? Just to please me?"

"Never," said George.

And at that moment it happened. He slipped, tried to recover his balance and failed. He was kneeling in the mud before her. Mary gave a squeal of joy and clapped her hands.

"Darling George! Now I will marry you. You can go straight to Lambeth Palace and fix up with the Archbishop of Canterbury about it."

"I didn't mean to," said George hotly. "It was a bl—er—a banana skin." He held the offender up reproachfully.

"Never mind," said Mary. "It happened. When we quarrel and you throw it in my teeth that I proposed to you, I can retort that you had to go on your knees to me before I would marry you. And all because of that blessed banana skin! It was a blessed banana skin you were going to say?"

"Something of the sort," said George.

At five-thirty that afternoon, Mr. Leadbetter was informed that his nephew had called and would like to see him.

“Called to eat humble pie,” said Mr. Leadbetter to himself. “I dare say I was rather hard on the lad, but it was for his own good.”

And he gave orders that George should be admitted.

George came in airily.

“I want a few words with you, uncle,” he said. “You did me a grave injustice this morning. I should like to know whether, at my age, you could have gone out into the street, disowned by your relatives, and between the hours of eleven-fifteen and five-thirty acquire an income of twenty thousand a year. This is what I have done!”

“You’re mad, boy.”

“Not mad, resourceful! I am going to marry a young, rich, beautiful society girl. One, moreover, who is throwing over a duke for my sake.”

“Marrying a girl for her money? I’d not have thought it of you.”

“And you’d have been right. I would never have dared to ask her if she hadn’t—very fortunately—asked me. She retracted afterwards, but I made her change her mind. And do you know, uncle, how all this was done? By a judicious expenditure of twopence and a grasping of the golden ball of opportunity.”

“Why the tuppence?” asked Mr. Leadbetter, financially interested.

“One banana—off a barrow. Not everyone would have thought of that banana. Where do you get a marriage licence? Is it Doctor’s Commons or Lambeth Palace?”

Seven

THE RAJAH'S EMERALD

“The Rajah’s Emerald” was first published in Red Magazine, 30 July 1926.

With a serious effort James Bond bent his attention once more on the little yellow book in his hand. On its outside the book bore the simple but pleasing legend, “Do you want your salary increased by £300 per annum?” Its price was one shilling. James had just finished reading two pages of crisp paragraphs instructing him to look his boss in the face, to cultivate a dynamic personality, and to radiate an atmosphere of efficiency. He had now arrived at a subtler matter, “There is a time for frankness, there is a time for discretion,” the little yellow book informed him. “A strong man does not always blurt out all he knows.” James let the little book close, and raising his head, gazed out over a blue expanse of ocean. A horrible suspicion assailed him, that he was not a strong man. A strong man would have been in command of the present situation, not a victim to it. For the sixtieth time that morning James rehearsed his wrongs.

This was his holiday. His holiday? Ha, ha! Sardonic laughter. Who had persuaded him to come to that fashionable seaside resort, Kimpton-on-Sea? Grace. Who had urged him into an expenditure of more than he could afford? Grace. And he had fallen in with the plan eagerly. She had got him here, and what was the result? Whilst he was staying in an obscure boardinghouse about a mile and a half from the sea-front, Grace who should have been in a similar boardinghouse (not the same one—the proprieties of James’s circle were very strict) had flagrantly deserted him, and was staying at no less than the Esplanade Hotel upon the seafront.

It seemed that she had friends there. Friends! Again James laughed sardonically. His mind went back over the last three years of his leisurely courtship of Grace. Extremely pleased she had been when he first singled her out for notice. That was before she had risen to heights of glory in the millinery salon at Messrs Bartles in the High Street. In those early days it

had been James who gave himself airs, now alas! the boot was on the other leg. Grace was what is technically known as “earning good money.” It had made her uppish. Yes, that was it, thoroughly uppish. A confused fragment out of a poetry book came back to James’s mind, something about “thanking heaven fasting, for a good man’s love.” But there was nothing of that kind of thing observable about Grace. Well fed on an Esplanade Hotel breakfast, she was ignoring a good man’s love utterly. She was indeed accepting the attentions of a poisonous idiot called Claud Sopworth, a man, James felt convinced, of no moral worth whatsoever.

James ground a heel into the the earth, and scowled darkly at the horizon. Kimpton-on-Sea. What had possessed him to come to such a place? It was preeminently a resort of the rich and fashionable, it possessed two large hotels, and several miles of picturesque bungalows belonging to fashionable actresses, rich Jews and those members of the English aristocracy who had married wealthy wives. The rent, furnished, of the smallest bungalow was twenty-five guineas a week. Imagination boggled at what the rent of the large ones might amount to. There was one of these palaces immediately behind James’s seat. It belonged to that famous sportsman Lord Edward Campion, and there were staying there at the moment a houseful of distinguished guests including the Rajah of Maraputna, whose wealth was fabulous. James had read all about him in the local weekly newspaper that morning; the extent of his Indian possessions, his palaces, his wonderful collection of jewels, with a special mention of one famous emerald which the papers declared enthusiastically was the size of a pigeon’s egg. James, being town bred, was somewhat hazy about the size of a pigeon’s egg, but the impression left on his mind was good.

“If I had an emerald like that,” said James, scowling at the horizon again, “I’d show Grace.”

The sentiment was vague, but the enunciation of it made James feel better. Laughing voices hailed him from behind, and he turned abruptly to confront Grace. With her was Clara Sopworth, Alice Sopworth, Dorothy Sopworth and—alas! Claud Sopworth. The girls were arm-in-arm and giggling.

“Why, you are quite a stranger,” cried Grace archly.

“Yes,” said James.

He could, he felt, have found a more telling retort. You cannot convey the impression of a dynamic personality by the use of the one word “yes.” He looked with intense loathing at Claud Sopworth. Claud Sopworth was almost as beautifully dressed as the hero of a musical comedy. James longed passionately for the moment when an enthusiastic beach dog should plant wet, sandy forefeet on the unsullied whiteness of Claud’s flannel trousers. He himself wore a serviceable pair of dark-grey flannel trousers which had seen better days.

“Isn’t the air beautiful?” said Clara, sniffing it appreciatively. “Quite sets you up, doesn’t it?”

She giggled.

“It’s ozone,” said Alice Sopworth. “It’s as good as a tonic, you know.” And she giggled also.

James thought:

“I should like to knock their silly heads together. What is the sense of laughing all the time? They are not saying anything funny.”

The immaculate Claud murmured languidly:

“Shall we have a bathe, or is it too much of a fag?”

The idea of bathing was accepted shrilly. James fell into line with them. He even managed, with a certain amount of cunning, to draw Grace a little behind the others.

“Look here!” he complained, “I am hardly seeing anything of you.”

“Well, I am sure we are all together now,” said Grace, “and you can come and lunch with us at the hotel, at least—”

She looked dubiously at James’s legs.

“What is the matter?” demanded James ferociously. “Not smart enough for you, I suppose?”

“I do think, dear, you might take a little more pains,” said Grace. “Everyone is so fearfully smart here. Look at Claud Sopworth!”

“I have looked at him,” said James grimly. “I have never seen a man who looked a more complete ass than he does.”

Grace drew herself up.

“There is no need to criticize my friends, James, it’s not manners. He’s dressed just like any other gentleman at the hotel is dressed.”

“Bah!” said James. “Do you know what I read the other day in ‘Society Snippets?’ Why, that the Duke of—the Duke of, I can’t remember, but one duke, anyway, was the worst-dressed man in England, there!”

“I dare say,” said Grace, “but then, you see, he is a duke.”

“Well?” demanded James. “What is wrong with my being a duke some day? At least, well, not perhaps a duke, but a peer.”

He slapped the yellow book in his pocket, and recited to her a long list of peers of the realm who had started life much more obscurely than James Bond. Grace merely giggled.

“Don’t be so soft, James,” she said. “Fancy you Earl of Kimpton-on-Sea!”

James gazed at her in mingled rage and despair. The air of Kimpton-on-Sea had certainly gone to Grace’s head.

The beach at Kimpton is a long, straight stretch of sand. A row of bathing huts and boxes stretched evenly along it for about a mile and a half. The party had just stopped before a row of six huts all labelled imposingly, “For visitors to the Esplanade Hotel only.”

“Here we are,” said Grace brightly; “but I’m afraid you can’t come in with us, James, you’ll have to go along to the public tents over there. We’ll meet

you in the sea. So long!”

“So long!” said James, and he strode off in the direction indicated.

Twelve dilapidated tents stood solemnly confronting the ocean. An aged mariner guarded them, a roll of blue paper in his hand. He accepted a coin of the realm from James, tore him off a blue ticket from his roll, threw him over a towel, and jerked one thumb over his shoulder.

“Take your turn,” he said huskily.

It was then that James awoke to the fact of competition. Others besides himself had conceived the idea of entering the sea. Not only was each tent occupied, but outside each tent was a determined-looking crowd of people glaring at each other. James attached himself to the smallest group and waited. The strings of the tent parted, and a beautiful young woman, sparsely clad, emerged on the scene settling her bathing cap with the air of one who had the whole morning to waste. She strolled down to the water’s edge, and sat down dreamily on the sands.

“That’s no good,” said James to himself, and attached himself forthwith to another group.

After waiting five minutes, sounds of activity were apparent in the second tent. With heavings and strainings, the flaps parted asunder and four children and a father and mother emerged. The tent being so small, it had something of the appearance of a conjuring trick. On the instant two women sprang forward each grasping one flap of the tent.

“Excuse me,” said the first young woman, panting a little.

“Excuse me,” said the other young woman, glaring.

“I would have you know I was here quite ten minutes before you were,” said the first young woman rapidly.

“I have been here a good quarter of an hour, as anyone will tell you,” said the second young woman defiantly.

“Now then, now then,” said the aged mariner, drawing near.

Both young women spoke to him shrilly. When they had finished, he jerked his thumb at the second young woman, and said briefly:

“It’s yours.”

Then he departed, deaf to remonstrances. He neither knew nor cared which had been there first, but his decision, as they say in newspaper competitions, was final. The despairing James caught at his arm.

“Look here! I say!”

“Well, mister?”

“How long is it going to be before I get a tent?”

The aged mariner threw a dispassionate glance over the waiting throng.

“Might be an hour, might be an hour and a half, I can’t say.”

At that moment James espied Grace and the Sopworth girls running lightly down the sands towards the sea.

“Damn!” said James to himself. “Oh, damn!”

He plucked once more at the aged mariner.

“Can’t I get a tent anywhere else? What about one of these huts along here? They all seem empty.”

“The huts,” said the ancient mariner with dignity, “are private.”

Having uttered this rebuke, he passed on. With a bitter feeling of having been tricked, James detached himself from the waiting groups, and strode savagely down the beach. It was the limit! It was the absolute, complete limit! He glared savagely at the trim bathing boxes he passed. In that moment from being an Independent Liberal, he became a red-hot Socialist. Why should the rich have bathing boxes and be able to bathe any minute

they chose without waiting in a crowd? “This system of ours,” said James vaguely, “is all wrong.”

From the sea came the coquettish screams of the splashed. Grace’s voice! And above her squeaks, the inane “Ha, ha, ha,” of Claud Sopworth.

“Damn!” said James, grinding his teeth, a thing which he had never before attempted, only read about in works of fiction.

He came to a stop, twirling his stick savagely, and turning his back firmly on the sea. Instead, he gazed with concentrated hatred upon Eagle’s Nest, Buena Vista, and Mon Desir. It was the custom of the inhabitants of Kimpton-on-Sea to label their bathing huts with fancy names. Eagle’s Nest merely struck James as being silly, and Buena Vista was beyond his linguistic accomplishments. But his knowledge of French was sufficient to make him realize the appositeness of the third name.

“Mong Desire,” said James. “I should jolly well think it was.”

And on that moment he saw that while the doors of the other bathing huts were tightly closed, that of Mon Desir was ajar. James looked thoughtfully up and down the beach, this particular spot was mainly occupied by mothers of large families, busily engaged in superintending their offspring. It was only ten o’clock, too early as yet for the aristocracy of Kimpton-on-Sea to have come down to bathe.

“Eating quails and mushrooms in their beds as likely as not, brought to them on trays by powdered footmen, pah! Not one of them will be down here before twelve o’clock,” thought James.

He looked again towards the sea. With the obedience of a well-trained leitmotif, the shrill scream of Grace rose upon the air. It was followed by the “Ha, ha, ha,” of Claud Sopworth.

“I will,” said James between his teeth.

He pushed open the door of Mon Desir and entered. For the moment he had a fright, as he caught sight of sundry garments hanging from pegs, but he

was quickly reassured. The hut was partitioned into two, on the right-hand side, a girl's yellow sweater, a battered panama hat and a pair of beach shoes were depending from a peg. On the left-hand side an old pair of grey flannel trousers, a pullover, and a sou'wester proclaimed the fact that the sexes were segregated. James hastily transferred himself to the gentlemen's part of the hut, and undressed rapidly. Three minutes later, he was in the sea puffing and snorting importantly, doing extremely short bursts of professional-looking swimming—head under the water, arms lashing the sea—that style.

“Oh, there you are!” cried Grace. “I was afraid you wouldn't be in for ages with all that crowd of people waiting there.”

“Really?” said James.

He thought with affectionate loyalty of the yellow book. “The strong man can on occasions be discreet.” For the moment his temper was quite restored. He was able to say pleasantly but firmly to Claud Sopworth, who was teaching Grace the overarm stroke:

“No, no, old man, you have got it all wrong. I'll show her.”

And such was the assurance of his tone, that Claud withdrew discomfited. The only pity of it was, that his triumph was short-lived. The temperature of our English waters is not such as to induce bathers to remain in them for any length of time. Grace and the Sopworth girls were already displaying blue chins and chattering teeth. They raced up the beach, and James pursued his solitary way back to Mon Desir. As he towelled himself vigorously and slipped his shirt over his head, he was pleased with himself. He had, he felt, displayed a dynamic personality.

And then suddenly he stood still, frozen with terror. Girlish voices sounded from outside, and voices quite different from those of Grace and her friends. A moment later he had realized the truth, the rightful owners of Mon Desir were arriving. It is possible that if James had been fully dressed, he would have waited their advent in a dignified manner, and attempted an explanation. As it was he acted on panic. The windows of Mon Desir were modestly screened by dark green curtains. James flung himself on the door

and held the knob in a desperate clutch. Hands tried ineffectually to turn it from outside.

“It’s locked after all,” said a girl’s voice. “I thought Peg said it was open.”

“No, Woggle said so.”

“Woggle is the limit,” said the other girl. “How perfectly foul, we shall have to go back for the key.”

James heard their footsteps retreating. He drew a long, deep breath. In desperate haste he huddled on the rest of his garments. Two minutes later saw him strolling negligently down the beach with an almost aggressive air of innocence. Grace and the Sopworth girls joined him on the beach a quarter of an hour later. The rest of the morning passed agreeably in stone throwing, writing in the sand and light badinage. Then Claud glanced at his watch.

“Lunchtime,” he observed. “We’d better be strolling back.”

“I’m terribly hungry,” said Alice Sopworth.

All the other girls said that they were terribly hungry too.

“Are you coming, James?” asked Grace.

Doubtless James was unduly touchy. He chose to take offence at her tone.

“Not if my clothes are not good enough for you,” he said bitterly. “Perhaps, as you are so particular, I’d better not come.”

That was Grace’s cue for murmured protestations, but the seaside air had affected Grace unfavourably. She merely replied:

“Very well. Just as you like, see you this afternoon then.”

James was left dumbfounded.

“Well!” he said, staring after the retreating group. “Well, of all the—”

He strolled moodily into the town. There were two cafés in Kimpton-on-Sea, they are both hot, noisy and overcrowded. It was the affair of the bathing huts once more, James had to wait his turn. He had to wait longer than his turn, an unscrupulous matron who had just arrived forestalling him when a vacant seat did present itself. At last he was seated at a small table. Close to his left ear three raggedly bobbed maidens were making a determined hash of Italian opera. Fortunately James was not musical. He studied the bill of fare dispassionately, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He thought to himself:

“Whatever I ask for it’s sure to be ‘off.’ That’s the kind of fellow I am.”

His right hand, groping in the recesses of his pocket, touched an unfamiliar object. It felt like a pebble, a large round pebble.

“What on earth did I want to put a stone in my pocket for?” thought James.

His fingers closed round it. A waitress drifted up to him.

“Fried plaice and chipped potatoes, please,” said James.

“Fried plaice is ‘off,’ ” murmured the waitress, her eyes fixed dreamily on the ceiling.

“Then I’ll have curried beef,” said James.

“Curried beef is ‘off.’ ”

“Is there anything on this beastly menu that isn’t ‘off?’ ” demanded James.

The waitress looked pained, and placed a pale-grey forefinger against haricot mutton. James resigned himself to the inevitable and ordered haricot mutton. His mind still seething with resentment against the ways of cafés, he drew his hand out of his pocket, the stone still in it. Unclosing his fingers, he looked absent-mindedly at the object in his palm. Then with a shock all lesser matters passed from his mind, and he stared with all his eyes. The thing he held was not a pebble, it was—he could hardly doubt it—an emerald, an enormous green emerald. James stared at it horror-

stricken. No, it couldn't be an emerald, it must be coloured glass. There couldn't be an emerald of that size, unless—printed words danced before James's eyes, "The Rajah of Maraputna—famous emerald the size of a pigeon's egg." Was it—could it be—that emerald at which he was now looking? The waitress returned with the haricot mutton, and James closed his fingers spasmodically. Hot and cold shivers chased themselves up and down his spine. He had the sense of being caught in a terrible dilemma. If this was the emerald—but was it? Could it be? He unclosed his fingers and peeped anxiously. James was no expert on precious stones, but the depth and the glow of the jewel convinced him this was the real thing. He put both elbows on the table and leaned forward staring with unseeing eyes at the haricot mutton slowly congealing on the dish in front of him. He had got to think this out. If this was the Rajah's emerald, what was he going to do about it? The word "police" flashed into his mind. If you found anything of value you took it to the police station. Upon this axiom had James been brought up.

Yes, but—how on earth had the emerald got into his trouser pocket? That was doubtless the question the police would ask. It was an awkward question, and it was moreover a question to which he had at the moment no answer. How had the emerald got into his trouser pocket? He looked despairingly down at his legs, and as he did so a misgiving shot through him. He looked more closely. One pair of old grey flannel trousers is very much like another pair of old grey flannel trousers, but all the same, James had an instinctive feeling that these were not his trousers after all. He sat back in his chair stunned with the force of the discovery. He saw now what had happened, in the hurry of getting out of the bathing hut, he had taken the wrong trousers. He had hung his own, he remembered, on an adjacent peg to the old pair hanging there. Yes, that explained matters so far, he had taken the wrong trousers. But all the same, what on earth was an emerald worth hundreds and thousands of pounds doing there? The more he thought about it, the more curious it seemed. He could, of course, explain to the police—

It was awkward, no doubt about it, it was decidedly awkward. One would have to mention the fact that one had deliberately entered someone else's

bathing hut. It was not, of course, a serious offence, but it started him off wrong.

“Can I bring you anything else, sir?”

It was the waitress again. She was looking pointedly at the untouched haricot mutton. James hastily dumped some of it on his plate and asked for his bill. Having obtained it, he paid and went out. As he stood undecidedly in the street, a poster opposite caught his eye. The adjacent town of Harchester possessed an evening paper, and it was the contents bill of this paper that James was looking at. It announced a simple, sensational fact: “The Rajah’s Emerald Stolen.” “My God,” said James faintly, and leaned against a pillar. Pulling himself together he fished out a penny and purchased a copy of the paper. He was not long in finding what he sought. Sensational items of local news were few and far between. Large headlines adorned the front page. “Sensational Burglary at Lord Edward Campion’s. Theft of Famous Historical Emerald. Rajah of Maraputna’s Terrible Loss.” The facts were few and simple. Lord Edward Campion had entertained several friends the evening before. Wishing to show the stone to one of the ladies present, the Rajah had gone to fetch it and had found it missing. The police had been called in. So far no clue had been obtained. James let the paper fall to the ground. It was still not clear to him how the emerald had come to be reposing in the pocket of an old pair of flannel trousers in a bathing hut, but it was borne in upon him every minute that the police would certainly regard his own story as suspicious. What on earth was he to do? Here he was, standing in the principal street of Kimpton-on-Sea with stolen booty worth a king’s ransom reposing idly in his pocket, whilst the entire police force of the district were busily searching for just that same booty. There were two courses open to him. Course number one, to go straight to the police station and tell his story—but it must be admitted that James funkcd that course badly. Course number two, somehow or other to get rid of the emerald. It occurred to him to do it up in a neat little parcel and post it back to the Rajah. Then he shook his head, he had read too many detective stories for that sort of thing. He knew how your supersleuth could get busy with a magnifying glass and every kind of patent device. Any detective worth his salt would get busy on James’s parcel and would in half an hour or so have discovered the sender’s profession, age, habits and

personal appearance. After that it would be a mere matter of hours before he was tracked down.

It was then that a scheme of dazzling simplicity suggested itself to James. It was the luncheon hour, the beach would be comparatively deserted, he would return to Mon Desir, hang up the trousers where he had found them, and regain his own garments. He started briskly towards the beach.

Nevertheless, his conscience pricked him slightly. The emerald ought to be returned to the Rajah. He conceived the idea that he might perhaps do a little detective work—once, that is, that he had regained his own trousers and replaced the others. In pursuance of this idea, he directed his steps towards the aged mariner, whom he rightly regarded as being an exhaustible source of Kimpton information.

“Excuse me!” said James politely; “but I believe a friend of mine has a hut on this beach, Mr. Charles Lampton. It is called Mon Desir, I fancy.”

The aged mariner was sitting very squarely in a chair, a pipe in his mouth, gazing out to sea. He shifted his pipe a little, and replied without removing his gaze from the horizon:

“Mon Desir belongs to his lordship, Lord Edward Campion, everyone knows that. I never heard of Mr. Charles Lampton, he must be a newcomer.”

“Thank you,” said James, and withdrew.

The information staggered him. Surely the Rajah could not himself have slipped the stone into the pocket and forgotten it. James shook his head, the theory did not satisfy him, but evidently some member of the house party must be the thief. The situation reminded James of some of his favourite works of fiction.

Nevertheless, his own purpose remained unaltered. All fell out easily enough. The beach was, as he hoped it would be, practically deserted. More fortunate still, the door of Mon Desir remained ajar. To slip in was the work

of a moment, Edward was just lifting his own trousers from the hook, when a voice behind him made him spin round suddenly.

“So I have caught you, my man!” said the voice.

James stared openmouthed. In the doorway of Mon Desir stood a stranger; a well-dressed man of about forty years of age, his face keen and hawklike.

“So I have caught you!” the stranger repeated.

“Who—who are you?” stammered James.

“Detective-Inspector Merrilees from the Yard,” said the other crisply. “And I will trouble you to hand over that emerald.”

“The—the emerald?”

James was seeking to gain time.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?” said Inspector Merrilees.

He had a crisp, businesslike enunciation. James tried to pull himself together.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said with an assumption of dignity.

“Oh, yes, my lad, I think you do.”

“The whole thing,” said James, “is a mistake. I can explain it quite easily —” He paused.

A look of weariness had settled on the face of the other.

“They always say that,” murmured the Scotland Yard man dryly. “I suppose you picked it up as you were strolling along the beach, eh? That is the sort of explanation.”

It did indeed bear a resemblance to it, James recognized the fact, but still he tried to gain time.

“How do I know you are what you say you are?” he demanded weakly.

Merrilees flapped back his coat for a moment, showing a badge. Edward stared at him with eyes that popped out of his head.

“And now,” said the other almost genially, “you see what you are up against! You are a novice—I can tell that. Your first job, isn’t it?”

James nodded.

“I thought as much. Now, my boy, are you going to hand over that emerald, or have I got to search you?”

James found his voice.

“I—I haven’t got it on me,” he declared.

He was thinking desperately.

“Left it at your lodgings?” queried Merrilees.

James nodded.

“Very well, then,” said the detective, “we will go there together.”

He slipped his arm through James’s.

“I am taking no chances of your getting away from me,” he said gently.

“We will go to your lodgings, and you will hand that stone over to me.”

James spoke unsteadily.

“If I do, will you let me go?” he asked tremulously.

Merrilees appeared embarrassed.

“We know just how that stone was taken,” he explained, “and about the lady involved, and, of course, as far as that goes—well, the Rajah wants it hushed up. You know what these native rulers are?”

James, who knew nothing whatsoever about native rulers, except for one cause célèbre, nodded his head with an appearance of eager comprehension.

“It will be most irregular, of course,” said the detective; “but you may get off scot-free.”

Again James nodded. They had walked the length of the Esplanade, and were now turning into the town. James intimated the direction, but the other man never relinquished his sharp grip on James’s arm.

Suddenly James hesitated and half spoke. Merrilees looked up sharply, and then laughed. They were just passing the police station, and he noticed James’s agonized glances at it.

“I am giving you a chance first,” he said good-humouredly.

It was at that moment that things began to happen. A loud bellow broke from James, he clutched the other’s arm, and yelled at the top of his voice:

“Help! thief. Help! thief.”

A crowd surrounded them in less than a minute. Merrilees was trying to wrench his arm from James’s grasp.

“I charge this man,” cried James. “I charge this man, he picked my pocket.”

“What are you talking about, you fool?” cried the other.

A constable took charge of matters. Mr. Merrilees and James were escorted into the police station. James reiterated his complaint.

“This man has just picked my pocket,” he declared excitedly. “He has got my notecase in his right-hand pocket, there!”

“The man is mad,” grumbled the other. “You can look for yourself, Inspector, and see if he is telling the truth.”

At a sign from the inspector, the constable slipped his hand deferentially into Merrilees’s pocket. He drew something out and held it up with a gasp of astonishment.

“My God!” said the inspector, startled out of professional decorum. “It must be the Rajah’s emerald.”

Merrilees looked more incredulous than anyone else.

“This is monstrous,” he spluttered; “monstrous. The man must have put it into my pocket himself as we were walking along together. It’s a plant.”

The forceful personality of Merrilees caused the inspector to waver. His suspicions swung round to James. He whispered something to the constable, and the latter went out.

“Now then, gentlemen,” said the inspector, “let me have your statements please, one at a time.”

“Certainly,” said James. “I was walking along the beach, when I met this gentleman, and he pretended he was acquainted with me. I could not remember having met him before, but I was too polite to say so. We walked along together. I had my suspicions of him, and just when we got opposite the police station, I found his hand in my pocket. I held on to him and shouted for help.”

The inspector transferred his glance to Merrilees.

“And now you, sir.”

Merrilees seemed a little embarrassed.

“The story is very nearly right,” he said slowly; “but not quite. It was not I who scraped acquaintance with him, but he who scraped acquaintance with me. Doubtless he was trying to get rid of the emerald, and slipped it into my pocket while we were talking.”

The inspector stopped writing.

“Ah!” he said impartially. “Well, there will be a gentleman here in a minute who will help us to get to the bottom of the case.”

Merrilees frowned.

“It is really impossible for me to wait,” he murmured, pulling out his watch. “I have an appointment. Surely, inspector, you can’t be so ridiculous as to suppose I’d steal the emerald and walk along with it in my pocket?”

“It is not likely, sir, I agree,” the inspector replied. “But you will have to wait just a matter of five or ten minutes till we get this thing cleared up. Ah! here is his lordship.”

A tall man of forty strode into the room. He was wearing a pair of dilapidated trousers and an old sweater.

“Now then, inspector, what is all this?” he said. “You have got hold of the emerald, you say? That’s splendid, very smart work. Who are these people you have got here?”

His eyes ranged over James and came to rest on Merrilees. The forceful personality of the latter seemed to dwindle and shrink.

“Why—Jones!” exclaimed Lord Edward Campion.

“You recognize this man, Lord Edward?” asked the inspector sharply.

“Certainly I do,” said Lord Edward dryly. “He is my valet, came to me a month ago. The fellow they sent down from London was on to him at once, but there was not a trace of the emerald anywhere among his belongings.”

“He was carrying it in his coat pocket,” the inspector declared. “This gentleman put us on to him.” He indicated James.

In another minute James was being warmly congratulated and shaken by the hand.

“My dear fellow,” said Lord Edward Campion. “So you suspected him all along, you say?”

“Yes,” said James. “I had to trump up the story about my pocket being picked to get him into the police station.”

“Well, it is splendid,” said Lord Edward, “absolutely splendid. You must come back and lunch with us, that is if you haven’t lunched. It is late, I know, getting on for two o’clock.”

“No,” said James; “I haven’t lunched—but—”

“Not a word, not a word,” said Lord Edward. “The Rajah, you know, will want to thank you for getting back his emerald for him. Not that I have quite got the hang of the story yet.”

They were out of the police station by now, standing on the steps.

“As a matter of fact,” said James, “I think I should like to tell you the true story.”

He did so. His lordship was very much entertained.

“Best thing I ever heard in my life,” he declared. “I see it all now. Jones must have hurried down to the bathing hut as soon as he had pinched the thing, knowing that the police would make a thorough search of the house. That old pair of trousers I sometimes put on for going out fishing, nobody was likely to touch them, and he could recover the jewel at his leisure. Must have been a shock to him when he came today to find it gone. As soon as you appeared, he realized that you were the person who had removed the stone. I still don’t quite see how you managed to see through that detective pose of his, though!”

“A strong man,” thought James to himself, “knows when to be frank and when to be discreet.”

He smiled deprecatingly whilst his fingers passed gently over the inside of his coat lapel feeling the small silver badge of that little-known club, the

Merton Park Super Cycling Club. An astonishing coincidence that the man Jones should also be a member, but there it was!

“Hallo, James!”

He turned. Grace and the Sopworth girls were calling to him from the other side of the road. He turned to Lord Edward.

“Excuse me a moment?”

He crossed the road to them.

“We are going to the pictures,” said Grace. “Thought you might like to come.”

“I am sorry,” said James. “I am just going back to lunch with Lord Edward Campion. Yes, that man over there in the comfortable old clothes. He wants me to meet the Rajah of Maraputna.”

He raised his hat politely and rejoined Lord Edward.

Eight

SWAN SONG

“Swan Song” was first published in Grand Magazine, September 1926.

It was eleven o'clock on a May morning in London. Mr. Cowan was looking out of the window, behind him was the somewhat ornate splendour of a sitting room in a suite at the Ritz Hotel. The suite in question had been reserved for Mme. Paula Nazorkoff, the famous operatic star, who had just arrived in London. Mr. Cowan, who was Madame's principal man of business, was awaiting an interview with the lady. He turned his head suddenly as the door opened, but it was only Miss Read, Mme. Nazorkoff's secretary, a pale girl with an efficient manner.

“Oh, so it's you, my dear,” said Mr. Cowan. “Madame not up yet, eh?”

Miss Read shook her head.

“She told me to come round at ten o'clock,” Mr. Cowan said. “I have been waiting an hour.”

He displayed neither resentment nor surprise. Mr. Cowan was indeed accustomed to the vagaries of the artistic temperament. He was a tall man, clean-shaven, with a frame rather too well covered, and clothes that were rather too faultless. His hair was very black and shining, and his teeth were aggressively white. When he spoke, he had a way of slurring his “s's” which was not quite a lisp, but came perilously near to it. It required no stretch of imagination to realize that his father's name had probably been Cohen. At that minute a door at the other side of the room opened, and a trim, French girl hurried through.

“Madame getting up?” inquired Cowan hopefully. “Tell us the news, Elise.”

Elise immediately elevated both hands to heaven.

“Madame she is like seventeen devils this morning, nothing pleases her! The beautiful yellow roses which monsieur sent to her last night, she says they are all very well for New York, but that it is imbecile to send them to her in London. In London, she says, red roses are the only things possible, and straight away she opens the door, and precipitates the yellow roses into the passage, where they descend upon a monsieur, très comme il faut, a military gentleman, I think, and he is justly indignant, that one!”

Cowan raised his eyebrows, but displayed no other signs of emotion. Then he took from his pocket a small memorandum book and pencilled in it the words “red roses.”

Elise hurried out through the other door, and Cowan turned once more to the window. Vera Read sat down at the desk, and began opening letters and sorting them. Ten minutes passed in silence, and then the door of the bedroom burst open, and Paula Nazorkoff flamed into the room. Her immediate effect upon it was to make it seem smaller, Vera Read appeared more colourless, and Cowan retreated into a mere figure in the background.

“Ah, ha! My children,” said the prima donna, “am I not punctual?”

She was a tall woman, and for a singer not unduly fat. Her arms and legs were still slender, and her neck was a beautiful column. Her hair, which was coiled in a great roll halfway down her neck, was of a dark, glowing red. If it owed some at least of its colour to henna, the result was none the less effective. She was not a young woman, forty at least, but the lines of her face were still lovely, though the skin was loosened and wrinkled round the flashing, dark eyes. She had the laugh of a child, the digestion of an ostrich, and the temper of a fiend, and she was acknowledged to be the greatest dramatic soprano of her day. She turned directly upon Cowan.

“Have you done as I asked you? Have you taken that abominable English piano away, and thrown it into the Thames?”

“I have got another for you,” said Cowan, and gestured towards where it stood in the corner.

Nazorkoff rushed across to it, and lifted the lid.

“An Erard,” she said, “that is better. Now let us see.”

The beautiful soprano voice rang out in an arpeggio, then it ran lightly up and down the scale twice, then took a soft little run up to a high note, held it, its volume swelling louder and louder, then softened again till it died away in nothingness.

“Ah!” said Paula Nazorkoff in naïve satisfaction. “What a beautiful voice I have! Even in London I have a beautiful voice.”

“That is so,” agreed Cowan in hearty congratulation. “And you bet London is going to fall for you all right, just as New York did.”

“You think so?” queried the singer.

There was a slight smile on her lips, and it was evident that for her the question was a mere commonplace.

“Sure thing,” said Cowan.

Paula Nazorkoff closed the piano lid down and walked across to the table, with that slow undulating walk that proved so effective on the stage.

“Well, well,” she said, “let us get to business. You have all the arrangements there, my friend?”

Cowan took some papers out of the portfolio he had laid on a chair.

“Nothing has been altered much,” he remarked. “You will sing five times at Covent Garden, three times in Tosca, twice in Aida.”

“Aida! Pah,” said the prima donna; “it will be unutterable boredom. Tosca, that is different.”

“Ah, yes,” said Cowan. “Tosca is your part.”

Paula Nazorkoff drew herself up.

“I am the greatest Tosca in the world,” she said simply.

“That is so,” agreed Cowan. “No one can touch you.”

“Roscarl will sing ‘Scarpia,’ I suppose?”

Cowan nodded.

“And Emile Lippi.”

“What?” shrieked Nazorkoff. “Lippi, that hideous little barking frog, croak—croak—croak. I will not sing with him, I will bite him, I will scratch his face.”

“Now, now,” said Cowan soothingly.

“He does not sing, I tell you, he is a mongrel dog who barks.”

“Well, we’ll see, we’ll see,” said Cowan.

He was too wise ever to argue with temperamental singers.

“The Cavardossi?” demanded Nazorkoff.

“The American tenor, Hensdale.”

The other nodded.

“He is a nice little boy, he sings prettily.”

“And Barrère is to sing it once, I believe.”

“He is an artist,” said Madame generously. “But to let that croaking frog Lippi be Scarpia! Bah—I’ll not sing with him.”

“You leave it to me,” said Cowan soothingly.

He cleared his throat, and took up a fresh set of papers.

“I am arranging for a special concert at the Albert Hall.”

Nazorkoff made a grimace.

“I know, I know,” said Cowan; “but everybody does it.”

“I will be good,” said Nazorkoff, “and it will be filled to the ceiling, and I shall have much money. Ecco!”

Again Cowan shuffled papers.

“Now here is quite a different proposition,” he said, “from Lady Rustonbury. She wants you to go down and sing.”

“Rustonbury?”

The prima donna’s brow contracted as if in the effort to recollect something.

“I have read that name lately, very lately. It is a town—or a village, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, pretty little place in Hertfordshire. As for Lord Rustonbury’s place, Rustonbury Castle, it’s a real dandy old feudal seat, ghosts and family pictures, and secret staircases, and a slap-up private theatre. Rolling in money they are, and always giving some private show. She suggests that we give a complete opera, preferably *Butterfly*.”

“*Butterfly*?”

Cowan nodded.

“And they are prepared to pay. We’ll have to square Covent Garden, of course, but even after that it will be well worth your while financially. In all probability, royalty will be present. It will be a slap-up advertisement.”

Madame raised her still beautiful chin.

“Do I need advertisement?” she demanded proudly.

“You can’t have too much of a good thing,” said Cowan, unabashed.

“Rustonbury,” murmured the singer, “where did I see—?”

She sprang up suddenly, and running to the centre table, began turning over the pages of an illustrated paper which lay there. There was a sudden pause as her hand stopped, hovering over one of the pages, then she let the periodical slip to the floor and returned slowly to her seat. With one of her swift changes of mood, she seemed now an entirely different personality. Her manner was very quiet, almost austere.

“Make all arrangements for Rustonbury, I would like to sing there, but there is one condition—the opera must be Tosca.”

Cowan looked doubtful.

“That will be rather difficult—for a private show, you know, scenery and all that.”

“Tosca or nothing.”

Cowan looked at her very closely. What he saw seemed to convince him, he gave a brief nod and rose to his feet.

“I will see what I can arrange,” he said quietly.

Nazorkoff rose too. She seemed more anxious than was usual, with her, to explain her decision.

“It is my greatest rôle, Cowan. I can sing that part as no other woman has ever sung it.”

“It is a fine part,” said Cowan. “Jeritza made a great hit in it last year.”

“Jeritza!” cried the other, a flush mounting in her cheeks. She proceeded to give him at great length her opinion of Jeritza.

Cowan, who was used to listening to singers’ opinions of other singers, abstracted his attention till the tirade was over; he then said obstinately:

“Anyway, she sings ‘Vissi d’Arte’ lying on her stomach.”

“And why not?” demanded Nazorkoff. “What is there to prevent her? I will sing it on my back with my legs waving in the air.”

Cowan shook his head with perfect seriousness.

“I don’t believe that would go down any,” he informed her. “All the same, that sort of thing takes on, you know.”

“No one can sing ‘Vissi d’Arte’ as I can,” said Nazorkoff confidently. “I sing it in the voice of the convent—as the good nuns taught me to sing years and years ago. In the voice of a choir boy or an angel, without feeling, without passion.”

“I know,” said Cowan heartily. “I have heard you, you are wonderful.”

“That is art,” said the prima donna, “to pay the price, to suffer, to endure, and in the end not only to have all knowledge, but also the power to go back, right back to the beginning and recapture the lost beauty of the heart of a child.”

Cowan looked at her curiously. She was staring past him with a strange, blank look in her eyes, and something about that look of hers gave him a creepy feeling. Her lips just parted, and she whispered a few words softly to herself. He only just caught them.

“At last,” she murmured. “At last—after all these years.”

Lady Rustonbury was both an ambitious and an artistic woman, she ran the two qualities in harness with complete success. She had the good fortune to have a husband who cared for neither ambition nor art and who therefore did not hamper her in any way. The Earl of Rustonbury was a large, square man, with an interest in horseflesh and in nothing else. He admired his wife, and was proud of her, and was glad that his great wealth enabled her to indulge all her schemes. The private theatre had been built less than a hundred years ago by his grandfather. It was Lady Rustonbury’s chief toy—she had already given an Ibsen drama in it, and a play of the ultra new school, all divorce and drugs, also a poetical fantasy with Cubist scenery. The forthcoming performance of *Tosca* had created widespread interest.

Lady Rustonbury was entertaining a very distinguished houseparty for it, and all London that counted was motoring down to attend.

Mme Nazorkoff and her company had arrived just before luncheon. The new young American tenor, Hensdale, was to sing “Cavaradossi,” and Roscari, the famous Italian baritone, was to be Scarpia. The expense of the production had been enormous, but nobody cared about that. Paula Nazorkoff was in the best of humours, she was charming, gracious, her most delightful and cosmopolitan self. Cowan was agreeably surprised, and prayed that this state of things might continue.

After luncheon the company went out to the theatre, and inspected the scenery and various appointments. The orchestra was under the direction of Mr. Samuel Ridge, one of England’s most famous conductors. Everything seemed to be going without a hitch, and strangely enough, that fact worried Mr. Cowan. He was more at home in an atmosphere of trouble, this unusual peace disturbed him.

“Everything is going a darned sight too smoothly,” murmured Mr. Cowan to himself. “Madame is like a cat that has been fed on cream, it’s too good to last, something is bound to happen.”

Perhaps as the result of his long contact with the operatic world, Mr. Cowan had developed the sixth sense, certainly his prognostications were justified. It was just before seven o’clock that evening when the French maid, Elise, came running to him in great distress.

“Ah, Mr. Cowan, come quickly, I beg of you come quickly.”

“What’s the matter?” demanded Cowan anxiously. “Madame got her back up about anything—ructions, eh, is that it?”

“No, no, it is not Madame, it is Signor Roscari, he is ill, he is dying!”

“Dying? Oh, come now.”

Cowan hurried after her as she led the way to the stricken Italian’s bedroom. The little man was lying on his bed, or rather jerking himself all

over it in a series of contortions that would have been humorous had they been less grave. Paula Nazorkoff was bending over him; she greeted Cowan imperiously.

“Ah! there you are. Our poor Roscari, he suffers horribly. Doubtless he has eaten something.”

“I am dying,” groaned the little man. “The pain—it is terrible. Ow!”

He contorted himself again, clasping both hands to his stomach, and rolling about on the bed.

“We must send for a doctor,” said Cowan.

Paula arrested him as he was about to move to the door.

“The doctor is already on his way, he will do all that can be done for the poor suffering one, that is arranged for, but never never will Roscari be able to sing tonight.”

“I shall never sing again, I am dying,” groaned the Italian.

“No, no, you are not dying,” said Paula. “It is but an indigestion, but all the same, impossible that you should sing.”

“I have been poisoned.”

“Yes, it is the ptomaine without doubt,” said Paula. “Stay with him, Elise, till the doctor comes.”

The singer swept Cowan with her from the room.

“What are we to do?” she demanded.

Cowan shook his head hopelessly. The hour was so far advanced that it would not be possible to get anyone from London to take Roscari’s place. Lady Rustonbury, who had just been informed of her guest’s illness, came hurrying along the corridor to join them. Her principal concern, like Paula Nazorkoff’s, was the success of Tosca.

“If there were only someone near at hand,” groaned the prima donna.

“Ah!” Lady Rustonbury gave a sudden cry. “Of course! Bréon.”

“Bréon?”

“Yes, Edouard Bréon, you know, the famous French baritone. He lives near here, there was a picture of his house in this week’s Country Homes. He is the very man.”

“It is an answer from heaven,” cried Nazorkoff. “Bréon as Scarpia, I remember him well, it was one of his greatest rôles. But he has retired, has he not?”

“I will get him,” said Lady Rustonbury. “Leave it to me.”

And being a woman of decision, she straightway ordered out the Hispano Suiza. Ten minutes later, M. Edouard Bréon’s country retreat was invaded by an agitated countess. Lady Rustonbury, once she had made her mind up, was a very determined woman, and doubtless M. Bréon realized that there was nothing for it but to submit. Himself a man of very humble origin, he had climbed to the top of his profession, and had consorted on equal terms with dukes and princes, and the fact never failed to gratify him. Yet, since his retirement to this old-world English spot, he had known discontent. He missed the life of adulation and applause, and the English country had not been as prompt to recognize him as he thought they should have been. So he was greatly flattered and charmed by Lady Rustonbury’s request.

“I will do my poor best,” he said, smiling. “As you know, I have not sung in public for a long time now. I do not even take pupils, only one or two as a great favour. But there—since Signor Roscari is unfortunately indisposed —”

“It was a terrible blow,” said Lady Rustonbury.

“Not that he is really a singer,” said Bréon.

He told her at some length why this was so. There had been, it seemed, no baritone of distinction since Edouard Bréon retired.

“Mme. Nazorkoff is singing ‘Tosca,’ ” said Lady Rustonbury. “You know her, I dare say?”

“I have never met her,” said Bréon. “I heard her sing once in New York. A great artist—she has a sense of drama.”

Lady Rustonbury felt relieved—one never knew with these singers—they had such queer jealousies and antipathies.

She reentered the hall at the castle some twenty minutes later waving a triumphant hand.

“I have got him,” she cried, laughing. “Dear M. Bréon has really been too kind, I shall never forget it.”

Everyone crowded round the Frenchman, and their gratitude and appreciation were as incense to him. Edouard Bréon, though now close on sixty, was still a fine-looking man, big and dark, with a magnetic personality.

“Let me see,” said Lady Rustonbury. “Where is Madame—? Oh! there she is.”

Paula Nazorkoff had taken no part in the general welcoming of the Frenchman. She had remained quietly sitting in a high oak chair in the shadow of the fireplace. There was, of course, no fire, for the evening was a warm one and the singer was slowly fanning herself with an immense palm-leaf fan. So aloof and detached was she, that Lady Rustonbury feared she had taken offence.

“M. Bréon.” She led him up to the singer. “You have never yet met Madame Nazorkoff, you say.”

With a last wave, almost a flourish, of the palm leaf, Paula Nazorkoff laid it down, and stretched out her hand to the Frenchman. He took it and bowed

low over it, and a faint sigh escaped from the prima donna's lips.

"Madame," said Bréon, "we have never sung together. That is the penalty of my age! But fate has been kind to me, and come to my rescue."

Paula laughed softly.

"You are too kind, M. Bréon. When I was still but a poor little unknown singer, I have sat at your feet. Your 'Rigoletto'—what art, what perfection! No one could touch you."

"Alas!" said Bréon, pretending to sigh. "My day is over. Scarpia, Rigoletto, Radames, Sharpless, how many times have I not sung them, and now—no more!"

"Yes—tonight."

"True, Madame—I forgot. Tonight."

"You have sung with many 'Toscas,' " said Nazorkoff arrogantly; "but never with me!"

The Frenchman bowed.

"It will be an honour," he said softly. "It is a great part, Madame."

"It needs not only a singer, but an actress," put in Lady Rustonbury.

"That is true," Bréon agreed. "I remember when I was a young man in Italy, going to a little out of the way theatre in Milan. My seat cost me only a couple of lira, but I heard as good singing that night as I have heard in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Quite a young girl sang 'Tosca,' she sang it like an angel. Never shall I forget her voice in 'Vissi d'Arte,' the clearness of it, the purity. But the dramatic force, that was lacking."

Nazorkoff nodded.

"That comes later," she said quietly.

“True. This young girl—Bianca Capelli, her name was—I interested myself in her career. Through me she had the chance of big engagements, but she was foolish—regrettably foolish.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“How was she foolish?”

It was Lady Rustonbury’s twenty-four-year-old daughter, Blanche Amery, who spoke. A slender girl with wide blue eyes.

The Frenchman turned to her at once politely.

“Alas! Mademoiselle, she had embroiled herself with some low fellow, a ruffian, a member of the Camorra. He got into trouble with the police, was condemned to death; she came to me begging me to do something to save her lover.”

Blanche Amery was staring at him.

“And did you?” she asked breathlessly.

“Me, Mademoiselle, what could I do? A stranger in the country.”

“You might have had influence?” suggested Nazorkoff, in her low vibrant voice.

“If I had, I doubt whether I should have exerted it. The man was not worth it. I did what I could for the girl.”

He smiled a little, and his smile suddenly struck the English girl as having something peculiarly disagreeable about it. She felt that, at that moment, his words fell far short of representing his thoughts.

“You did what you could,” said Nazorkoff. “That was kind of you, and she was grateful, eh?”

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

“The man was executed,” he said, “and the girl entered a convent. Eh, voilà! The world has lost a singer.”

Nazorkoff gave a low laugh.

“We Russians are more fickle,” she said lightly.

Blanche Amery happened to be watching Cowan just as the singer spoke, and she saw his quick look of astonishment, and his lips that half-opened and then shut tight in obedience to some warning glance from Paula.

The butler appeared in the doorway.

“Dinner,” said Lady Rustonbury, rising. “You poor things, I am so sorry for you, it must be dreadful always to have to starve yourself before singing. But there will be a very good supper afterwards.”

“We shall look forward to it,” said Paula Nazorkoff. She laughed softly. “Afterwards!”

Inside the theatre, the first act of Tosca had just drawn to a close. The audience stirred, spoke to each other. The royalties, charming and gracious, sat in the three velvet chairs in the front row. Everyone was whispering and murmuring to each other, there was a general feeling that in the first act Nazorkoff had hardly lived up to her great reputation. Most of the audience did not realize that in this the singer showed her art, in the first act she was saving her voice and herself. She made of La Tosca a light, frivolous figure, toying with love, coquettishly jealous and exciting. Bréon, though the glory of his voice was past its prime, still struck a magnificent figure as the cynical Scarpia. There was no hint of the decrepit roué in his conception of the part. He made of Scarpia a handsome, almost benign figure, with just a hint of the subtle malevolence that underlay the outward seeming. In the last passage, with the organ and the procession, when Scarpia stands lost in thought, gloating over his plan to secure Tosca, Bréon had displayed a wonderful art. Now the curtain rose up on the second act, the scene in Scarpia’s apartments.

This time, when Tosca entered, the art of Nazorkoff at once became apparent. Here was a woman in deadly terror playing her part with the assurance of a fine actress. Her easy greeting of Scarpia, her nonchalance, her smiling replies to him! In this scene, Paula Nazorkoff acted with her eyes, she carried herself with deadly quietness, with an impassive, smiling face. Only her eyes that kept darting glances at Scarpia betrayed her true feelings. And so the story went on, the torture scene, the breaking down of Tosca's composure, and her utter abandonment when she fell at Scarpia's feet imploring him vainly for mercy. Old Lord Leconmere, a connoisseur of music, moved appreciatively, and a foreign ambassador sitting next to him murmured:

"She surpasses herself, Nazorkoff, tonight. There is no other woman on the stage who can let herself go as she does."

Leconmere nodded.

And now Scarpia has named his price, and Tosca, horrified, flies from him to the window. Then comes the beat of drums from afar, and Tosca flings herself wearily down on the sofa. Scarpia standing over her, recites how his people are raising up the gallows—and then silence, and again the far-off beat of drums. Nazorkoff lay prone on the sofa, her head hanging downwards almost touching the floor, masked by her hair. Then, in exquisite contrast to the passion and stress of the last twenty minutes, her voice rang out, high and clear, the voice, as she had told Cowan, of a choir boy or an angel.

"Vissi d'arte, vissi d'arte, no feci mai male ad anima viva. Con man furtiva quante miserie conobbi, aiutai."

It was the voice of a wondering, puzzled child. Then she is once more kneeling and imploring, till the instant when Spoletta enters. Tosca, exhausted, gives in, and Scarpia utters his fateful words of double-edged meaning. Spoletta departs once more. Then comes the dramatic moment, when Tosca, raising a glass of wine in her trembling hand, catches sight of the knife on the table, and slips it behind her.

Bréon rose up, handsome, saturnine, inflamed with passion. “Tosca, finalmente mia!” The lightning stabs with the knife, and Tosca’s hiss of vengeance:

“Questo e il bacio di Tosca!” (“It is thus that Tosca kisses.”)

Never had Nazorkoff shown such an appreciation of Tosca’s act of vengeance. That last fierce whispered “Muori dannato,” and then in a strange, quiet voice that filled the theatre:

“Or gli perdono!” (“Now I forgive him!”)

The soft death tune began as Tosca set about her ceremonial, placing the candles each side of his head, the crucifix on his breast, her last pause in the doorway looking back, the roll of distant drums, and the curtain fell.

This time real enthusiasm broke out in the audience, but it was shortlived. Someone hurried out from behind the wings, and spoke to Lord Rustonbury. He rose, and after a minute or two’s consultation, turned and beckoned to Sir Donald Calthorp, who was an eminent physician. Almost immediately the truth spread through the audience. Something had happened, an accident, someone was badly hurt. One of the singers appeared before the curtain and explained that M. Bréon had unfortunately met with an accident—the opera could not proceed. Again the rumour went round, Bréon had been stabbed, Nazorkoff had lost her head, she had lived in her part so completely that she had actually stabbed the man who was acting with her. Lord Leconmere, talking to his ambassador friend, felt a touch on his arm, and turned to look into Blanche Amery’s eyes.

“It was not an accident,” the girl was saying. “I am sure it was not an accident. Didn’t you hear, just before dinner, that story he was telling about the girl in Italy? That girl was Paula Nazorkoff. Just after, she said something about being Russian, and I saw Mr. Cowan look amazed. She may have taken a Russian name, but he knows well enough that she is Italian.”

“My dear Blanche,” said Lord Leconmere.

“I tell you I am sure of it. She had a picture paper in her bedroom opened at the page showing M. Bréon in his English country home. She knew before she came down here. I believe she gave something to that poor little Italian man to make him ill.”

“But why?” cried Lord Leconmere. “Why?”

“Don’t you see? It’s the story of Tosca all over again. He wanted her in Italy, but she was faithful to her lover, and she went to him to try to get him to save her lover, and he pretended he would. Instead he let him die. And now at last her revenge has come. Didn’t you hear the way she hissed ‘I am Tosca?’ And I saw Bréon’s face when she said it, he knew then—he recognized her!”

In her dressing room, Paula Nazorkoff sat motionless, a white ermine cloak held round her. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said the prima donna.

Elise entered. She was sobbing.

“Madame, Madame, he is dead! And—”

“Yes?”

“Madame, how can I tell you? There are two gentlemen of the police there, they want to speak to you.”

Paula Nazorkoff rose to her full height.

“I will go to them,” she said quietly.

She untwisted a collar of pearls from her neck, and put them into the French girl’s hands.

“Those are for you, Elise, you have been a good girl. I shall not need them now where I am going. You understand, Elise? I shall not sing ‘Tosca’ again.”

She stood a moment by the door, her eyes sweeping over the dressing room, as though she looked back over the past thirty years of her career.

Then softly between her teeth, she murmured the last line of another opera:

“La commedia e finita!”

Nine

THE HOUND OF DEATH

“The Hound of Death” was first published in the hardback *The Hound of Death and Other Stories* (Odhams Press, 1933). No previous appearances have been found.

It was from William P. Ryan, American newspaper correspondent, that I first heard of the affair. I was dining with him in London on the eve of his return to New York and happened to mention that on the morrow I was going down to Folbridge.

He looked up and said sharply: “Folbridge, Cornwall?”

Now only about one person in a thousand knows that there is a Folbridge in Cornwall. They always take it for granted that the Folbridge, Hampshire, is meant. So Ryan’s knowledge aroused my curiosity.

“Yes,” I said. “Do you know it?”

He merely replied that he was darned. He then asked if I happened to know a house called Trearne down there.

My interest increased.

“Very well indeed. In fact, it’s to Trearne I’m going. It’s my sister’s house.”

“Well,” said William P. Ryan. “If that doesn’t beat the band!”

I suggested that he should cease making cryptic remarks and explain himself.

“Well,” he said. “To do that I shall have to go back to an experience of mine at the beginning of the war.”

I sighed. The events which I am relating took place in 1921. To be reminded of the war was the last thing any man wanted. We were, thank God, beginning to forget . . . Besides, William P. Ryan on his war experiences was apt, as I knew, to be unbelievably long-winded.

But there was no stopping him now.

“At the start of the war, as I dare say you know, I was in Belgium for my paper—moving about some. Well, there’s a little village—I’ll call it X. A one-horse place if there ever was one, but there’s quite a big convent there. Nuns in white what do you call ’em—I don’t know the name of the order. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Well, this little burgh was right in the way of the German advance. The Uhlans arrived—”

I shifted uneasily. William P. Ryan lifted a hand reassuringly.

“It’s all right,” he said. “This isn’t a German atrocity story. It might have been, perhaps, but it isn’t. As a matter of fact, the boot’s on the other leg. The Huns made for that convent—they got there and the whole thing blew up.”

“Oh!” I said, rather startled.

“Odd business, wasn’t it? Of course, off hand, I should say the Huns had been celebrating and had monkeyed round with their own explosives. But it seems they hadn’t anything of that kind with them. They weren’t the high-explosive johnnies. Well, then, I ask you, what should a pack of nuns know about high explosive? Some nuns, I should say!”

“It is odd,” I agreed.

“I was interested in hearing the peasants’ account of the matter. They’d got it all cut and dried. According to them it was a slap-up one hundred per cent efficient first-class modern miracle. It seems one of the nuns had got something of a reputation—a budding saint—went into trances and saw visions. And according to them she worked the stunt. She called down the lightning to blast the impious Hun—and it blasted him all right—and everything else within range. A pretty efficient miracle, that!

“I never really got at the truth of the matter—hadn’t time. But miracles were all the rage just then—angels at Mons and all that. I wrote up the thing, put in a bit of sob stuff, and pulled the religious stop out well, and sent it to my paper. It went down very well in the States. They were liking that kind of thing just then.

“But (I don’t know if you’ll understand this) in writing, I got kinder interested. I felt I’d like to know what really had happened. There was nothing to see at the spot itself. Two walls still left standing, and on one of them was a black powder mark that was the exact shape of a great hound.

“The peasants round about were scared to death of that mark. They called it the Hound of Death and they wouldn’t pass that way after dark.

“Superstition’s always interesting. I felt I’d like to see the lady who worked the stunt. She hadn’t perished, it seemed. She’d gone to England with a batch of other refugees. I took the trouble to trace her. I found she’d been sent to Trearne, Folbridge, Cornwall.”

I nodded.

“My sister took in a lot of Belgian refugees the beginning of the war. About twenty.”

“Well, I always meant, if I had time, to look up the lady. I wanted to hear her own account of the disaster. Then, what with being busy and one thing and another, it slipped my memory. Cornwall’s a bit out of the way anyhow. In fact, I’d forgotten the whole thing till your mentioning Folbridge just now brought it back.”

“I must ask my sister,” I said. “She may have heard something about it. Of course, the Belgians have all been repatriated long ago.”

“Naturally. All the same, in case your sister does know anything I’ll be glad if you pass it on to me.”

“Of course I will,” I said heartily.

And that was that.

It was the second day after my arrival at Trearne that the story recurred to me. My sister and I were having tea on the terrace.

“Kitty,” I said, “didn’t you have a nun among your Belgians?”

“You don’t mean Sister Marie Angelique, do you?”

“Possibly I do,” I said cautiously. “Tell me about her.”

“Oh! my dear, she was the most uncanny creature. She’s still here, you know.”

“What? In the house?”

“No, no, in the village. Dr. Rose—you remember Dr. Rose?”

I shook my head.

“I remember an old man of about eighty-three.”

“Dr. Laird. Oh! he died. Dr. Rose has only been here a few years. He’s quite young and very keen on new ideas. He took the most enormous interest in Sister Marie Angelique. She has hallucinations and things, you know, and apparently is most frightfully interesting from a medical point of view. Poor thing, she’d nowhere to go—and really was in my opinion quite potty—only impressive, if you know what I mean—well, as I say, she’d nowhere to go, and Dr. Rose very kindly fixed her up in the village. I believe he’s writing a monograph or whatever it is that doctors write, about her.”

She paused and then said:

“But what do you know about her?”

“I heard a rather curious story.”

I passed on the story as I had received it from Ryan. Kitty was very much interested.

“She looks the sort of person who could blast you—if you know what I mean,” she said.

“I really think,” I said, my curiosity heightened, “that I must see this young woman.”

“Do. I’d like to know what you think of her. Go and see Dr. Rose first. Why not walk down to the village after tea?”

I accepted the suggestion.

I found Dr. Rose at home and introduced myself. He seemed a pleasant young man, yet there was something about his personality that rather repelled me. It was too forceful to be altogether agreeable.

The moment I mentioned Sister Marie Angelique he stiffened to attention. He was evidently keenly interested. I gave him Ryan’s account of the matter.

“Ah!” he said thoughtfully. “That explains a great deal.”

He looked up quickly at me and went on.

“The case is really an extraordinarily interesting one. The woman arrived here having evidently suffered some severe mental shock. She was in a state of great mental excitement also. She was given to hallucinations of a most startling character. Her personality is most unusual. Perhaps you would like to come with me and call upon her. She is really well worth seeing.”

I agreed readily.

We set out together. Our objective was a small cottage on the outskirts of the village. Folbridge is a most picturesque place. It lies at the mouth of the river Fol mostly on the east bank, the west bank is too precipitous for building, though a few cottages do cling to the cliffside there. The doctor’s own cottage was perched on the extreme edge of the cliff on the west side. From it you looked down on the big waves lashing against the black rocks.

The little cottage to which we were now proceeding lay inland out of the sight of the sea.

“The district nurse lives here,” explained Dr. Rose. “I have arranged for Sister Marie Angelique to board with her. It is just as well that she should be under skilled supervision.”

“Is she quite normal in her manner?” I asked curiously.

“You can judge for yourself in a minute,” he replied, smiling.

The district nurse, a dumpy pleasant little body, was just setting out on her bicycle when we arrived.

“Good evening, nurse, how’s your patient?” called out the doctor.

“She’s much as usual, doctor. Just sitting there with her hands folded and her mind far away. Often enough she’ll not answer when I speak to her, though for the matter of that it’s little enough English she understands even now.”

Rose nodded, and as the nurse bicycled away, he went up to the cottage door, rapped sharply and entered.

Sister Marie Angelique was lying in a long chair near the window. She turned her head as we entered.

It was a strange face—pale, transparent looking, with enormous eyes. There seemed to be an infinitude of tragedy in those eyes.

“Good evening, my sister,” said the doctor in French.

“Good evening, M. le docteur.”

“Permit me to introduce a friend, Mr. Anstruther.”

I bowed and she inclined her head with a faint smile.

“And how are you today?” inquired the doctor, sitting down beside her.

“I am much the same as usual.” She paused and then went on. “Nothing seems real to me. Are they days that pass—or months—or years? I hardly know. Only my dreams seem real to me.”

“You still dream a lot, then?”

“Always—always—and, you understand?—the dreams seem more real than life.”

“You dream of your own country—of Belgium?”

She shook her head.

“No. I dream of a country that never existed—never. But you know this, M. le docteur. I have told you many times.” She stopped and then said abruptly: “But perhaps this gentleman is also a doctor—a doctor perhaps for the diseases of the brain?”

“No, no.” Rose said reassuring, but as he smiled I noticed how extraordinarily pointed his canine teeth were, and it occurred to me that there was something wolflike about the man. He went on:

“I thought you might be interested to meet Mr. Anstruther. He knows something of Belgium. He has lately been hearing news of your convent.”

Her eyes turned to me. A faint flush crept into her cheeks.

“It’s nothing, really,” I hastened to explain. “But I was dining the other evening with a friend who was describing the ruined walls of the convent to me.”

“So it is ruined!”

It was a soft exclamation, uttered more to herself than to us. Then looking at me once more she asked hesitatingly: “Tell me, Monsieur, did your friend say how—in what way—it was ruined?”

“It was blown up,” I said, and added: “The peasants are afraid to pass that way at night.”

“Why are they afraid?”

“Because of a black mark on a ruined wall. They have a superstitious fear of it.”

She leaned forward.

“Tell me, Monsieur—quick—quick—tell me! What is that mark like?”

“It has the shape of a huge hound,” I answered. “The peasants call it the Hound of Death.”

“Ah!”

A shrill cry burst from her lips.

“It is true then—it is true. All that I remember is true. It is not some black nightmare. It happened! It happened!”

“What happened, my sister?” asked the doctor in a low voice.

She turned to him eagerly.

“I remembered. There on the steps, I remembered. I remembered the way of it. I used the power as we used to use it. I stood on the altar steps and I bade them to come no farther. I told them to depart in peace. They would not listen, they came on although I warned them. And so—” She leaned forward and made a curious gesture. “And so I loosed the Hound of Death on them. . . .”

She lay back on her chair shivering all over, her eyes closed.

The doctor rose, fetched a glass from a cupboard, half-filled it with water, added a drop or two from a little bottle which he produced from his pocket, then took the glass to her.

“Drink this,” he said authoritatively.

She obeyed—mechanically as it seemed. Her eyes looked far away as though they contemplated some inner vision of her own.

“But then it is all true,” she said. “Everything. The City of the Circles, the People of the Crystal—everything. It is all true.”

“It would seem so,” said Rose.

His voice was low and soothing, clearly designed to encourage and not to disturb her train of thought.

“Tell me about the City,” he said. “The City of Circles, I think you said?”

She answered absently and mechanically.

“Yes—there were three circles. The first circle for the chosen, the second for the priestesses and the outer circle for the priests.”

“And in the centre?”

She drew her breath sharply and her voice sank to a tone of indescribable awe.

“The House of the Crystal. . . .”

As she breathed the words, her right hand went to her forehead and her finger traced some figure there.

Her figure seemed to grow more rigid, her eyes closed, she swayed a little—then suddenly she sat upright with a jerk, as though she had suddenly awakened.

“What is it?” she said confusedly. “What have I been saying?”

“It is nothing,” said Rose. “You are tired. You want to rest. We will leave you.”

She seemed a little dazed as we took our departure.

“Well,” said Rose when we were outside. “What do you think of it?”

He shot a sharp glance sideways at me.

“I suppose her mind must be totally unhinged,” I said slowly.

“It struck you like that?”

“No—as a matter of fact, she was—well, curiously convincing. When listening to her I had the impression that she actually had done what she claimed to do—worked a kind of gigantic miracle. Her belief that she did so seems genuine enough. That is why—”

“That is why you say her mind must be unhinged. Quite so. But now approach the matter from another angle. Supposing that she did actually work that miracle—supposing that she did, personally, destroy a building and several hundred human beings.”

“By the mere exercise of will?” I said with a smile.

“I should not put it quite like that. You will agree that one person could destroy a multitude by touching a switch which controlled a system of mines.”

“Yes, but that is mechanical.”

“True, that is mechanical, but it is, in essence, the harnessing and controlling of natural forces. The thunderstorm and the power house are, fundamentally, the same thing.”

“Yes, but to control the thunderstorm we have to use mechanical means.”

Rose smiled.

“I am going off at a tangent now. There is a substance called wintergreen. It occurs in nature in vegetable form. It can also be built up by man synthetically and chemically in the laboratory.”

“Well?”

“My point is that there are often two ways of arriving at the same result. Ours is, admittedly, the synthetic way. There might be another. The extraordinary results arrived at by Indian fakirs for instance, cannot be explained away in any easy fashion. The things we call supernatural is only the natural of which the laws are not yet understood.”

“You mean?” I asked, fascinated.

“That I cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that a human being might be able to tap some vast destructive force and use it to further his or her ends. The means by which this was accomplished might seem to us supernatural—but would not be so in reality.”

I stared at him.

He laughed.

“It’s a speculation, that’s all,” he said lightly. “Tell me, did you notice a gesture she made when she mentioned the House of the Crystal?”

“She put her hand to her forehead.”

“Exactly. And traced a circle there. Very much as a Catholic makes the sign of the cross. Now, I will tell you something rather interesting, Mr. Anstruther. The word crystal having occurred so often in my patient’s rambling, I tried an experiment. I borrowed a crystal from someone and produced it unexpectedly one day to test my patient’s reaction to it.”

“Well?”

“Well, the result was very curious and suggestive. Her whole body stiffened. She stared at it as though unable to believe her eyes. Then she slid to her knees in front of it, murmured a few words—and fainted.”

“What were the few words?”

“Very curious ones. She said: ‘The Crystal! Then the Faith still lives!’ ”

“Extraordinary!”

“Suggestive, is it not? Now the next curious thing. When she came round from her faint she had forgotten the whole thing. I showed her the crystal and asked her if she knew what it was. She replied that she supposed it was a crystal such as fortune tellers used. I asked her if she had ever seen one before? She replied: ‘Never, M. le docteur.’ But I saw a puzzled look in her eyes. ‘What troubles you, my sister?’ I asked. She replied: ‘Because it is so strange. I have never seen a crystal before and yet—it seems to me that I know it well. There is something—if only I could remember . . .’ The effort at memory was obviously so distressing to her that I forbade her to think any more. That was two weeks ago. I have purposely been biding my time. Tomorrow, I shall proceed to a further experiment.”

“With the crystal?”

“With the crystal. I shall get her to gaze into it. I think the result ought to be interesting.”

“What do you expect to get hold of?” I asked curiously.

The words were idle ones but they had an unlooked-for result. Rose stiffened, flushed, and his manner when he spoke changed insensibly. It was more formal, more professional.

“Light on certain mental disorders imperfectly understood. Sister Marie Angelique is a most interesting study.”

So Rose’s interest was purely professional? I wondered.

“Do you mind if I come along too?” I asked.

It may have been my fancy, but I thought he hesitated before he replied. I had a sudden intuition that he did not want me.

“Certainly. I can see no objection.”

He added: “I suppose you’re not going to be down here very long?”

“Only till the day after tomorrow.”

I fancied that the answer pleased him. His brow cleared and he began talking of some recent experiments carried out on guinea pigs.

I met the doctor by appointment the following afternoon, and we went together to Sister Marie Angelique. Today, the doctor was all geniality. He was anxious, I thought, to efface the impression he had made the day before.

“You must not take what I said too seriously,” he observed, laughing. “I shouldn’t like you to believe me a dabbler in occult sciences. The worst of me is I have an infernal weakness for making out a case.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and the more fantastic it is, the better I like it.”

He laughed as a man laughs at an amusing weakness.

When we arrived at the cottage, the district nurse had something she wanted to consult Rose about, so I was left with Sister Marie Angelique.

I saw her scrutinizing me closely. Presently she spoke.

“The good nurse here, she tells me that you are the brother of the kind lady at the big house where I was brought when I came from Belgium?”

“Yes,” I said.

“She was very kind to me. She is good.”

She was silent, as though following out some train of thought. Then she said:

“M. le docteur, he too is a good man?”

I was a little embarrassed.

“Why, yes. I mean—I think so.”

“Ah!” She paused and then said: “Certainly he has been very kind to me.”

“I’m sure he has.”

She looked up at me sharply.

“Monsieur—you—you who speak to me now—do you believe that I am mad?”

“Why, my sister, such an idea never—”

She shook her head slowly—interrupting my protest.

“Am I mad? I do not know—the things I remember—the things I forget. . .”

She sighed, and at that moment Rose entered the room.

He greeted her cheerily and explained what he wanted her to do.

“Certain people, you see, have a gift for seeing things in a crystal. I fancy you might have such a gift, my sister.”

She looked distressed.

“No, no, I cannot do that. To try to read the future—that is sinful.”

Rose was taken aback. It was the nun’s point of view for which he had not allowed. He changed his ground cleverly.

“One should not look into the future. You are quite right. But to look into the past—that is different.”

“The past?”

“Yes—there are many strange things in the past. Flashes come back to one—they are seen for a moment—then gone again. Do not seek to see anything in the crystal since that is not allowed you. Just take it in your hands—so. Look into it—look deep. Yes—deeper—deeper still. You

remember, do you not? You remember. You hear me speaking to you. You can answer my questions. Can you not hear me?”

Sister Marie Angelique had taken the crystal as bidden, handling it with a curious reverence. Then, as she gazed into it, her eyes became blank and unseeing, her head drooped. She seemed to sleep.

Gently the doctor took the crystal from her and put it on the table. He raised the corner of her eyelid. Then he came and sat by me.

“We must wait till she wakes. It won’t be long, I fancy.”

He was right. At the end of five minutes, Sister Marie Angelique stirred. Her eyes opened dreamily.

“Where am I?”

“You are here—at home. You have had a little sleep. You have dreamt, have you not?”

She nodded.

“Yes, I have dreamt.”

“You have dreamt of the Crystal?”

“Yes.”

“Tell us about it.”

“You will think me mad, M. le docteur. For see you, in my dream, the Crystal was a holy emblem. I even figured to myself a second Christ, a Teacher of the Crystal who died for his faith, his followers hunted down—persecuted . . . But the faith endured.

“Yes—for fifteen thousand full moons—I mean, for fifteen thousand years.”

“How long was a full moon?”

“Thirteen ordinary moons. Yes, it was in the fifteen thousandth full moon—of course, I was a Priestess of the Fifth Sign in the House of the Crystal. It was in the first days of the coming of the Sixth Sign. . . .”

Her brows drew together, a look of fear passed over her face.

“Too soon,” she murmured. “Too soon. A mistake . . . Ah! yes, I remember! The Sixth Sign. . . .”

She half sprang to her feet, then dropped back, passing her hand over her face and murmuring:

“But what am I saying? I am raving. These things never happened.”

“Now don’t distress yourself.”

But she was looking at him in anguished perplexity.

“M. le docteur, I do not understand. Why should I have these dreams—these fancies? I was only sixteen when I entered the religious life. I have never travelled. Yet I dream of cities, of strange people, of strange customs. Why?” She pressed both hands to her head.

“Have you ever been hypnotized, my sister? Or been in a state of trance?”

“I have never been hypnotized, M. le docteur. For the other, when at prayer in the chapel, my spirit has often been caught up from my body, and I have been as one dead for many hours. It was undoubtedly a blessed state, the Reverend Mother said—a state of grace. Ah! yes,” she caught her breath. “I remember, we too called it a state of grace.”

“I would like to try an experiment, my sister.” Rose spoke in a matter-of-fact voice. “It may dispel those painful half-recollections. I will ask you to gaze once more in the crystal. I will then say a certain word to you. You will answer another. We will continue in this way until you become tired. Concentrate your thoughts on the crystal, not upon the words.”

As I once more unwrapped the crystal and gave it into Sister Marie Angelique’s hands, I noticed the reverent way her hands touched it.

Reposing on the black velvet, it lay between her slim palms. Her wonderful deep eyes gazed into it. There was a short silence, and then the doctor said:

“Hound.”

Immediately Sister Marie Angelique answered: “Death.”

I do not propose to give a full account of the experiment. Many unimportant and meaningless words were purposely introduced by the doctor. Other words he repeated several times, sometimes getting the same answer to them, sometimes a different one.

That evening in the doctor’s little cottage on the cliffs we discussed the result of the experiment.

He cleared his throat, and drew his notebook closer to him.

“These results are very interesting—very curious. In answer to the words ‘Sixth Sign,’ we get variously Destruction, Purple, Hound, Power, then again Destruction, and finally Power. Later, as you may have noticed, I reversed the method, with the following results. In answer to Destruction, I get Hound; to Purple, Power; to Hound, Death; again, and to Power, Hound. That all holds together, but on a second repetition of Destruction, I get Sea, which appears utterly irrelevant. To the words ‘Fifth Sign,’ I get Blue, Thoughts, Bird, Blue again, and finally the rather suggestive phrase Opening of mind to mind. From the fact that ‘Fourth Sign’ elicits the word Yellow, and later Light, and that ‘First Sign’ is answered by Blood, I deduce that each Sign had a particular colour, and possibly a particular symbol, that of the Fifth Sign being a bird, and that of the Sixth a hound. However, I surmise that the Fifth Sign represented what is familiarly known as telepathy—the opening of mind to mind. The Sixth Sign undoubtedly stands for the Power of Destruction.”

“What is the meaning of Sea?”

“That I confess I cannot explain. I introduced the word later and got the ordinary answer of Boat. To ‘Seventh Sign’ I got first Life, the second time

Love. To 'Eighth Sign,' I got the answer None. I take it therefore that Seven was the sum and number of the signs."

"But the Seventh was not achieved," I said on a sudden inspiration. "Since through the Sixth came Destruction!"

"Ah! You think so? But we are taking these—mad ramblings very seriously. They are really only interesting from a medical point of view."

"Surely they will attract the attention of psychic investigators."

The doctor's eyes narrowed. "My dear sir, I have no intention of making them public."

"Then your interest?"

"Is purely personal. I shall make notes on the case, of course."

"I see." But for the first time I felt, like the blind man, that I didn't see at all. I rose to my feet.

"Well, I'll wish you good night, doctor. I'm off to town again tomorrow."

"Ah!" I fancied there was satisfaction, relief perhaps, behind the exclamation.

"I wish you good luck with your investigations," I continued lightly. "Don't loose the Hound of Death on me next time we meet!"

His hand was in mine as I spoke, and I felt the start it gave. He recovered himself quickly. His lips drew back from his long pointed teeth in a smile.

"For a man who loved power, what a power that would be!" he said. "To hold every human being's life in the hollow of your hand!"

And his smile broadened.

That was the end of my direct connection with the affair.

Later, the doctor's notebook and diary came into my hands. I will reproduce the few scant entries in it here, though you will understand that it did not really come into my possession until some time afterwards.

Aug. 5th. Have discovered that by "the Chosen," Sister M.A. means those who reproduced the race. Apparently they were held in the highest honour, and exalted above the Priesthood. Contrast this with early Christians.

Aug. 7th. Persuaded Sister M.A. to let me hypnotize her. Succeeded in inducing hypnotic sleep and trance, but no rapport established.

Aug. 9th. Have there been civilizations in the past to which ours is as nothing? Strange if it should be so, and I the only man with the clue to it. . . .

Aug. 12th. Sister M.A. not at all amenable to suggestion when hypnotized. Yet state of trance easily induced. Cannot understand it.

Aug. 13th. Sister M.A. mentioned today that in "state of grace" the "gate must be closed, lest another should command the body." Interesting—but baffling.

Aug. 18th. So the First Sign is none other than . . . (words erased here) . . . then how many centuries will it take to reach the Sixth? But if there should be a shortcut to Power. . . .

Aug. 20th. Have arranged for M.A. to come here with Nurse. Have told her it is necessary to keep patient under morphia. Am I mad? Or shall I be the Superman, with the Power of Death in my hands?

(Here the entries cease)

It was, I think, on August 29th that I received the letter. It was directed to me, care of my sister-in-law, in a sloping foreign handwriting. I opened it with some curiosity. It ran as follows:

Cher Monsieur,

I have seen you but twice, but I have felt I could trust you. Whether my dreams are real or not, they have grown clearer of late . . . And, Monsieur, one thing at all events, the Hound of Death is no dream . . . In the days I told you of (Whether they are real or not, I do not know) He who was Guardian of the Crystal revealed the Sixth Sign to the people too soon . . . Evil entered into their hearts. They had the power to slay at will—and they slew without justice—in anger. They were drunk with the lust of Power. When we saw this, We who were yet pure, we knew that once again we should not complete the Circle and come to the Sign of Everlasting Life. He who would have been the next Guardian of the Crystal was bidden to act. That the old might die, and the new, after endless ages, might come again, he loosed the Hound of Death upon the sea (being careful not to close the circle), and the sea rose up in the shape of a Hound and swallowed the land utterly. . . .

Once before I remembered this—on the altar steps in Belgium . . .

The Dr. Rose, he is of the Brotherhood. He knows the First Sign, and the form of the Second, though its meaning is hidden to all save a chosen few. He would learn of me the Sixth. I have withstood him so far—but I grow weak, Monsieur, it is not well that a man should come to power before his time. Many centuries must go by ere the world is ready to have the power of death delivered into its hand . . . I beseech you, Monsieur, you who love goodness and truth, to help me . . . before it is too late.

Your sister in Christ,

Marie Angelique

I let the paper fall. The solid earth beneath me seemed a little less solid than usual. Then I began to rally. The poor woman's belief, genuine enough, had almost affected me! One thing was clear. Dr. Rose, in his zeal for a case, was grossly abusing his professional standing. I would run down and—

Suddenly I noticed a letter from Kitty amongst my other correspondence. I tore it open.

“Such an awful thing has happened,” I read. “You remember Dr. Rose’s little cottage on the cliff? It was swept away by a landslide last night, the doctor and that poor nun, Sister Marie Angelique, were killed. The debris on the beach is too awful—all piled up in a fantastic mass—from a distance it looks like a great hound . . .”

The letter dropped from my hand.

The other facts may be coincidence. A Mr. Rose, whom I discovered to be a wealthy relative of the doctor’s, died suddenly that same night—it was said struck by lightning. As far as was known no thunderstorm had occurred in the neighbourhood, but one or two people declared they had heard one peal of thunder. He had an electric burn on him “of a curious shape.” His will left everything to his nephew, Dr. Rose.

Now, supposing that Dr. Rose succeeded in obtaining the secret of the sixth Sign from Sister Marie Angelique. I had always felt him to be an unscrupulous man—he would not shrink at taking his uncle’s life if he were sure it could not be brought home to him. But one sentence of Sister Marie Angelique’s letter rings in my brain . . . “being careful not to close the Circle . . .” Dr. Rose did not exercise that care—was perhaps unaware of the steps to take, or even of the need for them. So the force he employed returned, completing its circuit. . . .

But of course it is all nonsense! Everything can be accounted for quite naturally. That the doctor believed in Sister Marie Angelique’s hallucinations merely proves that his mind, too, was slightly unbalanced.

Yet sometimes I dream of a continent under the seas where men once lived and attained to a degree of civilization far ahead of ours. . . .

Or did Sister Marie Angelique remember backwards—as some say is possible—and is this City of the Circles in the future and not in the past?

Nonsense—of course the whole thing was merely hallucination!

Ten

THE GIPSY

“The Gipsy” was first published in the hardback *The Hound of Death and Other Stories* (Odhams Press, 1933). No previous appearances have been found.

Macfarlane had often noticed that his friend, Dickie Carpenter, had a strange aversion to gipsies. He had never known the reason for it. But when Dickie’s engagement to Esther Lawes was broken off, there was a momentary tearing down of reserves between the two men.

Macfarlane had been engaged to the younger sister, Rachel, for about a year. He had known both the Lawes girls since they were children. Slow and cautious in all things, he had been unwilling to admit to himself the growing attraction that Rachel’s childlike face and honest brown eyes had for him. Not a beauty like Esther, no! But unutterably truer and sweeter. With Dickie’s engagement to the elder sister, the bond between the two men seemed to be drawn closer.

And now, after a few brief weeks, that engagement was off again, and Dickie, simple Dickie, hard hit. So far in his young life all had gone so smoothly. His career in the Navy had been well chosen. His craving for the sea was inborn. There was something of the Viking about him, primitive and direct, a nature on which subtleties of thought were wasted. He belonged to that inarticulate order of young Englishmen who dislike any form of emotion, and who find it peculiarly hard to explain their mental processes in words.

Macfarlane, that dour Scot, with a Celtic imagination hidden away somewhere, listened and smoked while his friend floundered along in a sea of words. He had known an unburdening was coming. But he had expected the subject matter to be different. To begin with, anyway, there was no mention of Esther Lawes. Only, it seemed, the story of a childish terror.

“It all started with a dream I had when I was a kid. Not a nightmare exactly. She—the gipsy, you know—would just come into any old dream—even a good dream (or a kid’s idea of what’s good—a party and crackers and things). I’d be enjoying myself no end, and then I’d feel, I’d know, that if I looked up, she’d be there, standing as she always stood, watching me . . . With sad eyes, you know, as though she understood something that I didn’t . . . Can’t explain why it rattled me so—but it did! Every time! I used to wake up howling with terror, and my old nurse used to say: ‘There! Master Dickie’s had one of his gipsy dreams again!’ ”

“Ever been frightened by real gipsies?”

“Never saw one till later. That was queer, too. I was chasing a pup of mine. He’d run away. I got through the garden door, and along one of the forest paths. We lived in the New Forest then, you know. I came to a sort of clearing at the end, with a wooden bridge over a stream. And just beside it a gipsy was standing—with a red handkerchief over her head—just the same as in my dream. And at once I was frightened! She looked at me, you know . . . Just the same look—as though she knew something I didn’t, and was sorry about it . . . And then she said quite quietly, nodding her head at me: ‘I shouldn’t go that way, if I were you.’ I can’t tell you why, but it frightened me to death. I dashed past her on to the bridge. I suppose it was rotten. Anyway, it gave way, and I was chucked into the stream. It was running pretty fast, and I was nearly drowned. Beastly to be nearly drowned. I’ve never forgotten it. And I felt it had all to do with the gipsy. . . .”

“Actually, though, she warned you against it?”

“I suppose you could put it like that,” Dickie paused, then went on: “I’ve told you about this dream of mine, not because it has anything to do with what happened after (at least, I suppose it hasn’t), but because it’s the jumping off point, as it were. You’ll understand now what I mean by the ‘gipsy feeling.’ So I’ll go on to that first night at the Lawes.” I’d just come back from the west coast then. It was awfully rum to be in England again. The Lawes were old friends of my people’s. I hadn’t seen the girls since I was about seven, but young Arthur was a great pal of mine, and after he died, Esther used to write to me, and send me out papers. Awfully jolly letters, she wrote! Cheered me up no end. I always wished I was a better

hand at writing back. I was awfully keen to see her. It seemed odd to know a girl quite well from her letters, and not otherwise. Well, I went down to the Lawes' place first thing. Esther was away when I arrived, but was expected back that evening. I sat next to Rachel at dinner, and as I looked up and down the long table a queer feeling came over me. I felt someone was watching me, and it made me uncomfortable. Then I saw her—"

"Saw who—"

"Mrs. Haworth—what I'm telling you about."

It was on the tip of Macfarlane's tongue to say: "I thought you were telling me about Esther Lawes." But he remained silent, and Dickie went on.

"There was something about her quite different from all the rest. She was sitting next to old Lawes—listening to him very gravely with her head bent down. She had some of that red tulle stuff round her neck. It had got torn, I think, anyway it stood up behind her head like little tongues of flame . . . I said to Rachel: 'Who's that woman over there. Dark—with a red scarf?'

" 'Do you mean Alistair Haworth? She's got a red scarf. But she's fair. Very fair.'

"So she was, you know. Her hair was a lovely pale shining yellow. Yet I could have sworn positively she was dark. Queer what tricks one's eyes play on one . . . After dinner, Rachel introduced us, and we walked up and down in the garden. We talked about reincarnation. . . ."

"Rather out of your line, Dickie!"

"I suppose it is. I remember saying that it seemed to be a jolly sensible way of accounting for how one seems to know some people right off—as if you'd met them before. She said: 'You mean lovers . . .' There was something queer about the way she said it—something soft and eager. It reminded me of something—but I couldn't remember what. We went on jawing a bit, and then old Lawes called us from the terrace—said Esther had come, and wanted to see me. Mrs. Haworth put her hand on my arm

and said: 'You're going in?' 'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose we'd better,' and then—then—"

"Well?"

"It sounds such rot. Mrs. Haworth said: 'I shouldn't go in if I were you . . .'" He paused. "It frightened me, you know. It frightened me badly. That's why I told you about the dream . . . Because, you see, she said it just the same way—quietly, as though she knew something I didn't. It wasn't just a pretty woman who wanted to keep me out in the garden with her. Her voice was just kind—and very sorry. Almost as though she knew what was to come . . . I suppose it was rude, but I turned and left her—almost ran to the house. It seemed like safety. I knew then that I'd been afraid of her from the first. It was a relief to see old Lawes. Esther was there beside him . . ." He hesitated a minute and then muttered rather obscurely: "There was no question—the moment I saw her. I knew I'd got it in the neck."

Macfarlane's mind flew swiftly to Esther Lawes. He had once heard her summed up as "Six foot one of Jewish perfection." A shrewd portrait, he thought, as he remembered her unusual height and the long slenderness of her, the marble whiteness of her face with its delicate down-drooping nose, and the black splendour of hair and eyes. Yes, he did not wonder that the boyish simplicity of Dickie had capitulated. Esther could never have made his own pulses beat one jot faster, but he admitted her magnificence.

"And then," continued Dickie, "we got engaged."

"At once?"

"Well, after about a week. It took her about a fortnight after that to find out that she didn't care after all . . ." He gave a short bitter laugh.

"It was the last evening before I went back to the old ship. I was coming back from the village through the woods—and then I saw her—Mrs. Haworth, I mean. She had on a red tam-o'-shanter, and—just for a minute, you know—it made me jump! I've told you about my dream, so you'll understand . . . Then we walked along a bit. Not that there was a word Esther couldn't have heard, you know. . . ."

“No?” Macfarlane looked at his friend curiously. Strange how people told you things of which they themselves were unconscious!

“And then, when I was turning to go back to the house, she stopped me. She said: ‘You’ll be home soon enough. I shouldn’t go back too soon if I were you . . .’ And then I knew—that there was something beastly waiting for me . . . and . . . as soon as I got back Esther met me, and told me—that she’d found out she didn’t really care. . . .”

Macfarlane grunted sympathetically. “And Mrs. Haworth?” he asked.

“I never saw her again—until tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. At the doctor johnny’s nursing home. They had a look at my leg, the one that got messed up in that torpedo business. It’s worried me a bit lately. The old chap advised an operation—it’ll be quite a simple thing. Then as I left the place, I ran into a girl in a red jumper over her nurse’s things, and she said: ‘I wouldn’t have that operation, if I were you . . .’ Then I saw it was Mrs. Haworth. She passed on so quickly I couldn’t stop her. I met another nurse, and asked about her. But she said there wasn’t anyone of that name in the home . . . Queer. . . .”

“Sure it was her?”

“Oh! yes, you see—she’s very beautiful . . .” He paused, and then added: “I shall have the old op, of course—but—but in case my number should be up —”

“Rot!”

“Of course it’s rot. But all the same I’m glad I told you about this gipsy business . . . You know, there’s more of it if only I could remember. . . .”

Macfarlane walked up the steep moorland road. He turned in at the gate of the house near the crest of the hill. Setting his jaw squarely, he pulled the bell.

“Is Mrs. Haworth in?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll tell her.” The maid left him in a low long room, with windows that gave on the wildness of the moorland. He frowned a little. Was he making a colossal ass of himself?

Then he started. A low voice was singing overhead:

“The gipsy woman

Lives on the moor—”

The voice broke off. Macfarlane’s heart beat a shade faster. The door opened.

The bewildering, almost Scandinavian fairness of her came as a shock. In spite of Dickie’s description, he had imagined her gipsy dark . . . And he suddenly remembered Dickie’s words, and the peculiar tone of them. “You see, she’s very beautiful . . .” Perfect unquestionable beauty is rare, and perfect unquestionable beauty was what Alistair Haworth possessed.

He caught himself up, and advanced towards her. “I’m afraid you don’t know me from Adam. I got your address from the Lawes. But—I’m a friend of Dickie Carpenter’s.”

She looked at him closely for a minute or two. Then she said: “I was going out. Up on the moor. Will you come too?”

She pushed open the window, and stepped out on the hillside. He followed her. A heavy, rather foolish-looking man was sitting in a basket chair smoking.

“My husband! We’re going out on the moor, Maurice. And then Mr. Macfarlane will come back to lunch with us. You will, won’t you?”

“Thanks very much.” He followed her easy stride up the hill, and thought to himself: “Why? Why, on God’s earth, marry that?”

Alistair made her way to some rocks. “We’ll sit here. And you shall tell me—what you came to tell me.”

“You knew?”

“I always know when bad things are coming. It is bad, isn’t it? About Dickie?”

“He underwent a slight operation—quite successfully. But his heart must have been weak. He died under the anaesthetic.”

What he expected to see on her face, he scarcely knew—hardly that look of utter eternal weariness . . . He heard her murmur: “Again—to wait—so long—so long . . .” She looked up: “Yes, what were you going to say?”

“Only this. Someone warned him against this operation. A nurse. He thought it was you. Was it?”

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t me. But I’ve got a cousin who is a nurse. She’s rather like me in a dim light. I dare say that was it.” She looked up at him again. “It doesn’t matter, does it?” And then suddenly her eyes widened. She drew in her breath. “Oh!” she said. “Oh! How funny! You don’t understand. . . .”

Macfarlane was puzzled. She was still staring at him.

“I thought you did . . . You should do. You look as though you’d got it, too. . . .”

“Got what?”

“The gift—curse—call it what you like. I believe you have. Look hard at that hollow in the rocks. Don’t think of anything, just look . . . Ah!” she marked his slight start. “Well—you saw something?”

“It must have been imagination. Just for a second I saw it full of blood!”

She nodded. "I knew you had it. That's the place where the old sun worshippers sacrificed victims. I knew that before anyone told me. And there are times when I know just how they felt about it—almost as though I'd been there myself . . . And there's something about the moor that makes me feel as though I were coming back home . . . Of course it's natural that I should have the gift. I'm a Ferguesson. There's second sight in the family. And my mother was a medium until my father married her. Cristing was her name. She was rather celebrated."

"Do you mean by 'the gift' the power of being able to see things before they happen?"

"Yes, forwards or backwards—it's all the same. For instance, I saw you wondering why I married Maurice—oh! yes, you did!—It's simply because I've always known that there's something dreadful hanging over him . . . I wanted to save him from it . . . Women are like that. With my gift, I ought to be able to prevent it happening . . . if one ever can . . . I couldn't help Dickie. And Dickie wouldn't understand . . . He was afraid. He was very young."

"Twenty-two."

"And I'm thirty. But I didn't mean that. There are so many ways of being divided, length and height and breadth . . . but to be divided by time is the worst way of all . . ." She fell into a long brooding silence.

The low peal of a gong from the house below roused them.

At lunch, Macfarlane watched Maurice Haworth. He was undoubtedly madly in love with his wife. There was the unquestioning happy fondness of a dog in his eyes. Macfarlane marked also the tenderness of her response, with its hint of maternity. After lunch he took his leave.

"I'm staying down at the inn for a day or so. May I come and see you again? Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Of course. But—"

“But what—”

She brushed her hand quickly across her eyes. “I don’t know. I—I fancied that we shouldn’t meet again—that’s all . . . Goodbye.”

He went down the road slowly. In spite of himself, a cold hand seemed tightening round his heart. Nothing in her words, of course, but—

A motor swept round the corner. He flattened himself against the hedge . . . only just in time. A curious greyish pallor crept across his face. . . .

“Good Lord, my nerves are in a rotten state,” muttered Macfarlane, as he awoke the following morning. He reviewed the events of the afternoon before dispassionately. The motor, the shortcut to the inn and the sudden mist that had made him lose his way with the knowledge that a dangerous bog was no distance off. Then the chimney pot that had fallen off the inn, and the smell of burning in the night which he had traced to a cinder on his hearthrug. Nothing in it at all! Nothing at all—but for her words, and that deep unacknowledged certainty in his heart that she knew. . . .

He flung off his bedclothes with sudden energy. He must go up and see her first thing. That would break the spell. That is, if he got there safely . . . Lord, what a fool he was!

He could eat little breakfast. Ten o’clock saw him starting up the road. At ten-thirty his hand was on the bell. Then, and not till then, he permitted himself to draw a long breath of relief.

“Is Mr. Haworth in?”

It was the same elderly woman who had opened the door before. But her face was different—ravaged with grief.

“Oh! sir, oh! sir, you haven’t heard then?”

“Heard what?”

“Miss Alistair, the pretty lamb. It was her tonic. She took it every night. The poor captain is beside himself, he’s nearly mad. He took the wrong bottle

off the shelf in the dark . . . They sent for the doctor, but he was too late—”

And swiftly there recurred to Macfarlane the words: “I’ve always known there was something dreadful hanging over him. I ought to be able to prevent it happening—if one ever can—” Ah! but one couldn’t cheat Fate . . . Strange fatality of vision that had destroyed where it sought to save. . . .

The old servant went on: “My pretty lamb! So sweet and gentle she was, and so sorry for anything in trouble. Couldn’t bear anyone to be hurt.” She hesitated, then added: “Would you like to go up and see her, sir? I think, from what she said, that you must have known her long ago. A very long time ago, she said. . . .”

Macfarlane followed the old woman up the stairs, into the room over the drawing room where he had heard the voice singing the day before. There was stained glass at the top of the windows. It threw a red light on the head of the bed . . . A gipsy with a red handkerchief over her head . . . Nonsense, his nerves were playing tricks again. He took a long last look at Alistair Haworth.

“There’s a lady to see you, sir.”

“Eh?” Macfarlane looked at the landlady abstractedly. “Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Rowse, I’ve been seeing ghosts.”

“Not really, sir? There’s queer things to be seen on the moor after nightfall, I know. There’s the white lady, and the Devil’s blacksmith, and the sailor and the gipsy—”

“What’s that? A sailor and a gipsy?”

“So they say, sir. It was quite a tale in my young days. Crossed in love they were, a while back . . . But they’ve not walked for many a long day now.”

“No? I wonder if perhaps—they will again now. . . .”

“Lor! sir, what things you do say! About that young lady—”

“What young lady?”

“The one that’s waiting to see you. She’s in the parlour. Miss Lawes, she said her name was.”

“Oh!”

Rachel! He felt a curious feeling of contraction, a shifting of perspective. He had been peeping through at another world. He had forgotten Rachel, for Rachel belonged to this life only . . . Again that curious shifting of perspective, that slipping back to a world of three dimensions only.

He opened the parlour door. Rachel—with her honest brown eyes. And suddenly, like a man awakening from a dream, a warm rush of glad reality swept over him. He was alive—alive! He thought: “There’s only one life one can be sure about! This one!”

“Rachel!” he said, and, lifting her chin, he kissed her lips.

Eleven

THE LAMP

“The Lamp” was first published in the hardback *The Hound of Death and Other Stories* (Odhams Press, 1933). No previous appearances have been found.

It was undoubtedly an old house. The whole square was old, with that disapproving dignified old age often met with in a cathedral town. But No. 19 gave the impression of an elder among elders; it had a veritable patriarchal solemnity; it towered greyest of the grey, haughtiest of the haughty, chilliest of the chill. Austere, forbidding, and stamped with that particular desolation attaching to all houses that have been long untenanted, it reigned above the other dwellings.

In any other town it would have been freely labelled “haunted,” but Weyminster was averse from ghosts and considered them hardly respectable except at the appanage of a “county family.” So No. 19 was never alluded to as a haunted house; but nevertheless it remained, year after year, TO BE LET OR SOLD.

Mrs. Lancaster looked at the house with approval as she drove up with the talkative house agent, who was in an unusually hilarious mood at the idea of getting No. 19 off his books. He inserted the key in the door without ceasing his appreciative comments.

“How long has the house been empty?” inquired Mrs. Lancaster, cutting short his flow of language rather brusquely.

Mr. Raddish (of Raddish and Foplow) became slightly confused.

“E—er—some time,” he remarked blandly.

“So I should think,” said Mrs. Lancaster drily.

The dimly lighted hall was chill with a sinister chill. A more imaginative woman might have shivered, but this woman happened to be eminently practical. She was tall with much dark brown hair just tinged with grey and rather cold blue eyes.

She went over the house from attic to cellar, asking a pertinent question from time to time. The inspection over, she came back into one of the front rooms looking out on the square and faced the agent with a resolute mien.

“What is the matter with the house?”

Mr. Raddish was taken by surprise.

“Of course, an unfurnished house is always a little gloomy,” he parried feebly.

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Lancaster. “The rent is ridiculously low for such a house—purely nominal. There must be some reason for it. I suppose the house is haunted?”

Mr. Raddish gave a nervous little start but said nothing.

Mrs. Lancaster eyed him keenly. After a few moments she spoke again.

“Of course that is all nonsense, I don’t believe in ghosts or anything of that sort, and personally it is no deterrent to my taking the house; but servants, unfortunately, are very credulous and easily frightened. It would be kind of you to tell me exactly what—what thing is supposed to haunt this place.”

“I—er—really don’t know,” stammered the house agent.

“I am sure you must,” said the lady quietly. “I cannot take the house without knowing. What was it? A murder?”

“Oh! no,” cried Mr. Raddish, shocked by the idea of anything so alien to the respectability of the square. “It’s—it’s only a child.”

“A child?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know the story exactly,” he continued reluctantly. “Of course, there are all kinds of different versions, but I believe that about thirty years ago a man going by the name of Williams took No. 19. Nothing was known of him; he kept no servants; he had no friends; he seldom went out in the day time. He had one child, a little boy. After he had been there about two months, he went up to London, and had barely set foot in the metropolis before he was recognized as being a man ‘wanted’ by the police on some charge—exactly what, I do not know. But it must have been a grave one, because, sooner than give himself up he shot himself. Meanwhile, the child lived on here, alone in the house. He had food for a little time, and he waited day after day for his father’s return. Unfortunately, it had been impressed upon him that he was never under any circumstances to go out of the house or speak to anyone. He was a weak, ailing, little creature, and did not dream of disobeying this command. In the night, the neighbours, not knowing that his father had gone away, often heard him sobbing in the awful loneliness and desolation of the empty house.”

Mr. Raddish paused.

“And—er—the child starved to death,” he concluded, in the same tones as he might have announced that it had just begun to rain.

“And it is the child’s ghost that is supposed to haunt the place?” asked Mrs. Lancaster.

“It is nothing of consequence really,” Mr. Raddish hastened to assure her. “There’s nothing seen, not seen, only people say, ridiculous, of course, but they do say they hear—the child—crying, you know.”

Mrs. Lancaster moved towards the front door.

“I like the house very much,” she said. “I shall get nothing as good for the price. I will think it over and let you know.”

“It really looks very cheerful, doesn’t it, Papa?”

Mrs. Lancaster surveyed her new domain with approval. Gay rugs, well-polished furniture, and many knickknacks, had quite transformed the gloomy aspect of No. 19.

She spoke to a thin, bent old man with stooping shoulders and a delicate mystical face. Mr. Winburn did not resemble his daughter; indeed no greater contrast could be imagined than that presented by her resolute practicalness and his dreamy abstraction.

“Yes,” he answered with a smile, “no one would dream the house was haunted.”

“Papa, don’t talk nonsense! On our first day too.”

Mr. Winburn smiled.

“Very well, my dear, we will agree that there are no such things as ghosts.”

“And please,” continued Mrs. Lancaster, “don’t say a word before Geoff. He’s so imaginative.”

Geoff was Mrs. Lancaster’s little boy. The family consisted of Mr. Winburn, his widowed daughter, and Geoffrey.

Rain had begun to beat against the window—pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

“Listen,” said Mr. Winburn. “Is it not like little footsteps?”

“It is more like rain,” said Mrs. Lancaster, with a smile.

“But that, that is a footstep,” cried her father, bending forward to listen.

Mrs. Lancaster laughed outright.

Mr. Winburn was obliged to laugh too. They were having tea in the hall, and he had been sitting with his back to the staircase. He now turned his chair round to face it.

Little Geoffrey was coming down, rather slowly and sedately, with a child's awe of a strange place. The stairs were of polished oak, uncarpeted. He came across and stood by his mother. Mr. Winburn gave a slight start. As the child was crossing the floor, he distinctly heard another pair of footsteps on the stairs, as of someone following Geoffrey. Dragging footsteps, curiously painful they were. Then he shrugged his shoulders incredulously. "The rain, no doubt," he thought.

"I'm looking at the spongecakes," remarked Geoff with the admirably detached air of one who points out an interesting fact.

His mother hastened to comply with the hint.

"Well, Sonny, how do you like your new home?" she asked.

"Lots," replied Geoffrey with his mouth generously filled. "Pounds and pounds and pounds." After this last assertion, which was evidently expressive of the deepest contentment, he relapsed into silence, only anxious to remove the spongecake from the sight of man in the least time possible.

Having bolted the last mouthful, he burst forth into speech.

"Oh! Mummy, there's attics here, Jane says; and can I go at once and eggzplere them? And there might be a secret door, Jane says there isn't, but I think there must be, and, anyhow, I know there'll be pipes, water pipes (with a face full of ecstasy) and can I play with them, and, oh! can I go and see the Boi-i-ler?" He spun out the last word with such evident rapture that his grandfather felt ashamed to reflect that this peerless delight of childhood only conjured up to his imagination the picture of hot water that wasn't hot, and heavy and numerous plumber's bills.

"We'll see about the attics tomorrow, darling," said Mrs. Lancaster.
"Suppose you fetch your bricks and build a nice house, or an engine."

"Don't want to build an 'ouse."

"House."

“House, or h’engine h’either.”

“Build a boiler,” suggested his grandfather.

Geoffrey brightened.

“With pipes?”

“Yes, lots of pipes.”

Geoffrey ran away happily to fetch his bricks.

The rain was still falling. Mr. Winburn listened. Yes, it must have been the rain he had heard; but it did sound like footsteps.

He had a queer dream that night.

He dreamt that he was walking through a town, a great city it seemed to him. But it was a children’s city; there were no grown-up people there, nothing but children, crowds of them. In his dream they all rushed to the stranger crying: “Have you brought him?” It seemed that he understood what they meant and shook his head sadly. When they saw this, the children turned away and began to cry, sobbing bitterly.

The city and the children faded away and he awoke to find himself in bed, but the sobbing was still in his ears. Though wide awake, he heard it distinctly; and he remembered that Geoffrey slept on the floor below, while this sound of a child’s sorrow descended from above. He sat up and struck a match. Instantly the sobbing ceased.

Mr. Winburn did not tell his daughter of the dream or its sequel. That it was no trick of his imagination, he was convinced; indeed soon afterwards he heard it again in the day time. The wind was howling in the chimney but this was a separate sound—distinct, unmistakable; pitiful little heartbroken sobs.

He found out too, that he was not the only one to hear them. He overheard the housemaid saying to the parlour maid that she “didn’t think as that there nurse was kind to Master Geoffrey, she’d ’eard ’im crying ’is little ’eart out

only that morning.” Geoffrey had come down to breakfast and lunch beaming with health and happiness; and Mr. Winburn knew that it was not Geoff who had been crying, but that other child whose dragging footsteps had startled him more than once.

Mrs. Lancaster alone never heard anything. Her ears were not perhaps attuned to catch sounds from another world.

Yet one day she also received a shock.

“Mummy,” said Geoff plaintively. “I wish you’d let me play with that little boy.”

Mrs. Lancaster looked up from her writing table with a smile.

“What little boy, dear?”

“I don’t know his name. He was in a attic, sitting on the floor crying, but he ran away when he saw me. I suppose he was shy (with slight contempt), not like a big boy, and then, when I was in the nursery building, I saw him standing in the door watching me build, and he looked so awful lonely and as though he wanted to play wiv me. I said: ‘Come and build a h’engine,’ but he didn’t say nothing, just looked as—as though he saw a lot of chocolates, and his Mummy had told him not to touch them.” Geoff sighed, sad personal reminiscences evidently recurring to him. “But when I asked Jane who he was and told her I wanted to play wiv him, she said there wasn’t no little boy in the ’ouse and not to tell naughty stories. I don’t love Jane at all.”

Mrs. Lancaster got up.

“Jane was right. There was no little boy.”

“But I saw him. Oh! Mummy, do let me play wiv him, he did look so awful lonely and unhappy. I do want to do something to ‘make him better.’ ”

Mrs. Lancaster was about to speak again, but her father shook his head.

“Geoff,” he said very gently, “that poor little boy is lonely, and perhaps you may do something to comfort him; but you must find out how by yourself—like a puzzle—do you see?”

“Is it because I am getting big I must do it all my lone?”

“Yes, because you are getting big.”

As the boy left the room, Mrs. Lancaster turned to her father impatiently.

“Papa, this is absurd. To encourage the boy to believe the servants’ idle tales!”

“No servant has told the child anything,” said the old man gently. “He’s seen—what I hear, what I could see perhaps if I were his age.”

“But it’s such nonsense! Why don’t I see it or hear it?”

Mr. Winburn smiled, a curiously tired smile, but did not reply.

“Why?” repeated his daughter. “And why did you tell him he could help the—the—thing. It’s—it’s all so impossible.”

The old man looked at her with his thoughtful glance.

“Why not?” he said. “Do you remember these words:

‘What Lamp has Destiny to guide

Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?

“A Blind Understanding,” Heaven replied.’

“Geoffrey has that—a blind understanding. All children possess it. It is only as we grow older that we lose it, that we cast it away from us. Sometimes, when we are quite old, a faint gleam comes back to us, but the Lamp burns brightest in childhood. That is why I think Geoffrey may help.”

“I don’t understand,” murmured Mrs. Lancaster feebly.

“No more do I. That—that child is in trouble and wants—to be set free. But how? I do not know, but—it’s awful to think of it—sobbing its heart out—a child.”

A month after this conversation Geoffrey fell very ill. The east wind had been severe, and he was not a strong child. The doctor shook his head and said that it was a grave case. To Mr. Winburn he divulged more and confessed that the case was quite hopeless. “The child would never have lived to grow up, under any circumstances,” he added.

“There has been serious lung trouble for a long time.”

It was when nursing Geoff that Mrs. Lancaster became aware of that—other child. At first the sobs were an indistinguishable part of the wind, but gradually they became more distinct, more unmistakable. Finally she heard them in moments of dead calm: a child’s sobs—dull, hopeless, heartbroken.

Geoff grew steadily worse and in his delirium he spoke of the “little boy” again and again. “I do want to help him get away, I do!” he cried.

Succeeding the delirium there came a state of lethargy. Geoffrey lay very still, hardly breathing, sunk in oblivion. There was nothing to do but wait and watch. Then there came a still night, clear and calm, without one breath of wind.

Suddenly the child stirred. His eyes opened. He looked past his mother toward the open door. He tried to speak and she bent down to catch the half-breathed words.

“All right, I’m comin’,” he whispered; then he sank back.

The mother felt suddenly terrified, she crossed the room to her father. Somewhere near them the other child was laughing. Joyful, contented, triumphant and silvery laughter echoed through the room.

“I’m frightened; I’m frightened,” she moaned.

He put his arm round her protectingly. A sudden gust of wind made them both start, but it passed swiftly and left the air quiet as before.

The laughter had ceased and there crept to them a faint sound, so faint as hardly to be heard, but growing louder till they could distinguish it. Footsteps—light footsteps, swiftly departing.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they ran—those well-known halting little feet. Yet—surely—now other footsteps suddenly mingled with them, moving with a quicker and a lighter tread.

With one accord they hastened to the door.

Down, down, down, past the door, close to them, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, went the unseen feet of the little children together.

Mrs. Lancaster looked up wildly.

“There are two of them—two!”

Grey with sudden fear, she turned towards the cot in the corner, but her father restrained her gently, and pointed away.

“There,” he said simply.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter—fainter and fainter.

And then—silence.

Twelve

THE STRANGE CASE OF SIR ARTHUR CARMICHAEL

“The Strange Case of Sir Arthur Carmichael” was first published in the hardback *The Hound of Death and Other Stories* (Odhams Press, 1933). No previous appearances have been found.

(Taken from the notes of the late Dr. Edward Carstairs, M.D., the eminent psychologist.)

I am perfectly aware that there are two distinct ways of looking at the strange and tragic events which I have set down here. My own opinion has never wavered. I have been persuaded to write the story out in full, and indeed I believe it to be due to science that such strange and inexplicable facts should not be buried in oblivion.

It was a wire from my friend, Dr. Settle, that first introduced me to the matter. Beyond mentioning the name Carmichael, the wire was not explicit, but in obedience to it I took the 12:20 train from Paddington to Wolden, in Hertfordshire.

The name of Carmichael was not unfamiliar to me. I had been slightly acquainted with the late Sir William Carmichael of Wolden, though I had seen nothing of him for the last eleven years. He had, I knew, one son, the present baronet, who must now be a young man of about twenty-three. I remembered vaguely having heard some rumours about Sir William’s second marriage, but could recall nothing definite unless it were a vague impression detrimental to the second Lady Carmichael.

Settle met me at the station.

“Good of you to come,” he said as he wrung my hand.

“Not at all. I understand this is something in my line?”

“Very much so.”

“A mental case, then?” I hazarded. “Possessing some unusual features?”

We had collected my luggage by this time and were seated in a dogcart driving away from the station in the direction of Wolden, which lay about three miles away. Settle did not answer for a minute or two. Then he burst out suddenly.

“The whole thing’s incomprehensible! Here is a young man, twenty-three years of age, thoroughly normal in every respect. A pleasant amiable boy, with no more than his fair share of conceit, not brilliant intellectually perhaps, but an excellent type of the ordinary upper-class young Englishman. Goes to bed in his usual health one evening, and is found the next morning wandering about the village in a semi-idiotic condition, incapable of recognizing his nearest and dearest.”

“Ah!” I said, stimulated. This case promised to be interesting. “Complete loss of memory? And this occurred—?”

“Yesterday morning. The 9th of August.”

“And there has been nothing—no shock that you know of—to account for this state?”

“Nothing.”

I had a sudden suspicion.

“Are you keeping anything back?”

“N—no.”

His hesitation confirmed my suspicion.

“I must know everything.”

“It’s nothing to do with Arthur. It’s to do with—with the house.”

“With the house,” I repeated, astonished.

“You’ve had a great deal to do with that sort of thing, haven’t you, Carstairs? You’ve ‘tested’ so-called haunted houses. What’s your opinion of the whole thing?”

“In nine cases out of ten, fraud,” I replied. “But the tenth—well, I have come across phenomena that are absolutely unexplainable from the ordinary materialistic standpoint. I am a believer in the occult.”

Settle nodded. We were just turning in at the park gates. He pointed with his whip at a low-lying white mansion on the side of a hill.

“That’s the house,” he said. “And—there’s something in that house, something uncanny—horrible. We all feel it . . . And I’m not a superstitious man. . . .”

“What form does it take?” I asked.

He looked straight in front of him. “I’d rather you knew nothing. You see, if you—coming here unbiased—knowing nothing about it—see it too—well —”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s better so. But I should be glad if you will tell me a little more about the family.”

“Sir William,” said Settle, “was twice married. Arthur is the child of his first wife. Nine years ago he married again, and the present Lady Carmichael is something of a mystery. She is only half English, and, I suspect, has Asiatic blood in her veins.”

He paused.

“Settle,” I said, “you don’t like Lady Carmichael.”

He admitted it frankly. “No, I don’t. There has always seemed to be something sinister about her. Well, to continue, by his second wife Sir William had another child, also a boy, who is now eight years old. Sir William died three years ago, and Arthur came into the title and place. His

stepmother and half brother continued to live with him at Wolden. The estate, I must tell you, is very much impoverished. Nearly the whole of Sir Arthur's income goes to keeping it up. A few hundreds a year was all Sir William could leave his wife, but fortunately Arthur has always got on splendidly with his stepmother, and has been only too delighted to have her live with him. Now—"

"Yes?"

"Two months ago Arthur became engaged to a charming girl, a Miss Phyllis Patterson." He added, lowering his voice with a touch of emotion: "They were to have been married next month. She is staying here now. You can imagine her distress—"

I bowed my head silently.

We were driving up close to the house now. On our right the green lawn sloped gently away. And suddenly I saw a most charming picture. A young girl was coming slowly across the lawn to the house. She wore no hat, and the sunlight enhanced the gleam of her glorious golden hair. She carried a great basket of roses, and a beautiful grey Persian cat twined itself lovingly round her feet as she walked.

I looked at Settle interrogatively.

"That is Miss Patterson," he said.

"Poor girl," I said, "poor girl. What a picture she makes with the roses and her grey cat."

I heard a faint sound and looked quickly round at my friend. The reins had slipped out of his fingers, and his face was quite white.

"What's the matter?" I exclaimed.

He recovered himself with an effort.

In a few moments more we had arrived, and I was following him into the green drawing room, where tea was laid out.

A middle-aged but still beautiful woman rose as we entered and came forward with an outstretched hand.

“This is my friend, Dr. Carstairs, Lady Carmichael.”

I cannot explain the instinctive wave of repulsion that swept over me as I took the proffered hand of this charming and stately woman who moved with the dark and languorous grace that recalled Settle’s surmise of Oriental blood.

“It is very good of you to come, Dr. Carstairs,” she said in a low musical voice, “and to try and help us in our great trouble.”

I made some trivial reply and she handed me my tea.

In a few minutes the girl I had seen on the lawn outside entered the room. The car was no longer with her, but she still carried the basket of roses in her hand. Settle introduced me and she came forward impulsively.

“Oh! Dr. Carstairs, Dr. Settle has told us so much about you. I have a feeling that you will be able to do something for poor Arthur.”

Miss Patterson was certainly a very lovely girl, though her cheeks were pale, and her frank eyes were outlined with dark circles.

“My dear young lady,” I said reassuringly, “indeed you must not despair. These cases of lost memory, or secondary personality, are often of very short duration. At any minute the patient may return to his full powers.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe in this being a second personality,” she said. “This isn’t Arthur at all. It is no personality of his. It isn’t him. I—”

“Phyllis, dear,” said Lady Carmichael’s soft voice, “here is your tea.”

And something in the expression of her eyes as they rested on the girl told me that Lady Carmichael had little love for her prospective daughter-in-law.

Miss Patterson declined the tea, and I said, to ease the conversation: “Isn’t the pussycat going to have a saucer of milk?”

She looked at me rather strangely.

“The—pussycat?”

“Yes, your companion of a few moments ago in the garden—”

I was interrupted by a crash. Lady Carmichael had upset the tea kettle, and the hot water was pouring all over the floor. I remedied the matter, and Phyllis Patterson looked questioningly at Settle. He rose.

“Would you like to see your patient now, Carstairs?”

I followed him at once. Miss Patterson came with us. We went upstairs and Settle took a key from his pocket.

“He sometimes has a fit of wandering,” he explained. “So I usually lock the door when I’m away from the house.”

He turned the key in the lock and went in.

The young man was sitting on the window seat where the last rays of the westerly sun struck broad and yellow. He sat curiously still, rather hunched together, with every muscle relaxed. I thought at first that he was quite unaware of our presence until I suddenly saw that, under immovable lids, he was watching us closely. His eyes dropped as they met mine, and he blinked. But he did not move.

“Come, Arthur,” said Settle cheerfully. “Miss Patterson and a friend of mine have come to see you.”

But the young fellow in the window seat only blinked. Yet a moment or two later I saw him watching us again—furtively and secretly.

“Want your tea?” asked Settle, still loudly and cheerfully, as though talking to a child.

He set on the table a cup full of milk. I lifted my eyebrows in surprise, and Settle smiled.

“Funny thing,” he said, “the only drink he’ll touch is milk.”

In a moment or two, without undue haste, Sir Arthur uncoiled himself, limb by limb, from his huddled position, and walked slowly over to the table. I recognized suddenly that his movements were absolutely silent, his feet made no sound as they trod. Just as he reached the table he gave a tremendous stretch, poised on one leg forward, the other stretching out behind him. He prolonged this exercise to its utmost extent, and then yawned. Never have I seen such a yawn! It seemed to swallow up his entire face.

He now turned his attention to the milk, bending down to the table until his lips touched the fluid.

Settle answered my inquiring look.

“Won’t make use of his hands at all. Seems to have returned to a primitive state. Odd, isn’t it?”

I felt Phyllis Patterson shrink against me a little, and I laid my hand soothingly on her arm.

The milk was finished at last, and Arthur Carmichael stretched himself once more, and then with the same quiet noiseless footsteps he regained the window seat, where he sat, huddled up as before, blinking at us.

Miss Patterson drew us out into the corridor. She was trembling all over.

“Oh! Dr. Carstairs,” she cried. “It isn’t him—that thing in there isn’t Arthur! I should feel—I should know—”

I shook my head sadly.

“The brain can play strange tricks, Miss Patterson.”

I confess that I was puzzled by the case. It presented unusual features. Though I had never seen young Carmichael before there was something about his peculiar manner of walking, and the way he blinked, that reminded me of someone or something that I could not quite place.

Our dinner that night was a quiet affair, the burden of conversation being sustained by Lady Carmichael and myself. When the ladies had withdrawn Settle asked me my impression of my hostess.

“I must confess,” I said, “that for no cause or reason I dislike her intensely. You are quite right, she has Eastern blood, and, I should say, possesses marked occult powers. She is a woman of extraordinary magnetic force.”

Settle seemed on the point of saying something, but checked himself and merely remarked after a minute or two: “She is absolutely devoted to her little son.”

We sat in the green drawing room again after dinner. We had just finished coffee and were conversing rather stiffly on the topics of the day when the cat began to miaow piteously for admission outside the door. No one took any notice, and, as I am fond of animals, after a moment or two I rose.

“May I let the poor thing in?” I asked Lady Carmichael.

Her face seemed very white, I thought, but she made a faint gesture of the head which I took as assent and, going to the door, I opened it. But the corridor outside was quite empty.

“Strange,” I said, “I could have sworn I heard a cat.”

As I came back to my chair I noticed they were all watching me intently. It somehow made me feel a little uncomfortable.

We retired to bed early. Settle accompanied me to my room.

“Got everything you want?” he asked, looking around.

“Yes, thanks.”

He still lingered rather awkwardly as though there was something he wanted to say but could not quite get out.

“By the way,” I remarked, “you said there was something uncanny about this house? As yet it seems most normal.”

“You call it a cheerful house?”

“Hardly that, under the circumstances. It is obviously under the shadow of a great sorrow. But as regards any abnormal influence, I should give it a clean bill of health.”

“Good night,” said Settle abruptly. “And pleasant dreams.”

Dream I certainly did. Miss Patterson’s grey cat seemed to have impressed itself upon my brain. All night long, it seemed to me, I dreamt of the wretched animal.

Awaking with a start, I suddenly realized what had brought the cat so forcibly into my thoughts. The creature was miaowing persistently outside my door. Impossible to sleep with that racket going on. I lit my candle and went to the door. But the passage outside my room was empty, though the miaowing still continued. A new idea struck me. The unfortunate animal was shut up somewhere, unable to get out. To the left was the end of the passage, where Lady Carmichael’s room was situated. I turned therefore to the right and had taken but a few paces when the noise broke out again from behind me. I turned sharply and the sound came again, this time distinctly on the right of me.

Something, probably a draught in the corridor, made me shiver, and I went sharply back to my room. Everything was silent now, and I was soon asleep once more—to wake to another glorious summer’s day.

As I was dressing I saw from my window the disturber of my night’s rest. The grey cat was creeping slowly and stealthily across the lawn. I judged its object of attack to be a small flock of birds who were busy chirruping and preening themselves not far away.

And then a very curious thing happened. The cat came straight on and passed through the midst of the birds, its fur almost brushing against them—and the birds did not fly away. I could not understand it—the thing seemed incomprehensible.

So vividly did it impress me that I could not refrain from mentioning it at breakfast.

“Do you know?” I said to Lady Carmichael, “that you have a very unusual cat?”

I heard the quick rattle of a cup on a saucer, and I saw Phyllis Patterson, her lips parted and her breath coming quickly, gazing earnestly at me.

There was a moment's silence, and then Lady Carmichael said in a distinctly disagreeable manner: “I think you must have made a mistake. There is no cat here. I have never had a cat.”

It was evident that I had managed to put my foot in it badly, so I hastily changed the subject.

But the matter puzzled me. Why had Lady Carmichael declared there was no cat in the house? Was it perhaps Miss Patterson's, and its presence concealed from the mistress of the house? Lady Carmichael might have one of those strange antipathies to cats which are so often met with nowadays. It hardly seemed a plausible explanation, but I was forced to rest content with it for the moment.

Our patient was still in the same condition. This time I made a thorough examination and was able to study him more closely than the night before. At my suggestion it was arranged that he should spend as much time with the family as possible. I hoped not only to have a better opportunity of observing him when he was off his guard, but the ordinary everyday routine might awaken some gleam of intelligence. His demeanour, however, remained unchanged. He was quiet and docile, seemed vacant, but was in point of fact, intensely and rather slyly watchful. One thing certainly came as a surprise to me, the intense affection he displayed towards his stepmother. Miss Patterson he ignored completely, but he always managed to sit as near Lady Carmichael as possible, and once I saw him rub his head against her shoulder in a dumb expression of love.

I was worried about the case. I could not but feel that there was some clue to the whole matter which had so far escaped me.

“This is a very strange case,” I said to Settle.

“Yes,” said he, “it’s very—suggestive.”

He looked at me rather furtively, I thought.

“Tell me,” he said. “He doesn’t—remind you of anything?”

The words struck me disagreeably, reminding me of my impression of the day before.

“Remind me of what?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Perhaps it’s my fancy,” he muttered. “Just my fancy.”

And he would say no more on the matter.

Altogether there was mystery shrouding the affair. I was still obsessed with that baffling feeling of having missed the clue that should elucidate it to me. And concerning a lesser matter there was also mystery. I mean that trifling affair of the grey cat. For some reason or other the thing was getting on my nerves. I dreamed of cats—I continually fancied I heard him. Now and then in the distance I caught a glimpse of the beautiful animal. And the fact that there was some mystery connected with it fretted me unbearably. On a sudden impulse I applied one afternoon to the footman for information.

“Can you tell me anything,” I said, “about the cat I see?”

“The cat, sir?” He appeared politely surprised.

“Wasn’t there— isn’t there—a cat?”

“Her ladyship had a cat, sir. A great pet. Had to be put away though. A great pity, as it was a beautiful animal.”

“A grey cat?” I asked slowly.

“Yes, sir. A Persian.”

“And you say it was destroyed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re quite sure it was destroyed?”

“Oh! quite sure, sir. Her ladyship wouldn’t have him sent to the vet—but did it herself. A little less than a week ago now. He’s buried out there under the copper beech, sir.” And he went out of the room, leaving me to my meditations.

Why had Lady Carmichael affirmed so positively that she had never had a cat?

I felt an intuition that this trifling affair of the cat was in some way significant. I found Settle and took him aside.

“Settle,” I said. “I want to ask you a question. Have you, or have you not, both seen and heard a cat in this house?”

He did not seem surprised at the question. Rather did he seem to have been expecting it.

“I’ve heard it,” he said. “I’ve not seen it.”

“But the first day,” I cried. “On the lawn with Miss Patterson!”

He looked at me very steadily.

“I saw Miss Patterson walking across the lawn. Nothing else.”

I began to understand. “Then,” I said, “the cat—?”

He nodded.

“I wanted to see if you—unprejudiced—would hear what we all hear . . . ?

“You all hear it then?”

He nodded again.

“It’s strange,” I murmured thoughtfully. “I never heard of a cat haunting a place before.”

I told him what I had learnt from the footman, and he expressed surprise.

“That’s news to me. I didn’t know that.”

“But what does it mean?” I asked helplessly.

He shook his head. “Heaven only knows! But I’ll tell you, Carstairs—I’m afraid. The—thing’s voice sounds—menacing.”

“Menacing?” I said sharply. “To whom?”

He spread out his hands. “I can’t say.”

It was not till that evening after dinner that I realized the meaning of his words. We were sitting in the green drawing room, as on the night of my arrival, when it came—the loud insistent miaowing of a cat outside the door. But this time it was unmistakably angry in its tone—a fierce cat yowl, long-drawn and menacing. And then as it ceased the brass hook outside the door was rattled violently as by a cat’s paw.

Settle started up.

“I swear that’s real,” he cried.

He rushed to the door and flung it open.

There was nothing there.

He came back mopping his brow. Phyllis was pale and trembling, Lady Carmichael deathly white. Only Arthur, squatting contentedly like a child, his head against his stepmother’s knee, was calm and undisturbed.

Miss Patterson laid her hand on my arm and we went upstairs.

“Oh! Dr. Carstairs,” she cried. “What is it? What does it all mean?”

“We don’t know yet, my dear young lady,” I said. “But I mean to find out. But you mustn’t be afraid. I am convinced there is no danger to you personally.”

She looked at me doubtfully. “You think that?”

“I am sure of it,” I answered firmly. I remembered the loving way the grey cat had twined itself round her feet, and I had no misgivings. The menace was not for her.

I was some time dropping off to sleep, but at length I fell into an uneasy slumber from which I awoke with a sense of shock. I heard a scratching sputtering noise as of something being violently ripped or torn. I sprang out of bed and rushed out into the passage. At the same moment Settle burst out of his room opposite. The sound came from our left.

“You hear it, Carstairs?” he cried. “You hear it?”

We came swiftly up to Lady Carmichael’s door. Nothing had passed us, but the noise had ceased. Our candles glittered blankly on the shiny panels of Lady Carmichael’s door. We stared at one another.

“You know what it was?” he half whispered.

I nodded. “A cat’s claws ripping and tearing something.” I shivered a little. Suddenly I gave an exclamation and lowered the candle I held.

“Look here, Settle.”

“Here” was a chair that rested against the wall—and the seat of it was ripped and torn in long strips. . . .

We examined it closely. He looked at me and I nodded.

“Cat’s claws,” he said, drawing in his breath sharply. “Unmistakable.” His eyes went from the chair to the closed door. “That’s the person who is menaced. Lady Carmichael!”

I slept no more that night. Things had come to a pass where something must be done. As far as I knew there was only one person who had the key to the situation. I suspected Lady Carmichael of knowing more than she chose to tell.

She was deathly pale when she came down the next morning, and only toyed with the food on her plate. I was sure that only an iron determination kept her from breaking down. After breakfast I requested a few words with her. I went straight to the point.

“Lady Carmichael,” I said. “I have reason to believe that you are in very grave danger.”

“Indeed?” She braved it out with wonderful unconcern.

“There is in this house,” I continued, “A Thing—a Presence—that is obviously hostile to you.”

“What nonsense,” she murmured scornfully. “As if I believed in any rubbish of that kind.”

“The chair outside your door,” I remarked drily, “was ripped to ribbons last night.”

“Indeed?” With raised eyebrows she pretended surprise, but I saw that I had told her nothing she did not know. “Some stupid practical joke, I suppose.”

“It was not that,” I replied with some feeling. “And I want you to tell me—for your own sake—” I paused.

“Tell you what?” she queried.

“Anything that can throw light on the matter,” I said gravely.

She laughed.

“I know nothing,” she said. “Absolutely nothing.”

And no warnings of danger could induce her to relax the statement. Yet I was convinced that she did know a great deal more than any of us, and held some clue to the affair of which we were absolutely ignorant. But I saw that it was quite impossible to make her speak.

I determined, however, to take every precaution that I could, convinced as I was that she was menaced by a very real and immediate danger. Before she went to her room the following night Settle and I made a thorough examination of it. We had agreed that we would take it in turns to watch the passage.

I took the first watch, which passed without incident, and at three o’clock Settle relieved me. I was tired after my sleepless night the day before, and dropped off at once. And I had a very curious dream.

I dreamed that the grey cat was sitting at the foot of my bed and that its eyes were fixed on mine with a curious pleading. Then, with the ease of dreams, I knew that the creature wanted me to follow it. I did so, and it led me down the great staircase and right to the opposite wing of the house to a room which was obviously the library. It paused there at one side of the room and raised its front paws till they rested on one of the lower shelves of books, while it gazed at me once more with that same moving look of appeal.

Then—cat and library faded, and I awoke to find that morning had come.

Settle’s watch had passed without incident, but he was keenly interested to hear of my dream. At my request he took me to the library, which coincided in every particular with my vision of it. I could even point out the exact spot where the animal had given me that last sad look.

We both stood there in silent perplexity. Suddenly an idea occurred to me, and I stooped to read the title of the book in that exact place. I noticed that there was a gap in the line.

“Some book has been taken out of here,” I said to Settle.

He stooped also to the shelf.

“Hallo,” he said. “There’s a nail at the back here that has torn off a fragment of the missing volume.”

He detached the little scrap of paper with care. It was not more than an inch square—but on it were printed two significant words: “The cat. . . .”

“This thing gives me the creeps,” said Settle. “It’s simply horribly uncanny.”

“I’d give anything to know,” I said, “what book it is that is missing from here. Do you think there is any way of finding out?”

“May be a catalogue somewhere. Perhaps Lady Carmichael—”

I shook my head.

“Lady Carmichael will tell you nothing.”

“You think so?”

“I am sure of it. While we are guessing and feeling about in the dark Lady Carmichael knows. And for reasons of her own she will say nothing. She prefers to run a most horrible risk sooner than break silence.”

The day passed with an uneventfulness that reminded me of the calm before a storm. And I had a strange feeling that the problem was near solution. I was groping about in the dark, but soon I should see. The facts were all there, ready, waiting for the little flash of illumination that should weld them together and show out their significance.

And come it did! In the strangest way!

It was when we were all sitting together in the green drawing room as usual after dinner. We had been very silent. So noiseless indeed was the room that a little mouse ran across the floor—and in an instant the thing happened.

With one long spring Arthur Carmichael leapt from his chair. His quivering body was swift as an arrow on the mouse's track. It had disappeared behind the wainscoting, and there he crouched—watchful—his body still trembling with eagerness.

It was horrible! I have never known such a paralysing moment. I was no longer puzzled as to that something that Arthur Carmichael reminded me of with his stealthy feet and watching eyes. And in a flash an explanation, wild, incredible, unbelievable, swept into my mind. I rejected it as impossible—unthinkable! But I could not dismiss it from my thoughts.

I hardly remember what happened next. The whole thing seemed blurred and unreal. I know that somehow we got upstairs and said our good nights briefly, almost with a dread of meeting each other's eyes, lest we should see there some confirmation of our own fears.

Settle established himself outside Lady Carmichael's door to take the first watch, arranging to call me at 3 a.m. I had no special fears for Lady Carmichael; I was too taken up with my fantastic impossible theory. I told myself it was impossible—but my mind returned to it, fascinated.

And then suddenly the stillness of the night was disturbed. Settle's voice rose in a shout, calling me. I rushed out to the corridor.

He was hammering and pounding with all his might on Lady Carmichael's door.

"Devil take the woman!" he cried. "She's locked it!"

"But—"

"It's in there, man! In with her! Can't you hear it?"

From behind the locked door a long-drawn cat yowl sounded fiercely. And then following it a horrible scream—and another . . . I recognized Lady Carmichael's voice.

“The door!” I yelled. “We must break it in. In another minute we shall be too late.”

We set our shoulders against it, and heaved with all our might. It gave with a crash—and we almost fell into the room.

Lady Carmichael lay on the bed bathed in blood. I have seldom seen a more horrible sight. Her heart was still beating, but her injuries were terrible, for the skin of the throat was all ripped and torn . . . Shuddering, I whispered: “The Claws . . .” A thrill of superstitious horror ran over me.

I dressed and bandaged the wounds carefully and suggested to Settle that the exact nature of the injuries had better be kept secret, especially from Miss Patterson. I wrote out a telegram for a hospital nurse, to be despatched as soon as the telegraph office was open.

The dawn was now stealing in at the window. I looked out on the lawn below.

“Get dressed and come out,” I said abruptly to Settle. “Lady Carmichael will be all right now.”

He was soon ready, and we went out into the garden together.

“What are you going to do?”

“Dig up the cat’s body,” I said briefly. “I must be sure—”

I found a spade in a toolshed and we set to work beneath the large copper beech tree. At last our digging was rewarded. It was not a pleasant job. The animal had been dead a week. But I saw what I wanted to see.

“That’s the cat,” I said. “The identical cat I saw the first day I came here.”

Settle sniffed. An odour of bitter almonds was still perceptible.

“Prussic acid,” he said.

I nodded.

“What are you thinking?” he asked curiously.

“What you think too!”

My surmise was no new one to him—it had passed through his brain also, I could see.

“It’s impossible,” he murmured. “Impossible! It’s against all science—all nature . . .” His voice tailed off in a shudder. “That mouse last night,” he said. “But—oh! it couldn’t be!”

“Lady Carmichael,” I said, “is a very strange woman. She has occult powers—hypnotic powers. Her forebears came from the East. Can we know what use she might have made of these powers over a weak lovable nature such as Arthur Carmichael’s? And remember, Settle, if Arthur Carmichael remains a hopeless imbecile, devoted to her, the whole property is practically hers and her son’s—whom you have told me she adores. And Arthur was going to be married!”

“But what are we going to do, Carstairs?”

“There’s nothing to be done,” I said. “We’ll do our best though to stand between Lady Carmichael and vengeance.”

Lady Carmichael improved slowly. Her injuries healed themselves as well as could be expected—the scars of that terrible assault she would probably bear to the end of her life.

I had never felt more helpless. The power that defeated us was still at large, undefeated, and though quiescent for the minute we could hardly regard it as doing otherwise than biding its time. I was determined upon one thing. As soon as Lady Carmichael was well enough to be moved she must be taken away from Wolden. There was just a chance that the terrible manifestation might be unable to follow her. So the days went on.

I had fixed September 18th as the date of Lady Carmichael’s removal. It was on the morning of the 14th when the unexpected crisis arose.

I was in the library discussing details of Lady Carmichael's case with Settle when an agitated housemaid rushed into the room.

"Oh! sir," she cried. "Be quick! Mr. Arthur—he's fallen into the pond. He stepped on the punt and it pushed off with him, and he overbalanced and fell in! I saw it from the window."

I waited for no more, but ran straight out of the room followed by Settle. Phyllis was just outside and had heard the maid's story. She ran with us.

"But you needn't be afraid," she cried. "Arthur is a magnificent swimmer."

I felt forebodings, however, and redoubled my pace. The surface of the pond was unruffled. The empty punt floated lazily about—but of Arthur there was no sign.

Settle pulled off his coat and his boots. "I'm going in," he said. "You take the boat hook and fish about from the other punt. It's not very deep."

Very long the time seemed as we searched vainly. Minute followed minute. And then, just as we were despairing, we found him, and bore the apparently lifeless body of Arthur Carmichael to shore.

As long as I live I shall never forget the hopeless agony of Phyllis's face.

"Not—not—" her lips refused to frame the dreadful word.

"No, no, my dear," I cried. "We'll bring him round, never fear."

But inwardly I had little hope. He had been under water for half an hour. I sent off Settle to the house for hot blankets and other necessities, and began myself to apply artificial respiration.

We worked vigorously with him for over an hour but there was no sign of life. I motioned to Settle to take my place again, and I approached Phyllis.

"I'm afraid," I said gently, "that it is no good. Arthur is beyond our help."

She stayed quite still for a moment and then suddenly flung herself down on the lifeless body.

“Arthur!” she cried desperately. “Arthur! Come back to me! Arthur—come back—come back!”

Her voice echoed away into silence. Suddenly I touched Settle’s arm. “Look!” I said.

A faint tinge of colour crept into the drowned man’s face. I felt his heart.

“Go on with the respiration,” I cried. “He’s coming round!”

The moments seemed to fly now. In a marvellously short time his eyes opened.

Then suddenly I realized a difference. These were intelligent eyes, human eyes . . .

They rested on Phyllis.

“Hallo! Phil,” he said weakly. “Is it you? I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow.”

She could not yet trust herself to speak but she smiled at him. He looked round with increasing bewilderment.

“But, I say, where am I? And—how rotten I feel! What’s the matter with me? Hallo, Dr. Settle!”

“You’ve been nearly drowned—that’s what’s the matter,” returned Settle grimly.

Sir Arthur made a grimace.

“I’ve always heard it was beastly coming back afterwards! But how did it happen? Was I walking in my sleep?”

Settle shook his head.

“We must get him to the house,” I said, stepping forward.

He stared at me, and Phyllis introduced me. “Dr. Carstairs, who is staying here.”

We supported him between us and started for the house. He looked up suddenly as though struck by an idea.

“I say, doctor, this won’t knock me up for the 12th, will it?”

“The 12th?” I said slowly, “you mean the 12th of August?”

“Yes—next Friday.”

“Today is the 14th of September,” said Settle abruptly. His bewilderment was evident.

“But—but I thought it was the 8th of August? I must have been ill then?”

Phyllis interposed rather quickly in her gentle voice.

“Yes,” she said, “you’ve been very ill.”

He frowned. “I can’t understand it. I was perfectly all right when I went to bed last night—at least of course it wasn’t really last night. I had dreams though. I remember, dreams . . .” His brow furrowed itself still more as he strove to remember. “Something—what was it? Something dreadful—someone had done it to me—and I was angry—desperate . . . And then I dreamed I was a cat—yes, a cat! Funny, wasn’t it? But it wasn’t a funny dream. It was more—horrible! But I can’t remember. It all goes when I think.”

I laid my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t try to think, Sir Arthur,” I said gravely. “Be content—to forget.”

He looked at me in a puzzled way and nodded. I heard Phyllis draw a breath of relief. We had reached the house.

“By the way,” said Sir Arthur suddenly, “where’s the mater?”

“She has been—ill,” said Phyllis after a momentary pause.

“Oh! poor old mater!” His voice rang with genuine concern. “Where is she? In her room?”

“Yes,” I said, “but you had better not disturb—”

The words froze on my lips. The door of the drawing room opened and Lady Carmichael, wrapped in a dressing gown, came out into the hall.

Her eyes were fixed on Arthur, and if ever I have seen a look of absolute guilt-stricken terror I saw it then. Her face was hardly human in its frenzied terror. Her hand went to her throat.

Arthur advanced towards her with boyish affection.

“Hello, mater! So you’ve been knocked up too? I say, I’m awfully sorry.”

She shrank back before him, her eyes dilating. Then suddenly, with a shriek of a doomed soul, she fell backwards through the open door.

I rushed and bent over her, then beckoned to Settle.

“Hush,” I said. “Take him upstairs quietly and then come down again. Lady Carmichael is dead.”

He returned in a few minutes.

“What was it?” he asked. “What caused it?”

“Shock,” I said grimly. “The shock of seeing Arthur Carmichael, restored to life! Or you may call it, as I prefer to, the judgment of God!”

“You mean—” he hesitated.

I looked at him in the eyes so that he understood.

“A life for a life,” I said significantly.

“But—”

Oh! I know that a strange and unforeseen accident permitted the spirit of Arthur Carmichael to return to his body. But, nevertheless, Arthur Carmichael was murdered.”

He looked at me half fearfully. “With prussic acid?” he asked in a low tone.

“Yes,” I answered. “With prussic acid.”

Settle and I have never spoken our belief. It is not one likely to be credited. According to the orthodox point of view Arthur Carmichael merely suffered from loss of memory, Lady Carmichael lacerated her own throat in a temporary fit of mania, and the apparition of the Grey Cat was mere imagination.

But there are two facts that to my mind are unmistakable. One is the ripped chair in the corridor. The other is even more significant. A catalogue of the library was found, and after exhaustive search it was proved that the missing volume was an ancient and curious work on the possibilities of the metamorphosis of human beings into animals!

One thing more. I am thankful to say that Arthur knows nothing. Phyllis has locked the secret of those weeks in her own heart, and she will never, I am sure, reveal them to the husband she loves so dearly, and who came back across the barrier of the grave at the call of her voice.

Thirteen

THE CALL OF WINGS

“The Call of Wings” was first published in the hardback *The Hound of Death and Other Stories* (Odhams Press, 1933). No previous appearances have been found.

Silas Hamer heard it first on a wintry night in February. He and Dick Borrow had walked from a dinner given by Bernard Seldon, the nerve specialist. Borrow had been unusually silent, and Silas Hamer asked him with some curiosity what he was thinking about. Borrow’s answer was unexpected.

“I was thinking, that of all these men tonight, only two amongst them could lay claim to happiness. And that these two, strangely enough, were you and I!”

The word “strangely” was apposite, for no two men could be more dissimilar than Richard Borrow, the hardworking East End parson, and Silas Hamer, the sleek complacent man whose millions were a matter of household knowledge.

“It’s odd, you know,” mused Borrow, “I believe you’re the only contented millionaire I’ve ever met.”

Hamer was silent a moment. When he spoke his tone had altered.

“I used to be a wretched shivering little newspaper boy. I wanted then—what I’ve got now!—the comfort and the luxury of money, not its power. I wanted money, not to wield as a force, but to spend lavishly—on myself! I’m frank about it, you see. Money can’t buy everything, they say. Very true. But it can buy everything I want—therefore I’m satisfied. I’m a materialist, Borrow, out and out a materialist!”

The broad glare of the lighted thoroughfare confirmed this confession of faith. The sleek lines of Silas Hamer's body were amplified by the heavy fur-lined coat, and the white light emphasized the thick rolls of flesh beneath his chin. In contrast to him walked Dick Borrow, with the thin ascetic face and the star-gazing fanatical eyes.

"It's you," said Hamer with emphasis, "that I can't understand."

Borrow smiled.

"I live in the midst of misery, want, starvation—all the ills of the flesh! And a predominant Vision upholds me. It's not easy to understand unless you believe in Visions, which I gather you don't."

"I don't believe," said Silas Hamer stolidly, "in anything I can't see, hear and touch."

"Quite so. That's the difference between us. Well, good-bye, the earth now swallows me up!"

They had reached the doorway of a lighted tube station, which was Borrow's route home.

Hamer proceeded alone. He was glad he had sent away the car tonight and elected to walk home. The air was keen and frosty, his senses were delightfully conscious of the enveloping warmth of the fur-lined coat.

He paused for an instant on the kerbstone before crossing the road. A great motor bus was heavily ploughing its way towards him. Hamer, with the feeling of infinite leisure, waited for it to pass. If he were to cross in front of it he would have to hurry—and hurry was distasteful to him.

By his side a battered derelict of the human race rolled drunkenly off the pavement. Hamer was aware of a shout, an ineffectual swerve of the motor bus, and then—he was looking stupidly, with a gradually awakening horror, at a limp inert heap of rags in the middle of the road.

A crowd gathered magically, with a couple of policemen and the bus driver as its nucleus. But Hamer's eyes were riveted in horrified fascination on that lifeless bundle that had once been a man—a man like himself! He shuddered as at some menace.

“Dahn't yer blime yerself, guv'nor,” remarked a rough-looking man at his side. “Yer couldn't 'a done nothin.” 'E was done for anyways.”

Hamer stared at him. The idea that it was possible in any way to save the man had quite honestly never occurred to him. He scouted the notion now as an absurdity. Why if he had been so foolish, he might at this moment . . . His thoughts broke off abruptly, and he walked away from the crowd. He felt himself shaking with a nameless unquenchable dread. He was forced to admit to himself that he was afraid—horribly afraid—of Death . . . Death that came with dreadful swiftness and remorseless certainty to rich and poor alike. . . .

He walked faster, but the new fear was still with him, enveloping him in its cold and chilling grasp.

He wondered at himself, for he knew that by nature he was no coward. Five years ago, he reflected, this fear would not have attacked him. For then Life had not been so sweet . . . Yes, that was it; love of Life was the key to the mystery. The zest of living was at its height for him; it knew but one menace, Death, the destroyer!

He turned out of the lighted thoroughfare. A narrow passageway, between high walls, offered a shortcut to the Square where his house, famous for its art treasures, was situated.

The noise of the street behind him lessened and faded, the soft thud of his own footsteps was the only sound to be heard.

And then out of the gloom in front of him came another sound. Sitting against the wall was a man playing the flute. One of the enormous tribe of street musicians, of course, but why had he chosen such a peculiar spot? Surely at this time of night the police—Hamer's reflections were interrupted suddenly as he realized with a shock that the man had no legs. A

pair of crutches rested against the wall beside him. Hamer saw now that it was not a flute he was playing but a strange instrument whose notes were much higher and clearer than those of a flute.

The man played on. He took no notice of Hamer's approach. His head was flung far back on his shoulders, as though uplifted in the joy of his own music, and the notes poured out clearly and joyously, rising higher and higher. . . .

It was a strange tune—strictly speaking, it was not a tune at all, but a single phrase, not unlike the slow turn given out by the violins of Rienzi, repeated again and again, passing from key to key, from harmony to harmony, but always rising and attaining each time to a greater and more boundless freedom.

It was unlike anything Hamer had ever heard. There was something strange about it, something inspiring—and uplifting . . . it . . . He caught frantically with both hands to a projection in the wall beside him. He was conscious of one thing only—that he must keep down—at all costs he must keep down . . .

He suddenly realized that the music had stopped. The legless man was reaching out for his crutches. And here was he, Silas Hamer, clutching like a lunatic at a stone buttress, for the simple reason that he had had the utterly preposterous notion—absurd on the face of it!—that he was rising from the ground—that the music was carrying him upwards. . . .

He laughed. What a wholly mad idea! Of course his feet had never left the earth for a moment, but what a strange hallucination! The quick tap-tapping of wood on the pavement told him that the cripple was moving away. He looked after him until the man's figure was swallowed up in the gloom. An odd fellow!

He proceeded on his way more slowly; he could not efface from his mind the memory of that strange impossible sensation when the ground had failed beneath his feet. . . .

And then on an impulse he turned and followed hurriedly in the direction the other had taken. The man could not have gone far—he would soon overtake him.

He shouted as soon as he caught sight of the maimed figure swinging itself slowly along.

“Hi! One minute.”

The man stopped and stood motionless until Hamer came abreast of him. A lamp burned just over his head and revealed every feature. Silas Hamer caught his breath in involuntary surprise. The man possessed the most singularly beautiful head he had ever seen. He might have been any age; assuredly he was not a boy, yet youth was the most predominant characteristic—youth and vigour in passionate intensity!

Hamer found an odd difficulty in beginning his conversation.

“Look here,” he said awkwardly, “I want to know what was that thing you were playing just now?”

The man smiled . . . With his smile the world seemed suddenly to leap into joyousness. . . .

“It was an old tune—a very old tune . . . Years old—centuries old.”

He spoke with an odd purity and distinctness of enunciation, giving equal value to each syllable. He was clearly not an Englishman, yet Hamer was puzzled as to his nationality.

“You’re not English? Where do you come from?”

Again the broad joyful smile.

“From over the sea, sir. I came—a long time ago—a very long time ago.”

“You must have had a bad accident. Was it lately?”

“Some time now, sir.”

“Rough luck to lose both legs.”

“It was well,” said the man very calmly. He turned his eyes with a strange solemnity on his interlocutor. “They were evil.”

Hamer dropped a shilling in his hand and turned away. He was puzzled and vaguely disquieted. “They were evil!” What a strange thing to say! Evidently an operation for some form of disease, but—how odd it had sounded.

Hamer went home thoughtful. He tried in vain to dismiss the incident from his mind. Lying in bed, with the first incipient sensation of drowsiness stealing over him, he heard a neighbouring clock strike one. One clear stroke and then silence—silence that was broken by a faint familiar sound . . . Recognition came leaping. Hamer felt his heart beating quickly. It was the man in the passageway playing, somewhere not far distant. . . .

The notes came gladly, the slow turn with its joyful call, the same haunting little phrase . . . “It’s uncanny,” murmured Hamer, “it’s uncanny. It’s got wings to it. . . .”

Clearer and clearer, higher and higher—each wave rising above the last, and catching him up with it. This time he did not struggle, he let himself go . . . Up—up . . . The waves of sound were carrying him higher and higher . . . Triumphant and free, they swept on.

Higher and higher . . . They had passed the limits of human sound now, but they still continued—rising, ever rising . . . Would they reach the final goal, the full perfection of height?

Rising. . . .

Something was pulling—pulling him downwards. Something big and heavy and insistent. It pulled remorselessly—pulled him back, and down . . . down. . . .

He lay in bed gazing at the window opposite. Then, breathing heavily and painfully, he stretched an arm out of bed. The movement seemed curiously

cumbrous to him. The softness of the bed was oppressive, oppressive too were the heavy curtains over the window that blocked out the light and air. The ceiling seemed to press down upon him. He felt stifled and choked. He moved slightly under the bed clothes, and the weight of his body seemed to him the most oppressive of all. . . .

“I want your advice, Seldon.”

Seldon pushed back his chair an inch or so from the table. He had been wondering what was the object of this tête-à-tête dinner. He had seen little of Hamer since the winter, and he was aware tonight of some indefinable change in his friend.

“It’s just this,” said the millionaire. “I’m worried about myself.”

Seldon smiled as he looked across the table.

“You’re looking in the pink of condition.”

“It’s not that.” Hamer paused a minute, then added quietly. “I’m afraid I’m going mad.”

The nerve specialist glanced up with a sudden keen interest. He poured himself out a glass of port with a rather slow movement, and then said quietly, but with a sharp glance at the other man: “What makes you think that?”

“Something that’s happened to me. Something inexplicable, unbelievable. It can’t be true, so I must be going mad.”

“Take your time,” said Seldon, “and tell me about it.”

“I don’t believe in the supernatural,” began Hamer. “I never have. But this thing . . . Well, I’d better tell you the whole story from the beginning. It began last winter one evening after I had dined with you.”

Then briefly and concisely he narrated the events of his walk home and the strange sequel.

“That was the beginning of it all. I can’t explain it to you properly—the feeling, I mean—but it was wonderful! Unlike anything I’ve ever felt or dreamed. Well, it’s gone on ever since. Not every night, just now and then. The music, the feeling of being uplifted, the soaring flight . . . and then the terrible drag, the pull back to earth, and afterwards the pain, the actual physical pain of the awakening. It’s like coming down from a high mountain—you know the pains in the ears one gets? Well, this is the same thing, but intensified—and with it goes the awful sense of weight—of being hemmed in, stifled. . . .”

He broke off and there was a pause.

“Already the servants think I’m mad. I couldn’t bear the roof and the walls—I’ve had a place arranged up at the top of the house, open to the sky, with no furniture or carpets, or any stifling things . . . But even then the houses all round are nearly as bad. It’s open country I want, somewhere where one can breathe . . .” He looked across at Seldon. “Well, what do you say? Can you explain it?”

“H’m,” said Seldon. “Plenty of explanations. You’ve been hypnotized, or you’ve hypnotized yourself. Your nerves have gone wrong. Or it may be merely a dream.”

Hamer shook his head. “None of those explanations will do.”

“And there are others,” said Seldon slowly, “but they’re not generally admitted.”

“You are prepared to admit them?”

“On the whole, yes! There’s a great deal we can’t understand which can’t possibly be explained normally. We’ve any amount to find out still, and I for one believe in keeping an open mind.”

“What do you advise me to do?” asked Hamer after a silence.

Seldon leaned forward briskly. “One of several things. Go away from London, seek out your ‘open country.’ The dreams may cease.”

“I can’t do that,” said Hamer quickly. “It’s come to this, that I can’t do without them. I don’t want to do without them.”

“Ah! I guessed as much. Another alternative, find this fellow, this cripple. You’re endowing him now with all sorts of supernatural attributes. Talk to him. Break the spell.”

Hamer shook his head again.

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid,” said Hamer simply.

Seldon made a gesture of impatience. “Don’t believe in it all so blindly! This tune now, the medium that starts it all, what is it like?”

Hamer hummed it, and Seldon listened with a puzzled frown.

“Rather like a bit out of the Overture to Rienzi. There is something uplifting about it—it has wings. But I’m not carried off the earth! Now, these flights of yours, are they all exactly the same?”

“No, no.” Hamer leaned forward eagerly. “They develop. Each time I see a little more. It’s difficult to explain. You see, I’m always conscious of reaching a certain point—the music carries me there—not direct, but a succession of waves, each reaching higher than the last, until the highest point where one can go no further. I stay there until I’m dragged back. It isn’t a place, it’s more a state. Well, not just at first, but after a little while, I began to understand that there were other things all round me waiting until I was able to perceive them. Think of a kitten. It has eyes, but at first it can’t see with them. It’s blind and has to learn to see. Well, that was what it was to me. Mortal eyes and ears were no good to me, but there was something corresponding to them that hadn’t yet been developed—something that wasn’t bodily at all. And little by little that grew . . . there were sensations of light . . . then of sound . . . then of colour . . . All very vague and unformulated. It was more the knowledge of things than seeing or hearing them. First it was light, a light that grew stronger and clearer . . . then sand,

great stretches of reddish sand . . . and here and there straight long lines of water like canals—”

Seldon drew in his breath sharply. “Canals! That’s interesting. Go on.”

“But these things didn’t matter—they didn’t count any longer. The real things were the things I couldn’t see yet—but I heard them . . . It was a sound like the rushing of wings . . . somehow, I can’t explain why, it was glorious! There’s nothing like it here. And then came another glory—I saw them—the Wings! Oh, Seldon, the Wings!”

“But what were they? Men—angels—birds?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see—not yet. But the colour of them! Wing colour—we haven’t got it here—it’s a wonderful colour.”

“Wing colour?” repeated Seldon. “What’s it like?” Hamer flung up his hands impatiently. “How can I tell you? Explain the colour blue to a blind person! It’s a colour you’ve never seen—Wing colour!”

“Well?”

“Well? That’s all. That’s as far as I’ve got. But each time the coming back has been worse—more painful. I can’t understand that. I’m convinced my body never leaves the bed. In this place I get to I’m convinced I’ve got no physical presence. Why should it hurt so confoundly then?”

Seldon shook his head in silence.

“It’s something awful—the coming back. The pull of it—then the pain, pain in every limb and every nerve, and my ears feel as though they were bursting. Then everything presses so, the weight of it all, the dreadful sense of imprisonment. I want light, air, space—above all space to breathe in! And I want freedom.”

“And what,” asked Seldon, “of all the other things that used to mean so much to you?”

“That’s the worst of it. I care for them still as much as, if not more than, ever. And these things, comfort, luxury, pleasure, seem to pull opposite ways to the Wings. It’s a perpetual struggle between them—and I can’t see how it’s going to end.”

Seldon sat silent. The strange tale he had been listening to was fantastic enough in all truth. Was it all a delusion, a wild hallucination—or could it by any possibility be true? And if so, why Hamer, of all men . . .? Surely the materialist, the man who loved the flesh and denied the spirit, was the last man to see the sights of another world.

Across the table Hamer watched him anxiously.

“I suppose,” said Seldon slowly, “that you can only wait. Wait and see what happens.”

“I can’t! I tell you I can’t! Your saying that shows you don’t understand. It’s tearing me in two, this awful struggle—this killing long-drawn-out fight between—between—” He hesitated.

“The flesh and the spirit?” suggested Seldon.

Hamer stared heavily in front of him. “I suppose one might call it that. Anyway, it’s unbearable . . . I can’t get free. . . .”

Again Bernard Seldon shook his head. He was caught up in the grip of the inexplicable. He made one more suggestion.

“If I were you,” he advised, “I would get hold of that cripple.”

But as he went home he muttered to himself: “Canals—I wonder.”

Silas Hamer went out of the house the following morning with a new determination in his step. He had decided to take Seldon’s advice and find the legless man. Yet inwardly he was convinced that his search would be in vain and that the man would have vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up.

The dark buildings on either side of the passageway shut out the sunlight and left it dark and mysterious. Only in one place, half-way up it, there was a break in the wall, and through it there fell a shaft of golden light that illuminated with radiance a figure sitting on the ground. A figure—yes, it was the man!

The instrument of pipes leaned against the wall beside his crutches, and he was covering the paving stones with designs in coloured chalk. Two were completed, sylvan scenes of marvellous beauty and delicacy, swaying trees and a leaping brook that seemed alive.

And again Hamer doubted. Was this man a mere street musician, a pavement artist? Or was he something more. . . .

Suddenly the millionaire's self-control broke down, and he cried fiercely and angrily: "Who are you? For God's sake, who are you?"

The man's eyes met his, smiling.

"Why don't you answer? Speak, man, speak!"

Then he noticed that the man was drawing with incredible rapidity on a bare slab of stone. Hamer followed the movement with his eyes . . . A few bold strokes, and giant trees took form. Then, seated on a boulder . . . a man . . . playing an instrument of pipes. A man with a strangely beautiful face—and goat's legs . . .

The cripple's hand made a swift movement. The man still sat on the rock, but the goat's legs were gone. Again his eyes met Hamer's.

"They were evil," he said.

Hamer stared, fascinated. For the face before him was the face of the picture, but strangely and incredibly beautified . . . Purified from all but an intense and exquisite joy of living.

Hamer turned and almost fled down the passageway into the bright sunlight, repeating to himself incessantly: "It's impossible. Impossible . . .

I'm mad—dreaming!” But the face haunted him—the face of Pan. . . .

He went into the Park and sat on a chair. It was a deserted hour. A few nursemaids with their charges sat in the shade of the trees, and dotted here and there in the stretches of green, like islands in a sea, lay the recumbent forms of men. . . .

The words “a wretched tramp” were to Hamer an epitome of misery. But suddenly, today, he envied them. . . .

They seemed to him of all created beings the only free ones. The earth beneath them, the sky above them, the world to wander in . . . they were not hemmed in or chained.

Like a flash it came to him that that which bound him so remorselessly was the thing he had worshipped and prized above all others—wealth! He had thought it the strongest thing on earth, and now, wrapped round by its golden strength, he saw the truth of his words. It was his money that held him in bondage. . . .

But was it? Was that really it? Was there a deeper and more pointed truth that he had not seen? Was it the money or was it his own love of the money? He was bound in fetters of his own making; not wealth itself, but love of wealth was the chain.

He knew now clearly the two forces that were tearing at him, the warm composite strength of materialism that enclosed and surrounded him, and, opposed to it, the clear imperative call—he named it to himself the Call of the Wings.

And while the one fought and clung the other scorned war and would not stoop to struggle. It only called—called unceasingly . . . He heard it so clearly that it almost spoke in words.

“You cannot make terms with me,” it seemed to say.

“For I am above all other things. If you follow my call you must give up all else and cut away the forces that hold you. For only the Free shall follow

where I lead. . . .”

“I can’t,” cried Hamer. “I can’t. . . .”

A few people turned to look at the big man who sat talking to himself.

So sacrifice was being asked of him, the sacrifice of that which was most dear to him, that which was part of himself.

Part of himself—he remembered the man without legs. . . .

“What in the name of Fortune brings you here?” asked Borrow.

Indeed the East End mission was an unfamiliar background to Hamer.

“I’ve listened to a good many sermons,” said the millionaire, “all saying what could be done if you people had funds. I’ve come to tell you this: you can have funds.”

“Very good of you,” answered Borrow, with some surprise. “A big subscription, eh?”

Hamer smiled dryly. “I should say so. Just every penny I’ve got.”

“What?”

Hamer rapped out details in a brisk businesslike manner. Borrow’s head was whirling.

“You—you mean to say that you’re making over your entire fortune to be devoted to the relief of the poor in the East End with myself appointed as trustee?”

“That’s it.”

“But why—why?”

“I can’t explain,” said Hamer slowly. “Remember our talk about vision last February? Well, a vision has got hold of me.”

“It’s splendid!” Borrow leaned forward, his eyes gleaming.

“There’s nothing particularly splendid about it,” said Hamer grimly. “I don’t care a button about poverty in the East End. All they want is grit! I was poor enough—and I got out of it. But I’ve got to get rid of the money, and these tomfool societies shan’t get hold of it. You’re a man I can trust. Feed bodies or souls with it—preferably the former. I’ve been hungry, but you can do as you like.”

“There’s never been such a thing known,” stammered Borrow.

“The whole thing’s done and finished with,” continued Hamer. “The lawyers have fixed it up at last, and I’ve signed everything. I can tell you I’ve been busy this last fortnight. It’s almost as difficult getting rid of a fortune as making one.”

“But you—you’ve kept something?”

“Not a penny,” said Hamer cheerfully. “At least—that’s not quite true. I’ve just two pence in my pocket.” He laughed.

He said goodbye to his bewildered friend, and walked out of the mission into the narrow evil-smelling streets. The words he had said so gaily just now came back to him with an aching sense of loss. “Not a penny!” Of all his vast wealth he had kept nothing. He was afraid now—afraid of poverty and hunger and cold. Sacrifice had no sweetness for him.

Yet behind it all he was conscious that the weight and menace of things had lifted, he was no longer oppressed and bound down. The severing of the chain had seared and torn him, but the vision of freedom was there to strengthen him. His material needs might dim the Call, but they could not deaden it, for he knew it to be a thing of immortality that could not die.

There was a touch of autumn in the air, and the wind blew chill. He felt the cold and shivered, and then, too, he was hungry—he had forgotten to have any lunch. It brought the future very near to him. It was incredible that he should have given it all up; the case, the comfort, the warmth! His body

cried out impotently . . . And then once again there came to him a glad and uplifting sense of freedom.

Hamer hesitated. He was near the Tube station. He had twopence in his pocket. The idea came to him to journey by it to the Park where he had watched the recumbent idlers a fortnight ago. Beyond this whim he did not plan for the future. He believed honestly enough now that he was mad—sane people did not act as he had done. Yet, if so, madness was a wonderful and amazing thing.

Yes, he would go now to the open country of the Park, and there was a special significance to him in reaching it by Tube. For the Tube represented to him all the horrors of buried, shut-in life . . . He would ascend from its imprisonment free to the wide green and the trees that concealed the menace of the pressing houses.

The lift bore him swiftly and relentlessly downward. The air was heavy and lifeless. He stood at the extreme end of the platform, away from the mass of people. On his left was the opening of the tunnel from which the train, snakelike, would presently emerge. He felt the whole place to be subtly evil. There was no one near him but a hunched-up lad sitting on a seat, sunk, it seemed, in a drunken stupor.

In the distance came the faint menacing roar of the train. The lad rose from his seat and shuffled unsteadily to Hamer's side, where he stood on the edge of the platform peering into the tunnel.

Then—it happened so quickly as to be almost incredible—he lost his balance and fell. . . .

A hundred thoughts rushed simultaneously to Hamer's brain. He saw a huddled heap run over by a motor bus, and heard a hoarse voice saying: "Dahn't yer blime yerself, guv'nor. Yer couldn't 'a done nothin'." And with that came the knowledge that this life could only be saved, if it were saved, by himself. There was no one else near, and the train was close . . . It all passed through his mind with lightning rapidity. He experienced a curious calm lucidity of thought.

He had one short second in which to decide, and he knew in that moment that his fear of Death was unabated. He was horribly afraid. And then the train, rushing round the curve of the tunnel, powerless to pull up in time.

Swiftly Hamer caught up the lad in his arms. No natural gallant impulse swayed him, his shivering flesh was but obeying the command of the alien spirit that called for sacrifice. With a last effort he flung the lad forward on to the platform, falling himself. . . .

Then suddenly his Fear died. The material world held him down no longer. He was free of his shackles. He fancied for a moment that he heard the joyous piping of Pan. Then—nearer and louder—swallowing up all else—came the glad rushing of innumerable Wings . . . enveloping and encircling him. . . .

Fourteen

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM

“Magnolia Blossom” was first published in Royal Magazine, March 1926.

Vincent Easton was waiting under the clock at Victoria Station. Now and then he glanced up at it uneasily. He thought to himself: “How many other men have waited here for a woman who didn’t come?”

A sharp pang shot through him. Supposing that Theo didn’t come, that she had changed her mind? Women did that sort of thing. Was he sure of her—had he ever been sure of her? Did he really know anything at all about her? Hadn’t she puzzled him from the first? There had seemed to be two women—the lovely, laughing creature who was Richard Darrell’s wife, and the other—silent, mysterious, who had walked by his side in the garden of Haymer’s Close. Like a magnolia flower—that was how he thought of her—perhaps because it was under the magnolia tree that they had tasted their first rapturous, incredulous kiss. The air had been sweet with the scent of magnolia bloom, and one or two petals, velvety-soft and fragrant, had floated down, resting on that upturned face that was as creamy and as soft and as silent as they. Magnolia blossom—exotic, fragrant, mysterious.

That had been a fortnight ago—the second day he had met her. And now he was waiting for her to come to him forever. Again incredulity shot through him. She wouldn’t come. How could he ever have believed it? It would be giving up so much. The beautiful Mrs. Darrell couldn’t do this sort of thing quietly. It was bound to be a nine days’ wonder, a far-reaching scandal that would never quite be forgotten. There were better, more expedient ways of doing these things—a discreet divorce, for instance.

But they had never thought of that for a moment—at least he had not. Had she? he wondered. He had never known anything of her thoughts. He had asked her to come away with him almost timorously—for after all, what was he? Nobody in particular—one of a thousand orange growers in the

Transvaal. What a life to take her to—after the brilliance of London! And yet, since he wanted her so desperately, he must needs ask.

She had consented very quietly, with no hesitations or protests, as though it were the simplest thing in the world that he was asking her.

“Tomorrow?” he had said, amazed, almost unbelieving.

And she had promised in that soft, broken voice that was so different from the laughing brilliance of her social manner. He had compared her to a diamond when he first saw her—a thing of flashing fire, reflecting light from a hundred facets. But at that first touch, that first kiss, she had changed miraculously to the clouded softness of a pearl—a pearl like a magnolia blossom, creamy pink.

She had promised. And now he was waiting for her to fulfil that promise.

He looked again at the clock. If she did not come soon, they would miss the train.

Sharply a wave of reaction set in. She wouldn’t come! Of course she wouldn’t come. Fool that he had been ever to expect it! What were promises? He would find a letter when he got back to his rooms—explaining, protesting, saying all the things that women do when they are excusing themselves for lack of courage.

He felt anger—anger and the bitterness of frustration.

Then he saw her coming towards him down the platform, a faint smile on her face. She walked slowly, without haste or fluster, as one who had all eternity before her. She was in black—soft black that clung, with a little black hat that framed the wonderful creamy pallor of her face.

He found himself grasping her hand, muttering stupidly:

“So you’ve come—you have come. After all!”

“Of course.”

How calm her voice sounded! How calm!

“I thought you wouldn’t,” he said, releasing her hand and breathing hard.

Her eyes opened—wide, beautiful eyes. There was wonder in them, the simple wonder of a child.

“Why?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he turned aside and requisitioned a passing porter. They had not much time. The next few minutes were all bustle and confusion. Then they were sitting in their reserved compartment and the drab houses of southern London were drifting by them.

Theodora Darrell was sitting opposite him. At last she was his. And he knew now how incredulous, up to the very last minute, he had been. He had not dared to let himself believe. That magical, elusive quality about her had frightened him. It had seemed impossible that she should ever belong to him.

Now the suspense was over. The irrevocable step was taken. He looked across at her. She lay back in the corner, quite still. The faint smile lingered on her lips, her eyes were cast down, the long, black lashes swept the creamy curve of her cheek.

He thought: “What’s in her mind now? What is she thinking of? Me? Her husband? What does she think about him anyway? Did she care for him once? Or did she never care? Does she hate him, or is she indifferent to him?” And with a pang the thought swept through him: “I don’t know. I never shall know. I love her, and I don’t know anything about her—what she thinks or what she feels.”

His mind circled round the thought of Theodora Darrell’s husband. He had known plenty of married women who were only too ready to talk about their husbands—of how they were misunderstood by them, of how their finer feelings were ignored. Vincent Easton reflected cynically that it was one of the best-known opening gambits.

But except casually, Theo had never spoken of Richard Darrell. Easton knew of him what everybody knew. He was a popular man, handsome, with an engaging, carefree manner. Everybody liked Darrell. His wife always seemed on excellent terms with him. But that proved nothing, Vincent reflected. Theo was well-bred—she would not air her grievances in public.

And between them, no word had passed. From that second evening of their meeting, when they had walked together in the garden, silent, their shoulders touching, and he had felt the faint tremor that shook her at his touch, there had been no explainings, no defining of the position. She had returned his kisses, a dumb, trembling creature, shorn of all that hard brilliance which, together with her cream-and-rose beauty, had made her famous. Never once had she spoken of her husband. Vincent had been thankful for that at the time. He had been glad to be spared the arguments of a woman who wished to assure herself and her lover that they were justified in yielding to their love.

Yet now the tacit conspiracy of silence worried him. He had again that panic-stricken sense of knowing nothing about this strange creature who was willingly linking her life to his. He was afraid.

In the impulse to reassure himself, he bent forward and laid a hand on the black-clad knee opposite him. He felt once again the faint tremor that shook her, and he reached up for her hand. Bending forward, he kissed the palm, a long, lingering kiss. He felt the response of her fingers on his and, looking up, met her eyes, and was content.

He leaned back in his seat. For the moment, he wanted no more. They were together. She was his. And presently he said in a light, almost bantering tone:

“You’re very silent?”

“Am I?”

“Yes.” He waited a minute, then said in a graver tone: “You’re sure you don’t—regret?”

Her eyes opened wide at that. "Oh, no!"

He did not doubt the reply. There was an assurance of sincerity behind it.

"What are you thinking about? I want to know."

In a low voice she answered: "I think I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of happiness."

He moved over beside her then, held her to him and kissed the softness of her face and neck.

"I love you," he said. "I love you—love you."

Her answer was in the clinging of her body, the abandon of her lips.

Then he moved back to his own corner. He picked up a magazine and so did she. Every now and then, over the top of the magazines, their eyes met. Then they smiled.

They arrived at Dover just after five. They were to spend the night there, and cross to the Continent on the following day. Theo entered their sitting room in the hotel with Vincent close behind her. He had a couple of evening papers in his hand which he threw down on the table. Two of the hotel servants brought in the luggage and withdrew.

Theo turned from the window where she had been standing looking out. In another minute they were in each other's arms.

There was a discreet tap on the door and they drew apart again.

"Damn it all," said Vincent, "it doesn't seem as though we were ever going to be alone."

Theo smiled. "It doesn't look like it," she said softly. Sitting down on the sofa, she picked up one of the papers.

The knock proved to be a waiter bearing tea. He laid it on the table, drawing the latter up to the sofa on which Theo was sitting, cast a deft glance round, inquired if there were anything further, and withdrew.

Vincent, who had gone into the adjoining room, came back into the sitting room.

“Now for tea,” he said cheerily, but stopped suddenly in the middle of the room. “Anything wrong?” he asked.

Theo was sitting bolt upright on the sofa. She was staring in front of her with dazed eyes, and her face had gone deathly white.

Vincent took a quick step towards her.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

For answer she held out the paper to him, her finger pointing to the headline.

Vincent took the paper from her. “FAILURE OF HOBSON, JEKYLL AND LUCAS,” he read. The name of the big city firm conveyed nothing to him at the moment, though he had an irritating conviction in the back of his mind that it ought to do so. He looked inquiringly at Theo.

“Richard is Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas,” she explained.

“Your husband?”

“Yes.”

Vincent returned to the paper and read the bald information it conveyed carefully. Phrases such as “sudden crash,” “serious revelations to follow,” “other houses affected” struck him disagreeably.

Roused by a movement, he looked up. Theo was adjusting her little black hat in front of the mirror. She turned at the movement he made. Her eyes looked steadily into his.

“Vincent—I must go to Richard.”

He sprang up.

“Theo—don’t be absurd.”

She repeated mechanically:

“I must go to Richard.”

“But, my dear—”

She made a gesture towards the paper on the floor.

“That means ruin—bankruptcy. I can’t choose this day of all others to leave him.”

“You had left him before you heard of this. Be reasonable!”

She shook her head mournfully.

“You don’t understand. I must go to Richard.”

And from that he could not move her. Strange that a creature so soft, so pliant, could be so unyielding. After the first, she did not argue. She let him say what he had to say unhindered. He held her in his arms, seeking to break her will by enslaving her senses, but though her soft mouth returned his kisses, he felt in her something aloof and invincible that withstood all his pleadings.

He let her go at last, sick and weary of the vain endeavour. From pleading he had turned to bitterness, reproaching her with never having loved him. That, too, she took in silence, without protest, her face, dumb and pitiful, giving the lie to his words. Rage mastered him in the end; he hurled at her every cruel word he could think of, seeking only to bruise and batter her to her knees.

At last the words gave out; there was nothing more to say. He sat, his head in his hands, staring down at the red pile carpet. By the door, Theodora

stood, a black shadow with a white face.

It was all over.

She said quietly: “Goodbye, Vincent.”

He did not answer.

The door opened—and shut again.

The Darrells lived in a house in Chelsea—an intriguing, old-world house, standing in a little garden of its own. Up the front of the house grew a magnolia tree, smutty, dirty, begrimed, but still a magnolia.

Theo looked up at it, as she stood on the doorstep some three hours later. A sudden smile twisted her mouth in pain.

She went straight to the study at the back of the house. A man was pacing up and down in the room—a young man, with a handsome face and a haggard expression.

He gave an ejaculation of relief as she came in.

“Thank God you’ve turned up, Theo. They said you’d taken your luggage with you and gone off out of town somewhere.”

“I heard the news and came back.”

Richard Darrell put an arm about her and drew her to the couch. They sat down upon it side by side. Theo drew herself free of the encircling arm in what seemed a perfectly natural manner.

“How bad is it, Richard?” she asked quietly.

“Just as bad as it can be—and that’s saying a lot.”

“Tell me!”

He began to walk up and down again as he talked. Theo sat and watched him. He was not to know that every now and then the room went dim, and his voice faded from her hearing, while another room in a hotel at Dover came clearly before her eyes.

Nevertheless she managed to listen intelligently enough. He came back and sat down on the couch by her.

“Fortunately,” he ended, “they can’t touch your marriage settlement. The house is yours also.”

Theo nodded thoughtfully.

“We shall have that at any rate,” she said. “Then things will not be too bad? It means a fresh start, that is all.”

“Oh! Quite so. Yes.”

But his voice did not ring true, and Theo thought suddenly: “There’s something else. He hasn’t told me everything.”

“There’s nothing more, Richard?” she said gently. “Nothing worse?”

He hesitated for just half a second, then: “Worse? What should there be?”

“I don’t know,” said Theo.

“It’ll be all right,” said Richard, speaking more as though to reassure himself than Theo. “Of course, it’ll be all right.”

He flung an arm about her suddenly.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “It’ll be all right now that you’re here. Whatever else happens, I’ve got you, haven’t I?”

She said gently: “Yes, you’ve got me.” And this time she left his arm round her.

He kissed her and held her close to him, as though in some strange way he derived comfort from her nearness.

“I’ve got you, Theo,” he said again presently, and she answered as before: “Yes, Richard.”

He slipped from the couch to the floor at her feet.

“I’m tired out,” he said fretfully. “My God, it’s been a day. Awful! I don’t know what I should do if you weren’t here. After all, one’s wife is one’s wife, isn’t she?”

She did not speak, only bowed her head in assent.

He laid his head on her lap. The sigh he gave was like that of a tired child.

Theo thought again: “There’s something he hasn’t told me. What is it?”

Mechanically her hand dropped to his smooth, dark head, and she stroked it gently, as a mother might comfort a child.

Richard murmured vaguely:

“It’ll be all right now you’re here. You won’t let me down.”

His breathing grew slow and even. He slept. Her hand still smoothed his head.

But her eyes looked steadily into the darkness in front of her, seeing nothing.

“Don’t you think, Richard,” said Theodora, “that you’d better tell me everything?”

It was three days later. They were in the drawing room before dinner.

Richard started, and flushed.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he parried.

“Don’t you?”

He shot a quick glance at her.

“Of course there are—well—details.”

“I ought to know everything, don’t you think, if I am to help?”

He looked at her strangely.

“What makes you think I want you to help?”

She was a little astonished.

“My dear Richard, I’m your wife.”

He smiled suddenly, the old, attractive, carefree smile.

“So you are, Theo. And a very good-looking wife, too. I never could stand ugly women.”

He began walking up and down the room, as was his custom when something was worrying him.

“I won’t deny you’re right in a way,” he said presently. “There is something.”

He broke off.

“Yes?”

“It’s so damned hard to explain things of this kind to women. They get hold of the wrong end of the stick—fancy a thing is—well, what it isn’t.”

Theo said nothing.

“You see,” went on Richard, “the law’s one thing, and right and wrong are quite another. I may do a thing that’s perfectly right and honest, but the law

wouldn't take the same view of it. Nine times out of ten, everything pans out all right, and the tenth time you—well, hit a snag."

Theo began to understand. She thought to herself: "Why am I not surprised? Did I always know, deep down, that he wasn't straight?"

Richard went on talking. He explained himself at unnecessary lengths. Theo was content for him to cloak the actual details of the affair in this mantle of verbosity. The matter concerned a large tract of South African property. Exactly what Richard had done, she was not concerned to know. Morally, he assured her, everything was fair and aboveboard; legally—well, there it was; no getting away from the fact, he had rendered himself liable to criminal prosecution.

He kept shooting quick glances at his wife as he talked. He was nervous and uncomfortable. And still he excused himself and tried to explain away that which a child might have seen in its naked truth. Then finally in a burst of justification, he broke down. Perhaps Theo's eyes, momentarily scornful, had something to do with it. He sank down in a chair by the fireplace, his head in his hands.

"There it is, Theo," he said brokenly, "What are you going to do about it?"

She came over to him with scarcely a moment's pause and, kneeling down by the chair, put her face against his.

"What can be done, Richard? What can we do?"

He caught her to him.

"You mean it? You'll stick to me?"

"Of course. My dear, of course."

He said, moved to sincerity in spite of himself: "I'm a thief, Theo. That's what it means, shorn of fine language—just a thief."

"Then I'm a thief's wife, Richard. We'll sink or swim together."

They were silent for a little while. Presently Richard recovered something of his jaunty manner.

“You know, Theo, I’ve got a plan, but we’ll talk of that later. It’s just on dinnertime. We must go and change. Put on that creamy thingummybob of yours, you know—the Caillot model.”

Theo raised her eyebrows quizzically.

“For an evening at home?”

“Yes, yes, I know. But I like it. Put it on, there’s a good girl. It cheers me up to see you looking your best.”

Theo came down to dinner in the Caillot. It was a creation in creamy brocade, with a faint pattern of gold running through it and an undernote of pale pink to give warmth to the cream. It was cut daringly low in the back, and nothing could have been better designed to show off the dazzling whiteness of Theo’s neck and shoulders. She was truly now a magnolia flower.

Richard’s eye rested upon her in warm approval. “Good girl. You know, you look simply stunning in that dress.”

They went in to dinner. Throughout the evening Richard was nervous and unlike himself, joking and laughing about nothing at all, as if in a vain attempt to shake off his cares. Several times Theo tried to lead him back to the subject they had been discussing before, but he edged away from it.

Then suddenly, as she rose to go to bed, he came to the point.

“No, don’t go yet. I’ve got something to say. You know, about this miserable business.”

She sat down again.

He began talking rapidly. With a bit of luck, the whole thing could be hushed up. He had covered his tracks fairly well. So long as certain papers didn’t get into the receiver’s hands—

He stopped significantly.

“Papers?” asked Theo perplexedly. “You mean you will destroy them?”

Richard made a grimace.

“I’d destroy them fast enough if I could get hold of them. That’s the devil of it all!”

“Who has them, then?”

“A man we both know—Vincent Easton.”

A very faint exclamation escaped Theo. She forced it back, but Richard had noticed it.

“I’ve suspected he knew something of the business all along. That’s why I’ve asked him here a good bit. You may remember that I asked you to be nice to him?”

“I remember,” said Theo.

“Somehow I never seem to have got on really friendly terms with him. Don’t know why. But he likes you. I should say he likes you a good deal.”

Theo said in a very clear voice: “He does.”

“Ah!” said Richard appreciatively. “That’s good. Now you see what I’m driving at. I’m convinced that if you went to Vincent Easton and asked him to give you those papers, he wouldn’t refuse. Pretty woman, you know—all that sort of thing.”

“I can’t do that,” said Theo quickly.

“Nonsense.”

“It’s out of the question.”

The red came slowly out in blotches on Richard's face. She saw that he was angry.

"My dear girl, I don't think you quite realize the position. If this comes out, I'm liable to go to prison. It's ruin—disgrace."

"Vincent Easton will not use those papers against you. I am sure of that."

"That's not quite the point. He mayn't realize that they incriminate me. It's only taken in conjunction with—with my affairs—with the figures they're bound to find. Oh! I can't go into details. He'll ruin me without knowing what he's doing unless somebody puts the position before him."

"You can do that yourself, surely. Write to him."

"A fat lot of good that would be! No, Theo, we've only got one hope. You're the trump card. You're my wife. You must help me. Go to Easton tonight—"

A cry broke from Theo.

"Not tonight. Tomorrow perhaps."

"My God, Theo, can't you realize things? Tomorrow may be too late. If you could go now—at once—to Easton's rooms." He saw her flinch, and tried to reassure her. "I know, my dear girl, I know. It's a beastly thing to do. But it's life or death. Theo, you won't fail me? You said you'd do anything to help me—"

Theo heard herself speaking in a hard, dry voice. "Not this thing. There are reasons."

"It's life or death, Theo. I mean it. See here."

He snapped open a drawer of the desk and took out a revolver. If there was something theatrical about that action, it escaped her notice.

"It's that or shooting myself. I can't face the racket. If you won't do as I ask you, I'll be a dead man before morning. I swear to you solemnly that that's

the truth.”

Theo gave a low cry. “No, Richard, not that!”

“Then help me.”

He flung the revolver down on the table and knelt by her side. “Theo my darling—if you love me—if you’ve ever loved me—do this for me. You’re my wife, Theo, I’ve no one else to turn to.”

On and on his voice went, murmuring, pleading. And at last Theo heard her own voice saying: “Very well—yes.”

Richard took her to the door and put her into a taxi.

“Theo!”

Vincent Easton sprang up in incredulous delight. She stood in the doorway. Her wrap of white ermine was hanging from her shoulders. Never, Easton thought, had she looked so beautiful.

“You’ve come after all.”

She put out a hand to stop him as he came towards her.

“No, Vincent, this isn’t what you think.”

She spoke in a low, hurried voice.

“I’m here from my husband. He thinks there are some papers which may—do him harm. I have come to ask you to give them to me.”

Vincent stood very still, looking at her. Then he gave a short laugh.

“So that’s it, is it? I thought Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas sounded familiar the other day, but I couldn’t place them at the minute. Didn’t know your husband was connected with the firm. Things have been going wrong there for some time. I was commissioned to look into the matter. I suspected some underling. Never thought of the man at the top.”

Theo said nothing. Vincent looked at her curiously.

“It makes no difference to you, this?” he asked. “That—well, to put it plainly, that your husband’s a swindler?”

She shook her head.

“It beats me,” said Vincent. Then he added quietly: “Will you wait a minute or two? I will get the papers.”

Theo sat down in a chair. He went into the other room. Presently he returned and delivered a small package into her hand.

“Thank you,” said Theo. “Have you a match?”

Taking the matchbox he proffered, she knelt down by the fireplace. When the papers were reduced to a pile of ashes, she stood up.

“Thank you,” she said again.

“Not at all,” he answered formally. “Let me get you a taxi.”

He put her into it, saw her drive away. A strange, formal little interview. After the first, they had not even dared look at each other. Well, that was that, the end. He would go away, abroad, try and forget.

Theo leaned her head out of the window and spoke to the taxi driver. She could not go back at once to the house in Chelsea. She must have a breathing space. Seeing Vincent again had shaken her horribly. If only—if only. But she pulled herself up. Love for her husband she had none—but she owed him loyalty. He was down, she must stick by him. Whatever else he might have done, he loved her; his offence had been committed against society, not against her.

The taxi meandered on through the wide streets of Hampstead. They came out on the heath, and a breath of cool, invigorating air fanned Theo’s cheeks. She had herself in hand again now. The taxi sped back towards Chelsea.

Richard came out to meet her in the hall.

“Well,” he demanded, “you’ve been a long time.”

“Have I?”

“Yes—a very long time. Is it—all right?”

He followed her, a cunning look in his eyes. His hands were shaking.

“It’s—it’s all right, eh?” he said again.

“I burnt them myself.”

“Oh!”

She went on into the study, sinking into a big armchair. Her face was dead white and her whole body drooped with fatigue. She thought to herself: “If only I could go to sleep now and never, never wake up again!”

Richard was watching her. His glance, shy, furtive, kept coming and going. She noticed nothing. She was beyond noticing.

“It went off quite all right, eh?”

“I’ve told you so.”

“You’re sure they were the right papers? Did you look?”

“No.”

“But then—”

“I’m sure, I tell you. Don’t bother me, Richard. I can’t bear any more tonight.”

Richard shifted nervously.

“No, no. I see.”

He fidgeted about the room. Presently he came over to her, laid a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

“Don’t touch me.” She tried to laugh. “I’m sorry, Richard. My nerves are on edge. I feel I can’t bear to be touched.”

“I know. I understand.”

Again he wandered up and down.

“Theo,” he burst out suddenly. “I’m damned sorry.”

“What?” She looked up, vaguely startled.

“I oughtn’t to have let you go there at this time of night. I never dreamed that you’d be subjected to any—unpleasantness.”

“Unpleasantness?” She laughed. The word seemed to amuse her. “You don’t know! Oh, Richard, you don’t know!”

“I don’t know what?”

She said very gravely, looking straight in front of her: “What this night has cost me.”

“My God! Theo! I never meant—You—you did that, for me? The swine! Theo—Theo—I couldn’t have known. I couldn’t have guessed. My God!”

He was kneeling by her now stammering, his arms round her, and she turned and looked at him with faint surprise, as though his words had at last really penetrated to her attention.

“I—I never meant—”

“You never meant what, Richard?”

Her voice startled him.

“Tell me. What was it that you never meant?”

“Theo, don’t let us speak of it. I don’t want to know. I want never to think of it.”

She was staring at him, wide awake now, with every faculty alert. Her words came clear and distinct:

“You never meant—What do you think happened?”

“It didn’t happen, Theo. Let’s say it didn’t happen.”

And still she stared, till the truth began to come to her.

“You think that—”

“I don’t want—”

She interrupted him: “You think that Vincent Easton asked a price for those letters? You think that I—paid him?”

Richard said weakly and unconvincingly: “I—I never dreamed he was that kind of man.”

“Didn’t you?” She looked at him searchingly. His eyes fell before hers. “Why did you ask me to put on this dress this evening? Why did you send me there alone at this time of night? You guessed he—cared for me. You wanted to save your skin—save it at any cost—even at the cost of my honour.” She got up.

“I see now. You meant that from the beginning—or at least you saw it as a possibility, and it didn’t deter you.”

“Theo—”

“You can’t deny it. Richard, I thought I knew all there was to know about you years ago. I’ve known almost from the first that you weren’t straight as regards the world. But I thought you were straight with me.”

“Theo—”

“Can you deny what I’ve just been saying?”

He was silent, in spite of himself.

“Listen, Richard. There is something I must tell you. Three days ago when this blow fell on you, the servants told you I was away—gone to the country. That was only partly true. I had gone away with Vincent Easton—”

Richard made an inarticulate sound. She held out a hand to stop him.

“Wait. We were at Dover. I saw a paper—I realized what had happened. Then, as you know, I came back.”

She paused.

Richard caught her by the wrist. His eyes burnt into hers.

“You came back—in time?”

Theo gave a short, bitter laugh.

“Yes, I came back, as you say, ‘in time,’ Richard.”

Her husband relinquished his hold on her arm. He stood by the mantelpiece, his head thrown back. He looked handsome and rather noble.

“In that case,” he said, “I can forgive.”

“I cannot.”

The two words came crisply. They had the semblance and the effect of a bomb in the quiet room. Richard started forward, staring, his jaw dropped with an almost ludicrous effect.

“You—er—what did you say, Theo?”

“I said I cannot forgive! In leaving you for another man. I sinned—not technically, perhaps, but in intention, which is the same thing. But if I sinned, I sinned through love. You, too, have not been faithful to me since

our marriage. Oh, yes, I know. That I forgave, because I really believed in your love for me. But the thing you have done tonight is different. It is an ugly thing, Richard—a thing no woman should forgive. You sold me, your own wife, to purchase safety!”

She picked up her wrap and turned towards the door.

“Theo,” he stammered out, “where are you going?”

She looked back over her shoulder at him.

“We all have to pay in this life, Richard. For my sin I must pay in loneliness. For yours—well, you gambled with the thing you love, and you have lost it!”

“You are going?”

She drew a long breath.

“To freedom. There is nothing to bind me here.”

He heard the door shut. Ages passed, or was it a few minutes? Something fluttered down outside the window—the last of the magnolia petals, soft, fragrant.

Fifteen

NEXT TO A DOG

“Next to a Dog” was first published in Grand Magazine, September 1929.

The ladylike woman behind the Registry Office table cleared her throat and peered across at the girl who sat opposite.

“Then you refuse to consider the post? It only came in this morning. A very nice part of Italy, I believe, a widower with a little boy of three and an elderly lady, his mother or aunt.”

Joyce Lambert shook her head.

“I can’t go out of England,” she said in a tired voice; “there are reasons. If only you could find me a daily post?”

Her voice shook slightly—ever so slightly, for she had it well under control. Her dark blue eyes looked appealingly at the woman opposite her.

“It’s very difficult, Mrs. Lambert. The only kind of daily governess required is one who has full qualifications. You have none. I have hundreds on my books—literally hundreds.” She paused. “You have someone at home you can’t leave?”

Joyce nodded.

“A child?”

“No, not a child.” And a faint smile flickered across her face.

“Well, it is very unfortunate. I will do my best, of course, but—”

The interview was clearly at an end. Joyce rose. She was biting her lip to keep the tears from springing to her eyes as she emerged from the frowsy

office into the street.

“You mustn’t,” she admonished herself sternly. “Don’t be a snivelling little idiot. You’re panicking—that’s what you’re doing—panicking. No good ever came of giving way to panic. It’s quite early in the day still and lots of things may happen. Aunt Mary ought to be good for a fortnight anyway. Come on, girl, step out, and don’t keep your well-to-do relations waiting.”

She walked down Edgware Road, across the park, and then down to Victoria Street, where she turned into the Army and Navy Stores. She went to the lounge and sat down glancing at her watch. It was just half past one. Five minutes sped by and then an elderly lady with her arms full of parcels bore down upon her.

“Ah! There you are, Joyce. I’m a few minutes late, I’m afraid. The service is not as good as it used to be in the luncheon room. You’ve had lunch, of course?”

Joyce hesitated a minute or two, then she said quietly: “Yes, thank-you.”

“I always have mine at half past twelve,” said Aunt Mary, settling herself comfortably with her parcels. “Less rush and a clearer atmosphere. The curried eggs here are excellent.”

“Are they?” said Joyce faintly. She felt that she could hardly bear to think of curried eggs—the hot steam rising from them—the delicious smell! She wrenched her thoughts resolutely aside.

“You look peaky, child,” said Aunt Mary, who was herself of a comfortable figure. “Don’t go in for this modern fad of eating no meat. All fal-de-lal. A good slice off the joint never did anyone any harm.”

Joyce stopped herself from saying, “It wouldn’t do me any harm now.” If only Aunt Mary would stop talking about food. To raise your hopes by asking you to meet her at half past one and then to talk of curried eggs and slices of roast meat—oh! cruel—cruel.

“Well, my dear,” said Aunt Mary. “I got your letter—and it was very nice of you to take me at my word. I said I’d be pleased to see you anytime and so I should have been—but as it happens, I’ve just had an extremely good offer to let the house. Quite too good to be missed, and bringing their own plate and linen. Five months. They come in on Thursday and I go to Harrogate. My rheumatism’s been troubling me lately.”

“I see,” said Joyce. “I’m so sorry.”

“So it’ll have to be for another time. Always pleased to see you, my dear.”

“Thank you, Aunt Mary.”

“You know, you do look peaky,” said Aunt Mary, considering her attentively. “You’re thin, too; no flesh on your bones, and what’s happened to your pretty colour? You always had a nice healthy colour. Mind you take plenty of exercise.”

“I’m taking plenty of exercise today,” said Joyce grimly. She rose. “Well, Aunt Mary, I must be getting along.”

Back again—through St. James’s Park this time, and so on through Berkeley Square and across Oxford Street and up Edgware Road, past Praed Street to the point where the Edgware Road begins to think of becoming something else. Then aside, through a series of dirty little streets till one particular dingy house was reached.

Joyce inserted her latchkey and entered a small frowsy hall. She ran up the stairs till she reached the top landing. A door faced her and from the bottom of this door a snuffling noise proceeded succeeded in a second by a series of joyful whines and yelps.

“Yes, Terry darling—it’s Missus come home.”

As the door opened, a white body precipitated itself upon the girl—an aged wire-haired terrier very shaggy as to coat and suspiciously bleary as to eyes. Joyce gathered him up in her arms and sat down on the floor.

“Terry darling! Darling, darling Terry. Love your Missus, Terry; love your Missus a lot!”

And Terry obeyed, his eager tongue worked busily, he licked her face, her ears, her neck and all the time his stump of a tail wagged furiously.

“Terry darling, what are we going to do? What’s going to become of us? Oh! Terry darling, I’m so tired.”

“Now then, miss,” said a tart voice behind her. “If you’ll give over hugging and kissing that dog, here’s a cup of nice hot tea for you.”

“Oh! Mrs. Barnes, how good of you.”

Joyce scrambled to her feet. Mrs. Barnes was a big, formidable-looking woman. Beneath the exterior of a dragon she concealed an unexpectedly warm heart.

“A cup of hot tea never did anyone any harm,” enunciated Mrs. Barnes, voicing the universal sentiment of her class.

Joyce sipped gratefully. Her landlady eyed her covertly.

“Any luck, miss—ma’am, I should say?”

Joyce shook her head, her face clouded over.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Barnes with a sigh. “Well, it doesn’t seem to be what you might call a lucky day.”

Joyce looked up sharply.

“Oh, Mrs. Barnes—you don’t mean—”

Mrs. Barnes was nodding gloomily.

“Yes—it’s Barnes. Out of work again. What we’re going to do, I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Oh, Mrs. Barnes—I must—I mean you’ll want—”

“Now don’t you fret, my dear. I’m not denying but that I’d be glad if you’d found something—but if you haven’t—you haven’t. Have you finished that tea? I’ll take the cup.”

“Not quite.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. Barnes accusingly. “You’re going to give what’s left to that dratted dog—I know you.”

“Oh, please, Mrs. Barnes. Just a little drop. You don’t mind really, do you?”

“It wouldn’t be any use if I did. You’re crazy about that cantankerous brute. Yes, that’s what I say—and that’s what he is. As near as nothing bit me this morning, he did.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Barnes! Terry wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Growled at me—showed his teeth. I was just trying to see if there was anything could be done to those shoes of yours.”

“He doesn’t like anyone touching my things. He thinks he ought to guard them.”

“Well, what does he want to think for? It isn’t a dog’s business to think. He’d be well enough in his proper place, tied up in the yard to keep off burglars. All this cuddling! He ought to be put away, miss—that’s what I say.”

“No, no, no. Never. Never!”

“Please yourself,” said Mrs. Barnes. She took the cup from the table, retrieved the saucer from the floor where Terry had just finished his share, and stalked from the room.

“Terry,” said Joyce. “Come here and talk to me. What are we going to do, my sweet?”

She settled herself in the rickety armchair, with Terry on her knees. She threw off her hat and leaned back. She put one of Terry's paws on each side of her neck and kissed him lovingly on his nose and between his eyes. Then she began talking to him in a soft low voice, twisting his ears gently between her fingers.

"What are we going to do about Mrs. Barnes, Terry? We owe her four weeks—and she's such a lamb, Terry—such a lamb. She'd never turn us out. But we can't take advantage of her being a lamb, Terry. We can't do that. Why does Barnes want to be out of work? I hate Barnes. He's always getting drunk. And if you're always getting drunk, you are usually out of work. But I don't get drunk, Terry, and yet I'm out of work.

"I can't leave you, darling. I can't leave you. There's not even anyone I could leave you with—nobody who'd be good to you. You're getting old, Terry—twelve years old—and nobody wants an old dog who's rather blind and a little deaf and a little—yes, just a little—bad-tempered. You're sweet to me, darling, but you're not sweet to everyone, are you? You growl. It's because you know the world's turning against you. We've just got each other, haven't we, darling?"

Terry licked her cheek delicately.

"Talk to me, darling."

Terry gave a long lingering groan—almost a sigh, then he nuzzled his nose in behind Joyce's ear.

"You trust me, don't you, angel? You know I'd never leave you. But what are we going to do? We're right down to it now, Terry."

She settled back further in the chair, her eyes half closed.

"Do you remember, Terry, all the happy times we used to have? You and I and Michael and Daddy. Oh, Michael—Michael! It was his first leave, and he wanted to give me a present before he went back to France. And I told him not to be extravagant. And then we were down in the country—and it was all a surprise. He told me to look out of the window, and there you

were, dancing up the path on a long lead. The funny little man who brought you, a little man who smelt of dogs. How he talked. ‘The goods, that’s what he is. Look at him, ma’am, ain’t he a picture? I said to myself, as soon as the lady and gentleman see him they’ll say: “That dog’s the goods!” ’ ”

“He kept on saying that—and we called you that for quite a long time—the Goods! Oh, Terry, you were such a darling of a puppy, with your little head on one side, wagging your absurd tail! And Michael went away to France and I had you—the darlingest dog in the world. You read all Michael’s letters with me, didn’t you? You’d sniff them, and I’d say—‘From Master,’ and you’d understand. We were so happy—so happy. You and Michael and I. And now Michael’s dead, and you’re old, and I—I’m so tired of being brave.”

Terry licked her.

“You were there when the telegram came. If it hadn’t been for you, Terry—if I hadn’t had you to hold on to. . . .”

She stayed silent for some minutes.

“And we’ve been together ever since—been through all the ups and downs together—there have been a lot of downs, haven’t there? And now we’ve come right up against it. There are only Michael’s aunts, and they think I’m all right. They don’t know he gambled that money away. We must never tell anyone that. I don’t care—why shouldn’t he? Everyone has to have some fault. He loved us both, Terry, and that’s all that matters. His own relations were always inclined to be down on him and to say nasty things. We’re not going to give them the chance. But I wish I had some relations of my own. It’s very awkward having no relations at all.

“I’m so tired, Terry—and remarkably hungry. I can’t believe I’m only twenty-nine—I feel sixty-nine. I’m not really brave—I only pretend to be. And I’m getting awfully mean ideas. I walked all the way to Ealing yesterday to see Cousin Charlotte Green. I thought if I got there at half past twelve she’d be sure to ask me to stop to lunch. And then when I got to the house, I felt it was too cadging for anything. I just couldn’t. So I walked all

the way back. And that's foolish. You should be a determined cadger or else not even think of it. I don't think I'm a strong character."

Terry groaned again and put a black nose into Joyce's eye.

"You've got a lovely nose still, Terry—all cold like ice cream. Oh, I do love you so! I can't part from you. I can't have you 'put away,' I can't . . . I can't . . . I can't. . . ."

The warm tongue licked eagerly.

"You understand so, my sweet. You'd do anything to help Missus, wouldn't you?"

Terry clambered down and went unsteadily to a corner. He came back holding a battered bowl between his teeth.

Joyce was midway between tears and laughter.

"Was he doing his only trick? The only thing he could think of to help Missus. Oh, Terry—Terry—nobody shall part us! I'd do anything. Would I, though? One says that—and then when you're shown the thing, you say, 'I didn't mean anything like that.' Would I do anything?"

She got down on the floor beside the dog.

"You see, Terry, it's like this. Nursery governesses can't have dogs, and companions to elderly ladies can't have dogs. Only married women can have dogs, Terry—little fluffy expensive dogs that they take shopping with them—and if one preferred an old blind terrier—well, why not?"

She stopped frowning and at that minute there was a double knock from below.

"The post. I wonder."

She jumped up and hurried down the stairs, returning with a letter.

"It might be. If only. . . ."

She tore it open.

Dear Madam,

We have inspected the picture and our opinion is that it is not a genuine Cuyp and that its value is practically nil.

Yours truly,

Sloane & Ryder

Joyce stood holding it. When she spoke, her voice had changed.

“That’s that,” she said. “The last hope gone. But we won’t be parted. There’s a way—and it won’t be cadging. Terry darling, I’m going out. I’ll be back soon.”

Joyce hurried down the stairs to where the telephone stood in a dark corner. There she asked for a certain number. A man’s voice answered her, its tone changing as he realized her identity.

“Joyce, my dear girl. Come out and have some dinner and dance tonight.”

“I can’t,” said Joyce lightly. “Nothing fit to wear.”

And she smiled grimly as she thought of the empty pegs in the flimsy cupboard.

“How would it be if I came along and saw you now? What’s the address? Good Lord, where’s that? Rather come off your high horse, haven’t you?”

“Completely.”

“Well, you’re frank about it. So long.”

Arthur Halliday’s car drew up outside the house about three quarters of an hour later. An awestruck Mrs. Barnes conducted him upstairs.

“My dear girl—what an awful hole. What on earth has got you into this mess?”

“Pride and a few other unprofitable emotions.”

She spoke lightly enough; her eyes looked at the man opposite her sardonically.

Many people called Halliday handsome. He was a big man with square shoulders, fair, with small, very pale blue eyes and a heavy chin.

He sat down on the rickety chair she indicated.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully. “I should say you’d had your lesson. I say—will that brute bite?”

“No, no, he’s all right. I’ve trained him to be rather a—a watchdog.”

Halliday was looking her up and down.

“Going to climb down, Joyce,” he said softly. “Is that it?”

Joyce nodded.

“I told you before, my dear girl. I always get what I want in the end. I knew you’d come in time to see which way your bread was buttered.”

“It’s lucky for me you haven’t changed your mind,” said Joyce.

He looked at her suspiciously. With Joyce you never knew quite what she was driving at.

“You’ll marry me?”

She nodded. “As soon as you please.”

“The sooner, the better, in fact.” He laughed, looking round the room. Joyce flushed.

“By the way, there’s a condition.”

“A condition?” He looked suspicious again.

“My dog. He must come with me.”

“This old scarecrow? You can have any kind of a dog you choose. Don’t spare expense.”

“I want Terry.”

“Oh! All right, please yourself.”

Joyce was staring at him.

“You do know—don’t you—that I don’t love you? Not in the least.”

“I’m not worrying about that. I’m not thin-skinned. But no hanky-panky, my girl. If you marry me, you play fair.”

The colour flashed into Joyce’s cheeks.

“You will have your money’s worth,” she said.

“What about a kiss now?”

He advanced upon her. She waited, smiling. He took her in his arms, kissing her face, her lips, her neck. She neither stiffened nor drew back. He released her at last.

“I’ll get you a ring,” he said. “What would you like, diamonds or pearls?”

“A ruby,” said Joyce. “The largest ruby possible—the colour of blood.”

“That’s an odd idea.”

“I should like it to be a contrast to the little half hoop of pearls that was all that Michael could afford to give me.”

“Better luck this time, eh?”

“You put things wonderfully, Arthur.”

Halliday went out chuckling.

“Terry,” said Joyce. “Lick me—lick hard—all over my face and my neck—particularly my neck.”

And as Terry obeyed, she murmured reflectively:

“Thinking of something else very hard—that’s the only way. You’d never guess what I thought of—jam—jam in a grocer’s shop. I said it over to myself. Strawberry, blackcurrant, raspberry, damson. And perhaps, Terry, he’ll get tired of me fairly soon. I hope so, don’t you? They say men do when they’re married to you. But Michael wouldn’t have tired of me—never—never—never—Oh! Michael. . . .”

Joyce rose the next morning with a heart like lead. She gave a deep sigh and immediately Terry, who slept on her bed, had moved up and was kissing her affectionately.

“Oh, darling—darling! We’ve got to go through with it. But if only something would happen. Terry darling, can’t you help Missus? You would if you could, I know.”

Mrs. Barnes brought up some tea and bread and butter and was heartily congratulatory.

“There now, ma’am, to think of you going to marry that gentleman. It was a Rolls he came in. It was indeed. It quite sobered Barnes up to think of one of them Rolls standing outside our door. Why, I declare that dog’s sitting out on the window sill.”

“He likes the sun,” said Joyce. “But it’s rather dangerous. Terry, come in.”

“I’d have the poor dear put out of his misery if I was you,” said Mrs. Barnes, “and get your gentleman to buy you one of them plummy dogs as ladies carry in their muffs.”

Joyce smiled and called again to Terry. The dog rose awkwardly and just at that moment the noise of a dog fight rose from the street below. Terry craned his neck forward and added some brisk barking. The window sill was old and rotten. It tilted and Terry, too old and stiff to regain his balance, fell.

With a wild cry, Joyce ran down the stairs and out of the front door. In a few seconds she was kneeling by Terry's side. He was whining pitifully and his position showed her that he was badly hurt. She bent over him.

"Terry—Terry darling—darling, darling, darling—"

Very feebly, he tried to wag his tail.

"Terry boy—Missus will make you better—darling boy—"

A crowd, mainly composed of small boys, was pushing round.

"Fell from the window, 'e did."

"My, 'e looks bad."

"Broke 'is back as likely as not."

Joyce paid no heed.

"Mrs. Barnes, where's the nearest vet?"

"There's Jobling—round in Mere Street—if you could get him there."

"A taxi."

"Allow me."

It was the pleasant voice of an elderly man who had just alighted from a taxi. He knelt down by Terry and lifted the upper lip, then passed his hand down the dog's body.

“I’m afraid he may be bleeding internally,” he said. “There don’t seem to be any bones broken. We’d better get him along to the vet’s.”

Between them, he and Joyce lifted the dog. Terry gave a yelp of pain. His teeth met in Joyce’s arm.

“Terry—it’s all right—all right, old man.”

They got him into the taxi and drove off. Joyce wrapped a handkerchief round her arm in an absentminded way. Terry, distressed, tried to lick it.

“I know, darling; I know. You didn’t mean to hurt me. It’s all right. It’s all right, Terry.”

She stroked his head. The man opposite watched her but said nothing.

They arrived at the vet’s fairly quickly and found him in. He was a red-faced man with an unsympathetic manner.

He handled Terry none too gently while Joyce stood by, agonized. The tears were running down her face. She kept on talking in a low, reassuring voice.

“It’s all right, darling. It’s all right. . . .”

The vet straightened himself.

“Impossible to say exactly. I must make a proper examination. You must leave him here.”

“Oh! I can’t.”

“I’m afraid you must. I must take him below. I’ll telephone you in—say—half an hour.”

Sick at heart, Joyce gave in. She kissed Terry on his nose. Blind with tears, she stumbled down the steps. The man who had helped her was still there. She had forgotten him.

“The taxi’s still here. I’ll take you back.” She shook her head.

“I’d rather walk.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

He paid off the taxi. She was hardly conscious of him as he walked quietly by her side without speaking. When they arrived at Mrs. Barnes’, he spoke.

“Your wrist. You must see to it.”

She looked down at it.

“Oh! That’s all right.”

“It wants properly washing and tying up. I’ll come in with you.”

He went with her up the stairs. She let him wash the place and bind it up with a clean handkerchief. She only said one thing.

“Terry didn’t mean to do it. He would never, never mean to do it. He just didn’t realize it was me. He must have been in dreadful pain.”

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

“And perhaps they’re hurting him dreadfully now?”

“I’m sure that everything that can be done for him is being done. When the vet rings up, you can go and get him and nurse him here.”

“Yes, of course.”

The man paused, then moved towards the door.

“I hope it will be all right,” he said awkwardly. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

Two or three minutes later it occurred to her that he had been kind and that she had never thanked him.

Mrs. Barnes appeared, cup in hand.

“Now, my poor lamb, a cup of hot tea. You’re all to pieces, I can see that.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Barnes, but I don’t want any tea.”

“It would do you good, dearie. Don’t take on so now. The doggie will be all right and even if he isn’t that gentleman of yours will give you a pretty new dog—”

“Don’t, Mrs. Barnes. Don’t. Please, if you don’t mind, I’d rather be left alone.”

“Well, I never—there’s the telephone.”

Joyce sped down to it like an arrow. She lifted the receiver. Mrs. Barnes panted down after her. She heard Joyce say, “Yes—speaking. What? Oh! Oh! Yes. Yes, thank you.”

She put back the receiver. The face she turned to Mrs. Barnes startled that good woman. It seemed devoid of any life or expression.

“Terry’s dead, Mrs. Barnes,” she said. “He died alone there without me.”

She went upstairs and, going into her room, shut the door very decisively.

“Well, I never,” said Mrs. Barnes to the hall wallpaper.

Five minutes later she poked her head into the room. Joyce was sitting bolt upright in a chair. She was not crying.

“It’s your gentleman, miss. Shall I send him up?”

A sudden light came into Joyce’s eyes.

“Yes, please. I’d like to see him.”

Halliday came in boisterously.

“Well, here we are. I haven’t lost much time, have I? I’m prepared to carry you off from this dreadful place here and now. You can’t stay here. Come on, get your things on.”

“There’s no need, Arthur.”

“No need? What do you mean?”

“Terry’s dead. I don’t need to marry you now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My dog—Terry. He’s dead. I was only marrying you so that we could be together.”

Halliday stared at her, his face growing redder and redder. “You’re mad.”

“I daresay. People who love dogs are.”

“You seriously tell me that you were only marrying me because—Oh, it’s absurd!”

“Why did you think I was marrying you? You knew I hated you.”

“You were marrying me because I could give you a jolly good time—and so I can.”

“To my mind,” said Joyce, “that is a much more revolting motive than mine. Anyway, it’s off. I’m not marrying you!”

“Do you realize that you are treating me damned badly?”

She looked at him coolly but with such a blaze in her eyes that he drew back before it.

“I don’t think so. I’ve heard you talk about getting a kick out of life. That’s what you got out of me—and my dislike of you heightened it. You knew I hated you and you enjoyed it. When I let you kiss me yesterday, you were disappointed because I didn’t flinch or wince. There’s something brutal in

you, Arthur, something cruel—something that likes hurting . . . Nobody could treat you as badly as you deserve. And now do you mind getting out of my room? I want it to myself.”

He spluttered a little.

“Wh—what are you going to do? You’ve no money.”

“That’s my business. Please go.”

“You little devil. You absolutely maddening little devil. You haven’t done with me yet.”

Joyce laughed.

The laugh routed him as nothing else had done. It was so unexpected. He went awkwardly down the stairs and drove away.

Joyce heaved a sigh. She pulled on her shabby black felt hat and in her turn went out. She walked along the streets mechanically, neither thinking nor feeling. Somewhere at the back of her mind there was pain—pain that she would presently feel, but for the moment everything was mercifully dulled.

She passed the Registry Office and hesitated.

“I must do something. There’s the river, of course. I’ve often thought of that. Just finish everything. But it’s so cold and wet. I don’t think I’m brave enough. I’m not brave really.”

She turned into the Registry Office.

“Good morning, Mrs. Lambert. I’m afraid we’ve no daily post.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Joyce. “I can take any kind of post now. My friend, whom I lived with, has—gone away.”

“Then you’d consider going abroad?”

Joyce nodded.

“Yes, as far away as possible.”

“Mr. Allaby is here now, as it happens, interviewing candidates. I’ll send you in to him.”

In another minute Joyce was sitting in a cubicle answering questions. Something about her interlocutor seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she could not place him. And then suddenly her mind awoke a little, aware that the last question was faintly out of the ordinary.

“Do you get on well with old ladies?” Mr. Allaby was asking.

Joyce smiled in spite of herself.

“I think so.”

“You see my aunt, who lives with me, is rather difficult. She is very fond of me and she is a great dear really, but I fancy that a young woman might find her rather difficult sometimes.”

“I think I’m patient and good-tempered,” said Joyce, “and I have always got on with elderly people very well.”

“You would have to do certain things for my aunt and otherwise you would have the charge of my little boy, who is three. His mother died a year ago.”

“I see.”

There was a pause.

“Then if you think you would like the post, we will consider that settled. We travel out next week. I will let you know the exact date, and I expect you would like a small advance of salary to fit yourself out.”

“Thank you very much. That would be very kind of you.”

They had both risen. Suddenly Mr. Allaby said awkwardly:

“I—hate to butt in—I mean I wish—I would like to know—I mean, is your dog all right?”

For the first time Joyce looked at him. The colour came into her face, her blue eyes deepened almost to black. She looked straight at him. She had thought him elderly, but he was not so very old. Hair turning grey, a pleasant weatherbeaten face, rather stooping shoulders, eyes that were brown and something of the shy kindliness of a dog’s. He looked a little like a dog, Joyce thought.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “I thought afterwards—I never thanked you.”

“No need. Didn’t expect it. Knew what you were feeling like. What about the poor old chap?”

The tears came into Joyce’s eyes. They streamed down her cheeks. Nothing on earth could have kept them back.

“He’s dead.”

“Oh!”

He said nothing else, but to Joyce that Oh! was one of the most comforting things she had ever heard. There was everything in it that couldn’t be put into words.

After a minute or two he said jerkily:

“Matter of fact, I had a dog. Died two years ago. Was with a crowd of people at the time who couldn’t understand making heavy weather about it. Pretty rotten to have to carry on as though nothing had happened.”

Joyce nodded.

“I know—” said Mr. Allaby.

He took her hand, squeezed it hard and dropped it. He went out of the little cubicle. Joyce followed in a minute or two and fixed up various details with

the ladylike person. When she arrived home. Mrs. Barnes met her on the doorstep with that relish in gloom typical of her class.

“They’ve sent the poor little doggie’s body home,” she announced. “It’s up in your room. I was saying to Barnes, and he’s ready to dig a nice little hole in the back garden—”